

THE COOK ISLANDS

GSTC Destination Assessment

January 2025





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ACRONYMS

AACI	Airport Authority Cook Islands
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASI	Assurance Services International
CIT	Cook Islands Tourism
CITDS	Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GSTC	Global Sustainable Tourism Council
GSTC-D	GSTC Destination Criteria
MEC	Muri Environment Care
NASAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSDA	National Sustainable Development Agenda
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SPCA	Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cook Islands is a tropical paradise in the South Pacific known for its pristine beaches, clear turquoise waters, and vibrant coral reefs. The nation consists of 15 islands spread over 1.8 million square kilometers of ocean, which are divided into two groups—the Northern and Southern Cook Islands. The Southern Islands, including the main island of Rarotonga and the famous lagoon at Aitutaki, are more populated and developed. The Northern Islands are remote and sparsely populated.

The Cook Islands lie between French Polynesia to the east and Tonga to the west, situated about 3,000 kilometers (1,865 miles) northeast of New Zealand. The islands are of volcanic origin, with Rarotonga—the most populated island—characterized by rugged mountains, lush valleys, and a barrier reef enclosing a serene lagoon. The islands have a tropical climate, with warm temperatures year-round and a wet season from November to April.

According to recent estimates, the nation has a population of around 17,000 people, with most residing on Rarotonga. The islands' residents are primarily of Polynesian descent and speak Cook Islands Māori and English. While the Cook Islands is self-governing in free association with New Zealand, its people are New Zealand citizens, allowing for migration between the two countries.

Tourism is the economic backbone of the Cook Islands, accounting for approximately 70% of its GDP and being the primary source of foreign exchange. This industry significantly contributes to local employment and sustains many businesses, from accommodations and restaurants to tour companies and handicrafts. The Cook Islands is a unique destination, attracting visitors seeking an authentic and serene South Pacific experience. The nation's dependence on tourism makes sustainable practices



essential to preserving its natural beauty and cultural heritage, and the benefits flowing to its citizenry.

With the full support of Cook Islands Tourism, GSTC expert assessors Dr. Bricker and Dr. Kerstetter led this unbiased assessment of the Cook Island's compliance with the GSTC Destination Criteria (D), the global baseline standard for sustainable destinations. The assessment consisted of extensive desktop analysis of current national and tourism-based activities and approaches. The assessment also included a 10-day on-site visit by Dr. Bricker. She interviewed local authorities and stakeholders to objectively verify evidence of compliance with GSTC Destination Criteria (D). The combined findings of Dr. Bricker's and Dr. Kerstetter's efforts are provided in this report.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The Cook Islands Destination Assessment evaluates the nation's tourism sector based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Destination Criteria. The assessment provides a comprehensive overview of the nation's sustainable tourism practices across four key pillars: Sustainable Management, Socio-economic Sustainability, Cultural Sustainability, and Environmental Sustainability. The results reveal strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement to achieve a more sustainable and regenerative tourism model.

Section A: Sustainable Management

Score: 1.91 (Needs Improvement)

Highlights: The Cook Islands demonstrates a solid foundation in destination management with an effective strategy emphasizing regenerative tourism principles. Key strengths include the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) and its alignment with global frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Challenges: Areas requiring improvement include better systems for monitoring, planning regulations, and feedback mechanisms for visitors regarding sustainability-related aspects of tourism in the Cook Islands.

Performance Overview: One criterion achieved “Excellent Performance” (Destination Management Strategy), while others require enhancement to strengthen governance and implementation of sustainability practices.

Section B: Socio-economic Sustainability

Score: 1.61 (Moderate Risk)

Highlights: Tourism contributes approximately 70% of GDP, underscoring its economic importance. Safety, security, and support for local entrepreneurs are areas of relative strength.

Challenges: Accessibility for people with disabilities and addressing labor shortages remain critical gaps. Increased focus is needed on equitable economic benefits and workforce development.

Performance Overview: While there is evidence of economic impact measurement and workforce support, further action is needed to ensure widespread community benefits and equitable opportunities.

Section C: Cultural Sustainability

Score: 1.20 (Moderate Risk)

Highlights: Cultural initiatives such as preserving traditional crafts, music, and language demonstrate a commitment to heritage. Programs like Te Maeva Nui and cultural villages provide meaningful cultural experiences.

Challenges: Visitor management at cultural sites and protections for intellectual property remain

insufficient. Strengthening these areas is crucial for preserving the integrity of cultural heritage.

Performance Overview: Efforts to integrate culture into tourism are evident but require enhanced safeguards to protect and promote cultural assets effectively.

Section D: Environmental Sustainability

Score: 1.14 (High Risk)

Highlights: Notable initiatives include the Marae Moana Marine Protected Area and renewable energy projects aimed at achieving 100% renewable energy generation. Environmental conservation is emphasized in the CITDS framework.

There are also numerous NGOs that are actively contributing to efforts to manage tourism and tourism impacts. These include but are not limited to:

- Te Ipukarea Society: This environmental NGO is committed to advocating for and fostering a sustainable, healthy, biodiverse, and beautiful environment in the Cook Islands.
- Kōrero O Te `Ōrau: This organization focuses on preserving the Cook Islands' culture, environment, and natural resources.
- Cook Islands Voyaging Society: Dedicated to promoting Polynesian navigation, cultural ancestry, and environmental knowledge, this society builds and sails replicas of traditional double-hulled voyaging canoes, undertaking voyages throughout Polynesia using traditional navigation techniques.
- Cook Islands Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA): While primarily focused on animal welfare, the SPCA contributes to the tourism sector by managing stray and abandoned animals, ensuring a safer and more pleasant environment for both residents and visitors, and offering visitors' opportunities for active engagement.
- Te Are Manu Vet Clinic: This veterinary clinic provides essential services for animal health and welfare, indirectly supporting tourism by maintaining public health standards and animal control.

- Cook Islands Red Cross Society: Engaged in disaster relief and community development, the Society plays a crucial role in maintaining the resilience of communities, which is vital for a stable tourism industry.
- Cook Islands National Council of Women: Focused on women's rights and welfare, the Council contributes to social development, which enhances the cultural experience for tourists.
- Muri Environment Care (<https://mec.org.ck>): Muri Environment Care is a community group whose passion is to preserve and protect the beautiful Muri Lagoon. This area is well-loved and respected by local community members, who volunteer to undertake projects which will conserve the natural environment in the face of changing climate challenges.

These organizations collaborate with government agencies, local businesses, and communities to develop and implement sustainable tourism strategies. For instance, the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy, launched in 2022, provides a roadmap for regenerative tourism development, focusing on holistic well-being across community, culture, conservation, and commerce.

Challenges: Critical areas of concern include waste management, wildlife interaction, greenhouse gas emissions, and water stewardship. Enhanced policies and enforcement mechanisms are essential to mitigate environmental risks.

Performance Overview: Environmental sustainability efforts are still in early stages, with significant work needed to achieve meaningful outcomes.

SUMMARY

The Cook Islands' overall average score of 1.46 reflects the need for significant advancements to meet the GSTC baseline destination assessment tourism standards. Strengths in strategic planning (currently underway) and cultural preservation provide a foundation, but gaps in environmental and socio-economic practices highlight areas for urgent attention. Further, there appears to be a lack of regulations related to tourism management,

a tourism authority who can address tourism management, and a strong cross-sector collaboration specifically to address tourism management. Based on the results of this assessment at this moment in time, the main tourism challenges facing the Cook Islands, as identified in the assessment, are as follows:

1. Infrastructure Limitations

- Insufficient infrastructure to support growing visitor numbers, particularly on the outer islands (Pa Enua). Key areas of concern include waste management, water resources, energy systems, and transportation networks.
- Outdated facilities and a lack of sustainable tourism infrastructure hinder the ability to meet environmental, resident, and visitor needs.

2. Environmental Impact

- Increasing tourism activities have led to significant environmental concerns, such as inadequate waste management, threats to biodiversity, habitat, and wildlife (e.g., sea turtles, whales) and water pollution.
- Wildlife interactions, such as tours involving turtles and whales, are insufficiently regulated, creating risks for local ecosystems.
- Limited efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and light and noise pollution exacerbate environmental challenges.

3. Over-reliance on Tourism

- Tourism contributes approximately 70% of the GDP, making the economy highly dependent on this single sector.
- This reliance leaves the Cook Islands vulnerable to external shocks, such as global economic downturns or events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Workforce and Labor Shortages

- The sector faces labor shortages, particularly in skilled roles within hospitality and tourism services.
- Youth engagement in tourism careers is low, with limited workforce development initiatives to prepare the next generation of professionals.

Gender equity issues and family responsibilities affect women’s pursuit of and roles in the workforce, particularly in the non-agricultural arena, which includes tourism.

5. Uneven Distribution of Tourism Benefits

- Tourism benefits are concentrated in Rarotonga and Aitutaki, while the outer islands struggle to attract visitors and distribute economic gains equitably. This division reinforces the various stages of development within the Cook Islands.
- Infrastructure gaps in the Pa Enua limit their ability to accommodate and benefit from tourism.

6. Cultural Preservation and Management

- Cultural sites and intangible heritage are at risk due to insufficient visitor management systems and protections for intellectual property. Cultural representation safeguards must ensure that presentations authentically reflect Cook Islands culture.
- There is a lack of robust systems to monitor and mitigate the impacts of tourism on cultural sites.

7. Climate Change Vulnerability

- The Cook Islands are highly susceptible to climate change effects, including rising sea levels and extreme weather events, which threaten both tourism infrastructure and natural resources.

8. Visitor Management

- Overtourism during peak seasons strains resources, particularly in Rarotonga and

Aitutaki, where visitor volumes may exceed levels appropriate with infrastructure, workforce, and visitor management.

- There is limited monitoring and regulation of visitor activities, impacting both community quality of life and the natural environment.

9. Funding and Resource Allocation

- The tourism sector struggles with securing adequate funding for sustainability initiatives and infrastructure improvements.
- Competition for municipal budgets with other critical services (e.g., police and fire) often results in insufficient financial support for parks, recreation, and tourism management.

10. Awareness and Education

- Limited public awareness campaigns targeting visitors, educating them on sustainable tourism practices and the importance of environmental and cultural stewardship.
- A lack of comprehensive education programs for local communities and stakeholders to fully understand and engage with regenerative tourism principles.

By addressing these challenges through improved planning, investment, and enforcement of sustainability measures, the Cook Islands can move toward a more resilient and balanced tourism model.

TABLE 1. Average Summary of the GSTC-D Sustainability Pillars

Pillars		Scoring # of Indicators per Criterion
A	Sustainable Management	1.91
B	Socio-Economic Sustainability	1.58
C	Cultural Sustainability	1.26
D	Environmental Sustainability	1.16
Overall Average		1.47

INTRODUCTION

GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM COUNCIL

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council® (GSTC®) is an independent and neutral organization, legally registered in the USA as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that represents a diverse and global membership, including national and provincial governments, leading travel companies, hotels, tour operators, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), individuals, and communities—all striving to achieve best practices in sustainable tourism. It is a virtual organization without a main office, with staff and volunteers working from all six populated continents. Financial support from donations, sponsorship, and membership fees allows GSTC to provide services at low cost and to create, revise, and make available the GSTC Criteria. GSTC is an ISEAL community member.

GSTC establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, known as the GSTC Criteria. There are two sets of criteria: Destination Criteria for public policymakers and destination managers, and Industry Criteria for hotels and tour operators. The Criteria are the result of a worldwide effort to develop a common language about sustainability in tourism. They are arranged in four pillars: (A) Sustainable management; (B) Socio-economic sustainability; (C) Cultural sustainability; and (D) Environmental sustainability. Since tourism destinations each have their own culture, environment, customs, and laws, the Criteria are designed to be adapted to local conditions and supplemented by additional criteria for the specific location and activity.

The GSTC Criteria forms the foundation for the Accreditation for Certification Bodies that certify hotels/accommodations, tour operators, and destinations as having sustainable policies and



practices in place. GSTC does not directly certify any products or services but does provide an accreditation program through its partner Assurance Services International (ASI) to accredit Certification Bodies.

GSTC DESTINATION ASSESSMENT

The GSTC Destination Assessment is designed to introduce the destination management team to the core elements required for development of sustainable policies and practices informed by the GSTC Criteria. The Assessment process allows a destination to participate directly in the GSTC application of the Criteria to the destination, to understand the destination's sustainability status

against the world's leading standard, and to identify areas for improvement based on the GSTC Criteria.

The GSTC Criteria aims to address sustainability from a holistic perspective, reviewing overall governance, socio-economic benefits to the destination, cultural and heritage preservation, and environmental performance. These factors all lead to a positive investment climate, a strong sense of place, and high quality of life for both residents and visitors in the destination. The GSTC destination assessment is not an audit and does not constitute any kind of verification or endorsement of the destination's policies, practices, or status by GSTC. The objective of the assessment is to provide the destination with an overview of current good practices and risk areas, a demonstration of practical application of the GSTC Destination Criteria (GSTC-D) for stakeholder capacity building purposes, and a tool for internal use to improve destination policy and practice to align with international best practice and the GSTC Criteria.

GSTC-D has been built on decades of prior work and experience around the world and considers numerous guidelines and standards for sustainable tourism from every continent. The GSTC-D v2.0 is the first revision to the GSTC Destination Criteria. The GSTC-D v2.0 includes performance indicators designed to provide guidance in measuring compliance with the Criteria. Application of the Criteria will help a destination to contribute towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

In selecting the GSTC Destination Criteria as a guide for the Cook Island's strategic development, the nation joins an elite group of forward-thinking destinations that are prioritizing international best practices. As the Cook Islands moves forward in adopting all the GSTC Destination Criteria, it will be better able to market itself to individuals who believe in and adopt sustainability practices. Based on the GSTC Destination Assessment, the Cook Islands cannot claim GSTC's endorsement of the destination or its policies. However, it would be appropriate for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation to communicate that it participated in the GSTC assessment, and is committed, if true, to adopting the world's leading sustainability criteria for tourism development.

It is recommended that findings resulting from this GSTC assessment be used:

- to inform action on destination sustainability planning and project work,
- to catalyze decision maker support for a destination tourism sustainability agenda,
- as a training and education tool,
- for monitoring and evaluation of destination performance, and
- as an input into the strategic planning process that Cook Islands Tourism Corporation has underway for sustainable tourism development in the Cook Islands.



OVERVIEW OF THE COOK ISLANDS

INTRODUCTION

TURANGA MEMEITAKI

Located between French Polynesia and American Samoa, the 15 islands that comprise the Cook Islands are “self-governing in ‘free association’ with New Zealand.”¹ This unique partnership has its own set of principles (see Joint Centenary Declaration²), obligations, and expectations. Specifically, the Cook Islands is expected to uphold shared values and principles including human rights and good governance and New Zealand has specific obligations for foreign affairs, defense and security, upon the request of the Cook Islands Government.

Building on the autonomy it was afforded with the Joint Centenary Declaration, the Cook Islands has entered in to treaties with other countries in the South Pacific, become a founding member of the South Pacific Forum (now called the Pacific Islands Forum), and become a member of international organizations such as UNESCO and the Asian Development Bank (<https://www.britannica.com>). It has not forgotten its roots, however. A council of hereditary leaders, the House of Ariki (High Chiefs) advises the government on traditional matters of landownership, customs, and more.

The Cook Islands and New Zealand share a common history; a relationship with the British monarchy; a common currency; and economic, cultural and community links. Given the nation’s “...distance from foreign markets, limited size of domestic markets, lack of natural resources, periodic devastation from natural disasters, and inadequate infrastructure” (<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org>), the service sector—



primarily tourism—leads its economy. In financial year 2022/23 tourism accounted for approximately 68% of the Cook Island’s GDP (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/visitor-arrivals-go-recovery-record>). Other leading industries include construction, agriculture/forestry/fishing,

¹ <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/countries-and-regions/australia-and-pacific/cook-islands/new-zealand-high-commission-to-the-cook-islands/about-cook-islands>

² <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Countries-and-Regions/Pacific/Cook-Islands/Cook-Islands-2001-Joint-Centenary-Declaration-signed.pdf>

government administration, and international financial services (Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030).

The Covid-19 Pandemic had a devastating impact on the Cook Islands Economy, with nominal GDP reducing by 41.1% between the year to December 2019 and year to June 2021 (Cook Islands Statistics Office, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management). In response, the government is pursuing an economic recovery with a primary emphasis on infrastructure and aviation investment.

The infrastructure investment, which is outlined in the Cook Islands National Infrastructure Investment Plan Report, is tied to the National Planning Framework (2015-2020) as well as the nation's National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020 (Te Kaveinga Nui), the National Infrastructure Investment Plan (2015), and key policies and strategies that affect infrastructure asset management. The government plans to work with overseas development partners (e.g., Pacific Island countries); solicit funding from the European Development Fund, the Global Climate Change Alliance Plus, the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement (funded by the European Commission), Pacific Aviation Investment Project, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, etc.; and draw on domestic revenues, loans, and the private sector to pay for upgrades to the Cook Islands.

Government agencies involved in infrastructure planning, delivery, and maintenance are: Cook Islands Investment Corporation, Infrastructure Cook Islands, Major Project and Procurement Support, To Tatou Vai, Te Aponga Uira, Te Mana O Uira, Airport Authority, Ports Authority, and Avaroa Cable Limited. Other government agencies who are not implementing but are involved in infrastructure projects include the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Transport, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Cook Islands Tourism Corporation is the government agency tasked with promoting and developing tourism in the Cook Islands. Its goal is “to achieve sustained growth, in a manner which is economically viable, socially acceptable [,] and environmentally sustainable” (<https://ck.linkedin.com/company/cookislands>). It also endeavors to use tourism to “[advance] the well-being of resident

Cook Islanders,” which is in line with the nation's National Sustainable Development Plan (see National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+). A Minister of Tourism, who is appointed by the Prime Minister, is not involved in the day-to-day management of the Corporation but does appoint and work with a Board of Directors who in turn appoints and oversees the efforts of the CEO of the Corporation. In addition to the offices on Rarotonga, Aitutaki, and Atiu, the Corporation has satellite offices in New Zealand and Australia and third-party representation in Southern and Northern Europe as well as the United States.

The Corporation has three divisions: Destination Marketing, Destination Development, and Finance & Administration. A Director of Global Sales & Marketing oversees the efforts of the International Offices as well as the General Manager of Marketing, a Digital Manager and five Digital Marketing Coordinators, and a Trade Manager. Destination Development is primarily engaged in the following activities: tourism infrastructure; event development; tourism enterprise development and industry standards, including communication to the community, education, and training; and strategic planning. A Director of Destination Development; a Industry Development Manager; a Regenerative Tourism Manager; a Visitor Experience Manager; a Industry Development Coordinator; a Regenerative Tourism Coordinator; a Visitor Experience Coordinator; Tourism Coordinators for Rarotonga, Aitutaki, and Atiu; Tourism Officers for Rarotonga and Aitutaki; and a Research and Statistic Officer manage these activities. Finance & Administration is represented through a Director of Finance & Administration as well as a Finance & Administration Manager and a Finance & Administration Officer.

A second organization, the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council, which represents over 175 businesses, works with the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and other stakeholders to “...ensure that the opinions and needs of [its] members are effectively communicated...” (<https://citourismindustryCouncil.com>). Formed in 2008, the Council also assists its members by “...strengthening [the] tourism infrastructure (water, electricity, human resources/training, security, plus airline access and capacity)” and identifying and providing resources that will help them to more efficiently operate their businesses. (<https://citourismindustryCouncil.com/about-us>).

The Cook Islands Chamber of Commerce also represents private sector interests in the Cook Islands. It “aims to assist, advocate, train and develop, and collaborate with [its] business, government, and international agencies to promote a business enabling environment in the Cook Islands” (<https://commerce.co.ck/>).

GEOGRAPHY

The Cook Islands is in the South Pacific Ocean, 3,500 kilometers (2,200) miles northeast of New Zealand and 1,000 kilometers (600) miles southwest of Tahiti—the center of the Polynesian Triangle. The 15 islands, encompassing 236.7 square kilometers (91 square miles), are divided into the main island of Rarotonga and the northern and southern groups (i.e., Pa Enua or outer islands). The northern Pa Enua (Manihiki, Nassau, Penrhyn, Pukapuka, Rakahanga, and Suvarrow) are covered in light vegetation and edged by white sand beaches. The southern Pa Enua (Aitutaki, Atiu, Mangaia, Manuae, Mauke, Mitiaro, Palmerston, and Takutea) are home to coral reefs, lagoons, and volcanic hills that support tropical and subtropical vegetation. The two Pa Enua are “markedly different in their social, cultural and economic activities” (Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030).

Rarotonga, the largest and most populated island, is volcanic with ridges and a rainforest located in its interior. It is also home to the Cross-Island Track that passes the highest point in the Cook Islands—Te Manga at 652 meters (2,140 feet). Avarua, a town and district in the north of the island, is the national capital of the Cook Islands. As of the 2021 Census, Rarotonga, the largest island in the Cook Islands, had a resident population of 10,898. In 2023, the Cook Islands welcomed 143,506 tourists, marking a significant increase from the 113,551 visitors in 2022.

The second most populated island and tourist destination is Aitutaki. It consists of a main land area (18.05 km² or 6.97 sq m), 15 islets set in a turquoise lagoon, and a surrounding barrier reef. Five of the fifteen islands are divided into land districts and/or traditional sub-districts (i.e., tapere). For example, Rarotonga is divided into five land districts and 54 tapere. Aitutaki, on the other hand, has 8 districts and 19 tapere. The remaining islands have villages (Miti'āro, Nassau, Penrhyn, Pukapuka, and Rakahanga), are uninhabited (Manuae, Takutea, and Suvarrow), or are uniquely

structured (Palmerston Island and Manihiki). Palmerston Island is home to descendants of one family, the Marsters. In 1954 the family was granted full ownership of the island. Today, in association with New Zealand, the Island is administered by the Cook Islands government through the Palmerston Island Administration. Manihiki, on the other hand, known informally as the “Island of Pearls,” consists of seven islands, two (Tauhunu and Ngake) of which are inhabited. Two tribes—the Matakeinanga and Tukufare—each with seven sub-tribes, live in two separate villages on the two inhabited islands.

“The Cook Islands Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) measures 1.97 million square kilometers. Negotiations [are] being conducted to increase the sea-floor area controlled by the Cook Islands, by extending the claim over the continental shelf. This will not increase the size of the EEZ but will give the Cook Islands sovereign rights over the extra-floor area. This is of interest because of the potential for seabed minerals in that region” (Cook Islands Third National Communication, 2019).

The Cook Islands is a biodiversity hotspot that is home to several endemic animals and species. Specifically, seven birds (Rarotonga Fruit Dove, Mangaia Kingfisher, Atiu Swiftlet, Rarotonga Monarch, Rarotonga Starling, Cook Reed Warbler, and the extinct Mysterious Starling); one reptile (Rarotonga Tree Skink); two marine fish species (Flashlightfish and Powell's False Moray); and six endemic trees (Mitiaro Fan-Palm, Cook Islands Homalium, Rarotonga Fitchia, Cook Islands Pittosporum, Rarotonga Meryta, and the Ngaputoru Pandanus). The Islands are also host to numerous endemic arthropods, land snails, species of vascular plants, lichens, and non-vascular plants (see <https://Intreasures.com/cooks.html>.) Bird Life International has recognized “Important Bird Areas” throughout the Cook Islands. These areas include: Takitumu Conservation Area on Rarotonga and the islands of Aitutaki, Takutea, Atiu, Mangaia, Miti'āro, and Suvarrow. In 2017 Moko'ero Nui Nature Reserve was established on Atiu to protect 120 hectares of coastal forest.

POPULATION

In 2016 the Cook Islands had a population of 17,459 people. By 2024 the population had declined by 2.2% (<https://www.worldometers.info>). Known as “Cook Islanders,” most are citizens of New Zealand and



have the status of “Cook Island Nationals.” This same privilege is not available to New Zealand citizens.

More than one-half of Cook Islanders live on Rarotonga, but only half of them are permanent residents. The majority live in New Zealand and Australia” (<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org>). Those who do live permanently in the area tend to live in villages or on their farms, particularly on Rarotonga (<https://www.britannica.com>). Residents are very homogeneous; 85.7% of the population identify as part or fully Cook Island Maori. A very small percentage of residents identify as New Zealand Maori/European (3.4%), Filipino (2.9%), other Pacific Islands (1.8%), or other (2.6%). The median age in the Cook Islands is approximately 41 years of age.

“The traditional leadership structure of the Cook Islands still exists and is recognized by the local communities. On some islands, access to land and other resources is still controlled by the Ariki (traditional chief). In 1966 the government legislated to establish a 15-member Are Ariki, House of Ariki and later the Koutu Nui 3 to advise government on land and customary matters as well as other matters of national importance. Both bodies are involved in consultations on important national issues. Engagement on climate change-related matters with the traditional leaders is essential in determining actions and acceptance” (Cook Islands Third National Communication, 2019).

COOK ISLANDS TOURISM

The Cook Islands is a country characterized by two different development trajectories. The main island of Rarotonga is the commercial and governmental hub with matching infrastructure. There is a robust tourism industry and a developed private sector. Aitutaki also has a growing tourism industry (Cook Islands Third National Communication, 2019).

According to the Cook Islands Tourism Marketing Corporation Amendment of 2007, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) has policy and planning, marketing and promotion, cultural and community, outer islands, general administration, and education and training functions. All these functions contribute to the Corporation’s efforts to promote the Cook Islands as a visitor destination.

The CIT is the official source for information on tourism market research, partnership opportunities, and industry news.

The tourism industry in the Cook Islands is a cornerstone of its economy and is outlining significant strategies toward sustainability and regenerative practices. The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) emphasizes a shift from sustainability to regeneration. This approach focuses on enhancing well-being across four pillars: community, culture, conservation, and commerce. The goal is for tourism to actively contribute to the

well-being of residents and the environment, ensuring long-term social, cultural, and ecological benefits.

SUSTAINABILITY AND WELL-BEING

Tourism aligns with the National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+ (NSDA), prioritizing “Turanga Memeitaki” (well-being) by promoting comfort, health, and happiness through economic and social development. Efforts include responsible management of resources, preserving cultural heritage, and maintaining environmental integrity.

TOURISM PERFORMANCE AND CHALLENGES

1. Visitor Arrivals

Visitor numbers increased approximately 32% from 123,884 in 2019/20 to 163,552 in 2023/24, with New Zealand being the primary market (68%), followed by Australia (20%).

The average length of stay was 8.9 days, with a high visitor satisfaction rate of 94%.

2. Economic Contribution

Tourism generated approximately NZD 429 million in direct visitor expenditure in 2022/23, highlighting its economic significance.

3. Challenges

According to the CIT, key challenges include infrastructure limitations, labor shortages, reliance on New Zealand visitors, and environmental impacts from high-season tourism in Rarotonga and Aitutaki.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

1. The Love Our Little Paradise brand strategy and market positioning work

It represents a major shift in how the CIT wants to promote the Cook Islands as a tourism offering, and the role tourism can play in contributing to overall wellbeing amongst residents.

2. Air Connectivity

The addition of new international routes, including direct flights from Sydney, Honolulu, and Papeete, has strengthened access and market diversification. However, this also adds

potentially more visitors during the established peak season.

3. Sustainable Practices

Initiatives such as the “Mana Tiaki” (guardianship) program highlight cultural and environmental stewardship, encouraging visitors to respect local traditions and natural resources.

4. Community and Regional Focus

Efforts to integrate tourism benefits into the Pa Enua aim to distribute economic and cultural gains more evenly, yet infrastructure developments may slow this progress.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The CIT has numerous plans to enhance destination resilience including, but not limited to: diversifying visitor markets and increasing contributions from new source countries, promoting local goods and services to maximize economic benefits, and strengthening public-private partnerships to foster innovation and competitiveness. This regenerative approach places the well-being of residents and environmental conservation at the core of tourism, setting a benchmark for sustainable destination development.

SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS IN THE COOK ISLANDS

The Cook Islands is working on sustainability initiatives to balance economic development with environmental conservation and cultural preservation. There are many plans and efforts starting up to ensure long-term sustainability of the island nation. Currently many of these efforts are aspirational, yet at the forefront of stakeholders’ minds.

The following are examples of environmental, cultural/historic, and economic sustainability initiatives underway in the Cook Islands.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

1. Renewable Energy Transition

The Cook Islands has embarked on a program to enhance energy security and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by increasing the use of renewable energy sources. This initiative aims to achieve 100% renewable electricity generation, primarily through solar energy and biomass.

Progress to date includes the installation of solar panels with battery backups on northern atolls and the commissioning of the Te Mana O Te Ra solar farm on Rarotonga. The Cook Islands is just embarking on this initiative; thus, it has achieved 17% renewable electricity generation.

2. Marine Conservation

In 2017 the Cook Islands established Marae Moana, one of the world's largest multiple-use marine protected areas, covering the nation's entire exclusive economic zone of over 1.9 million square kilometers. This initiative aims to protect marine biodiversity while allowing sustainable use of marine resources. There are initiatives underway to address visitor management and licensing of tour operators.

3. Regenerative Tourism Development

The Cook Islands is adopting regenerative tourism practices to ensure that tourism development benefits local communities and preserves natural and cultural resources. The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy provides a roadmap for this approach, focusing on community engagement, cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and economic sustainability. Efforts are currently underway to create a strategic plan for implementation.

4. National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) 2020+

The NSDA 2020+ outlines a long-term vision for sustainable development in the Cook Islands, emphasizing well-being, social equity, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. The agenda serves as a living framework guiding the nation's progress toward achieving its sustainable development goals.

5. Climate Resilience and Green Climate Fund Engagement

The Cook Islands has actively engaged with the Green Climate Fund to enhance climate resilience. The nation has received multiple readiness grants to strengthen its capacity to access climate finance and implement climate adaptation and mitigation projects.

6. Biodiversity Conservation Initiatives

The Cook Islands is committed to conserving biodiversity by establishing protected areas and implementing conservation programs. Efforts include the eradication of invasive species and the protection of endangered native species to maintain ecological balance and preserve natural heritage. The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NASAP) and Project Eヌua are key components of this effort, both of which are administered by the NES.

With respect to biodiversity conservation, it is important to note that the Cook Islands is considering deep-sea mining to extract minerals from the ocean floor, which could boost the country's economy however be contrary to "Love our Little Paradise" as expressed by many stakeholders.

The Cook Islands has large reserves of minerals in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that could be used to make electric vehicle batteries and other clean energy technologies. Some say that mining the ocean floor could be less harmful to the environment than open-pit surface mines.

However, others are concerned that deep-sea mining could cause irreparable damage to the ocean, which is still poorly understood. Environmentalists and over 800 scientists have called for a moratorium on deep-sea mining. In 2022, the Cook Islands issued five-year exploration licenses to three companies to survey the waters and test mining technology. The government has not announced if or when mining could start.

Cook Islanders have protested deep-sea mining, with some saying that the ocean is important for their livelihood, health, and cycle of life. A flotilla of several hundred Cook Islanders took to the water in a traditional double-hulled vaka, kayaks, jet skis, and other vessels to float a 75-square meter sign that said, "Protect Our Ocean, Think Deeply".

CULTURAL AND HISTORIC INITIATIVES

The Cook Islands places a high priority on cultural and historic preservation, recognizing that these elements are vital to national identity and an essential part of the visitor's experience. The following are some of the main efforts underway.

1. Cultural Heritage Sites and Traditional Architecture

The Cook Islands has undertaken preservation projects for key historic sites, such as ancient marae (sacred meeting places) and other traditional Polynesian structures. Rarotonga is home to several marae, which are not only physical relics of the past but also sacred spaces for the local community. Preservation efforts often include the careful restoration of these sites and promoting awareness about their cultural significance. Further, the Ministry of Culture is working to strengthen language (nine dialects), and documenting history through stories. Several documents support cultural preservation and initiatives, including the Cook Islands Cultural Policy, Cook Islands Cultural Strategy, and the Māori Act of 2003.

2. Te Au Vairanga—Cultural Village Experiences

Cultural experiences across the islands allow tourists and locals to experience traditional Cook Islands lifestyles, customs, music, and crafts. These villages showcase skills such as weaving, tattooing, drumming, and dance. Some examples include:

- Te Vara Nui Cultural Village (Rarotonga): Offers traditional Maori cultural tours and evening shows with dancing, drumming, and feasting.
- Highland Paradise (Rarotonga): Features tours of ancient mountain villages and cultural feasts.
- Punarea Culture Tours (Atiu): Explores cultural heritage with activities like traditional hunting.

3. Promotion of Traditional Arts and Handicrafts

Handicrafts are an essential part of Cook Islands culture, with weaving, carving, and tivaevae (a distinctive form of quilting) being popular. The government, along with local artisans, actively supports and promotes traditional arts and crafts through exhibitions, festivals, and markets. Programs often focus on training youth in these crafts to ensure tradition arts and handicrafts are sustained.

4. Cook Islands Māori Language Revitalization

Efforts are underway to preserve and revitalize the Cook Islands Māori language, a crucial component of cultural identity. The government has implemented language initiatives in schools and community programs to encourage use of the Māori language. Some tourist experiences also emphasize language immersion, allowing visitors to hear and learn basic phrases.

5. Music and Dance Conservation

Traditional music and dance are highly celebrated, especially with performances that showcase Cook Islands drumming, a unique style with strong Polynesian roots. The preservation of these traditions is supported through local performances, festivals, and competitions like Te Maeva Nui, a yearly cultural celebration featuring dance and music from all the islands. Te Maeva Nui helps pass down traditional dances and songs and provides an avenue for locals to showcase their heritage.

6. Historic Documents and Artifact Preservation

The Cook Islands National Museum, along with other cultural institutions, plays a key role in preserving documents, artifacts, and artwork that tell the history of the islands. Preservation includes storing and displaying artifacts from pre-European times, colonial history, and modern-day Cook Islanders' life.

7. Protection of Intangible Heritage

The government and cultural organizations work to document and preserve stories, legends, oral histories, and traditional knowledge passed down through generations. Some efforts involve creating digital archives, community workshops, and partnerships with schools to ensure that intangible cultural heritage remains vibrant.

8. Te Papa Takaro o te Oraanga—Protecting Natural Heritage

Ra'ui is a traditional practice of resource management where specific areas, whether on land or in the sea, are designated as off-limits for harvesting or use. This system, rooted in Polynesian customs, integrates environmental preservation with cultural and spiritual values,

aligning well with the description of “living landscapes” as culturally significant.

Through Ra’ui, community-based conservation initiatives are managed by local villages or leaders, ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources. This aligns with the emphasis on local communities playing a central role in protecting natural resources while balancing tourism and development—a critical consideration as tourism continues to grow in the Cook Islands.

However, tourism numbers and expanding tour operator offerings must be considered as the nation moves forward with its sustainable development plan.

9. Integration of Culture in Tourism

The Cook Islands is in the process of establishing a regenerative tourism model, which will work to ensure that tourism activities promote and respect local culture rather than exploit it. The upcoming Destination Stewardship Plan and “Responsible Tourism Framework” (including an Industry Standards refresh) will encourage tourism industry members to align with the Cook Island Tourism Corporation’s brand positioning. It is envisioned these will be steps towards implementing actions to enhance community benefits, and protect and preserve the cultural and natural resources of the Cook Islands.

The Cook Islands’ dedication to cultural and historical preservation ensures that its heritage is honored, shared, and safeguarded for future generations. This commitment not only benefits residents but also enriches the experience of visitors who gain deeper insights into the Islands’ unique cultural landscape.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

The government and local organizations have initiated various strategies to build a resilient, diversified economy that benefits the local population while mitigating the potential impacts of tourism and external economic shocks. The following is an overview of some key initiatives and approaches.

DIVERSIFICATION OF THE ECONOMY

1. Agriculture

The Cook Islands has been focusing on revitalizing its agricultural sector to reduce dependence on imports and promote food security, while reducing food emissions by reducing the miles food travels to the islands. Local programs encourage the cultivation of crops like taro, breadfruit, and tropical fruits.

SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

1. Foreign Investment with Local Benefits

The Cook Islands carefully regulates foreign investment, ensuring that projects align with national development goals and provide tangible benefits to local communities. The government prioritizes projects that include local employment, skills transfer, and long-term investment in the community. By requiring foreign-owned businesses to work closely with local stakeholders, the Cook Islands aims to foster sustainable partnerships that support economic stability.

2. Financial Services Sector Development

As a self-governing nation with close ties to New Zealand, the Cook Islands has established a regulated offshore financial services sector. While this sector is small, it contributes to the economy through services like trust management, insurance, and financial consulting. The government works to ensure the sector complies with international financial regulations to maintain credibility and avoid the risks associated with offshore finance.

3. Renewable Energy Transition

The Cook Islands aims to be fully powered by renewable energy, reducing reliance on costly imported fossil fuels and promoting energy independence. This transition is expected to lower energy costs for residents and businesses alike, making the economy more resilient to fluctuations in fuel prices. By investing in solar energy, the islands are working towards reducing their environmental footprint and creating new opportunities for green jobs and energy-based innovation. However, this is just

beginning with 17% of energy attributed to solar production thus far.

4. Resilience to Climate and Economic Shocks

The Cook Islands faces a high vulnerability to natural disasters and global economic shifts. To build resilience, the government has partnered with international organizations like the Green Climate Fund to finance projects that protect coastal areas, upgrade infrastructure, and develop disaster preparedness programs. This proactive approach is essential for safeguarding livelihoods, particularly in tourism and agriculture, from unexpected climate and economic events.

5. Digital Transformation and E-Government Services

The Cook Islands is investing in digital infrastructure to enhance efficiency, transparency, and economic opportunities. E-government services are improving access to information, simplifying business registration, and streamlining public services. This digital shift not only helps the government operate more efficiently but also opens new avenues for business and education, especially in remote areas.

6. Strengthening Regional and International Partnerships

The Cook Islands engages in regional trade agreements, environmental accords, and international partnerships to promote sustainable development. By working with regional organizations like the South Pacific Tourism Organization, Pacific Islands Forum, and global bodies like the United Nations and development banks such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Cook Islands gains access to resources, expertise, and funding that bolster economic sustainability efforts. It is unclear whether these programs have effectively and practically reached the local level.

These initiatives reflect the Cook Islands' aspirations for sustainable development, aiming to create a harmonious balance between economic growth, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation. Yet it appears that some of the initiatives have not been implemented nor enforced. The remainder of this report will highlight some of the successes and challenges faced by the Cook Islands sustainability initiatives relative to

tourism development and the efforts necessary by stakeholders, non-profits, and government initiatives that all play a role toward a sustainable destination.

SOURCES

- Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands National Infrastructure Investment Plan Report
- The Cook Islands National Water Policy 2016
- <https://www.britannica.com>
- <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/cook-islands/>
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- <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org>
- <https://www.worldometers.info>
- <https://www.worldtravelguide>
- NSDA 2020+
- The Cook Islands Third National Communication 2019
- Meetings and discussions with tourism stakeholders, Appendix A.
- United Nations Women website

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

GSTC ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The process of the GSTC Destination Assessment consists of the following phases as summarized below.

Pre-Desktop Assessment



Stakeholder mapping, document mapping, onsite assessment planning, communication with destination liaison

Onsite Assessment



Introductory workshop, meetings and interviews with stakeholders, site visits, closing workshop with preliminary findings

Desktop Assessment



Review of all documents and information collected, create a report, peer review from destination

Report Submission



PRE-DESKTOP ASSESSMENT

The two main tasks for pre-desktop assessment are stakeholder mapping and document mapping. These tasks were executed through close communication with the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation. The Corporation supported the GSTC Destination Assessors by collecting relevant information and arranging online and offline meetings with stakeholders.

Stakeholder Mapping: In this task key stakeholders from both the private and public sectors who should be involved in the assessment were identified by Cook Islands Tourism.

Document Mapping: In this task policy documents that address the GSTC Destination Criteria (e.g., relevant laws, regulations, guidelines) are identified. Document mapping was initiated by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation in response to Dr.

Bricker's and Dr. Kerstetter's queries. The primary documents used in this task are listed within each criteria assessed.

ONSITE ASSESSMENT

The onsite assessment took place from October 29–November 10, 2024. The Cook Island's operation, management, and cooperation systems were assessed based on GSTC-D through interviews and meetings with a range of stakeholders and by visiting some of the island's major sites. Interviews were planned with the assistance of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and based on previous stakeholder mapping and the desktop assessment. The places visited represented the nation's travel and tourism industry and were thought to impact sustainability.

Dr. Bricker traveled to Rarotonga, Aitutaki and Atiu to speak with stakeholders and community leaders and members (see Appendix A).

DESKTOP ASSESSMENT

Drs. Bricker and Kerstetter wrote this report based on the results of the onsite assessment and secondary data analysis of materials, which included information obtained from documents obtained from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation team as well as web-based information sites. Drs. Bricker and Kerstetter submitted a draft report to the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation team following the site visit. After analyzing and incorporating the feedback from the team, Drs. Bricker and Kerstetter finalized and submitted the final report.

GSTC ASSESSMENT TOOLS

EVALUATION CRITERIA COMPLIANCE

The Cook Islands (CI) were assessed against all GSTC Destination Criteria. The results are shown with different colors and scores. The evaluation starts with individual indicators. The compliance level of each criterion and pillar are calculated based on the average of the indicators and criteria respectively.

Indicator Scoring: Each indicator is evaluated based on evidence discussed, produced, or observed. Indicators are scored “0” if no documents or evidence exist, “1” if documentation exists but there is no evidence of implementation or ongoing work, “2” if there is evidence and implementation or ongoing work, and “3” if there is evidence and implementation or ongoing work as well as improving trends.

Criterion Scoring: Once indicators are reviewed, a score is calculated for each criterion. The criterion

score provides an overview of performance, ranging from “Areas of Risk” <1, “Areas of Moderate Risk” 1.00-1.49, “Needs Improvement” 1.50-1.99, “Good Performance” 2.00-2.49, and “Excellent Performance” >2.5.

Pillar Scoring: Each pillar score is calculated based on average criteria scores. The pillar score provides an overview of performance, ranging from “Level 1” <1 to “Level 2” 1.00-1.49, “Level 3” 1.50-1.99, “Level 4” 2.00-2.49, and “Level 5” >2.5.

COOK ISLANDS TOURISM ASSESSMENT PROCESS

- September 2024: Project initiated.
- October 2024: Completed desktop assessment; Onsite assessment, site visits, stakeholder meetings.
 - Destination On-site Engagement: Representatives from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation served as the primary destination liaison team. They responded to queries and provided documentation for each pillar based on questions asked by Drs. Bricker and Kerstetter. The list of people who participated in this process is in Appendix A.
- November 2024: Revised report draft to include onsite assessment updates.
- December 2024: GSTC and CIT review of DRAFT Report, revisions.
- January 2025: Completed final assessment report to CIT.

FIGURE 1. Scoring process

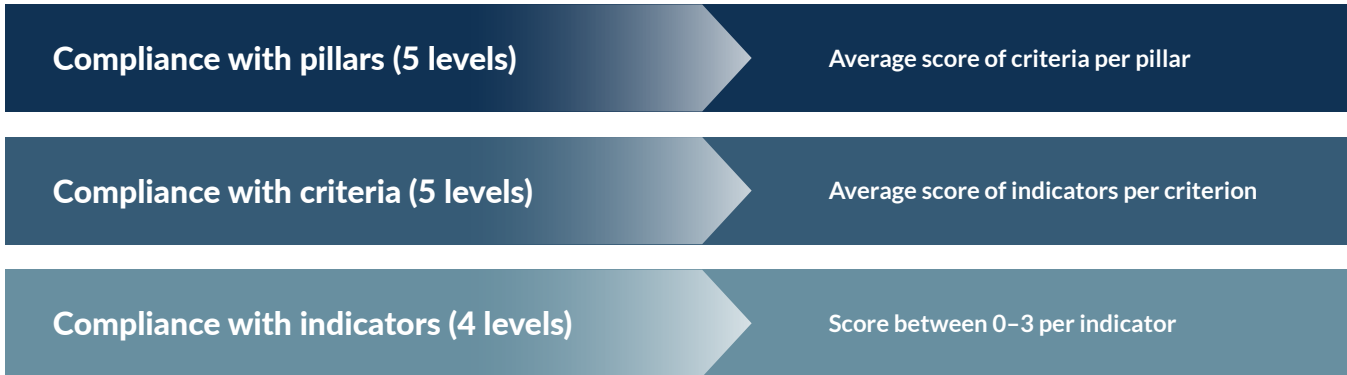


FIGURE 2. Indicator, Criterion and Pillar Evaluation Example

Indicator Scoring		Criterion Scoring		Pillar scoring	
No document exists	0	Areas of Risk	< 1	Level 1	< 1
Document exists	1	Areas of Moderate Risk	1.00–1.49	Level 2	1.00–1.49
Document and evidence of implementation	2	Needs Improvement	1.50–1.99	Level 3	1.50–1.99
Document, evidence, and improving trends	3	Good Performance	2.00–2.49	Level 4	2.00–2.49
Not applicable in the destination	NA	Excellent Performance	≥ 2.50	Level 5	≥ 2.50



ASSESSMENT RESULTS



Section A: Sustainable Management

Sustainable Management received an overall average score of **1.91** which is based on an average of the overall scores of Criterion A, Sustainable Management.

Within the criterion in Sustainable Management, One criterion was identified as exhibiting an area of “Moderate Risk”—Managing visitor volumes and activities.

Four criteria fell in to the “Needs Improvement” category. They were:

- Monitoring and reporting,
- Resident engagement and feedback,
- Visitor engagement and feedback, and
- Planning regulations and development control.

Five criteria were identified as exhibiting “good performance:”

- Destination management responsibility,
- Enterprise engagement and sustainability standards,

- Promotion and Information,
- Climate change adaptation.
- Risk and crisis management.

In addition, one criterion—Destination Management Strategy and Action Plan—had “excellent performance.”

TABLE A0. Summary of Sustainable Management Scoring

GSTC CRITERIA SCORING	Criteria A: Sustainable Management
Areas of Risk <1	0
Areas of Moderate Risk 1.00–1.49	1
Needs Improvement 1.50–1.99	3
Good Performance 2.00–2.49	7
Excellent Performance ≥2.50	0
TOTAL	11



Area of Focus—Management Structure & Framework

A1. DESTINATION MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY

The destination has an effective organization, department, group, or committee responsible for a coordinated approach to sustainable tourism, with involvement by the private sector, public sector, and civil society. This group has defined responsibilities, oversight, and implementation capability for the management of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental issues. The group is adequately funded, works with a range of bodies in delivering destination management, has access to sufficient staffing (including personnel with experience in sustainability), and follows principles of sustainability and transparency in its operations and transactions.

To assess the Cook Islands against A1, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following sources of information were reviewed:

- ▶ Airport Authority Cook Islands 2040 Master Plan
- ▶ CIT Agency Metrics Business Plan
- ▶ CIT Annual Report 2022-2023
- ▶ CIT Development Strategy
- ▶ CIT Position Descriptions
- ▶ Cook Islands Corporate Research Report
- ▶ Cook Islands Crisis Management Plan, January 2020
- ▶ Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan
- ▶ Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- ▶ Cook Islands National Infrastructure Development Plan 2021-2030
- ▶ Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- ▶ Environment NGO Cook Islands (<https://www.korerooteorau.org/>)
- ▶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website
- ▶ Muri Environment Care (<https://mec.org.ck/>)
- ▶ National Environmental Service (<https://environment.gov.ck/partners/>)

The Cook Islands scored well, with an overall score of **2.00** on Criteria A1, or “Good Performance.”

A1.a Documentary evidence showing relevant make-up and responsibilities of the group

Cook Islands Tourism (CIT) is the relevant group evaluated within this context. The CIT annual report 2022-23 does show an organizational chart yet is not explicit about the responsibilities of each role (even though some are more obvious than others). However, destination assessors were provided with job descriptions for each of the various positions that reside within the CIT. Each description includes position title, division, to whom individuals are responsible, the purpose of the position, the legal obligation of the position, where the position falls within the organizational structure, and the specific objectives of the position. Job descriptions also include significant details regarding the responsibility outputs of the positions and the functional relationships with other staff. These descriptions are comprehensive and well done.

A1.b A financial plan and budget, current and future funding

The most recent financial plan and budget reviewed by the destination assessors was the CIT Annual Report 2022-23. The report highlights several metrics related to contributions of tourism to the economy of the Cook Islands and dashboard style updates, including airlines, and tourist arrivals. There is a financial management statement of 2022 and 2023 actuals, yet the report also references “ensuring adequate resources will enable the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation to fulfill its mission effectively.” Therefore, it appears that there is still a question as to what resources will be needed and available moving forward. The assessors were not given access to nor were they able to evaluate the 2023-2024 or most current report.

A1.c Evidence of links and engagement with other bodies

There is evidence that CIT partners with other organizations. The partners are listed and include national, regional, and global partnerships. However, a clearer understanding of these relationships and

their associated engagement would be useful and the operationalization of these relationships through the implementation of the CITDS moving forward. There is an ongoing effort to design and implement a steering committee with representatives from all relevant organizations, including the government, the private sector, and communities.

A1.d Records of permanent staff and contracted personnel, indicating relevant experience

As noted above, assessors were given comprehensive position requirements, which also addressed the skills, experience, and knowledge necessary to complete the requirements of the positions outlined.

A1.e Management guidelines and processes, which demonstrate awareness and adherence to sustainability principles and transparency in operations and letting of contracts

CIT has “Brand Foundations” which identify Kia Orana values, including mana tiaki which identifies them as proud guardians of the Cook Islands. As part of their principles of mana tiaki, sustainability is embedded within these meanings. For example, principles include, to “preserve our natural environment,” respect and perpetuate the traditions, customs, and culture of indigenous people of the Cook Islands, have a deep respect for each other’s beliefs, and to support development of the people. In addition, CIT’s Brand Foundations have core strategies that include working to attract the right visitors at the right time and maintain a high-quality visitor offering, encouraging minimizing costs and maximizing benefits.

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) is based on a regenerative framework with clearly defined 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.

As noted within the CITDS, “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.” However, since it is in the early stages, the letting of contracts and transparency pieces still need to be operationalized.

TABLE A1. Destination Management Responsibility

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Documentary evidence showing relevant make-up and responsibilities of the group.	2	2.00
B	A financial plan and budget showing current and future funding sources.	1	
C	Evidence of links and engagement with other bodies.	2	
D	Records of permanent staff and contracted personnel, indicating relevant experience.	2	
E	Management guidelines and processes that demonstrate awareness and adherence to sustainability principles and transparency in operations and letting of contracts.	3	

A2. DESTINATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

The destination has established and is implementing a multi-year destination management strategy and action plan that is publicly available, is suited to its scale, was developed with stakeholder engagement and is based on sustainability principles. The strategy includes an identification and assessment of tourism assets and considers socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues and risks. The strategy relates to and influences wider sustainable development policy and action in the destination.

To assess the Cook Islands against A2, the following sources were referenced:

- Airport Authority Cook Islands 2040 Master Plan
- CIT Development Strategy Plan
- CIT Annual Report 2022-2023
- Cook Islands Corporate Research Report
- Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands National Infrastructure Development Plan 2021-2030
- Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website

The Cook Islands scored very high, with an overall score of **2.00** on Criteria A2, or Excellent Performance. However, some indicators demonstrated the need for action.

A2.a A published document setting out the current destination strategy and action

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS), known as “Te Kaveinga Manava Turoto o te Ipukarea” provides a roadmap to regenerative tourism development for the Cook Islands over the next five years. It aligns with sustainable development goals at national, regional, and global levels, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Pacific 2030 Sustainable

Tourism Policy Framework. The strategy emphasizes leveraging the visitor economy to enhance the well-being of the Cook Islands people and environment, focusing on four main aspirations:

1. Enhance and Leverage the Visitor Economy: Collaborate to ensure the visitor economy delivers broad and sustainable benefits to the Cook Islands.
2. Optimize the Visitor Experience: Ensure visitor well-being, comfort, and satisfaction.
3. Empower the Tourism Industry: Build capability and resilience within the industry for a high-quality visitor offering.
4. Encourage Regenerative Tourism Practices: Ensure that tourism positively impacts the social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of the Cook Islands.

The CITDS aims to move beyond sustainability and embrace regenerative tourism, which focuses on holistic well-being across four pillars: community (social), culture, conservation (environmental), and commerce (economic). It seeks to empower visitors, industry, and the community to enhance the well-being of the Cook Islands now and for future generations. Key focal areas include improving visitor spending, promoting off-peak and outer-island travel, enhancing the tourism product, developing resilient infrastructure, and promoting cultural and environmental conservation. Visitor education and promoting regenerative practices are critical elements to ensure that tourism becomes a positive force in protecting the islands’ natural and cultural heritage. Yet visitor education needs further development and action-oriented implementation.

SWOT analyses for the Cook Islands, Rarotonga, and other islands outline strengths such as rich culture and natural beauty, weaknesses like infrastructure issues, opportunities for niche markets like remote work, and threats like overtourism and climate change.

While the CITDS is designed to create long-term economic and social resilience, ensuring a high-quality and regenerative visitor experience, the strategy is aimed at the CIT. There is considerable room for taking the strategy created for CIT to a more comprehensive destination level.

A2.b The strategy/plan clearly visible and available online

The document is publicly available online at <https://cookislands.travel/news/strategic-focus-regenerative-tourism>.

A2.c Evidence of stakeholder consultation, meetings etc. in developing the plan

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) outlines the consultation process that was undertaken to develop the plan. The strategy emphasizes collaboration with various stakeholders, including:

1. National Partners such as the tourism industry, government agencies, host communities, civil society organizations, and traditional leaders (Aronga Mana).
2. Regional Partners, notably the New Zealand Government and the Pacific Tourism Organization (SPTO).
3. Global Partners like the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC).

These stakeholders were engaged to ensure the strategy aligns with relevant local, regional, and international sustainable development initiatives. Additionally, preliminary assessments of the Cook Islands' tourism landscape were conducted in collaboration with Pa Enuā (outer island) communities to provide a baseline understanding of the current state of tourism (CITDS).

Future engagement with local community members not engaged in tourism as well as government and non-government organizations working on the environment, culture, and social aspects of development should be considered. Engagement should also take place with those associated with managing and implementing infrastructure development. Many stakeholders, especially Pa Enuā communities, identified infrastructure development as a key challenge. A few are seeking to increase tourism, which will require significant infrastructure (water, septic, waste management, energy, etc.) support.

A2.d Reference to sustainability principles and an assessment of assets, issues and risks, contained in the strategy and action plan

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) makes several references to sustainability principles and includes an assessment of assets, issues, and risks.

In terms of sustainability principles, the strategy goes beyond sustainability, aiming for regenerative tourism that enhances social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being. It aligns with global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria, which include sustainable management, socio-economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability principles. The CITDS is built around four pillars: community (social), culture, conservation (environmental), and commerce (economic).

To address assets, issues, and risks, the document includes a SWOT analysis for the Cook Islands as a whole, as well as specific islands such as Rarotonga and Aitutaki. These assessments cover the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the tourism industry. Strengths include the rich culture and natural beauty while weaknesses highlight infrastructure issues, over-reliance on tourism, and environmental concerns. The SWOT analysis also notes threats such as overtourism, climate change, and depopulation.

CITDS emphasizes managing assets and risks through careful planning and partnerships to ensure tourism contributes positively to the Cook Islands' future development.

A2.e Specific references in the strategy/action plan to wider sustainable development policy (including pursuit of the SDGs), and vice versa

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) makes multiple references to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strategy emphasizes how it aligns with global, regional, and national sustainable development frameworks, specifically highlighting the SDGs as a key guide for their initiatives. The following SDGs are referenced:

1. No Poverty (SDG 1)
2. Zero Hunger (SDG 2)
3. Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3)

4. Quality Education (SDG 4)
5. Gender Equality (SDG 5)
6. Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6)
7. Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7)
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8)
9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG 9)
10. Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10)
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11)
12. Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12)
13. Climate Action (SDG 13)
14. Life Below Water (SDG 14)
15. Life on Land (SDG 15)
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)
17. Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17)

These goals are woven into the Strategy's approach to regenerative tourism, which focuses on the broader impact of tourism on the community, the environment, and the economy. The strategy is also aligned with the Pacific 2030 Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council Destination Criteria, ensuring it adheres to both local and international sustainability standards.

COOK ISLANDS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy (CIEDS) 2030 outlines key strategies for the sustainable development of the Cook Islands' economy while emphasizing the importance of sustainability and regenerative practices. The strategy is framed within a long-term vision to ensure the well-being of residents by focusing on four primary pillars: Community, Culture, Conservation, and Commerce. It provides a roadmap for balancing economic growth with environmental protection, cultural preservation, and social well-being.

Key development strategies include:

1. Prioritizing regenerative tourism as a key sector, focusing on tourism that benefits both the environment and local communities. This approach goes beyond sustainability, aiming to leave destinations in a better state than they were before by emphasizing conservation, cultural heritage, and community involvement. The strategic goal is to use tourism as a tool to enhance the well-being of the Cook Islands while preserving natural resources and cultural identity.
2. Recognizing the Cook Islands' heavy reliance on tourism, the strategy advocates for diversification of the economy. By reducing over-dependence on tourism, especially after the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategy encourages development of sectors like agriculture, fisheries, and renewable energy.
3. Addressing existing infrastructure challenges by improving waste management, enhancing water resources, and developing sustainable tourism infrastructure. This also involves upgrading accommodations and sources of transportation to align with environmental conservation efforts.
4. A significant focus is placed on empowering local communities and preserving cultural heritage. The strategy encourages community-based tourism initiatives and emphasizes the development of local human resources, ensuring that the benefits of tourism and other economic activities are shared widely.

SUSTAINABILITY AND CONSERVATION

CIEDS also deeply integrates sustainability principles into its approach, aligning with global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some key aspects include:

- Conservation of natural resources, including protection of the Cook Islands' natural ecosystems, particularly marine and land-based ecosystems. These efforts aim to address vulnerabilities such as climate change and environmental degradation.
- The importance of safeguarding the Cook Islands' cultural practices, languages, and traditions is

also emphasized. This is viewed as essential not only for the well-being of local communities but also as a unique draw for visitors.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

The CIEDS 2030 outlines several key objectives aimed at achieving long-term economic sustainability and resilience for the Cook Islands. The following objectives focus on areas that balance growth, environmental protection, and community well-being:

1. Strengthening Economic Resilience

Focus on reducing the over-dependence on tourism and diversifying the economy by promoting sectors like agriculture, fisheries, and renewable energy.

2. Enhance Infrastructure

Emphasize improving infrastructure across the islands, with particular attention being given to sustainable transport, waste management, and energy systems that support environmental conservation efforts.

3. Promote Regenerative Tourism

Build a tourism model that goes beyond sustainability by focusing on regenerative tourism (i.e., preserving the natural environment, cultural heritage, and providing benefits to local communities). This includes protecting marine and land-based ecosystems and promoting cultural tourism.

4. Invest in Human Capital

Develop the skills and education of the local workforce, ensuring that Cook Islanders are prepared to meet the evolving demands of a diversified economy and can participate fully in the tourism sector.

5. Environmental Protection

Incorporate strong environmental protection measures to safeguard the islands' ecosystems from the impacts of climate change, while promoting sustainable resource management practices.

The five objectives aim to align with global sustainability goals such as the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that the Cook Islands are positioned for sustainable and inclusive economic growth into 2030.

Notable actions highlighted with its first objective included considering the merits of incentivizing tourism operators to build long-term housing for staff; engaging in minimum wage reform by “[reducing] the percentage of the population earning less than the minimum livable income to five percent by 2030; increasing the female labor force to 70% by 2030, and the percentage of the population with vocational or tertiary qualifications.”

Actions taken thus far include:

- ▶ An increase in the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$7.60 per hour in 2019 to \$8.00 per hour in 2020. Concomitant with this wage increase was an increase in the tax-free threshold to \$14,600/year.
- ▶ The Labor Force Survey 2019 documented that women of childbearing age (e.g., 35 to 44) drop out of the workforce. This may be due to the cost of having children and the opportunity cost associated with the time allocated to childbearing. In response, the government has decided the best solutions are to introduce an additional six weeks of paid parental leave on top of the six weeks already allocated to women and expand government support for early childcare education and after school care.
- ▶ Development of an apprenticeship program looking at the potential for training hubs in the Pa Enua.
- ▶ Introduction of Te Reinga Akataunga'anga, a scholarship program administered by the Ministry of Education, which repays \$5,000 towards student loans each year for Cook Islanders who have studied abroad and returned home. The government is increasing the scholarship to \$10,000 for students who return to the Pa Enua on a permanent basis. It is also establishing a matched repayment scheme dollar for dollar to a capped amount per year and establishing a payment system to process repayments to the New Zealand Inland Revenue Department.

Objectives also include encouraging private sector investment in environmentally sustainable assets, reducing farming's environmental footprint through new technology, setting a renewable energy target of

100% by 2020, replacing “end-of-life” government vehicles with electric cars, considering introducing tax and licensing arrangement that support the importation and use of low carbon transport, shifting its disaster management approach from recovery and response to preparedness and risk reduction, developing a Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan, establishing a policy for solid waste management, and developing “a best practice environmental management framework that promotes economic growth in harmony with [the] environment” (CIEDS 2030).

In summary, the Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030 emphasizes a holistic, sustainable approach to economic growth. While not yet in action, it promotes regenerative tourism, economic diversification, and community empowerment while aligning with the SDGs to ensure long-term environmental, social, and cultural resilience.

AIRPORT AUTHORITY COOK ISLANDS

Airport Authority Cook Islands has developed a 2040 Master Plan. The Plan addresses future development (e.g., efficient and flexible aeronautical facilities) as well as capital projects (e.g., runway repairs). The Authority has also published a statement of corporate intent for 2023-2027 (<https://airportauth.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/AACI-SCI-2023-2027.pdf>), which highlights five strategies it is pursuing through 2027, they include:

- investing in airport staff by reviewing salaries, filling and/or modifying positions to meet daily operational needs and providing additional education;

- adopting cost effective initiatives, including the introduction of new sustainable technology;
- increasing non-aeronautical activities such as improving retail and concession performance;
- improving total revenue; and
- growth through infrastructure expansion, improvement in passenger experience, and meeting stakeholder’s expectations.

With the support of the Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility, the Cook Islands Government introduced a National Infrastructure Investment Plan 2021-2030. According to the authors of the Plan, “the Cook Islands economy is heavily reliant on tourism...”, which in turn is dependent on a solid infrastructure. The tourism-related assets receiving attention in the plan include roads (e.g., roads, bridges, street lighting); airports (e.g., runways, terminals); ports (e.g., jetties, navigational aids); water (e.g., plants, reservoirs); sanitation (e.g., treatment plants, septic tanks); energy (e.g., power generation and distribution); solid waste (e.g., landfill, transfer stations); coastal protection (e.g., seawalls, armoring); and ICT (e.g., undersea cables, data networks).

In their statement of corporate intent, the Airport Authority Cook Islands highlights a framework for evaluation and monitoring its progress on five strategies for 2023-2027 (i.e., invest in airport staff, adopt cost-effective strategies, increase non-aeronautical activities, improve total revenue, and airport growth). For example, to address how it is doing with the adoption of cost-effective strategies the Authority plans to document and review cost performance, obtain feedback and peer assessments, and more.

TABLE A2. Destination Management Strategy and Action Plan

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	A published document setting out the current destination strategy and action.	1	2.00
B	The strategy/plan clearly visible and available online.	3	
C	Evidence of stakeholder consultation, meetings etc. in developing the plan.	2	
D	Reference to sustainability principles and an assessment of assets, issues, and risks, contained in the strategy and action plan.	2	
E	Specific references in the strategy/action plan to wider sustainable development policy (including pursuit of the SDGs), and vice versa.	2	

A3. MONITORING AND REPORTING

The destination is implementing a system to monitor and respond to socio-economic, cultural, and environmental issues and impacts arising from tourism. Actions and outcomes are regularly monitored, evaluated, and publicly reported. The monitoring system is periodically reviewed.

In addition to interviews and site visits, the following information was reviewed to assess the Cook Islands against A3.

- Airport Authority Cook Islands 2040 Master Plan
- CIT Development Strategy Plan
- CIT Annual Report 2022-2023
- Cook Islands Corporate Research Report (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>)
- Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands National Infrastructure Development Plan 2021-2030
- Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website
- SPTO-Cook Islands International Tourism Survey (<https://southpacificislands.travel/pacific-tourism-organization-and-cook-islands-tourism-release-key-insights-from-international-visitor-surveys/>)

The score for this Criteria was **1.50** which reflects the start of monitoring and evaluation plan, with results to yet be determined.

A3.a Specific quantifiable socio-economic, cultural, and environmental indicators and targets identified.

Cook Islands Tourism have some specific, quantifiable socio-economic, cultural, and environmental indicators and targets identified in various strategic documents.

Economic Indicators

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) tourism indicators, such as visitor arrivals, visitor expenditure, length of stay, occupancy rates, and visitor satisfaction, are reported annually by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT). This information is typically published in the CIT Annual Reports, which provide detailed data and analysis on the performance of the tourism sector over the year. These reports include:

- Year-over-year comparisons of visitor numbers.
- Breakdown of average expenditure and economic contribution from different visitor segments.
- Results from satisfaction surveys that gauge tourists' experiences with accommodation, activities, and their overall travel experience in the Cook Islands.

The CIT Annual Reports are made available to stakeholders, including the government, tourism operators, and the public, through official channels like the CIT's website and industry briefings. These reports can help with tracking progress, adjusting strategies, and ensuring transparency in the sector's performance.

CULTURAL INDICATORS

Cultural indicators are reported through various entities, including:

1. Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS)

The Strategy includes aspirations to protect and enhance cultural well-being by promoting cultural heritage and community involvement in tourism. Targets include fostering community-based tourism models, protecting traditional practices, and increasing local engagement in tourism activities (CITDS). The cultural indicators related to tourism in the Cook Islands are generally reported through broader national strategic documents rather than tourism-specific reports. While not always providing quantitative metrics, CITDS emphasizes the importance of promoting cultural tourism and incorporating local culture into experiences. It highlights initiatives aimed at supporting community-based tourism models that celebrate and preserve Cook Islands' cultural identity.

2. Annual Reports from the Ministry of Cultural Development

These Reports, although not exclusively focused on tourism, track the outcomes of programs and activities that support the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. This includes data on festival participation, cultural training programs, and language revitalization efforts, which are indirectly tied to the tourism sector by highlighting the cultural assets that draw visitors.

These indicators are generally embedded in broader national reporting efforts rather than being part of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation's annual reporting, focusing on the cultural dimensions of development and how they intersect with tourism.

ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS

Environmental sustainability is emphasized through regenerative tourism practices. Key environmental indicators focus on the conservation of natural resources, mitigating the impacts of tourism on the environment, and supporting conservation efforts through tourism. Specific initiatives include monitoring visitor impact on natural and cultural sites, reducing waste, and promoting eco-friendly tourism (CITDS; CIT—Annual Report).

The environmental indicators align with broader national and global frameworks such as the National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+, the Pacific 2030 Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (CITDS).

A3.b Measurement against these indicators, with results recorded and publicized at least annually

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CITD) measures performance against socio-economic, cultural, and environmental indicators, and records results annually. These measurements are reported publicly, primarily through their Annual Reports and other strategic documents. Some key areas where measurements and results are tracked include:

- **Economic Impact:** Metrics such as visitor arrivals, in-country spending, prepaid expenditure, and contributions to the local economy are measured annually and compared year-over-year (CITD—Annual Report).
- **Environmental and Cultural Initiatives:** The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) outlines Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the mechanisms used for tracking performance in areas such as regenerative tourism, visitor satisfaction, and conservation efforts (CIT—Annual Report). However, these need to be further developed based on issues identified by stakeholders, such as tour operations that may be impacting wildlife (turtles, whales, etc.) in areas where there are no limits on the number of tourists or operators.
- **Social and Community Engagement:** Programs such as Mana Tiaki (which promotes environmental and cultural stewardship) have specific KPIs and track results related to community and individual engagement, rewarding contributions to cultural preservation (CIT—Annual Report). However, the safety and well-being of tourists is not prominent in tour operations, emergency management, etc.

These results are typically compiled and published annually, as evidenced in documents like the CIT Annual Report 2022/23, which includes both quantitative and qualitative data on key tourism and sustainability goals (CIT—Annual Report). Yet, as identified through stakeholder engagement, indicators need further development based on the new strategic plan currently underway.

A3.c Written evidence of monitoring and reporting of actions and outcomes

The Cook Islands is tracking tourism development to some extent. The following are examples of some evidence for monitoring and reporting of actions and outcomes in the Cook Islands:

1. Annual Reports with Performance Metrics

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) Annual Report 2022/23 documents the organization's efforts to monitor and report on tourism activities. The report includes specific metrics such as visitor arrivals, average spend per visitor, and economic contributions from tourism. For instance, the 2022/23 report highlights a 113% increase in visitor arrivals compared to the previous year and a total visitor expenditure of \$251 million, compared to \$96.7 million in 2021/22.

Based on the onsite visit, tourism in the Pa Enua is less known, and distinguishing between visitors, visiting friends and family, etc. is lacking. There is an increased need for better reporting and statistics.

Annual reports also include other performance indicators such as visitor satisfaction rates (97% in 2022/23), average length of stay (9.1 days), and measures of airlift and accommodation capacity. This shows an active and structured approach to evaluating economic and tourism performance on an annual basis (CIT—Annual Report).

2. Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) Monitoring Framework

CITDS provides a comprehensive framework for monitoring key indicators across socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions. It specifies that monitoring will occur regularly using Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tied to each of the four well-being pillars: commerce (economic), community (social), conservation (environmental), and culture. The strategy identifies specific tactics and actions to be tracked, such as optimizing visitor spending, promoting regenerative tourism practices, and conserving cultural heritage. It details that performance will be monitored against these KPIs and reported in alignment with other national and regional frameworks (e.g., Pacific 2030 Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework, UN Sustainable Development Goals, CIT—Annual Report).

Concerns raised by various stakeholders during the on-site visit included a need for increased enforcement of areas such as environmental impacts, registration of businesses, licensing of businesses, carrying capacity of some tour operations, visitor safety, etc.

3. Structured Evaluation Framework

The CITDS also includes a formal Evaluation Framework that outlines how outcomes will be tracked, measured, and reported. The strategy indicates that performance on tourism-related initiatives will be reviewed using clearly defined KPIs, and the results will be assessed in periodic reports.

Furthermore, the CITDS Work Plan, a companion document, is intended to operate these strategies. It contains detailed actions, timelines, and evaluation mechanisms. The plan specifies that performance will be reviewed against the agreed objectives and tactics, providing continuous feedback on the success of tourism initiatives (CITDS). When this is implemented, it will be a useful tool.

4. Public Reporting and Accountability

Annual Reports serve as the primary public-facing document where outcomes and the effectiveness of the tourism strategy are shared with stakeholders, including the government and public. For example, the 2022/23 Annual Report provides detailed insights into visitor behavior, market performance, airline capacity, and accommodation inventory, reflecting the CIT's commitment to transparency and accountability (CIT—Annual Report).

CITDS emphasizes the importance of aligning with broader national strategies like the National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+, ensuring that results are not only measured but publicly reported.

There is substantial written evidence of public reporting of actions either in place or to be implemented with respect to tourism development, primarily through structured frameworks like the CITDS and the Annual Reports. These documents demonstrate the potential for accountability and transparency in achieving tourism and sustainability goals. However, it is not yet clear what actions have been taken based on the outcomes to date. It is assumed that these will be forthcoming in the development of the new strategic plan, which should include indicators specific to each of the sustainability goals and regenerative aspirations.

A3.d Previous reviews of monitoring system and schedule for future reviews

There is some written evidence of previous reviews of the monitoring systems and a schedule for future reviews in the Cook Islands Tourism strategy documents. The following are examples of this evidence.

1. Annual Reviews: The CIT Annual Report commits to annual reviews of strategic goals and

performance metrics, including KPIs related to tourism growth, visitor satisfaction, and the environment. For example, the 2022/23 report outlines adjustments and improvements based on past performance and reviews.

2. **Ongoing Monitoring and Future Reviews:** The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) provides a framework for continuous monitoring and reporting. The strategy includes provisions for regular evaluations of key performance areas such as environmental sustainability, economic contribution, and visitor experience. It also outlines a system for prioritizing tactics based on annual reviews to ensure adaptive management. Specifics are slated to be implemented through their current strategic planning development and process.

3. **Scheduled Future Reviews:** In the CITDS and Annual Reports, there are references to scoping studies and evaluations planned for areas such as destination carrying capacity and regenerative tourism. These assessments are scheduled to take place periodically to ensure ongoing alignment with strategic goals and evolving conditions (CIT—Annual Report; CITDS). It appears that these reviews have not been fully implemented.

In summary, there is some documentation of previous and future reviews of the monitoring systems, ensuring transparency and accountability in achieving tourism and sustainability objectives. Additional work is needed to achieve full implementation.

TABLE A3. Monitoring and Reporting

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Specific quantifiable socio-economic, cultural, and environmental indicators and targets identified.	1	1.50
B	Measurement against these indicators, with results recorded and publicized at least annually.	2	
C	Written evidence of monitoring and reporting of actions and outcomes.	1	
D	Previous reviews of monitoring system and schedule for future reviews.	2	



Area of Focus—Stakeholder Engagement

A4. ENTERPRISE ENGAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS

The destination regularly informs tourism-related enterprises about sustainability issues and encourages and supports them in making their operations more sustainable. The destination promotes the adoption of sustainability standards, promoting the application of GSTC-I Recognized standards and GSTC-I Accredited certification schemes for tourism enterprises, where available. The destination publicizes a list of sustainability certified enterprises.

To assess the Cook Islands against A4, discussions and interviews took place on-site, and a review of the following information was conducted:

- ▶ Airport Authority Cook Islands 2040 Master Plan
- ▶ CIT Development Strategy Plan
- ▶ CIT Annual Report 2022-2023
- ▶ Cook Islands Corporate Research Report (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>)
- ▶ Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan
- ▶ Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- ▶ Cook Islands National Infrastructure Development Plan 2021-2030
- ▶ Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- ▶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website
- ▶ SPTO-Cook Islands International Tourism Survey (<https://southpacificislands.travel/pacific-tourism-organization-and-cook-islands-tourism-release-key-insights-from-international-visitor-surveys/>)

The Cook Islands scored **2.00** on Criteria A4.

A4.a Evidence of regular communication of sustainability issues to tourism-related businesses (Media, meetings, direct contact etc.)

There is clear evidence of regular communication of sustainability issues to tourism-related businesses in the Cook Islands through the following three channels:

1. **Media and Public Relations:** The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) regularly engages in public relations activities to communicate updates on sustainability initiatives. For example, roadshows such as the Europe Promotional Roadshow involve providing destination updates to over 100 travel agents, including the introduction of new sustainable travel routes (CIT—Annual Report).
2. **Industry Updates:** CIT has a regular communication program with the industry through platforms like the Coconut Connection electronic direct mail (eDM) and Global Business updates. These channels are used to share updates, including sustainability efforts and progress on regenerative tourism (CIT—Annual Report; CITDS).
3. **Direct Industry Engagement:** The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) highlights a commitment to fostering ongoing collaboration with tourism-related businesses. CIT regularly engages the industry through consultations and meetings to build industry resilience and encourage the adoption of regenerative tourism practices. This includes regular meetings, such as the tourism stakeholder roundtables, which is aimed at building awareness and ensuring active participation in sustainability initiatives.

This structured approach ensures consistent communication and active involvement of tourism-related businesses in sustainability practices.

A4.b Sustainability support and advice to tourism-related business—available and promoted

The Cook Islands has developed a structured approach to sustainability support and advice for tourism-related businesses. The support is available through various programs and initiatives, which are actively promoted by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) and its strategic partners. The programs and initiatives are highlighted below.

1. Mana Tiaki Certification Program

The Mana Tiaki Certification was a sustainability initiative designed to help tourism-related businesses adopt environmentally and culturally responsible practices. “Mana Tiaki” translates to “Guardians of the Future,” and the program aligns businesses with practices that protect the natural environment and uphold cultural values. Unfortunately, this certification is not active and at the time of the study was undergoing review.

2. Regenerative Tourism Practices

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) emphasizes regenerative tourism, aiming for tourism that not only sustains but enhances the local environment, economy, and culture.

CIT is promoting practices where businesses are encouraged to implement regenerative tourism models that contribute positively to conservation efforts, community well-being, and cultural preservation. It is envisioned that the efforts will be enhanced with the new strategic developments currently underway.

CIT regularly engages tourism businesses through meetings, training sessions, and consultations to raise awareness of regenerative tourism and encourage the adoption of these principles (CITDS).

3. Capability Building and Training Programs

CIT provides specific programs aimed at building the capacity of tourism operators to adopt sustainable practices. This includes upskilling in areas such as environmental management, waste reduction, and energy efficiency.

CIT works with local and international experts to provide workshops and training on best practices in sustainable tourism. These training programs are designed to empower businesses to not only comply with sustainability standards but to actively contribute to the well-being of the community and environment. These programs have typically been promoted through CIT’s Coconut Connection e-newsletters, industry forums, and one-on-one consultations with operators (CIT—Annual Report).

4. Sustainability-focused Partnerships

CIT collaborates with regional and global sustainability organizations, such as the Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to align its sustainability efforts with broader international standards. Further, the CIT has started initiatives such as World Ocean Day in collaboration with the Ministry of Marine Resources to bring awareness of ocean conservation to residents and visitors.

These partnerships provide tourism businesses in the Cook Islands with access to additional resources, expertise, and funding opportunities aimed at supporting sustainable practices. CIT facilitates these connections and provides guidance on how to engage with these organizations. It is evident that relationships with conservation and cultural organizations in the future will be key to improving the implementation of regenerative strategies in tourism development and perhaps more important, tourism management.

These partnerships are highlighted in CIT’s strategic documents and shared with businesses, non-profit organizations, and government through industry briefings and communications campaigns (CITDS).

5. Waste Management and Environmental Preservation Initiatives

As part of their sustainability support, CIT has launched initiatives aimed at addressing waste management and promoting environmental conservation efforts, yet there are limited options for businesses with respect to waste management. While efforts are underway to increase the ability to recycle, landfills are exceeding capacity, and further options are needed to address waste management holistically.

Businesses are provided with tools, guidelines, and recommendations for reducing waste, managing resources efficiently, and ensuring minimal environmental impact. This support includes guidance on proper waste disposal, recycling, and reducing the use of single-use plastics. Receiving little attention is the issue of visitors and the waste they generate.

CIT promotes these initiatives via awareness campaigns, workshops, and direct outreach to businesses, ensuring widespread participation across the tourism sector (CIT—Annual Report).

6. Digital and Media Campaigns

To promote sustainable practices and enhance awareness, CIT utilizes digital marketing channels and social media platforms. These campaigns target tourism businesses and the wider public, promoting the benefits of adopting sustainable tourism practices, including regenerative tourism.

CIT shares guidelines, tips, and case studies of successful sustainable tourism initiatives through its website, newsletters, and social media platforms. The content often highlights best practices, success stories, and the long-term benefits of sustainability for tourism operators and the environment.

These efforts are widely promoted through CIT's website, social media channels, and newsletters, reaching thousands of businesses and stakeholders annually (CIT—Annual Report).

7. CIT Annual Reports and Strategic Updates

The CIT Annual Reports serve as a key communication tool for reporting on sustainability progress and providing updates on ongoing and future sustainability initiatives. These reports highlight the achievements and challenges faced by the tourism industry in adopting sustainable practices.

Through these reports, businesses receive updates on the Cook Islands' progress in areas such as environmental protection, community involvement, and economic sustainability. These reports also identify areas where further improvement is needed and provide actionable insights for businesses to utilize.

The annual reports are publicly available and promoted through CIT's official channels, ensuring that tourism operators and stakeholders are well informed about the sustainability goals and their role in achieving them (CIT—Annual Report).

8. Public-Private Collaboration Initiatives

CIT actively fosters collaboration between the public and private sectors to enhance the collective effort toward sustainability. This involves working closely with local businesses, government agencies, and community leaders to co-create solutions to sustainability challenges. This will be a key factor in the development of their new strategic plan moving forward, and a steering committee is planned to ensure that various entities from environment, marine resources, non-profit organizations, internal affairs, and others are represented in the future development of tourism management strategies and developments.

Tourism operators are provided with platforms to engage in public-private partnerships, participate in policy discussions, and contribute to the design and implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives.

These collaborative initiatives are promoted through industry forums, roundtables, and strategic planning meetings, ensuring that tourism-related businesses are actively involved in shaping the sustainability landscape (CIT—Annual Report).

9. Tourism Crisis Management and Resilience Planning

As part of its sustainability support, CIT also emphasizes the importance of building resilience within the tourism sector. This involves preparing businesses to adapt to environmental challenges, such as climate change and natural disasters, through strategic planning and sustainable resource management.

CIT provides businesses with tools and guidance on crisis management, helping them to prepare for potential disruptions to the tourism industry. This includes training on sustainable practices that contribute to long-term resilience, such as efficient water usage, energy conservation, and eco-friendly building designs. However, it is also clear that emergency management forums must continually consider the addition of visitors in developing plans for events such as typhoons, fire, etc.

Resilience planning is promoted through workshops, conferences, and publications, which provide tourism operators with the knowledge and resources to adopt sustainable and crisis-resilient practices (CIT—Annual Report).

10. Sustainability Incentives and Recognition

To encourage tourism businesses to adopt sustainable practices, CIT offers incentives and recognition programs, including the Mana Tiaki Certification, which has served as a formal acknowledgment of businesses that adhere to sustainability standards. CIT offers resources and guidance to help businesses qualify for these incentives, including training on meeting certification criteria. Certified businesses receive promotional support from CIT, enhancing their marketability and reputation.

However, in discussions with various stakeholders, it appears that this program needs an overhaul, and other mechanisms potentially could be employed to ensure greater uptake of regenerative and sustainability efforts in the tourism sector.

While the certification and incentive programs are widely promoted through media campaigns, industry communications, and events where businesses are celebrated for their contributions to sustainability, the uptake is relatively limited (CIT—Annual Report).

In summary, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation provides some level of support, advice, and promotion for sustainability in the tourism industry. This support is delivered through various initiatives, including certifications, training programs, digital campaigns, collaboration efforts, and public-private partnerships, all aimed at promoting sustainable practices across the sector. However, discussions with stakeholders identified a lack of follow-up and implementation, and lack of consequences for non-compliance or little to no enforcement on key laws reflecting environmental sustainability and business-related policies that affect tourism.

A4.c Number and percentage of businesses certified against tourism sustainability standards (and whether GSTC recognized/accredited), with targets for wider outreach

There is some evidence that the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) promotes sustainability standards and certifications for tourism businesses. Specifically:

1. **Mana Tiaki Certification:** This is a voluntary certification for operators who demonstrate commitments to sustainability and conservation. While the exact number or percentage of businesses certified under this program is not explicitly stated, it is a significant initiative aimed at enhancing the environmental and cultural stewardship of businesses (CIT—Annual Report).
2. **Cook Islands Quality Assurance Program:** In 2022/23 this certification program saw the onboarding of new members from the existing accreditation scheme. The Cook Islands Quality Assured business partnership program focuses on improving the overall quality and sustainability of tourism products. For example, 74% of applications for provisional accreditation were granted, with 77% of those provisionally accredited suppliers listed on the CIT website (CIT—Annual Report).

In discussion with stakeholders, it appears that this program needs an overhaul. While it may have been effective in the past, the industry has outgrown the program, and the needs and challenges have evolved in a way that this program does not necessarily assist in moving the industry forward on sustainability or regenerative tourism goals.

3. **GSTC Recognition:** The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) aligns with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria, which provides a robust framework for sustainable tourism management. This suggests that businesses adhering to CIT's certifications operate within globally recognized sustainability standards (CITDS).

While the CIT reports the progression of certifications and standards, specific targets for wider outreach and the expansion of certification efforts are tied to their regenerative tourism objectives and strategic alignment with global sustainability frameworks. However, detailed quantitative goals for certification outreach were not explicitly identified.

A4.d Evidence of promotion of certification schemes

Evidence of the promotion of certification schemes for sustainability in the Cook Islands' tourism sector include:

1. Mana Tiaki Certification

The Mana Tiaki Certification is a flagship sustainability certification promoted by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT). This certification is actively encouraged for businesses that demonstrate environmental and cultural stewardship. CIT promotes this certification as part of its broader regenerative tourism strategy, highlighting its importance in preserving the Cook Islands' natural and cultural heritage (CIT—Annual Report).

While these programs are actively promoted through industry meetings, newsletters, and publications aimed at tourism operators, encouraging participation and adoption of sustainable practices, it appears the program needs an update and overhaul (Discussions with stakeholders, November 2024).

2. Cook Islands Quality Assurance Program (see comments above)

The Cook Islands Quality Assurance Program is another certification which some have commented is outdated and in need of either a change or removal. CIT has promoted this program through its digital platforms, including the CIT website and social media channels, providing visibility for businesses that are part of the program. Certified businesses are also featured and promoted as part of the destination's offerings (CIT—Annual Report).

The program is regularly mentioned in annual reports, industry forums, and tourism conferences, further encouraging businesses to seek certification and improve their sustainability practices, yet it is unclear as to the effectiveness and therefore is undergoing review.

3. Partnerships and Public Communication

CIT leverages its partnerships with regional and international organizations to promote sustainability certifications. For instance, CIT

is aligning its goals with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria and is looking toward a revamping of its programs in the future.

4. Digital Marketing and Media Campaigns

CIT has actively promoted its certification schemes through digital marketing initiatives such as its website, social media platforms, and newsletters. Certified businesses, such as those that have achieved the Mana Tiaki Certification or been recognized through the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Program, are highlighted in these campaigns to both domestic and international audiences. These promotions not only encourage more businesses to become certified but also educate tourists on the importance of supporting sustainable businesses (CIT—Annual Report).

5. Events and Industry Workshops

CIT organizes workshops and events that provide training and education on sustainability certifications, specifically targeted at local tourism operators. These workshops often focus on the benefits of certification, the steps to achieve it, and the long-term advantages for the environment and business profitability. Through these events, businesses are encouraged to participate in certification schemes as part of a broader commitment to sustainable tourism (CIT—Annual Report).

6. Recognition and Public Endorsement

Businesses certified under programs like Mana Tiaki or the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Program receive public recognition through CIT publications and industry events. This public endorsement provides an incentive for other businesses to pursue certification as it enhances their marketability and reputation within the tourism industry (CIT—Annual Report).

In conclusion, CIT's history of active promotion of sustainability certification schemes is evident through a combination of digital marketing, public endorsement, workshops, and events. These efforts aim to increase participation among tourism operators and ensure that sustainability is integrated into the tourism industry's practices. However, in discussions with CIT and other stakeholders, there is

a need to review these schemes and the effectiveness of the schemes moving forward.

A4.e List of tourism-related certified enterprises, kept up to date

There is evidence that the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) maintains a list of certified tourism-related enterprises, and this list is kept up to date. This is done as follows:

1. Cook Islands Quality Assurance Program

A structured Business Partnership Program is in place. It aims to enhance the quality and sustainability of tourism products. In the 2022/23 financial year, 74% of applications for provisional accreditation were granted, and 77% of those accredited suppliers were listed

on CIT’s official website, indicating that the list of certified enterprises is actively managed and kept up to date (CIT—Annual Report).

2. Accredited Businesses on Website

Certified businesses, particularly those under the Mana Tiaki Certification and the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Program, are listed on the CIT website. This allows for easy access and visibility to both local and international visitors (CIT—Annual Report). Schemes are not GSTC recognized or accredited.

These efforts have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to maintaining and promoting a list of certified tourism-related businesses in the Cook Islands, which is regularly updated to ensure the information is current.

TABLE A4. Enterprise Engagement and Sustainability Standards

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Evidence of regular communication of sustainability issues to tourism-related businesses (Media, meetings, direct contact etc.).	2	2.00
B	Sustainability support and advice to tourism- related business—available and promoted.	2	
C	Number and percentage of businesses certified against tourism sustainability standards (and whether GSTC recognized/accredited), with targets for wider outreach.	1	
D	Evidence of promotion of certification schemes.	2	
E	List of tourism-related certified enterprises, kept up to date.	3	



A5. RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

The destination enables and promotes public participation in sustainable destination planning and management. Local communities' aspirations, concerns and satisfaction with tourism sustainability and destination management are regularly monitored and publicly reported, and action is taken in response to them. The destination has a system to enhance local understanding of sustainable tourism opportunities and challenges and to build the capacity of communities to respond.

To assess the Cook Islands against A5, discussions were held with stakeholders onsite, and the following sources of information were reviewed:

- CIT Development Strategy Plan
- CIT Annual Report 2022-2023
- Cook Islands Corporate Research Report (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>)
- Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands National Infrastructure Development Plan 2021-2030
- Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website
- SPTO-Cook Islands International Tourism Survey (<https://southpacificislands.travel/pacific-tourism-organization-and-cook-islands-tourism-release-key-insights-from-international-visitor-surveys/>)

The Cook Islands had an overall score of **1.80** on criterion A5, or “needs improvement” overall.

A5.a Evidence of the promotion and facilitation of public participation in destination planning/management

Evidence of the promotion and facilitation of public participation in destination planning and

management can be found in the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) and other reports, which emphasize community engagement and empowerment as critical components of tourism development.

The CITDS places a strong emphasis on including Cook Islands culture and traditions in the tourism offering. One of its core objectives is to ensure the people and culture of the Cook Islands are engaged, empowered, and benefit from tourism. This is achieved by creating opportunities for local communities to participate in tourism experiences and initiatives, including community-based tourism models.

The CITDS highlights collaboration with local communities, industry stakeholders, and government bodies to ensure that tourism development benefits all. For example, one of the key focus areas involves working with island communities and leaders to determine optimal visitor types and numbers, thereby promoting public involvement in decision-making.

The Strategy also encourages public participation by promoting regenerative tourism practices. This includes initiatives that allow both locals and visitors to contribute to environmental and cultural conservation efforts. By involving communities in preserving their environment and heritage, the strategy facilitates a collaborative approach to destination management (CIT—Annual Report).

Cook Islands is working hard to engage stakeholders, including government departments, businesses, and non-profits. In some of the discussions with community stakeholders, it was felt that residents who are not engaged in tourism should be considered in tourism development and management discussions, as they are impacted by this sector in a variety of ways. Not only can there be negative impacts from mismanaged tourism, but there are also benefits that it may be important to share with community members. Sharing benefits will help community members understand the full picture of tourism development within the Cook Islands. This sentiment was raised in many contexts such as understanding the impacts of tourism on infrastructure, engaging young people in the opportunities that exist in the islands, the influx of migrant workers to the islands, and more.

A5.b Information on the type and level of such participation

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) outlines the inclusion of public participation in destination planning, but details regarding the specific type and level of participation are somewhat generalized. The following are some key points based on the documents reviewed and the discussions with various stakeholders.

- ▶ **Community-Based Tourism Models:** CITDS encourages the use of community-based tourism models, suggesting direct involvement of local communities in managing and offering tourism experiences. This model ensures that locals play a role in tourism planning and decision-making, focusing on small-scale, sustainable tourism initiatives that align with local needs and values.
- ▶ **Collaboration with Leaders and Stakeholders:** The strategy mentions working with island communities and leaders to agree on optimal visitor numbers and types. This indicates a consultative approach, where public feedback and collaboration are integrated into tourism management decisions. Some leaders who participated in discussions during the onsite visit indicated that talking to residents who do not work in tourism would be important to fully understand resident sentiment regarding future tourism developments.
- ▶ **Environmental and Cultural Conservation:** Public participation is encouraged through initiatives that allow locals to engage in environmental and cultural conservation efforts, contributing to both preservation and tourism experiences. Based on conversations with a range of stakeholders, including government, non-profit organizations, and businesses, conservation of natural and cultural resources is challenging with little to no enforcement. This must be addressed in future strategic initiatives considering the impacts of tourism developments and operations on Cook Islands natural and cultural resources.

The level of public participation in decision planning/ management appears to be more advisory and collaborative. Community leaders and stakeholders are consulted in decision-making processes, especially regarding visitor management, cultural preservation, and tourism product

development. However, it appears that in tandem with a bottom-up approach, there is a desire for additional top-down enforcement of environmental and cultural laws and efforts to manage development on the islands.

In certain areas, like community-led beautification initiatives and environmental conservation efforts, there is an element of hands-on participation where residents take an active role in managing and maintaining tourism resources (CITDS); however, individuals met during the onsite visit mentioned the need for additional resources and enforcement in areas of waste management, safety, wildlife tours, etc.

In summary, participation ranges from advisory roles in planning and decision-making to direct, hands-on involvement in conservation and tourism management. However, the exact mechanisms for public engagement and how feedback is incorporated into decisions has not been explicitly detailed.

A5.c Surveys of residents and other systematic feedback mechanisms covering tourism issues

Cook Islands has established regular surveys since 2018 (see <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>). There are also several points within the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) that demonstrate a level of public input and consultation.

- ▶ **Community and Leader Consultations:** CITDS refers to the process of working with community leaders and local stakeholders to determine optimal tourism levels and develop destination management strategies. This suggests that some form of public consultation occurs, likely in the form of informal meetings or discussions with key community representatives (CITDS). However, these do not appear to be formalized surveys or systematic processes but rather collaborative dialogues that influence decision-making.
- ▶ **Community-Based Tourism Models:** The Strategy promotes community-based tourism models, which typically involve active participation from residents in the planning and execution of tourism initiatives. These models imply that residents' feedback and perspectives are gathered through direct involvement, although the specifics of how this feedback is collected are not detailed.

The CITDS also highlights the role of local communities in environmental and cultural conservation efforts. While not explicitly stated as a feedback mechanism, these initiatives often include ongoing engagement with residents, where feedback is integrated into conservation and tourism practices.

One of the objectives within the CITDS is to improve community sentiment toward tourism by informing locals about the benefits tourism provides. This suggests that there is an awareness of the importance of community perceptions and possibly some informal feedback mechanisms, though structured surveys are not mentioned.

In summary, the strategy references various forms of engagement and consultation with local communities, and since 2018 there has been regular engagement with the Cook Islands Attitude Toward Tourism Survey. There is also engagement through meetings and collaborative discussions with community leaders and stakeholders.

A5.d Evidence of action taken in response to residents' feedback

There is no explicit evidence in the available documents detailing specific actions taken in direct response to residents' feedback on tourism issues. However, several components of the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) suggest that community input has influenced the direction of tourism planning, even if the mechanisms for gathering and acting on that feedback are not formally documented. The following are some examples where community perspectives appear to have shaped tourism policy.

- ▶ **Regenerative Tourism Approach:** The CITDS is actively incorporating a regenerative tourism model that emphasizes the well-being of the local community, culture, environment, and economy. The emphasis on this model suggests that the Strategy has evolved in response to concerns about overtourism and the need for a more sustainable approach. Although not explicitly stated, this shift may reflect feedback or sentiment from residents, as well as discussions had onsite reinforced this idea as well.
- ▶ **Community-Based Tourism Models:** The focus on involving communities directly in tourism development, especially through community-based tourism models, shows a sensitivity to

local preferences and a desire to align tourism practices with community values. This reflects a response to community needs, even though no specific examples of resident feedback influencing decisions are provided.

CITDS acknowledges issues such as overtourism, particularly in Rarotonga, and is setting out a strategic initiative to assist in the management of visitor numbers and to spread tourism benefits more evenly across the Cook Islands. This could be seen as a response to resident concerns about overcrowding and the strain on local resources although, again, direct feedback mechanisms are not detailed. Further, there is increased concern about infrastructure to support visitor populations, especially in the Pa Enua, or outer islands. Concerns about waste management—“landfill is at capacity,” water—“we are using emergency backup tanks now,” septic systems, and access were raised repeatedly in discussions with leaders in the Pa Enua.

While the Strategy points to a tourism development approach that aligns with resident needs and concerns, explicit examples of action taken as a direct result of formal feedback from residents are not provided in the available documents. The influence of community sentiment seems more implicit, guiding overall policy direction rather than being tied to specific feedback mechanisms.

A5.e Program of information, education and training on tourism provided for residents

The available documents do not provide explicit details of a formal, structured program of information, education, and training on tourism specifically for residents. However, there are elements in the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) that suggest education and capacity building are considered important components of tourism development. For example,

CITDS includes objectives aimed at supporting the tourism industry in attracting and retaining high-quality staff, with a focus on developing local Cook Islanders. The strategy mentions upskilling and providing learning opportunities, particularly in regenerative tourism practices. While this is geared primarily towards industry workers, it likely includes elements of training for residents who are or wish to become involved in tourism. Further support was indicated around business

and entrepreneurial skill development, as well as investment planning. In addition, there is a need to further develop the workforce locally, as many tourism businesses are increasingly relying on migrant workers to support their efforts.

The following are specific examples of education and capacity building components of tourism development highlighted in the CITDS:

- Community Engagement and Information Sharing: The CITDS refers to improving community sentiment by informing locals about the benefits of tourism and involving them in community-based tourism models. This indicates that there may be informal educational programs aimed at helping residents understand tourism’s value and how they can participate (CITDS).

- Mana Tiaki Program: The concept of “Mana Tiaki,” which emphasizes guardianship and responsibility toward the environment and culture, is a key principle in the tourism strategy. Although not explicitly an educational program, it involves educating both visitors and locals on their role in protecting the Cook Islands’ natural and cultural heritage (CIT—Annual Report).

While these components suggest efforts are being made to engage and educate residents, the documents do not outline a formal, systematic program of education or training in tourism specifically designed for the general population. If such a program exists, it may be found in operational documents or specific government initiatives not covered in the available reports.

TABLE A5. Resident Engagement and Feedback

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Evidence of the promotion and facilitation of public participation in destination planning/management.	2	2.00
B	Information on the type and level of such participation.	2	
C	Surveys of residents and other systematic feedback mechanisms, covering tourism issues.	3	
D	Evidence of action taken in response to residents’ feedback.	2	
E	Programme of information, education and training on tourism provided for residents.	1	



A6. VISITOR ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

The destination has a system to monitor and publicly report visitor satisfaction with the quality and sustainability of the destination experience and, if necessary, to take actions in response. Visitors are informed about sustainability issues in the destination and the part that they can play in addressing them.

To assess the Cook Islands against A6, the following information was reviewed and discussions with stakeholders took place onsite.

- CIT Development Strategy Plan
- CIT Annual Report 2022-2023
- Cook Islands Corporate Research Report (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>)
- Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands National Infrastructure Development Plan 2021-2030
- Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website
- SPTO-Cook Islands International Tourism Survey (<https://southpacificislands.travel/pacific-tourism-organization-and-cook-islands-tourism-release-key-insights-from-international-visitor-surveys/>)

The Cook Islands scored moderately, with an overall score of **1.75** on Criteria A6, and as a result, “Needs Improvement” overall.

As a service-oriented industry, tourism operators and destinations must continually strive to meet the demands and expectations of visitors in the provision of quality tourism products, experiences, and services. Visitors’ satisfaction is determined by a combination of perceived quality, expectations, and actual experience. A visitor’s overall satisfaction will influence the likelihood of repeat visitation, extended length of stay, increased expenditure, and word of mouth referrals.

A6.a Visitor surveys (and other feedback mechanisms)—carried out and reported

There are indications that visitor feedback plays a role in the Cook Islands’ tourism management strategy. The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report for 2022/23 mentions tracking visitor satisfaction rates, which reached 97%, as well as statistics on visitor spending, length of stay, and willingness to return. This suggests that some form of a visitor survey is conducted regularly to gauge satisfaction levels and gather data on visitor behavior together with together with SPTO <https://southpacificislands.travel/pacific-tourism-organization-and-cook-islands-tourism-release-key-insights-from-international-visitor-surveys/>.

The Report also mentions a Data & Insights Program, which highlights shifts in traveler preferences, including a growing emphasis on environmental consciousness. While the exact methods for collecting this data are not detailed, it implies a systematic approach to understanding visitor trends, likely through surveys or other feedback mechanisms.

A6.b Surveys and feedback include visitor reaction to sustainability issues

There is a research program to engage visitors in a survey effort (see together with SPTO <https://southpacificislands.travel/pacific-tourism-organization-and-cook-islands-tourism-release-key-insights-from-international-visitor-surveys/> and the website: <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>).

The survey results indicate that they address content such as visitor demographics, characteristics and preferences, information and decision-making, spending and impact, and satisfaction, which could be argued that plays a role in sustainability. For example, the Data & Insights Program mentioned in the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report highlights a shift in traveler preferences toward environmentally conscious choices. This suggests that sustainability may be a topic explored in visitor feedback, though the specific content of the surveys, such as questions related to environmental impact or visitor awareness of sustainability efforts, is not explicitly detailed.

The emphasis on regenerative tourism practices, community well-being, and conservation

throughout the strategy implies that these themes are likely important in feedback mechanisms, even if they are not directly referenced as survey questions about sustainability.

A6.c Evidence of actions taken in response to visitor survey/feedback findings

The documents available do not provide specific evidence of actions taken directly in response to visitor surveys. While there are references to visitor satisfaction data and trends gathered through the Data & Insights Program, there is no detailed information on how this feedback has influenced specific actions or policy changes within the Cook Islands tourism sector.

However, the broader strategic direction outlined in the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS), with its focus on sustainable and regenerative tourism, suggests that visitor feedback is likely to play a role in shaping tourism policies. The emphasis on improving visitor experiences, promoting sustainability, and addressing issues like overtourism and community well-being indicates that visitor feedback is valued, even if the exact mechanisms and resulting actions are not explicitly documented in the available sources.

To find direct evidence of actions taken in response to visitor surveys, more specific operational reports or government updates on tourism policies will need to be consulted.

A6.d Examples of visitor information that covers sustainability issues and how to respond to them

The Cook Islands has implemented some initiatives to guide visitor behavior toward sustainability and regenerative practices. The following are specific examples and details:

1. Regenerative Tourism Experiences

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) emphasizes regenerative tourism, aiming to create positive impacts for the environment and communities. Specific activities promoted include:

Marine Conservation: Tourists can participate in activities such as snorkeling or boating trips combined with conservation efforts like species identification or removing invasive

species. However, there are concerns about visitor management of these programs. Not only do they have an impact on species, such as turtles and whales, but there are also safety concerns on how the tours are managed. Many stakeholders identified a need for monitoring and enforcement of these activities.

Land Conservation: Guided hikes involve tourists learning about local ecosystems and even participating in replanting native species or removing invasive flora (Cook Islands Travel). There are also programs to assist with erosion and increasing habitat for native species.

Community-Based Tourism: This involves agritourism, where visitors engage with rural farmers and learn about sustainable agriculture practices. Other examples include visiting local markets, traditional arts and crafts workshops, and village tours that help support the local economy while preserving cultural heritage (Cook Islands Travel).

2. Sustainability-Focused Campaigns

Love Our Little Paradise Campaign: This campaign educates visitors on how to behave responsibly while visiting. The focus is on conserving water, reducing plastic use, and supporting eco-friendly businesses. Visitors are also encouraged to respect the natural environment by not littering and minimizing their impact on fragile ecosystems. There are references to what this means on the arrival card, yet the messaging could be strengthened within the industry.

Water Conservation Efforts: Many hotels in the Cook Islands use rainwater treated for taps, and efforts like these are emphasized to visitors to show the importance of water conservation, given the frequent droughts and water shortages in the region, yet these are not consistent across the industry.

3. Visitor Behavior Guidelines

Mana Tiaki Certification: The Mana Tiaki (Guardianship) Eco Certification program encourages tourism operators to adopt sustainable practices. Visitors are informed about which businesses have earned this certification, signaling that these businesses

adhere to high environmental standards. The certification promotes responsible behavior among both businesses and visitors. Yet there are considerable issues with non-compliance and visitors are often left to their own devices. There have been attempts to come together as an industry around, for example, the turtle tours, yet without monitoring and enforcement there appears to be mixed uptake and consistency amongst operators and lodging providers.

4. Sustainability-Focused Information on the Website

The Cook Islands Tourism website includes a section on Regenerative Travel, which explains how visitors can contribute positively to the environment and local culture. This section highlights responsible travel tips and

provides examples of eco-friendly activities and community-driven tourism initiatives.

All these efforts are a great starting point. However, there is significant and consistent concern amongst stakeholders regarding the negative impacts (environmental, social, economic, and cultural) of tourism on the islands. The strategic initiative holds promise in mitigating some of these impacts and bringing about consensus among industry, non-profit, and government entities in sustainable tourism management and development. Further the concept of carrying capacity came up in many discussions with stakeholders relative to infrastructure, environmental impacts, visitor management, protocols regarding respect for the culture of the Cook Islands, and social disparities. In addition, there is growing concern around migration outwards and engaging young people in tourism for the future of the islands.

TABLE A6. Visitor Engagement and Feedback

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Visitor surveys (and other feedback mechanisms)—carried out and reported.	3	1.75
B	Surveys and feedback include visitor reaction to sustainability issues.	1	
C	Evidence of actions taken in response to visitor survey/feedback findings.	1	
D	Examples of visitor information that covers sustainability issues and how to respond to them.	2	



A7. PROMOTION AND INFORMATION

Promotion and visitor information material about the destination is accurate regarding its products, services, and sustainability claims. Marketing messages and other communications reflect the destination's values and approach to sustainability and treat local communities and natural and cultural assets with respect.

In addition to onsite visits and discussions with stakeholders, the following websites were reviewed for Criteria A7:

- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporate Website—This site provided comprehensive information on the tourism strategy, sustainability initiatives, and downloadable resources for visitors. It also highlighted promotional campaigns like “Love Our Little Paradise” and the Ridge to Reef biodiversity messaging. Cook Islands Tourism Corporate
- ▶ Cook Islands Marketing Campaigns—This section detailed various campaigns aimed at educating visitors on environmental and cultural sustainability, including videos and safety tips. Cook Islands Marketing Campaigns.
- ▶ Visitor Guide—A key resource for tourists that outlines travel tips, health and safety, and cultural information for a more responsible tourism experience (Visitor Guide Cook Islands Travel).
- ▶ Downloadable Resources—This page provides brochures, guides, and safety information to ensure tourists are informed about sustainability practices and respectful behavior (Downloadable Resources; Cook Islands Travel)

These websites collectively offer a detailed and responsible approach to tourism promotion in the Cook Islands, aligning with sustainable and regenerative travel goals.

The Cook Islands scored well, with an overall score of **2.33** on Criteria A7, indicating “Good Performance.”

A7.a Current information and promotional material with appropriate content

The promotional material on the Cook Islands Tourism website appears to be both appropriate and current. The site focuses heavily on sustainability and regenerative tourism, aligning with global trends in responsible travel. For example, the

“Love Our Little Paradise” campaign emphasizes environmental conservation and encourages tourists to minimize their footprint while visiting. This campaign is supported by specific guidelines and tips for conserving water, avoiding plastic, and respecting local ecosystems and communities.

There is also a strong emphasis on eco-friendly and community-based tourism activities. The website promotes regenerative travel experiences, where visitors are encouraged to participate in activities like marine conservation, forest replanting, and engaging with local communities through Agri-tourism and cultural exchange programs.

Additionally, the Ridge to Reef project, which is part of the CIT’s biodiversity messaging, has used local humor to educate visitors on sustainability topics like waste management and water conservation. This approach makes important environmental issues more accessible and engaging for tourists.

The website is updated with various downloadable resources for tourists, including safety guidelines and cultural insights, ensuring that visitors are well-informed about both how to stay safe and how to behave responsibly in the Cook Islands. Overall, the promotional material reflects a balanced approach, highlighting the natural beauty of the islands while reinforcing the importance of sustainable tourism practices.

A7.b A process exists for checking the accuracy and appropriateness of destination promotion and information

There is no explicit mention of a formal process for checking the accuracy and appropriateness of destination promotion and information in the documents available. However, based on the general governance structures outlined below, it is likely that the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation adheres to internal and governmental guidelines for maintaining the quality and accuracy of their promotional materials.

- ▶ Governance and Accountability: The Cook Islands Tourism Marketing Corporation Act provides the regulatory framework under which the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation operates. This suggests that oversight mechanisms, likely involving regular review and reporting, are in place to ensure the organization’s activities—including

promotional content—align with legal and governmental standards (Cook Islands Travel).

- ▶ **Board and CEO Accountability:** The structure outlined in the Act holds the CEO accountable to the Board for implementing the strategies and policies set by the Minister of Tourism. This chain of accountability likely includes reviewing marketing strategies and ensuring that the information presented to visitors is accurate and appropriate (Cook Islands Travel).
- ▶ **Kia Orana Values and Quality Assurance:** The emphasis on Kia Orana Values, which underpin the promotion of cultural sensitivity and environmental sustainability, suggests that these principles guide the creation and review of promotional materials. Additionally, the Cook Islands Quality Assured accreditation standards indicate that there is a mechanism in place for ensuring tourism operators meet high standards (Cook Islands Travel).

Although there isn't a detailed public-facing process described, the presence of governance structures and quality assurance programs suggests that some form of review and oversight exists to check the accuracy and appropriateness of destination promotion and information.

A7.c Evidence of consultation with local communities and environmental and cultural bodies on communications content and delivery

There is no explicit evidence in the available documents detailing formal consultation with local communities, environmental, or cultural bodies specifically for the content and delivery of promotional materials. However, there are

indirect indications that community and cultural consultation is integral to the broader approach of Cook Islands Tourism and the information secured by operators and other tourism enterprises is what is communicated through various outlets. Examples of these indirect indications are:

- ▶ **Regenerative Tourism Approach:** The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) emphasizes regenerative tourism, which directly involves local communities in tourism planning and development. This suggests that community input is likely to inform broader communication strategies, although specific details about how it influences promotional content are not provided.
- ▶ **Kia Orana Values:** The Kia Orana Values initiative is a culturally rooted framework promoted across all tourism communications. These values reflect community input and are designed to align tourism practices with local customs, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation. The promotion of these values across communications indicates that local culture plays a role in shaping tourism messaging.
- ▶ **Community-Based Tourism Models:** The focus on community-based tourism and cultural preservation in the CITDS suggests that local cultural and environmental bodies are likely consulted on certain aspects of tourism delivery. This could extend to promotional materials that emphasize local traditions, sustainable practices, and environmental stewardship.

While there appears to be some level of community and cultural involvement in shaping the CIT's messaging, documents do not explicitly detail a structured consultation process for the creation and dissemination of promotional materials.

TABLE A7. Promotion and Information

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Current information and promotional material with appropriate content.	3	2.33
B	A process exists for checking the accuracy and appropriateness of destination promotion and information.	2	
C	Evidence of consultation with local communities and environmental and cultural bodies on communications content and delivery.	2	

Area of Focus—Managing Pressure & Change

A8. MANAGING VISITOR VOLUMES AND ACTIVITIES

The destination has a system for visitor management which is regularly reviewed. Action is taken to monitor and manage the volume and activities of visitors, and to reduce or increase them as necessary at certain times and in certain locations, working to balance the needs of the local economy, community, cultural heritage, and environment.

To assess the Cook Islands against A8, the following information was reviewed in addition to onsite visits and discussions with stakeholders:

- Airport Authority Cook Islands 2040 Master Plan
- CIT Development Strategy Plan
- CIT Annual Report 2022-2023
- Cook Islands Corporate Research Report
- Cook Islands Economic Crisis Management Plan
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands National Infrastructure Development Plan 2021-2030
- Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website

Cook Islands scored **1.40** overall, on Criteria A8, indicating a level of “Moderate Risk” overall.

A8.a The destination management strategy and action plan address seasonality and spread of visitation

Based on the documents reviewed, there is no mention of how the Cook Islands’ Destination Management Strategy and Action Plan explicitly addresses seasonality and the spread of visitation. However, the broader Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) does make indirect references to managing visitation patterns, which could be interpreted as efforts to address seasonality and visitor distribution.

Key elements that could be relevant include:

- **Airlift and Route Development:** The CITDS emphasizes expanding and diversifying air routes, such as direct flights from Australia, Hawaii, and Tahiti. By increasing air connectivity, especially from non-traditional markets, the strategy aims to smooth visitation peaks and spread demand across different seasons.
- **Diversification of Visitor Markets:** The CITDS outlines a diversification strategy aimed at attracting visitors from different international markets, which may help reduce the reliance on peak travel periods (like the heavy New Zealand and Australia demand during the southern hemisphere winter).
- **Development in Outer Islands:** The strategy emphasizes developing tourism in the less-visited Pa Enua, which could help in redistributing visitor flows away from Rarotonga and Aitutaki, thus spreading visitation geographically and potentially reducing seasonal peaks.

While the Strategy includes elements that address diversification and spread visitation, specific actions targeting seasonality, such as pricing strategies or event-based tourism promotion during low seasons, are not explicitly detailed. Furthermore, the strategic plan to develop this further is underway, noting part of the issue is getting accurate data across all the tourism destinations within the Cook Islands, including Pa Enua.

A8.b Variation in visitor volumes throughout the year is monitored, including in the most visited locations

While there is no direct evidence in the documents provided that describes a formal process for monitoring visitor volume variations throughout the year, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23 presents data on visitor arrivals and their distribution across the year. This suggests that some level of monitoring is taking place and includes:

- **Visitor Arrival Tracking:** The report mentions visitor numbers per month, showing fluctuations throughout the year. For instance, it notes a significant increase in visitor arrivals in 2022/23,

with monthly figures provided, indicating that seasonal variation is tracked.

- **Data & Insights Program:** The Data & Insights Program mentioned in the Report helps track tourism trends and shifts in visitor behavior. While specific details on monitoring seasonality are not provided, this program is likely to include data on visitor volumes across different periods of the year.
- **Key Locations:** The Report indicates that Rarotonga and Aitutaki are the most visited locations, and the emphasis on the development of outer islands (Pa Enua) suggests an awareness of the need to manage visitor distribution across locations and the need for regular tracking and consistent data inputs across the islands.

While variation in visitor volumes is monitored through visitor arrival data, the documents do not provide explicit details on how seasonality is managed at a granular level across specific locations. It is evident that the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation tracks these variations and may use this data to inform strategic decisions and desire more accurate input and consistent information. In addition, in discussions with various stakeholders, there is considerable concern regarding impacts on the environment and infrastructure to support tourism development and management. There are site specific concerns environmentally and growing concerns that infrastructure is not keeping pace with development.

A8.c Impacts of visitor volumes and activities are identified through observation and community and stakeholder feedback

The available documents do not provide explicit evidence that the impacts of visitor volumes and activities are systematically identified through observation and community or stakeholder feedback. However, there are some indications that the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) and related reports emphasize community involvement and the need for managing tourism impacts. Examples follow.

- **Community Consultation:** The CITDS highlights the importance of community-based tourism models and collaboration with local leaders to manage tourism sustainably. While specific processes for identifying the impacts of visitor volumes are not detailed, the emphasis on community consultation suggests that feedback

from residents and stakeholders plays a role in shaping tourism policies.

- **Focus on Regenerative Tourism:** The Strategy promotes a regenerative tourism approach, which inherently involves monitoring the environmental and social impacts of tourism activities. This approach likely requires ongoing observation and feedback mechanisms, although the exact methods for gathering such feedback are not fully articulated.
- **Data Collection:** The annual report mentions the collection of data on visitor satisfaction and behavior, which can indirectly indicate the impacts of visitor volumes on the environment and local communities. However, it does not specify whether these data are collected systematically through stakeholders and community feedback.

While it appears that feedback from stakeholders and community members is considered in tourism planning, the documents do not provide detailed descriptions of formal processes for identifying the impacts of visitor volumes and activities through structured observation or feedback. There is a significant desire to bring these efforts to fruition in the next strategic planning process, along with ways to better manage tourism and the visitor experience.

A8.d Actions taken to manage visitor flows and impacts

The available documents do not explicitly outline specific actions taken to manage visitor flows and impacts. However, certain strategies and initiatives within the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) suggest that efforts are being made to manage both the flow of visitors and the potential impacts of tourism. Examples of these strategies and initiatives are:

- **Diversification of Source Markets and Air Routes:** The CITDS emphasizes expanding air connectivity and diversifying international source markets, which can help distribute visitor numbers more evenly throughout the year and reduce pressure on peak seasons. By attracting visitors from different regions (such as the U.S. and Australia), the Cook Islands aims to balance visitor flows and minimize congestion during traditional high seasons.
- **Development of Outer Islands (Pa Enua):** The Strategy includes a focus on promoting tourism

to less-visited outer islands like Aitutaki and Atiu, which helps spread visitor impacts geographically. This initiative supports the sustainable development of these islands while alleviating pressure on more popular destinations like Rarotonga (CIT—Annual Report). However, there are concerns raised by the Pa Enua regarding infrastructure to support increased tourism, as well as concerns to create limits in some areas, with a focus on environmental, social, and cultural resource protection and benefits for local communities.

While community-based tourism models and the focus on regenerative tourism strategies suggest that actions are being considered to manage visitor flows and impacts, the documents do not provide detailed examples of specific measures, such as infrastructure changes, visitor caps, or dynamic pricing models, to actively regulate visitor numbers and mitigate their effects.

A8.e Marketing strategy and selection of target markets takes account of visit patterns, the impact of activities and destination needs

The available documents do not explicitly state that the marketing strategy and selection of target markets are based on visit patterns, the impact of activities, and destination needs. However, several aspects of the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) and related reports suggest that these factors are considered:

1. **Diversification of Source Markets:** The CITDS emphasizes expanding and diversifying target markets by attracting visitors from new regions such as the United States, Australia, and Hawaii. This diversification may help distribute

visitor numbers across different seasons and reduce reliance on traditional markets like New Zealand. This strategy indirectly takes visit patterns into account, aiming to balance visitor flows throughout the year.

2. **Focus on Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism:** The regenerative tourism approach promoted in the CITDS is designed to align with the destination’s needs, focusing on sustainable visitor activities that positively impact the environment and local communities. This suggests that the selection of target markets is likely to align with attracting visitors who value responsible tourism and low impact activities.
3. **Visitor Experience Optimization:** The strategy outlines goals to optimize the visitor experience while managing environmental and social impacts. By targeting markets that are more likely to participate in eco-friendly and culturally enriching activities, the marketing approach is likely to consider the impact of visitor activities.
4. **Pa Enua (Outer Islands) Development:** The marketing strategy includes promoting less-visited outer islands to spread visitor impact and meet the needs of these destinations by developing tourism infrastructure and promoting community-based tourism models. This aligns with managing visitor patterns and supporting destination needs.

While there is no explicit mention of a formalized process linking market selection directly to visit patterns and impacts, the Strategy does suggest that these factors are considered in the overall approach to tourism marketing and destination management.

TABLE A8. Managing Visitor Volumes and Activities

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	The destination management strategy and action plan address seasonality and spread of visitation.	2	1.40
B	Variation in visitor volumes throughout the year is monitored, including in the most visited locations.	2	
C	Impacts of visitor volumes and activities are identified through observation and community and stakeholder feedback	1	
D	Actions taken to manage visitor flows and impacts.	1	
E	Marketing strategy and selection of target markets takes account of visit patterns, the impact of activities and destination needs.	1	

A9. PLANNING REGULATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

The destination has planning guidelines, regulations and/or policies which control the location and nature of development, require environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impact assessment, and integrate sustainable land use, design, construction, and demolition. Regulations also apply to operations, including property rental and concessions for tourism purposes. The guidelines, regulations and policies were created with public participation and are widely communicated and enforced.

To assess the Cook Islands against A9, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following documents were reviewed:

- Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028
- Cook Islands National Maritime Transport Policy 2014
- Cook Islands National Water Policy 2016

The Cook Islands scored well, with an overall score of **1.83** on Criteria A9, indicating “Needs Improvement.”

A9.a Specific policies/regulations/ guidelines which control development—documented and identified by title and date

The Cook Islands has several policies, regulations, and guidelines in place that control development. All are primarily focused on sustainability and compliance with environmental standards. Some key regulatory frameworks include:

▸ **Environment Act 2003**

This act governs environmental protection and assessment processes in the Cook Islands, ensuring that any development adheres to environmental sustainability standards. It is administered by the National Environment Service (NES), which plays a critical role in approving development projects and ensuring that environmental impacts are minimized (Cook Islands News).

▸ **Public Health Act 2004**

Administered by Te Marae Ora (Ministry of Health), this Act ensures that building and development projects meet health and sanitation

regulations. This includes reviewing construction plans to manage sanitation impacts for residential and commercial developments.

▸ **Infrastructure Act 2019**

This Act, which is regulated by Infrastructure Cook Islands, covers development and infrastructure projects, including roads, utilities, and public facilities. All are carried out safely, sustainably, and in alignment with the nation’s broader development goals.

These regulatory frameworks help to streamline the permitting process for development while ensuring that environmental and health standards are upheld. Additionally, coordination between the government agencies cited above helps maintain a balance between development and sustainability, promoting long-term environmental protection and compliance with national regulations.

The Cook Islands National Maritime Transport Policy, established in 2014, guides the planning, actions, and strategies necessary to ensure that local port and harbor safety, infrastructure, and shipping services operating to, from, or within the Cook Islands, or operating internationally under the Cook Islands flag, are compliant, safe and secure, and pose no threat to the marine environment.

The Cook Islands National Water Policy 2016 represents an “integrated multi-sectoral approach to the country’s sustainable water needs” that:

- protects all national water resources against contamination sources;
- manages national water resources in an integrated, equitable, and sustainable way;
- ensures all the population has access to safe drinking water; and
- identifies all public health risks associated with unsafe drinking water and manages them in a timely manner.

The purpose of the Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028 is “to strengthen climate resilience to protect lives, livelihoods, economic, infrastructural, cultural, and environmental assets in the Cook Islands, while ensuring sustainable development.” The Policy is one part of the government’s efforts to achieve its national goals

regarding climate change, which are: (a) to contribute to the sustainable development of the Cook Islands; (b) to strengthen resilience to the impacts of climate change through a coordinated, inclusive, culturally appropriate adaptation and mitigation program; and (c) to work collaboratively in climate change activities domestically and internationally.

Based on the tourism documents provided to the assessment team, specific policies, regulations, or guidelines that control development in the Cook Islands are not explicitly listed by title and date. However, development in the Cook Islands is generally governed by broader strategies and frameworks that guide sustainable tourism and economic development. They include:

1. Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS): This Strategy outlines sustainable and regenerative tourism practices and provides guidance for tourism development. While the CITDS emphasizes responsible tourism, it does not specify regulatory controls but aligns with broader national and regional sustainability goals.
2. National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+ (NSDA): This Agenda provides the overarching framework for sustainable development in the Cook Islands. It is referenced in tourism planning documents as the guiding policy for aligning tourism activities with environmental, social, and economic sustainability (CITDS; CIT—Annual Report).
3. Cook Islands Tourism Marketing Corporation Act 1998 & Amendment 2007: While this Act primarily focuses on the management and marketing of tourism, it may also impact development by ensuring tourism growth is aligned with economic, social, and environmental objectives.

A9.b Impact assessment requirements are set out, covering environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts, at sufficient scale to address long term issues for the destination

The available documents do not provide explicit details about formal impact assessment requirements covering environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts. However, based on the following policies and strategies, there are some indications that impact assessments are considered, particularly in the context of sustainability and development:

1. Environment Act 2003: Managed by the National Environment Service (NES), this Act is likely to require environmental impact assessments for large-scale projects. These assessments are intended to ensure that environmental impacts are considered before development projects are approved. However, the scope and specific requirements of these assessments, such as whether they cover long-term environmental, economic, and socio-cultural issues, are not detailed in the documents reviewed.
2. Public Health Act 2004 and Infrastructure Act 2019: These Acts include provisions for reviewing public health and infrastructure impacts related to development. However, these acts primarily focus on immediate health and infrastructure safety rather than broader socio-cultural or economic impacts.
3. Regenerative Tourism and Sustainable Development Focus: The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS) emphasizes a regenerative tourism approach, which likely requires some level of assessment for long-term sustainability, particularly in terms of socio-cultural and environmental impacts. However, the documents do not specify formal requirements for comprehensive impact assessments at the scale necessary to address long-term issues.

In summary, while environmental impact assessments are likely part of the process under the Environment Act, the specific inclusion of economic and socio-cultural impact assessments and their ability to address long-term issues is not clearly outlined in the documents reviewed. Formalized and detailed processes for these broader assessments may exist in other government documents that were not made available to the assessment team.

A9.c Specific regulations on property rental and operation for tourism, with evidence of their application and enforcement

The Cook Islands has several regulations and policies governing property rental and tourism operations. Specific details about property rental enforcement were limited and discussions with various stakeholders suggested there is a lack of enforcement.

The Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework (2016) includes guidelines to ensure

that tourism development in the Cook Islands is economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially acceptable. It highlights the importance of governance, environmental protection, and economic linkages with local communities.

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) are mandatory for new tourism products that could have an impact on the environment (UNEP LEAP). Yet, again, there is an issue with respect to enforcement of these policies and follow-through.

The Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy focuses on ensuring sustainable tourism growth while protecting the environment and promoting community involvement. This Strategy aligns global sustainable development goals and outlines broad guidelines for the development of tourism infrastructure, including property rentals used for tourism purposes. Yet there are enforcement issues with existing policies.

The Property Law Act (1952) governs leases and tenancies, including those used for tourism rentals. Customary landownership rules also play a significant role in regulating property rentals, as most land in the Cook Islands is leasehold and not available for freehold purchase.

The Cook Islands government has been holding public consultations to reform land laws, with an emphasis on absentee landowners and the management of land use for tourism purposes. These reforms could impact property rentals in the future.

While there are overarching frameworks that regulate property use and tourism development, evidence of strict enforcement or specific regulations on short-term tourism rentals is less defined. However, the existing frameworks indicate a commitment to sustainability and community-centered development.

A9.d Evidence of public participation in the development of policies/regulations/guidelines

There is some evidence of public participation in the development of policies and regulations within the Cook Islands. Key processes like the Joint National Action Plan (JNAP II) and the National Infrastructure Investment Plan 2015 were developed through extensive public consultation. The JNAP II, focusing on disaster resilience and climate change, involved collaboration with local communities and

sectoral stakeholders to address issues related to environmental sustainability and infrastructure. Similarly, the National Infrastructure Plan was built through consultations covering multiple sectors. However, discussions with stakeholders during the onsite visit indicated that engagement with policy changes does include processes involving residents.

A9.e Evidence of consultation with, and consent from indigenous people or minority ethnic groups when tourism development has been proposed or has occurred in their territories

There is evidence that the Cook Islands incorporates public consultation and involvement of indigenous people and local communities when developing policies, regulations, and tourism projects. Examples of this evidence are as follows:

- **Public Participation in Policy Development:** The development of key national strategies, such as the Joint National Action Plan (JNAP II) and the National Infrastructure Investment Plan 2015, involved public consultations. These efforts aimed to gather input from local communities on matters like environmental sustainability and infrastructure planning. Public meetings, like those on land law reforms, demonstrated efforts to gather community feedback and ensured that indigenous perspectives were included in decision-making processes.
- **Indigenous Consent for Tourism Projects:** International standards, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, emphasize the importance of obtaining Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from indigenous groups before initiating tourism development in their territories. While specific case studies from the Cook Islands are limited, international frameworks encourage such practices, and some best practices highlight indigenous-led tourism ventures that prioritize local community consent and participation (UN Special Rapporteur).

Overall, while there are frameworks and guidelines in place to promote consultation and consent, the application and enforcement of these processes appears to vary by project. Notably, however, the emphasis on public participation and community engagement remains central to many of the policies governing tourism and development in the Cook Islands.

A9.f Evidence of communication and enforcement of the policies/regulations/guidance, at planning, development, and implementation stages

There is little evidence of communication and enforcement of policies, regulations, and guidelines at various stages of tourism planning, development, and implementation in the Cook Islands. For example, the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework (2016) includes requirements for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for new tourism products that could disrupt or damage the environment. The Framework outlines guidelines for sustainable economic growth, protection of the environment, and the involvement of local communities in tourism development. It also emphasizes the enforcement of these measures at various stages to ensure that tourism activities are sustainable and align with national goals (UNEP LEAP). However, in discussions with stakeholders, there appears to be little enforcement and often a lack of resources to ensure there is follow-up on these guidelines/requirements. Despite this, there is a desire to engage on this issue and find ways to ensure policies are followed. The development of the strategic plan will certainly address these issues and is slated to address these issues which seem relatively consistent across various stakeholders.

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation's Destination Development Strategy focuses on strategic planning and infrastructure development while promoting sustainability. The strategy incorporates clear communication with local communities and stakeholders, ensuring that policies and guidelines are followed during the planning and development stages. Yet, again, implementation is lacking and falling short. There is awareness of these issues and a desire to engage many government agencies to collaborate on both enforcement and encouragement in sustainability practices.

The CIT's emphasis on regenerative tourism includes stronger focal areas on environmental sustainability and community empowerment. It's strategy, which guides operations and aligns national and international sustainable development goals, ensures that policies are communicated to the public and implemented in tourism projects.

In summary, there is a clear desire to enforce tourism-related policies, which many stakeholders agree are key priorities, especially during planning and implementation stages, to promote sustainability and local engagement.

TABLE A9. Planning Regulations and Development Control

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Specific policies/regulations/ guidelines which control development—documented and identified by title and date.	3	1.83
B	Impact assessment requirements are set out, covering environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts, at sufficient scale to address long term issues for the destination.	1	
C	Specific regulations on property rental and operation for tourism, with evidence of their application and enforcement.	1	
D	Evidence of public participation in the development of policies/regulations/guidelines.	2	
E	Evidence of consultation with, and consent from indigenous people or minority ethnic groups when tourism development has been proposed or has occurred in their territories.	3	
F	Evidence of communication and enforcement of the policies/regulations/guidance, at planning, development, and implementation stages	1	

A10. CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

The destination identifies risks and opportunities associated with climate change. Climate change adaptation strategies are pursued for the siting, design, development, and management of tourism facilities. Information on predicted climate change, associated risks and future conditions is provided for residents, businesses, and visitors.

To assess the Cook Islands against A10, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following documents were reviewed:

- Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028
- Cook Islands National Maritime Transport Policy 2014
- Cook Islands National Water Policy 2016
- UNEP LEAP

The Cook Islands has experienced the direct effects of climate change. The nation scored very well on Climate Change Adaptation (A10), with an overall score of **2.00**, indicating “Good Performance” overall.

Because tourism contributes to, suffers from, and potentially mitigates climate change, it must continuously address these issues for its own sustainability.

A10.a The destination management strategy and action plan identify and addresses climate issues

The Cook Islands’ destination management strategy and related plans, including the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework and other strategic documents, do address climate issues, particularly in the context of environmental sustainability and resilience. The following are descriptions of the Framework as well as other strategic documents.

- Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework (2016): This Framework highlights the importance of climate change adaptation and mitigation within the tourism sector. It specifically focuses on addressing environmental challenges, including minimizing degradation caused by tourism and industrial activities. The framework emphasizes resilience to sea level rise, cyclone damage, and disaster risk management (UNEP LEAP).

- Climate Change Adaptation Strategies: The Strategies incorporate measures to increase resilience to climate risks, including sea level rise and natural disasters. They also outline the need for sustainable tourism development that accounts for these climate challenges by integrating environmental protection into tourism planning (UNEP LEAP).
- National Climate-Related Plans: The Joint National Action Plan (JNAP II) and the Cook Islands Climate Change Country Programme also integrate climate change adaptation into their development goals. These plans include managing the impacts of climate change on the tourism sector and ensuring that infrastructure and policies are designed to withstand environmental challenges (Asia Pacific Energy Policy).

Thus, the Cook Islands’ tourism strategies do identify and address climate issues, focusing on resilience and sustainability.

A10.b Regulations, guidelines and zoning for tourism development and activities accommodate the consequences of climate change

Based on the following documents, it appears that the Cook Islands has regulations, guidelines, and zoning frameworks that address tourism development and accommodate the consequences of climate change.

▸ Cook Islands Environmental Act 2003

This Act suggests that all development applications, including those for tourism, are subject to Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). These assessments are a legal requirement to manage environmental risks, including those related to climate change, and to ensure that development projects are sustainable.

▸ Cook Islands National Infrastructure Investment Plan 2021-2031 (NIIP)

This plan emphasizes the need to incorporate climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction in infrastructure projects, including tourism-related developments. It stresses that protection against climate change impacts is vital for safeguarding both people and infrastructure (CI-Full-NIIP-2021-FINAL).

- ▶ **National Environmental Strategic Action Framework (NESAF)**

NESAF includes a climate change adaptation strategy, which outlines short- and medium-term actions to strengthen resilience against climate change impacts in various sectors, including tourism. This includes zoning initiatives aimed at protecting coastal and environmentally sensitive areas from the adverse effects of climate change.

- ▶ **Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (CITDS)**

The CITDS outlines a commitment to a regenerative approach to tourism, focusing on leveraging tourism to improve environmental well-being and mitigating the impacts of climate change. The strategy encourages responsible tourism development that aligns with sustainability goals.

Collectively, the four items listed above demonstrate that the Cook Islands is actively integrating climate change considerations into its tourism development planning, supported by environmental regulations, zoning guidelines, and national strategic plans. While written documents suggest activity in this area, some stakeholders believe the implementation and enforcement of these strategies is less than adequate.

A10.c A climate risk assessment, covering current and future risks—undertaken and made publicly available

There is evidence that climate risk assessments covering current and future risks have been undertaken and made publicly available in the Cook Islands. For example, the Cook Islands 2nd Joint National Action Plan (JNAP) 2016-2020 outlines a comprehensive climate change assessment and risk analysis for the Cook Islands. This document identifies key sectors affected by climate risks, such as coastal zones, marine resources, agriculture, biodiversity, water supply, and human health. It also provides a detailed breakdown of vulnerabilities, including sea level rise, coral bleaching, and impacts on infrastructure and food security. The plan includes both short-term and long-term strategies for managing and adapting to these risks.

In addition, several vulnerability assessments for individual islands (e.g., Penrhyn, Rakahanga, Manihiki) were conducted as part of the

government's climate change adaptation strategy. These assessments addressed island-specific risks and are publicly available, offering insights into how different islands are vulnerable to climate impacts.

The Cook Islands Climate Risk Profile, developed with the support of international partners like Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, outlines the nation's climate-related hazards. The Profile is publicly accessible and used to inform disaster risk management and development planning.

In summary, the Cook Islands has taken steps to assess and publicly share information on climate risks, ensuring transparency and strategic planning for climate resilience. This will likely be a key area of focus in the development of the strategic plan moving forward as the impact of climate changes are intimately known and felt by small island destinations.

A10.d Evidence of consideration of impact on, and contribution of, local ecosystems to climate change adaptation

In the documents reviewed, there is substantial detail regarding the consideration of local ecosystems in climate change adaptation. The following examples highlight plans and programs addressing Coral Reefs and Marine Ecosystems, the Marae Moana Marine Protected Area, Coastal Vegetation and Mangroves, Agroforestry and Sustainable Land Use, Water Catchment and Management, and Biodiversity Conservation and Ecosystem-based Adaptation.

- ▶ **Coral Reefs and Marine Ecosystems**

The Cook Islands 2nd Joint National Action Plan (JNAP) 2016-2020 extensively addresses the critical role of coral reefs in shielding coastal areas from climate change impacts such as sea-level rise, storm surges, and coastal erosion. Coral reefs act as natural barriers, protecting shorelines from the full force of waves and providing critical habitat for marine species.

The JNAP identifies threats like coral bleaching (caused by rising ocean temperatures) and ocean acidification (due to increased carbon dioxide absorption). These factors weaken the reef systems, reducing their effectiveness in protecting coastal infrastructure and communities. As a result, a key adaptation strategy involves reef restoration projects

to enhance reef resilience and protect this ecosystem from further degradation.

- **Marae Moana Marine Protected Area**

Marae Moana, one of the largest marine parks in the world, spans the entire Cook Islands' exclusive economic zone (EEZ), covering over 1.9 million square kilometers. The establishment of this marine protected area was designed to safeguard marine biodiversity and promote sustainable fishing practices, recognizing the essential role that healthy marine ecosystems play in climate adaptation.

Marine biodiversity and fisheries are crucial for the livelihoods of local communities, and sustainable management of these resources is integral to ensuring food security under changing climate conditions. By protecting marine areas from overfishing and harmful activities, Marae Moana contributes to maintaining ecosystem services that help buffer against climate impacts. This area also contributes to carbon sequestration, with healthy ocean ecosystems acting as carbon sinks that absorb CO₂, thus playing a role in mitigating climate change impacts.

- **Coastal Vegetation and Mangroves**

The JNAP emphasizes the importance of coastal vegetation and mangroves in preventing erosion and protecting against storm surges. Mangroves are highlighted for their ability to absorb storm energy, reduce wave impact, and stabilize shorelines by trapping sediments.

Rehabilitation of mangrove ecosystems is promoted as a natural adaptation measure. These ecosystems not only provide physical protection to the coast but also serve as nurseries for fish and other marine species, thus supporting local fisheries and food security.

- **Agroforestry and Sustainable Land Use**

The National Environmental Strategic Action Framework (NESAF) and the Cook Islands 2nd JNAP both reference the importance of sustainable land use and agroforestry practices to build resilience in the agricultural sector. By promoting agriculture-ecological zoning, the government encourages sustainable agricultural practices that align with the local

ecosystems' capacity to regenerate. This approach enhances soil health, water retention, and biodiversity, making ecosystems more resilient to climate-induced stresses such as droughts, flooding, and changing rainfall patterns. Moreover, agroforestry contributes to carbon sequestration, as trees absorb carbon and provide long-term environmental benefits.

- **Water Catchment and Management**

Water resources are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts like droughts and changing rainfall patterns. Local ecosystems, including watersheds and wetlands, play a crucial role in water catchment and groundwater recharge, essential for ensuring a stable water supply. Protecting these ecosystems is a key focus in the Cook Islands Climate Risk Profile and JNAP. Plans include strategies for improving water management through integrated water resource management, which includes protecting and restoring wetlands and natural water catchment areas to help mitigate the effects of water scarcity and flooding.

- **Biodiversity Conservation**

The Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui—National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) 2020+ emphasizes biodiversity conservation as a critical component of sustainable development and wellbeing in the Cook Islands. Below are the summarized key points:

- *Environmental Stewardship (Turanga Memeitaki—Wellbeing Focus)*

The document prioritizes protecting the pristine environment to ensure future generations inherit an ecosystem rich in biodiversity. The Cook Islands' environment is seen as central to cultural, spiritual, and economic wellbeing.

- *Marae Moana Legacy*

The Marae Moana (a multi-use marine park) covers nearly two million square kilometers of ocean and stands as a global model for marine protection.

The agenda builds on this legacy to sustainably manage oceanic and marine resources while protecting biodiversity.

- *Halting Biodiversity Loss*

A core goal is to stop biodiversity loss and control invasive species that threaten local ecosystems. Emphasis is placed on integrating biodiversity conservation into decision-making processes and national education systems.

- *Sustainable Use of Natural Resources*

The NSDA promotes balancing economic development with environmental sustainability to avoid exploitation that harms natural ecosystems.

It also calls for re-evaluating harmful incentives that degrade the environment.

- *Community Awareness and Education*

Increasing respect for biodiversity and raising public awareness are key strategies to promote conservation. Incorporating traditional knowledge alongside scientific evidence ensures culturally aligned solutions for biodiversity management.

- *Nature-Based Solutions and Climate Resilience*

The document highlights nature-based solutions for addressing climate change challenges, such as ecosystem restoration, which benefit both human wellbeing and biodiversity. Resilience strategies include sustainable food systems, clean energy, and water self-sufficiency to minimize environmental impacts.

- *Blue and Green Economy*

The agenda advocates for a clean blue economy (marine-based) and green economy that are respectful of biodiversity and cultural heritage while supporting sustainable development.

- *Integration into National Frameworks*

Biodiversity conservation is part of the long-term vision (100 years), integrated into education, governance, and community participation frameworks to ensure continuity.

By protecting its marine and terrestrial ecosystems and focusing on sustainable resource use, the Cook Islands endeavors to safeguard its biodiversity as part of its cultural and natural heritage while achieving broader sustainable development goals. This provides a significant opportunity upon which

to manage tourism sustainably and ensure the aims are met for future generations.

The Cook Islands have developed comprehensive strategies to consider the impact of local ecosystems in their climate adaptation plans. These strategies focus on protecting critical ecosystems such as coral reefs, mangroves, forests, and water catchments, recognizing their vital roles in both mitigating climate change impacts and providing long-term resilience to local communities. These actions are publicly documented in national strategies and plans like JNAP, NESAF, and Marae Moana Marine Park guidelines. The nexus with tourism is significant and will likely be considered in the future development of a tourism destination management plan and program. Taking the plans in place to the next level of implementation and enforcement.

A10.e Information on climate change that has been made publicly available

Climate change information has been made publicly available in the Cook Islands through various official channels and documents, including:

- The Cook Islands' 2nd Joint National Action Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (2016-2020) is a publicly available document that provides comprehensive information on climate vulnerabilities, adaptation strategies, and disaster risk management. It highlights the climate risks faced by the Cook Islands, including tropical cyclones, sea-level rise, and ocean acidification. This Plan is accessible through the Office of the Prime Minister's website.
- The NSDA sets out a long-term vision for the Cook Islands to achieve holistic wellbeing and sustainable development over a 100-year period. The document prioritizes Turanga Memeitaki—a state of wellbeing that encompasses being comfortable, healthy, and happy. This vision will be achieved through multi-generational planning, including 25-year frameworks and 5-year strategies with measurable actions and outcomes.
- The agenda highlights 15 core goals, or a “15 Star Pledge,” that address key areas such as environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, economic prosperity, governance, and community resilience. It emphasizes the importance of protecting biodiversity, promoting

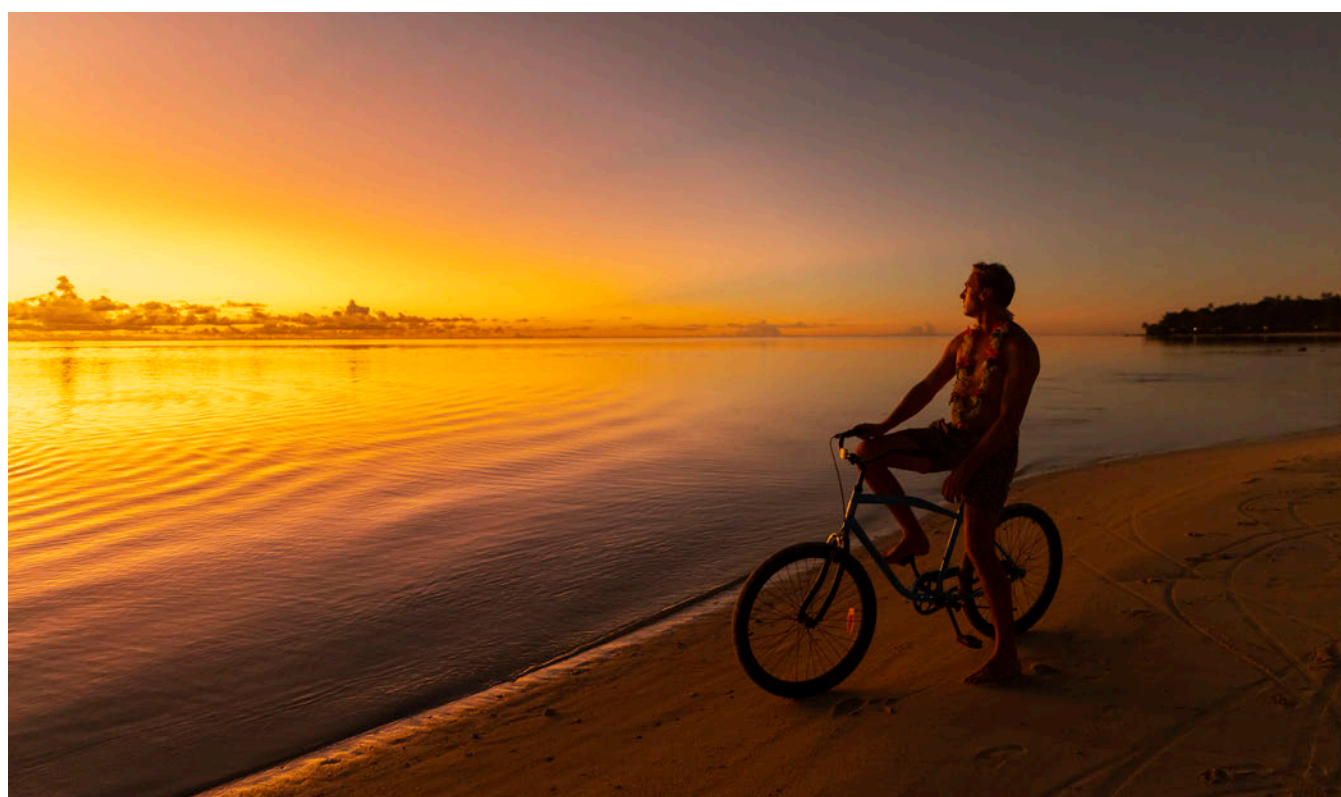
a clean blue and green economy, revitalizing cultural heritage, and enhancing social equity. By focusing on the interconnectedness of people, culture, and the environment, the NSDA aims to guide the Cook Islands toward a prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable future, balancing development with the preservation of natural and cultural heritage.

- The Strengthening the Resilience of our Islands and Communities to Climate Change (SRIC-CC)

program and various national seminars, such as the “Brilliant Resilient” national seminar, engage the public in discussions about climate change. These initiatives include community consultations and are intended to raise awareness at both national and local levels. The information is disseminated through government websites, public meetings, and strategic documents to ensure widespread accessibility and public participation in climate adaptation efforts.

TABLE A10. Climate Change Adaptation

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	The destination management strategy and action plan identify and addresses climate issues.	3	2.00
B	Regulations, guidelines and zoning for tourism development and activities accommodate the consequences of climate change.	1	
C	A climate risk assessment, covering current and future risks—undertaken and made publicly available.	3	
D	Evidence of consideration of impact on, and contribution of, local ecosystems to climate change adaptation.	2	
E	Information on climate change that has been made publicly available.	2	



A11. RISK AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The destination has a risk reduction, crisis management and emergency response plan that is appropriate to the destination. Key elements are communicated to residents, visitors, and enterprises. Procedures and resources are established for implementing the plan and it is regularly updated.

To assess Cook Islands against A11, the following websites and documents were reviewed:

- ▶ Emergency Management Cook Island website
- ▶ Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028
- ▶ Cook Islands National Maritime Transport Policy 2014

The Cook Islands scored **2.00** overall on Criteria A11, indicating “Good Performance” overall.

Emergency Management Cook Islands is a government agency “dedicated to protecting... community[ies], [the] environment, and cultural heritage by effectively managing and mitigating impacts of natural and human-caused emergencies” (<https://emci.gov.ck/emci-blog/>). On its home page, the agency posts updates on current emergencies. The remaining contents of the website include links to documents detailing its strategies and protocols for disasters, a blog “aimed at enhancing awareness, preparedness, and resilience in emergency situations across the Cook Islands,” a geoportal, and more.

However, in discussing risk management as it relates to tourism, stakeholders identified a gap in addressing the vulnerabilities associated with having visitors as part of the planning for evacuations, etc.

A11.a A documented risk reduction, crisis management and emergency response plan for tourism in the destination

There is a documented risk reduction, crisis management, and emergency response plan for tourism in the Cook Islands. These include:

- ▶ The Cook Islands Tourism Crisis Management Plan, as referenced in the Economic Development Strategy 2030, outlines a mechanism for the tourism sector to respond to and recover from disaster events effectively. It was commissioned by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and is specifically designed for the tourism industry,

aiming to address emergencies and crises such as natural disasters.

- ▶ The National Disaster Risk Management Plan (NDRM) 2017 provides a comprehensive framework for managing disaster risks across all sectors, including tourism. The Plan outlines responsibilities for government agencies and businesses in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. It emphasizes disaster risk reduction as a critical element, highlighting that the tourism sector must also prepare for risks such as cyclones, tsunamis, and other natural hazards. Despite the efforts of this Plan there appears to be some confusion as to the responsibility of visitors. There is currently work underway to identify a specific action plan for those visiting the islands.
- ▶ The Joint National Action Plan (JNAP II) integrates climate change adaptation and disaster risk management, providing guidelines on how sectors like tourism should handle crisis situations. This Plan stresses the importance of public-private collaboration to ensure that tourism stakeholders are well-prepared to mitigate and manage disaster risks (Cook-Islands-National-Disaster).

These three plans demonstrate systems for addressing risks for residents and are being further developed within the tourism sector, incorporating crisis management and disaster response strategies to safeguard the industry’s resilience against emergencies.

A11.b The plan recognizes a wide range of risks, including natural disasters, terrorism, health, resource depletion, and others appropriate to the location

The Cook Islands Tourism Crisis Management Plan recognizes a wide range of risks, including:

1. Natural Disasters: The Plan extensively addresses natural hazards such as cyclones, droughts, and sea surges, which are common in the Cook Islands due to its geographic location. Cyclones are noted as a significant recurring threat to the tourism sector and the broader economy.
2. Climate Change: The Plan incorporates the impacts of climate change, specifically sea-level

rise and extreme weather events, as critical long-term threats to the tourism sector.

3. **Health Risks:** It acknowledges epidemics and pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a significant economic impact on the Cook Islands. The Plan includes strategies for managing health crises and their effects on tourism.
4. **Environmental Risks:** The Plan includes concerns over marine resource disasters, erosion, and the degradation of natural habitats due to climate impacts, which can reduce the appeal of the destination for visitors.
5. **Terrorism and Man-Made Risks:** Though deemed a low-risk factor, the Plan does address the potential threat of terrorism and other man-made disasters, ensuring that the tourism industry is prepared for a broad spectrum of risks.

The Cook Islands National Disaster Risk Management Plan (NDRMP) supports the Cook Islands Tourism Crisis Management Plan by identifying a comprehensive set of hazards, ensuring that tourism development is equipped to handle a wide range of risks beyond natural disasters, including health, resource depletion, and environmental impacts.

A11.c Communication procedures identified for use during and after an emergency

Communication procedures for use during and after an emergency are identified in various strategic documents for the Cook Islands, particularly in relation to disaster risk management and tourism, including:

- **National Disaster Risk Management Plan (NDRMP) 2017**

This document outlines the communication protocols to be followed during and after an emergency. It specifies how the Emergency Operations Centre will coordinate communication with relevant agencies, stakeholders, and the public. It highlights the role of Emergency Management Cook Islands in disseminating information and coordinating response efforts.

- **Cook Islands Tourism Crisis Management Plan**

This identifies procedures for communicating with visitors, tourism businesses, and the public during emergencies. It includes providing guidance, disseminating updates, and ensuring clear communication channels to help mitigate the impact on the tourism sector (CITDS).

- **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)**

The Standard Operating Procedures for International Assistance outline the role of the International Assistance Focal Point (IAFP) in facilitating communication between international responders, the national authorities, and local agencies during disaster relief and recovery phases. This includes maintaining records, updating information on required goods and services, and coordinating with international relief teams.

These three plans ensure that communication strategies are in place for different phases of disaster management, helping to coordinate responses effectively during and after emergencies. Further consideration is being given to tourists visiting the island in terms of implementation strategies and facilities needed; however, this needs to be documented and made public for both hosts and visitors within the tourism sector.

A11.d Program for local delivery of information and training on risk and crisis management

Evidence of multiple plans/programs for the local delivery of information and training on risk and crisis management in the Cook Islands include:

- **Cook Islands Joint National Action Plan (JNAP II)**

The Plan outlines a clear framework for capacity building and community engagement in both climate change adaptation and disaster risk management. It emphasizes the need for ongoing education and training at the local level to build resilience. This includes training in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, with a focus on local communities and businesses.

- **Emergency Management Cook Islands (EMCI)**

EMCI is responsible for conducting training workshops and drills across the islands, ensuring that local communities are well-prepared to respond to natural disasters. These activities are tailored to local needs and are designed to

increase awareness of risk and improve crisis management at the community level.

► **Tourism Education and Training Initiatives**

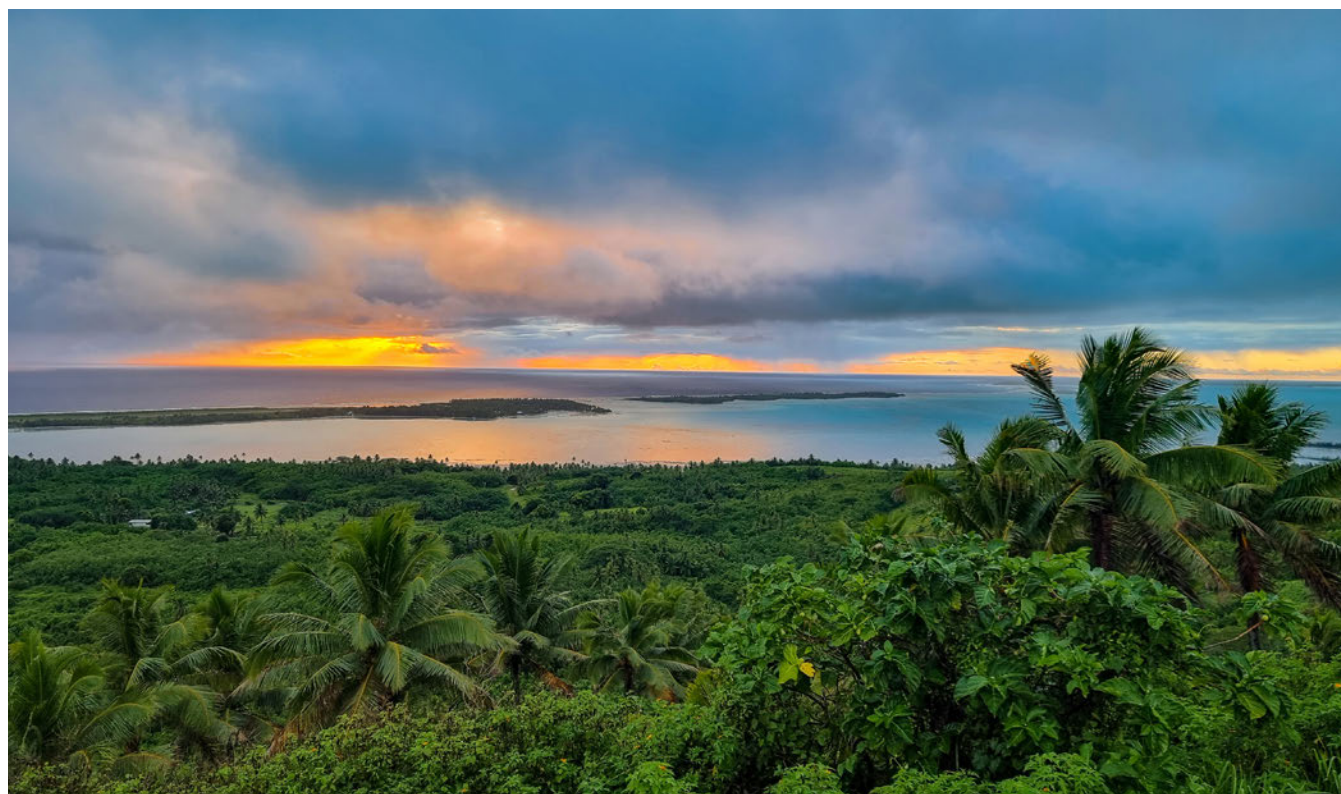
The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation implements education and training programs for the tourism sector, focusing on visitor safety, hospitality, and emergency response. These initiatives include practical workshops and guidelines to ensure that tourism businesses are equipped to handle crises. However, it appears that these are not consistently offered.

With migrant workers increasingly becoming central to the tourism workforce and on-going development of the Pa Enua, addressing what training needs exist across the islands appears to be in development with CIT's current strategic efforts.

The programs highlighted above ensure that both the public and specific sectors like tourism are informed and trained on how to respond to emergencies and mitigate risks, strengthening overall resilience in the Cook Islands.

TABLE A11. Planning Regulations and Development Control

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	A documented risk reduction, crisis management and emergency response plan for tourism in the destination.	2	2.00
B	The plan recognises a wide range of risks, including natural disasters, terrorism, health, resource depletion, and others appropriate to the location.	2	
C	Communication procedures identified for use during and after an emergency.	2	
D	Programme for local delivery of information and training on risk and crisis management.	2	



Section B: Socio-Economic Sustainability

The Cook Island’s tourism campaign — “Love our little paradise” — focuses on the characteristics that make the island nation a unique tourism destination. On the landing page of its website, Cook Islands Tourism Corporation “boast[s] an idyllic climate, endless adventure, romance [,] and pure relaxation.” However, access to these benefits and the promotional focus varies by island. For example, tourists are encouraged to “walk the beach less travelled” and experience the variety of amenities on Rarotonga. Alternatively, on Aitutaki, tourists are encouraged to embrace “paradise,” which is manifested through the island’s natural beauty. Adventurous tourists are encouraged to visit the “...underdeveloped sister islands... [where] their uniqueness and timelessness are their own reward.”

A potential contributor to socio-economic sustainability in the Cook Islands is the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy. Launched by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation in 2022/23, the Strategy “provides a roadmap towards a more regenerative approach to tourism and destination development... in the next five years” (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23). Specifically, its main aspirations are to:

- ▶ optimize tourism’s contribution towards a prosperous, sustainable, and resilient Cook Islands economy;
- ▶ ensure tourism has a positive influence on the well-being of the country’s people and place;
- ▶ ensure the ongoing well-being, comfort, and satisfaction of visitors; and
- ▶ develop and maintain a positive relationship with the tourism industry to help build capability and resilience, and collectively ensure a high-quality offering to visitors.

Socio-Economic Sustainability scored an overall average of **1.58**, which is based on an average of the overall scores of each of the 8 criteria.

One criterion—Access for all—was identified as an area of “Risk” and another—Preventing exploitation and discrimination—was deemed to be at “Moderate Risk.”



Decent work and career opportunities, supporting local entrepreneurs and fair trade, Support for community, and Property and user rights “Needs Improvement.”

Two criteria—Measuring the economic contribution of tourism and Safety and security were identified as having “Good Performance.”

TABLE B0. Summary of Socio-economic Sustainability Scoring

GSTC INDICATORS SCORING	Criteria B: Socio-Economic
Areas of Risk <1	1
Areas of Moderate Risk 1.00–1.49	1
Needs Improvement 1.50–1.99	4
Good Performance 2.00–2.49	2
Excellent Performance ≥2.50	0
TOTAL	8

Area of Focus—Delivering Local Economic Benefits

B1. MEASURING THE ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF TOURISM

The direct and indirect economic contribution of tourism to the destination's economy is monitored and publicly reported. Appropriate measures may include levels of visitor volume, visitor expenditure, employment and investment and evidence of the distribution of economic benefits.

To assess the Cook Islands against B1, the following documents were reviewed. This was in addition to interviews and site visits.

- Cook Islands Community Attitudes Towards Tourism February 2021
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2023
- Cook Islands: Pacific Tourism Sector Snapshot 2021
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23
- DD Scorecard 2020-21
- Cook Islands Research Reports (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>).
- Pacific Tourism Data Initiative
- Pacific Tourism Statistics Assessment prepared for OECD Paris 21 by IDEEA Group 2020
- Protecting our Future: Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework and Goals
- Te Kaveinga Nui: National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020
- Visitor Economy Factsheet Vol.1

The Cook Islands scored well, with an overall score of **2.33** on Criteria B1, or “Good Performance.”

B1.a Program of economic data gathering

According to the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation has a program of economic data gathering. It conducts regular surveys with tourists, businesses, and the community to obtain information related

to sustainable tourism indicators. However, the Cook Islands government “does not use a consistent methodology to measure the economic impacts of tourism, which results in varying indicators of its contribution to GDP (IDEAA Group, 2020).

B1.b Annual reports on the direct and indirect economic contribution of tourism to the destination

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation supplies annual reports on the direct and indirect contribution of tourism to the country. In its annual report for 2022/23, the Corporation noted an economic contribution of \$251 million in direct visitor expenditures. Tourists spent an average of \$216 on the island per day. In addition, the Corporation generates the Visitor Economy Factsheet, which is “designed to share key data and insight regarding tourism, the visitor and economic contribution of the single largest industry for the Cook Islands” (Visitor Economy Factsheet Vol.1).

The Corporation stated that it “has transitioned [away from partnering with the New Zealand Tourism Institute] to participate in a regional data programme delivered through the South Pacific Tourism Organization...” (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23; Pacific Tourism Data Initiative).

Examples of past efforts with the New Zealand Tourism Institute include the Business Confidence Index Survey, the Cook Islands Community Attitudes Towards Tourism study, and the International Visitor Survey. These past efforts as well as recent international visitor surveys can be accessed at the following website: <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/research-report>.

The Corporation acknowledges that there is “a need to re-evaluate key instruments for modern measurement of the visitor economy” (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23).

B1.c Data covering a range of measures of economic impact (e.g., volume, expenditure, employment, investment and spread of economic benefit in the destination)

The 2020 study of community attitudes towards tourism (Cook-Islands-Community-Attitudes-Survey-2020-Report-Mar2021-d20210519.pdf) included a set of questions focused on tourism and the economy. Respondents were inclined to somewhat or strongly agree that “tourism is good for the Cook Islands economy” (mean = 4.4) and “tourism creates more jobs for local people” (mean = 4.3).

In 2021 the Government of the Cook Islands published “Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030.” Specific to B1c, the government extended its underwriting of the Rarotonga-Sydney route, which has been “a successful program in growing tourism numbers and expanding [the country’s] tourism market further afield.” To maintain this growth, the government intends to measure progress related to transforming the economy by documenting increases in international arrivals from markets other than New Zealand and Australia, improving internet and mobile phone

penetration rates, and reducing internet data costs. It also plans to assess the annual real GDP growth rate, international visitors’ average daily expenditure, reduction of commercial electricity bills, and maintenance of business owner’s confidence.

The Corporation has contracted with various organizations to conduct the Cook Islands International Visitor Survey. Results of the survey allow the Corporation to document economic impact as well as demographic characteristics of tourists, type of trip, average length of stay, islands visited, visitor expenditures, level of satisfaction with services and experiences, and intention to revisit.

The first goal of the Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Policy is to ensure strong governance, leadership, and management. To do this, the nation must have “reliable, robust and on-going research of visitors, businesses, and communities... and translate it into usable outcomes and resources.” It must also develop specific research for the Pa Enua.

TABLE B1. Planning Regulations and Development Control

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Programme of economic data gathering.	2	2.33
B	Annual reports on the direct and indirect economic contribution of tourism in the destination.	3	
C	Data covering a range of measures of economic impact (e.g., volume, expenditure, employment, investment and spread of economic benefit in the destination).	2	



B2. DECENT WORK AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

The destination encourages and supports career opportunities and training in tourism. The destination's tourism enterprises commit to providing equality of opportunity for local employment, training and advancement, a safe and secure working environment, and a living wage for all.

To assess the Cook Islands against B2, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following documents were reviewed:

- ▶ Cook Islands Decent Work Country Programme 2019-2022
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23
- ▶ Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- ▶ DD Scorecards 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2020-21
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/cook-islands-tourism-launches-leadership-programme-develop-next-generation-leaders>
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/blog/creative-centre-empowering-people-disabilities-rarotonga>
- ▶ IDEEA Group. 2020. Pacific Tourism Statistics Assessment prepared for OECD Paris 21.
- ▶ Ministry of Internal Affairs website
- ▶ National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Action Plan 2019-2024
- ▶ Protecting our Future: Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework & Goals
- ▶ Te Kaveinga Nui: National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020

The Cook Islands received an overall score of **1.75** on Criteria B2; thus, it “Needs Improvement.”

The travel and tourism industry is one of the largest and most dynamic industries in the world. The economic contributions are significant. In 2023 the travel and tourism industry supported approximately 9% of all economic activity on the planet. To ensure tourism continues to have a positive impact on its host community, it is

imperative that tourism businesses provide equal employment, training opportunities, occupational safety, and fair wages for all.

B2.a Provision of relevant skills training

The Destination Development division of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation holds training sessions/workshops for tourism businesses such as the Kia Orana Service course on basic customer service principles and digital workshops on social media marketing and smartphone photography and videography. The Corporation has also subsidized the cost of training for Cook Islanders interested in boat master and radio license certification.

- ▶ The Aitutaki Boat Masters Course is a comprehensive training programme designed to educate individuals in the safe and proficient operation of boats, particularly in the context of the maritime and tourism industry. This course equips participants with the knowledge and skills required to become competent boat masters, responsible for safely navigating vessels and ensuring the well-being of passengers and crew (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23).

The Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines require accredited businesses to “prioritize on the job training and development of staff to ensure the workforce is completely skilled” and “ensure all staff have completed the Kia Orana Customer Service Course.”

The Corporation initiated the Cook Islands Bronze Medallion program through Water Safety & Surf Life Saving Cook Islands Incorporated to promote water safety, drowning prevention, and to implement rescue strategies in the Cook Islands. The program, taught by a Bronze Medallion accredited facilitator, “involved rigorous theory and practical application sessions both in the classroom and out on the water. Water safety is paramount and this course and support for water-based tour operators is expected to continue” (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23).

In discussion with stakeholders, it appears there are several needs with respect to supporting youth development and education, including skills development around tourism and entrepreneurial support programs.

B2.b Statements of commitment by tourism enterprises to the provision of decent work/ career opportunities.

Initiatives that may lead to decent work and career opportunities include funding to support The Cook Islands Tertiary Training Institute offering of Level 5 Diplomas in Hospitality Management and Travel and Tourism, sponsoring a Red Cross representative to deliver first aid presentations to over 200 participants on Aitutaki, attending career expos to enlighten students and the community on the importance of tourism, and offering the Mangaia Tour Guide Training and Mentoring course, which “encourages utilizing resources and human power, and the traditional knowledge of the local people, to share their own hidden treasures through quality ecotours.” However, in discussions with stakeholders, these programs have not moved forward or have lapsed in the past few years.

A more recent initiative is the Cook Islands Tourism Leadership Programme which was created in partnership with Air New Zealand and Pacific Resort Hotel Group and launched in early 2024.

The programme is designed to nurture the next generation of tourism leaders, providing them with the base skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the industry, and the opportunity to work with a leading tourism operator in the Cook Islands” (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/cook-islands-tourism-launches-leadership-programme-develop-next-generation-leaders>).

Specifically, individuals will participate in a 17-week Leadership and Performance course in New Zealand and then return to Rarotonga for a 6-month management internship with the Pacific Resort Hotel Group.

At the national level, the only statements of commitment to the creation of decent work and career opportunities in tourism are found in the 2016-2020 National Sustainable Development Plan. One of its goals is to “expand economic opportunities, improve economic resilience and productive employment to ensure decent work for all.” An indicator for this goal is to promote fair employment through the creation of an employee wellbeing index which addresses the state of the labor market and its fairness and conditions.

B2.c Training and employment opportunities promoted to and taken up by local people, including women, young people, minorities, and people with disabilities

The Cook Islands enacted the Decent Work Country Programme for Cook Islands in 2019. The Programme focused on three priorities:

- ▶ advance labour laws reform and improve labour administration in line with international labour standards [;]
- ▶ enhance labour force development and opportunities for inclusive growth and improved employment prospects, with special attention given to youth, women, and persons with disabilities [;] and
- ▶ promote social dialogue, tripartism, and strong representative employers’ and workers’ organizations (Cook Islands Decent Work Country Programme 2019-2022).

One initiative targeted at empowering individuals with disabilities is the Creative Centre. One of the focus areas is empowerment. The Centre does this through having members create pareus, paintings, and other handicrafts that are sold at the Punanga Nui Market. Profits from sales are used to fund the Centre’s operations, maintain their stall, and provide income for its members.

Outcome 3 of The National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment—Women engaged in economic development—includes key objectives that may affect tourism. The objectives include promoting gender equality in access to productive resources and earning capacity, reducing barriers to women in business, advancing gender equality in the workplace, supporting women’s economic empowerment, reducing the personal cost to women entering (and remaining in) the workforce, and protecting women from all forms of discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

Directly aligned with tourism, the Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Policy includes a goal to develop a strong and sustainable workforce and provide career pathways and employment opportunities for the Cook Islands people. Specific actions proposed to meet this goal include increasing the percentage of Cook Island Māori workers from

the local employment pool as well as overseas, integrating tourism specific courses into school curricula, increasing the role of women in tourism, continuing to develop the Business Confidence Index to gain insight to employment trends, and adding questions about workers' experiences and perceptions into the community attitude survey.

Despite efforts taken to provide decent work and career opportunities, the Cook Islands face an uphill battle as the labor supply is an ongoing challenge for the private sector and work permits for foreign labor can be hard to obtain (PSDI-TourismSnapshot-COO.pdf).

B2.d Channels for checking working conditions and receiving/handling grievances (e.g., involvement of labour unions)

According to the authors of Cook Islands Decent Work Country Programme 2019-2022, conciliation, mediation, arbitration and the Labour Court institutions are still in infant stages in the Cook Islands, and workers believe that these institutions do not strengthen workers positions within the industrial relations system. Labour legislation in the Cook Islands emphasizes self-resolution before seeking state assistance; only if the two parties are unable to resolve the grievance at the organization level can they resort to the dispute resolution machinery at the state level. Employers and employees are required to exhaust the organization's internal grievance procedures before seeking third-party intervention.¹⁹ If the dispute remains unresolved the matter goes to conciliation and mediation, a process which is underdeveloped in the Cook Islands.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs Labor Division engages in active awareness raising activities, inspects worksites and retail establishments, and deals with complaints and disputes. However, according to the authors of Cook Islands Decent Work Country Programme 2019-2022, the Director of Labour can only informally facilitate the parties to find a mediator. The two parties (employers and employees) have to arrange and pay for a private mediator, usually a lawyer or retired senior civil servant, and the state does not get involved in this process. The parties normally pay 50 percent each for the fees of a mediator. The costs of conciliation and mediation is an effective barrier to workers taking their grievances outside the organization as mediators need to be engaged by the respective

parties at their own costs, and since, most workers cannot afford to pay for the cost of mediation and/or pay for the cost of taking action in High Court, most worker grievances that are not resolved at the organization level remain unresolved.

Disputes unresolved at the mediation and conciliation stage are referred to the Arbitration Tribunal which has the status of a magistrate's court and operate in a legalistic manner vis-à-vis conciliation and mediation. Each party at the Arbitration Tribunal can be represented by a lawyer and an employer and a worker who have the power to nominate and choose arbitrators themselves. The two arbitrators then select a third arbitrator, thereby making a team of three arbitrators (ERA 2012, s10(1)). Unresolved disputes go directly to the High Court and an employer, or an employee can also appeal to the Court of Appeals.

On the Ministry of Internal Affairs's website there is a link to "Fair and Decent Workplace Practices." This link does not indicate how individuals can file a complaint against an employer. Instead, under a separate tab, "Tools and Resources," there is a link to the "Discrimination Harassment and Duress Fact Sheet." At the end of the Fact Sheet there is a link to the Employment Dispute Resolution Process.

Workers' organizations in the Cook Islands include the Public Service Association, the Cook Islands Workers Association, Nurses Association, and the Teachers Association. The private sector's interests are represented by the Cook Islands Chamber of Commerce.

A proposed action of the National Policy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment is to establish a National Employment Dispute Resolution Mechanism to address employee grievances, to review labor market policies to protect and support all women in the workplace, explore and promote options that support women returning to work, and to establish an awareness campaign for employers on the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees in the workplace. In addition, to ensure that the outcomes established by the Policy are achieved, a Gender Advisor within the Social Policy and Service Division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Women Development Officers from the Pa Enua, the Cook Islands National Council of Women, and the Office of the Public Service Commissioner will be empowered to act.

TABLE B2. Decent Work and Career Opportunities

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Provision of relevant skills training programmes/courses available locally.	2	1.50
B	Statements of commitment by tourism enterprises to the provision of decent work/ career opportunities.	2	
C	Training and employment opportunities promoted to and taken up by local people, including women, young people, minorities, and people with disabilities.	2	
D	Channels for checking working conditions and receiving/handling grievances (e.g., involvement of labor unions).	1	



B3. SUPPORTING LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS AND FAIR TRADE

The destination encourages the retention of tourism spending in the local economy through supporting local enterprises, supply chains and sustainable investment. It promotes the development and purchase of local sustainable products based on fair trade principles that reflect the area's nature and culture. These may include food and beverages, crafts, performance arts, agricultural products, etc.

To assess the Cook Islands against B3, interviews and site visits were conducted and the following documents were reviewed.

- Agriculture Sector Action Plan 2020-2025
- Business Trade Investment Board website
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23
- Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- Destination Marketing Scorecard 2019-20
- <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/business-training-collab-btib>
- Ministry of Cultural Development website
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration website
- State of the Environment Report 2018

The Cook Islands “Needs Improvement” with a score of **1.60** on Criteria B3.

Destinations that include local businesses, service providers, and farms within their value chains continue to strengthen the economic base of the community. Local businesses are also owned by people who live within the community and are more invested in the destination’s future.

B3.a Advice, finance, or other support—available in the destination for tourism-related SMEs.

The Business Trade and Investment Board offers loans of up to \$100,000NZD to local indigenous Cook Islanders who want to start their own business. Loans applicable to tourism businesses include “Business Support,” which is for the purchase of capital items, promotional materials, and other business-related costs, and the “Sustainable Export Fund,” which is focused on helping “businesses who want to purchase products from the Outer Islands and on-sell them to the market... in Rarotonga or overseas” (<https://btib.gov.ck/business-enterprise/>).

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation recently partnered with the Business Trade Investment Board to provide business training for small businesses with particular emphasis on “leveraging the digital world for marketing and promotion” (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/business-training-collab-btib>). It also maintains a relationship with businesses by holding Global Business Updates, providing in-kind support for events, promoting partnership projects with local individuals/businesses, and producing and distributing Coconut Connection and electronic direct mail to stakeholders to update them on the Cook Islands tourism industry. With respect to Pa Enua, Cook Islands Tourism Corporation conducts destination audits with the intent of:

- auditing the key offerings of the respective island as a holiday destination within the greater brand of the Cook Islands; and
- engaging with the island community (government, businesses, and community) to facilitate its tourism needs and implement destination development projects that will benefit the respective island. It also identifies and recommends key improvements to enhance the visitor experience, strengthen the destination marketing of the respective island and the Pa Enua, and increase synergies with key stakeholders.

An additional example of the Corporation’s efforts to support local entrepreneurs was evident

in the Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines. To receive Quality Assured accreditation businesses must “encourage visitors and guests to purchase locally made products in the Cook Islands and promote local gastronomy and culinary experiences.” However, in discussions with stakeholders, to be effective, this program must be revised to meet the needs of current day regenerative and sustainable tourism goals.

The Cook Islands government plans to increase the contribution of the cultural industries to GDP. This likely will coincide with further investment in key focal areas such as essential infrastructure (e.g., housing) and an attractive business environment, which are intended to “[stimulate] demand for goods and services and [build] the future capacity of local businesses.” Specific actions/investments that have been made by the government include, but are not limited to:

- introduction of an accelerated depreciation tax incentive to encourage investment in buildings and other assets;
- development of a shipping roadmap that considers options for “government intervention to ensure the sustainable, safe, reliable, and affordable provision of inter-island shipping”;
- studies of the seven-island government-administered airports serving the Pa Enua;
- the launch of an affordable and high-quality telecommunication service to the Pa Enua;
- introduction of Infrastructure Cook Islands which is focused on air and marine infrastructure improvement, including management of solid waste and sanitation, both of which impact future tourism development;
- a review of the effectiveness of the Business Trade and Investment Board’s (BTIBs) revolving fund loan scheme, particularly how it can be targeted at small businesses;
- considering more effective methods of connecting businesses on other islands with Rarotonga and export markets;
- reviewing and strengthening BTIB’s skills training programs for small business owners.
- having the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation provide financial support for small-scale tourism business development and private sector package tours to Pa Enua destinations;
- development of the Island Host Program in collaboration with Air Rarotonga and island stakeholders to assist Pa Enua accommodation and service providers to develop a brand and consistent service provision; and
- introducing a new grant funding initiative aimed at fostering innovative and viable business ventures in the creative industries.

The government is also proposing a new body of tourism leaders, including the Chamber of Commerce, the Tourism Industry Council, and other stakeholders who will provide a single voice for the private sector.

The Ministry of Cultural Development encourages the growth and expansion of cultural events such as the Ta Maeva Nui Festival—an annual celebration of traditional music and dancing—as well as the burgeoning film industry.

B3.b Assistance with market access for tourism-related SMEs

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration announced a renewed commitment to implementing the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus—a trade and development agreement aimed at lowering trade barriers, providing greater certainty for businesses, and raising living standards. In addition, the Business Trade and Investment Board in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and industry representatives intends to develop an industry trade strategy that will focus on addressing constraints and opportunities in various sectors (Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030).

The Ministry of Agriculture has proposed several initiatives including, but not limited to, innovative and Agri-ecological production methods of farming; expanding the range of value-added agricultural products; development of niche market products (e.g., dragon fruit, lime, courgettes, ginger, turmeric, honey, vanilla); and assisting local businesses with promoting and marketing their value-added agriculturally based products. All these initiatives are in response to the growth of

the tourism industry but are not directly targeted towards supporting local tourism enterprises.

B3.c Action to encourage and assist local tourism enterprises to purchase goods and services locally

B3.d Initiatives to help local farmers, artisans, and food producers to engage in the tourism value chain

B3.e Local produce and crafts identified, promoted, and available for sale to visitors in the destination

A goal of the Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy is to “adopt a yield drive approach to tourism development.” Relevant actions include growing and enhancing linkages between tourism and local agriculture and handicrafts and building awareness and knowledge of the industry in the Pa Enua. However, according to the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, it does not have any active campaigns dedicated towards encouraging and assisting tourism businesses to buy local; helping local farmers, artisans or food producers access the tourism value chain; or identifying, promoting, and making available local produce and crafts for sale to tourists.

TABLE B3. Supporting Local Entrepreneurs & Fair Trade

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Advice, finance, or other support—available in the destination for tourism-related SMEs.	2	1.60
B	Assistance with market access for local tourism- related SMEs.	1	
C	Action to encourage and assist local tourism enterprises to purchase goods and services locally.	2	
D	Initiatives to help local farmers, artisans, and food producers to engage in the tourism value chain.	1	
E	Local produce and crafts identified, promoted and available for sale to visitors in the destination.	2	



B4. SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY

The destination has a system to enable and encourage enterprises, visitors, and the public to contribute to community and sustainability initiatives in a responsible manner.

Support for Community (B4) in the Cook Islands was assessed based on interviews and site visits as well as a review of numerous sources of information, including:

- ▶ 2023 Cook Islands People's Choice Awards celebrates business and Individual achievements in tourism
- ▶ Atiu residents receive "tourist dividend"
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- ▶ Destination Development Scorecard 2018/2019
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/mana-tiaki-experiences>
- ▶ Muri Environment Care launches ecological restoration experience

The Cook Islands "Needs Improvement" with an overall score of 1.67 on Criteria B4.

B4.a Support for local community and sustainability initiatives by local tourism enterprises is encouraged and facilitated

In 2018/19 Cook Islands Tourism Corporation added a community program in Mauke. Te leie O te Orau completed three competitive projects—maintenance and upkeep of each village, cleaning of beach coves and rebuilding of beach huts, and refurbishment of historical sites.

More recently, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation has focused on promoting regenerative travel on its website. Tourists can click on the link "Plan Your Trip" and drop down to "Regenerative Travel." Here they will be challenged to ...seek out adventure, learning opportunities, and connections with others while also using [your] travels as a means of making a positive impact on our little paradise. We encourage visitors to share their experiences on social media platforms

using relevant hashtags such as #cookislands and #lovealittleparadise.

In addition, there is a list of ways tourists can get involved, including using the services of Cook Islands Quality Assured and Mana Tiaki Certified businesses, learning how to be a responsible visitor, participating in community events, and learning about Cook Islands culture. Tourists can also access short videos about water usage, sanitation, rubbish, and more by clicking on "Learn how to be a responsible visitor." News about regenerative projects and practices are also located on this link. These are in a development phase and part of an ongoing effort to ensure sustainability efforts for tourism are implemented and enforced.

Through a rewards program, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation highlights and builds support for community by recognizing and celebrating "individuals and businesses within the tourism community who embody the Kia Orana values and consistently go above and beyond when delivering memorable moments" (2023 Cook Islands...).

B4.b Schemes exist, and are promoted, for visitors to support local community and sustainability initiatives

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation created the Regenerative Experiences Incubator Programme to encourage visitors to engage in regenerative experiences that follow aspects of the Mana Tiaki values (e.g., environmental stewardship, cultural and community engagement, and economic support). Regenerative experiences available to tourists are located on the Corporation's website at <https://cookislands.travel/mana-tiaki-experiences>. They include:

- ▶ participating in a coral transplant and restoration project,
- ▶ taking local shelter dogs for a walk,
- ▶ participating in riparian and coastal restoration efforts, and
- ▶ creating discarded materials into fashion pieces.

Tourists are encouraged to donate to the partner agency offering the experience.

A second scheme is the Atiu Villas Tourist Dividend. The idea, which began in 2012, involves setting aside \$5 a day/night from every guest’s payment, with the intention of giving back to the local community of Atiu. The funds collected are shared equally among individuals in Atiu who are not directly involved in the tourism industry but “are considered to be the true hosts who contribute to making visitors’ time in Atiu truly memorable.” The Tourist Dividend “showcases a commitment to sustainable tourism and community development, demonstrating how a

small contribution from each guest can collectively make a significant impact on the lives of those who shape the unique cultural experience of Atiu” (“Atiu residents receive tourist dividend”).

B4.c Volunteering and engagement with the community does not involve intrusion or exploitation

The only volunteer experience available to tourists are through the Regenerative Experience Incubator Programme. The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation is currently developing a voluntourism/give-back page on its website; therefore, the scoring is low at this stage.

TABLE B4. Support for Community

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Support for local community and sustainability initiatives by local tourism enterprises is encouraged and facilitated.	2	1.67
B	Schemes exist, and are promoted, for visitors to support local community and sustainability initiatives.	2	
C	Volunteering and engagement with the community does not involve intrusion or exploitation.	1	



B5. PREVENTING EXPLOITATION AND DISCRIMINATION

The destination upholds international standards on human rights. It has laws, practices, and an established code of conduct to prevent and report on human trafficking, modern slavery and commercial, sexual, or any other form of exploitation, discrimination, and harassment of or against anyone, particularly children, adolescents, women, LGBT, and other minorities. The laws and established practices are publicly communicated and enforced.

To assess the Cook Islands against B5, the following sources of information were reviewed. They supplemented interviews and site visits.

- ▶ Cook Islands decriminalizes consensual LGBTQ adult relationships making headway for other countries to do the same (see <https://glaad.org/>)
- ▶ Constitution Act 1964
- ▶ <https://thecode.org/ourmembers/>
- ▶ <https://www.humanium.org/en/cook-islands/>
- ▶ International Labor Organization website
- ▶ National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Action Plan 2019-2024
- ▶ Office of the Ombudsman website
- ▶ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of International Labor Affairs website

The Cook Islands is at “Moderate Risk” with an overall score of **1.00** on Criteria B5.

Inequalities can be deeply entrenched, including within the tourism sector. Combating exploitation and harassment in the tourism industry is an on-going challenge that requires partnerships between all relevant stakeholders.

B5.a Reference (title, date) to specific laws that pertain in the destination regarding human rights, exploitation, discrimination, and harassment.

Fundamental and civil rights are protected by the Constitution Act 1964. Cook Islanders have the right to life, liberty, and security of person; non-discrimination; equality before the law; property;

freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; peaceful assembly and association; and due process and fair trial. In 1984 the Office of the Ombudsman was established to investigate complaints against government ministries and Crown agencies. In 2008 its responsibilities were enhanced through the Official Information Act and the Disability Act. The additional responsibilities included an investigation of complaints made about decisions made by ministries and ministers of the Crown and Crown agencies and complaints filed by individuals with disabilities. Four years later, after the ratification of the Police Act 2012, the Ombudsman was empowered to investigate complaints filed against the policies, procedures, and conduct associated with police officers.

The Cook Islands has ratified three of the nine core human rights treaties—the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1997), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (2006), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2011). Most recently it supported a Crimes (Sexual Offences) Amendment Bill 2023 which decriminalizes homosexuality. Despite the ratification of these treaties, the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment indicated,

Labour and Consumer Services at the Ministry of Internal Affairs has reported issues regarding discrimination practices and human rights violations in the private sector against young women..., working mothers..., workers in the informal sector, female foreign workers, [and] women with disabilities...

The Cook Islands is a member of the International Labour Organization and has ratified eight conventions. The Organization has worked with the Cook Islands to strengthen labor policy, occupational safety and health, minimum wage systems, and the right to bargain collectively. According to the International Labour Organization's website, there are no initiatives currently underway in the Cook Islands.

No laws exist that criminally prohibit the use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution; the production of pornography, or pornographic performances; or the use of children for illicit activities, including for the production and trafficking of drugs.

B5.b Evidence of communication and enforcement of the above laws and related good practice (including tourism enterprises and visitors)

The Ministry of Internal Affairs Labor division employs inspectors who are responsible for monitoring labor protections, occupational safety, and health, enforcing labor laws, and providing child services.

The Cook Islands Police Service enforces criminal laws against forced child labor, child trafficking, and criminal sexual exploitation.

There is no evidence of communication of laws and related good practice in general or to tourism enterprises and visitors. Stakeholders mentioned increasing concern for migrant workers and enforcement of the laws/acts mentioned previously.

B5.c Risk and impact analysis regarding human rights, including human trafficking, modern slavery, and child labour—conducted regularly

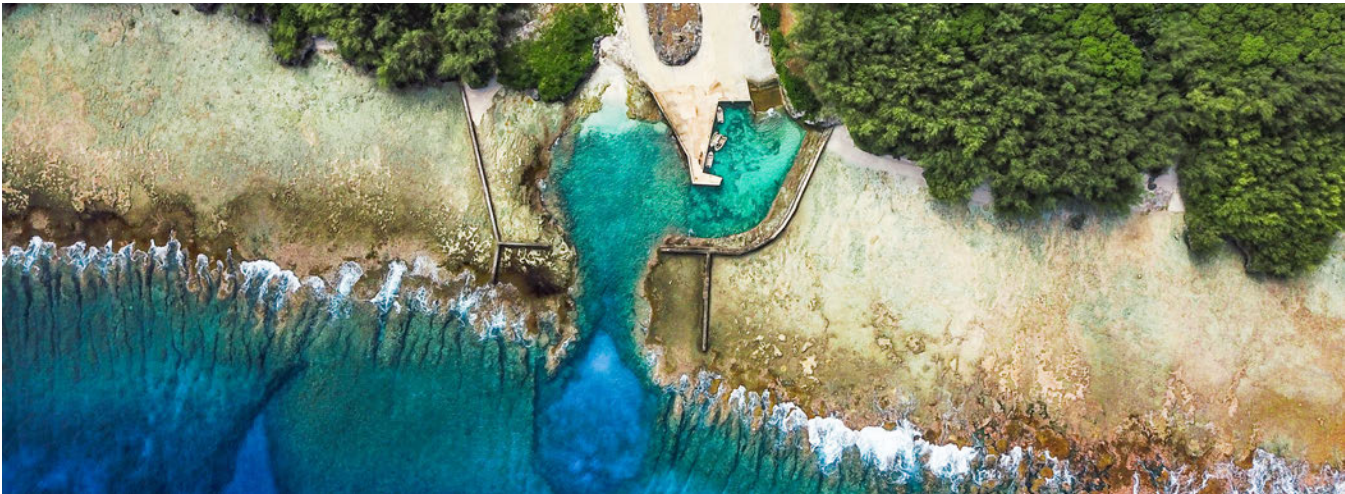
The Cook Islands is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Children. However, the country has not enacted regulation regarding human trafficking, modern slavery, or child labor. In 2022 the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of International Labor Affairs found no evidence that child labor exists in the Cook Islands.

B5.d Destination and key tourism players are signatories of the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism

The Cook Islands and key tourism players are not signatories to the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism (see <https://thecode.org/ourmembers/>).

TABLE B5. Preventing Exploitation and Discrimination

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Reference (title, date) to specific laws that pertain in the destination regarding human rights, exploitation, discrimination, and harassment.	2	1.00
B	Evidence of communication and enforcement of the above laws and related good practice (including tourism enterprises and visitors).	1	
C	Risk and impact analysis regarding human rights, including human trafficking, modern slavery, and child labour—conducted regularly.	1	
D	Destination and key tourism players are signatories to the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.	0	



B6. PROPERTY AND USER RIGHTS

Laws and regulations regarding property rights and acquisitions are documented and enforced. They comply with communal and indigenous rights, ensure public consultation, and do not authorize resettlement without free prior and informed consent and fair and just compensation. Laws and regulations also protect users and access rights to key resources.

Property and User Rights (B6) was assessed based on interviews and site visits as well as a review of numerous sources of information. A list of the sources follows.

- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy
- Housing, Land and Property Mapping Project Cook Islands
- Ministry of Justice website
- Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative Tourism Sector Snapshot: Cook Islands
- The Cook Islands: Stronger Investment Climate for Sustainable Growth. Asian Development Bank 2015

The Cook Islands had an overall score of **1.50** on Criteria B6 and thus “Needs Improvement.”

Policies and legislation regarding property acquisitions can help ensure that important landscapes within a destination remain protected and alive with the spirit of the past. New strategies and actions to protect, enhance, and interpret scenic, biological, and cultural values will help sustain destinations for years to come.

B6.a Reference (title, date) to specific laws that pertain in the destination regarding property rights and acquisitions and user and access rights to resources

B6.b References in the above laws to communal and indigenous rights, public consultation, and resettlement

The main laws governing land, building, planning and housing are the Constitution, the Cook Islands Act 1915, Property Law Act 1952, Land (Facilitation of Dealings) Act 1970, and Leases Restrictions Act 1976. The main government and judicial bodies responsible for administering land are the:

- Land Division of the High Court of the Cook Islands, which maintains the Register of Land Titles;
- Leases Approval Tribunal, which approves every lease and/or assignment or mortgage of lease in the Cook Islands;
- Land Trust Section of the Ministry of Justice, which manages a leases database created by the information provided by the Land Information Division and the High Court Land Division concerning the outcome of applications for leases, and the resolution of disputes over ownership; and
- Land Information Division of the Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for maintaining the Register of Land Titles.

Land tenure in the Cook Islands is divided into customary land and native freehold land.

- Customary land is held by natives or the descendants of natives of the Cook Islands. Customary land can also be held by virtue of a person’s title as a high chief (Ariki). Ariki title gives title over land to the Ariki, and his or her successors in office. Customary land... cannot be sold/bought, leased or (subject to a statutory exception for the benefit of Bank of the Cook Islands) mortgaged.
- Native freehold land is held by either the Crown, where it needs land for its own purposes; native Cook Islands landowners who have established their rights to an award of ‘native freehold’ title; and the Cook Islands Christian Church (Housing, Land and Property Mapping Project Cook Islands).

On Rarotonga most land is native freehold land. The same is not true on other islands. On Mitiaro, Mangaia, and Pukapuka, all land is customary land. Customary land can also be found on other outer islands.

Other types of land tenure in the Cook Islands include Occupation Right and Lease/Sub-Lease. According to the Housing, Land and Property Mapping Project Cook Islands, the Land Division of the High Court [can] make an occupation order which specifies who is allowed to occupy the land, for how long they are allowed to occupy the land, what they can or must do with the land, and any other terms and conditions the court thinks fit to impose. Occupation rights are now being granted

in terms of a maximum life of 60 years. (Note: Individuals of Cook Islands Maori descent can apply for an occupation right on a section of land, which will allow them to build and/or plant—see https://www.justice.gov.ck/?page_id=1606).

All leases, subleases and assignments with a five-year term or more must be approved by the Leases Approval Tribunal. The maximum term for any lease is 60 years. The Leases Approval Tribunal must approve every lease and/or assignment or mortgage of lease in the Cook Islands.

Almost all (99%) land in the Cook Islands is subject to customary title (Asian Development Bank 2015), which is an impediment to tourism investment. Tourism growth has led to increased demand for land, and more people are trying to achieve land rights. This has caused fragmentation of title, under which hundreds of people have rights to small blocks of

land, making the agglomeration of development sites extremely difficult (<https://www.pacificpsdi.org/assets/Uploads/PSDI-TourismSnapshot-COO.pdf>).

B6.c Evidence of enforcement of the above laws in the context of tourism development and activity

According to Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030, “There is no mechanism for permitting authorities to assess external impacts of individual developments (for example on drainage), nor are there any land zoning controls to assess whether larger commercial or residential developments are appropriate in certain locations.”

B6.d Evidence of community consultation, consent, and compensation

No evidence exists.

TABLE B6. Property and User Rights

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Reference (title, date) to specific laws that pertain in the destination regarding property rights and acquisitions and user and access rights to resources.	3	1.50
B	Reference in the above laws to communal and indigenous rights, public consultation, and resettlement.	3	
C	Evidence of enforcement of the above laws in the context of tourism development and activity.	0	
D	Evidence of community consultation, consent, and compensation.	0	



B7. SAFETY AND SECURITY

The destination has a system to monitor, prevent, publicly report, and respond to crime, safety, and health hazards that addresses the needs of both visitors and residents.

To assess The Cook Islands against B7, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following sources of information were reviewed:

- Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering 2018 Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures: Cook Islands mutual evaluation report
- Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2015 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report
- Cook Islands Ministry of Health website
- Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs website
- Cook Islands National Health Bulletin 2021-2023
- Cook Islands National Security Policy
- Cook Islands Office of the Prime Minister website
- Cook Islands Quality Assured program website
- Cook Islands Quality Assured Terms and Conditions
- Cook Islands Sustainable Development Policy
- Cook Islands Tourism Quality Assured Charter
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Destination Development Scorecard 2019/2020
- <https://rightstracker.org/country/COK>
- Pacific Islands Forum 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent
- Special Board Meeting 2021

The Cook Islands scored very well, with an overall score of **2.33** on Criteria B7.

B7.a Security and health services are well established and active in the destination

The Cook Islands National Security Policy has eight pillars including a few directly to tourism,

i.e. resilient national systems that support disaster preparedness, response, recovery and climate change adaptation; a strong, well-managed economy; effective monitoring and protection of the Cook Islands borders and its Exclusive Economic Zone; and political stability and strong governance of institutions, including the private sector. This Policy is built on other policies central to the Pacific Islands, particularly the Boe Declaration on Regional Security 2018 which identified five regional security priorities (i.e., climate change, human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime, cybersecurity). To ensure that the Policy is followed, a Cook Islands Security Council and a National Security Committee were created. The Council's members include the Prime Minister and select members of the Cabinet. The Committee's membership is the Chief of Staff of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Commissioner of Police, the Solicitor-General, the Director of National Security (whose position was established by the Policy), the Principal Immigration Office, and the Comptroller of Customs.

In discussion with stakeholders, reaction time for specific tourism related issues is slow, and the force is under-resources in this area. Discussions with stakeholders focused on finding ways to increase resources, especially to assist in tourist-related crimes, as petty theft is on the rise, and support to tourists-related crime is limited.

Health services in the Cook Islands are overseen by the Ministry of Health. The Ministry offers five types of services—public health, oral health, primary care, hospital health, and planning and funding. All these services and how to contact them are promoted on the Ministry's website. Health care is fully subsidized by the government for all children 16 years of age and younger, students who are older than 16 and in school, and all individuals 60 years of age and older. Health care delivery services (public health, primary and limited secondary care, tertiary care via hospitals and health specialist visits) are complemented by a few private medical clinics, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations (e.g., Red Cross Society, Creative Center, Te Punanga Ora'anga Matutu). The Health Information System, a unit within the Planning and Funding service, provides health data resources and reporting.

In 2022 the Pacific Islands Forum crafted the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Attendees committed to seven interconnected thematic areas that will strengthen their collective action. The thematic area relevant to B7 includes Peace and Security. Attendees recognized that climate change is the region's single greatest threat to security. In response they committed to establishing a flexible and responsive regional security and emergency management system and implementation processes; enhance collaboration and cooperation between policy makers; strengthen partnerships and cooperation mechanisms; and more.

Overall, the HRMI Rights Tracker indicates that “compared with the other countries in the Pacific, the Cook Islands are performing better than average on the right to be safe from the state” (<https://rightstracker.org/country/COK>). One vulnerability, however, is terrorist financing. The Cook Islands supports a substantial offshore financial sector which is vulnerable to money laundering and terrorist financing. “The government of the Cook Islands... has taken steps to reduce the risks presented by both the offshore sector and its small domestic financial sector” (The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs). Examples of steps include having a sound licensing framework, implementation of the Banking Act 2011, acceptance of the Trustee Companies Act 2014, and more (Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering, 2018).

B7.b The needs of visitors are identified and addressed in the delivery of security and health services

An example of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation's involvement in health safety and security came about with the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Corporation became the official source of all COVID-19 related responses for the Cook Islands through a dedicated online site and Facebook; and supported Te Marae Ora—Ministry of Health to inform public of national alert changes, vaccinations, and border opening(s). It also introduced two initiatives in anticipation of tourists returning to the country— “Cook Islands Promise” and “CookSafe.”

The “Cook Islands Promise” initiative asked tourists to see their doctor before departing and to consider taking other measures, including bringing their own

snorkel gear. When in the Cook Islands they were asked to frequently wash and sanitize their hands and avoid unnecessarily touching public surfaces. On the supply side, restaurants were asked to require dinner reservations to reduce crowding. Motels, hotels, and holiday homes were asked to deliver luggage directly to rooms and maintain contactless service.

Concomitantly the government and a taskforce representing the private sector launched CookSafe.

CookSafe equipped public places, such as shops, cafes, restaurants, and fitness centres, with a QR code that patrons [could] scan using either a card or a Wi-Fi-enabled device. The date, time, and location of their visit [was] promptly transmitted to a database secured by multiple layers of encryption. Only the Cook Islands Ministry of Health [had] access to [the] information.

More generally, the Corporation's Cook Islands Quality Assured program accredits tourism businesses who “provide high-level service, quality facilities, safe practices, and welcoming Cook Islands hospitality” (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/quality-assurance>). The Industry Development Team at Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and independent assessors affirm that the “business is a quality tourism product meeting a set of minimum standards and guidelines” (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/quality-assurance>). Members of the program must agree to and uphold the Cook Islands Tourism Quality Assured Charter, provide accurate statistics to the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation when they are requested, and to be compliant with all government regulations, allow on-site inspection annually, and more. However, in discussions with stakeholders, some businesses fall off the radar, as they are not registered as businesses; therefore, they are overlooked. This issue is exacerbated by the increased number of second homes for rent, and more.

Nine sectors (Accommodation, Food and Beverage, Land Tours, Marine Tours, Transportation, Wedding and Events, Health and Beauty/Spa, Retail, and Professional Services) of the tourism industry can obtain accreditation through the Cook Islands Tourism Quality Assured program. The standards they must meet fall into seven categories— governance, compliance, and regulation; culture and heritage; human resources; environment; marketing and promotions; health, safety, and security; and

customer service. With respect to the health, safety, and security standard, the guidelines differ based on the sector. For example, with accommodations, business owners are expected to maintain high standards of safety, cleanliness, and hygiene; maintain a register of current guests; provide 24-hour access to a telephone and directory; have hiking and water safety messages as well as tsunami and cyclone evacuation procedures on display; ensure the dwellings are locked; and more. Marine Tour operators, on the other hand, must have a clean toilet available, ensure all visitors complete an Acknowledgment of Risks Form and are exposed to a safety and emergency briefing prior to their tour, make sure all employees are able to communicate emergency response/standard operating and evacuation procedures to customers, and more.

Stakeholders interviewed during the onsite were concerned that many of the practices identified above are not enforced, and there is significant work to be done regarding implementation of visitor management strategies during emergencies.

The Cook Islands Travel Corporation’s corporate website includes a link to “Safety Resources.” On the Safety Resources page individuals can find general safety tips, what number to call in case of an emergency, and safety information related to turtle tours, water, and hiking. On its general website, which is accessed by tourists, there are two links that provide information about safety/security. The first falls under “More Info,” specifically “Frequently Asked Questions.” On this page tourists can find out what health services are available in the Cook Islands, what the emergency contact number is for the Cook Islands, where to go if they feel sick, and more. The second, also under “More Info,” focuses on travel advisories. On this page tourists

will find travel entry requirements, advice for travelers, information about travel to the Pa Enua (outer islands), and any travel advisories.

Goal 7 of the Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy is to ensure the health, safety, and security of all visitors. To accomplish this, the government is expected to “work with industry and other stakeholders to develop disaster response strategies to enable a fast response to devastating events,... review emergency incident response time and effective outcome[s] of response, make sure all businesses have a cyclone disaster plan, ... ensure the messaging about health insurance and potential health-related costs is clear to tourists, encourage visitors to wear helmets when riding bikes, ensure all new tourism structures be built according to accessibility standards and that they use best practices, reduce the incidence of stray dogs and related accidents, and obtain/provide bi-annual updates on core crime statistics related to tourism.” These efforts have yet to be implemented in a significant way.

B7.c Tourism facilities are inspected for compliance with safety and hygiene standards

Tourism businesses who are accredited through the Cook Islands Quality Assured program may be inspected annually by a member of the Industry Development Team at Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and/or independent assessors. However, according to some stakeholders many businesses are not officially registered and the follow-up on meeting standards is questionable. Thus, there is a need for increased enforcement of business licensing requirements, especially with the advent of increased “Air B&B” product development.

TABLE B7. Safety & Security

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Security and health services are well established and active in the destination.	3	2.33
B	The needs of visitors are identified and addressed in the delivery of security and health services.	2	
C	Tourism facilities are inspected for compliance with safety and hygiene standards.	2	

B8. ACCESS FOR ALL

Where practical sites, facilities, and services, including those of natural and cultural importance, are accessible to all, including people with disabilities and others who have specific access requirements or other special needs. Where sites and facilities are not immediately accessible, access is afforded through the design and implementation of solutions that consider both the integrity of the site and such reasonable accommodation for people with access requirements as can be achieved. Information is made available on the accessibility of sites, facilities, and services.

To assess the Cook Islands against B8, the following sources of information were reviewed. Interviews and site visits were also conducted.

- ▶ Cook Islands Building Code
- ▶ Cook Islands Disability Act 2008
- ▶ Cook Islands Disability Policy
- ▶ Cook Islands Investment Corporation Statement of Corporate Intent 2023-2027
- ▶ Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/improving-website-accessibility-tourism-industry>
- ▶ Improving Accessibility in the Tourism Industry 2023
- ▶ Initial report submitted by the Cook Islands to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2013

The Cook Islands had an overall score of **0.67** on Criteria B8, suggesting it is at “Risk.”

B8.a The existence of any regulations and standards regarding the accessibility of visitor sites, facilities, and services

Section 12 of the Building Controls and Standards Act 1991 requires that ...reasonable and adequate provision by way of access, parking provisions [,] and sanitary facilities must be made for persons with a disability who may be expected to visit or work in that building and carry out normal activities and processes in that building (Cook Islands Disability Act 2008).

In addition, any footpath that is constructed on public land contiguous to or upon a road, including intermediate points in the footpaths must be made accessible to a person with a disability. Cook Islands National Disability Council, in concert with the Disability Division of Internal Affairs is the lead group implementing policies affiliated with the Disability Act 2008. The Cook Islands also has a building code to guide development of new facilities in the islands.

B8.b Consistent application of accessibility standards in public facilities

The Cook Islands government ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol in 2013. In so doing it, affirmed its commitment to improve the situation of persons with disabilities in the Cook Islands” (Initial report submitted by the Cook Islands to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2013).

The Cook Islands commitment to the rights of people with disabilities was also highlighted in the country’s National Policy on Disability. The most recent iteration of the Policy—The Cook Islands Disability Inclusive Development Policy—indicates that its goal is to “improve the quality of life and realize the rights of persons with disabilities by empowering them; enabling inclusion and participation in all aspects of life.”

B8.c Data on the extent/proportion of visitor sites and facilities that are accessible

B8.d Evidence of programmes to improve access for people with a range of access needs

No data on the extent/proportion of visitor sites and facilities that are accessible exists.

Aims of The Cook Islands Disability Inclusive Development Policy that directly apply to the tourism industry include ensuring that people with disabilities have access to facilities, formal and informal education, and gainful employment. An example of how the Policy has begun to be enacted is that the Cook Islands Investment Corporation completed a new toilet facility at the Punanga Nui Market. This facility is notable because it includes disability toilets and ramps for wheelchair access.

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation’s Quality Assured program standards include compliance

with the country’s building code and all relevant legislation. In addition, the Corporation provides local businesses with a primer to designing an accessible website on its website (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/improving-website-accessibility-tourism-industry>).

B8.e Information on accessibility included in communications about the destination

B8.f Details of accessibility included in visitor information about key sites

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation has an icon on its homepage that allows people who click on it to make accessibility adjustments. However, access to additional information does not exist. The only information on accessibility found on the webpage was as follows: click on “More Info” and scroll down to “Other Questions” to find out whether there is adaptive vehicle assistance for people with disabilities.

TABLE B8. Access for All

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	The existence of any regulations and standards regarding the accessibility of visitor sites, facilities, and services.	1	0.67
B	Consistent application of accessibility standards in public facilities.	1	
C	Data on the extent/proportion of visitor sites and facilities that are accessible.	0	
D	Evidence of programmes to improve access for people with a range of access needs.	1	
E	Information on accessibility included in communications about the destination.	1	
F	Details of accessibility included in visitor information about key sites.	0	



Section C: Cultural Sustainability

Cultural sustainability scored an overall average of **1.26**, which is based on an average of the overall scores of each of the 7 criteria. Five of the seven criteria were deemed to be at some level of risk.

Visitor management at cultural sites was considered at “Risk” while Cultural artefacts, Traditional access, Intellectual property, and Site interpretation were deemed to be at “Moderate Risk.”

Protection of cultural assets “Needs Improvement” and Intangible heritage is exhibiting “Good Performance.”

TABLE C0. Summary of Cultural Sustainability Scoring

GSTC INDICATORS SCORING	Criteria C: Cultural
Areas of Risk <1	1
Areas of Moderate Risk 1.00–1.49	4
Needs Improvement 1.50–1.99	1
Good Performance 2.00–2.49	1
Excellent Performance ≥2.50	0
TOTAL	7



Area of Focus—Cultural Sustainability

“Our culture is our way of life. Our values are reflected in the culture we practice, the choices we make, and ultimately determine who we are as a nation. The goals we set are a reflection of these values” (National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020).

C1. PROTECTION OF CULTURAL ASSETS

The destination has a policy and system to evaluate, rehabilitate, and conserve cultural assets, including built heritage and cultural landscapes.

The Protection of Cultural Assets (C1) was assessed based on interviews and site visits as well as a review of numerous sources of information, including:

- ▶ Cook Islands National Youth Policy 2021-2026
- ▶ Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy
- ▶ Cultural and Historic Places Act 1994-1995
- ▶ <https://cookislandspocketguide.com/category/cook-islands-culture/>
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/kia-orana>
- ▶ <https://www.highlandparadise.co.ck/about/>
- ▶ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ck>
- ▶ Ministry of Cultural Development website
- ▶ Te Ara Akapapa’anga Nui NSDA 2020+
- ▶ Te Kaveinga Nui: National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020
- ▶ The Cook Islands National Cultural Policy 2017-2030

The Cook Islands had a score of **1.67** on Criteria C1, indicating it “Needs Improvement.”

C1.a Lists of cultural assets, including evaluation and indication of vulnerability

The Parliament of the Cook Islands enacted the Cultural and Historic Places Act 1994-1995. The intent of the act was to “preserve the historic heritage of the Cook Islands, and to establish a Cultural and Historical Places Trust...” The Trust investigates, identifies, classifies, and records historic places and areas.

Tourists can find information about arts and culture in the Cook Islands on the website of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation. Under the tab, “Plan Your Trip,” tourists can click on “Culture” and find additional links to Islands Nights, a cultural show; authentic village tours; traditional church services; information about the Punanga Nui Markets; and links to sites of cultural and historical significance. Additional information about historical sites, cultural activities, museums, art galleries, and cultural shows can be found on the website of the Cook Islands Pocket Guide (<https://cookislandspocketguide.com/category/cook-islands-culture/>).

According to a representative from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, evaluations of the vulnerability of cultural assets are conducted by the Ministry of Cultural Development.

C1.b Programme of rehabilitation and conservation of assets

Tauranga Vananga, the Cook Islands Ministry of Cultural Development, protects the nation’s cultural assets through its three divisions—Finance and Policy, Cultural Heritage, and Cultural Identity. The mission of the Ministry is “Kia matutu ta tatou peu Maori ei tutau no to tatou oraanga tiratiratu” or “To strengthen our culture as foundation for achieving a high quality of life.” In 2016 the Ministry introduced the Cook Islands National Cultural Policy. Goals of the Policy are to: (1) strengthen the use of Maori languages and any of its dialects, (2) preserve and promote all arts and art forms, (3) preserve and promote Cook Islands history and historical places, (4) promote the cultural industry in a safe and sustainable manner, and (5) increase national support for culture. Examples of key objectives for each of the five goals are:

- ▶ Goal 1: Work with the Ministry of Education to develop learning resources, accredit trainers, and ensure Maori language courses are offered through accredited institutions.
- ▶ Goal 2: Educate children on the various art forms of the Cook Islands, encourage the outer islands

to send art forms to the National Museum, and encourage the development and diversification of arts as a vehicle for economic development.

- ▶ Goal 3: Collect and record the Cook Island's history to ensure preservation and perpetuation, partner with the Ministry of Education to integrate local history into the school curriculum at the primary level, develop a multi-sector program for the maintenance of existing historical places, and work with the Island Councils to identify all historic places on the islands and develop a register.
- ▶ Goal 4: Create a stimulating and innovative environment in which people can create cultural products, train Cook Islanders how to develop their art into marketable products, provide on-going mentoring to ensure sustainability, use technology to access markets beyond the Cook Islands.
- ▶ Goal 5: Develop and participate in government programs that promote the Cook Island's unique culture and tradition; partner with the private sector to demonstrate Cook Island's unique cultural art forms as a way of promoting the nation's culture; and work with key regional partners to strengthen, promote, and preserve the nation's language and culture.

The National Auditorium which hosts events of special cultural significance, international sporting events, conferences, and stage productions; Runanga Pakau, the National Museum; Runanga Puka, the National Library; and Punanga Akamou Korero, National Archives are managed by the Ministry of Culture.

Other national initiatives linked to protection of cultural assets include the National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020 and the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy. Goal 14 of the National Sustainable Development Plan is to preserve the country's "heritage and history, protect [its] traditional knowledge, and develop [its] language, creative [,] and cultural endeavours." Language is considered "a cornerstone of Cook Islands culture and identity." Thus, a focus on teaching the Cook Islands Maori languages in schools is a priority for the government. So, too, is involving Cook Islanders in traditions and customs which perpetuate the culture. Because cultural heritage is fragile, the government has proposed

curating stories; preserving arts, crafts, documents, sounds, and films; and promoting the culture of the Cook Islands to preserve the nation's heritage and make it accessible to future generations.

Goal 2 of the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy is to perpetuate the strong essence of the Cook Islands culture. This is to be accomplished by initiating ongoing community-focused research with Cook Islanders exposed to tourism development and using the results to inform communities about the benefits and costs of tourism development. The Policy also encourages maximizing opportunities for visitors to understand and learn about heritage in all its forms, and sustaining and further developing the Kia Orana Values Project—an "initiative designed to align [the] tourism industry with the core values of [Cook Islanders]" (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/kia-orana>).

Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui NSDA 2020+ proposes invigorating Maori languages and dialects by incorporating and normalizing them into everyday life.

At the international level the Cook Islands has not listed any properties on UNESCO's World Heritage List, provided any mandates to its World Heritage Committee, or provided any state of conservation reports.

C1.c Mechanisms for using income from tourism to support conservation of cultural assets

Highland Paradise, the Cook Islands Cultural Centre, "is a family and village project, rejuvenated, maintained[,] and managed by the Pirangi family and the descendants of [the Tinomana Tribe] who once lived on this [600 year old village site..." (<https://www.highlandparadise.co.ck/about/>). It offers two experiences—the TAPU'AE Day Tour "Footprints of our Ancestors" and the KA'ARA Sunset Show and Feast "Drums of our Forefathers." The intent of both experiences is to provide attendees the chance to "experience the strong and meaningful spiritual bonds associated with the land, the maraes[,] and the people (past and present) of [the Tinomana Tribe]" (<https://www.highlandparadise.co.ck/about/>). Revenue generated is used to maintain Highland Paradise and more.

According to a representative from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, income from tourism is used by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to support its beautification program.

TABLE C1. Protection of Cultural Assets

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Lists of cultural assets, including evaluation and indication of vulnerability.	2	1.67
B	Programme of rehabilitation and conservation of assets.	2	
C	Mechanisms for using income from tourism to support conservation of cultural assets.	1	



C2. CULTURAL ARTEFACTS

The destination has laws governing the proper sale, trade, display, or gifting of historical and archaeological artefacts. The laws are enforced and publicly communicated, including tourism enterprises and visitors.

To assess the Cook Islands against C2, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following sources of information were reviewed:

- Cook Islands Copyright Act 2013
- Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act 2013
- Cultural and Historical Places Act 1994-95
- <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ck/Laws>
- Te Reo Maori Act 2003

The Cook Islands was deemed to be at “Moderate Risk” with an overall score of **1.33** on Criteria C2.

C2.a Reference to relevant laws relating to historical artefacts pertaining in the destination (title, date)

Several laws govern cultural heritage in the Cook Islands. Four are reviewed here. In 1994-95 the Cultural and Historical Place Act was ratified. The Act focuses on the preservation of the historic heritage of the Cook Islands and the establishment of a Cultural and Historic Places Trust. The Trust was established to “investigate, identify, classify, and record historic place and historic areas.”

In 2003 the Te Reo Maori Act recognized Maori as the official language of the Cook Islands. It also established a commission—Te Kopapa Reo Maori—

whose mission is “to create, and update as necessary, a national standard for Maori on matters such as phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and the alphabet.”

To protect the rights of artists, authors, broadcasters, performers, and producers of sound recordings the Cook Islands passed the Copyright Act in 2013. In the same year the Parliament of the Cook Islands passed the Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act. The intent of this Act was to “give legal recognition to rights in the traditional knowledge of the traditional communities in the Cook Islands and help those communities, and the holders of those rights, to protect those rights for the benefit of the people of the Cook Islands.” Traditional knowledge includes changes, riddles, legends, songs, or stories in the Cook Islands Maori or Pukapukan language; traditional carvings, clothing, canoes, drawings, drums, headwear, jewelry, mat or other weaving; any traditional design or form of costume or textile; any traditional ceremony, conservation practice, dance, music, ritual performance, sport, or theatrical work; any traditional practice forming part of the traditional way of life; and more.

C2.b Evidence of communication of relevant laws to tourism enterprises and visitors

No available evidence.

C2.c Evidence of enforcement of relevant laws

When laws regarding traditional knowledge are broken, the “rights-holder” may seek justice through the Court or through the Attorney-General who may refer the case to the Court (Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act 2013).

TABLE C2. Cultural Artefacts

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Reference to relevant laws relating to historical artefacts pertaining in the destination (title, date)	3	1.33
B	Evidence of communication of relevant laws to tourism enterprises and visitors.	0	
C	Evidence of enforcement of relevant laws.	1	

C3. INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

The destination supports the celebration and protection of intangible cultural heritage, including local traditions, arts, music, language, gastronomy and other aspects of local identity and distinctiveness. The presentation, replication and interpretation of living culture and traditions is sensitive and respectful, seeks to involve and benefit local communities, and provides visitors with an authentic and genuine experience.

Information was reviewed and interviews and site visits conducted to assess the Cook Islands against C3. The specific information reviewed included:

- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- <https://cookislandspocketguide.com/category/cook-islands-culture/>
- <https://www.highlandparadise.co.ck/about/>

The Cook Islands exhibited “Good Performance” on Intangible Heritage (C3) with an overall score of **2.00**.

C3.a Identification and listing of intangible cultural heritage

As noted previously in C1, tourists can find information about arts and culture in the Cook Islands on the website of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation. Under the tab, “Plan Your Trip,” tourists can click on “Culture” and find additional links to Islands Nights, a cultural show; authentic village tours; traditional church services; information about the Punanga Nui Markets; and links to sites of cultural and historical significance. Additional information about historical sites, cultural activities, museums, art galleries, and cultural shows can be found on the website of the Cook Islands Pocket Guide (<https://cookislandspocketguide.com/category/cook-islands-culture/>).

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation promotes intangible heritage through its Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines. To become accredited, businesses’ management and staff must “understand the Kia Orana Values and guiding principles to foster [an] authentic Cook Islands experience.” They must also “showcase and promote Cook Islands

culture and traditions by using one or more of the key components in their products or structures, artefacts, images, videos, and [or] visual art; use ‘Reo Maori’ words to create awareness of the importance of the Cook Islands Maori language on the visitor experience; promote historical and cultural events [to enhance customers knowledge and appreciation of] Cook Islands social practices, rituals, traditions, music, dance, and performing arts; and emulate Cook Islands culture through attire or presentation.

C3.b and c

C3.b Examples of celebration and visitor experiences of intangible cultural heritage (events, distinctive products, etc.)

C3.c Evidence of involvement of local and indigenous communities in developing and delivering visitor experiences based on intangible cultural heritage

One leading example of an on-going celebration of intangible cultural heritage is Highland Paradise, the Cook Islands Cultural Centre. The Centre “is a family and village project, rejuvenated, maintained[,] and managed by the Pirangi family and the descendants of [the Tinomana Tribe] who once lived on this [600 year old village site...” (<https://www.highlandparadise.co.ck/about/>). Through its two experiences—the TAPU’AE Day Tour “Footprints of our Ancestors” and the KA’ARA Sunset Show and Feast “Drums of our Forefathers”—tourists have the chance to “experience the strong and meaningful spiritual bonds associated with the land, the maraes[,] and the people (past and present) of [the Tinomana Tribe]” (<https://www.highlandparadise.co.ck/about/>).

Other examples of celebration and protection of intangible cultural heritage include the Te Maeva Nui Festival (a weeklong national culture and dance event celebrating the August 4th anniversary of the Cook Islands as an independent nation), Te Mire ‘Atu (a celebration of original compositions as well as traditional music from the Cook Islands), and Ui Ariki Day (a public holiday celebrating the traditional leaders of the Cook Islands).

Cook Islands National Youth Policy 2021-2026 focused on five priority areas, one of which directly aligned with C3. The priority area—youth are proud of their culture, traditions, and identity—intends

to “instill a sense of pride and identity of [the] Cook Islands culture to develop strong value systems and enable full participation in family and community life. To do this, traditional knowledge, skills and practices will be promoted and incorporated into school curriculum and the wider community.”

C3.d Feedback from visitors and local communities on delivery of intangible heritage experiences

No feedback is collected.

TABLE C3. Intangible Heritage

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Identification and listing of intangible cultural heritage	3	2.00
B	Examples of celebration and visitor experiences of intangible cultural heritage (events, distinctive products etc.).	3	
C	Evidence of involvement of local and indigenous communities in developing and delivering visitor experiences based on intangible cultural heritage.	2	
D	Feedback from visitors and local communities on delivery of intangible heritage experiences.	0	



C4. TRADITIONAL ACCESS

The destination monitors, protects, and when necessary, rehabilitates or restores local community access to natural and cultural sites.

To assess the Cook Islands against C4, the following sources of information were reviewed. Interviews and site visits were also conducted.

- Takitumu Conservation Area website
- Ministry of Culture

The Cook Islands scored poorly with an overall score of **1.00** on Criteria C4 and as such is deemed to be at “Moderate Risk.”

Many natural and cultural sites are subject to growing visitation. Maintaining such sites requires adequate practices to guarantee environmentally sound management and protection while simultaneously ensuring that local community’s benefit and have access.

C4.a Monitoring of accessibility to natural and cultural sites for the local community

No evidence of monitoring of accessibility.

C4.b Evidence of engagement with the local community regarding traditional access.

According to a representative from Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, Highland Paradise supports trips for school children.

C4.c Specific action to protect and/or rehabilitate local community access

One example of an action in the Cook Islands to protect and/or rehabilitate community access is the Takitumu Conservation Area. The Cook Islands Environment Service worked with three land-owning groups (i.e., Ngati Kainuku, Karika, and Manavaroa) to establish the Area in 1996. Representatives from each land-owning group serve on the Conservation Area Coordinating Committee which makes all major decisions regarding the Area.

TABLE C4. Traditional Access

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Monitoring of accessibility to natural and cultural sites for the local community.	0	1.00
B	Evidence of engagement with the local community regarding traditional access.	1	
C	Specific action to protect and/or rehabilitate local community access.	2	



C5. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

The destination has a system to contribute to the protection and preservation of intellectual property rights of communities and individuals.

To assess the Cook Islands against C5, the following sources of information were reviewed. These materials supplemented the interviews and site visits.

- Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act 2013
- Ministry of Culture

The Cook Islands had an overall score of **1.00** on Criteria C5; thus, is at “Moderate Risk.”

C5.a Reference to laws on intellectual property pertaining to the destination (title, date)

The rights of artists, authors, broadcasters, performers, and producers of sound recordings are protected through the Copyright Act of 2013. In addition, Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act, which was also ratified in 2013, “[gave] legal recognition to rights in the traditional knowledge of the traditional communities in the Cook Islands and help those communities, and the holders of those

rights, to protect those rights for the benefit of the people of the Cook Islands.”

When laws regarding traditional knowledge are broken, the rights-holder may seek justice through the Court or through the Attorney-General who may refer the case to the Court (Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act 2013).

According to a representative from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, the Ministry of Cultural Development, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Community Development have been working on intellectual property and trademark laws.

C5.b Communication of intellectual property rights to tourism stakeholders

Communication of intellectual property rights does not take place.

C5.c Evidence that intellectual property rights are protected in the development of cultural experiences for visitors.

No evidence was found.

TABLE C5. Intellectual Property

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Reference to laws on intellectual property pertaining in the destination (title, date).	3	1.00
B	Communication of intellectual property rights to tourism stakeholders.	0	
C	Evidence that intellectual property rights are protected in the development of cultural experiences for visitors.	0	



Area of Focus—Visiting Cultural Sites

C6. VISITOR MANAGEMENT AT CULTURAL SITES

The destination has a system for the management of visitors within and around cultural sites, which takes account of their characteristics, capacity and sensitivity and seeks to optimize visitor flow and minimize adverse impacts. Guidelines for visitor behavior at sensitive sites and cultural events are made available to visitors, tour operators and guides before and at the time of the visit.

To assess the Cook Islands against C6, the Cook Islands Tourism Strategic Plan was reviewed as were the following sources of information. Site visits also provided insight to this criterion.

- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation
- ▶ <https://cookislandspocketguide.com/a-travellers-guide-to-the-cook-islands-culture/>

Having received an overall score of **0.40** on Criteria C6, the Cook Islands is at “Risk” with visitor management at cultural sites.

Visitor management plays an essential role in protecting the sustainability of natural and cultural areas by providing funding and business opportunities through tourism and ensuring visitors can obtain a worthwhile experience from their visit by taking measures to limit over-visitation.

C6.a Monitoring visitor flows and impact on cultural sites, with results shared across the destination

C6.b Evidence of action to manage tourism-related impacts in or around cultural sites

According to a representative from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation there is no formal monitoring of visitor flows and impacts on cultural sites other than that which takes place by landowners.

C6.c Existence and distribution of published guidelines on visitor behavior at sensitive sites and cultural events and periodic monitoring of compliance

Cook Islands Pocket Guide provides tourists with access to information about Rarotonga and Cook Islands customs and traditions, a guide to religions in the Cook Islands, published guidelines regarding appropriate behavior for tourists who visit cultural sites, the national language, religion, customs, and more specific information about traditional arts and crafts, clothing, food and drink.

C6.d A code of practice for tour operators and tour guides and/or other engagement with them on visitor management at cultural sites

There are no guidelines for tourism businesses who bring tourists to cultural sites. According to a representative from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, family owners of the land on which a cultural site or experience sits have their own guidelines.

C6.e Provision of training for guides

Training programs for guides who travel with tourists to cultural sites are generated and provided by the owner/manager of the tour guide business.

TABLE C6. Visitor Management at Cultural Sites

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Monitoring of visitor flows and impact on cultural sites, with results shared across the destination.	0	0.40
B	Evidence of action to manage tourism-related impacts in or around cultural sites.	0	
C	Existence and distribution of published guidelines on visitor behavior at sensitive sites and cultural events and periodic monitoring of compliance.	1	
D	A code of practice for tour operators and tour guides and/or other engagement with them on visitor management at cultural sites.	0	
E	Provision of training for guides.	1	

C7. SITE INTERPRETATION

Accurate interpretative material is provided which informs visitors of the significance of the cultural and natural aspects of the sites they visit. The information is culturally appropriate, developed with host community collaboration, and clearly communicated in languages pertinent to visitors and residents.

To assess the Cook Islands against C7, site visits were conducted, and the following information was reviewed.

- ▶ Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines Land Tours Sector
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/storyboards>

The Cook Islands is at “Moderate Risk” with an overall score of **1.40** on Criteria C7.

As visitor demand has increasingly focused on the provision of tourism experiences rather than products, the importance of interpretation and education has risen. The interpretation of tourism attractions, products, stories, and history is an important part of providing a positive visitor experience as well as serving as an educational tool. Interpretation and education can be achieved through a range of methods including informative brochures, guided or self-guided tours, interactive displays, signage, media displays, audio information, and interpretive information boards.

C7.a Provision of informative interpretive material on site and in formats that are accessible pre-arrival

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation has storyboards located at 13 sites of cultural and historical significance on Rarotonga and Aitutaki. Tourists who can't manage to visit the sites in person

can do so online via the website of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (see <https://cookislands.travel/storyboards>). In addition, interpretive material is provided on-site by tour guides.

No interpretive material is accessible pre-arrival.

C7.b Evidence that interpretive material has been well researched and is accurate

Tour companies with Quality Assured accreditation have shown that: their management and staff understand the Kia Orana Values and guiding principles to foster authentic Cook Islands experiences; their management and staff use ‘Reo Maori’ words during the visitor experience to create awareness on the importance of the Cook Islands Maori language; they ensure cultural information provided to guests is well researched, appropriate, and accurate; and they emulate Cook Islands culture through attire or presentation where applicable.

C7.c Interpretation material that identifies the significance and sensitivity/fragility of sites

No material found.

C7.d Evidence of host community collaboration in preparation of relevant interpretive material

No evidence found or process has been outlined. Information placed on the website is provided directly by suppliers to ensure authenticity.

C7.e Interpretative material available in relevant languages

According to a representative from Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, there is no dedicated entity responsible for generating interpretive material for tourists in multiple languages.

TABLE C7. Site Interpretation

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Provision of informative interpretative material on site and in formats that are accessible pre-arrival.	2	1.00
B	Evidence that interpretative material has been well researched and is accurate.	2	
C	Interpretation material identifies the significance and sensitivity/fragility of sites.	1	
D	Evidence of host community collaboration in preparation of relevant interpretative material.	0	
E	Interpretative material available in relevant languages.	0	

Section D: Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability scored an overall average of **1.16**, which is based on an average of the overall scores of each of the 12 criteria.

Two criteria exhibited “Good Performance”—Protection of sensitive environments and Water quality.

Two of the criteria—Solid Waste and GHG Emissions and Climate Change Mitigation—“Needs Improvement.”

The remaining eight criteria are at some level of risk. Specifically, Energy conservation and Low impact transportation are at “Moderate Risk” and Visitor management at natural sites, Wildlife interaction, Species exploitation and animal welfare, Water stewardship, Wastewater, and Light and noise pollution are at “Risk.”

TABLE D0. Summary of Environmental Sustainability Scoring

GSTC INDICATORS SCORING	Criteria C: Socio-Environment
Areas of Risk <1	6
Areas of Moderate Risk 1.00–1.49	2
Needs Improvement 1.50–1.99	2
Good Performance 2.00–2.49	2
Excellent Performance ≥2.50	0
TOTAL	12



Area of Focus—Conservation of Natural Heritage

The Cook Islands generated a State of Environment Report in 1993 and 2018. The 2018 report recognized that the country has had many assessments done, however...

...implementation and enforcement of these efforts is inconsistent and, in some cases, non-existent. Activities and initiatives are largely dependent on external funding from donors and international sources, many of which are short-term and determined by changing international priorities.

Since 2018 Cook Islands has engaged with many international organizations to sustain the environment. For example, in 2022 the Cook Islands joined other leaders in the Pacific Islands Forum to generate 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Leaders committed to seven interconnected thematic areas that will strengthen their collective action. Thematic areas relevant to this assessment include Peace and Security, Resources and Economic Development, Climate Change and Disasters, and Ocean and Environment.

In this section, primary initiatives aligned with environmental sustainability are highlighted.

D1. PROTECTION OF SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

The destination has a system to monitor, measure and respond to the impacts of tourism on the natural environment, conserve ecosystems, habitats, and species, and prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species.

To assess the Cook Islands against D1, the team reviewed the following and met with stakeholders onsite and on zoom:

- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands GEF-7 Project ENUA
- Cook Islands National Heritage Trust website
- Cook Islands National Environment Service website
- Cook Islands National Security Policy

- Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority website
- Cook Islands State of Environment Report 2018
- Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy
- Go Local Cook Islands website
- Kōrero O Te ‘Ōrau website
- Marae Moana website
- Marae Moana Oceans Policy 2016-2020
- Marine Resources and Tourism strengthen partnership 2022
- Marine Resources Shark Conservation Regulations 2012
- National Invasive Species Strategy and Action Plan 2019-2025
- Ocean Toa website, State of the Environment Report 2018
- Te Ara Akapapa’anga Nui—National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
- Te Ipukarea Society website
- Te Kaveinga Nui: National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020

The Cook Islands scored well, with an overall score of 2.00 on Criteria D1, indicating “Good Performance.”

D1.a List of natural heritage sites and assets, indicating type, conservation status, and vulnerability

The Cook Islands Natural Heritage Trust maintains a biodiversity database as well as a companion website that “is a portal for information sharing through the publication of short articles showcasing Cook Islands plants, animals and other organisms. The articles also cover topics of relevance to our living world, such as geology, climatology, ethnography and conservation” (<https://cinature.org>).

D1.b Programmes to conserve biodiversity and natural heritage

The Takitumu Conservation Area was established in 1996 through an agreement between three landowning groups (i.e., Ngati Kainuku, Karika, and Manavaroa). The Area, established primarily to protect what was an endangered bird—the kakerori or Rarotonga Fly-catcher—and conserve many other unique plants and animals, is a 1555-hectare forested area. Today two members from each of the three land-owning clans sit on the Conservation Area Coordinating Committee. They oversee all decisions affecting the Area.

According to the National Environment Service, the Cook Islands has carried out several species' conservation projects, including protection of the Rarotonga Monarch, the translocation of the Lorikeet Kura from French Polynesia to the Island of Atiu in 2007, the declaration of the Cook Islands as a shark and whale sanctuary, and conservation of the Mitiaro Fan Palm, coconut crabs, turtles, and fruit bats.

In 2012 the Cook Islands designated 1.2 million km² of its waters as a shark sanctuary through the Marine Resources Shark Conservation Regulations. The intent was to protect sharks from target fishing as well as the possession, sale, and trade of shark parks and products.

In 2017 Marae Moana was legally designated as a multiple-use marine park by the government of the Cook Islands.

Marae Moana extends over an area of 1.9 million km² or 16% of the country's coastal and marine areas, which exceeds the Convention of Biological Diversity's target of protecting 10% of coastal and marine areas by 2020. It is currently the largest commitment by a single country for integrated management and conservation from ridge to reef and from reef to ocean... It provides a robust framework to promote sustainable development by balancing economic growth interests such as tourism, fishing, and deep-sea mining, with conserving core biodiversity and natural assets in the ocean, reefs, and islands (Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030).

Marae Moana is a multiple-use area where zones will be drawn up for specific activities. These zones will be defined by the wants and economic, cultural,

social and environmental needs of Cook Islands people. Island communities together with their local and national government will decide what they want to happen around their island (<https://www.maraemoana.gov.ck>).

The Marae Moana Oceans Policy 2016-2020 was enacted to conserve biodiversity and natural assets in the oceans, reefs, and islands while ensuring sustainable development of economic growth interests. Its geographical scope covers Cook Islands' internal waters, territorial sea, exclusive economic zone, and continental shelf as well as marine areas that become under control of the Cook Islands. Specific objectives were to:

- enhance conservation and ecological sustainability;
- improve integrated planning and adaptive management through greater collaboration with key stakeholders;
- sustainably developing Cook Island marine resources;
- harness marine tourism opportunities;
- develop a regular, reliable, and safe inter-island shipping service;
- coordinate use of the Marae Moana through a zoning and management plan;
- ensure transparent management practices;
- minimize negative social impacts of marine and maritime development;
- protect maritime cultural heritage;
- promote partnerships;
- have an educated, informed, and committed community leader and be responsible for ecologically sustainable use of natural resources;
- foster a culture of investigation and research; and
- seek long-term financing to resource the activities of this Policy.

In 2018 the Cook Islands declared 6% of its land area to be “protected.” In its National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+ the nation made a commitment to achieving 25% of its area as protected. Currently the Cook Islands has two

designated protected areas, Marae Moana and Suwarrow—and two protected islands—Takutea and Manuae. Conserved or managed areas include Takitumu Conservation Area and Takuvaine Water Catchment Managed Area. The areas most impacted by tourism are Marae Moana, Takitumu Conservation Area, Takutea, and Manuae. While not designated as protected/conserved, lagoons are also heavily impacted by tourism.

Authors of the 2018 State of Environment Report suggested government agencies work together to create a holistic habitat management plan that “...consider[s] all threatened species but also traditionally important plants such as herbs, food used for traditional medicine, or plants used for traditional costumes.”

Created by the National Environment Service in consultation with stakeholders to “strengthen the protection and management of its ecological systems and use of natural resources in the Cook Islands,” The National Environment Policy 2022-32 introduced six environmental policy objectives and instruments based on land, marine, biodiversity, water, air, climate change, and waste.

“Protecting and promoting environmental and resource security is a fundamental objective of the Cook Island’s] National Security Policy” (Cook Islands National Security Policy). So, too, is the intent to continue to support treaties having to do with environmental and resource security such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Conference on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction.

In terms of biodiversity, The Cook Island’s National Environment Service (NES) engages in biodiversity planning in several ways. It has submitted six different reports regarding its progress on achieving its biodiversity goals to the Convention of Biological Diversity. It also implemented a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan in 2002, which does not appear to have been updated, but still serves as “the principal instrument for national implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity” (<https://environment.gov.ck/stewardship/biodiversity/>).

The Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) in the Cook Islands undertakes comprehensive initiatives

to monitor and protect the nation’s ocean waters, emphasizing environmental conservation, educational outreach, and strategic partnerships with the tourism sector. Examples of these initiatives follow.

▸ **Monitoring and conservation efforts**

- **Marine and Lagoon Assessments:** MMR conducts regular environmental baseline assessments and compliance monitoring, particularly in areas impacted by infrastructure development. For instance, in collaboration with the National Environment Service (NES) and Climate Change Cook Islands, MMR initiated assessments in Aitutaki to evaluate the health of lagoon and coastal ecosystems.
- **Marine Surveillance:** To combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, MMR has enhanced maritime surveillance capabilities. This includes partnerships with regional organizations like the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) to implement aerial surveillance programs, bolstering the monitoring of the expansive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Cook Islands.

▸ **Educational Initiatives:**

- **Community Engagement:** MMR actively engages with local communities and schools to raise awareness about marine conservation. During research expeditions, such as those on Mangaia, MMR staff conduct presentations to students, discussing human-environment interactions and the importance of monitoring marine resources.
- **Youth Workshops:** In support of World Ocean Day, MMR collaborates with organizations like Cook Islands Tourism, Climate Change Cook Islands, and NES to conduct youth workshops. These workshops focus on marine conservation, coral restoration, and sustainable practices, fostering environmental stewardship among the younger generation.

▸ **Partnerships with tourism:**

- **Collaborative Agreements:** Recognizing the intersection between tourism and marine resources, MMR has formalized partnerships with Cook Islands Tourism.

A notable example is the Memorandum of Understanding signed to preserve and enhance lagoon and marine spaces, focusing on projects like the Muri Lagoon ecological restoration and improving tourism industry standards related to marine operations.

- Sustainable Tourism Initiatives: MMR supports sustainable tourism by collaborating on projects such as the installation of eco-friendly toilets in Aitutaki, aimed at reducing environmental impact in high-traffic tourist areas. This initiative, in partnership with Cook Islands Tourism and NES, underscores the commitment to maintaining the natural beauty of marine environments for both locals and visitors.

▸ **Example:**

In June 2024, the Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) and Cook Islands Tourism collaborated to celebrate World Ocean Day, emphasizing community engagement and environmental stewardship. The initiative featured a series of activities across Rarotonga and Aitutaki, including youth workshops, coastal clean-ups, crown-of-thorns starfish eradication, coral restoration, and pāua (clam) farm visits. In Aitutaki, the Island Council and Executive welcomed representatives from Cook Islands Tourism, Climate Change Cook Islands, and MMR. Schoolchildren participated in educational sessions on climate change and marine conservation, engaging in underwater activities to assess marine life. Senior science students from Araura College joined Pacific Resort Aitutaki's coral planting initiative, learning innovative restoration techniques. Community members, including government workers and elders, collected over 25 sacks of rubbish along the coastline, demonstrating a collective commitment to ocean health.

The Ministry of Marine Resources has demonstrated a desire for a holistic approach to marine conservation through these initiatives, integrating scientific monitoring, educational outreach, and strategic partnerships to safeguard the ocean waters of the Cook Islands. However, stakeholders suggest enforcement of policies and initiatives as they relate to tourism is difficult as they tend to involve not just MMR, but NES and

Health and Safety. Work is underway to ensure that tourism operators and visitors work with these entities for sustainable development of guest experiences and accommodations.

An excellent example of communities stepping up to support and conserve the environment is Muri Environment Care (MEC), a community-driven organization dedicated to preserving and protecting Muri Lagoon on Rarotonga in the Cook Islands. Its initiatives focus on ecological restoration, environmental education, and foster community involvement to address climate challenges and maintain the lagoon's natural beauty.

In collaboration with Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, MEC launched the Ecological Restoration Experience in September 2023. This program offers visitors hands-on opportunities to engage in conservation activities, such as stream restoration, native plant cultivation, and learning about traditional uses of various plant species. The experience aims to build a greener future through environmental stewardship, sustainable tourism, and cultural preservation.

Additionally, MEC organized the first Muri Environment Expo in October 2024 to promote their work and raise environmental awareness. The Expo featured discussions on Muri's environment and showcased the community's efforts in conservation.

Through these initiatives, MEC integrates tourism with environmental conservation, allowing visitors to contribute to the preservation of Muri Lagoon while gaining insights into local ecology and culture. These collaborative efforts underscore the Cook Islands' dedication to preserving marine environments through education, community involvement, and sustainable tourism practices.

D1.c Programmes to eradicate and control invasive species

In 2018, the National Environment Service generated a National Invasive Species Strategy and Action Plan 2019-2025. The Plan was developed collaboratively with stakeholders who help to manage invasive species.

D1.d Action to identify, monitor, and mitigate tourism impacts on biodiversity and natural heritage

In the National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020, the government proposed supporting healthy coral reefs, protecting marine areas, and monitoring lagoon waters to identify potential environmental risks. The National Environment Service (NES) appears to be responsible for implementing these actions. In addition, with assistance from the United Nations Development Program, the NES implemented the Cook Islands GEF-7 Project ENUA, which “aims to reduce and mitigate negative environmental impacts of the key development sectors (agriculture, infrastructure, tourism), which were recognized in the 2018 State of Environment Report as the main national drivers of biodiversity and habitat degradation” (<https://environment.gov.ck/partnerships/current-projects/cook-islands-gef7-project/>).

The NES hopes to accomplish its aims by working with Infrastructure Cook Islands, Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, and the Ministry of Agriculture to improve management effectiveness of target protected areas, and expand “...the protected area system through establishment of a 118-ha community conserved area safeguarding globally significant biodiversity within the Cloud forests of Rarotonga” (<https://environment.gov.ck/partnerships/current-projects/cook-islands-gef7-project/>).

The National Environment Policy 2022-32 has six environmental policy objectives and instruments based on land, marine, biodiversity, water, air, climate change, and waste. The Policy lists monitoring indicators that will be used to determine if objectives are met.

The fourth goal of the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy is to ensure the protection of the pristine environment through sustainable practices. One way to do this is by reducing the percentage of tourism and tourism products located in highly vulnerable settings.

The following statement is on the landing page of the Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority: “The ocean has always supported us, and we will not do anything to impact its ability to continue to support our cultures and Pacific way of life.” The Authority maintains its commitment to the ocean by implementing the

objectives and authority of the Seabed Minerals Act 2019, monitoring and enforcing actions in non-compliant situations, overseeing licensing, cooperating with other government agencies whose interests align with the Authority, and more.

Te Ipukarea Society is a Cook Islands environmental non-governmental organization managed by a voluntary committee who is elected by its members. The Society has five focal areas:

- Biodiversity— Volunteers work on invasive species eradication, native bird surveys, and monitoring and advocating for terrestrial and marine ecosystems.
- Climate Change—Volunteers promote nature-based adaptation to climate change and offer educational programs in schools.
- Ecologically Sustainable Development— Volunteers attempt to raise awareness about the potential impacts of seabed mining and overfishing. They also comment on Environmental Impact Assessments.
- Waste—Volunteers advocate for the use of compost bins and worm farms as well as re-useable and biodegradable packaging and nappies. They use documentaries and short clips in their campaigns.
- Youth—Volunteers present in schools on a variety of environmental issues and host youth science camps and environmental competitions. They also train youth to do environmental monitoring.

Examples of recent projects include attending the International Seabed Authority Assembling Meeting in Jamaica to push the Authority to work on a General Policy for the Protection and Preservation of the Marine Environment; a collaborative effort with Muri Environment Care and the Archipelago Research Centre from Hawaii to teach youth about ecosystems and how to protect them; research effort with Volunteer Services Abroad focusing on documenting the Rarotonga starling’s breeding and nesting habits; and the 6th annual Muri Lagoon Beach Cleanup. The organization also provides free UV-treated water refill stations all around Rarotonga. Individuals can click on a link on the organization’s website to find the nearest refill station.

A second environmental non-governmental organization active in the Cook Islands is Kōrero O Te ‘Ōrau. Its membership is comprised of passionate Cook Islanders who want to protect the nation’s culture, environment, and natural resources. Members help organizations with project management, proposal writing, and environmental impact assessments. According to its website, the organization’s focus is:

- Terrestrial and marine research—members collect, collate, and analyze data to establish a database for future research projects. They also assist overseas researchers.
- Indigenous support—members assist the Aronga Mana (traditional leaders) and Iti Tangata (indigenous people) with the management of their 50 nautical mile boundary and the tribal lands of their Matakeinanga (jurisdiction). They also promote, execute, and monitor customary laws aligned with the Marae Moana Policy, and train the indigenous people to monitor and protect the ecology and biodiversity in their Matakeinanga.
- Education support—members endeavor to increase public awareness about local science to improve understanding of resource management, sustainable use, and conservation in the Cook Islands.
- Media outreach—members advocate and promote research findings internationally. In the

future they hope to generate research articles, videographic and electronic documents, and other materials for local and international dissemination.

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation is also involved in the protection of sensitive environments. A new partnership between the Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) and the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation will preserve and enhance lagoon and marine space. The two organizations signed a memorandum of understanding recognizing their intent to work on joint projects that will support ecological restoration of the Muri Lagoon, strengthen communication efforts, and improve tourism industry standards related to tourism marine operators.

D1.e Mechanisms for using income from tourism to support conservation of natural assets

The departure tax, included in tourists’ outbound flight ticket, is used to support initiatives by the Cook Islands government. In addition, some of the revenue generated through two tour companies—Ocean Toa and Go Local Cook Islands—is used to support conservation of natural assets.

D1.f Communications with visitors and enterprises on reducing the spread of alien species

According to a representative from Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, there is a biosecurity video in limited distribution.

TABLE D1. Protection of Sensitive Environments

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	List of natural heritage sites and assets, indicating type, conservation status and vulnerability.	3	2.00
B	Programmes to conserve biodiversity and natural heritage.	2	
C	Programmes to eradicate and control invasive species.	3	
D	Action to identify, monitor and mitigate tourism impacts on biodiversity and natural heritage.	1	
E	Mechanisms for using income from tourism to support conservation of natural assets.	2	
F	Communications with visitors and enterprises on reducing the spread of alien species.	1	

D2. VISITOR MANAGEMENT AT NATURAL SITES

The destination has a system for the management of visitors within and around natural sites, which takes account of their characteristics, capacity and sensitivity and seeks to optimize visitor flow and minimize adverse impacts. Guidelines for visitor behaviour at sensitive sites are made available to visitors, tour operators and guides before and at the time of the visit.

To assess the Cook Islands against D2, there were discussions with stakeholders, onsite visits, and a review of the following sources of information.

- ▶ Cook Islands National Environment Service website
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- ▶ Destination Development Scorecard 2017/2018, 2018/2019
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/turtle-tour-operators-praised-commitment-refreshed-code-conduct> <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/turtle-tour-operators-praised-commitment-refreshed-code-conduct>

The Cook Islands is at “Risk” with its visitor management at natural sites (D2). It received an overall score of **0.83** on D2.

D2.a Monitoring of visitor flows and impact on natural sites, with results shared across the destination

There is no monitoring system in place.

D2.b Evidence of action to manage and mitigate tourism-related impact in or around natural sites

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) installed eco-toilets as well as hiking, road and water safety signage on Rarotonga; channel markers and storyboards on Aitutaki; and plaques and eco-toilets on Atiu. While these efforts were “designed for visitor convenience and to connect areas of environmental and cultural significance to improve the economic impact of tourism and enhance visitor experiences” (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

Annual Report 2022/23), they also may mitigate tourism-related impacts.

Further, between 2017 and 2019 CIT purchased public litter bins for high visibility areas visited by tourists and installed a CCTV camera to monitor use of the bins. The Corporation also placed quick response codes along the Raemaru trek to provide useful information (e.g., safety tips, environmental messaging, to clean shoes prior to trekking into the mountain) for hikers and walkers.

The CIT promotes regenerative travel on its website. Tourists can click on the link “Plan Your Trip” and drop down to “Regenerative Travel.” Here they will be challenged to “...seek out adventure, learning opportunities, and connections with others while also using [your] travels as a means of making a positive impact on our little paradise.” Tourists can also access short videos about water usage, sanitation, rubbish, and more by clicking on “Learn how to be a responsible visitor.” News about regenerative projects and practices are also located on this link.

A non-governmental organization—Kōrero O Te ‘Ōrau—contributes to visitor management at natural sites on Rarotonga. Members help organizations with project management, proposal writing, and environmental impact assessments. They also train Iti Tangata (indigenous people) to monitor and protect the ecology and biodiversity in their Matakeinanga.

Goal 4 of the Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy is to ensure the protection of the pristine environment through sustainable practices. It proposes doing this by documenting the percentage of businesses complying with the Environmental Warrant of Fitness Site Standard and conducting an environmental impact assessment with all new businesses, and more.

While the information above indicates efforts are underway to effectively manage tourists at natural sites, nearly all stakeholders discussed the need for action-oriented work and enforcement to ensure tourism does not negatively impact the environment in the Cook Islands. Evidence of overtourism and its impact on reefs and wildlife is beginning to crop up in sensitive areas (e.g., lagoons) and through onshore and offshore activities developed for tourism (e.g., accommodation, turtle viewing,

whale watching). Stakeholders indicated this is a significant concern.

D2.c Existence and distribution of published guidelines on visitor behaviour at sensitive sites, and periodic monitoring of compliance

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation is not mandated to formally govern the tourism industry, yet it does help individuals, businesses, and organization through education, codes of conduct, voluntary certification programs, etc.

In 2022/23 the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation informed and educated visitors about safety through advertisements related to water, hiking, and marine life. It also installed new water danger signs and turtle-related signage in the Avaavaroa Passage.

There is no periodic monitoring of visitor compliance at sensitive sites.

There are no other established guidelines adopted, facilitated, or fully implemented within the Cook Islands.

D2.d A code of practice for tour operators and tour guides and/or other engagement with them on visitor management at natural sites

In February 2024 nine turtle tour operators signed a refreshed memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

that “affirmed their dedication to visitor safety, operational best practice, community wellbeing, and environmental sustainability” (<https://cookislands.travel/corporate/turtle-tour-operators-praised-commitment-refreshed-code-conduct>). The MOU is a voluntary and self-governing code of conduct. Plans are underway to develop “...an environmental management plan for areas within Rarotonga that are being impacted by unsustainable tourism operations.” Currently, according to various stakeholders, there is very little compliance overall.

No other tour operators in the Cook Islands have established a code of practice.

D2.e Cooperation with local conservation bodies to identify environmental risks associated with tourism and measures to reduce them

The Cook Islands National Environment Service is tasked with reducing and mitigating the negative environmental impacts of tourism. The Service intends to work with Infrastructure Cook Islands, Cook Islands Tourism, and the Ministry of Agriculture to improve management effectiveness of protected areas.

D2.f Provision of training for guides

Guides are trained through their employers. The only exception is water safety training, which is managed by Cook Islands Tourism Corporation.

TABLE D2. Visitor Management at Natural Sites

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Monitoring of visitor flows and impact on natural sites, with results shared across the destination.	0	0.83
B	Evidence of action to manage and mitigate tourism-related impacts in or around natural sites.	1	
C	Existence and distribution of published guidelines on visitor behavior at sensitive sites, and periodic monitoring of compliance.	1	
D	A code of practice for tour operators and tour guides and/or other engagement with them on visitor management at natural sites.	1	
E	Cooperation with local conservation bodies to identify environmental risks associated with tourism and measures to reduce them.	1	
F	Provision of training for guides.	1	

D3. WILDLIFE INTERACTION

The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards for wildlife interactions. Interactions with free roaming wildlife, considering cumulative impacts, are non-invasive and responsibly managed to avoid adverse impacts on the animals concerned and, on the viability, and behavior of populations in the wild.

To assess the Cook Islands against D3 interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following information was reviewed.

- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23
- ▶ Cook Islands Quality Assured program
- ▶ <https://cookislands.travel/corporate/quality-assurance>
- ▶ New marine tourism rules and guidelines are imminent as Cook Islands Tourism Corporation finalizes the details

The Cook Islands scored poorly on criteria D3, earning an overall score of **0.33** or at “Risk.”

The protection and presence of wildlife is critically important to ecosystems functioning and enhances the possibility of a thriving tourism industry. The flow of tourism dollars can provide an economic incentive and additional awareness/education mechanism for wildlife and habitat protection and preservation.

D3.a Reference (title, date) to international, national, and local laws that apply in the destination regarding interaction with wildlife

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation has developed a Dog Controlling Strategy to guide the efforts of the Dog Registration and Animal Control Committee over the next five years. The Strategy was introduced in response to “dog and animal issues and concerns raised through the International

Visitor Survey and voiced by the Cook Islands community” (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23).

There are no other laws regarding interacting with wildlife.

D3.b Endorsement of international standards for wildlife viewing for both marine and terrestrial species

The Ministry for Marine Resources and the National Environment Service will be establishing tourism regulations to support the health and biodiversity of lagoons and their inhabitants. These regulations may include standards for wildlife viewing.

D3.c Distribution of a code of practice for wildlife interaction, including viewing, which reflects international standards

The only code of practice resides with the turtle tour operators, to which they are not required to comply.

D3.d System for checking compliance with regulations and code of practice amongst tourism operations

There is no system for checking compliance with regulations and code of practice other than the Quality Assured program, which is voluntary.

D3.e Actions to monitor wildlife wellbeing and minimize disturbance in locations where interactions occur

Any actions that occur are taken by the National Environment Service and the Ministry of Marine Resources.

D3.f Provision of information to visitors on harmful wildlife interaction, such as touching and feeding

Information regarding interaction with turtles and protection of the reef is provided to tourists through tour operators.

TABLE D3. Wildlife Interaction

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Reference (title, date) to international, national and local laws that apply in the destination regarding interaction with wildlife.	0	0.33
B	Endorsement of international standards for wildlife viewing for both marine and terrestrial species.	0	
C	Distribution of a code of practice for wildlife interaction, including viewing, which reflects international standards.	0	
D	System for checking compliance with regulations, and code of practice amongst tourism operations.	0	
E	Actions to monitor wildlife wellbeing and minimize disturbance, in locations where interactions occur.	1	
F	Provision of information to visitors on harmful wildlife interaction, such as touching and feeding.	1	



D4. SPECIES EXPLOITATION AND ANIMAL WELFARE

The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards that seek to ensure animal welfare and conservation of species (animals, plants, and all living organisms). This includes the harvesting or capture, trade, display, and sale of wildlife species and their products. No species of wild animal is acquired, bred, or held captive, except by authorized and suitably equipped people and for properly regulated activities. Housing, care, and handling of all wild and domestic animals meets the highest standards of animal welfare.

To assess the Cook Islands against D4, discussion with stakeholders and onsite visits were conducted and the following documents were reviewed:

- ▶ Cook Islands National Environment Service website
- ▶ Cook Islands Review of Natural Resource and Environment Related Legislation 2018 Discover Marine and Wildlife Eco Centre website
- ▶ Environment Act Regulations 2008
- ▶ <https://agriculture.gov.ck/departing-passengers>
- ▶ The Environment Act 2003

The Cook Islands is at “Risk” in this area. It scored **0.86** on Criteria D4.

D4.a Reference (title, date) to specific international, national, and local laws, standards, and guidelines that apply in the destination regarding animal welfare and conservation of species

When enacted in 2003 The Environment Act was intended “to provide a strategy for domestic implementation of the international environmental obligations assumed by the Cook Islands under international law[,]” including the Convention of Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (<https://www.sprep.org/attachments/Publications/EMG/sprep-legislative-review-cookislands.pdf>). Of import to D4, the Act established the National Environment Service, which is responsible for protecting, conserving, and managing the environment and wildlife, ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources, and more. It also provided national legislation that addresses the protection,

conservation, and management of wildlife, protected species, or both, and regulates or prohibits trade and commerce in wildlife, protected species, or both.

Environment Act Regulations 2008 for Mitiaro, Atiu, and Takutea make provisions for the protection of species and habitats. They also “identify the right to declare a Ra’ui (restrictions on the use of the land, reef and lagoon with regards to their resources), provide for the appointment of officers called to enforce the regulations (Tiaki Rau), and make provisions on general environmental health and management, and protection of marine resources” (<https://www.sprep.org/attachments/Publications/EMG/sprep-legislative-review-cookislands.pdf>). The regulations also designate Takutea as a Community Conserved Area that will be managed by the native local community in accordance with a management plan drafted with the support of the National Environmental Service. Further, the NES has a list of endangered species that require a permit to be exported from the country.

The Cook Islands Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) looks after stray, abused, and homeless animals on Rarotonga. Volunteers inspect animals that the public is concerned about, transport animals to and from veterinarians, and are involved in a desexing project to keep the dog population under control. In addition, they conduct a program called Waggy Tails Walking Experience, which is a unique opportunity for visitors to engage with rescue dogs awaiting adoption. Participants can take these dogs for walks, providing them with essential exercise, socialization, and mental stimulation. This interaction not only benefits the dogs but also allows visitors to enjoy the island’s scenic beauty alongside a canine companion.

This initiative not only enhances the well-being of the animals but also enriches the visitor experience, fostering a meaningful connection between tourists and the local community.

D4.b Notification of laws, standards, and guidelines to tourism enterprises and guides

Tourism businesses, particularly tour operators, are notified of laws, standards, and guidelines for coral, shells, aquarium fish species, etc. through the National Environment Service and the Ministry of Marine Resources.

D4.c A system for inspection of the conditions of captive wildlife and domestic animals, including their housing and handling

Discover Marine and Wildlife Eco Centre is a for-profit business that provides tourists with access to coconut crabs; freshwater fish, eels, and prawns; stonefish, turtles, sharks, and cetacean, and more. The Centre also provides educational programs and maintains a bird rescue center. Whether or not the Centre is inspected regularly is unknown.

D4.d Licensing and checking of qualifications of personnel responsible for captive wildlife

This information does not exist.

D4.e Action to promote the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in the tourism sector and to ensure compliance with it

The Cook Islands has not ratified the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) but does require a permit to remove wild animals and plants from the nation. The permitting process

is managed by the National Environment Service. “The issuing of permits is applicable to coral and seashells and is limited to 2kg per CITES permit.

D4.f Provision of information to visitors on avoiding trade in endangered species, e.g. in the purchase of souvenirs derived from threatened species of wildlife notified by IUCN or CITES

Tourists traveling to New Zealand and Australia can obtain information about approved export commodities on the Ministry of Agriculture website (see <https://agriculture.gov.ck/departing-passengers/>). They can also find out what permits are required should they want to take home wood/coconut products, shells, or corals.

D4.g Enforcement of legislation to ensure that any hunting activity is part of a scientifically based, properly managed and strictly enforced approach to conservation

The GSTC assessors did not locate information on this indicator.

TABLE D4. Species Exploitation and Welfare

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Reference (title, date) to specific international, national, and local laws, standards and guidelines that apply in the destination regarding animal welfare and conservation of species.	3	0.86
B	Notification of laws, standards and guidelines to tourism enterprises and guides.	1	
C	A system for inspection of the conditions of captive wildlife and domestic animals, including their housing and handling.	0	
D	Licensing and checking of qualifications of personnel responsible for captive wildlife.	0	
E	Action to promote the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in the tourism sector and to ensure compliance with it.	1	
F	Provision of information to visitors on avoiding trade in endangered species, e.g., in the purchase of souvenirs derived from threatened species of wildlife notified by IUCN or CITES.	1	
G	Enforcement of legislation to ensure that any hunting activity is part of a scientifically based, properly managed and strictly enforced approach to conservation.	0	

D5. ENERGY CONSERVATION

The destination has targets to reduce energy consumption, improve efficiency in its use, as well as increase the use of renewable energy. The destination has a system to encourage enterprises to measure, monitor, reduce, and publicly report their contribution to these targets.

To assess the Cook Islands against D5, interviews and site visits were held, and the following documents were reviewed:

- ▶ January-June 2024 Environmental and Social Monitoring Report on the Cook Islands Renewable Energy Sector Project
- ▶ Cook Islands Investment Corporation Statement of Corporate Intent 2023-2027
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- ▶ Ki Mua: Towards a just transition for the Pacific

With respect to Criterion D5, the Cook Islands had an overall score of **1.00**, suggesting “Moderate Risk.”

D5.a Energy consumption targets are publicized and promoted

A subsidiary of Cook Islands Investment Corporation—Te Aponga Uira—is the power utility responsible for providing electricity on Rarotonga. It also supports Pa Enua energy infrastructure. In the last decade the utility has “moved its focus towards developing power generation from renewable solar energy sources.” To that end, Te Aponga Uira has a memorandum of understanding with each of the Pa Enua and Te Mana Uira o Araura (a limited liability company and wholly owned subsidiary of the Corporation) which sets out the working arrangement between the organizations. Te Mana Uira o Araura provides free electricity to churches, streetlights, and water stations, and supports community organizations on Aitutaki.

The government of the Cook Islands set a renewable energy target of 100% by 2020. In 2021 the government undertook an energy sector wide review to ensure that its 100% target remains an

achievable, economically efficient outcome. It also assessed its affordability across the Pa Enua. To date the achievement is 17%. The targets are present, yet implementation has been difficult and there are no clear projections of meeting the target of 100%.

In 2023 governments convened on Rarotonga for the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting. At the meeting the report—Ki Mua: Towards a just transition for the Pacific—was unveiled. The report charts a “transformative path toward renewable energy adoption and equitable development for Pacific Island Countries.” More specifically, the report calls for a fossil fuel phaseout, ensuring that no carbon dioxide be pumped into international waters, support from the largest greenhouse gas emitting nations for alternative energy generation systems, and more.

With respect to tourism, to be accredited as a Quality Assured Accommodation, Land Tour, Marine Tour, Wedding/Event, or Retail business, management/owners must communicate to staff and guests how to conserve energy (e.g., turn off lights/air conditioning when not in use). However, it is not clear how much communication or action regarding energy efficiency occurs.

D5.b Programme to increase energy efficiency—e.g. promoting and supporting insulation

According to the January-June 2024 Environmental and Social Monitoring Report on the Cook Islands Renewable Energy Sector Project, the government is endeavoring to install hybrid systems that will provide 95% renewable energy across the Pa Enua.

The Project was divided into two phases. Phase 1 included subprojects on Atiu, Mitiaro, Mauke, and Mangaia. Four solar photovoltaic generator systems, advanced secondary battery storage and control systems were installed on all four islands. New diesel backup generators and new power stations were also installed on Mauke and Mitiaro. Phase 2 included a subproject on Aitutaki, comprising solar PV power system and battery storage to supplement the existing diesel generator power station. The second phase also included a solar project at the airport on Rarotonga. These actions appear to be ongoing.

No data were found regarding the percentage of renewable energy now being produced by hybrid systems across the Pa Enua.

D5.c Investment in renewable energy and percentage of total provision/consumption

No information was found.

D5.d Support and incentives for energy monitoring and reduction by enterprises

No information was found.

TABLE D5. Energy Conservation

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Energy consumption targets are publicized and promoted.	2	1.00
B	Programme to increase energy efficiency—e.g. promoting and supporting insulation.	2	
C	Investment in renewable energy and percent of total provision/consumption.	0	
D	Support and incentives for energy monitoring and reduction by enterprises.	0	



D6. WATER STEWARDSHIP

The destination has targets to reduce energy consumption, improve efficiency in its use, as well as increase the use of renewable energy. The destination has a system to encourage enterprises to measure, monitor, reduce, and publicly report their contribution to these targets.

To assess the Cook Islands against D6, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following information was reviewed.

- Competition and Regulatory Authority website
- Cook Islands National Water Policy 2016
- Cook Islands Sustainable Tourism Development Policy
- Cook Islands Tourism Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- DD Scorecard 2020-21
- Mei Te Vai Ki Te Vai Project website
- National Environment Policy 2022-32
- Te Kaveinga Nui: National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020

Earning an overall score of **0.80** the Cook Islands exhibited “Risk” on Criteria D6.

Water is at the core of sustainable development and is critical for socio-economic development, healthy ecosystems, and for human survival. Water, especially fresh water, is one of the most critical natural resources. The tourism industry generally overuses water resources for hotels, swimming pools, golf courses, and tourists’ personal use. This can result in water shortages, degradation of water supplies, and a greater volume of wastewater.

D6.a Provision of guidance and support for monitoring and reduction of water usage by enterprises

No program exists. However, a program may be introduced as a part of the new water tariff initiative.

D6.b Program to regularly assess water risk

In 2017 the Cook Islands launched the Mei Te Vai Ki Te Vai project to improve the quality of the lagoons in Rarotonga and Aitutaki. According

to the project’s website, “the project includes a comprehensive environmental monitoring and investigation program, the design of long-term measures for improved wastewater management and establishment of a state-owned water and wastewater authority” (https://www.facebook.com/vaikitevai/about_details). The program has not yet been generated.

D6.c Setting, publication, and enforcement of water stewardship goals, where water risk has been assessed as high

In 1998 the Parliament of the Cook Islands enacted the Prevention of Marine Pollution Act. The Act was intended to “provide for the prevention of marine pollution, the dumping and transportation of other waste in Cook Islands waters by vessels and to give effect to various international conventions on marine pollution and protection of the marine environment” (<https://www.transport.gov.ck/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/prevention-of-marine-pollution-act-1998.pdf>).

The government committed to the sustainable development of small island developing states in 2014 with the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway 2014. With this commitment the government agreed to address issues affecting water and sanitation.

The Cook Islands National Water Policy 2016 established objectives and articulated desired outcomes that were intended to guide government efforts associated with protection of water resources from contaminants; management of water resources in an integrated, equitable, and sustainable way; access to safe drinking water for all Cook Islanders; and management of public health risks associated with unsafe drinking water. Establishment of the Policy coincided with the introduction of the National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020. In the Plan the Cook Islands proposed improving access to sufficient and safe water as well as management of sanitation.

In the early 20s, the National Environment Service created The National Environment Policy 2022-32 to “strengthen the protection and management of its ecological systems and use of natural resources in the Cook Islands.” Water stewardship is one of the six environmental policy objectives and instruments outlined in the Policy. Similarly, the Cook Islands

Sustainable Tourism Development Policy has as one of its objectives the “protection of the pristine environment through sustainable practices.” One of these practices is enhancing water conservation through improved measures and education.

D6.d Monitoring and control of sources and volume of water used for tourism purposes and its effect on local communities and ecosystems. Promotion and checking of adherence to goals by tourism enterprises

No programs exist.

D6.e Visitor information on water risk and minimizing water use

The Cook Islands Tourism Corporation promotes how tourists can be responsible visitors on its website. By clicking on the link—Learn how to be a responsible visitor—visitors can access short videos about water usage, sanitation, rubbish, and more. In addition, water safety signs have been placed at Arutanga and Amuri wharfs. The Corporation also encourages its accredited (through the Quality Assured Program) businesses to do the same. For example, the guidelines for Accommodations who want to be accredited include offering filtered drinking water rather than water in single use plastic bottles, having a plan in place in the event of water shortage, and more. Alternatively, Land Tours must encourage visitors to bring reusable drink bottles rather than single use plastic bottles on the tour.

TABLE D6. Water Stewardship

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Provision of guidance and support for monitoring and reduction of water usage by enterprises.	0	0.80
B	Program to regularly assess water risk.	1	
C	Setting, publication and enforcement of water stewardship goals, where water risk has been assessed as high.	1	
D	Monitoring and control of sources and volume of water used for tourism purposes and its effect on local communities and ecosystems. Promotion and checking of adherence to goals by tourism enterprises.	0	
E	Visitor information on water risk and minimizing water use.	2	



D7. WATER QUALITY

The destination monitors water quality for drinking, recreational and ecological purposes using quality standards. The monitoring results are publicly available, and the destination has a system to respond in a timely manner to water quality issues.

To assess the Cook Islands against D7, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following sources of information were reviewed:

- ▶ Cook Islands Investment Corporation Statement of Corporate Intent 2023-2027
- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- ▶ Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- ▶ <https://cookislands-data.sprep.org/dataset/water-quality-data>
- ▶ Ministry of Marine Resources website
- ▶ Prevention of Marine Pollution Act
- ▶ To Tatou Vai website

The Cook Islands received a “Good Performance” score of **2.00** on Criteria D7.

An increase in use and overcrowded conditions due to tourism can lead to water quality issues—which is a threat to health and safety.

D7.a Programme of water quality monitoring

The Cook Islands National Water Policy 2016 established objectives and articulated desired outcomes that were intended to guide access to safe drinking water for all Cook Islanders as well as management of public health risks associated with unsafe drinking water. One outcome of the Policy was an upgrade to the water network in Rarotonga, which now “provides a reliable water supply that is safe to drink.” The network is managed by a state-owned water utility—To Tatou Vai—established under the To Tatou Vai Act 2021. The utility operates and manages 10 water treatment plants, oversees an apprentice scheme for technicians, and has strengthened its laboratory and testing capabilities.

D7.b Existence of data and reports on water quality

Tatou Vai maintains a website that provides updates on water quality (e.g., on August 7, 2024, Rarotonga’s public water was not safe to drink), shutdowns, projects, and upcoming plans. It also provides information about the location of all water stations on Rarotonga and gives access to annual reports. For example, the utility’s main report documented what is known about environmental hazards and risks affecting each water treatment plant; what To Tatou Vai intends to do about the hazards and risks, including inspection, monitoring, and management; future objectives; and more.

The Ministry of Marine Resources provides water quality reports that include water quality data (i.e., bacteria count, total suspended solids, and dissolved oxygen level) drawn from 12 lagoon sites on Aitutaki and 17 sites on Rarotonga. The water quality reports also include rainfall data. In 2024 water quality reports for Aitutaki were filed in January, May (for February through May), and each month from June to December. The Ministry released monthly reports for Rarotonga; however, data were not consistently collected at all sites each month.

The National Environment Service provides water quality data, including streams, obtained from various locations in the Cook Islands. The most recent data presented was from February 2022.

D7.c Monitoring bathing water, with certification and identification of sites reaching set standards

The government proposes having the Competition and Regulatory Authority—a statutory body that acts independently of the government—regulate the water and sanitation sector. Currently the Authority only regulates the telecommunications industry.

D7.d Evidence of actions to improve water quality

The state-owned water utility—To Tatou Vai—upgraded the water network in Rarotonga, which now “provides a reliable water supply that is safe to drink.” In addition, the utility has strengthened its laboratory and testing capabilities.

D7.e Information for visitors on quality of local drinking water, to encourage use as alternative to bottled water

One category of standards businesses must meet if they want to be accredited by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation’s Quality Assured program is titled, “Environment.” Several guidelines in this category are associated with water quality

but do differ based on the sector. For example, the guidelines for Accommodations who want to be accredited include providing information about the tap water in each room, having a plan in place in the event of water shortage, and more. Alternatively, Land Tours must encourage visitors to bring reusable drink bottles rather than single use plastic bottles on the tour.

TABLE D7. Water Quality

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Programme of water quality monitoring.	2	2.00
B	Existence of data and reports on water quality.	3	
C	Monitoring bathing water, with certification and identification of sites reaching set standards.	1	
D	Evidence of actions to improve water quality.	2	
E	Information for visitors on quality of local drinking water, to encourage use as alternative to bottled water.	2	



Area of Focus—Management of Waste & Emissions

D8. WASTEWATER

The destination has clear and enforced guidelines in place for the siting, maintenance, and testing of discharge from septic tanks and wastewater treatment systems. The destination ensures that waste is properly treated and reused or released safely without adverse impacts on the local population and the environment.

To assess the Cook Islands against D8, the following information was reviewed.

- ▶ Economic Development Strategy 2030
- ▶ Natural Capital Project Stanford University
- ▶ Public Health (Sewage and Wastewater Treatment and Disposal) Regulations 2014
- ▶ Solid and Hazardous Wastes Bill 2020

The Cook Islands is at “Risk” with an overall score of **0.50** on Criteria D8.

Construction of hotels, recreation sites, and service facilities often leads to increased sewage pollution. Wastewater has polluted seas, lakes, and rivers surrounding tourist attractions, damaging the health of the environment. Sewage runoff has the potential to cause harm in both freshwater and marine environments. Changes in salinity and siltation can have widespread impacts on coastal environments. And sewage pollution can threaten the health of all living beings.

D8.a Written guidelines and regulations on wastewater treatment

Recognizing that the “government has struggled to find adequate funding to address sanitation and

wastewater problems” (<https://naturalcapitalproject.stanford.edu/news/cook-islands-workshop>), the Cook Islands and the Asian Development Bank have been working on a pilot project to develop a centralized wastewater system focused on improving the water quality in the Muri Lagoon.

The Lagoon has long been the largest tourist attraction in the country yet has suffered from severe pollution... due to runoff from coastal development and wastewater pollution. Impacts to this ecosystem threaten the community’s livelihoods, fishing, recreation, and cultural activities, as well as the tourism revenue their economy relies on” (<https://naturalcapitalproject.stanford.edu/news/cook-islands-workshop>).

This pilot project is part of People, Planet, Prosperity, “a global collaboration between the Natural Capital Project, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and 16 different countries” (<https://naturalcapitalproject.stanford.edu/news/cook-islands-workshop>).

D8.b System of enforcing guidelines amongst enterprises

No system exists.

D8.c Monitoring/testing of released wastewater

Monitoring and testing of released wastewater is the responsibility of the Ministry of Infrastructure.

D8.d Provision of sustainable municipal water treatment systems, for use by the tourism sector, where practical and appropriate

No systems exist.

TABLE D8. Wastewater Management

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Written guidelines and regulations on wastewater treatment.	1	0.50
B	System of enforcing guidelines amongst enterprises.	0	
C	Monitoring/testing of released wastewater.	1	
D	Provision of sustainable municipal water treatment systems, for use by the tourism sector, where practical and appropriate.	0	

D9. SOLID WASTE

The destination measures and reports on its generation of waste and sets targets for its reduction. It ensures solid waste is properly treated and diverted from landfill, with provision of a multiple-stream collection and recycling system which effectively separates waste by type. The destination encourages enterprises to avoid, reduce, reuse, and recycle solid waste, including food waste. Action is taken to eliminate or reduce single-use items, especially plastics. Any residual solid waste that is not reused or recycled is disposed of safely and sustainably.

To assess the Cook Islands against D9, the following information was reviewed.

- Advance Recovery and Disposal Fee Scheme Policy 2022
- Asian Development Bank website
- Cook Islands General Transport website
- Cook Islands National Solid Waste Management Strategy 2013-2016
- Cook Islands Sustainable Development Policy
- Cook Islands Tourism Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- Destination Development Scorecard 2018/2019
- Infrastructure Cook Islands website, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management website
- National Environment Policy 2022-32
- National Environment Service website
- PacWaste Plus website
- Solid and Hazardous Wastes Bill
- Te Kaveinga Nui: National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020
- Tita' Ki Te Tita'Kore Project

The Cook Islands received an overall score of **1.88** on Criteria D9, suggesting it “Needs Improvement.”

Solid waste generation is considered one of the most relevant environmental impacts from tourism activities, especially since many establishments that make up the tourism sector, such as hotels, bars, and restaurants, use large quantities of expendable

single-use consumer goods within their operations. In addition, tourists are not always aware of how waste management functions within a specific region. Due to the relatively short stay of most tourists, education is critical to understanding local recycling and solid waste management programs.

D9.a Waste monitoring programme, with results and targets published

In 2014 the government introduced Public Health (Sewage and Wastewater Treatment and Disposal) Regulations. A notable outcome of this regulation was the continuation of the Sewage and Sanitation Board or, on islands other than Rarotonga, the Island Environment Authority and a health officer or the relevant Island Council and a health officer, to perform the functions of the Board for that island. The Sewage and Sanitation Board has responsibility for reviewing all regulations, issuing/revoking/suspending permits, directing inspections, authorizing enforcement action, registering sanitary professionals/technicians and septic tank manufacturers, approval and registration of sewage treatment unit designs, appointment of sanitary inspectors, and maintaining a registry of all sewage systems. Additional outcomes of the regulation were: requirements for construction, operation, maintenance, and inspection of sewage systems; and criteria for enforcement, penalties, and liabilities associated with sewage systems.

One of the Cook Island's sustainability goals was to “promote sustainable practices and effectively manage solid and hazardous waste” through increased recycling, reduction of waste generated by tourism-related activities, and better and more effective promotion about and management of hazardous waste (Cook Islands National Sustainable Tourism Development Policy; National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020). This goal was further refined into a vision for “Zero Waste” (Cook Islands National Solid Waste Management Strategy 2013-2016). Unfortunately, recycling and solid waste in the Cook Islands continue to be a problem. According to Infrastructure Cook Islands and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management.

The landfill in Rarotonga and Aitutaki, and uncontrolled dumps across the Cook Islands, are becoming filled with recyclable and potentially hazardous waste. Electronic waste and vehicle bodies are stockpiled on private land. The Rarotonga landfill

was scheduled to be closed in 2020, but operation has continued due to unsuccessful attempts to find another solution. The landfill in Aitutaki was also scheduled to be closed in 2020. Fortunately, much space remains. The repatriation of recyclables, vehicles, electrical waste and whiteware to recyclers overseas takes place intermittently and predominantly relies on externally funded project money. Littering and dumping of recyclables, hazardous waste and non-recyclable waste is a common occurrence on Rarotonga. Litter is evident along roadsides and at places people congregate, especially beaches... (Advance Recovery and Disposal Fee Scheme Policy 2022).

The government introduced the Solid and Hazardous Wastes Bill 2020. As of 2023 it had not been finalized. The Bill establishes rules for responsible disposal of waste, provides for the collection of solid wastes, proposes establishment and operation of waste facilities, bans or controls importation of unwanted waste, establishes a scheme for the payment of an advanced disposal fee, prohibits sale of plastic shopping bags, and enables the Cook Islands to comply with international conventions regarding the disposal of solid or hazardous waste.

The National Environment Service and Cook Islands General Transport partnered on the Tita' Ki Te Tita'Kore Project. They addressed environmental and health risks associated with improper disposal of whiteware, electronic waste, and end-of-life vehicles on Rarotonga.

An objective in the Cook Island's Economic Development Strategy 2030 is to "Green Our Economy." Two of its foci are sanitation and solid waste management.

D9.b Coordinated campaign/advice/support with tourism enterprises on waste management, including food waste

Cook Islands Tourism Corporation supported WATSAN with their waste management campaign—B in it to Win it—which "was about each household creating their own recycle bins out of reusable products and showcasing the separation of rubbish." In addition, rubbish bins were placed in the black rock and social center area to assist with waste disposal.

On the island of Aitutaki, the Corporation supported the Te Vaka O Ru Competition which

focused on waste disposal and replanting of trees. More generally, the Corporation instituted the Quality Assured Program. To be accredited by the Program businesses must comply with specific standards and guidelines, a few of which have to do with solid waste. For example, businesses in the Accommodation, Restaurant/Café/Bar and Bistro, and Wedding and Events sectors must collect, separate, and recycle all rubbish. They must also compost all organic waste.

According to a representative from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, some farmers collect food waste from resorts for their own purposes. There is no overarching program.

D9.c Campaign to reduce/eliminate single use items, especially plastics

The Cook Islands has had single use plastics regulation in place since 2012.

The National Environment Service, with support from UNEP, proposed the GEF-8 Plastic RESPONSE Project. The objective of the project is to "reduce the amount of plastics entering the Cook Islands via the food and beverage sector and to support enabling environments for reuse options and other circular solutions, with the intention of reducing the burden on the Cook Islands waste management system, as well as reducing pollution and harmful impacts of plastic" (<https://environment.gov.ck/partnerships/current-projects/gef-8-plastic-r-e-s-p-o-n-s-e-project/>).

The Solid and Hazardous Wastes Bill 2020 proposes bans or controls on importation of unwanted waste and prohibits sale of plastic shopping bags.

With the support of PacWaste Plus, an initiative of The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, the Cook Islands finalized the Advance Recovery and Disposal Fee (ARDF) Scheme Policy in 2022. The vision for the policy was to have the community take responsibility for sustainable management of solid waste. The ARDF includes three components: a refund for consumers who return recyclable items; a handling fee paid to the refund depot operator; and a management fee, which will be used to pay for processing equipment, logistics contract service, and support systems. In 2023 a PacWaste Plus Mission was conducted to help the Cook Islands progress on the implementation of the ARDF. While in-country Infrastructure Cook Islands and members of the Mission "...completed

a customs code classification exercise to enable the Cook Island Customs to identify ARDF items upon import” (<https://pacwasteplus.org/news/cook-islands-mission-travel-2/>).

D9.d Waste management programme for public offices and facilities

No information was available.

D9.e Provision of a collection and recycling systems, with at least four streams (i.e., organic, paper, metal, glass and plastic)

According to the Asian Development Bank, there are several recycling initiatives on Rarotonga. There is a transfer station located at the landfill for the processing of recyclable materials (i.e., aluminum cans, PET bottles, glass). The Cook Islands Trading Corporation, a for-profit company, recycles compact fluorescent light bulbs and runs a drop off center for recyclables and cardboard boxes. All recyclables collected on Rarotonga are shipped to New Zealand for processing.

The Advance Recovery and Disposal Fee (ARDF) Scheme Policy 2022 includes a refund for consumers who return recyclable items.

D9.f Provision of sustainable system for disposal of residual waste

There is a transfer station located at the landfill for the processing of recyclable materials (i.e., aluminum cans, PET bottles, glass). The Cook Islands Trading Corporation, a for-profit company, recycles compact fluorescent light bulbs and runs a drop off center for recyclables and cardboard boxes.

D9.g Campaign to eliminate dropping of litter, including by visitors, and to keep public spaces clean

No information was available.

D9.h Adequate bins for separated waste disposal

According to a representative from the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, there are issues with the waste management infrastructure, making separation of waste disposal and waste disposal problematic.

TABLE D9. Solid Waste

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Waste monitoring programme, with results and targets published.	2	1.88
B	Coordinated campaign advice/support with tourism enterprises on waste management, including food waste.	2	
C	Campaign to reduce/eliminate single use items, especially plastics.	2	
D	Waste management programme for public offices and facilities.	2	
E	Provision of a collection and recycling system, with at least four streams (i.e., organic, paper, metal, glass, and plastic).	2	
F	Provision of sustainable system for disposal of residual waste.	2	
G	Campaign to eliminate dropping of litter, including by visitors, and to keep public spaces clean.	2	
H	Adequate bins for separated waste disposal.	1	

D10. GHG EMISSIONS AND CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION

The destination has targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and implements and reports on mitigation policies and actions. Enterprises are encouraged to measure, monitor, reduce or minimize, publicly report, and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions from all aspects of their operation (including from suppliers and service providers). Offsetting of any remaining emissions is encouraged.

To assess the Cook Islands against D10, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following sources of information were reviewed.

- 2nd Joint National Action Plan 2016-2020
- Cook Islands Climate Change Country Programme 2018-2030
- Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028
- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands National Security Policy
- Cook Islands strengthening legislation to build climate change resilience in the Cook Islands Pacific Islands Forum 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent Cook Islands
- Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui NSDA 2020+
- The National Environment Service website
- United Nations Development Program: Strengthening the Resilience of the Cook Islands to Climate Change

The Cook Islands received an overall score of **1.80** on Criteria D10, or “Needs Improvement.”

The tourism industry is closely linked to climate change as it involves the movement of people from their homes to other destinations and accommodating and servicing these people in host locations prior to returning home. Many aspects of this business cycle are accompanied by a heavy carbon footprint. As more time and money are dedicated to leisure, the tourism industry is playing a larger role in global greenhouse gas emissions. Mitigation in the tourism sector can be achieved by reducing energy use through changes in travel behavior, improving energy efficiency, increasing the use of renewable energy, carbon offsetting strategies, and changes within business operations and practice.

D10.a Published target for percentage of emissions reduction by specified date

In response to increases in global surface temperatures and intensity and frequency of extreme climate events, including cyclones and droughts, the government of the Cook Islands has “shifted emphasis in its disaster management approach in recent years from recovery and response only to preparedness and risk reduction” (Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030). It has also introduced the Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028. Specific objectives of the Policy are as follows.

- **Adaptation and Mitigation:** Increase climate resilience through greater health-related activities, promote climate risk assessment and climate proofing within the development framework, achieve a greater understanding on climate loss and damage, strengthen community-based and ecosystem approaches to climate resilience building, promote a low carbon development approach toward development goals and sustainable development goals, achieve 100% renewable energy generation in all islands by 2025, achieve 100% energy efficiency across the country by 2025, and confirm a zero emissions target by 2040.
- **Mainstreaming:** Provide direction to all key sectors involved in the national response to the impacts of climate change, strengthen capacity and capabilities of Cook Islanders in all climate financed programs and projects, assess and foster innovation in technology application as well as research regarding climate change and its impact, strengthen education and public awareness on climate change, aim to achieve 100% involvement for gender issues across all climate-related activities, establish a set of standards and procedures that foster green investment in the Cook Islands, increase access to climate financing as an integral part of development expenditures, and identify incentives and tools to promote additional climate financing through the private sector.
- **International Engagement:** Support meeting our international obligations by providing a domestic focus to our international commitments in the climate change area.

To date, the government has overseen production of cyclone shelters, implemented a water upgrade

program, and allocated funding to mitigate the impact of sea-level rises.

D10.b Annual climate report, including monitoring and mitigation actions

The Cook Islands National Security Policy is affiliated with the Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028. It recognizes that “climate change is one of the greatest security hazards facing humankind...” As such the government intends to continuously review new data and information and update existing climate change and related policies as needed.

D10.c Supported campaign or other engagement with tourism enterprises on reduction and mitigation of emissions

No campaign exists.

D10.d Action to reduce emissions from public sector operations

In 2011 the Cook Islands presented its first Joint National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change. It was updated with a five-year plan for 2016-2020. The goal of the updated plan was to “strengthen climate and disaster resilience to protect lives, livelihoods, economic, infrastructural, cultural, and environmental assets in the Cook Islands...”

From 2012 to 2018 the Cook Islands worked with the United Nations Development Program on three objectives related to climate change. The first objective, which was national in scope, focused on strengthening policy and institutional capacity and public awareness on climate change and disaster reduction. This was accomplished through conducting and updating climate risk assessments, enhancing early warning systems, and training policy makers and technicians. The second and third objectives targeted all 11 inhabited islands of the Pa Enua. The foci of the two objectives were to:

- increase the adaptive capacity of households, businesses, and affected sectors (e.g., tourism) through engagement in island level climate change adaptation and disaster risk management planning, training, and awareness raising activities; and
- strengthen Cook Islander’s livelihoods through “diversifying food production, processing, and related subsistence and income-earning activities amongst local communities[;] improving

protection of household and business assets[;]
reducing the risks of disease and death associated with climate-related extreme events; and
enhancing the resilience of terrestrial, coastal, and marine ecosystems [upon] which the communities, businesses, and sectors depend (<https://www.adaptation-undp.org/projects/af-cook-islands>).

National initiatives that have taken place in response to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change include three separate National Communications (1999, 2011, and 2019). The last Communication, which was informed by the earlier Communications as well as two national consultations with a wide variety of stakeholders (e.g., community, island, and village residents) highlighted the progress made by the Cook Islands towards addressing climate change. For example, there are now more than one dozen agencies/organizations active in climate change initiatives, including: four groups housed in the Office of the Prime Minister—Climate Change Cook Islands, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (Platform) with Climate Change Cook Islands as its secretariat, Emergency Management Cook Islands, and Renewable Energy Development Division; the Cook Islands Meteorological Office; Infrastructure Cook Islands; Ministry of Agriculture; Ministry of Finance and Economic Management; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Marine Resources; National Environment Service; Te Aponga Uira, the government-owned supplier of electricity in the Cook Islands; non-government organizations such as the Cook Islands Red Cross and the Cook Islands National Council of Women; and regional and international organizations (e.g., the New Zealand and Australian governments, and United Nations agencies, Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific agencies).

Other national initiatives include the submission of the Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions in 2013 and the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions in 2016 to the United Nations.

The Cook Islands Climate Change Country Program was developed as part of the Green Climate Fund Readiness and Preparatory Support program. It is building upon ongoing climate and development strategies in the Cook Islands including the NSDA; JNAP II—Are We Resilient? The Cook Islands 2nd Joint National Action Plan (JNAP)—A sectoral approach to Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management 2016-2020; Cook Islands Renewable Energy Chart 2016-2020; Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) 2015; Second

National Communication to the UNFCCC 2011; Cook Islands National Infrastructure Investment Plan 2015–2025; Individual Island Community Development Plans; Cook Islands State of the Environment Report 2017; Cook Islands National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2017-2021 and the draft Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-28. It has been informed by the community, the public and private sectors, and non-government and civil society partners, through participatory approaches, under the guidance of the National Designated Authority, the Climate Change Cook Islands division of the Office of the Prime Minister. The national government will provide oversight for the implementation of this Country Programme, including the operationalizing of a system of national coordination. All sectors and levels of government will be responsible for integrating, where appropriate, climate finance considerations in their plans and programmes.

The National Environment Service participates in the Montreal Protocol Project. The Project “aims to phase out Ozone Depleting Substances and phase down Hydrofluorocarbons” (<https://environment.gov.ck/current-projects/>). Further, the Cook Islands became the 81st country to formally ratify the Kigali Amendment of the Montreal Protocol—“an international agreement aimed at phasing down the production and consumption of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs)...” (<https://environment.gov.ck/applications-permits/montreal-protocol-licensing-system/>). Phasing down has begun in the Cook Islands which implemented a HFC Licensing Permit System to monitor the importation of HFCs.

In the early 2020s, leaders from the Cook Islands participated in the Pacific Islands Forum. The document generated was the 2050 Strategy for the

Blue Pacific Continent. Leaders recognized that the region has “an integrated approach to address climate change and disaster risk management in the region.” However, they have proposed pursuing efforts to increase commitment, collaboration, and innovative financing and research to address climate change, disaster risk, and transition to renewable sources of energy. They have also called for cooperation and collaboration to,

build the capacity and resilience of communities to effectively address the impacts of climate change and disasters, including gendered impacts [,” while] simultaneously ensuring the protection and practice of the rights, cultural values, and heritage and traditional knowledge of Pacific people...

The authors of Te Ara Akapapa’anga Nui NSDA 2020+ propose preparing for continued climate change through adaptation and mitigation planning and the adoption of technologies that will enable adaptation and mitigation to occur.

The National Cook Islands Climate Change Response Bill is being drafted. It aims to “take a consolidated approach in reducing national vulnerability and building climate change resilience.” The next steps are to complete stakeholder consultations and discussion that are expected to shape the Bill, presenting the Bill to the Cabinet for endorsement, and then preparing final legislation through the Crown Law Office.

D10.e Information for enterprises and visitors on offsetting schemes that meet recognized standards

Airlines provide information about offsetting schemes like some accommodation providers but there is no standardized program.

TABLE D10. GHG Emissions & Climate Change Mitigation

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Published target for percentage of emissions reduction by specified date.	3	1.80
B	Annual climate report, including monitoring and mitigation actions.	2	
C	Supported campaign or other engagement with tourism enterprises on reduction and mitigation of emissions.	0	
D	Action to reduce emissions from public sector operations.	3	
E	Information for enterprises and visitors on offsetting schemes that meet recognized standards.	1	

D11. LOW-IMPACT TRANSPORTATION

The destination has targets to reduce transport emissions from travel to and within the destination. An increase in the use of sustainable, low-emissions vehicles and public transport and active travel (e.g., walking and cycling) is sought to reduce the contribution of tourism to air pollution, congestion, and climate change.

To assess the Cook Islands against D11, interviews and onsite visits were conducted and the following information was reviewed:

- Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2022/23
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Quality Assured Standards and Guidelines
- Cook Islands Tourism Corporation website
- Locals and visitors enjoy eco-friendly transport alternatives

The Cook Islands obtained an overall score of **1.00** on Criteria D11, or “Moderate Risk.”

Sustainable, low-impact transportation systems make positive contributions to the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of the communities they serve. These systems limit emissions and waste and use renewable resources at or below their rates of generation while minimizing impact on land use and generation of noise.

D11.a Investment in more sustainable transport infrastructure, including public transport and low emissions vehicles

The government-owned power station installed a charging station, allowing ownership of an electric vehicle to satisfy a requirement for the eco-certification program Mana Tiaki, and the fifth objective of Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030 encourages replacing “end-of-life” government vehicles with electric cars.

D11.b Information promoted to visitors on alternative transport options to and within the destination

On the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation’s website, under the link “Plan Your Trip,” visitors can

click on “Explore by Land” and find information about cycling the Cook Islands. They can also click on “Getting Around” and review a list of all transportation options on the island of Rarotonga. Included in the list is riding a scooter, taking the public bus, and cycling. In addition, rental car agencies who want to be a Quality Assured accredited business must provide tourists with electric vehicle options. All compliant rental agencies are listed on the website.

D11.c Data on visitor use of alternative transport modes

No data were available.

D11.d Improvement and promotion of cycling and walking opportunities

Cycling and walking opportunities are promoted on the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation’s website.

D11.e Prioritization of visitor markets accessible by short and more sustainable transport options

The two primary markets for the Cook Islands are New Zealand and Australia. However, the Corporation is hoping to grow the North American, European, and UK/Nordic markets. In terms of the North American (i.e., Hawaii and the Pacific Northwest) market, it is considered viable given its propensity to spend and stay for extended visits. Hawaiian airlines offer a direct flight from Honolulu. The European and UK/Nordic markets are also considered to have potential, particularly because they tend to travel during off-season and like to visit the Pa Enua. The Corporation is also planning to enhance its promotion of direct flights to the Cook Islands from Tahiti.

D11.f Public sector and tourism enterprises prioritise low-impact transportation in their own operations

The only evidence of prioritization of low-impact transportation in the public sector is with the fifth objective of Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030, which encourages replacing “end-of-life” government vehicles with electric cars. No evidence for tourism enterprises exists.

TABLE D11. Low Impact Transportation

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Investment in more sustainable transport infrastructure, including public transport and low emissions vehicles.	2	1.00
B	Information promoted to visitors on alternative transport options to and within the destination	2	
C	Data on visitor use of alternative transport modes.	0	
D	Improvement and promotion of cycling and walking opportunities.	1	
E	Prioritization of visitor markets accessible by short and more sustainable transport options.	0	
F	Public sector and tourism enterprises prioritize low-impact transportation in their own operations.	1	



D12. LIGHT AND NOISE POLLUTION

The destination has guidelines and regulations to minimize light and noise pollution. The destination encourages enterprises to follow these guidelines and regulations.

To assess the Cook Islands against D12, interviews and site visits were conducted, and the following documents were reviewed:

- ▶ Cook Islands Pocket Guide: 6 Best Spots for Stargazing in Rarotonga & the Cook Islands
- ▶ Noise Control Act 1986
- ▶ Noise Control Amendment Act 1993-94 (No. 14 of 1993-94)

The Cook Islands scored poorly on D12, receiving an overall score of **0.67** or a rating of “Risk.”

D12.a Guidelines on light and noise pollution—produced and promoted to tourism enterprises

In 1986 the Cook Islands ratified the Noise Control Act. Individuals can file a complaint against excessive noise (e.g., loud musical instrument, noise from a gathering or meeting) with a noise control

officer (i.e., any constable appointed under the Police Act 1981). The Act was amended in 1993-94 to read, “...every constable appointed under the Police Act 1981 shall by virtue of his office and without further authority than this section, be deemed to be a Noise Control Officer for the purposes of this Act. This Act and the principal Act shall be administered by the Police Department.”

The assessors could not obtain any information regarding light pollution.

D12.b Identification and monitoring of potential sources of noise and light pollution related to tourism

No information was available.

D12.c Mechanisms to enable residents to report noise and light pollution, with follow-up action

Individuals can file a complaint against excessive noise (e.g., loud musical instrument, noise from a gathering or meeting) with a noise control officer (i.e., any constable appointed under the Police Act 1981).

No information about mechanisms related to light pollution were found.

TABLE D12. Light & Noise Pollution

Indicators Evaluated		Score/Average	
A	Guidelines on light and noise pollution—produced and promoted to tourism enterprises.	1	0.67
B	Identification and monitoring of potential sources of noise and light pollution related to tourism.	0	
C	Mechanisms to enable residents to report noise and light pollution, with follow-up action.	1	

APPENDICES



APPENDIX A: List of Onsite Meetings and Visits

Name	Department/Organization	Date
Jean Nootai	Youth	10/31/2024
Keren Aview	SPCA	10/31/2024
Jane Wichman-Poa—Manager Policy, Research & Stats	Ministry of Culture	11/1/2024
Anne Herman—Secretary of INTAFF	Ministry of Internal Affairs	11/1/2024
Grace Chynoweth—Director of Social Welfare	Ministry of Internal Affairs	11/1/2024
Terese Matara—Corporate Services Manager	Ministry of Internal Affairs	11/1/2024
Liz Nootai—National Disability Coordinator	Ministry of Internal Affairs	11/1/2024
Elizabeth Hosking—Director of Labour and Consumer Affairs	Ministry of Internal Affairs	11/1/2024
Toka Toka—National Coordinator for Youth	Ministry of Internal Affairs	11/1/2024
Alex King—Founder of Te Ara o te Akau	NGO	11/1/2024
John and Anne Tiene	Muri Environment Care	11/1/2024
Eve	Chamber of Commerce	11/4/2024
Jaimie Short—Policy Advisor	Infrastructure Cook Islands	11/4/2024
Tangi Tereapii	Renewable Energy	11/4/2024
Apii Porio	CIT Board Member	11/4/2024
Tere Carr	Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council	11/4/2024
	Atiu Island Council	11/5/2024
	Atiu Tourism Industry	11/5/2024
	CIT Board	11/6/2024
	Aitutaki Island Council	11/7/2024
Pamela Maru— Secretary	Ministry of Marine Resources	11/8/2024
Dean Yarrall	Ministry of Finance	11/8/2024
Halatoa Fua	National Environment Service	11/12/2024 (Zoom call)

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APPENDIX C: Summary of Pillar Assessments

PILLAR A—SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT (OVERALL SCORE 1.91)

TABLE A1-A11. Summary of Scores for Pillar A

Criteria Number	Criteria Name	Score
A1	Destination management responsibility	2.00
A2	Destination management strategy and action plan	2.00
A3	Monitoring and reporting	1.50
A4	Enterprise engagement and sustainability standards	2.00
A5	Resident engagement and feedback	2.00
A6	Visitor engagement and feedback	1.75
A7	Promotion and information	2.33
A8	Managing visitor volumes and activities	1.40
A9	Planning regulations and development control	1.83
A10	Climate change adaptation	2.20
A11	Risk and crisis management	2.00

A1: DESTINATION MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY

What Scored Well:

- CIT effectively oversees tourism management with clear roles, responsibilities, and principles like the “Kia Orana Values.”
- Collaboration exists in public, private, and civil sectors, along with job descriptions clarifying functional responsibilities.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Uncertainty around long-term funding sufficiency and access to updated budgets.
- Strengthen the operationalization of partnerships to ensure sustainable implementation of joint goals.

A2: DESTINATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

What Scored Well:

- CITDS integrates regenerative tourism strategies aligned with national, regional, and global sustainable frameworks like the United Nation’s sustainable development goals (UN SDGs).
- Multi-stakeholder collaboration in creating a publicly available action plan.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Need to address residents’ (beyond direct tourism stakeholders) concerns regarding management strategies.
- Must focus on infrastructure planning in the Pa Enua to mitigate environmental and resource-related challenges.

A3: MONITORING AND REPORTING

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Annual reports track visitor metrics and include satisfaction surveys, expenditures, and visitor behavior.
- ▶ Key performance indicators related to social, environmental, and economic goals are included in strategic plans.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Gaps in monitoring broader impacts such as carrying capacity and environmental degradation.
- ▶ Insufficient periodic review mechanisms for tourism-related monitoring systems.

A4: ENTERPRISE ENGAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Effective communication channels like newsletters, forums, and workshops to engage businesses in sustainability.
- ▶ Promotion of certification programs like Mana Tiaki and partnerships with global sustainability entities.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Low business participation in certification programs, which require updates to remain effective.
- ▶ Weak enforcement mechanisms for ensuring compliance with sustainability practices among tourism enterprises.

A5: RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Community input collected through Cook Islands Attitude Toward Tourism surveys and community-based tourism models.
- ▶ Engagement of traditional leaders and stakeholders in tourism strategy formulation.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Broader engagement is needed with residents not actively involved in tourism, especially around infrastructure concerns.

- ▶ Limited documentation of actions taken in response to resident feedback has reduced transparency and accountability.

A6: VISITOR ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Visitor surveys report a 97% satisfaction rate, with tracked behaviors, expenditures, and feedback through reports.
- ▶ Educational campaigns such as “Love Our Little Paradise” promote sustainable practices for visitors.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Visitor surveys inadequately address sustainability-related behaviors and impacts on cultural and environmental resources.
- ▶ Actions stemming from visitor feedback remain vague and under-documented.

A7: PROMOTION AND INFORMATION

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Accurate promotional content, emphasizing sustainability via campaigns such as Ridge to Reef and Mana Tiaki messaging.
- ▶ Comprehensive visitor resources on cultural sensitivity and regenerative tourism principles.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Lack of a formalized system for validating promotional materials’ accuracy and sustainability focus.
- ▶ Greater collaboration is needed with cultural and environmental stakeholders to ensure authenticity in communication.

A8: MANAGING VISITOR VOLUMES AND ACTIVITIES

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Recognizing overtourism concerns, strategies promote visitor dispersal to outer islands and off-peak travel.
- ▶ Preliminary discussions on carrying capacity issues are included in strategy documents.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- No formal studies or systems to determine visitor capacity limits for vulnerable islands and ecosystems.
- Weak enforcement of tourism activity regulations, such as wildlife interaction and tour operator compliance.

A9: PLANNING REGULATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

What Scored Well:

- Frameworks safeguard land-use planning and prioritize sustainable infrastructure aligned with regional and national goals.
- Inclusion of environmental considerations in new tourism developments.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Weak enforcement of planning regulations, especially regarding the environmental impacts of tourism developments.
- A lack of comprehensive zoning and consistent community consultation in planning processes.

A10: CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

What Scored Well:

- National and regional policies integrate climate resilience in tourism strategies and infrastructure planning.
- Emphasis on renewable energy and ecosystem conservation aligns with UN SDGs.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Infrastructure remains vulnerable to climate impacts, particularly in the Pa Enua.
- Adaptation strategies lack robust implementation and measurable tourism-specific outcomes.

A11: RISK AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

What Scored Well:

- Detailed crisis management plans and systems, such as “CookSafe,” address emergencies and mitigate tourism risks.

- Strong governance structures like the National Security Council oversee crisis response and planning.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Emergency management does not fully account for visitor-specific needs during disasters, particularly in remote areas.
- There is limited engagement with local tourism operators in designing risk and crisis strategies.

PILLAR A—MOVING FORWARD

1. **Identify and/or establish a destination management organization** coordinating stakeholders and sustainable tourism management and development initiatives with all stakeholders relevant to tourism and its impacts.
2. **Enforcement and Accountability:** Strengthen enforcement mechanisms for business compliance, visitor management, and development controls.
3. **Carrying Capacity:** Develop formal systems to determine and enforce tourism capacity limits for sensitive areas.
4. **Community and Visitor Feedback:** Expand systematic feedback from residents and visitors, ensuring actions are transparent and responsive.
5. **Infrastructure and Climate:** Address vulnerabilities in outer islands with stronger infrastructure planning and climate resilience strategies.
6. **Collaborative Development:** Deepen collaboration among stakeholders in creating and implementing inclusive, sustainable, and regenerative tourism initiatives.

PILLAR B—SOCIO-ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY (OVERALL SCORE 1.58)

TABLE B1-B3. Economic Related Criteria

Criteria Number	Criteria Name	Score
B1	Measuring the economic contribution of tourism	2.33
B2	Decent work and career opportunities	1.50
B3	Supporting local entrepreneurs and fair trade	1.60

B1: MEASURING THE ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF TOURISM

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Tourism Corporation conducts regular economic data gathering through surveys and produces reports such as the Visitor Economy Factsheet.
- ▶ Reports detail direct visitor expenditure (\$251M for 2022/23) and offer insights into key indicators (e.g., daily spending, tourist demographics).
- ▶ Efforts to modernize tools and data collection processes align with sustainability goals.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Lack of a consistent methodology to measure tourism's economic impact reduces reliability.
- ▶ Data on broader measures, such as economic distribution, investment, and employment impacts, are somewhat limited and need strengthening.
- ▶ Stronger and more modern research instruments would improve comprehensiveness.

B2: DECENT WORK AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation provides relevant skills training programs, such as customer service and boat master certifications.
- ▶ Initiatives such as the Tourism Leadership Programme aim to nurture young talent.

- ▶ Efforts to empower disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, youth, people with disabilities) are evident, as reflected in broader policy frameworks.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Many training and entrepreneurial support programs for youth and minorities are not sustained long-term.
- ▶ Employment pathways for local populations require greater emphasis to address labor shortages.
- ▶ Channels for grievance handling and labor dispute resolution remain underdeveloped, increasing costs and barriers for workers.

B3: SUPPORTING LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS AND FAIR TRADE

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Business support initiatives exist, such as loans for SMEs and partnerships between tourism stakeholders and trade boards.
- ▶ Specific initiatives like promoting local cultural products and gastronomy in tourism businesses show alignment with sustainability.
- ▶ Pa Enua-specific programs have been initiated, focusing on development audits and improved inter-island trade linkages.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Efforts to actively integrate local farmers, artisans, and food producers into the tourism value chain are limited.

- Market access initiatives for local SMEs are inadequate, particularly in value-added products.
- Campaigns to encourage the purchasing and promoting local produce and crafts are currently insufficient to ensure economic retention locally.

PILLAR B—ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY MOVING FORWARD

1. **Strengthen and systematize data gathering** and analysis for B1 indicators.
2. **Sustain and expand training initiatives** and emphasize decent work through improved grievance systems for B2.
3. **Develop focused campaigns** to integrate local enterprises into the tourism value chain for B3.



PILLAR B—SOCIAL BENEFITS RELATED CRITERIA

TABLE B4-B8. Social Related Criteria

Criteria Number	Criteria Name	Score
B4	Support for community	1.67
B5	Preventing exploitation and discrimination	1.00
B6	Property and user rights	1.50
B7	Safety and security	2.33
B8	Access for all	0.67

B4: SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Tourism enterprises are encouraged to engage with and support local communities through initiatives like the Regenerative Travel Program and Mana Tiaki Experiences.
- ▶ Schemes such as the Tourist Dividend program in Atiu effectively involve tourists in community support.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Voluntourism opportunities are limited, and the planned give-back page for visitors is still in early development.
- ▶ Greater promotion and scaling of community engagement schemes is needed to enhance local benefits.

B5: PREVENTING EXPLOITATION AND DISCRIMINATION

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Human rights laws, such as the Crimes (Sexual Offences) Amendment Bill 2023 and Constitution Act 1964, offer foundational protections.
- ▶ Recent steps to decriminalize LGBTQ+ relationships demonstrate progress toward inclusivity.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Lack of communication and enforcement of human rights laws specific to tourism enterprises.
- ▶ Insufficient laws to address human trafficking, modern slavery, and child exploitation.
- ▶ Tourism players in the Cook Islands are not signatories to international codes of conduct to prevent exploitation (e.g., The Code).

B6: PROPERTY AND USER RIGHTS

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Strong legislative framework governing land tenure and use, including protections for native freehold land.
- ▶ Procedures for granting leases provide structured regulation over land use.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Weak enforcement mechanisms for regulations, particularly in the context of tourism development.
- ▶ Lack of community consultation, consent, and compensation in property rights enforcement.

B7: SAFETY AND SECURITY

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Security and health services, including disaster preparedness systems and the “Cook Islands Promise,” support both tourists and locals.

- Comprehensive tourism accreditation through the Cook Islands Quality Assured program.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Lacking enforcement of safety and hygiene standards for unregistered businesses.
- Emergency management strategies require better implementation and in addition to residents, a visitor-centric focus.

B8: ACCESS FOR ALL

What Scored Well:

- Some progress in accessibility, such as the inclusion of disability-friendly facilities in new infrastructure (e.g., Punanga Nui Market).
- Building codes include accessibility compliance for new developments.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Limited data on the accessibility of visitor sites and facilities.

- Lack of information and resources on accessibility for tourists.
- Few targeted programs to improve accessibility across tourism facilities.

PILLAR B—SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY MOVING FORWARD

1. Efforts should focus on **strengthening enforcement, monitoring, and communication** of laws and regulations across all criteria.
2. **Enhance inclusiveness in tourism initiatives**, focusing on accessibility and protection of marginalized groups.
3. **Expand and promote existing support systems** for community engagement and sustainable tourism.



PILLAR C—CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY (OVERALL SCORE 1.26)

TABLE C1-C7. Cultural Sustainability

Criteria Number	Criteria Name	Score
C1	Protection of Cultural Assets	1.67
C2	Cultural artefacts	1.33
C3	Intangible heritage	2.00
C4	Traditional access	1.00
C5	Intellectual Property	1.00
C6	Visitor management at cultural sites	0.40
C7	Site interpretation	1.40

C1: PROTECTION OF CULTURAL ASSETS

What Scored Well:

- Established laws such as the Cultural and Historic Places Act (1994-1995) preserve historic sites and empower the Cultural and Historical Places Trust to investigate and classify heritage locations.
- Institutions like the National Museum and the Ministry of Culture actively rehabilitate and conserve cultural assets.
- Programs such as Highland Paradise demonstrate how tourism-generated income supports the maintenance of cultural assets.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- No Cook Islands sites are listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, which could aid global recognition and conservation.
- Mechanisms for directing income from tourism toward asset protection require better transparency and consistency.
- The vulnerability evaluation of cultural assets could be expanded and strengthened.

C2: CULTURAL ARTEFACTS

What Scored Well:

- Comprehensive laws like the Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act (2013) protect traditional knowledge, art, and craft heritage.

- The Te Reo Maori Act (2003) preserves the Maori language as an integral part of cultural identity.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Limited communication of laws and regulations to tourism stakeholders and visitors reduces awareness and compliance.
- Enforcement mechanisms, though legally defined, are inconsistently applied and insufficiently documented.

C3: INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

What Scored Well:

- Celebrations like Te Maeva Nui and cultural centers like Highland Paradise showcase authentic Cook Islands traditions and arts.
- Accreditation programs encourage tourism businesses to embed intangible heritage in their experiences.
- The Cook Islands National Youth Policy integrates the teaching of culture into schools and communities.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Feedback mechanisms for visitors and locals about the quality and delivery of intangible cultural experiences are absent.
- Direct community involvement in heritage-based tourism opportunities is limited and thus does not ensure inclusion and sustainability.

C4: TRADITIONAL ACCESS

What Scored Well:

- The Takitumu Conservation Area demonstrates community-led initiatives for preserving traditional access while promoting sustainability.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Monitoring local access to cultural and natural sites is limited or nonexistent.
- Community engagement on issues of access, particularly where tourism development competes with local rights, is not emphasized.
- Rehabilitation of cultural access points requires additional investment and documentation.

C5: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

What Scored Well:

- The Cook Islands Traditional Knowledge Act (2013) legally recognizes and protects the intellectual property rights of traditional communities.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- No evidence of efforts to communicate intellectual property rights to tourism businesses, stakeholders, or visitors.
- Lacking initiatives to ensure intellectual property rights are respected when developing cultural tourism products.

C6: VISITOR MANAGEMENT AT CULTURAL SITES

What Scored Well:

- Guides and resources like the “Cook Islands Pocket Guide” provide some basic guidelines on appropriate visitor behavior at cultural sites.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- No formal system exists for monitoring visitor flows and tourism-related impacts on cultural sites.
- A code of practice for tour operators or training for visitor management at cultural sites is poorly developed or absent.
- Sensitive areas and cultural events lack well-publicized visitor guidelines and monitoring.

C7: SITE INTERPRETATION

What Scored Well:

- Storyboards at key cultural sites (e.g., Rarotonga, Aitutaki) provide informative interpretation material that is accessible to some visitors.
- Accredited tour operators incorporate well-researched and culturally accurate narratives into visitor experiences.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Interpretation materials identifying the sensitivity or fragility of cultural sites are limited.
- Host community collaboration in preparing interpretative materials is minimal or undocumented.
- Limited availability of multi-language interpretive resources constrains accessibility for international visitors.

PILLAR C-CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY MOVING FORWARD:

1. **Visitor Management:** Develop formal systems to monitor and manage visitor impacts on cultural sites and provide comprehensive training to tour operators and guides.
2. **Community Engagement:** Enhance collaboration with host communities to ensure the development and delivery of sustainable and culturally appropriate visitor experiences.
3. **Cultural Asset Funding:** Create transparent and consistent mechanisms for allocating tourism income toward cultural asset protection and restoration.
4. **Heritage Awareness:** Broaden communication of laws, cultural guidelines, and interpretative materials for tourism businesses and visitors to ensure cultural values are understood and respected.
5. **Recognition and Integration:** Consider nominations for UNESCO World Heritage status and expand education programs to deepen the integration of culture into everyday community and tourism life.

PILLAR D—ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY (OVERALL SCORE 1.21)

TABLE D1-D12. Environmental Sustainability

Criteria Number	Criteria Name	Score
D1	Protection of sensitive environments	2.17
D2	Visitor management at natural sites	0.83
D3	Wildlife interaction	0.33
D4	Species exploitation and animal welfare	0.86
D5	Energy Conservation	1.50
D6	Water stewardship	0.80
D7	Water Quality	2.20
D8	Wastewater	0.50
D9	Solid waste	1.88
D10	GHG emissions and climate change mitigation	1.80
D11	Low-impact transportation	1.00
D12	Light and noise pollution	0.67

D1: PROTECTION OF SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

What Scored Well:

- Robust frameworks like the Marae Moana marine park (covering 1.9 million km²) and the Takitumu Conservation Area protect sensitive environments and biodiversity.
- Conservation programs address invasive species, endangered species like the Rarotonga Flycatcher, and sustainable marine use.
- Community-driven initiatives like the Muri Environment Care program integrate conservation with tourism.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Limited monitoring and mitigation of tourism impacts related to biodiversity, especially in lagoons and other heavily visited areas.
- Communication with visitors and enterprises about preventing the spread of invasive species is poor.

- Few mechanisms to transparently use tourism income for conservation exist.

D2: VISITOR MANAGEMENT AT NATURAL SITES

What Scored Well:

- Some signage and eco-toilets have been installed to manage tourism impacts.
- Voluntary codes of conduct exist for turtle tour operators.
- Regenerative tourism initiatives are promoted online to educate visitors.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Absence of systems to monitor visitor flows and compliance with guidelines at natural sites.
- Lack of widespread codes of practice for tour operators beyond voluntary agreements and enforcement.

- No consistent cooperation with local conservation bodies to mitigate tourism-related environmental risks.

D3: WILDLIFE INTERACTION

What Scored Well:

- Basic information is provided to visitors regarding responsible interactions with turtles and reefs.
- The Ministry of Marine Resources and National Environment Service is working to establish new tourism regulations for wildlife viewing.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- No endorsement of international wildlife interaction standards.
- Lack of systems to monitor compliance with regulations or provide training for operators.
- Codes of practice for wildlife interactions are voluntary and poorly enforced.

D4: SPECIES EXPLOITATION AND ANIMAL WELFARE

What Scored Well:

- Existing regulations under the Environment Act protect some endangered species and habitats.
- Permits are required for the export of certain species like coral and shells.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Insufficient oversight of captive wildlife and lack of a licensing system for personnel handling such wildlife.
- No established mechanism to ensure compliance with international conservation standards like CITES.
- Limited communication and enforcement of animal welfare laws.

D5: ENERGY CONSERVATION

What Scored Well:

- Renewable energy initiatives like hybrid systems and solar photovoltaic systems are being implemented across the islands.

- Quality Assured tourism businesses encourage energy-saving practices among staff and guests.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Only 17% of the nation's energy is currently renewable, far from the 100% that has been targeted by 2025.
- Minimal support for businesses to monitor and reduce energy consumption.
- Limited public reporting on energy efficiency progress.

D6: WATER STEWARDSHIP

What Scored Well:

- Water stewardship objectives are outlined in the National Environment Policy 2022-32 and Sustainable Tourism Development Policy.
- Some educational content for visitors on water conservation is provided.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Lack of programs for enterprises to monitor and reduce water use.
- No systematic monitoring of water risks or adherence to stewardship goals by businesses.
- Absence of effective wastewater management systems, especially in high-tourism areas.

D7: WATER QUALITY

What Scored Well:

- Rarotonga's water network was upgraded to provide safe drinking water, monitored by To Tatou Vai.
- Lagoon water quality is regularly monitored and reported.
- Educational initiatives promote responsible visitor behavior regarding water usage.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- Priority is not given to certifying bathing water or tourism businesses adherence to set standards.
- Lagoon water is not monitored on all islands impacted by tourism.

D8: WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Pilot projects, like those targeting the Muri Lagoon, aim to improve wastewater management.
- ▶ Monitoring wastewater discharge by the Ministry of Infrastructure is in place.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ No centralized wastewater system or municipal wastewater treatment plants.
- ▶ Guidelines for wastewater treatment lack enforcement, especially among tourism enterprises.

D9: SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Recycling initiatives and campaigns are supported by Infrastructure Cook Islands and NGOs.
- ▶ The Quality Assured Program encourages businesses to recycle, reduce, and compost waste.
- ▶ Policies to eliminate single-use plastics have been implemented.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ Landfill capacity issues exist and there is reliance on external funding for waste repatriation.
- ▶ Comprehensive multi-stream recycling systems are not consistently implemented.
- ▶ Public awareness campaigns about littering and waste separation are non-existent or extremely limited.

D10: GHG EMISSIONS AND CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Clear climate policies and targets, including achieving net-zero emissions by 2040 and 100% renewable energy by 2025.
- ▶ Public sector actions like climate-resilient infrastructure.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ No campaigns for tourism businesses to monitor or mitigate their emissions.

- ▶ Limited information on carbon offset programs for visitors or enterprises.

D11: LOW-IMPACT TRANSPORTATION

What Scored Well:

- ▶ Promotion of cycling, walking, and electric vehicle options for visitors.
- ▶ Bus transportation.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ No public transport options on most islands and limited prioritization of low-impact transport.
- ▶ Data on visitor use of sustainable transportation modes is unavailable.

D12: LIGHT AND NOISE POLLUTION

What Scored Well:

- ▶ The Existing Noise Control Act allows residents to report noise complaints.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ▶ No guidelines or monitoring mechanisms for light pollution.
- ▶ Insufficient enforcement or follow-up on noise complaints, especially in tourism zones.

PILLAR D—ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY MOVING FORWARD:

1. **Monitoring and Enforcement:** Establish robust systems for monitoring visitor flows, wildlife interaction, and compliance with environmental guidelines.
2. **Waste and Water Management:** Expand recycling and wastewater infrastructure, especially in high-tourism zones, and promote water conservation among enterprises.
3. **Climate Action:** Strengthen engagement with tourism businesses on emissions reduction and provide incentives for adopting renewable energy.
4. **Visitor Education:** Improve communication with visitors on sustainable behaviors, including waste disposal, water use, and wildlife interaction.
5. **Sustainable Transport:** Develop public transport options and prioritize sustainable transport infrastructure.