

An aerial photograph of a tropical island. The foreground is dominated by a dense forest of palm trees, some with golden-yellow fronds. The middle ground shows a clear, turquoise lagoon with a small boat in the center. The background features a white sand beach, more palm trees, and a small island in the distance under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Love  
our little paradise

Our Paradise, Our Promise

Cook Islands  
Destination Stewardship Plan  
Te Kaveinga Mana Tiaki o te Ipukarea

2026-2030

Meitaki maata to our partners for their support in developing  
the Cook Islands Destination Stewardship Plan



# Foreword

Tourism has always been central to the life and prosperity of our country. It is stitched into our past and present, and it remains an integral part of shaping our future. As we continue our nation's journey, we must ensure that the way we welcome the world protects what matters most—our people, our culture, and our environment. This Destination Stewardship Framework marks a new chapter for the Cook Islands, one where tourism becomes not just an economic driver, but a unifying force for sustainable development and wellbeing.

Our approach is guided by the four dimensions of stewardship—Economy, Community, Culture, and Environment—and supported by strong governance systems that ensure progress is measured and shared by all. Like the elements of our beloved Tivaevae/Tivaivai, each dimension is distinct yet sewn together by collective commitment, creating a stronger whole. Through this pathway, we seek not only to secure prosperity but also to safeguard the heritage, identity, and natural beauty that define our nation.

This kaupapa is firmly grounded in our National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA+) and its call for “Turanga Memeitaki – an empowered, innovative and environmentally conscious people who are anchored in our culture and languages, with the highest quality of wellbeing in life.” Tourism, when guided by stewardship, becomes a practical vessel for achieving this vision—supporting livelihoods, protecting our environment, and strengthening the cultural identity that makes us unique.

We aspire for the Cook Islands to be recognised worldwide as an exemplar of Destination Stewardship. We want visitors to engage authentically with our people and traditions, to contribute to thriving communities across both Rarotonga and the Pa Enua, and to actively support the responsible management of our land and ocean. This is also about our young people—ensuring there are meaningful opportunities here at home so they can build their futures in the Cook Islands.

By acting locally with integrity and purpose, we strengthen our contribution globally—showing how large ocean states can lead by example in protecting culture, people, and planet.

Achieving this vision will require dedication, collaboration, and patience. We must work across government, with the private sector, with traditional leaders, churches, civil society, and with every community. International partners too have a role to play, supporting us with expertise and resources as we step into this new era.

Challenges will arise, as they always do when great change is undertaken. But I am confident in the resilience of our people, and in the spirit of Mana Tiaki—our duty as guardians of these islands—that guides our journey. Together, we will ensure that tourism strengthens rather than strains our society, uplifts rather than displaces our communities, and protects rather than depletes our environment.

I extend my sincere thanks to all who have contributed to shaping this framework—community voices, government officials, tourism operators, traditional leaders, and development partners. Your shared wisdom and commitment have laid down a pathway that is ambitious, achievable, and uniquely Cook Islands.

With this stewardship journey, we step forward with unity and purpose. We do so for today, for future generations, and for all who will continue to call these islands home. I invite all partners—local, regional, and international—to walk this pathway with us, to honour our values, and to shape a future where tourism truly serves the Cook Islands people, our Ipukarea and the planet alike.

Kia manuia,



**Hon. Mark Brown**  
Prime Minister and Minister of Tourism

# Our Tivaevae/Tivaivai, Our Destination

To bring the principles of this Destination Stewardship Plan to life in a way that is uniquely our own, it is essential to ground this plan in the wisdom and traditions of the Cook Islands. One of the most powerful cultural metaphors that reflects the spirit of collaboration and shared responsibility at the heart of Destination Stewardship is Tivaevae/Tivaivai. In the Cook Islands, Tivaevae/Tivaivai is more than an artform. It is a cherished tradition of unity, anchored in collaboration, enriched through the sharing of knowledge and expressed with care and patience. Each quilt tells a story of our people, our land, and our values.

Our Destination Stewardship Plan is inspired by this same spirit. It recognises that no single group can succeed alone. Like the elements of our beloved Tivaevae/Tivaivai, each dimension is distinct yet sewn together by commitment, creating a stronger whole. Together, we will create a future where the Cook Islands remains a place of beauty, culture, and belonging - for those who call it home and those who visit with respect.

The Tivaevae/Tivaivai shown below, created especially for the Cook Islands Destination Stewardship Plan, is a visual expression of how our values and priorities are interconnected. Each motif carries meaning: the Red Hibiscus represents our Culture, celebrating the traditions, identity, and heritage that defines who we are; the Yellow Tipani symbolises Economy, reflecting the role of business, innovation, and tourism in sustaining livelihoods; the Green Breadfruit and leaves embody our Environment, honouring our duty to protect the land and sea that sustain us; and the Blue Tiki-Tiki Tangata border and background symbolise Community, the foundation that holds everything together through unity, relationships, and shared responsibility.

Just as every stitch in a Tivaevae/Tivaivai contributes to the beauty of the whole, these four dimensions—Culture, Economy, Environment, and Community—are stitched together in stewardship, guiding us to protect what matters most while creating a sustainable future for the Cook Islands.

At the centre of the Tivaevae/Tivaivai lies the Cook Islands' national flower, the Tiare Māori, representing te iti Tangata o te Kuku Airani—the people of the Cook Islands. Like the petals of the flower, our people provide strength, balance, and resilience—anchoring the colourful fabrics of economy, community, culture, and environment, and piecing them together into a unified and lasting design for sustainable tourism.

## NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We acknowledge and respect that there are different perspectives regarding the spelling of the term 'Tivaevae' or 'Tivaivai.' Both forms are used across the Cook Islands and within our communities. In this document, we have chosen to use both spellings interchangeably to honour and reflect these diverse viewpoints. Our intention is not to prioritise one over the other, but rather to recognise and celebrate the richness of our shared cultural heritage.



## Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ARDF	Advanced Recovery & Disposal Fee
BTIB	Business Trade and Investment Board
CFCSP	Climate Finance Capacity Support Programme
CIIC	Cook Islands Investment Corporation
CIT	Cook Islands Tourism Corporation
CIQA	Cook Islands Quality Assured
DSAG	Destination Stewardship Advisory Group
DSP	Destination Stewardship Plan
EDS	Economic Development Strategy 2030
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GSTC	Global Sustainable Tourism Council
ICI	Infrastructure Cook Islands
INTAFF	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MFEM	Ministry of Finance and Economic Management
MOA	Ministry of Agriculture
MOCD	Ministry of Cultural Development
MOE	Ministry of Education
MMR	Ministry of Marine Resources
NES	National Environment Service
NSDA	National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
NZMFAT	New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PMU	Project Management Unit
PSDI	Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative
PSTPF	Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SPREP	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme
SPTO	Pacific Tourism Organisation
STDPF	Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
TMO	Te Marae Ora, Cook Islands Ministry of Health

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# Executive Summary

## Vision Statement

Through tourism, together we drive opportunity and excellence – enriching lives, protecting our islands, honouring our culture, and achieving wellbeing for all, now and for generations to come.

Na roto i te angaanga turoto, rave kapiti ei tatou i te akamaroiroi anga i tetai uatu akakoro'anga e te turanga tiratiratu – te akapuapinga anga i te ora'anga, te paruru anga i to tatou pa enua, te akararangi anga i ta tatou akono'anga tupuna, kia rauka te turanga ora'anga matutu no tatou katoatoa, i teia tuatau e te uki ka aru mai.

## Strategic Context

The Cook Islands faces a critical tourism development juncture. While tourism creates economic benefits, it generates significant challenges: revenue leakage offshore, community displacement, cultural commodification, and environmental degradation. COVID-19 revealed the need for stronger strategic planning around tourism growth, while the rapid rebound has intensified existing pressures.

This five-year Destination Stewardship Plan represents a fundamental shift from treating tourism as an isolated economic sector towards positioning it as an integrated mechanism for comprehensive sustainable development. This plan serves as a critical stepping stone, establishing the systems and frameworks that will enable tourism to contribute meaningfully to Cook Islands' development for generations to come. Strategic alignment with international, regional, and national goals—including UN SDGs and the National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA+)—strengthens the tourism intervention logic by ensuring that tourism sector

outputs contribute not only to local Destination Stewardship outcomes but also to Cook Islands' commitments under international and regional agreements, maximising the transformative potential of tourism as a mechanism for sustainable development.

## Framework and Intervention Logic

The DSP establishes an intervention logic linking required activities and inputs to long-term impacts, ensuring tourism activities contribute to broader wellbeing outcomes and national development commitments. The plan operates through four interconnected dimensions of stewardship—Economy, Community, Culture, and Environment—supported by five enabling systems that provide the operational foundation for implementation. Over the five-year implementation period, these systems will become embedded in government operations, creating lasting institutional capacity that extends well beyond the life of this plan.

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## THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP

**Economy:** Transform tourism into inclusive prosperity with local revenue circulation, evidence-based decisions, thriving businesses across all islands, and rewarding careers for Cook Islanders through nine strategic outcomes addressing revenue leakage, workforce development, geographic equity, and business growth barriers.

**Community:** Strengthen social fabric through community-led development, protected housing and worker rights, preserved cultural values, and safe, inclusive environments via six outcomes ensuring meaningful community participation, comprehensive safety systems, worker protections, housing security, cultural preservation, and impact monitoring.

**Culture:** Preserve authentic heritage with community-led cultural sharing, fair compensation for knowledge holders, intergenerational transmission, and traditional governance integration through six outcomes addressing cultural documentation, coordinated governance, traditional knowledge protection, visitor education, knowledge transmission, and cultural impact monitoring.

**Environment:** Protect natural heritage through regenerative ecosystem management, renewable energy transition, holistic visitor impact management, and community environmental participation via eight outcomes covering circular economy systems, resource efficiency, renewable energy, visitor flow management, biodiversity conservation, pollution reduction initiatives, visitor engagement, and environmental monitoring.

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## FIVE ENABLING SYSTEMS

The plan establishes robust operational systems essential for coordinated implementation. These systems represent the foundational infrastructure that will endure beyond 2030, ensuring tourism development continues to serve Cook Islands communities effectively for generations:

- 1. Management Structure:** DSAG-led governance ensuring inter-agency coordination, clear institutional roles, and integrated stewardship approaches across all government operations, creating permanent coordination mechanisms that will guide tourism development long-term.
- 2. Stakeholder Engagement:** Comprehensive mapping and meaningful participation mechanisms ensuring communities are genuinely engaged in tourism development affecting their areas, establishing engagement processes that become standard practice.
- 3. Brand & Communications:** Authentic positioning attracting value-aligned visitors through comprehensive education, capacity-responsive marketing strategies, and optimised efficiency supporting stewardship campaigns that evolve with changing contexts.

- 4. Destination Development:** Strategic infrastructure serving visitor and community needs within cultural and environmental limits, comprehensive visitor journey mapping, and community-operated attractions ensuring authentic experiences that can adapt to future challenges.
- 5. Resiliency, Risk & Crisis Management:** Systematic risk assessment, tourism-inclusive emergency preparedness, proactive climate adaptation, comprehensive worker protection, and enhanced healthcare preparedness supporting sector resilience across generations.

## Key Challenges Addressed

The plan directly addresses critical barriers to sustainable tourism development:

- **Revenue leakage** through international booking platforms, foreign ownership, and import dependency
- **Community displacement** from cost increases and housing conversion to tourist accommodation
- **Cultural commodification** pressuring traditions for commercial appeal
- **Environmental degradation** from waste crisis, water over-extraction, and pollution
- **Workforce challenges** competing with other local and international employment
- **Geographic inequality** concentrating prosperity in Rarotonga/Aitutaki while Pa Enea lack participation capacity

## Structured Intervention Approach

The plan creates clear pathways from interventions to outcomes through 29 strategic outcomes across the four dimensions, supported by comprehensive enabling outcomes addressing governance, stakeholder participation, marketing effectiveness, destination development quality, and resilience capacity. Each outcome includes evidence-based mechanisms identified through stakeholder consultations, with specific activities to be co-designed with communities during implementation planning. These outcomes build institutional muscle that strengthens over time, creating sustainable approaches that persist beyond this five-year period.

## Implementation Framework

The implementation framework establishes a phased approach to building lasting systems and capacity:

**Phase 1 (Year 1):** Institutional foundation—DSAG establishment, existing project enhancement, new initiative development, and implementation preparation through structured quarterly activities building coordination capacity. This critical first year lays the groundwork for all subsequent progress.

**Phase 2 (Years 2-5):** Comprehensive implementation scaling from demonstration projects (Years 2-3) to coordinated government integration and large-scale multi-agency initiatives (Years 4-5). During this phase, pilot approaches are tested, refined, and embedded into standard operating procedures.

**Phase 3 (Beyond 2030):** Permanent integration of tourism into Cook Islands economic development alongside other sectors, ensuring sustained stewardship benefits. By the end of the five-year journey, the systems established will enable tourism to be managed as an integrated component of national development, with robust frameworks for ongoing adaptation and improvement that serve future generations.

## Key Institutional Roles:

- **Destination Stewardship Advisory Group (DSAG):** Strategic oversight and inter-agency coordination led by Prime Minister
- **Project Management Unit (PMU):** Operational coordination and technical support
- **Wellbeing Leads:** Dimension-specific implementation management
- **Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT):** Tourism sector integration and industry engagement
- **Government Agency Partners:** Sectoral expertise and implementation capacity
- **Island Councils:** Local adaptation ensuring community priorities
- **Private Sector & Community:** Practical expertise and ground-level implementation
- **Development Partners:** Technical assistance and financial support

## Resources and Implementation Success

The plan establishes the basis for diversified funding through government budget integration, development partner support, private sector partnerships, and visitor contribution systems.

Strategic resource allocation follows evaluation criteria balancing strategic alignment (40%), impact and sustainability (35%), and implementation feasibility (25%).

Monitoring operates through comprehensive progress tracking, quarterly DSAG reviews, bi-annual stakeholder surveys, and annual evaluations with adaptive management. This monitoring framework creates institutional learning capacity that continues to strengthen over time. Success depends on sustained inter-agency coordination, adequate financial resources, stakeholder engagement, and implementation capacity supported by clear risk mitigation strategies. The exact performance metrics and criteria are in development across government and in line with the NSDA+ framework and metrics revisions.

## Expected Impact by 2030 and beyond

Tourism contributes to Cook Islands' SDG and NSDA+ achievement through measurable outcomes across all four dimensions. The plan demonstrates how economic success grounded in cultural values and environmental stewardship delivers genuine community value, transforming tourism from an economic activity into a comprehensive development mechanism.

By 2030, the Cook Islands will be recognised internationally as an exemplar of Destination Stewardship where tourism strengthens rather than strains communities, uplifts rather than displaces residents, and protects rather than depletes natural and cultural heritage. More importantly, the systems and institutional capacity built during this five-year journey will ensure that tourism continues to serve Cook Islands communities effectively for generations to come, adapting to new challenges whilst remaining anchored in the stewardship principles established through this plan.

This represents not merely incremental improvement but fundamental transformation in how tourism operates. The five-year implementation period serves as a critical stepping stone, establishing the foundation for permanent integration of tourism stewardship into Cook Islands governance and development planning. This creates a model for small island states demonstrating that prosperity, cultural vitality, environmental health, and community wellbeing can advance together through coordinated stewardship approaches that endure across generations.

# Destination Stewardship



“An approach to destination governance balancing economic, environmental, and social/cultural needs through legitimate organising models with active participation from public and private sectors and local communities.”

-adapted from the Travel Foundation

# Cook Islands Tourism at a Glance:



July 2024 - June 2025

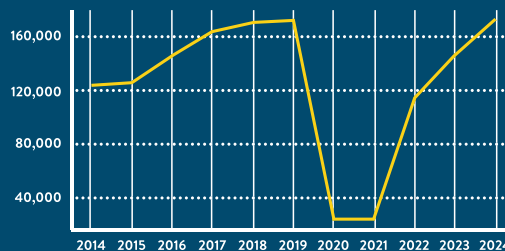
# NZD 477 MILLION

FROM VISITORS 175,757

Tourism Receipts & GDP Contribution  
2019-2024

YEAR	RECEIPTS	GDP%
2019	301m	55.5%
2022	259m	56.8%
2023	428.9m	70.6%
2024	520m	73.0%

Total Visitor Arrivals



**ECONOMIC  
IMPACT**

**\$2,715** per visitor per trip  
**\$312** per visitor per day



**MAIN  
PURPOSE**

**79%**  
Holiday



**x 8.7 Nights**  
Average length  
of stay



**TOP  
MARKETS**

**65%**  
New Zealand

**23%**  
Australia

**5%**  
North America

**4%**  
Europe

**3%**  
Other



**4.7/5 =**  
Overall, visitors  
are satisfied



**93% =**  
Visitors are willing  
to return



**98% =**  
Visitors are willing  
to recommend

# 1

## Introduction ~ *Akatomoanga*

The next five years represent a critical juncture for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Cook Islands' National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA+), the Economic Development Strategy (EDS) objectives, and establishing the foundation necessary for longer-term sustainable development that benefits future generations.

Research shows that current progress toward these frameworks is falling behind both national and international ambitions, underscoring an urgent need to redesign approaches that prioritise collaboration across government and sectors for the public good and the wellbeing of all Cook Islanders.

As the most significant economic sector and primary driver of livelihoods, infrastructure development, and environmental stewardship, tourism possesses transformative potential to accelerate progress towards the Cook Islands' overall sustainable development agenda. A reimagined tourism sector—strategically aligned with the NSDA+ vision of “an empowered, innovative and environmentally conscious people who are grounded in Cook Islands culture and languages, with the highest quality of wellbeing in life”—can serve as a cornerstone for action and measurable progress.

This Destination Stewardship Plan (DSP) represents a vital step in the Cook Islands' commitment to pioneering an integrated sustainable development approach across the nation through a comprehensive five-year implementation framework. The plan establishes a clear intervention logic linking tourism sector activities to broader sustainable development impacts. By embedding principles of equity,

resourcefulness, and environmental consciousness, this approach redesigns tourism as a force for public good, leveraging its economic value to uplift communities, protect cultural heritage, and safeguard natural environments - the very elements that our visitor offering relies on.

### 1.1 Developing the Destination Stewardship Plan

The plan builds on a comprehensive and inclusive consultation process that provides an in-depth understanding of the tourism landscape in the Cook Islands, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts. It outlines the pathway for sustainable tourism growth in the Cook Islands, ensuring development remains aligned with the values, needs, and aspirations of our people.

Extensive consultations were conducted in Rarotonga, including public presentations and meetings with a broad range of stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-government organisations, businesses, and industry representatives.

Consultations were also undertaken in the Pa Enua, including Aitutaki and Atiu. These consultations provided a forum for open dialogue, allowing community members to share aspirations, raise concerns, and explore how tourism can contribute positively to their holistic wellbeing.

Further information on the consultation process undertaken to guide the development of this plan can be found in Appendix A.

## 1.2 Destination Stewardship Plan Intervention Logic

This Destination Stewardship plan (DSP) employs a comprehensive intervention logic approach that ensures all tourism development activities contribute to broader wellbeing outcomes, which in turn advances progress towards national and international sustainable development commitments.

Regular monitoring and evaluation processes track progress across all levels, enabling adaptive management and continuous improvement throughout implementation. The PMU is working with the Destination Wayfinder™ framework and tool to monitor systems progress across the four dimensions of wellbeing and the enabling environment (see pg. 13).

This document outlines each of the four dimensions of wellbeing in Chapter 4, and provides more detail on the enabling systems the Cook Islands will establish to drive positive outcomes in Chapter 3

1. ACTIVITIES & INPUTS	2. OUTPUTS	3. OUTCOMES	4. IMPACTS
Coordinated government, private sector, and community actions supported by human, financial, and technical resources to generate the required outputs.	<p><b>Short-term outputs (2026-2028):</b></p> <p>Tangible deliverables from strategic projects including review of policy frameworks, infrastructure risk assessments and improvements, capacity building programmes for operators and communities, improved monitoring systems, and ongoing stakeholder engagement mechanisms</p>	<p><b>Medium-term outcomes (2026-2030):</b></p> <p>Positive measurable changes across the four dimensions of Destination Stewardship, supported by a strengthened enabling environment:</p> <p><b>Economy:</b> Diversified, resilient tourism economy generating equitable benefits and sustainable livelihoods.</p> <p><b>Culture:</b> Strengthened cultural identity, authentic cultural expression, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.</p> <p><b>Community:</b> Enhanced social cohesion, community capacity, and participatory decision-making in tourism development.</p> <p><b>Environment:</b> Protected and restored ecosystems, sustainable resource management, and climate resilience.</p> <p><b>Enabling Systems:</b> Effective governance frameworks, institutional capacity, policy coherence, and cross-sectoral collaboration supporting integrated stewardship</p>	<p><b>Long-term impacts (2030 and beyond):</b></p> <p>Achievement of relevant UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA+) targets, contributing to the NSDA+ vision of “Turanga Memeitaki - an empowered, innovative and environmentally conscious people who are grounded in our culture and languages, with the highest quality of wellbeing in life.”</p>
Joint targets, partnership and shared responsibilities encourage <b>stakeholder collaboration</b> for impact.			
<b>Measurement systems</b> ensure progress tracking at all stages, allowing for adjustments throughout the implementation plan.			

### 1.3 Addressing Development Challenges through Systematic Intervention

The consultations undertaken to develop this plan discovered that most of the current challenges are not new and that previous tourism strategies have already identified critical imbalances in development and management approaches. Without fundamental changes to systems, clear causal pathways between interventions and impacts, and improved alignment across sectors and government agencies, these challenges have persisted and intensified. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the risks of depending too heavily on a single economic sector, while the strong recovery of tourism has brought renewed activity that adds to existing pressures on infrastructure, communities, and ecosystems.

This DSP represents a strategic evolution beyond previous approaches, implementing an intervention logic methodology that addresses systemic gaps in sustainable development.

Rather than treating tourism as an isolated sector, this plan positions tourism development as an integrated mechanism for achieving measurable outcomes across the four dimensions of Destination Stewardship, contributing to the Cook Islands' National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) and SDG achievement.



## 1.4 Strategic Framework Alignment

The Cook Islands Destination Stewardship Plan is deliberately positioned within a nested hierarchy of strategic frameworks that provide coherent direction from local to global levels. This multi-layered approach ensures that tourism sector interventions align with and reinforce broader sustainable development commitments, creating synergies between international obligations, regional cooperation mechanisms, national development priorities, and the localised implementation of plans at island or Vaka level. By integrating guidance from the UN Sustainable Development Goals, Pacific regional frameworks, and national strategic documents, this plan establishes clear connections between Destination Stewardship activities and wider development outcomes. This strategic alignment strengthens the intervention logic by ensuring that tourism sector outputs contribute not only to local Destination Stewardship outcomes but also to Cook Islands' commitments under international and regional agreements, maximising the transformative potential of tourism as a mechanism for sustainable development.

### 1.4.1 International Development Context

The UN Sustainable Development Goals provide the global framework for this plan's development approach. The National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA+) for the Cook Islands explicitly aligns development with SDG achievement, ensuring that tourism development contributes to the national goals of economic viability, social equity, and environmental sustainability.

This DSP prioritises SDG-focused outcomes through measurable indicators including equitable benefit distribution (SDG 1, 2, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12), cultural preservation (SDG 4, 11), ecosystem protection (SDG 11, 14, 15), and climate action (SDG 13). The Global Sustainable Tourism Council's (GSTC) Cook Islands Destination Assessment provided baseline benchmarking against the GSTC destination standards, highlighting key areas for specific intervention that have directly informed the development of the DSP.

## 1.4.2 Regional Cooperation Frameworks

Regional integration through Pacific frameworks ensures alignment with Pacific partners and support of regional initiatives. These include:

### **The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent**

The Cook Islands' leadership role in developing implementation mechanisms for this strategy directly informs tourism initiatives. Regional cooperation on climate resilience and sustainable development, including adoption of Pacific Sustainable Tourism Standards, creates economies of scale for ecosystem and cultural heritage protection.

### **Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework (PSTPF)**

As a Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) member, endorsement of the PSTPF commits the Cook Islands to achieving resilient, prosperous, and inclusive tourism by 2030. Participation in regional environmental sustainability initiatives provides technical support and resource sharing for implementation.

### **Pacific Sustainable Tourism Standards – Destination and Industry**

The Pacific Sustainable Tourism Standards developed by SPTO are aligned with the GSTC standards and are already contextualised to the Pacific, making them a useful baseline for adaptation to the unique Cook Islands context.

### 1.4.3 National Policy Integration

The NSDA+ Framework establishes comprehensive wellbeing goals, while the Economic Development Strategy (EDS) 2030 outlines specific economic development pathways. This DSP operationalises these ambitions through tourism-specific mechanisms, creating measurable progress towards national wellbeing objectives while recognising inter-island differences in context, capacity, and development aspirations.

# Strategic Framework Alignments

## Planning

The Cook Islands Destination Stewardship Plan is embedded within a layered framework that connects local, national, regional, and global strategies. This structure ensures tourism initiatives are aligned with sustainable development priorities, while also creating synergies across international commitments, regional cooperation and national strategies

Global Frameworks



Regional Frameworks



National Strategies



Cook Islands  
Destination Stewardship Plan

DSAG

CIT



PMU

Government



Wellbeing Leads

Stakeholders

## Implementation

The implementation framework ensures coordinated action across all stakeholders, clear accountability mechanisms, and measurable progress towards sustainable development outcomes.

## 1.5 Connecting Destination Marketing and Management for Stewardship

Building upon the Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy (Te Kaveinga Manava Turoto O Te Ipukarea), the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework (STDPF), the “Love our Little Paradise” brand and associated marketing strategies, this stewardship plan creates a unified implementation framework aligning destination marketing and management towards measurable stewardship outcomes.

### 1.5.1 Co-governance across Agencies

The Cabinet Minute of January 2025 mandated an all-of-government approach to tourism planning through the establishment of the Destination Stewardship Advisory Group (DSAG), led by the Minister for Tourism, ensuring tourism’s economic development benefits communities while protecting natural and cultural assets. With New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (NZMFAT) funding support through the CFCSP Programme, the plan was developed by a dedicated Project Management Unit (PMU) through integrated stakeholder engagement and implementation support. The DSAG and PMU enable broader cross-sectoral oversight while maintaining Cook Islands Tourism Corporation’s (CIT) integral role in driving tourism development initiatives.

#### **This governance structure ensures:**

- Local actions support regional frameworks
- Regional cooperation informs international standard adoption
- National governance maintains strategic alignment and monitors implementation progress
- Plans are contextualised to local island ambitions

### 1.5.2 Implementation Values and Principles

The DSP will embody and uphold the ‘Kia Orana’ values which are the foundation of all tourism work in the Cook Islands. These values are discussed on the following page.

### 1.5.3 Commitment to Transformation

This plan commits the Cook Islands to coordinated transformation through an evidence-based intervention logic—moving beyond fragmented approaches towards unified stewardship that generates measurable sustainable benefits across the four dimensions of Destination Stewardship. DSP implementation will establish the intervention logic approach, optimising tourism sector outputs to achieve positive outcomes in Economy, Culture, Community, Environment, and governance effectiveness.

## 1.6 Implementation Pathway

This challenge-led approach recognises that redesigning tourism management represents both an economic and societal imperative. When developed with structured planning and evidence-based foresight, tourism can demonstrate how an economy grounded in cultural values and environmental stewardship can achieve economic success while delivering measurable value for communities.

Through focus on sustainable practices, innovation, and inclusivity, this five-year implementation plan accelerates achievement of national and global development goals while fostering a resilient Cook Islands grounded in cultural identity and committed to intergenerational wellbeing. The following sections detail specific strategies, implementation mechanisms, and monitoring frameworks necessary to achieve these transformative objectives

## 1.7 Kia Orana Values

The Kia Orana Values are the foundation that aligns our tourism industry with the core values of the Cook Islands people and its residents. Our values are based on our culture and traditions while reflecting our unique and modern way of life. It informs our collective approach to tourism and guides our aspirations for its continued development.

### Kia Orana

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



### Meitaki

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



### Mana Tiaki

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



# 2

## The First Stitch

*~ Atuitui ki te Tango – Te Atava Mua*

Turanga Memeitaki - an empowered, innovative and environmentally conscious people who are grounded in our culture and languages, with the highest quality of wellbeing in life. (NSDA+)

This chapter presents the current situation and future direction for tourism development in the Cook Islands, organised around the four dimensions of Destination Stewardship that form the foundation of our intervention logic approach. These dimensions guide our systematic approach to creating tourism that generates measurable positive outcomes for our people, culture, and environment.



## 2.1 The Four Dimensions of Destination Stewardship



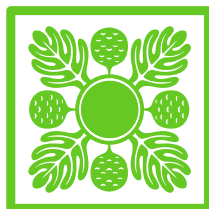
### ECONOMY

Sustainable tourism that fosters economic wellbeing and prosperity for all Cook Islanders.



### COMMUNITY

Social wellbeing through meaningful connections between Cook Islanders and visitors.



### ENVIRONMENT

Protecting and preserving our environment for present and future generations.



### CULTURE

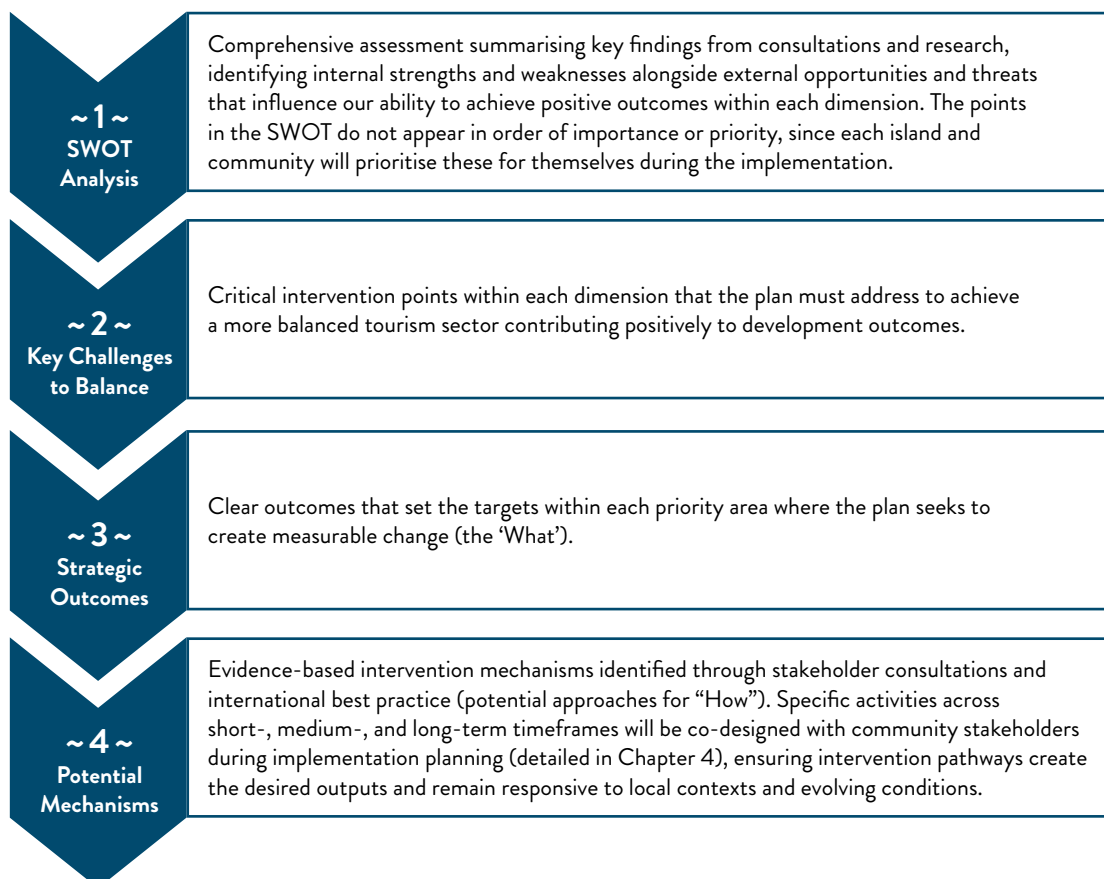
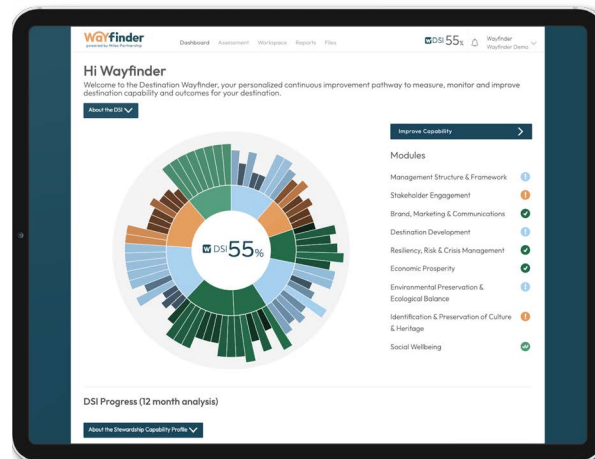
Upholding our values and identity while strengthening cultural wellbeing through tourism.



These four dimensions connect directly to the Wayfinder™ Sustainable Tourism Framework, an internationally recognised assessment and improvement tool that measures destination progress toward sustainable tourism leadership. The Wayfinder framework evaluates performance and progress across four stewardship modules and five enabling modules.

By aligning our intervention logic with Wayfinder indicators, we establish benchmarks for tracking progress from tourism sector outputs through dimension-specific outcomes toward broader sustainable development impacts. The framework’s emphasis on enabling systems, including governance structures, stakeholder collaboration, and institutional capacity, is addressed comprehensively in Chapter 3, ensuring our intervention logic includes the foundational elements necessary for successful implementation.

The content within each dimension is based on extensive stakeholder consultation (see Appendix A) and evidence-based research, structured to support our intervention logic methodology. Each dimension analysis covers:



This approach ensures that a situation analysis directly informs intervention design, creating clear causal pathways from current challenges through strategic interventions to desired outcomes across all four dimensions of Destination Stewardship.

## 2.2 Economy



Tourism drives an inclusive and prosperous economy where revenue circulates locally, evidence guides decisions, businesses and investors thrive across all islands, competitive markets flourish, and Cook Islanders build rewarding careers that keep families together and communities strong.

### Economy Alignments

NSDA+			SDG				
Goal 2: Welfare & Equity	Goal 3: Economy, Employment Trade and Enterprise	Goal 14: A Sustainable Population	SDG 1: No poverty	SDG 8: Decent Work & Economic Growth	SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	SDG 12: Responsible Consumption & communities	SDG 16: Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions
							

EDS		GSTC
Objective 1: Improving equality and access for all	Objective 2: Transforming our economy	Section B - Socio-Economic Sustainability



## 2.2.1 SWOT Analysis of Economy

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High tourism demand throughout the year providing economic stability</li> <li>• Tourism is the primary driver of GDP, creating diverse employment opportunities, rewarding career paths, and business opportunities</li> <li>• Strong local business integration, with visitor spending reaching small businesses like the Punanga Nui Market</li> <li>• Existing skills development programmes to enhance workforce capabilities and address industry needs</li> <li>• Growing responsible and holistically beneficial business practices through local production and circular economy practices</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major revenue leakage through imported goods, untaxed businesses, and overseas platform commissions</li> <li>• High operational costs from expensive utilities and complex and outdated administrative processes</li> <li>• The perception of low wages, coupled with irregular hours and sector image make the industry unattractive to local workers</li> <li>• Housing market pressure from short-term rental conversions reducing availability of accommodation for locals.</li> <li>• Lack of data and insights on leakage and workforce constraining evidence-based policy making</li> <li>• High cost of access and shipping to and from the Pa Enea, limiting opportunities for economic integration</li> <li>• Lack of occupational health and safety frameworks to protect workers and visitors</li> <li>• The Cook Islands' land tenure system protects traditional ownership and cultural identity but can also create barriers to economic development and efficient land use</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expanding value chains by linking tourism with agriculture, crafts, and other local sectors</li> <li>• Developing Pa Enea (outer islands) through improved inter-island trade and travel connections</li> <li>• Building off-season tourism and niche markets for entrepreneurial development</li> <li>• Creating investment incentives and pathways for Cook Islands diaspora participation in tourism businesses</li> <li>• Leveraging digital connectivity for remote work opportunities and online market access</li> <li>• Growth market potential, including from Australia and the United States</li> <li>• Increasing public transport offering to reduce reliance on private transport</li> <li>• Ability to actively target value-aligned and higher spending visitors</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over-concentration of economic benefits in Rarotonga and Aitutaki may heighten regional disparities, creating long-term dependency of Pa Enea on external support and increasing vulnerability to social and economic instability.</li> <li>• Failure to address inadequate port and airport infrastructure in the outer islands could continue to limit development potential, restrict connectivity, and exacerbate economic disparities</li> <li>• Ongoing lack of competition in shipping and domestic air services poses a threat of sustained high pricing and inconsistent service quality, which could undermine accessibility and economic growth</li> <li>• Continued heavy reliance on migrant workers, driven by locals seeking opportunities overseas, threatens long-term workforce stability in the tourism sector</li> <li>• Visitors and travel trade have increasing safety and sustainability expectations</li> <li>• Continued visitor number growth could breach social and environmental carrying capacity, leading to erosion of social license and the natural environment</li> </ul>

## 2.2.2 Key Challenges to Balance

### 1. Revenue retention versus global competitiveness

While tourism generates substantial economic activity, significant revenue flows offshore through international booking platforms (15-30% commission), foreign-owned businesses, remittances by foreign workers, and heavy import dependency.

The challenge is for the Cook Islands to capture more value locally without losing the connection to global markets or making the destination unaffordable for visitors.

### 2. Workforce development versus employment attractiveness

Despite existing training programs, the tourism industry struggles to compete with government jobs for local talent.

Perceived low wages and total compensation relative to other sectors, long hours, split shifts, and perceived low status drive Cook Islanders to seek employment opportunities elsewhere, including in the public service and overseas.

Tourism must transform into a desirable career pathway with fair compensation and clear advancement opportunities.

### 3. Geographic equity versus development capacity

Tourism prosperity currently concentrates in Rarotonga and Aitutaki while Pa Enua communities, despite unique cultural and natural assets, lack the infrastructure and connectivity to participate meaningfully.

Building outer island capacity requires alignment of development ambitions with local capabilities and traditional governance structures.

### 4. Business growth versus operational barriers

Local entrepreneurs face significant hurdles including high import costs, expensive utilities, complex, outdated regulations, and limited access to international payment systems.

The Cook Islands require a comprehensive and coordinated policy package that reduces duplicate functions in the public sector, streamlines policies between departments, and encourages evidence-based decision making to support responsible development.

Success requires reducing these barriers while maintaining necessary protections and building local business capabilities.



## 2.2.3 Economy Outcomes

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 1: Tourism revenue circulates within the local economy**

Tourism dollars remain in Cook Islands communities, particularly the Pa Enua, through community benefit-sharing mechanisms and reduced leakage to international operators.

**Key challenge addressed: 1, 3**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish community revenue sharing frameworks** – Create Pa Enua-specific distribution mechanisms that link tourism earnings to local development funds and address current revenue concentration in main islands.
- **Reduce revenue leakage through local business support** – Support import substitution programmes, address losses from untaxed properties and online platform commissions, and retain visitor spending within the domestic economy.
- **Implement consistent tracking of offshore revenue flows** – Monitor online travel agency commissions, overseas investor profits, and other revenue streams leaving the Cook Islands economy.

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 2: Small businesses successfully participate in tourism growth**

Cook Islander entrepreneurs operate viable tourism businesses with reduced operational costs, streamlined processes, and access to markets and financing.

**Key challenge addressed: 1, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Replicate and scale successful business models** – Expand proven approaches, like the Punanga Nui Market, to other islands, test successful international models in the Cook Islands, like establishing bulk purchasing cooperatives and shared services.
- **Streamline business operations and reduce barriers** – Simplify licensing, taxation, land tenure, and compliance processes while improving access to direct payment systems and international payment gateways.
- **Provide targeted business support and mentorship** – Establish business support clinics and mentorship programs to address critical challenges, including high operational costs and limited access to markets.

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 3: Cook Islanders actively contribute to tourism development through investment and expertise**

Cook Islanders, both local residents and diaspora, successfully invest skills and capital in tourism businesses while supporting local entrepreneurship and skills transfer.

**Key challenges addressed: 1, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Create investment pathways and incentives for all Cook Islanders** – Establish clear routes for both local residents and overseas Cook Islanders to invest in tourism businesses with appropriate incentive structures and financing support.
- **Build mentorship and knowledge transfer networks** – Connect overseas and local Cook Islander entrepreneurs through structured mentorship, cultural exchange programmes, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
- **Support skills development and return migration** – Design programmes that bring diaspora hospitality and tourism expertise to local businesses while encouraging return migration and building local investor capacity.

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 4: Tourism businesses utilise integrated local supply chains and authentic products**

Strong connections between tourism operators and local producers reduce import dependency while supporting traditional livelihoods, food security, and cultural authenticity.

**Key challenges addressed: 1, 3, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish authentic product certification and marketing** – Support BTIB's Uniquely Cook Islands Certification Programme, and visitor education highlighting cultural significance while addressing commodification concerns.
- **Build reliable food and craft supply chains** – Connect certified local producers with tourism businesses through Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification, aggregation systems, and support for traditional and contemporary craft production.
- **Support sustainable production practices** – Support Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) programmes including disease-resistant crops, hydroponics, organic production, and ecological pesticide use while maintaining food security.

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 5: Competitive markets and reliable services operate across all islands**

Market competition flourishes with consumer protection while supply chain monopolies are addressed, and service reliability improves across the Cook Islands.

**Key challenges addressed: 3, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Strengthen market competition oversight and consumer protection** – Establish anti-monopoly legislation and systems that reduce business costs and prevent monopolistic practices.
- **Develop alternative logistics and shipping solutions** – Create competitive mechanisms to address directional shipping imbalances, reduce freight costs, and improve inter-island trade reliability.
- **Build infrastructure** – Connect producers, buyers, and logistics providers while supporting and weather-proofing storage, processing, and cooling infrastructure for efficient trade.

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 6: Tourism workers have attractive career pathways with competitive conditions**

Tourism careers offer competitive wages, professional development opportunities, and positive working conditions that attract and retain local talent while ensuring fair treatment for all workers.

**Key challenges addressed: 2**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Implement competitive employment standards and conditions** – Establish living wage standards, improved working conditions, and healthcare access that make tourism careers competitive with government employment.
- **Develop structured career progression and skills programmes** – Launch upskilling programmes targeting young Cook Islanders and current workers while building local capacity for leadership roles.
- **Enhance sector reputation and worker protection** – Improve tourism employment branding, establish grievance handling mechanisms, and create employer accountability systems including exploitation prevention measures.

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 7: Tourism opportunities are distributed equitably across all communities**

All Cook Islands communities, particularly the Pa Enua, directly benefit from tourism success.

**Key challenge addressed: 3**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Implement targeted Pa Enua infrastructure and capacity building** – Direct investment to outer island tourism infrastructure, transportation, accommodation, and service capabilities while building community-led development capacity.
- **Establish equitable revenue-sharing and financial mechanisms** – Create Pa Enua-specific benefit distribution systems that ensure outer islands receive direct benefits from national tourism success.

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### **ECONOMY OUTCOME 8: Efficient inter-island trade networks support tourism supply chains**

Pa Enua production is integrated into tourism supply chains through improved trade efficiency, digital connectivity, and collaborative frameworks across all islands.

**Key challenges addressed: 3, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Build digital connectivity and aggregation systems** – Create platforms connecting producers, buyers, and logistics providers while developing quality systems that enable Pa Enua suppliers to participate in tourism markets.
- **Improve inter-island logistics and infrastructure** – Improve scale of freight, scheduling reliability, and dedicated infrastructure for perishable goods trade.
- **Foster inter-island collaboration and cultural connection** – Establish frameworks for resource sharing, joint marketing, coordinated development, and traditional inter-island programmes linking tourism with cultural exchange.

**ECONOMY OUTCOME 9: Tourism stakeholders make evidence-based decisions using comprehensive economic intelligence**

Tourism policy, investment, and business decisions are informed by robust data systems that provide reliable economic intelligence and forecasting capabilities.

**Key challenges addressed: 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish comprehensive monitoring and measurement systems** – Track visitor spending patterns, revenue flows across sectors, and integrate economic impact measurement across employment, investment, and distribution indicators.

- **Build advanced business intelligence and forecasting capabilities** – Develop economic forecasting tools, comprehensive tourism sector analysis, and realistic cost-benefit analyses for policy development.
- **Create accessible data platforms for planning and development** – Provide business intelligence systems that support business planning, policy development, and investment decisions across the tourism sector.



## 2.3 Community



Tourism in the Cook Islands delivers inclusive and sustainable benefits by empowering communities to shape development, safeguarding housing and livelihoods, protecting cultural integrity, prioritising community needs in infrastructure planning, and ensuring safety, decent work and inclusion for all. This balanced approach strengthens community resilience while enhancing visitor experiences and long-term national prosperity.

### Community Alignments

NSDA+						SDG			
Goal 1: Wellbeing for All	Goal 3: Economy, Employment Trade and Enterprise	Goal 9: Our inclusiveness Gender, equity and social inclusion	Goal 10: Agriculture & Food Security	Goal 14: A Sustainable Population	Goal 15: Our Security, a Peaceful & Just Society	SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing	SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	SDG 11: Sustainable Cities & Communities	SDG 16: Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions
									

EDS				GSTC
Objective 1: Improving equity and access for all	Objective 2: Transforming our economy	Objective 3: Developing our People & Culture	Objective 4: Investing in our Islands	Section B - Socio-Economic Sustainability



## 2.3.1 SWOT Analysis of Community

### Strengths

- Tourism supports major cultural preservation platforms like Te Maeva Nui and Te Mire Ura festivals
- Strong “Kia Orana” hospitality culture rooted in traditional values creates authentic visitor experiences
- Economic opportunities through employment creation across Rarotonga and Pa Enea islands
- Social impact funding through INTAFF and examples of tourism giveback programmes supporting community projects
- Traditional social structures (Koutu Nui, Arongo Mana, churches) providing frameworks for community governance and support
- Strong active NGOs that contribute significantly to our communities

### Weaknesses

- The misalignment between wages and increased living costs is widening economic disparities and contributing to increased outbound migration
- Migrant worker exploitation including unpaid wages, excessive overtime, and poor living conditions
- Infrastructure strain on transportation, healthcare, utilities, and accessibility services across islands
- Communities, including youth representatives, often excluded from tourism planning and decision-making processes
- Short-term rental growth is conflicting with resident accommodation needs
- Weakening of traditional social structures as economic pressures override community connections

### Opportunities

- Developing community ambassador programs where residents share traditions with global audiences
- Expanding visitor contribution through knowledge exchange and volunteer support for schools and other community groups/initiatives
- Growing Pa Enea participation in tourism with community-led initiatives respecting local governance
- Strengthening connections with Cook Islands diaspora in New Zealand and Australia
- Building on traditional collective responsibility (taokotai) for enhanced community stewardship
- Labour strategies for retaining Cook Islanders in meaningful careers or encouraging the return of diaspora to contribute to the islands’ development

### Threats

- Erosion of social fabric as younger generations move away from traditional values and Koutu Nui structures
- Limited land leads to conflicts between development and preservation of important sites identifying the need for land reforms
- Rising crime rates, including domestic violence, with inadequate policing and emergency response systems
- Sunday trading and around-the-clock tourism activities disrupting traditional community routines

## 2.3.2 Key Challenges to Balance

### 1. Economic opportunity vs. community displacement

Tourism generates jobs and business opportunities but can also increase living costs and shift local housing into tourist accommodation. Many Cook Islanders risk being priced out of their own communities. Tourism development must deliver genuine local benefits while safeguarding residents' ability to live, work, and thrive in their home communities.

### 2. Cultural exchange vs. value preservation

While tourism facilitates meaningful cultural sharing and supports efforts, it can pressure communities to adapt traditions for commercial purposes. Issues such as Sunday trading and inappropriate visitor behaviour challenge core community values. Sustainable tourism must foster authentic cultural exchange while protecting the integrity of the Cook Islands' cultural and spiritual identity.

### 3. Infrastructure development vs. community priorities

Tourism drives essential infrastructure investment but can strain systems that serve both visitors and residents. Transportation, waste management, water supply and public facilities face growing pressure. Development planning must balance tourism needs with community priorities and ensure residents have meaningful participation in decision-making.

### 4. Safety and inclusion vs. systemic barriers

The Cook Islands' reputation for safety and hospitality remains strong, yet rising crime and persistent inequities risk excluding vulnerable groups from tourism benefits. Strengthening safety frameworks and promoting inclusive participation require addressing both immediate security issues and deeper structural barriers.

## 2.3.3 Community Outcomes

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### COMMUNITY OUTCOME 1: Communities have meaningful involvement in tourism development and receive equitable benefits

Communities exercise real decision-making power over tourism affecting their areas while generating benefits through authentic, locally-led initiatives.

#### Key challenges addressed: 1, 3

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Implement community-led planning and review processes** – Empower communities to lead local tourism planning and review processes for proposed developments. Ensure transparent, accountable mechanisms where community recommendations directly inform final decisions.

- **Build community capacity and ownership** – Develop and implement capacity-building programmes that empower communities to participate effectively in technical planning processes and manage local tourism enterprise.
- **Foster collaboration and expand visitor contributions** – Promote equitable and sustainable benefit-sharing mechanisms by expanding opportunities for visitors to contribute meaningfully to community development initiatives

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### COMMUNITY OUTCOME 2: Comprehensive safety systems protect residents and visitors

Robust safety frameworks, health standards, and emergency response systems address rising crime and safety concerns while maintaining the Cook Islands' reputation as a safe destination.

#### Key challenges addressed: 4

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Strengthen comprehensive safety and crime prevention frameworks** – Strengthen national safety systems that protect both residents and visitors, address rising crime and theft through enhanced policing, and strengthen law enforcement presence and coordination in key tourism areas. Support local neighborhood watch and community policing schemes.
- **Strengthen health standards and medical capacity** – Develop and enforce robust national health and safety standards, develop and enhance medical and trauma care availability, and improve health infrastructure to support both residents and visitors.
- **Address Community safety and public health concerns** – Implement comprehensive measures to safeguard community well-being and enhance public health standards within tourism destinations through effective regulation, monitoring, and enforcement.

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### COMMUNITY OUTCOME 3: Tourism workers have comprehensive rights protection and health system support

Tourism employment offers fair compensation, comprehensive worker protections, and accessible healthcare while strengthening community support systems for all workers and families.

#### Key challenges addressed: 1, 4

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Implement comprehensive worker protection and accountability systems** – Transform tourism employment into attractive careers, establish migrant worker protections through pre-arrival education, accessible complaint mechanisms, and the development of robust employer accountability frameworks to ensure compliance and transparency.
- **Improve healthcare access and emergency medical**

**capacity** – Enhance healthcare access and insurance coverage for all tourism workers regardless of status, address medical service limitations including trauma units, and develop public health protocols for infectious disease risks.

- **Strengthen community and legal support systems** – Create accessible legal support for workers facing exploitation, develop clear career progression pathways, and strengthen community support for families affected by tourism employment demands.

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#### **COMMUNITY OUTCOME 4: Local housing supply is protected and community displacement prevented**

Balanced planning controls ensure housing affordability for residents while supporting appropriate tourism accommodation development and workforce housing programmes.

**Key challenges addressed: 1**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Implement planning controls and conversion limits** – Establish zoning restrictions, developer contributions for short-term rental conversions, and clear limits balancing tourism growth with community housing needs while collecting comprehensive rental market data.
- **Develop workforce and affordable housing programmes** – Create dedicated workforce housing supporting tourism employees and housing affordability initiatives linking tourism development to community benefits.
- **Strengthen community consultation and prioritisation mechanisms** – Develop community consultation requirements for tourism accommodation developments, ensure local housing needs are prioritised in planning decisions, and address foreign investment impacts on affordability.

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#### **COMMUNITY OUTCOME 5: Community social fabric and cultural values are preserved and strengthened amid tourism growth**

Traditional practices, cultural values, and community cohesion are maintained and enhanced while tourism adapts to respect local ways of life and strengthen rather than disrupt community bonds.

**Key challenges addressed: 2**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Address cultural value disruption and align industry standards** – Manage business operations on culturally significant days to protect traditional practices and community wellbeing, align tourism industry standards with cultural values, and establish clear consequences for culturally inappropriate visitor behaviour.
- **Support traditional practices and cultural preservation** –

Strengthen dietary and food security initiatives promoting traditional foods, support cultural preservation connecting tourism with traditional practices, and create practical visitor education programmes addressing cultural protocols.

- **Strengthen community integration and family support** – Create programmes addressing integration difficulties for migrant workers, develop initiatives supporting childcare and elderly care for hospitality workers, and create programmes helping families balance tourism work with cultural obligations.

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#### **COMMUNITY OUTCOME 6: Community tourism impacts are regularly monitored and measured**

Comprehensive monitoring systems track tourism effects on community wellbeing, social cohesion, and local control while providing data that guides planning decisions and ensures tourism strengthens rather than disrupts community social fabric.

**Key challenges addressed: 1, 3, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish community impact monitoring and assessment systems** – Create regular monitoring of community displacement, housing affordability, and social cohesion tracking tourism impacts, develop community impact assessment processes for tourism developments and accommodation projects, and implement integrated data platforms for comprehensive community wellbeing monitoring.
- **Develop community feedback and participation monitoring mechanisms** – Create feedback systems for residents and community groups to track tourism's effects on daily life and community priorities, establish monitoring ensuring community control mechanisms function effectively, and gather evidence to guide policy decisions about tourism development and community protection.
- **Track social fabric and community resilience indicators** – Monitor effects on community cohesion, traditional practices, and family stability, establish regular assessment tracking both positive and negative social impacts, gather feedback from community leaders and vulnerable groups, and track effectiveness of community participation in tourism decision-making processes.

## 2.4 Culture



Tourism will support, preserve, and celebrate authentic Cook Islands heritage by ensuring that knowledge holders are fairly compensated, traditions pass to future generations, and visitor experiences become a force for cultural vitality rather than commodification. Traditional governance systems guide sustainable tourism development with comprehensive monitoring, education, and enforcement that transforms legal protections into practical safeguards for cultural integrity.

### Culture Alignments

NSDA+	SDG			
Goal 13: Cultural Heritage, History, Identity and Language  	SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing  	SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth  	SDG 11: Sustainable Cities & Communities  	SDG 16: Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions  

EDS	GSTC	
Objective 1: Improving equity and access for all	Objective 2: Transforming our economy	Section C - Cultural Sustainability



## 2.4.1 SWOT Analysis of Culture

### Strengths

- Major festivals like Te Maeva Nui successfully engage youth in traditional practices and cultural transmission
- Cultural education integrated into school curricula including dance, music, legends, and traditional knowledge
- Tourism provides financial support through visitor donations, give-back programs, and cultural event sponsorship
- Strong traditional governance through House of Ariki and Koutu Nui maintain customary protocols
- Traditional stewardship practices like Rāui and Tapu now recognised by modern science as effective models

### Weaknesses

- Increasing commodification and dilution pressure reshaping culture for commercial gain rather than authentic expression
- Limited community involvement in heritage-based tourism development and benefit-sharing
- Many cultural practices remain undocumented despite risk of loss within current generation
- Disconnect between traditional knowledge systems and values and modern visitor expectations
- Reliance on migrant workers threatening an authentic Cook Islands cultural experience (e.g., welcoming guests with ‘Bula!’ instead of ‘Kia Orana’)
- Shortage of qualified cultural tutors and educators limiting knowledge transmission capacity
- Differing opinions of ‘authenticity’

### Opportunities

- Millennial generation creating bridges between traditional knowledge (Peu Tupuna) and contemporary relevance
- Growing international recognition of indigenous knowledge systems for sustainable development
- Cultural entrepreneurship emerging as viable career path combining tradition with economic opportunity as visitors demand for authentic experiences increases
- Digital technologies enabling new methods for documenting, preserving, and sharing cultural knowledge
- Potential for visitors to contribute to cultural preservation programmes
- Strong demand and interest from culturally aligned visitors (e.g. NZ Maori) provides opportunities for increased visitation

### Threats

- Globalisation and social media rapidly changing cultural practices and youth perceptions of tradition
- Intellectual property theft through fake artifacts, unauthorised use of designs, and AI reproduction
- Inappropriate visitor behaviour disrupting cultural norms, sacred sites, and community protocols
- External cultures claiming Cook Islands heritage as their own without attribution or compensation
- Limited cultural content in school curricula reducing youth engagement with traditional knowledge
- Increased risk of Cook Islands Te Reo Māori becoming an endangered language

## 2.4.2 Key Challenges to Balance

### 1. Cultural preservation versus tourism revenue

Tourism provides essential funding for cultural activities and festivals, yet this economic relationship creates pressure to modify traditions for tourist consumption. Meaningful practices risk becoming mere performances. Tourism revenue must be leveraged for genuine preservation while ensuring cultural knowledge holders maintain authenticity and receive fair compensation.

### 2. Knowledge transmission versus external pressures

While festivals and schools actively teach culture, significant barriers exist including shortage of qualified tutors, limited elder support, and competing influences from global media. Youth face pressure from modern lifestyles that conflict with traditional learning methods. Success requires structured support for passing knowledge between generations while protecting against dilution.

### 3. Legal protection versus practical enforcement

The Traditional Knowledge Act (2013) provides legal frameworks for protecting cultural assets, yet remains largely ineffective due to poor communication, absent enforcement mechanisms, and widespread ignorance about protocols among tourism operators. The challenge is transforming good laws into practical protection systems with clear enforcement and education.

### 4. Community management versus heritage tourism expansion

Successful models like Takitumu Conservation Area (in the environmental space) demonstrate effective community management, yet most cultural sites lack formal community participation or benefit-sharing mechanisms. Heritage tourism often develops without meaningful local input. Community-led models must be expanded while ensuring authentic representation and local ownership.

## 2.4.3 Culture Outcomes

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### CULTURE OUTCOME 1: Cultural authenticity is documented, strengthened, and protected in tourism

Comprehensive documentation of authentic Cook Islands culture establishes clear standards that distinguish genuine traditions from commercialised representations while protecting cultural heritage from exploitation.

**Key challenges addressed: 1, 3**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Create comprehensive cultural documentation and protect vulnerable practices** – Develop authoritative catalogues of authentic Cook Islands culture including traditional techniques, fishing methods, crafts, and

practices at risk of being forgotten with proper preservation protocols and address knowledge transfer barriers between generations.

- **Establish community-validated cultural standards** – Create clear definitions distinguishing authentic traditional expressions from contemporary adaptations, develop standards for tourism product development and marketing, and ensure promotional materials align with cultural values.
- **Conduct authenticity audits and interpretation enhancement** – Audit current cultural tourism offerings, address concerns about authenticity and story versions and use interpretation and storytelling to deepen cultural understanding building on CIT's initiatives

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### CULTURE OUTCOME 2: Coordinated cultural governance aligns preservation with tourism development

Multi-sector collaboration creates integrated cultural governance systems where preservation efforts, tourism development, and traditional authorities work together through clear guidelines and monitoring systems.

**Key challenges addressed: 3, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish multi-sector coordination and policy alignment** – Convene regular cultural policy roundtables aligning preservation and tourism goals, create permanent coordination mechanisms across culture, tourism, education, and governance, and address current policy coordination challenges.
- **Develop cultural practice guides and operator training** – Create comprehensive cultural practice guides for tourism operators ensuring values-based operations, provide cultural guidelines for significant sites, and establish appropriate cultural orientation including sensitivity training.
- **Strengthen traditional authority involvement and monitoring** – Formalise House of Ariki and Arongo Mana involvement in cultural tourism planning and oversight, create cultural impact monitoring systems providing planning data, and develop systems protecting traditional intellectual property while enabling appropriate sharing.

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### CULTURE OUTCOME 3: Traditional knowledge, and IP protection are integrated into tourism planning for fair compensation

Traditional leaders have formal roles in tourism oversight, informing development decisions through traditional environmental knowledge and cultural practices. Traditional knowledge is protected and knowledge holders receive fair compensation for their Intellectual Property (IP).

**Key challenges addressed: 1, 2, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish formal roles for traditional leaders and governance** – Create formal advisory roles for House

of Ariki and appropriate customary leaders in tourism planning, establish traditional knowledge advisory committees for policy development, and integrate traditional environmental management practices like Rāui into conservation and tourism management.

- **Protect traditional knowledge holders IP and ensure fair compensation** – Establish protocols ensuring traditional knowledge holders receive fair compensation for cultural wisdom, and implement an intellectual property protection system that ensures equitable benefit sharing while protecting against unauthorised use or appropriation.
- **Expand community-led cultural tourism and funding mechanisms** – Establish and support cultural tourism initiatives that benefit local communities, create funding mechanisms for community-led initiatives, and ensure cultural work is paid and provides a sustainable income for knowledge holders.

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#### **CULTURE OUTCOME 4: Comprehensive cultural education and visitor management systems protect cultural integrity**

Coordinated cultural education campaigns and visitor management systems ensure appropriate behaviour at cultural sites while authentic storytelling and interpretation programs enhance visitor understanding throughout their experience.

##### **Key challenges addressed: 3**

##### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Create cultural education and orientation programmes** – Develop cultural education campaigns embedded in all tourism marketing and visitor touchpoints, implement appropriate cultural orientation/checks for tourism operators, and address visitor education gaps through comprehensive training systems.
- **Establish visitor behavioural guidelines and enforcement** – Develop and enforce visitor guidelines for sacred sites and culturally significant locations, address inappropriate behaviour and dress code issues, and implement meaningful consequences for cultural site violation
- **Build comprehensive interpretation and storytelling systems** – Create multilingual interpretation programmes enhancing accessibility, use storytelling to deepen cultural understanding, and address confusion about authentic cultural narratives through clear definitions.

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#### **CULTURE OUTCOME 5: Intergenerational knowledge transmission thrives with structured cultural career pathways**

Knowledge-sharing between elders and youth is supported through funded workshops, expanded cultural programmes, and mentorship systems that create viable career pathways in cultural sectors.

##### **Key challenges addressed: 2**

##### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Fund knowledge-sharing workshops and intergenerational programmes** – Support elder knowledge-sharing workshops enabling traditional knowledge transfer to youth and visitors, address elder support needs and tutor shortages, and establish mentorship programmes connecting cultural knowledge holders with next generation leaders. Initiatives will also focus on mitigating the risk of Cook Islands Te Reo Māori becoming an endangered language.
- **Expand cultural participation and career development** – Expand inclusive cultural programmes like Te Maeva Nui, Takarua Food Festival and Koni Raoni, create structured cultural education pathways including career development in cultural sectors, and address the youth's role in revitalising practices in revitalising practices.
- **Develop cultural calendar and community initiatives** – Create national cultural calendar promoting year-round events for locals and tourists, support community initiatives like Orongo markets bringing communities together, and provide training and capacity building for community-led cultural tourism management.

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#### **CULTURE OUTCOME 6: Cultural tourism impacts are regularly monitored and measured**

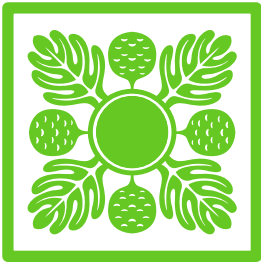
Develop a comprehensive register and classification of cultural sites, implement regular monitoring of cultural sites to track visitor flows and tourism impacts, and assess the cultural impact of tourism developments.

##### **Key challenges addressed: 1, 3, 4**

##### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish cultural impact monitoring and assessment systems** – Create regular monitoring of cultural sites tracking visitor flows and tourism impacts, develop cultural impact assessment processes for tourism developments and major sites, and implement integrated data platforms for comprehensive monitoring.
- **Develop feedback and quality monitoring mechanisms** – Create feedback systems for visitors and locals to track cultural experience quality, establish quality monitoring ensuring experiences meet authenticity and respect standards, and gather evidence to guide policy decisions about cultural tourism development.
- **Track cultural vitality and community wellbeing indicators** – Monitor effects on cultural resources and communities, establish regular assessment tracking both positive and negative impacts, gather feedback from cultural practitioners and Koutu Nui, and track traditional knowledge transmission vitality.

# 2.5 Environment



Tourism will protect natural heritage through evidence-based circular economy systems, accelerates renewable energy transition and climate resilience, manages visitor impacts, integrates traditional and modern conservation approaches, comprehensively addresses pollution, and engages visitors and communities in meaningful environmental activities that demonstrate that environmental health and economic success go hand in hand.

## Environment Alignments

NSDA+					SDG					
Goal 4: Manage solid waste and hazardous waste	Goal 5: Water & sanitation	Goal 10: Agriculture & food security	Goal 11: Biodiversity and natural environment	Goal 12: Climate change, resilience, renewable energy and efficiency	SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation	SDG 7: Affordable & clean energy	SDG 12: Responsible consumption & communities	SDG 13: Climate action	SDG 14: Life below water	SDG 15: Life on land

EDS	GSTC
Objective 5: Greening our economy	Section D - Environmental Sustainability



## 2.5.1 SWOT Analysis of Environment

### Strengths

- Examples of progressive waste prevention including single-use plastic bans, recycling programs, and bottle return schemes
- Established Environment frameworks through Marae Moana marine park and Takitumu Conservation Area
- Integration of traditional Rāui and Tapu practices
- Community engagement through Mana Tiaki campaigns, regular village cleanups, and collective responsibility
- Traditional environmental management systems providing time-tested models for sustainable resource use

### Weaknesses

- Waste infrastructure crisis with overflowing landfills and limited waste prevention strategies
- No centralised wastewater treatment systems across any islands threatening lagoon health
- Water over-extraction disrupting freshwater corridors and stream species habitats
- Renewable energy achievement is at only 17%, well below initial targets due to implementation constraints
- Limited respect for traditional practices such as Rauī
- Lack of community awareness around responsible recycling practices, and climate change mitigation
- Insufficient bio-security controls

### Opportunities

- Consider regenerative approaches that go beyond 'efficiency' practices and instead target long term solutions
- Transitioning to renewable energy and electric transport for tourism operations
- Building climate resilience through nature-based solutions that protect tourism asset
- Formalising traditional conservation methods (Rāui, Tapu) within modern regulatory frameworks
- Strengthening local food production to reduce imports, waste, and carbon emissions
- Connecting visitors with conservation activities that respect cultural protocols and values
- International support/donor partner programmes (e.g. GEF RESPONSE project)
- Provide tax incentives or assistance to support environmental initiatives by businesses, such as large properties investing in their own glass crushers, to encourage self-sufficiency of operations
- Test the feasibility of desalination plants to address periods of drought

### Threats

- Tourism overwhelming critical sites (Muri Lagoon, turtle passages) and driving coastal development
- Unsustainable extraction of marine species (parrotfish, paua) for tourist and local consumption
- Climate change threatening infrastructure, particularly in the vulnerable Pa Enea
- Marine pollution from boats, chemical sunscreens, and noise disrupting wildlife behaviour
- Weakening respect for traditional conservation protocols as commercial pressures increase
- Lack of Infrastructure to support environmental activities
- Environmental degradation from increased pollution, waste, and resource consumption affecting communities
- Biodiversity threats caused by invasive species such as ants, rats and the weeds vine

## 2.5.2 Key Challenges to Balance

### 1. Environment frameworks versus management capacity

While the Cook Islands has established impressive conservation areas and policies, significant gaps exist in managing tourism pressure on critical sites like Muri Lagoon and turtle passages. Marine species face unsustainable extraction for tourist consumption, freshwater systems suffer from over-extraction, and voluntary codes lack enforcement power. Conservation frameworks must be transformed into active management systems that protect specific vulnerable locations and species.

### 2. Infrastructure innovation versus systemic inadequacy

Successful pilot projects in renewable energy and waste management demonstrate capability, yet fundamental challenges persist. With renewable energy at only 17% and no central wastewater treatment, current systems cannot handle tourism growth. Heavy reliance on imported food generates excessive packaging waste while missing opportunities to support local producers. Climate change action must focus more on adaptation - building resilience against climate impacts while reducing import dependency.

### 3. Community leadership versus institutional coordination

Strong community participation in environmental protection contrasts with fragmented approaches between government agencies, creating gaps in oversight and implementation. Communities lead by example through cleanups and conservation but lack institutional support and coordination. Success requires aligning community action with clear institutional frameworks.

### 4. Environmental innovation versus enforcement gaps

Tourism businesses increasingly adopt sustainable practices while progressive policies eliminate plastics and set environmental targets. However, enforcement remains weak across multiple pollution sources - from marine noise and boat fuel to chemical sunscreens and development runoff. Most efforts focus on visible pollution while ignoring impacts on marine life and ecosystems. Good intentions must be transformed into comprehensive pollution reduction initiatives that address both direct tourism impacts and indirect effects from infrastructure and supply chains.

## 2.5.3 Environment Outcomes

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### ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 1: Circular economy systems eliminate waste and create business opportunities

Comprehensive waste management transformation through upgraded recycling facilities, elimination of single-use plastics, and circular economy principles that turn waste streams into economic opportunities.

#### Key challenges addressed: 2

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Establish zero waste infrastructure and circular economy models** – Develop comprehensive waste prevention systems, including producer responsibility, create community repair and reuse hubs nationwide, implement product design standards that eliminate waste at the source, and establish circular economy business models that prioritise waste avoidance through reuse, refurbishment, and material regeneration, with recycling as a last resort before disposal.
- **Eliminate single-use plastics and expand successful programmes** – Phase out single-use plastics to environmentally friendly alternatives, expand bottle/can return schemes with financial incentives building on successful initiatives, and implement comprehensive waste segregation with tourism operators as early adopters.
- **Food-waste management systems** – Develop and implement green waste standards and support food waste management programmes through composting and sustainable use as livestock feed (e.g., pigs) across tourism operators and prioritise local food sourcing to reduce import packaging waste.

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### ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 2: Resource efficiency systems optimise water, energy, and material use across tourism operations

Regular resource efficiency measurement, baseline and target development, and improvement programmes reduce tourism's environmental footprint through water conservation, energy optimisation, and material use reduction while creating environmental certification systems that demonstrate operator commitment to sustainability.

#### Key challenges addressed: 2,4

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Establish resource efficiency measurement and improvement programmes for tourism businesses** – Regularly measure and monitor water, electricity, and material use across tourism operations, implement efficiency improvement programmes with targets and benchmarks, and provide technical assistance helping operators reduce resource consumption and operational costs.

- **Develop environmental certification and verification systems for tourism operators** – Establish comprehensive environmental targets and incorporate them into certification programmes recognising operators demonstrating resource efficiency, water conservation, energy optimisation, and waste reduction, create verification systems ensuring authentic environmental performance, and link certification to marketing advantages and regulatory incentives.
- **Create resource sharing and optimisation infrastructure** – Develop shared resource systems including water recycling, renewable energy cooperatives, and material sharing networks, implement rainwater harvesting and greywater systems across tourism facilities, and create bulk purchasing programmes for sustainable materials and energy-efficient equipment reducing individual operator costs.

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### **ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 3: Renewable energy transition and climate resilience position Cook Islands as sustainable tourism leader**

Accelerated renewable energy adoption, comprehensive climate adaptation strategies, and climate-resilient infrastructure demonstrate regional leadership while achieving national clean energy goals.

#### **Key challenges addressed: 2**

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Accelerate renewable energy adoption and remove barriers** – Remove barriers to private sector solar adoption, develop renewable energy microgrids, build local capacity for maintenance creating jobs, and demonstrate tourism leadership through renewable energy pilots and showcases.
- **Develop climate adaptation strategies** – Develop island-specific climate adaptation strategies with measurable outcomes, and create mechanisms for local implementation and support, including finance from different sources for private and public projects.
- **Build climate-resilient infrastructure and transport systems** – Incentivise clean transport in tourism operations, build climate-resilient infrastructure serving both tourism and community needs, and position Cook Islands as a regional model for sustainable tourism innovation.

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### **ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 4: Coordinated visitor impact management protects sensitive sites and wildlife**

Science-based carrying capacity limits, mandatory licensing systems, and comprehensive enforcement mechanisms protect sensitive environments while maintaining quality visitor experiences.

#### **Key challenges addressed: 1**

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish carrying capacity limits and visitor flow management** – Implement carrying capacity assessments and visitor flow management systems for sensitive cultural and natural sites, establish visitor impact tracking systems, and implement regular site monitoring to track environmental conditions.
- **Create comprehensive enforcement mechanisms** – Implement threatened species legislation and management plans, introduce mandatory licensing systems for all wildlife tour operators, and elevate voluntary wildlife interaction codes into enforceable standards, supported by robust enforcement mechanisms and meaningful penalties for non-compliance
- **Regular monitoring of sensitive sites and wildlife** – Regular sensitive sites and wildlife through comprehensive processes that generate evidence-based data to guide regulation, while continuously enhancing monitoring capacity with the integration of AI.

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### **ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 5: Integrated conservation efforts protect biodiversity through traditional and modern approaches**

National biodiversity strategies integrate tourism considerations while strengthening community-led traditional conservation methods and addressing biosecurity threats through coordinated conservation efforts.

#### **Key challenges addressed: 1, 3**

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Complete national biodiversity strategies and integrate tourism considerations** – Finish National Strategy for Biodiversity integrating tourism-specific considerations, expand marine spatial planning efforts at island and national level by Marae Moana, and create integrated conservation funding mechanisms linking tourism revenue to biodiversity protection, including support for coral rehabilitation and native ecosystem restoration projects.
- **Support ongoing conservation programmes and traditional methods** – Support biodiversity surveys, GEF projects, War on Weeds, coral restoration projects and Restore our Islands initiatives while strengthening community-led Rāui practices and traditional conservation building on successful programs like Takitumu Conservation Area.

- **Address biosecurity threats and ecosystem restoration** – Enhance early detection surveillance systems with MOA biosecurity programmes and address invasive species affecting agriculture and tourism.

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#### **ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 6: Comprehensive pollution management protects environments and community quality of life**

Coordinated pollution monitoring, enforcement mechanisms, and prevention strategies address noise, light, water, and air pollution while creating community-based environmental reporting systems.

**Key challenges addressed: 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish pollution guidelines** – Develop comprehensive guidelines to address all forms of pollution—including light and noise pollution—such as regulating the use of sea scooters around turtles. Produce educational materials to inform and engage stakeholders.
- **Develop plans to strengthen wastewater and sanitation systems management in the Cook Islands** - Develop wastewater plans for concentrated tourism areas such as Muri, conduct regular and transparent wastewater and sanitation systems audits, and enforce compliance of tourism properties with standards and public health regulations
- **Implement pollution prevention strategies** - Implement and enforce the Solid & Hazardous Waste Act 2025 to address air and water pollution from tourism activities, prevent fuel and oil contamination from marine vessels, promote reef-safe sunscreens and visitor education about chemical impacts, and reduce pesticide runoff from tourism food supply chains.

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#### **ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 7: Environmental participation programmes engage visitors and communities in conservation**

Expanded environmental responsibility campaigns, visitor contribution mechanisms, and regenerative tourism initiatives create meaningful conservation engagement while supporting funding and community stewardship.

**Key challenges addressed: 3, 4**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Expand successful environmental campaigns and education** – Expand ‘Love our Little Paradise’ and Mana Tiaki environmental responsibility campaigns, establish visitor education programmes about sustainable tourism practices, and connect environmental education with operator certification programmes.

- **Create visitor contribution and regenerative tourism mechanisms** – Develop contribution mechanisms for visitors to support conservation efforts financially or through in-kind contributions, create regenerative tourism experiences that educate visitors about environmental stewardship, and connect visitors with meaningful conservation volunteer opportunities.

- **Develop community-based conservation and engagement programmes** – Create community-based conservation programmes engaging both residents and visitors, support monthly village clean-ups and community environmental initiatives, and strengthen connections between tourism and local environmental stewardship.

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#### **ENVIRONMENT OUTCOME 8: Comprehensive environmental monitoring systems guide evidence-based tourism management**

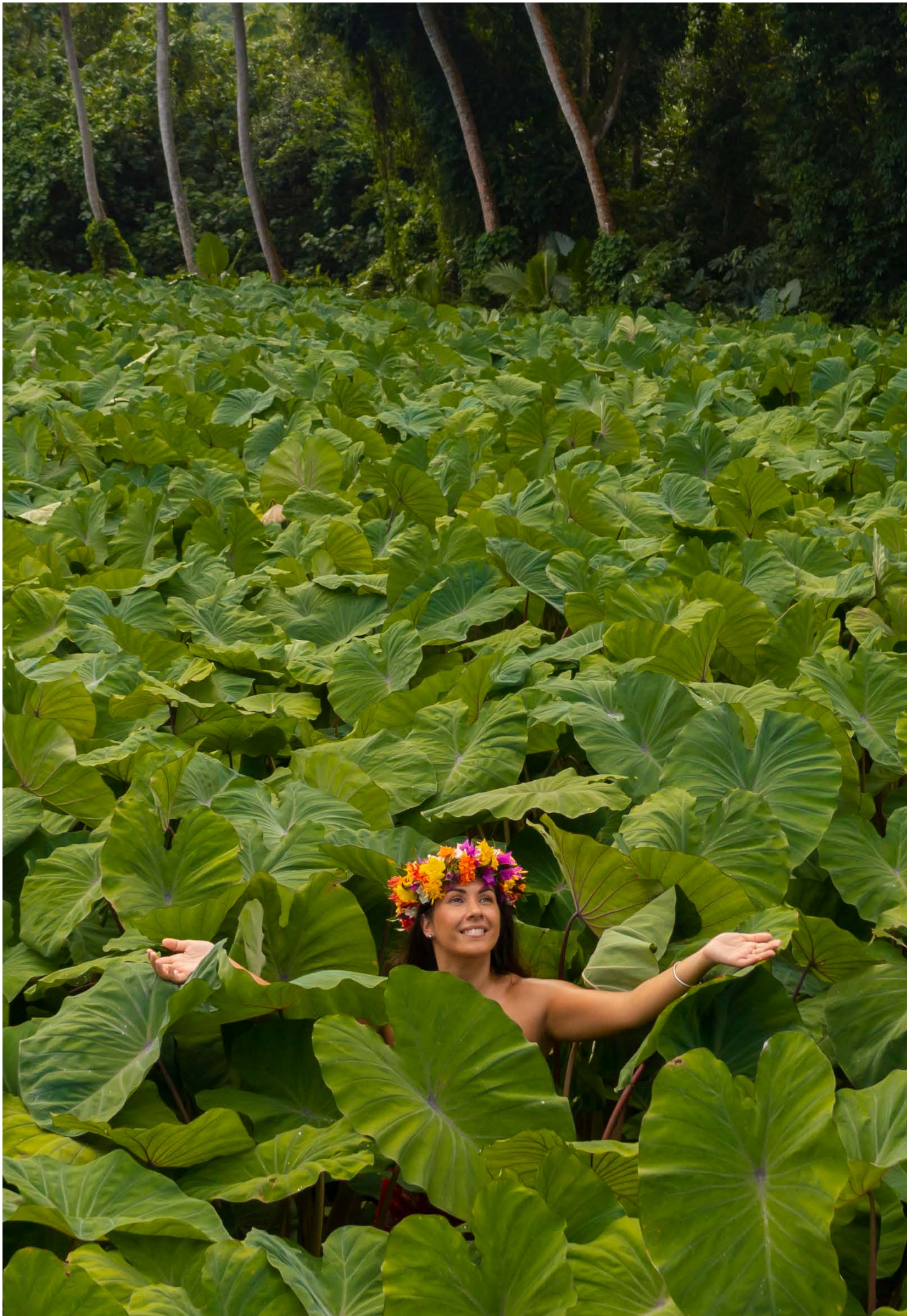
Unified environmental monitoring integrates existing agency data while establishing regular measurement of tourism’s environmental impacts to guide evidence-based decision-making and effective mitigation strategies.

**Key challenges addressed: 1, 3**

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Integrate fragmented agency data into unified reporting frameworks** – Combine existing agency data collection (eg: NES compliance monitoring, ICI vehicle tracking, MMR marine surveys) into a comprehensive environmental intelligence platform addressing current fragmented approaches and allowing national targets and monitoring.
- **Establish comprehensive monitoring systems and baselines** – Implement digital monitoring systems across all tourism-impacted areas, create tourism-specific environmental impact indicators, establish regular wildlife tour operator compliance monitoring, and provide practical tools to improve operator maturity. Strengthen water quality, wastewater, and waste monitoring mechanisms in coordination with MMR, ICI, and other agencies.
- **Enhance water quality and waste monitoring programmes** – Conduct regular waste audits to understand all waste streams, enhance water quality monitoring across sectors and agencies, and implement comprehensive wastewater treatment systems starting with tourism hotspots.





## 2.6 Connecting the Four Dimensions of Destination Stewardship

The four dimensions of Destination Stewardship provide a comprehensive framework for achieving sustainable development through tourism.

Together, they transform tourism from an unmanaged economic activity into a strategic tool for advancing Cook Islands' development priorities and contributing to global sustainability goals.

Each dimension of Destination Stewardship - economy, community, culture and environment, addresses specific development needs while supporting broader objectives.

Economy creates inclusive prosperity through local revenue circulation, evidence-based decisions, thriving businesses across all islands, competitive markets, and rewarding careers.

Community strengthens social fabric by empowering communities to drive development, protecting housing and worker rights, preserving cultural values, and creating safe, inclusive environments where residents and visitors connect meaningfully.

Culture preserves authentic heritage by ensuring communities manage cultural sharing, compensating knowledge holders fairly, transmitting traditions to future generations, and integrating traditional governance systems into tourism development with robust monitoring and education.

Environment protects natural heritage through evidence-based management that regenerates ecosystems, accelerates renewable energy and climate resilience, manages visitor impacts, integrates traditional and modern conservation, addresses pollution, and engages visitors and communities in environmental stewardship.

These dimensions are deeply interconnected. Import dependency illustrates this complexity—creating waste and emissions (environment), driving economic leakage (economy), threatening food security (community), and undermining traditional food systems (culture). Protecting sites like Muri Lagoon requires coordinated action across economic incentives, community engagement, cultural protocols, and environmental management.

Traditional practices like Rāui and tapu exemplify integrated approaches where environmental and cultural activities reinforce each other. Effective workforce development must simultaneously address fair wages (economy), family wellbeing (community), knowledge transmission (culture), and sustainable practices (environment).

Together, these four dimensions create pathways for tourism to contribute meaningfully to national development across all Cook Islands communities. However, achieving integrated outcomes requires appropriate systems, structures, and processes to coordinate action, engage stakeholders, and manage implementation. Chapter 3 examines these enabling mechanisms that make comprehensive Destination Stewardship possible.

# 3

## Enabling Systems for Stewardship ~ *Akono'anga i tei oti i te akanoonoo'ia.*

These systems provide strength, balance and resilience - anchoring the four dimensions of stewardship: economy, community, culture, and environment, and stitching them together into a unified and lasting design for sustainable tourism



## 3.1 The Five Enabling Systems

The five enabling systems of destination stewardship form the essential backbone for managing destinations sustainably. These systems ensure that decisions are collaborative, evidence-based, and aligned with the long-term wellbeing of people, place, and culture. When strengthened together, they empower destinations to balance visitor growth with community benefits, protect natural and cultural assets, and build resilience for future generations.

Achieving positive outcomes across the economy, community, culture, and environment depends on having robust systems and structures that can support comprehensive implementation while ensuring evidence guides decisions, communities drive development, and traditional governance systems inform tourism management.

Current institutional arrangements often work against the integration outlined above. Fragmented agency responsibilities, inconsistent policies, and limited coordination prevent consistent action on interconnected challenges.

When tourism revenue leaks offshore, it reduces capacity to fund cultural programs, protect environmental assets, and build community infrastructure.

When environmental regulations lack enforcement, it damages natural assets, undermines community trust, and contradicts cultural values of stewardship.

These systemic barriers show why project-based approaches alone cannot deliver sustainable tourism. Individual initiatives struggle within systems that work against coordination.

Transforming tourism into a force for comprehensive development requires addressing the operational and institutional frameworks that shape decision-making, resource allocation, stakeholder collaboration, and community leadership.

This chapter examines five enabling systems that provide the operational foundation for Destination Stewardship. When functioning effectively, they create conditions for the integrated approaches identified in Chapter 2 to generate comprehensive benefits for Cook Islands communities.

ENABLING SYSTEMS	FOCUS AREAS
1. Management Structure & Framework	Institutional coordination and governance systems
2. Stakeholder Engagement	Participatory processes and partnership mechanisms
3. Brand, Marketing & Communications	Strategic positioning and visitor education systems
4. Destination Development	Infrastructure and experience development frameworks
5. Resilience, Risk & Crisis Management	Risk mitigation and adaptive management systems



Together, these systems transform fragmented efforts into coordinated action, creating the institutional foundation required for consistent progress toward Destination Stewardship goals and broader sustainable development impacts.

## 3.2 Management Structure and Framework

Strong management structures ensure coordinated action across agencies with clear roles and consistent approaches toward shared stewardship goals, building on existing foundations including DSAG and traditional governance while addressing critical gaps in policy coordination, enforcement consistency, and funding flows.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 1: Agency roles are redefined with integrated stewardship approaches**

All tourism stakeholders understand their contribution to shared outcomes through clear institutional roles, evolved CIT leadership, and stewardship principles integrated into operations and accreditation standards.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Redefine CIT's role and clarify agency responsibilities** – Establish CIT as lead agency within integrated Destination Stewardship, clarify supporting agency roles reflecting tourism's contribution to overall development, and integrate stewardship goals into annual work plans.
- **Develop comprehensive vision and values framework** – Create unified vision statement balancing economic viability with community, cultural, and environmental sustainability, establish “Kia Orana” values as core industry principles, and create values-based operational guidelines balancing Christian and indigenous cultural values.
- **Integrate stewardship principles into business operations** – Embed stewardship principles into all tourism business operations and accreditation standards ensuring all stakeholders operate according to shared values centred on long-term wellbeing outcomes.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 2: Strengthened governance integrates traditional authority and community participation**

Comprehensive governance frameworks build on DSAG foundations while ensuring traditional leaders have formal roles and communities exercise meaningful influence over tourism development affecting their areas.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Strengthen DSAG authority and expand traditional governance integration** – Build DSAG authority and decision-making protocols, integrate House of Ariki and traditional governance structures into formal tourism planning processes, and expand support systems for the Wellbeing Leads.
- **Formalise Wellbeing Lead lead roles in governance and planning** – Establish mechanisms to involve lead agencies from the four wellbeing dimensions in tourism planning and policy development and engage related groups in consultation for all tourism projects.
- **Develop inclusive decision-making processes** – Create inclusive processes ensuring all community segments influence tourism development, establish transparent community input processes, and build accountability systems that enhance institutional trust.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 3: Clear planning coordination eliminates fragmentation and duplication**

Coordinated development through tourism operates through clear inter-agency protocols, consistent enforcement standards, and collaboration that eliminates duplication while building institutional capacity.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish clear tourism policy leadership and coordination protocols** – Complete comprehensive policy gaps assessment, establish tourism policy leadership and inter-agency coordination ensuring consistent enforcement across NES, MMR, ICI, TMO, and other agencies, and create transition mechanisms to an all-of-government stewardship approach.
- **Create cross-agency coordination and capacity building systems** – Establish cross-agency budget coordination through existing government processes, build institutional capacity through training and resourcing, and create accountability mechanisms for effective implementation.
- **Ensure Pa Enea representation and collaboration** – Establish Pa Enea representation requirements in all tourism governance bodies including rotating DSAG representation, create regular coordination meetings aligning activities with stewardship goals, and develop mechanisms eliminating duplication of efforts.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 4: Comprehensive stewardship is integrated into agency operations**

Evidence-based Destination Stewardship integrates into agency operations through unified data systems, island-specific roadmaps, and adaptive management capacity that supports coordinated planning and implementation.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Integrate stewardship strategy into operational planning and evidence systems** – Embed Destination Stewardship outcomes and projects into operational planning for all agencies and partners, create integrated data and evidence systems measuring progress across all dimensions, and establish unified data collection using the UN Statistical Framework.

- **Develop island-specific assessments and adaptive planning** – Create island-specific tourism assessments and roadmaps aligned with island development strategies, implement evidence-based planning processes using integrated data, and establish adaptive management capacity for continuous improvement.
- **Create a project pipeline and monitoring systems** – Develop 3-year pipeline projects aligned with government budget cycles and NSDA priorities, establish comprehensive monitoring tracking processes across all dimensions, and implement quarterly review cycles with adaptive management protocols.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 5: Coherent policy framework streamlines regulation while strengthening protections**

Comprehensive tourism legislation and streamlined regulatory processes reduce administrative burdens while ensuring effective protections for workers, consumers, and the environment through integrated enforcement systems.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Develop comprehensive tourism policy and legislation** – Develop comprehensive tourism policies that addresses gaps in environmental, cultural, labour, and safety areas, supported by tourism-specific legislation and clearly defined institutional mandates with adequate enforcement and resources.
- **Streamline regulatory processes and strengthen protections** – Digitise business registration and licensing through integrated online platforms, streamline tourism permits into single-window systems, strengthen consumer protection and anti-monopoly legislation, and review labour protections specific to tourism working conditions.
- **Create integrated enforcement and compliance systems** – Establish coordinated enforcement mechanisms across agencies reducing regulatory duplication, create unified compliance monitoring systems enabling comprehensive tourism regulation assessment, and develop consistent enforcement standards with meaningful penalties that ensure effective implementation of tourism policies and protections.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 6: Coordinated funding mechanisms direct tourism revenue to support development**

Tourism revenue supports community development, cultural preservation, and environmental protection through transparent visitor contribution systems, cross-agency collaboration, and diversified investment mechanisms.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish coordinated revenue direction mechanisms** – Create mechanisms directing tourism revenue toward community development, cultural preservation, and environmental protection, implement environmental impact charges building on the Advance Recovery & Disposal Fee (ARDF) precedent with transparent administration, and establish permanent social tourism funds allocating visitor fees to community projects.
- **Create cross-agency funding collaboration and investment pathways** – Develop better cross-agency funding mechanisms fostering collaboration toward development goals, create investment incentives and pathways for Cook Islanders and diaspora participation, and ensure sustainable financing for long-term stewardship success.
- **Develop diversified funding portfolio and transparent systems** – Build diversified funding streams, reducing dependence on single sources through government, development partners, private sector, and community funding and create transparent visitor contribution systems.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 7: Inclusive development actively serves diverse community needs and visitor markets**

Comprehensive inclusive frameworks ensure tourism development benefits all community members through paid representation opportunities, accessibility standards, leadership programmes, and systems serving diverse needs.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Ensure representation and leadership development for marginalised groups** – Ensure representation opportunities for marginalised groups (youth, elderly, people with disabilities, women, LGBTQ+) in tourism governance with succession planning, implement youth governance workshops including policy training, and develop women in tourism leadership programmes.

- **Implement comprehensive accessibility standards and infrastructure** – Implement and enforce consistent building code accessibility standards for all new developments, upgrade tourism infrastructure with essential features such as ramps and accessible toilets at major sites, provide adequate signage, and ensure facilities also address the needs of diverse visitors, including those with non-physical impairments.
- **Ensure inclusive development systems and opportunity creation** – Ensure inclusive development systems serving diverse community needs and visitor markets, and expand diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks across tourism development.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 8: Tourism organisations demonstrate commitment to Destination Stewardship through robust, responsive systems**

Tourism organisations adapt to meet stewardship demands through integrated compliance frameworks, coordinated enforcement systems, and unified monitoring that enables comprehensive impact assessment and rapid response.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Evolve organisations to support Stewardship and integrated compliance** – Transform tourism sector management organisations to meet Destination Stewardship demands ensuring fitness for purpose, create integrated compliance frameworks streamlining environmental, cultural, labour, and safety standards, and generate systems producing meaningful local benefit.
- **Build adaptive capacity and responsive institutional systems** – Implement quarterly review cycles with adaptive management protocols enabling rapid response to changing circumstances, create structures supporting rather than constraining innovation, and establish capacity for continuous learning and adaptation through coordinated approaches.



## 3.3 Stakeholder Engagement

Meaningful stakeholder engagement ensures all community sectors participate in tourism development through genuine partnership where communities hold real power in decisions affecting them, building on the Cook Islands' cultural tradition of collective work while addressing critical gaps in community inclusion and traditional governance integration.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 1: Comprehensive stakeholder mapping enables coordinated engagement and collaboration**

All stakeholders understand their interests, relationships, and roles within the destination ecosystem through structured mapping and coordinated engagement processes that enable effective collaboration across tourism development.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Conduct stakeholder mapping and awareness building** – Map all stakeholder groups including local businesses, community members, civil society organisations, visitors, other industries, and public institutions while building stakeholder awareness of their interests, influence, and relationships within the destination ecosystem.
- **Create formal dialogue and coordination mechanisms** – Establish formal mechanisms for ongoing dialogue and collaboration addressing current gaps in stakeholder consultation, develop stakeholder communication protocols ensuring regular information sharing, and create coordinated engagement processes enabling effective collaboration.
- **Establish stakeholder coordination and shared responsibility frameworks** – Build stakeholder awareness of their roles and shared stewardship responsibilities, create a joint understanding of collaborative engagement opportunities, and ensure meaningful participation of diverse groups in coordinated stewardship efforts.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 2: Private sector actively engage in contributing to achieving stewardship goals**

Local entrepreneurs participate effectively in tourism business ownership through reduced operational barriers, coordinated industry support mechanisms, and improved consultation in policy development that enhances business contribution to stewardship objectives.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Reduce operational barriers and establish coordinated industry support** – Address high operational costs, complex administrative processes, and limited market access preventing local tourism business participation, and replicate successful business models across islands.
- **Improve private sector consultation and advisory mechanisms** – Strengthen private sector engagement in policy development to ensure inclusive participation in government decision-making, create formal industry advisory groups for tourism policy input and regulatory impact assessment, and establish regular business roundtables with government agencies.
- **Strengthen business contribution to stewardship planning** – Ensure business voices are heard in stewardship planning, support industry contribution to stewardship goals, and create mechanisms for private sector input into comprehensive tourism development processes.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 3: Communities take meaningful ownership and influence over tourism development processes**

Communities are involved in tourism decision-making through inclusive consultation processes, comprehensive community participation mechanisms, and benefit-sharing frameworks that ensure meaningful local ownership of tourism initiatives.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Increase inclusion through consultation** – Include communities in decision-making through inclusive consultation processes, create meaningful local ownership of tourism initiatives through comprehensive community participation mechanisms, and establish community consultation requirements for infrastructure development and revenue-sharing decisions.
- **Establish comprehensive benefit-sharing and ownership frameworks** – Develop Pa Enua-specific benefit-sharing mechanisms ensuring outer islands receive tourism development support, implement community benefit-sharing frameworks ensuring tourism revenue supports local development priorities, and create authentic cultural experiences through community involvement.
- **Build community capacity and participation systems** – Strengthen stewardship effectiveness through community engagement, enhance social license for tourism growth through meaningful participation, and build community capacity for effective tourism management and decision-making.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 4: Comprehensive visitor education systems reduce risks and enhance cultural understanding**

Comprehensive visitor education covering cultural protocols, environmental responsibility, and community respect reduces the risk of uninformed visitors negatively impacting host communities while enhancing visitor experiences through comprehensive orientation programmes.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Implement visitor education and orientation programmes** – Create comprehensive visitor education programmes covering cultural protocols, environmental responsibility, and community respect, establish structured orientation programmes and impact management systems to minimise visitor impacts on cultural and environmental assets, and embed cultural education campaigns into all tourism marketing and visitor touchpoints.
- **Establish enforcement and accountability mechanisms** – Create consequences and enforcement mechanisms for inappropriate visitor behaviour including fines and accountability measures, establish clear behavioural expectations and guidelines, and implement proactive education preventing damage across stewardship dimensions.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 5: Regular sentiment research and feedback systems enable evidence-based stakeholder decision-making**

Comprehensive research frameworks understand stakeholder support, concerns, and collaborative engagement opportunities through regular evaluation of community attitudes, business perspectives, and civil society positions that inform evidence-based tourism policy and planning.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish an evaluation frameworks for stakeholder perspectives** – Create comprehensive evaluation frameworks for community attitudes, business perspectives, and civil society positions toward tourism development, establish a national framework for tracking tourism’s social impacts based on the UN Statistical Framework, and develop comprehensive understanding of stakeholder support and concerns.
- **Conduct regular stakeholder surveys and impact measurement** – Implement bi-annual stakeholder surveys measuring engagement levels, satisfaction, and perceived impact, track collaborative engagement opportunities for sustainable stewardship, and provide data for adaptive management and decision-making.
- **Create visitor feedback and improvement systems** – Implement visitor feedback systems improving education programmes and site management, and use visitor input for adaptive management of education and impact prevention systems.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 6: Stakeholders participate in collaborative decision-making through formal advisory and consultation mechanisms**

Open and participatory communication empowers stakeholders through formal involvement in destination decision-making processes, advisory groups, and collaborative platforms that gather insights for strategic planning while ensuring ongoing buy-in and addressing stakeholder concerns.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish formal advisory groups and consultation platforms** – Create structured advisory groups serving as key platforms for stakeholder involvement in destination decision-making, establish formal consultation mechanisms enabling ongoing stakeholder input into strategic processes, and develop participatory communication systems that empower stakeholders through meaningful involvement.
- **Integrate traditional governance with modern advisory structures** – Combine traditional governance systems including House of Ariki participation with modern advisory mechanisms, establish formal roles for traditional leaders in destination decision-making processes, and create collaborative approaches that honour both traditional protocols and contemporary stakeholder engagement needs.

- **Develop regular stakeholder engagement and feedback systems** – Create information sharing and concern-addressing mechanisms, establish ongoing buy-in processes through regular stakeholder consultation beyond just research, and develop education programmes helping all stakeholders understand and participate effectively in collaborative decision-making processes.

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**ENABLING OUTCOME 7: Cross-sector collaboration strengthens tourism value chains and destination competitiveness**

Strategic partnerships between tourism and related sectors including education, agriculture, arts and crafts, and technology create integrated value chains that enhance destination appeal, sustainability, and economic benefits while fostering innovation and authentic experiences.

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish formal partnerships between tourism and key sectors** – Create structured collaboration frameworks linking tourism with education and research institutions, agriculture and food manufacturing, arts and crafts producers, and technology and innovation sectors to enhance destination competitiveness and authentic visitor experiences.

- **Develop integrated supply chains and value-adding networks** – Build connections enabling local producers, artisans, educators, and technology providers to participate in tourism value chains, create aggregation systems supporting multi-sector collaboration, and establish quality standards ensuring authentic cross-sector products and services meet tourism market expectations.
- **Create innovation and knowledge-sharing platforms** – Establish cross-sector innovation hubs facilitating collaboration between tourism operators and other industries, develop knowledge-sharing mechanisms enabling best practice transfer across sectors, and create joint marketing and promotion opportunities that showcase integrated destination offerings highlighting local expertise and production.



## 3.4 Brand, Marketing & Communications

Authentic branding and strategic marketing determine visitor types and ensure they arrive with respect for local people, culture, and environment by reflecting genuine Cook Islands values while attracting visitors who appreciate and contribute to stewardship goals. This builds on the “Love our Little Paradise” brand platform while addressing challenges where marketing materials misalign with community values and expensive approaches limit stewardship messaging capacity.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 1: Authentic cultural heritage standards guide marketing and protect against commodification**

Community-validated cultural standards ensure tourism marketing reflects genuine Cook Islands heritage, preventing commodification and misrepresentation while strengthening distinctive brand positioning in competitive Pacific tourism markets.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Develop authentic cultural heritage definitions and community validation processes** – Create clear definitions of authentic Cook Islands cultural heritage with community-validated standards for tourism product development and marketing materials, ensuring alignment between promotional content and cultural values while maintaining distinctive identity through genuine cultural assets.
- **Establish authenticity audits and brand protection mechanisms** – Implement regular authenticity audits of cultural marketing materials, establish brand protection preventing cultural appropriation by competitors, and develop brand strategy resonating with value-aligned international visitors who respect cultural preservation.
- **Build authentic competitive advantages through genuine storytelling** – Establish competitive advantages based on genuine cultural and natural assets differentiating Cook Islands from other Pacific destinations, create authentic brand experiences through community-validated storytelling, and build trust by ensuring marketing supports rather than undermines cultural values and community expectations.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 2: Marketing messaging and distribution channels align with island carrying capacity**

Destination marketing strategies actively manage visitor distribution and volumes to match infrastructure capacity and community tolerance levels across different islands, preventing concentration that degrades visitor experience and community wellbeing.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Develop capacity-responsive marketing strategies** – Create marketing approaches that promote outer islands with available capacity while moderating promotion of locations approaching environmental or social limits, adjust distribution channel emphasis based on real-time capacity monitoring, and align promotional intensity with infrastructure readiness.
- **Establish visitor expectation management systems** – Communicate accurate information about island capacities, seasonal variations, and appropriate visitor behaviours in pre-arrival marketing, set realistic expectations about amenities and experiences across different islands, and educate potential visitors about sustainable travel practices aligned with local carrying capacity.
- **Implement dynamic marketing models** – Develop mechanisms to temporarily reduce marketing pressure on specific locations experiencing capacity stress, redirect promotional efforts toward underutilised areas and seasons, and coordinate marketing adjustments with accommodation providers and tour operators to manage visitor flows responsibly.

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**ENABLING OUTCOME 3: Comprehensive market and visitor research informs destination marketing strategy and responsible stewardship**

Regular research insights and analysis provide understanding of market trends, visitor behaviours, values, preferences, and perceptions while incorporating environmental, cultural, and social metrics that guide both destination marketing strategy and responsible stewardship programmes.

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish regular market and visitor research programmes** – Create comprehensive research systems understanding market trends, visitor behaviours, values, and preferences related to Cook Islands and competitor destinations, develop reliable data collection addressing current inconsistency limiting evidence-based decisions, and modernise research methodologies following international best practices.
- **Develop integrated research platforms and real-time monitoring** – Create accessible research platforms supporting marketing strategy development and business planning, establish real-time visitor monitoring systems tracking behaviours and spending patterns, and provide actionable intelligence for effective marketing positioning and strategic decision-making.

- **Integrate stewardship metrics with market research** – Incorporate environmental, cultural, and social metrics into comprehensive visitor research programmes, ensure market research insights guide responsible stewardship programmes and policies, and create integrated intelligence enabling marketing strategies that balance visitor attraction with stewardship priorities across environmental, cultural, and community outcomes.

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**ENABLING OUTCOME 4: Strategic targeting attracts value-aligned visitors and encourages sustainable tourism patterns**

Enhanced targeting strategies consistently attract value-aligned visitors who respect cultural heritage and support sustainable development through targeted approaches that encourage geographic dispersal, address seasonal challenges, and build sustainable tourism demand aligned with Cook Islands values.

**Potential mechanisms:**

- **Enhance targeting for value-aligned and high-value visitors** – Build on current targeting work to consistently attract value-aligned visitors who respect cultural heritage and support sustainable development, develop targeted strategies for wellness, remote work, and cultural tourism markets aligning with Cook Islands values, and enhance targeting for visitors who appreciate Destination Stewardship values.



- **Encourage geographic dispersal and address seasonal challenges** – Create off-season programming maintaining employment and business viability addressing seasonal fluctuation challenges and build sustainable tourism demand patterns across islands.
- **Target culturally motivated visitors and diaspora connections** – Focus on visitors that have close cultural ties, including Cook Islands diaspora, NZ Māori, and Tahitians, create opportunities for cultural exchanges, and sustainable tourism patterns supporting authentic cultural experiences.

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#### **ENABLING OUTCOME 5: Marketing expands beyond demand generation to comprehensive visitor education and stewardship messaging**

Marketing campaigns integrate stewardship messaging and visitor education that goes beyond traditional demand generation through cultural intellectual property protection, comprehensive visitor education, and campaigns supporting authentic experiences and responsible tourism behaviour.

##### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Integrate stewardship messaging and visitor education in campaigns** – Expand marketing beyond traditional demand generation to include stewardship messaging creating positive outcomes, align marketing campaigns with local reality and visitor education addressing stewardship goals, and educate visitors before arrival about cultural protocols and environmental responsibility.
- **Launch intellectual property awareness and protection campaigns** – Implement comprehensive IP awareness campaigns educating all tourism stakeholders about Traditional Knowledge Act (2013) requirements, develop practical business guidelines ensuring intellectual property rights are respected in marketing campaigns, protect cultural intellectual property while improving marketing effectiveness, and develop coordinated digital strategy protecting cultural intellectual property.
- **Create multilingual interpretation and responsible behaviour support** – Develop multilingual interpretation programmes enhancing accessibility and cultural understanding through marketing channels, create campaigns supporting authentic experiences and responsible tourism behaviour, and ensure marketing supports rather than undermines cultural preservation and environmental stewardship.

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#### **ENABLING OUTCOME 6: Optimised marketing efficiency supports stewardship campaigns while reducing economic leakage**

Strategic media buying approaches reduce high costs and economic leakage through local digital platforms and coordinated strategies that free up budget for stewardship campaigns while improving cost efficiency and marketing effectiveness.

##### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Develop strategic media buying and cost reduction approaches** – Create strategic media buying approaches reducing high costs and freeing budget for stewardship campaigns, improve cost efficiency in media buying enabling greater investment in stewardship-focused marketing initiatives, and reduce dependence on expensive placements while maintaining marketing effectiveness.
- **Reduce economic leakage through local digital platforms** – Address online travel agency commission losses through local digital booking platforms and direct marketing systems and create shared digital platforms connecting smaller operators with international markets while reducing commission dependency.
- **Create capacity for stewardship-focused marketing initiatives** – Improve overall marketing efficiency while supporting local suppliers and ensure strategic resource allocation maximises both marketing effectiveness and local economic benefits.



## 3.5 Destination Development

Strategic destination development creates tourism infrastructure and experiences that serve both visitor expectations and community needs while respecting cultural values and environmental limits, integrating with community priorities on each island, managing visitor flows to protect sensitive sites, and providing capability building to industry stakeholders.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 1: Integrated infrastructure development serves multiple community benefits and climate resilience**

Tourism infrastructure planning integrates with community development needs to maximise multiple benefits through upgraded facilities, comprehensive wastewater treatment, improved accessibility, signage and climate-resilient infrastructure serving both tourism growth and community needs.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Integrate tourism infrastructure with community development planning** – Align tourism infrastructure planning with community development needs to maximise multiple benefits, address inadequate wastewater systems and accessibility barriers affecting both visitors and residents, and create integrated infrastructure planning serving tourism growth and community needs.
- **Upgrade critical infrastructure across all islands** – Implement port, airport, and storage infrastructure upgrades on all islands, especially priority Pa Enea locations, establish comprehensive wastewater treatment systems starting with tourism hotspots like Muri lagoon, and improve public facility maintenance including toilets, parking, and beach access.
- **Integrate climate-resilience into all infrastructure planning** – Create climate-resilient infrastructure plans supporting both tourism and community needs particularly in vulnerable Pa Enea locations.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 2: Comprehensive visitor journey mapping integrates cultural education throughout tourism experiences**

Visitor journey and touchpoint mapping creates comprehensive integration of cultural protocols,

environmental responsibility, and community respect throughout all tourism interactions while establishing education campaigns at every touchpoint.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Create comprehensive visitor journey and touchpoint mapping** – Map visitor journeys and touchpoints across Cook Islands and integrate stewardship education/ protocols throughout all key tourism interactions.
- **Implement cultural orientation and education campaigns** – Create consistent cultural education campaigns embedded in all tourism marketing and visitor touchpoints/experiences, implement appropriate cultural orientation for tourism operators including sensitivity training.
- **Establish visitor behavioural guidelines and enforcement** – Develop and enforce visitor behavioural guidelines for environmentally/ culturally significant locations, create detailed journey maps managing flows to prevent damage to sensitive areas, and ensure protection of cultural sites and values through comprehensive education.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 3: Visitor flow monitoring and carrying capacity management protect sensitive sites**

Evidence-based visitor flow monitoring and carrying capacity limits prevent damage to cultural sites and natural environments through comprehensive monitoring systems that enable coordinated site protection and experience quality management.

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Establish coordinated visitor flow and impact monitoring systems** – Develop visitor flow, impact monitoring, and carrying capacity management, develop real-time impact monitoring tracking visitor behaviour, site conditions, and community effects, and create evidence-based site protection and experience quality management.
- **Implement carrying capacity limits and visitor management** – Establish carrying capacity limits and visitor flow management systems for all sensitive cultural and natural sites based on scientific assessment, develop visitor cap systems protecting cultural integrity and environmental assets, and ensure quality experiences through responsible management.

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#### ENABLING OUTCOME 4: Community-led attractions strategy ensures authentic experiences and local ownership

Comprehensive attractions and experiences strategy replicates successful community-led models ensuring local ownership, cultural authenticity, and direct community benefits while supporting destination development across all islands.

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Develop comprehensive community-led attractions strategy** – Work with community to create a complete attractions and experiences strategy, increase community involvement in heritage-based tourism development ensuring authentic experiences and direct community benefits.
- **Replicate successful community-led models** – Expand successful community-led models like Takitumu Conservation Area for cultural sites across all islands, establish transparent community benefit-sharing mechanisms for cultural tourism experiences, and ensure local ownership and benefits from tourism development.
- **Build community capacity and support Pa Enea development** – Create training and capacity building programmes for community-led cultural tourism management, support destination development in Pa Enea to encourage geographic dispersal, and create authentic experiences respecting cultural protocols through community-driven development.

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#### ENABLING OUTCOME 5: Enhanced digital connectivity enables Pa Enea participation and protects cultural intellectual property

Improved digital infrastructure and technological capacity enable Pa Enea participation in tourism markets, business development opportunities, and environmental monitoring while creating systems protecting cultural assets from digital threats.

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Enhance digital connectivity and technological capacity** – Improve digital infrastructure enabling Pa Enea participation in tourism markets and provide digital readiness assessments and training programmes for tourism operators especially in the Pa Enea, and enable business development opportunities and environmental monitoring capabilities.
- **Support direct booking systems and reduce commission dependency** – Develop direct booking systems and online marketing capabilities reducing commission dependency, create shared digital platforms connecting smaller operators with international markets, and support innovation and monitoring systems through modern digital tools.
- **Protect cultural intellectual property and address digital threats** – Create cultural IP protection from AI and digital platform threats through monitoring and enforcement systems, protect against digital security threats while enabling broader participation, and ensure digital tools strengthen rather than undermine traditional practices.

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#### ENABLING OUTCOME 6: Comprehensive connectivity solutions address transportation and digital access challenges

Transportation and digital connectivity challenges limiting tourism access and community participation are addressed through sustainable transport infrastructure, expanded public services, and comprehensive connectivity supporting both environmental goals and economic participation.

#### Potential mechanisms:

- **Address transportation and digital connectivity barriers** – Tackle transportation challenges limiting tourism access and community participation, address expensive transport costs and limited public services constraining visitor experiences and local economic participation, and ensure comprehensive accessibility reaches all areas and communities.
- **Expand public transport and sustainable infrastructure** – Expand public transport availability beyond Rarotonga to other islands, develop sustainable transport infrastructure supporting both tourism and community needs, and improve transportation barriers between islands while supporting environmental goals.
- **Improve payment systems** – Enhance payment systems across all islands enabling full Pa Enea participation and ensure digital inclusion for all communities.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 7: Comprehensive capability building programmes enhance skills and knowledge across tourism and related sectors**

The destination organisation (CIT) delivers structured training initiatives and programmes that enhance skills, knowledge, and capabilities of local communities, businesses, and stakeholders involved in managing and servicing tourism through formal training programmes and informal networking opportunities that support information sharing and sector-wide connection.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Deliver formal training programmes and skills development initiatives** – Implement structured training programmes targeting tourism operators, community members, and stakeholders across all islands, create capability building initiatives enhancing knowledge and skills for tourism service delivery, and establish structured upskilling programmes addressing sector-wide capacity needs and career progression opportunities
- **Create informal networking and knowledge-sharing opportunities** – Establish networking platforms enabling information sharing and connection across tourism and related sectors, facilitate peer-to-peer learning opportunities between experienced and emerging practitioners, and create mentorship programmes connecting industry leaders with developing professionals across islands.
- **Integrate capability building across education and community systems** – Embed tourism capability building into educational curricula at all levels, fund elder knowledge-sharing workshops enabling traditional knowledge transfer to support sector development and create comprehensive capability programmes that enhance local community participation in tourism management and service delivery while building sector-wide expertise.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 8: Cultural values guide quality standards and authentic visitor experiences**

Cultural values integrate into quality standards through enhanced certification approaches, community validation, and quality monitoring systems that ensure authentic visitor experiences while supporting community benefit and cultural IP protection.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Integrate cultural values into quality standards** – Address current lack of cultural integration and community validation in tourism standards, ensure cultural values guide tourism operations through enhanced certification approaches maintaining authenticity, and develop standards reflecting stewardship values and community expectations.

- **Implement cultural certification and quality monitoring** – Incorporate cultural standards into CIQA tourism certification programmes aligning with cultural values, develop cultural certification recognising businesses upholding IP rights and involving local communities, and implement quality monitoring ensuring cultural experiences meet authenticity and respect standards.
- **Develop comprehensive support programme to improve industry performance** – Utilise data from quality assurance programme to develop targeted capacity building initiatives, track operator performance over time, and establish reward mechanisms for operator improvement.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 9: Strategic event development and support enhances destination attractiveness and community engagement**

Comprehensive event organisation planning, coordination, and support with partners creates diverse and engaging events that enhance destination attractiveness, stimulate tourism and boost the local economy also in the Pa Enuu, and enrich cultural and social fabric through strategic attraction of mass and niche event organisers and successful event execution.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Develop strategic event attraction and coordination systems** – Create strategies to attract event organisers to Cook Islands, establish planning and coordination frameworks supporting various events within the destination, and develop comprehensive event development approaches that enhance destination attractiveness while stimulating tourism and economic activity.
- **Provide logistical support and ensure successful event execution** – Establish logistical support systems for event organisers including infrastructure, permits, and coordination assistance, create frameworks ensuring successful event execution across all islands, and develop partnerships enabling effective event planning and delivery that meets organiser and community needs.
- **Promote events effectively and enhance community benefits** – Create effective event promotion systems that boost local economy and visitor engagement, develop programming that enriches cultural and social fabric of communities through diverse events, and establish year-round event calendars distributing visitor flows while creating economic opportunities and authentic experiences for both residents and visitors.



## 3.6 Resiliency, Risk & Crisis Management

Building resilience protects workers, visitors, and residents through comprehensive health and safety protocols while creating systematic risk management that enables adaptation and rapid recovery from climate change, health crises, and external economic shocks, building on strong community resilience and traditional support systems while addressing critical gaps in tourism emergency planning and healthcare capacity.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 1: Systematic risk assessment and adaptive management integrate tourism with community resilience planning**

Comprehensive risk frameworks integrate tourism-specific risk planning with broader community resilience needs through structured assessment, adaptive management capacity, and business continuity planning that addresses climate impacts, infrastructure vulnerability, and rapid response to various threats.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish systematic risk assessment and adaptive management capacity** – Create comprehensive risk frameworks addressing current constraints on destination resilience, conduct tourism-focused climate change risk assessment identifying risks and planning measures addressing infrastructure vulnerability particularly in Pa Enua, and integrate tourism-specific risk planning with broader community resilience needs.
- **Develop business risk mapping and adaptation planning** – Create business risk mapping and adaptation planning addressing limited business resilience, build adaptive management systems enabling rapid response to climate impacts affecting tourism assets, and develop comprehensive scenario planning for various threat types across all islands.
- **Build operator capacity and international safety standards** – Enhance operator capacity for handling international visitor safety expectations and litigation risks and create adaptive management capacity supporting business risk planning.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 2: Tourism-inclusive emergency preparedness systems ensure comprehensive crisis response**

Comprehensive crisis management integrates tourism considerations into emergency preparedness through tourism-inclusive response systems, rapid deployment mechanisms, and coordinated protection for both residents and visitors during various emergency situations.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Develop tourism-inclusive emergency preparedness and response systems** – Establish tourism-inclusive emergency response and disaster preparedness systems and ensure comprehensive protection during various emergency situations filling current disaster planning gaps.
- **Create crisis response protocols and rapid deployment mechanisms** – Develop tourism-specific climate adaptation strategies with measurable outcomes, create crisis response protocols for tourism sector disruption (climate, economic, health emergencies), and establish rapid deployment mechanisms for emergency stewardship support and recovery.
- **Ensure coordinated response and visitor protection** – Coordinate response across all agencies ensuring visitor and resident protection and establish comprehensive emergency plans with coordinated preparation for future challenges.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 3: Proactive climate adaptation protects infrastructure and builds regional leadership in resilience**

High climate vulnerability, particularly in Pa Enea, is addressed through integration of tourism considerations with disaster risk reduction strategies, climate-resilient infrastructure development, and regional leadership in climate adaptation through partnerships and innovative approaches.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Address climate vulnerability through integration and assessment** – Tackle high climate vulnerability particularly in Pa Enea threatening tourism infrastructure, cultural sites, and community resilience, and conduct comprehensive climate vulnerability assessments for tourism infrastructure and operations on each island.
- **Build climate-resilient infrastructure and adaptation strategies** – Prioritise climate-adaptive design in new tourism infrastructure particularly in vulnerable Pa Enea incorporating sea-level rise and extreme weather projections and develop island-specific adaptation strategies with measurable outcomes.
- **Show leadership and contribute to regional efforts** – Establish the Cook Islands tourism as a regional model for climate action through SPTO and SPREP partnerships and contribute to regional adaptation efforts through innovative approaches.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 4: Comprehensive worker protection frameworks eliminate exploitation and ensure safety standards**

Robust worker protection systems address current legislative gaps and poor enforcement through comprehensive occupational health and safety frameworks, enforceable accountability mechanisms, and protection for both local and migrant workers that eliminate exploitation opportunities.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish comprehensive occupational health and safety frameworks** – Create robust frameworks addressing current absence that creates worker exploitation and operator litigation risks, develop national Occupational Safety and Health framework with standards and enforcement mechanisms, and address current legislative gaps and poor enforcement limiting worker protection.
- **Implement worker protection and accountability systems** – Establish living wage standards and improved working conditions in tourism businesses and create employer accountability systems including blacklisting mechanisms for businesses engaging in exploitation.
- **Create accessible support and dispute resolution mechanisms** – Establish accessible grievance handling and dispute resolution mechanisms for all tourism workers, address health and safety management issues especially around excursions to reduce litigation exposure and ensure protection for both local and migrant workers in tourism employment through meaningful consequences.



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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 5: Health regulations and enforcement create comprehensive public health protection**

Inadequate health and safety regulations combined with poor enforcement are transformed into comprehensive health protection through enhanced food safety, hygiene standards, operator certification, and consistent enforcement that protects both residents and visitors.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Establish comprehensive health protection and safety standards** – Address inadequate health and safety regulations combined with poor enforcement creating public health risks, update health and safety regulations including food safety, hygiene requirements, and tour operator certification, and create consistent health regulation and certification systems.
- **Strengthen enforcement and transform voluntary codes** – Strengthen enforcement of existing regulations particularly in tourism areas transforming voluntary codes into mandatory standards, address community safety concerns including crime prevention, noise control, and stray dog management, and establish operator certification requirements with transparent safety protocols.
- **Enhance safety awareness and build visitor confidence** – Increase visitor safety awareness and improve public transport, build visitor confidence through transparent safety protocols and health management, and create comprehensive public health protection addressing current gaps in safety standards.

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### **ENABLING OUTCOME 6: Enhanced healthcare preparedness and surge capacity support tourism sector health needs**

Limited healthcare preparedness for tourism contexts is addressed through robust healthcare systems, comprehensive medical preparedness, emergency response capabilities, and surge capacity that ensures healthcare access for both residents and visitors while enhancing destination competitiveness.

#### **Potential mechanisms:**

- **Address healthcare limitations and build emergency medical capacity** – Tackle limited healthcare preparedness including absence of trauma units and inadequate emergency medical capacity creating health risks, address medical service limitations posing risks to residents and tourists, and create robust healthcare systems supporting tourism sector health needs.
- **Improve healthcare access and insurance coverage** – Enhance healthcare access and insurance coverage for tourism workers regardless of status, support planning for availability and accessibility of essential medicines and vaccines meeting healthcare needs of residents and visitors and ensure comprehensive healthcare access for all community members.
- **Establish tourism-specific health protocols and surge capacity** – Create tourism-specific health protocols ensuring visitor and worker safety while enhancing destination competitiveness and build surge capacity for crisis situations and major incidents.



## 3.7 Systems Integration and Intervention Logic

These enabling systems support the four dimensions of Destination Stewardship and provide the institutional foundation that enables tourism sector activities to generate the outputs required for positive outcomes across Economy, Community, Culture, and Environment. When management structures align agencies toward shared goals, when stakeholders work together, when branding reflects authentic values, when development serves community needs, and when resilience systems protect against shocks, the conditions exist for tourism to contribute meaningfully to broader sustainable development impacts.

### Successful implementation requires:

- Government agencies working collaboratively with coordinated mandates and shared accountability
- Communities holding genuine power in decisions affecting their development
- Businesses contributing to collective stewardship outcomes beyond individual profit
- Traditional leaders providing guidance through formal governance integration
- Young people pursuing viable careers in tourism across all islands
- Visitors engaging respectfully and contributing to Destination Stewardship goals

The Destination Stewardship vision is clear: tourism that strengthens rather than strains the fabric of Cook Islands life. With these enabling systems as the institutional foundation, conditions exist for economic prosperity, community cohesion, cultural vitality, and environmental health to generate consistent progress toward national sustainable development goals and international commitments.

The implementation planning process will translate these objectives into specific projects, timelines, and responsibilities through structured stakeholder collaboration. Capacity will be built throughout implementation, with continuous learning and adaptation to create tourism systems that truly support comprehensive wellbeing outcomes.

### 3.7.1 Building Systems for Long-term Change

The five enabling systems outlined in this chapter represent both the current operational gaps and the institutional transformation required for Destination Stewardship success. These systems—management structures, stakeholder engagement, brand and communications, destination development, and resilience planning—must be systematically built, strengthened, and integrated to create lasting change in how tourism operates across the Cook Islands.

True transformation requires more than implementing individual projects or policies. It demands building institutional capacity, strengthening coordination mechanisms, and creating new ways of working that become embedded in how agencies, businesses, and communities approach tourism development.

Some systems exist but need strengthening and better integration, while others must be built from the ground up to support the comprehensive stewardship approach.

The implementation process becomes an opportunity to construct these enabling systems while delivering immediate benefits. Each intervention contributes not only to specific outcomes across the four dimensions but also to building the institutional foundation that will sustain positive change over time. This systems-building approach ensures that improvements become permanent features of how tourism development occurs, rather than temporary initiatives dependent on short-term funding or political support.

Creating this transformation requires strategic investment in institutional capacity, strengthening of coordination mechanisms, and deliberate integration of new approaches with existing structures. The goal is establishing robust systems that can adapt and evolve while maintaining their commitment to stewardship principles, ensuring that tourism serves Cook Islands communities effectively for generations to come.

Chapter 4 examines the implementation framework for building these enabling systems—detailing how institutional strengthening, strategic capacity building, and coordinated systems integration will create the lasting transformation needed to realise the full potential of Destination Stewardship across all Cook Islands communities.



# 4

## Implementation Framework

*~ Akatupu'anga i tei oti i te akanoono'ia*

Having established the Destination Stewardship framework (the four dimensions) and identified the institutional requirements (the five enabling systems), this chapter introduces the approach for implementing the comprehensive vision over the next five years and beyond. The implementation framework ensures coordinated action across all stakeholders, clear accountability mechanisms, and measurable progress toward sustainable development outcomes.

Like any transformation process, success depends on clear organisational structures—defined roles and responsibilities, coordinated timing, shared resource allocation, and robust monitoring systems. This framework ensures all stakeholders understand their contributions and how individual efforts integrate to achieve comprehensive stewardship outcomes.



## 4.1 Institutional Roles and Responsibilities

Successful implementation requires clearly defined institutional arrangements where each entity contributes specific capabilities and expertise toward shared stewardship objectives.

### 4.1.1 Destination Stewardship Advisory Group (DSAG) - Strategic Leadership

The DSAG provides strategic oversight for Destination Stewardship implementation, ensuring consistent progress toward integrated outcomes. Led by the Prime Minister with senior leadership from MFEM, Crown Law, CIIC, CIT, OPM, and private sector representatives, the DSAG will:

- Direct tourism development priorities based on community aspirations and capacity across all islands
- Ensure implementation alignment with NSDA+ goals, EDS Objectives and SDG contributions
- Review major project and funding decisions for strategic coherence
- Facilitate inter-agency coordination toward stewardship goals
- Monitor implementation progress and authorise strategic adjustments
- Exercise institutional authority to secure resources and remove implementation barriers

### 4.1.2 Project Management Unit (PMU) - Operational Coordination

The PMU provides operational coordination and technical support for daily implementation activities across all stewardship components:

- Coordinate implementation activities across all four stewardship dimensions
- Support DSAG decision-making through accurate information
- Facilitate inter-project coordination and resource sharing mechanisms
- Provide technical assistance to the Wellbeing Leads
- Maintain progress tracking through structured monitoring systems
- Ensure communication flows between all implementation participants

### 4.1.3 Wellbeing Leads - Thematic Implementation

Each Wellbeing Lead manages implementation within their specific stewardship area, ensuring quality outcomes and cross-cutting coordination:

- Guide implementation within designated areas
- Convene relevant agencies and stakeholder groups for coordinated action
- Assess existing activities and identify implementation gaps
- Identify new intervention opportunities and resource requirements
- Facilitate inter-agency collaboration on shared initiatives
- Develop new projects addressing priority intervention needs

### 4.1.4 Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) - Tourism Sector Integration

CIT provides specialised tourism sector expertise and industry engagement, ensuring integration of stewardship principles across tourism operations:

- Drive demand aligned with carrying capacity via marketing efforts
- Engage tourism businesses in broader stewardship implementation efforts
- Build industry capacity for sustainable practices
- Monitor tourism sector performance against stewardship indicators
- Ensure industry compliance with established stewardship principles
- Provide market intelligence to inform strategic implementation decisions

### 4.1.5 Government Agency Partners - Sectoral Implementation

Each government agency contributes specialised expertise and resources aligned with their institutional mandates and stewardship framework requirements:

- Provide technical expertise aligned with respective areas of institutional responsibility
- Align existing programs and initiatives with stewardship objectives
- Participate in coordination mechanisms through sector-based networks
- Dedicate staff time and institutional resources to implementation activities
- Integrate stewardship principles into routine operational procedures

### 4.1.6 Island Councils - Local Implementation and Adaptation

Island Councils ensure local adaptation and implementation of stewardship approaches reflecting specific island contexts and priorities:

- Adapt implementation approaches to island-specific needs and development priorities
- Ensure alignment with traditional governance systems and cultural protocols
- Facilitate grassroots participation and local ownership of implementation processes
- Manage island-specific implementation activities and coordination
- Contribute traditional knowledge systems to strengthen implementation approaches

### 4.1.7 Private Sector and Community Representatives - Implementation Partners

Private sector entities and community organisations ensure implementation approaches reflect practical requirements and community priorities:

- Contribute practical expertise and implementation capacity from operational experience
- Participate in project design ensuring ground-level feasibility and effectiveness
- Provide regular feedback on implementation effectiveness and required adjustments
- Identify and facilitate funding networks and partnership opportunities
- Ensure cultural appropriateness and community ownership of implementation processes

### 4.1.8 Development Partners - Technical and Financial Support

International development partners provide technical expertise, financial resources, and global best practice knowledge. Key development partners include MFAT (primary funding support), PSDI, climate finance mechanisms, ADB, and regional organisations including SPTO and SPREP. Assistance needed:

- Share international best practices and technical expertise relevant to implementation
- Support capacity building across implementing organisations
- Provide funding for initiatives aligned with development cooperation priorities
- Facilitate connections to regional and global implementation networks
- Support policy and framework development through technical assistance
- Conduct independent evaluation of implementation progress and outcomes

## 4.2 Implementation Timeline and Phasing

DSP implementation follows structured phases, beginning with institutional preparation (Phase 1) and progressing to comprehensive implementation across all stewardship areas (Phase 2). Phase 3, beyond the horizon of this plan, is the permanent integration of tourism into the economic development of the Cook Islands alongside other sectors and programmes.

### 4.2.1 Phase 1: Institutional Foundation (Year 1)

The first year of implementation lays the groundwork for all future activity, establishing the systems to integrate tourism into the overall development planning approach for the Cook Islands.

QUARTER / TIMEFRAME	ACTIVITIES
<b>Q1 (Months 1–3)</b> <b>Organisational Establishment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing implementation structures and baseline assessment</li> <li>DSAG endorsement of implementation approach and regular oversight</li> <li>PMU establishment of operational systems for coordination and progress tracking</li> <li>Wellbeing Leadership team mapping existing activities against stewardship objectives</li> <li>Government agencies identifying alignment mechanisms between current operations and stewardship goals</li> </ul>
<b>Q2 (Months 4–6)</b> <b>Existing Initiative Enhancement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support funded projects to achieve enhanced stewardship impact and alignment</li> <li>Structured identification of unfunded projects and priority ranking for implementation</li> <li>Comprehensive gap analysis identifying critical intervention requirements</li> <li>Strategy development for addressing identified implementation gaps</li> </ul>
<b>Q3 (Months 7–9)</b> <b>New Initiative Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of projects addressing critical gaps identified through structured analysis</li> <li>Stakeholder engagement in participatory project planning and design processes</li> <li>Funding proposal development for priority intervention initiatives</li> <li>Budget strategy development for 2026 and subsequent implementation years</li> </ul>
<b>Q4 (Months 10–12)</b> <b>Implementation Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government agency integration of stewardship goals into institutional work plans</li> <li>Project prioritisation based on available resources and strategic importance</li> <li>Coordination mechanism establishment for inter-agency collaboration</li> <li>Year 1 progress evaluation and Year 2 implementation planning</li> </ul>

## 4.2.2 Phase 2: Comprehensive Implementation (Years 2-5)

This phase will pilot new approaches to test, refine, and integrate tourism’s contribution to broader development outcomes into annual processes and the long-term direction of the Cook Islands.

TIMEFRAME	ACTIVITIES
<p><b>Years 2-3: Ongoing Integration and Capacity Building</b></p>	<p>Demonstration and System Building - Establishing implementation momentum while strengthening institutional capacity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch 3-5 flagship projects demonstrating stewardship value and approach effectiveness</li> <li>• Enhancement of existing projects to increase impact and alignment with stewardship objectives</li> <li>• Continuous building across implementing agencies and community partners</li> <li>• Monitoring system establishment for tracking progress and impact assessment</li> <li>• Tourism sector initiative integration with broader stewardship framework</li> <li>• Development partner support leverage for enhanced implementation capacity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Years 4-5: Scale and Institutionalisation</b></p>	<p>Comprehensive Implementation and System Embedding - Addressing complex challenges while institutionalising systematic approaches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of large-scale, multi-agency initiatives addressing complex stewardship challenges</li> <li>• Successful pilot scaling across appropriate island contexts and sectors</li> <li>• stewardship principle integration into all relevant government policies and procedures</li> <li>• Market mechanism development supporting sustainability practices</li> <li>• Regional leadership achievement in Destination Stewardship approaches and outcomes</li> </ul>

## 4.2.3 Phase 3: Ongoing Integration

This plan is intended to kick-start the Cook Islands’ journey towards destination stewardship. Over the 5-year period, the implementation will install an all of government and all of country approach to tourism development that ensures tourism creates positive outcomes across all islands and wellbeing dimensions. Phase 3 sees the permanent integration of tourism planning into the economic development of the Cook Islands, ensuring that tourism continues to deliver benefits alongside other economic sectors and programmes.

### 4.3: Resource Mobilisation Strategy and Allocation

Successful implementation requires diversified funding sources and strategic resource allocation mechanisms ensuring sustainable financing for stewardship outcomes. This plan is supported by a structured resource mobilisation strategy that outlines the funding principles, the potential funding channels, and the process for continually adjusting to the changing resource requirements for implementation.

TIMEFRAME	ACTIVITIES
<p>(Year 1) Existing Resource Optimisation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalise resource mobilisation strategy to identify funding gaps and opportunities across diverse funding channels</li> <li>• Align government agency budgets with stewardship objectives and priorities</li> <li>• Develop inter-agency resource sharing mechanisms for enhanced efficiency and coordination</li> <li>• Establish partnerships for cost-effective implementation approaches</li> <li>• Improve efficiency through coordinated procurement and shared service arrangements</li> </ul>
<p>(Year 2 onwards) Government Investment Enhancement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate stewardship projects and programmes into annual government budget processes</li> <li>• Establish multi-year funding commitments for implementation continuity</li> <li>• Establish resource pooling mechanisms for shared initiatives with coordinated investment</li> <li>• Utilise performance-based funding approaches to link resources allocation to measurable outcomes</li> <li>• Regularly review and adjust funding approach to evolve with resource requirements</li> </ul>

#### 4.3.1: Resource Allocation Framework

Strategic resource allocation decisions will be guided by evaluation criteria ensuring optimal impact and sustainability:

- **Strategic Alignment** - 40%: Implementation contribution to the Cook Islands’ stewardship outcomes and development priorities
- **Impact and Sustainability** - 35%: Potential for measurable impact and long-term systemic change
- **Implementation Feasibility** - 25%: Technical capacity, stakeholder support, and resource availability for successful completion

## 4.4: Risk Management and Mitigation

Systematic risk identification and mitigation strategies ensure implementation resilience and adaptive capacity for addressing implementation challenges. The table below outlines the biggest risks identified for implementation as well as planned mitigation strategies. A comprehensive risk register and regular reviews with the DSAG will guide implementation through the inevitable changes in context and risk profiles.

RISK	MITIGATION STRATEGY
<p><b>Insufficient Inter-Agency Coordination</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prime Minister leadership through DSAG providing institutional authority and accountability</li> <li>• Formal inter-agency collaboration agreements establishing coordination requirements and fostering a culture in which all agencies integrate stewardship principles into their day-to-day operations</li> <li>• Regular coordination meetings ensuring information sharing and joint planning</li> <li>• Shared performance measurement systems creating accountability for collaborative outcomes</li> </ul>
<p><b>Inadequate Financial Resources</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversified funding source development reducing dependence on single funding streams</li> <li>• Contingency planning for alternative implementation approaches under resource constraints</li> <li>• Government budget cycle alignment ensuring coordinated funding integration</li> <li>• Emergency reserve establishment for addressing unexpected implementation challenges</li> </ul>
<p><b>Implementation Delays and Capacity Constraints</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realistic timeline development with built-in flexibility for adaptive management</li> <li>• Comprehensive project support systems providing technical assistance and capacity building</li> <li>• Early warning mechanism establishment for identifying implementation challenges</li> <li>• Alternative implementation pathway development for addressing capacity constraints</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stakeholder Disengagement</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular communication systems maintaining stakeholder awareness and engagement</li> <li>• Multiple participation mechanisms accommodating diverse stakeholder preferences and capacity</li> <li>• Conflict resolution processes addressing disagreements and implementation disputes</li> <li>• Responsive feedback systems ensuring stakeholder input influences implementation approaches</li> </ul>

## 4.5: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Systems

Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems ensure consistent progress tracking, impact assessment, and adaptive management for continuous improvement. The measurement and evaluation process is designed to evolve in response to project and funder requirements, and to national-level outcome measurement through the NSDA+ indicators.

<p><b>Systematic Monitoring Framework</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive project and activity mapping across all stewardship dimensions and enabling systems</li> <li>• Progress tracking with regular completion assessment and performance scoring</li> <li>• Quarterly DSAG reviews ensuring strategic oversight and course correction authority</li> <li>• Priority setting based on progress analysis and emerging implementation challenges</li> </ul>
<p><b>Regular Reporting and Review Cycles</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monthly progress reports from PMU providing operational oversight and coordination support</li> <li>• Monthly Wellbeing Leadership reports ensuring thematic implementation accountability</li> <li>• Quarterly DSAG reviews enabling strategic decision-making and resource allocation</li> <li>• Bi-annual stakeholder surveys assessing implementation effectiveness and satisfaction</li> <li>• Annual comprehensive evaluation providing comprehensive impact assessment and learning</li> </ul>
<p><b>Multi-Level Success Measurement</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Level: Progress toward NSDA+ goals and SDG contribution assessment</li> <li>• Operational Level: Project implementation success and coordination effectiveness</li> <li>• Impact Level: Measurable changes in stewardship outcomes across all four dimensions</li> </ul>

## 4.5.1 Learning and Adaptive Management Continuous Improvement Systems

Each government agency contributes specialised expertise and resources aligned with their institutional mandates and stewardship framework requirements:

- Quarterly learning sessions facilitating best practice sharing and innovation diffusion
- Annual workshops capturing lessons learned and implementation insights
- Cross-dimension knowledge exchange promoting integrated approaches and coordination
- Regional network participation sharing Pacific Destination Stewardship experiences
- Integrate stewardship principles into routine operational procedures

### Adaptive management mechanisms

- Monthly implementation reviews enabling rapid adjustment and course correction
- Quarterly strategy updates ensuring responsiveness to changing conditions and emerging opportunities
- Annual framework reviews providing systematic assessment and strategic evolution
- Emergency protocols ensuring crisis response capability and implementation continuity

## 4.5.2 Transparency and Accountability Public Information and Engagement

- Quarterly public progress reports ensuring community awareness and engagement
- Annual parliamentary presentations providing legislative oversight and accountability
- Community consultation sessions facilitating feedback and participatory evaluation
- Online dashboard development showing key indicators and progress tracking

### Knowledge sharing and regional leadership

- Best practice documentation for knowledge capture and dissemination
- Pacific region support through experience sharing and technical cooperation
- International forum participation demonstrating leadership and learning from global experience
- Research partnership development supporting evidence-based implementation and innovation

## 4.6 Implementation Success Framework

This implementation framework provides the institutional structure for coordinated action over the next five years and beyond. Successful Destination Stewardship transformation requires sustained coordination, technical expertise, and collaborative commitment across all participating organisations and stakeholders.

Implementation success depends on maintaining structured approaches while remaining adaptive to changing conditions and emerging opportunities. Some phases will progress smoothly through established procedures, while others will require innovative problem-solving and strategic adjustment.

The critical success factor is sustained commitment to collaborative implementation, with each organisation contributing specialised capabilities toward shared stewardship objectives. Clear institutional roles, coordinated effort, shared resource mobilisation, and learning mechanisms create the foundation for transforming tourism from an unmanaged economic activity into a mechanism for comprehensive sustainable development.

This framework provides guidance, but implementation success occurs through daily operational decisions, project-level collaboration, and stakeholder commitment to achieving Destination Stewardship outcomes. Through purposeful institutional development, coordinated resource allocation, and adaptive management, the Cook Islands can achieve tourism that truly serves as a source of prosperity, cultural vitality, environmental sustainability, and community wellbeing for current and future generations.

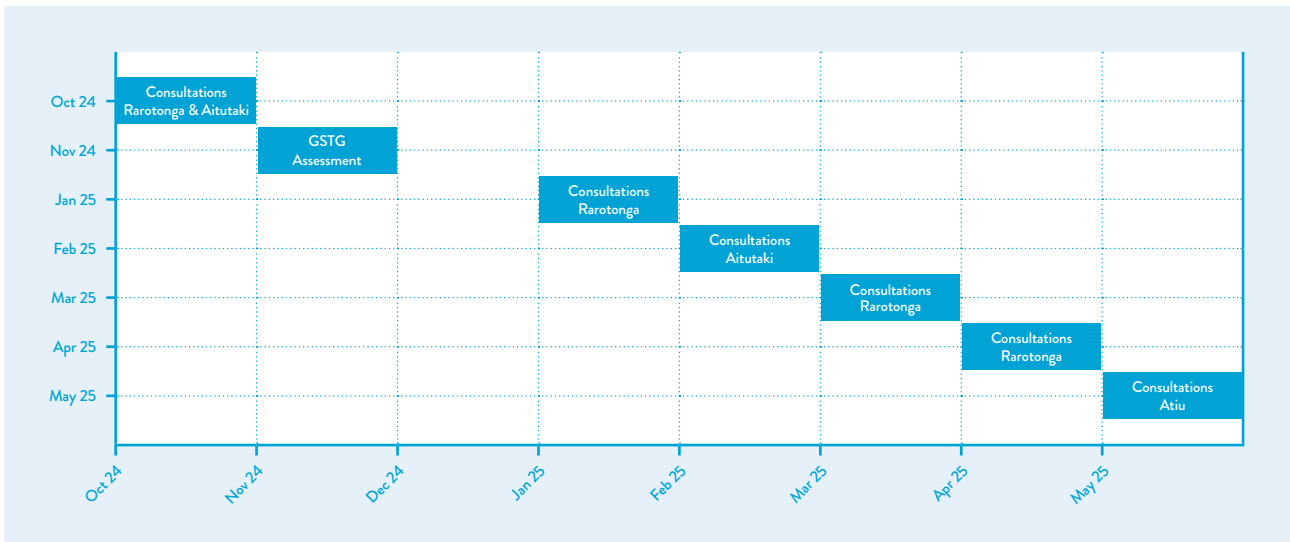
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## Appendicies

*~ Au mea puapinga takake*

# Appendix A: Situation Analysis Timeline and Consultation Details

DSP Situation Analysis Timeline



## October 2024 Consultations

### Rarotonga

DETAILS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES	COMMENTS
Public Consultation	21 Oct	26	Included representation from the public service, private sector, House of Ariki & Religious Advisory Council
Public Consultation	24 Oct	25	Included representation from govt & the tourism sector
One to One Meetings	21-25 Oct	-	One to one meetings with House of Ariki, CIT Board, Island Council & Religious Advisory Group

### Aitutaki

DETAILS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES	COMMENTS
Public Consultation	22 Oct	34	Included representation from the Island Government, Arongo Mana, tourism sector, public service & private sector
One to One Meetings	22 Oct	-	One to one meetings with Island Council & individual tourism business owners

## January 2025 Consultations

Rarotonga

DETAILS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES	COMMENTS
<b>DSAG Meeting</b>	27 Jan	26	First Destination Stewardship Advisory Board (DSAG) Meeting
<b>Public Consultation: Environment Pillar</b>	28 Jan	25	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
<b>Public Consultation: Environment Pillar</b>	28 Jan	25	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
<b>Public Consultation: Environment Pillar</b>	28 Jan	25	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
<b>Public Consultation: Environment Pillar</b>	28 Jan	25	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
<b>Public Consultation: Environment Pillar</b>	28 Jan	25	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
<b>One to One Meetings</b>	222 Oct	-	One to one meetings with Island Council & individual tourism business owners

## February 2025 Consultations

Aitutaki

DETAILS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES	COMMENTS
<b>Public Consultation</b>	3 Feb	26	Included representation from the Island Government, Arongo Mana, tourism sector, public service & private sector
<b>Public Consultation</b>	3 Feb	25	One to one meetings with Island Council and individual tourism business owners
<b>One to One Meetings</b>	2-3 Feb	-	One to one meetings with Island Council and tourism business owners

## Rarotonga

## March 2025 Consultations

DETAILS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES	COMMENTS
Focus Group Session Community Pillar	24 Mar	13	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
Focus Group Session Culture Pillar	26 Mar	12	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
Community Pillar Economy Pillar	27 Mar	8	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
Focus Group Session Environment Pillar	28 Mar	14	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
DSAG Meeting	28 Mar	13	Destination Stewardship Advisory Board (DSAG) Meeting

## Rarotonga

## April 2025 Consultations

DETAILS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES	COMMENTS
Focus Group Session All Pillars	24 Mar	13	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
Focus Group Session All Pillars	26 Mar	12	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
DSP Presentation	27 Mar	8	Presentation to Executive members of the Cook Islands Chamber of Commerce & Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council
One to One Meetings	28 Mar	13	OPM/CPPO, Climate Change, MFAT,

## Atiu

## May 2025 Consultations

DETAILS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES	COMMENTS
DSAG Meeting	16 May	9	Destination Stewardship Advisory Board (DSAG) Meeting
Focus Group Session All Pillars	22 May	40	Included representation from the NGOs, public service & private sector
DSP Presentation	23 May	20	Included representation from the public service, private sector & community
One to One Meetings	22-24 May	7	One to one meetings with Island Council, Arongo Mana and tourism business owners

## Appendix B: Reference List

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- **Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030**  
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- **Cook Islands GSTC Destination Assessment 2025**  
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- **Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Annual Report 2023/24**  
<https://cookislands.travel/sites/default/files/2025-01/Cook%20Islands%20Tourism%20Annual%20Report%20FY%202023-2024.pdf>
- **Cook Islands Tourism Development Strategy**  
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- **Cook Islands Tourism International Visitor Survey Annual Report 2023 -2024**  
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- **Pacific Islands Forum 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent**  
<https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>
- **South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) Pacific Sustainable Tourism Destination Standards**  
<https://southpacificislands.travel/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Pacific-Sustainable-Tourism-Destination-Standard.pdf>
- **South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) Pacific Sustainable Tourism Industry Standards**  
<https://southpacificislands.travel/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Pacific-Sustainable-Tourism-Industry-Standard.pdf>
- **South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework 2030**  
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