



Te Kaveinga Manava Turoto o te Ipukarea
Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy

Ka'aka'ara ana i te toki, ei toki tarai enua.
Awaken the axe to pave the way forward.

Full Version

CO
OK
ISLANDS

Love a little paradise
...for real



Executive Summary



Te Kaveinga Manava Turoto o te Ipukarea, also known as the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS), provides a roadmap towards a more regenerative approach to tourism and destination development in the Cook Islands over the next five years. This strategy builds upon the work achieved to date in this space and aims to improve or strengthen areas previously absent or underrepresented. It aligns with national, regional, and global sustainable development aspirations outlined in the National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+, Pacific 2030 Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework, and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

At its heart, the CITDS seeks to leverage the power of the visitor economy to enhance the well-being of the Cook Islands people and environment by assessing and optimising the impact that visitors have on the Cook Islands culture, community, conservation, and commerce (economy). This is an objective articulated in the vision statement: 'Tourism advances the well-being of resident Cook Islanders in a way that is socially acceptable, economically viable, and environmentally sustainable'.

The CITDS is framed by four main aspirations:

ASPIRATION 1: ENHANCE AND LEVERAGE OUR VISITOR ECONOMY

Work collaboratively to ensure the visitor economy generates widespread and sustainable benefits to the Cook Islands.

ASPIRATION 2: OPTIMISE THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Ensure the ongoing well-being, comfort, and satisfaction of our visitors.

ASPIRATION 3: EMPOWER OUR TOURISM INDUSTRY

Maintain a positive relationship with our industry to help build capability and resilience, and collectively ensure an exceptional offering to visitors.

ASPIRATION 4: ENCOURAGE REGENERATIVE TOURISM PRACTICES

Ensure visitors have a positive influence on the social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of our people and place.

In addition to detailing a strategic approach, the CITDS also maps out the successful operationalisation of the aspirations contained and describes the main tactics or methods that will be used to achieve them. These will be adopted and operationalised by the Destination Development division of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation using the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy Working Plan, which was developed in tandem with this strategy.

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Introduction



Te Kaveinga Manava Turoto o te Ipukarea is drawn from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation's vision, which is: 'Tourism advances the well-being of resident Cook Islanders in a way that is socially acceptable, economically viable, and environmentally sustainable.' The front cover reflects the image of the axe through the proverb 'Ka 'aka'ara ana i te toki, ei toki tarai enua - awaken the axe to pave the way forward'. One of the many uses of the toki or axe was to function as a tool for making a vaka or canoe. The significance of the toki is powerful as it represents a means of navigation and movement for the Cook Islands people. This strategy is symbolic of the toki.

As international borders are now open and quarantine-free travel re-established, the strategy acknowledges the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout all levels of the travel supply chain, and the ongoing collective cautiousness displayed by both visitors and the communities that host them. Alongside the challenges caused, the strategy also acknowledges how this 'forced reset' has allowed both travellers and the tourism industry an opportunity to consider the impact that travel has on the climate, environment, and communities, in keeping with a near-global surge in the popularity of 'responsible' travel.

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) aims to provide a roadmap towards a more regenerative approach to tourism and destination development in the Cook Islands. Rather than primarily considering the needs and wants of the visitor, this regenerative approach emphasises leveraging the power of the wider visitor economy to improve the holistic well-being of the host community and environment across the '4 C's of well-being': community, culture, conservation, and commerce. The overarching goal is to ensure this holistic well-being lies at the very heart of all decision-making and associated actions.

Numerous initiatives contribute towards sustainable development and regenerative destination development at national, regional, and global levels. As such, another key objective of the CITDS is to identify and align with these initiatives to operate more cohesively with like-minded partners and within suitable criteria and frameworks, while also ensuring the approach is relevant to the Cook Islands context.

The overarching goal of the CITDS is to ensure the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) team and other relevant stakeholders and delivery partners are provided with a robust and practical set of aspirations that align with regenerative destination development for the Cook Islands.

An aerial photograph of a dense tropical forest. A path of tall palm trees runs vertically through the center of the image. The surrounding forest is a vibrant green, with various shades of foliage. The text is centered in a dark, semi-transparent box.

A roadmap towards
a more *regenerative*
approach to tourism
development in the
Cook Islands

KIA ORANA VALUES

Te Kaveinga Manava Turoto o te Ipukarea builds on the Kia Orana Values Programme, which is the foundation of all the work of tourism in the Cook Islands.

KIA ORANA

Kia Orana is the essence of the Cook Islands people and their culture. Just two words, Kia Orana, share our personality, our way of life, and our aspirations for the future. The phrase means may you live long, or may you have a long and fulfilling life. We want our visitors to the Cook Islands to understand and learn from our way of understanding relationships and the world.



MEITAKI

Meitaki means everything is good, well, and thank you all in one. To be meitaki is to feel great. It is how we share how happy we feel. This is how we want our visitors to feel while they are here with us.



MANA TIAKI

Tiaki means keeper or guardian and mana translates as influence or power. It means guardianship with a sacred purpose: to preserve for future generations. The keeper has the power or the ability to keep our culture and heritage alive. Mana Tiaki also refers to our responsibility as guardians of these islands and the environment.



OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

CURRENT SITUATION / CONTEXT

During the development of the CITDS, international tourism was still in a state of disruption due to the Covid-19 global pandemic, with the Cook Islands being no exception. Though international borders have now reopened to visitors, significant disruption throughout all levels of the travel supply chain combined with an ongoing collective cautiousness has resulted in many changes and limitations to the wider travel experience. This disruption has also meant a wide-ranging change in mindset as communities, stakeholders, and decision-makers reconsider tourism – the perennial ‘golden goose’ – and acknowledge the fragility of tourism and the lack of resilience created by an over-reliance on international visitors. This mindset shift has now become obvious in the Cook Islands, where a resurgence in visitor demand is being met with an undersupply of tourism products and human resourcing, and a cautiousness or unwillingness to invest or become overly reliant on tourism.

Though causing many challenges, the forced ‘reset’ that the Covid-19 pandemic caused also brings with it some opportunities. Most notably for the Cook Islands, Rarotonga had previously been moving dangerously close to (or past) the line of ‘over-tourism’ levels, where too many tourists during the high season resulted in a strain on services and resources, negative sentiment towards tourism felt in the local community, and a less than ideal experience for the visitor themselves. There is now an opportunity to ‘build back better’, where the Cook Islands can address previous mistakes to ensure a stronger sustainable (and regenerative) path is now taken. The halt in international travel has also allowed travellers to consider the impact their travel choices have on the climate, environment, and communities. This means both the supply and demand sides of the travel equation are more likely to lean towards regenerative practices and options providing an opportunity for the Cook Islands to align with this global movement.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The current structure of the Cook Islands Tourism Marketing Corporation Act 1998, which was amended in 2007, covers the role of destination marketing without much consideration for destination development activities. However, future strategic considerations are

being made to ensure that the Act is representative of all areas within the Corporation to support the evolving tourism landscape. These considerations must be made carefully to ensure that the legislation is effective and that the appropriate resources are allocated to support this.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

• National Partners:

Tourism Industry, Government, Religious advisory council, host communities, Civil Society Organisations, Chamber of Commerce and the Aronga Mana (Traditional Leaders).

• Regional Partners:

New Zealand Government, Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO)

• Global Partners:

United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), Global Sustainable Tourism Industry Council (GSTC)

Strategic Approach



Regenerative tourism develops and supports an environment that caters to a visitor who will leave a destination better than it was before



REGENERATIVE DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

For the Cook Islands, regenerative destination development is about empowering our visitors, our industry, and our community to actively enhance the holistic well-being of our people and place, both now and for future generations.

INTRODUCTION

While still widely referred to as sustainable development, we have an opportunity and an obligation to evolve our destination development approach into a movement that goes beyond sustainability (simply maintaining the status quo), and instead becomes regenerative. This requires a conscious shift in our collective mentality, away from

short-term economic growth as the dominant driver, past viewing environmental, social, and cultural improvement as mere tokenism, and towards a more holistic and long-term approach where each of these components is treated with equal value and importance.

THE CORE COMPONENTS OF WELL-BEING

To succeed in enhancing the holistic well-being of our people and place through regenerative destination development, we must first define well-being for the Cook Islands.

The National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+ (NSDA) refers to the aspiration towards Turanga Meitaki, or well-being for all. The vision is for each person to attain a state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy. It describes well-being as judging life positively and feeling good.

Using a wider perspective, the movement toward holistic well-being can be closely linked to the three interconnected core components of sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. Remembering that the CITDS strives to transcend sustainability towards regenerative outcomes, these three core elements can be expanded across four pillars of well-being, expressed below as the 'Four C's':

PILLARS OF WELL-BEING



COMMUNITY (SOCIAL)

Social well-being can be defined as the sharing, developing, and sustaining of meaningful relationships with others. For the CITDS, this involves understanding our people's needs and desires, and identifying and managing impacts on these people and communities so that they feel more valued and enjoy a heightened sense of connectedness and belonging. Tupuranga Tangata is a principle that aligns with the Mana Tiaki value and translates as the development of our people.



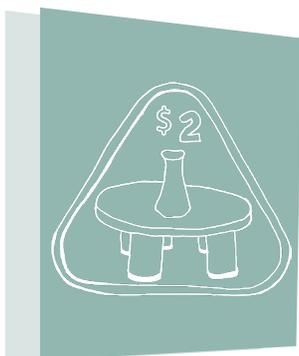
CULTURAL

Cultural well-being is the ability to retain or improve values and attitudes in the face of external forces. For regenerative destination development in the Cook Islands, this means protecting, strengthening, and celebrating our cultural beliefs, practices (e.g., language, songs, traditions), heritage conservation, and culture as its own entity. The value of Mana Tiaki has the core principle of Peu Maori that resonates with this well-being and refers to our traditions, customs, and lifestyle.



CONSERVATION (ENVIRONMENTAL)

Environmental well-being refers to living in a caring and healthy environment, as well as being aware of and respectful of the environment in which we live. For the CITDS this is about acting in a way that ensures future generations have the natural resources available to live a safer, more comfortable, and connected way of life than current generations. The Mana Tiaki value refers to being guardians or custodians of our environment and specifically refers to this through the principle of Akono I Te Ao Rangi which means to preserve our natural environment.



COMMERCE (ECONOMICS)

Economic well-being means that individuals have their most basic survival needs met and have sustainable income and assets so they can prosper. For the CITDS, this is ensuring that we make optimal use of available resources to deliver opportunity and prosperity across the Cook Islands economy, without jeopardising the ability of our future generations to do the same.

Important Note: While there are specific aspirations, areas of focus, and activities that relate more directly to each of the four well-being pillars, the CITDS aims to embed each of these into the matters it addresses.



THE VISITOR ECONOMY

When considering the many possibilities of regenerative destination development, it is also essential to transcend our traditional view of 'tourism' and consider the significantly broader influence that each visitor has throughout a destination community. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) defines the visitor economy as 'any direct, indirect, and induced economic activity resulting from visitors' interactions with a destination outside their usual environment'. It refers to the economic benefit of visitor activity in a much broader sense as their spending flows through the economy, not only for the industry directly related to tourism. This broader approach can be applied across

all the pillars of well-being, with a focus also placed on leveraging the wider social, cultural, and environmental benefits visitors can generate.

Another important differentiation of the 'visitor economy' is that the term moves the emphasis away from the actions of an individual tourist or visitor and places more attention on the host environment within which tourists or other visitors act. This subtle difference is important to align with regenerative destination development, where rather than primarily considering the needs and wants of the visitor, the focus is instead placed on how visitors can contribute towards the needs and wants of the host community.

ALIGNMENT WITH RELEVANT STRATEGIES & FRAMEWORKS

There are numerous strategic approaches toward sustainable development and regenerative destination development being taken at the global, regional, and national levels. The below outlines how the CITDS aligns with these.

Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda

TO TATOU AKA'ATINA 15 / 15-STAR PLEDGE

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. No poverty | infrastructure |
| 2. Zero hunger | 10. Reduced inequalities |
| 3. Good health and well-being | 11. Sustainable cities and communities |
| 4. Quality education | 12. Responsible consumption and production |
| 5. Gender equality | 13. Climate action |
| 6. Clean water and sanitation | 14. Life below water |
| 7. Affordable and clean energy | 15. Life on land |
| 8. Decent work and economic growth | 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions |
| 9. Industry, innovation and | 17. Partnerships for the goals |

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. To Tatou Turanga Meitaki - Our well-being as our focus | 8. To Tatou Ngaki'anga - Our responsibility |
| 2. To Tatou Ao Ora Natura - Our ocean and environment | 9. To Tatou Akamana'anga - Our empowerment |
| 3. To tatou Ora'anga Kopapa Matutu - Our Health | 10. To Tatou Parau'anga - Our dignity |
| 4. To Tatou Reo Maori e te Takanava Reo - Our vibrant languages and dialects | 11. To Tatou kimi'anga puapinga - Our prosperity |
| 5. To Tatou Akono'anga Maori - Our cultural heritage and history | 12. To Tatou Kite Pakari - Our knowledge and innovation |
| 6. To Tatou Tu Tanga - Our identity | 13. To Tatou Piri'anga - Our connectedness |
| 7. To Tatou Akatere'anga Tau - Our governance | 14. To Tatou paruru'anga Ipukarea - Our security |
| | 15. To Tatou akamatutu'anga ora'anga e te akateateamamao - Our resilience and preparedness |

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Pacific 2030 Goals & Priorities

- Goal 1: Prosperous Economies (Commerce)
- Goal 2: Thriving & Inclusive Communities
- Goal 3: Visible & Valued Cultures (Cultural)
- Goal 4: Healthy Islands & Oceans (Conservation)

Global Sustainable Tourism Council Destination Criteria

- Sustainable Management
- Socio-economic Sustainability
- Cultural Sustainability
- Environmental Sustainability

Destination Assessment

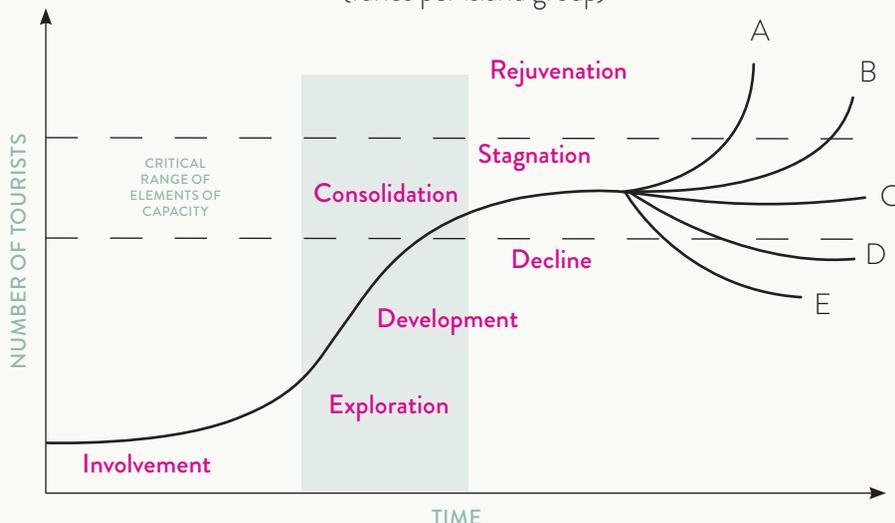


Before journeying toward regenerative tourism, we must first assess and acknowledge where we are today. The following destination audits provide a basic analysis and overview of how the Cook Islands (collectively), Rarotonga and Aitutaki are currently positioned as visitor destinations. A key part of the CITDS is to collaborate closely with our Pa Enua stakeholders, and while preliminary assessments for each island have been completed, for the purposes of this document these have been aggregated to overviews for both the northern and southern island groups.

Important Note: These initial assessments have been conducted by CIT to provide a high-level baseline only and will be checked and expanded upon in collaboration with the various communities in the Pa Enua. The below assessments reference Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle to describe each destination's current stage in tourism development.

DESTINATION LIFE-CYCLE

Cook Islands: Exploration - Consolidation
(varies per island group)



COOK ISLANDS - OVERVIEW

Lying halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii (<4 hrs flight time north-east of Auckland), the Cook Islands are made up of 15 islands roughly split into the ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ groups. Home to approximately 17,500 residents, the biggest island of Rarotonga accounts for 75% of the population and is the main access point for all international travel.

Point of Difference
 Little tropical paradise, no buildings taller than a coconut tree, friendly people, vibrant culture and ease of travel.

ANNUAL VISITORS



EXPERIENCES

 628 Accommodation Operators	 34 Land Tours	 44 Marine Tours
 9 Weddings & Honeymoons	 15 Health & Beauty	 68 Food & Beverage
	 24 Transportation	

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Rich, vibrant, welcoming culture
- Inexpensive compared to alternatives
- Relatively untouched environment
- Safe destination
- Caters for diverse range of visitor types
- Use of New Zealand dollar

OPPORTUNITIES

- Utilise regenerative destination development to enhance the well-being of people and place
- Leverage regenerative destination development approach to attract more & better aligned visitors
- Long term visitor market (e.g. remote workers)
- Diversification of economy using tourism
- Improving the Visitor Economy
- Increased focus on developing MICE sector

WEAKNESSES

- Some infrastructure in disrepair
- Labour constraints
- Waste management
- Communication infrastructure
- Limited tourism product in Pa Enua
- Low product awareness and limited ability to book
- Wandering and stray animals
- Water constraints

THREATS

- Over-tourism during peak season for Rarotonga and Aitutaki
- Population decrease/labour shortage
- Over-dependence on tourism for economy
- Reliant on air-route access from key markets
- Susceptible to climate change impacts and events
- Environment fragile and susceptible to locally induced impacts
- Erosion of Cook Islands traditional culture

RAROTONGA



OVERVIEW

The largest, most popular, and developed visitor destination of the Cook Islands. Rarotonga is home to the Cook Islands' only international airport, with a well-established tourism industry hosting large numbers of international visitors each year.

Point of Difference

Gateway into the Cook Islands, ease of getting around, and like one big resort.



512

Accommodation Operators



21

Land Tours



20

Marine Tours



7

Weddings & Honeymoons



12

Health & Beauty



55

Food & Beverage



24

Transportation

ANNUAL VISITORS

143,573 – Jan-Oct 2019 (Pre-Covid)

94,122 – Jan-Oct 2022 (Post-Covid)

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Easy to get around
- Easy access from New Zealand
- Varying beautiful landscapes (e.g. mountains and ocean)
- Established, well-received tourism offering

OPPORTUNITIES

- Establish regenerative tourism approach
- Develop new international air routes
- Develop cuisine, film tourism, pilgrim travel

WEAKNESSES

- Highly seasonal
- Capacity issues during peak periods
- Mass tourism impacting people and place
- Shortage/quality of staff
- Stray dogs

THREATS

- Risk of overdevelopment
- Over-dependence on tourism
- Susceptible to climate change events

AITUTAKI



OVERVIEW

The second-most popular island for visitors, Aitutaki is a 50-minute flight from Rarotonga. Made up of 15 motus (islets) spread across a huge lagoon, Aitutaki is a more secluded and romantic visitor offering and a favourite of couples/honeymooners.

Point of Difference
The most beautiful lagoon in the world.



ANNUAL VISITORS

29,348 – Jan-Oct 2019 (Pre-Covid)
20,968 – Jan-Oct 2022 (Post-Covid)

DESTINATION LIFECYCLE

Stage in Destination Lifecycle: Development

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Beautiful lagoon with scattered motus (islets)
- Locals are naturally friendly and welcoming
- Abundance of natural resources for activities & crafts
- High-end properties
- Bonefishing
- Kite Surfing
- Frequent flights

OPPORTUNITIES

- High levels of support for Pa Enua development
- Development of land tours (bicycle tour, marae tour, dining tour)

WEAKNESSES

- Expensive to get there
- Waste & water management
- Access to fresh produce (vegetation and fish)
- Sandflies
- Materials/resources hard to source
- A limited number of land-based tours
- Limited mid-range and family accommodation

THREATS

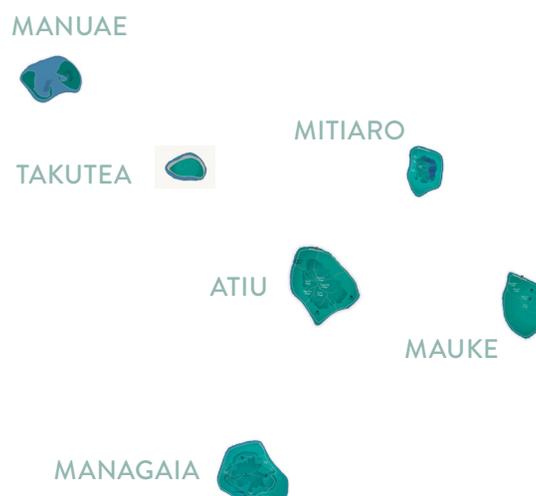
- Limited implementation of strategic planning
- Risk of overdevelopment
- Depopulation/lack of human resource
- Susceptible to climate change events

SOUTHERN GROUP



OVERVIEW

Atiu, Mauke, and Mitiaro are known as the Nga Pu Toru (the three roots) and are clustered in a triangle approximately 45 kilometres apart. Mangaia is the most southerly of the Cook Islands and is the second largest after Rarotonga



Point of Difference

The Nga Pu Toru are volcanic islands surrounded by a rim of makatea (limestone). Mangaia is one of the oldest islands in the South Pacific, having been formed by a volcanic eruption more than 18 million years ago.

DESTINATION LIFECYCLE

Stage in Destination Lifecycle: Exploration

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Limestone (makatea) surrounding the islands
- Strong and rich in cultural values
- Caves and natural resources as assets
- Strong historical ties with each island
- Interconnections of each island
- Fertile land for planting
- Endemic species for the Cook Islands in each island

OPPORTUNITIES

- High levels of support for Pa Enea development
- Development of land and water-based tours
- Niche markets to be developed such as cave diving and bird watching
- Key natural attractions to be developed, particularly around access to these sites
- Community based tourism can be developed

WEAKNESSES

- Expensive airfares
- Lack of tourism infrastructure such as accommodation and activities
- Waste & water management
- Depopulation is a major issue
- Existing accommodation requires uplift
- Challenges around materials for infrastructure development
- Staff shortages due to population age demographics

THREATS

- Limited foresight of the potential opportunities for tourism
- Risk of community resistance
- Political interference
- Susceptible to climate change events, natural disasters, and locally induced impacts

NORTHERN GROUP

OVERVIEW

Only half of the Northern group islands are accessible by plane which highlights the remoteness and isolation of these hidden gems. Each island is renowned for a variety of distinct and unique qualities with the northerners known to be people of the sea



Point of Difference

These atolls are separated by the vast and stunning ocean. Each island has a significant connection to the ocean and its valuable resources which are creatively turned into incredible pieces of art.

DESTINATION LIFECYCLE

Stage in Destination Lifecycle: Exploration

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Abundant in seafood
- Strong and rich in cultural values
- Weaving and handcrafts
- Cultural and natural pearls
- Traditional cooking/cuisine
- Exquisite lagoon and environment

OPPORTUNITIES

- Niche markets to explore such as bonefishing and pearl harvesting
- Airport development in government's priority plans
- High levels of support for Pa Enea development
- Development of land- and water-based tours

WEAKNESSES

- Accessibility (expensive and infrequent flights)
- Sparse accommodation offerings
- Existing accommodation require refurbishment
- Waste and water management
- Access to fresh produce
- Depopulation is a major issue
- Building materials are a struggle to source
- Limited activities

THREATS

- Susceptible to climate change events, natural disasters, and locally induced impacts
- Limited foresight of the potential opportunities for tourism
- Risk of community resistance
- Political interference
- Remoteness and isolation from the main island



Vision

Tourism advances the well-being of resident Cook Islanders in a way that is socially acceptable, economically viable and environmentally sustainable

ASPIRATIONS AND AREAS OF FOCUS OVERVIEW

Recognizing the current opportunities, challenges, and activities specific to the Cook Islands as a visitor destination and the corresponding resources available to meet these, the CITDS has identified four key aspirations with associated areas of focus that will be used to achieve Cook Islands Tourism Corporation's vision.

The following pages outline these aspirations and focus areas, along with the specific objectives associated with each and the methods or tactics available to CIT and/or their delivery partners to achieve them. The more detailed information associated with each tactic (e.g., key actions, delivery partners) has been omitted from this document, but are covered in detail within the 'CITDS Work Plan'

Aspirations

Key Focus Areas



ENHANCE AND LEVERAGE

Our Visitor Economy

- Visitor Spend and Dispersal
- Tourism Sector Development
- Economic Development
- Leadership and Governance



OPTIMISE

The Visitor Experience

- Visitor Assistance
- Health, Safety and Security
- Infrastructure and Services
- Environment



EMPOWER

Our Tourism Industry

- Human Resource Management
- Capability Building
- Quality Assurance
- Industry Engagement



ENCOURAGE

Regenerative Travel

- Market Positioning
- Community and Culture
- Visitor Contribution
- Industry Contribution



ASPIRATION 1:

ENHANCE AND LEVERAGE OUR VISITOR ECONOMY

Work collaboratively to ensure the visitor economy generates widespread and sustainable benefits to the Cook Islands

Key Focus Areas



1A: VISITOR SPEND AND DISPERSAL

Current State:

Most visitation and consequent benefits are concentrated on Rarotonga during the high tourism season (July – August). There is a need to proactively manage capacity issues and deliver increased benefits to the Pa Enua by promoting and incentivising off-peak and outer-island travel. Spend is dominated by flights and accommodation, followed by food and beverage, with an opportunity to raise average yield by increasing awareness of activity offerings both before and during travel.

Objective:

Work with communities and industry to ensure the visitor economy generates widespread benefits to the Cook Islands.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priority 2
- NSDA 2020+: Pledge 1, 8, 11

Tactics

- Work with island communities/leaders to agree optimal visitor types and numbers
- Manage visitor capacity issues and ensure widespread benefits by spreading demand appropriately via marketing efforts
- Increase average visitor yield by providing more opportunity for them to spend
- Use MICE to increase visitation and associated benefits outside of peak season

1B: TOURISM SECTOR DEVELOPMENT

Current State:

Limited availability of tourism products and associated capacity issues (in peak season) due to businesses closing and operators finding alternative income sources because of Covid-19 border closure. There is a widespread reluctance to invest in tourism due to the perceived fragility of the sector.

Objective:

Assist with the identification, development, and optimisation of sustainable business opportunities within the visitor economy.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priorities 2, 3
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 1, 9, 11, 12

Tactics

- Address the issue of under-supply of tourism product by supporting the development of new tourism business initiatives and the expansion of existing offerings
- Attract and facilitate investment opportunities that align with regenerative tourism principles



1C: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Current State:

Recent border closures have demonstrated the Cook Islands' over-reliance on the tourism industry as an economic driver (previously accounting for 67% of GDP). This has highlighted the need to strengthen the resilience of both the tourism industry and the wider Cook Islands economy.

Objective:

Seek ways in which tourism can help increase the resilience of the wider Cook Islands economy.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priority 3
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 1, 8, 11, 15

Tactics

- Build economic resilience by supporting the diversification of the tourism industry
- Maximise community benefits by encouraging a circular economy approach within the tourism industry
- Develop policies and practices that minimise economic leakage and maximise benefits to the Cook Islands visitor economy.

1D: LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

Current State:

CIT is the leading organisation for Cook Islands destination development and marketing. The Cook Islands is a current member of the Pacific Tourism Association (SPTO) with the Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework 2030 central to regenerative/sustainable destination development within the Pacific region. CIT is the main voice and advocate for tourism across Cook Island government ministries and the main link between the tourism industry (private sector) and government.

Objective:

Lead the Cook Islands in working collectively towards becoming a leading regenerative tourism destination.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priorities 1, 4, 7, 8
- NSDA 2020+: n/a

Tactics

- Further develop partnerships that will advance our regenerative tourism objectives
- Utilise CIT's position of leadership to advocate for and provide guidance towards a collective regenerative tourism approach
- Ensure resources and support for regenerative tourism initiatives are maximised by influencing ministerial decision-making where appropriate



ASPIRATION 2: OPTIMISE THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Ensure the ongoing well-being, comfort, and satisfaction of our visitors.

Key Focus Areas



2A: VISITOR ASSISTANCE

Current State:

Ongoing border closures have meant significant disruption and changes to the tourism offering. As a result, the provision of accurate travel information and advice to visitors requires significant resourcing from the CIT team. The provision of travel information or paths to purchase on the ground is fragmented and passive. The provision of a friendly welcome and initial assistance to visitors is currently the role of the CIT destination development team and imperative to the Cook Islands visitor experience.

Objective:

Ensure a warm, friendly, and inclusive welcome, and help our visitors optimize their time here.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: n/a
- NSDA 2020+: Pledge 10

Tactics

- Improve visitor satisfaction by providing accurate visitor information and services when required
- Increase yield and visitor satisfaction by streamlining the ability for visitors to book experiences while in-country
- Remain true to Cook Islands traditions and culture, and provide a positive point of difference by facilitating port-of-arrival welcome and entertainment
- Improve visitor satisfaction by providing a channel for identification and resolution of visitor issues

2B: HEALTH, SAFETY & SECURITY

Current State:

Visitor safety, in general, is viewed with moderate concern in the short to medium term. When taking a longer-term outlook, the impacts of climate change and associated severe weather events will potentially have a significant impact on the Cook Islands visitor experience, particularly for the low-lying islands. The Cook Islands Tourism Crisis Management Plan will provide a robust plan to assist in this space. Though also not of major concern at this point, the formal regulation, licensing, and monitoring of tourism operations concerning customer safety is currently limited.

Objective:

Support a safe and comfortable visitor experience.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priority 7
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 3, 14, 15

Tactics

- Help visitors as much as possible in the event of an emergency or crisis by providing effective and efficient guidance and services
- Reduce the rate of negative and undesirable incidents by ensuring the visitor experience is positive, safe, and comfortable



2C: INFRASTRUCTURE & SERVICES

Current State:

Several key areas of infrastructure are in a state of disrepair, with accessibility for those with mobility difficulties also needing to be created or improved. While it is not officially CIT's role to lead (re) development or beautification efforts, the organisation has been obligated to invest a large portion of recent resources in infrastructure/amenities/facilities projects, as the status quo was negatively affecting both the visitor experience and community sentiment towards tourism. Several visitor services are less than optimal in their current state and require support in terms of improving efficiency and quality.

Objective:

Ensure the needs and satisfaction of both our visitors and community are considered appropriately when concerning tourism-related infrastructure, amenities, and services.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priority 8
- NSDA 2020+: Pledge 3

Tactics

- Improve both visitor and community satisfaction by contributing towards the development and/or upkeep of suitable areas, facilities, and amenities
- Improve the visitor experience by helping to identify and mitigate any major service issues being faced by visitors

2D: ENVIRONMENT

Current State:

There are currently no monitoring or management systems in place to ensure both visitors and the local community can interact with and enjoy places of significance in a sustainable or regenerative manner, whether they are natural or cultural (built) elements. Informal community-led beautification initiatives (e.g., village clean-ups) have previously worked well, and may provide inspiration for future initiatives involving visitor participation.

Objective:

Help protect and improve our home for everyone to enjoy.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priority 7
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 2, 5

Tactics

- Protect our home by monitoring and managing visitor impact on areas of natural, cultural, and social significance
- Contribute towards the preservation and conservation efforts of our natural environment



ASPIRATION 3: EMPOWER OUR TOURISM INDUSTRY

Maintain a positive relationship with our industry to help build capability and resilience, and collectively ensure an exceptional offering to visitors.

Key Focus Areas



3A: HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Current State:

The perception of tourism as a fragile and underpaid or undervalued career option has resulted in a significant shortfall of quality local staff within the tourism industry, with ongoing depopulation trends also adding to this problem, particularly in the Pa Enua. Operators have had to rely on talent sourced from overseas for tourism-related jobs, particularly for those jobs viewed as 'service' roles (e.g., cleaners). As such, there is a need for CIT to support the wider Cook Island tourism industry in this area.

Objective:

Support the tourism industry in attracting and retaining high-quality staff, with a focus on the development of Cook Islanders.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: n/a
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 1, 9, 10, 11, 12

Tactics

- Support industry in improving business resilience by upskilling and retaining staff
- Build sector resilience and future-readiness by increasing awareness and attractiveness of tourism as a career option

3B: CAPABILITY BUILDING

Current State:

Though ad-hoc coaching programmes have been delivered, the approach to building capability within the industry is currently not formalised or structured. With the ongoing fragility of international travel, there is a need to help active operators to build more efficient practices and strengthen economic resilience to ensure the long-term sustainability of their businesses.

Objective:

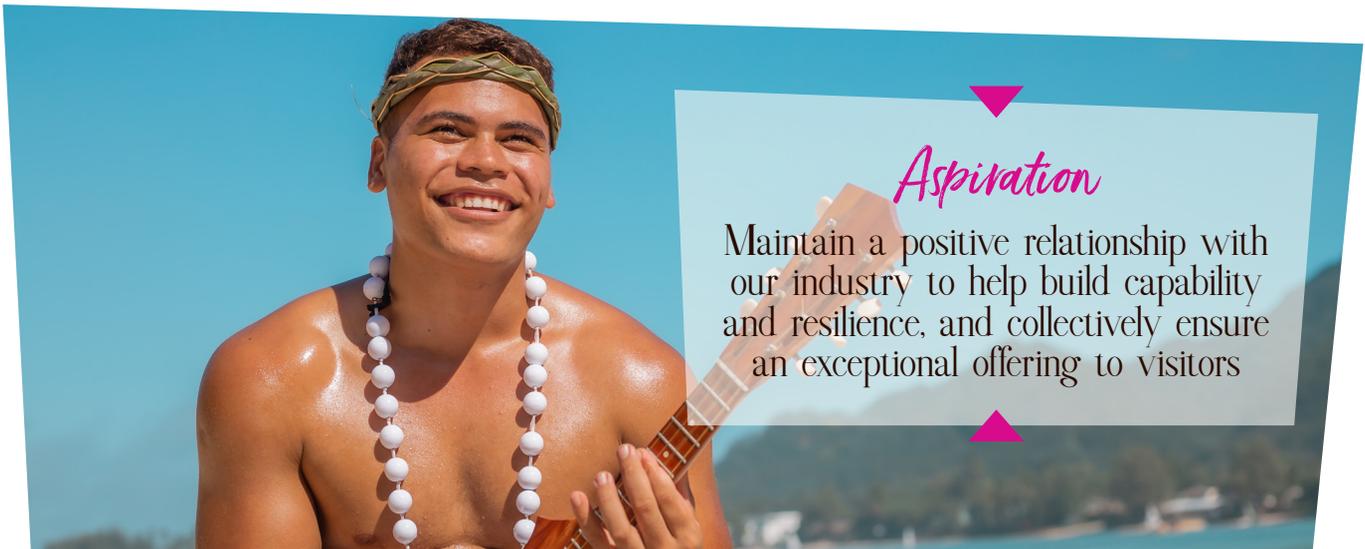
Help our tourism industry operate as effectively, efficiently, and sustainably as possible.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: n/a
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 1, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12

Tactics

- Grow sector capability and productivity by providing learning opportunities, with emphasis placed on upskilling in regenerative tourism practices



Aspiration

Maintain a positive relationship with our industry to help build capability and resilience, and collectively ensure an exceptional offering to visitors

3C: QUALITY ASSURANCE

Current State:

Previously facilitated by the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council, the Quality Assurance Accreditation Programme is well established and has enjoyed a reasonable level of patronage from local industry. Recently brought under the remit of CIT, the programme is currently being refreshed and will work in tandem with the Mana Tiaki Certification programme

Objective:

Empower our industry to deliver a high-quality, safe, and sustainable tourism experience to our visitors.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priority 2
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 2, 3, 4, 5

Tactics

- Improve business confidence and visitor satisfaction by providing tourism accreditation programmes that focus on improving quality and capability
- Encourage continuous improvements in business practises and visitor offerings by incentivising and supporting operators

3D: INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT

Current State:

Communication with the industry has been relatively consistent via the ‘Coconut Connection’ eDM and regular updates including the Global Breakfast updates. Engagement beyond this is limited, however, with communication largely one-sided and dominated by the larger players. With the regenerative destination approach requiring true collaboration, there is a need and desire to enhance the working relationship enjoyed between CIT and the wider local industry.

Objective:

Maintain a close and consistent relationship with our tourism industry.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: n/a
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 9, 13

Tactics

- Ensure a consistent and collaborative approach is achieved by keeping the tourism industry informed and updated
- Build business confidence within the tourism sector by developing and maintaining positive relationships with operators
- Grow business confidence and well-being of industry members by celebrating our successes



ASPIRATION 4: ENCOURAGE REGENERATIVE TOURISM PRACTICES

Ensure visitors have a positive influence on the social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of our people and place.

Key Focus Areas



4A: MARKET POSITIONING

Current State:

While viewed favourably, the Cook Islands are part of a large competitor set of Pacific islands that are perceived by core target markets to offer a similar experience. Current promotions centre on the geographic offering (beaches/lagoons) with warm, friendly people and unique culture included as secondary messages. While some quality regenerative travel content has been produced, the promotion of this has been limited and there is an opportunity to move towards a stronger, more overt brand positioning.

Objective:

Utilise our unique culture, heritage, and visitor experience to promote regenerative tourism principles and initiatives and increase the appeal of the Cook Islands as a visitor destination.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priority 2
- NSDA 2020+: Pledge 4,5

Tactics

- Attract aligned visitor types by infusing regenerative travel education/information into marketing activity
- Ensure what we are trying to achieve with regenerative tourism is succinctly defined and communicated well to potential visitors

4B: COMMUNITY & CULTURE

Current State:

There has been some progress surrounding the inclusion of Cook Islands culture and traditions within the tourism offering, however this needs to be expanded to include social elements to ensure a truly community-based approach.

Objective:

Ensure the people and culture of the Cook Islands are engaged, empowered, and benefited by tourism.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priorities 4, 5, 6
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13

Tactics

- Enable opportunities for locals and VFR to enjoy tourism experiences
- Provide direct support to community initiatives using the Mana Tiaki programmes
- Utilise community-based tourism models for regenerative tourism development
- Facilitate the ongoing inclusion and strengthening of Cook Islands culture to support community resilience
- Improve community sentiment by engaging and informing the local community about the benefits that tourism provides them



4C: VISITOR CONTRIBUTION

Current State:

There has been some great initial work within this area, most notably the ‘Love a Little Paradise’ visitor education campaign. A visitor levy has been considered previously, but never formally instigated. There is an opportunity and appetite to explore this area further and to analyse how regenerative visitor experiences can be developed, promoted, and supported.

Objective:

Identify, facilitate, and promote further ways in which visitors can contribute positively to the Cook Islands.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priorities 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 11

Tactics

- Increase visitor awareness, appeal, and participation in regenerative tourism initiatives in the Cook Islands
- Help develop regenerative initiatives that can be experienced or supported by visitors

4D: INDUSTRY CONTRIBUTION

Current State:

There is very little formal activity or initiatives in this space outside of the more obvious economic benefits the tourism industry provides to the Cook Islands. The exception is the voluntary ‘Mana Tiaki’ Eco Certification for operators who have proven to have certain sustainability/conservation commitments. There is an opportunity for the tourism industry to become more directly involved in/supportive of surrounding communities and the environment, both collectively and as individual operators. This opportunity is available throughout the travel-trade distribution system, where trade partners can be chosen/incentivised based on regenerative principles.

Objective:

Develop travel-trade partnerships, practices, and products that maximise regenerative travel benefits to the Cook Islands.

Strategic Alignment:

- Pacific 2030: Priorities 1, 4, 5, 6
- NSDA 2020+: Pledges 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 11

Tactics

- Encourage industry to improve levels of corporate social responsibility and regenerative practices
- Empower industry to advocate for responsible/regenerative travel

Tactical Approach

A high priority of the CITDS is to guide the process of turning strategic ideas and aspirations into operational reality, with real-world efforts and outcomes. The following outlines this process for each of the aspirations and areas of focus identified.



Step 1:

TACTICS & KEY ACTIONS

Potential methods or tactics available to achieve each of the sixteen Areas of Focus (AOF) were identified. This was followed by examining the key actions each of these would require. Potential measures of performance for each tactic were then established.

Step 2:

PRIORITIZATION

With a large number of potential actions identified and a finite amount of resources available to CIT, the relative importance of each to the overall role of CIT needed to be assessed. This was achieved by creating an assessment model where each tactic was scored against multiple criteria to provide an overall priority score. Tactics were then grouped into priority ratings (High, Medium, Low).

Step 3:

TIMEFRAME

A realistic timeframe for the successful development or achievement of each of the tactics was confirmed. The timeframes considered are as follows: 'Short-term' (up to 12 months), 'Mid-term' (1 - 3 years), and 'Long-term' (3 - 5 years). This information is used to build a timeline of operational efforts and clarifies what the immediate priorities for CIT should be.

Step 4:

AN OVERVIEW OF THE COOKISLANDS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT WORKING PLAN

The CITDS is very ambitious in terms of what it strives to influence and achieve over the next five years and therefore requires a clear roadmap detailing how the aspirations, areas of focus, and associated tactics will be actioned most efficiently and effectively using the resources available.

With this in mind and as part of the development of CITDS, a companion document (CITDS working plan) has been produced. This will act as a largely internal document providing a detailed guide for CIT and their delivery partners toward the successful adoption and operationalisation of the CITDS.

Workstreams

Details the key actions required for each tactic, then groups the tactics into recurring areas of work. Identifies whether the tactic is something that should be led or supported by CIT and which delivery partners may be required.

Resources

Lists the current Human Resource (HR) and financial (\$) resources available for the actioning of the CITDS, and provides recommendations concerning the most appropriate allocation of these. Outlines which external partners might help and how.

Adoption of Strategy

Details how CIT intends to transition its current operations and resources to align with the CITDS approach, and how the CITDS framework will be applied in practice.

Evaluation Framework

Identifies the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and measuring mechanisms that will be used to evaluate performance. Outlines how this performance will be tracked and reported, and how the CITDS document itself will be kept fit for purpose.

Risk Mitigation

Provides an overview of potential risks to the successful undertaking of CITDS, along with some possible mitigating or contingent actions that can be taken.



Conclusion



The Cook Islands Development Strategy (CITDS) is much more than just a strategic document. It represents a new dawn for Cook Islands tourism – one that leverages the inherent power of the wider visitor economy to actively enhance the health and happiness of both our people and place. This approach firmly and unapologetically places the long-term needs of our communities and treasured island home first, then explores how a high-quality, culturally genuine, and truly unique visitor experience can be designed and developed around these.

One undeniable lesson that Covid-19 has taught us is that tourism can and will be susceptible to disrupting events that we have little or no control over. The forced ‘reset’ that the pandemic has brought to global travel also brings with it an incredible, once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink our approach to destination development and to ‘build back better’. As international travel slowly recovers, it is crucial that lessons are learned from recent crises and that we work together to embed long-term inclusivity, sustainability, and resilience into our tourism sector. As tourism is the Cook Islands’ main source of GDP, it is also our role to influence and inspire the collective, acting as a leader and catalyst for the Cook Islands as a whole to embrace a more sustainable (and ultimately regenerative) way of working.

Never has the trend toward responsible/regenerative travel been more prevalent or timely. The CITDS represents an exciting opportunity to harness this and create a legacy for the Cook Islands that translates into enormous benefits both now and for future generations. We must be brave and grab it with both hands.

Te Kaveinga Manava Turoto o te Ipukarea

AIMS TO:

- **Enhance and Leverage our Visitor Economy**
Work collaboratively to ensure the visitor economy generates widespread and sustainable benefit to the Cook Islands.
- **Optimise the Visitor Experience**
Ensure the ongoing well-being, comfort, and satisfaction of our visitors.
- **Empower our Tourism Industry**
Maintain a positive relationship with our industry to help build capability and resilience, and collectively ensure an exceptional offering to visitors.
- **Encourage Regenerative Tourism Practices**
Ensure visitors have a positive influence on the social, cultural, environmental, and economic wellbeing of our people and place.



Love a little paradise
...for real

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