

Telling your story



Visit**Aberdeenshire**

Telling your Responsible Tourism story

Why is it important to tell your Responsible Tourism story?

Telling your Responsible Tourism story is not just about showing that you care about sustainability and inclusivity, it's also a great way to connect with your customers.

Visitors to North-east Scotland are increasingly looking for experiences that are authentic and genuine, and showing that you are respectful of the environment and local communities will make you stand out from the crowd.

This approach can also help extend the seasonality of your business and increase customer spending. Plus, when customers see the positive impact of their choices, they're more likely to spread the word and keep coming back.

Business benefits from marketing your Responsible Tourism story include:

- Improve your service
- Increase customer spending
- Improve customer satisfaction
- Increase loyalty and repeat bookings
- Extend booking season

However, telling your responsible tourism story can sometimes be challenging.

Many businesses struggle to find the balance between greenwashing and greenhushing. They worry about making claims they can't provide evidence of (greenwashing), which means that most companies don't share their efforts (greenhushing), out of fear of consumer backlash. In fact, 70% of sustainability actions are **not** communicated.

Sharing your story is important, so here are some tips on how to strike the right balance:

Know your audience

To tell your story effectively, start by identifying your audience.

There are usually two types of audiences: your customers and other stakeholders, such as potential employees, suppliers, or destination authorities.

Stakeholders:

Potential employees

They will check your website and social media for evidence of your commitment to sustainability. Having a Responsible Tourism policy on your website is a good start.

Also, highlight practical examples, like promoting public transport or cycling to work schemes on your website, social media, and in job adverts.

Destination authorities (for example VisitAberdeenshire and VisitScotland)

These organisations will look for your commitment to VisitScotland's 4 pillars (see [Introduction](#)). If you are applying for awards or certifications, showcasing your responsible tourism efforts on your website and social media can be used as evidence as part of the application process.

Suppliers

They are more likely to stay loyal if you share their story and show appreciation for them on your website and on social media.

Customers:

Your customers can be split into two types:

- **B2C** – these are your direct customers
- **B2B** – these include third parties that book on behalf of the end-consumer. They are often referred to as the travel trade (e.g. tour operators, travel agents, DMCs, online travel agents).

B2B customers are increasingly looking to work with suppliers that have a Responsible Tourism policy and may ask for this information before booking your services. Having your policy clearly displayed on your website, along with any accreditations and awards, will make it easier for them to choose you to work with.

How do you reach your customers?

- **Share your Responsible Tourism story across all channels.**
- **Provide clear, engaging information at all stages of the visitor journey.**
- **Use certifications to provide credible evidence of your commitment and to build consumer confidence (read more here: [Next Steps](#)).**
- **Make it easier for customers to live their values, even on holiday.**

Visitor journey – all stages

To communicate effectively, you need to provide clear and engaging information at every stage of the visitor journey, across all available channels. This includes (with some examples of actions):

Before the visit:

- Website – display your responsible tourism policy, blog about your initiatives.
- Social media – post about your sustainability and inclusivity initiatives.
- Confirmation emails – include useful information such as public transport options and links to your accessibility guide.

- Awards, accreditations – mention them on your website and social media, be proud of them.
- Reviews – share positive reviews that highlight your responsible practices.

During the visit

- Menus – tell the story behind your food and drink, especially if locally sourced, and showcase your suppliers on the menu.
- Guides and instructions – include your responsible tourism messaging in any guide books or instructions you share with customers.
- Awards – display them on site.
- Plan the flow of the visit – visitors often remember the best moment and the last moment of a visit. What does the last moment look like when they visit you? How can you make their final experience positive (e.g. don't collect payment at the end of the experience.)

After the visit

- Thank you emails – make them feel good about their visit or stay afterwards. For example, say “by booking with us, you have contributed to...” and mention your sustainability efforts in your follow up email.
- Reviews – share positive reviews by people who have visited / stayed with you.
- Social media – reshare posts from your customers, make them feel valued and seen.

Language

One of the most common challenges when it comes to talking about responsible tourism is around language – how do you tell your sustainability and inclusivity story without sounding preachy, or making people feel guilty?

Sustainability

People love the idea of sustainability, but few people change their behaviour. As mentioned in our [data insights](#) previously, 78% of people intend to stay in sustainable accommodation, but only 46% actually do.

The word “sustainable” can sometimes carry negative connotations and be seen as a risky option. Some people associate “sustainable” with more expensive, lower quality offerings, and inconvenience.

While people are willing to pay more for quality, convenience and location, they may not be willing to pay extra for sustainability alone. Your sustainability commitment should complement those aspects, not compete with them.

Instead of focusing solely on saving the planet, which makes some people feel guilty, frame your sustainability efforts in a way that highlights benefits to the customer, like comfort or quality. You don't want to put them off travelling.

Different nationalities may also have varying levels of interest in sustainability. For example, customers from Germany and Scandinavia might be more engaged, while those from the USA and China might have less interest.

So, sustainability may not be what attracts customers initially, but it may be something that turns them into repeat customers, if you tell your story in the right way.

Use words like genuine, caring, authentic, quality, local, rather than “sustainable”. For instance, if you are a distillery, you might talk about how your gin is made with love and care on social media and on your website, then mention your sustainability practices during the guided tour.

Inclusivity

Telling your inclusivity story can sometimes feel like a box ticking exercise, and some businesses worry about appearing overly politically correct.

For example, many companies post about their LGBTQ+ commitment during Pride Month, but then neglect to mention it for the rest of the year.

To avoid this, make inclusivity a natural part of your storytelling. Feature a wide range of team members and visitors on social media, show (don't just tell) your accessibility features, mention staff training, and show your support for all aspects of the local community, including underrepresented groups.

Use welcoming language and the accepted terminology (see the Inclusive Tourism section).

Images

Using the right images is very important, as the right image can tell a whole story at a glance and resonate with your audience on an emotional level.

A well-chosen image can capture the essence of your Responsible Tourism story, making it even more impactful.

A few things to consider when selecting images:

- Showcase all seasons – it's tempting to use only sunny, summer images, but it's important to show your destination throughout the year. Highlight the beauty of each season, like a crisp winter morning or a colourful autumn day. This helps visitors see that your business has something special to offer, no matter the time of year.
- Be inclusive - make sure your images reflect the diversity of your visitors and the inclusive values of your business. Show people of different ages, backgrounds, and abilities, as well as same-sex couples. This helps everyone feel welcome and valued when they see themselves in your photos.

- People find it difficult to visualise sustainability – a sustainable bedroom or lightbulb looks very much like a non-sustainable version. However, there are other ways to show your sustainability story – photos of local products, natural scenery, and activity days can also tell a story.
- Highlight quality – there is a misconception that sustainability means lower quality, so use images to show that you are not compromising on the quality of your products or services.
- Be honest - it's important to be authentic and honest with your images. Make sure they give an accurate view of what visitors can expect.

Break it down – what are you doing already?

You may already be doing a lot of things that you haven't considered as "telling a story" – review what you already do, and weave it into your story. A few examples could be:

Local supply chains

For example, if you are an accommodation provider using locally sourced eggs for breakfast, mention it on your menu, maybe even include the name and a photo of the supplier. Feature them on your website under "meet our suppliers" and include a photo to make it personal.

Retail

Is there a story there? For example, Craigievar Castle recently underwent a renovation project to make it "Pink Again". They now collaborate with a local gin distillery (Lost Loch Distillery in Aboyne) to sell a Pink Castle Gin in their gift shop. This is an example of a great story to share.

Lost Loch Spirits



Collaborating with Lost Loch Distillery, located just 7 miles from Craigievar Castle, we have created the Pink Castle Gin. This gin is naturally flavoured with Scottish raspberries, celebrating the region's delicious local produce. Helen Ruth's bespoke Craigievar Castle label design is a delightful additional feature in the Pink Castle collection.

Shop Pink Castle gin now

Your team

Do they have a story to tell? Get your team involved and share their ideas and stories on social media.

Create a social media plan

Social media is something that a lot of people find challenging. It's time consuming and it can be discouraging when a post you have spent a lot of time on doesn't get a lot of engagement.

Social media is not an exact science, so experiment to see what works best for you. If you are short on time, set aside an hour at the start of each month to plan a few

posts. This will give you a solid foundation for your posting, and you can then be reactive throughout the month.

Test different times and days to find when you get the most engagement. If something works, repeat it.

You can feature recurring themes, for example, post about a local supplier once a month, or share different sustainability initiatives a couple of times a month. Mix these posts up with other content, so you don't become solely a sustainability account.

Returning to the accommodation provider example above; if you use locally sourced eggs, post on social media about your eggs and the supplier. If someone has posted a positive review about your breakfast, use that as an opportunity to mention that the eggs are locally sourced. That's two posts already.

How to communicate with your customers

As mentioned above, it's important to communicate in a way that doesn't make your visitors feel guilty or uncomfortable. You want them to engage with your story, in a positive way, that makes them feel good. Here are some tips:

Be humorous – avoid doom and gloom, make it fun. It is easier to change someone's behaviour if you share a joke than if you make them feel forced to do it against their will. However, keep in mind that humour doesn't always translate well.

Be personal - make yourself relatable. Write in the first person and include a photo of the owner or manager on your website. Introduce your team to your followers (and potential customers) on social media.

Be trustworthy - make them trust you and show empathy. Providing evidence of your claims is essential, and one way of doing that is to get other people to say it for you (testimonials, meet our suppliers, awards, certificates etc).

Make your audience feel involved - making them the protagonists and enhancing the experience increases the willingness to pay. For example, someone would pay more for a garden experience where they pick their own food and then enjoy it for dinner, rather than just a standard garden tour.

Make them feel good – use your menu descriptions, provenance statements and cross-selling opportunities to show that you care. Share the pride of making a difference together.

Make your audience feel special – for example, post an appreciation post about a supplier, or share a success story, thanking your customers for contributing to it. Unique service and sense of exclusivity increase willingness to pay. You may want to consider offering specific products only for loyal visitors.

Be engaging - show your audience that you share their values, whether it's ethical practices, social values, or being a good employer. Make them feel like they are helping you personally, as well as the environment.

Make it easy for them – remove the stress and responsibility from customers when it comes to making sustainable choices. Offer sustainable products as the default option and provide evidence to back up these choices. This should be part of your customer service.

Guilt alleviation – instead of making customers feel guilty about not doing enough, show them that they are contributing by booking you. The message “don't worry, we will look after it”, will make them feel good about booking you.

Help them take decisions - present information that is useful at that point in time. Make it convenient and straightforward, so it becomes the normal choice:

1. Before booking or purchase
2. After booking and confirmation
3. On arrival or start of the tour
4. During the tour or stay
5. After the stay or visit

Behaviour that is already accepted – for example, instead of asking guests to “save the planet” by reusing their towels, why not say: “reuse your towel, just like at home”. This simple change makes the sustainable choice feel more natural to the guests.

Focus on “what's in it for me” - instead of focusing on “what's in it for the planet”, tell customers what's in it for them and how they benefit. For example, if you have invested in better insulation, mention how cosy it makes their rooms, while also being energy efficient.

Make it tangible – after purchase or booking, reinforce their perception of having made the right choice by letting them know how their visit also helps sustainability, in addition to a great experience. “By booking with us, you have contributed to...”

Tell your story compellingly – make sure it's relevant to your audience and that it is what they want to hear, not just what you want to say. Adapt it to your audience's knowledge, or lack thereof. Find the universal elements of your story, that anyone can relate to.

Ask nicely - when designing your sustainability communications, using your logo and adding personal touches to signs produces better results with your customers. Avoid generic phrases like “be eco-friendly”, which could be read as an order.

Make all seasons appealing – show that your offer is attractive year-round. Weatherproof your offer - tell them what to do when there are midges, it rains, or it's too hot. Add a calendar to your website to highlight the best features at your venue each month. This is also great content for social media, such as:

- Which birds and flowers can they expect to see?
- Are there any festivals or events happening?
- What seasonal food will you be serving?

- What will your garden look like?
- Use photos from that time of year.

Give them reasons to recommend or return – attracting new customers is more costly and complex, so value your repeat visitors.

Build and share knowledge

It is also important to continuously improve your and your team's knowledge.

Get your team involved in your Responsible Tourism journey and storytelling, both onsite and on social media. Encourage staff engagement by asking for ideas and suggestions. Learn from each other and make sure every new member of staff is familiar with your values.

Learn from other tourism businesses in the region as well as your suppliers. Look at their social media and websites, what are they doing well?

Look for partnerships and collaborations – are there other businesses you can collaborate with in the area, who can help you tell your story?

Create a sustainability policy / statement and make sure it's available both externally (website) and internally (induction, training manuals). Some tour operators may require sustainability policies to book your services, so it's beneficial to have one for many reasons.

Provide an accessibility guide and ensure it's available on your website, and that your team are all aware of its content.

VisitAberdeenshire

If you implement these suggestions, let VisitAberdeenshire know so they can share your story in presentations and with buyers. Tag VisitAberdeenshire in your social media posts, using their handle and hashtags:

@visitabdn
#VisitABDN
#BeautifulABDN
#Aberdeenshire

Be part of our promotions

VisitAberdeenshire work with a PR consultancy to help pitch potential stories and items of interest about the region to travel journalists and specialist titles, and we are always on the lookout for positive stories to share.

If you have a good news story or would like to share any new developments to enhance your sustainability or inclusivity, please feel free to share it by emailing: industry@visitabdn.com

Businesses can also be featured and promoted to our engaged audiences through a range of paid-for advertising opportunities including advertorials, social media and e-newsletters.

Our paid-for advertising opportunities are an additional offering to our day-to-day free promotional activities such as website listings.

Find out more using this link: [Advertising Opportunities](#)

Case study

For some good examples of how to communicate your sustainability story, see “[Case Study – The Bay](#)”.

Sources: ETAG conference with Professor Xavier Font, National Trust for Scotland

Next steps



Visit**Aberdeenshire**

Next steps

Once you have started to implement changes to your business, certifications, accreditations or awards can help tell your story and gain you much deserved recognition of your efforts.

You may also want to expand your network by connecting with other businesses and joining relevant membership organisations and associations.



Awards, associations and accreditations

Scottish Thistle Awards

Suitable for:

All tourism businesses (accommodation providers, attractions, activity companies, tour operators, events, festivals, restaurants, pubs, etc).

Description:

The annual Scottish Thistle Awards are VisitScotland's way of celebrating excellence and recognising businesses in Scotland's tourism industry.

Sustainable Tourism is central to these awards, so if you are committed to sustainability and inclusivity, you may want to consider applying. Each entry must provide evidence of responsible and sustainable practices and ambitions.

How to apply:

- Nominations usually open in March.
- If you are nominated by someone, you will receive an email with details of how to enter the awards.
- It's not essential to receive a public nomination to enter. You can still enter your chosen award categories directly online.
- There are a lot of different categories to choose from (see list below), so you may want to apply for more than one category.
- Take your time filling in the application, and really consider your answers.
- The Scottish Thistle Awards panel will consider the entries during May and June, and the shortlist is usually announced in July
- The regional awards take place in the autumn.
- Winners from each regional award ceremony advance to the national final which is usually held in November or December.
- The overall winner for each category is announced at the national final.

Categories:

- Best Accommodation or Unique Stay
- Best Bar or Pub
- Best Community Tourism and Events Initiative
- Best Eating Experience
- Best Hotel
- Best Outdoor and Adventure Experience
- Best Self-Catering or Exclusive Use
- Best Visitor Attraction
- Climate Action Award
- Employer of the Year
- Inclusion Award
- Innovation Award
- Outstanding Cultural Event or Festival
- Individual of the Year
- Rising Star Award



Regional awards:

- Aberdeen City and Shire Tourism Awards (ACSTA)
- Central and East Regional Final
- South of Scotland Thistle Awards
- The Highland and Islands Tourism Awards (HITA)
- West Regional Final

Read more here: [VisitScotland Scottish Thistle Awards information page](#)

Source: VisitScotland

Green Tourism certification

Suitable for:

All tourism businesses (accommodation providers, attractions, activity companies, tour operators, venues, etc).

Description:

Green Tourism is a world-leading sustainability certification for the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors. Their aim is to help embed responsible, sustainable and environmentally friendly practices across businesses and the wider tourism sector.

Despite being called “Green” Tourism, it’s not just about sustainability and green practices. They also cover communication, inclusivity and accessibility, all under three headings (people, places and planet – see below). Basically, everything we cover in this Responsible Tourism Toolkit.

They provide expert advice and manageable actions to help tourism businesses achieve a sustainability certification, which lets your customers know your business is invested in a healthy future.

You will have clear and practical actions to run a more sustainable business, embrace the circular economy, and reduce your carbon footprint. You might find that you are probably doing more than you realise already.

PEOPLE GOALS



Communication



Awareness



Community



Health &
Well-being



Equality, Diversity
& Inclusivity

PLACES GOALS



Destinations



Experiences



Travel



Food and Drink



Biodiversity

OUR PLANET GOALS



Energy



Water



Waste



Carbon



Chemicals

How to apply:

You can do a quick eligibility test on their website. If eligible, you can fill in an online application form and pay the membership fee.

You don't have to fill in all the information at once, the application is an online form, so you can save your progress and revisit the form as needed.

You will also need to submit evidence, such as photos, links to social media or screenshots. The Green Tourism team will support you throughout the application process.

Once your application is ready, submit it for assessment. The Green Tourism team will then review your assessment and award you a Green Tourism Award – Bronze, Silver or Gold.

Read more here: [Green Tourism website](#)

Other Green Certification schemes in Scotland

There are other Green Certification schemes available in Scotland, and you can read more about them here: [VisitScotland Green Certification Schemes](#)

Tourism Cares

Suitable for:

All tourism businesses who are ready to engage with the travel trade (Tourism Cares is a B2B website).

Description:

VisitScotland are working to support Scotland's Responsible Tourism objectives, and as part of that project, they have developed a partnership with Tourism Cares.

Tourism cares is a US non-profit who are closely aligned with USTOA (the US Tour Operator Association). USTOA is a major influencer in bringing North American visitors to Scotland.

Tourism Cares believes that tourism can be a real force for good, and they work with over 160 members (including travel advisors, tour operators and airlines) to reach millions of travellers worldwide who are planning and booking their holidays.

They have created an interactive [Meaningful Travel Map](#), allowing the travel trade to search for 'meaningful travel' providers across the globe.

Scotland is the first European destination to feature on the map, and VisitScotland aim to showcase as many responsible tourism products and experiences as possible, that meet the eligibility criteria.

How to apply:

To be considered, you need:

- 1) A tour, product or experience that is relevant to tourists (this includes accommodation, as well as attractions and activities).
- 2) To be visitor ready – i.e. have a website, social media, have all necessary permissions and licences and respond to enquiries.
- 3) The capacity to benefit from additional marketing (i.e. have room to grow your business).
- 4) To adhere to Tourism Cares' child safety and animal welfare policies.
- 5) To meet at least two of the eligibility criteria listed on their website.

Take a look at the criteria on the Tourism Cares website: [Tourism Cares Criteria](#)

If you believe you meet these criteria, you would need to complete an application form. The form takes about 20 minutes to fill in, but you may need more time to consider and write your submission texts. You will need to describe your experiences, write an impact statement, outline your mission / vision, and provide a couple of high-resolution images.

Read more here: [VisitScotland Tourism Cares](#)

Make Travel Matter® Experience

Suitable for:

Tourism businesses that offer experiences to the travel trade (B2B).

Description:

The Travel Corporation (TTC) is the parent company of tour operators such as Insight Vacations, Trafalgar, Contiki, Highland Explorer Tours and Brendan Vacations, as well as other tourism businesses such as The Red Carnation Hotel Collection and Evan Evans.

In 2020, they launched a 5-year sustainability strategy called **How We Tread Right (HWTR)** for its family of brands, based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

This led to the creation of Make Travel Matter®, a tool to allow their brands to select experiences that benefit the people and communities they visit, with a clear social or environmental mission at the core of their operations.

Their brand teams identify experiences that are suitable for this programme. The experiences must meet the criteria of at least 1 of the 11 Global Goals they have selected from the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.

How to apply:

If your experience aligns with at least one of the Global Goals, reach out to your TTC contractor to be considered.

Learn more here: [Make Travel Matter Experiences](#)

Wild Scotland

Suitable for:

Organisations and individuals that offer wildlife, adventure or activity tourism services to visitors in Scotland.

Description:

Wild Scotland is a membership organisation, committed to sharing best practices across the outdoor sector in Scotland. Every member is required to pledge their commitment through signing up to the Wild Scotland Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines, focusing on 4 key principles: Care, Sustainability, Responsibility and Excellence.

How to apply:

Apply online on their website.

Read more here: [Wild Scotland](#)