# Setting up an award for sustainable tourist destinations in the Alps

FEASIBILITY STUDY AND INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE
WORKING GROUP SUSTAINABLE TOURISM OF THE ALPINE
CONVENTION (2016-2018)

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# 1. Introduction

One of the goals set for the Working Group on Sustainable Tourism of the Alpine Convention over the 2017-2018 period was the one of discussing the feasibility of developing and award or a similar initiative aimed to formally recognise innovative initiatives in sustainable alpine tourism destinations.

The Working Group has deemed necessary to take an overview of the *status quo* with existing awards, certification schemes, branding initiatives, networks and any other action initiated mainly in the Alps. The aim of this composite set of instruments had to be the one of recognising, measuring, or certifying – at least to some extent – the sustainability of tourist centres (e.g. towns, villages, regions, parks, valleys, or other territorial agglomerates), local businesses in general and tourist operators, entrepreneurs and managers more specifically.

In order to collect a limited number of real experiences, schemes or even only attempts to set up a comprehensive approach to tourist sustainability in the Alpine region, the Working Group on Sustainable Tourism launched a call among its members and invited the participants in its meetings to actively cooperate in identifying and collecting experiences of awards, prizes, schemes, and other initiatives aimed to estimate the sustainability of tourist destinations, resorts, towns or villages, valleys etc. preferably located within the scope of application of the Alpine Convention.

A standardised form has been used for the collection. Most significant cases received and used for developing the synthetic remarks reported in the sections that follow have been used for the preparation of this report.

The work collected in this report was possible thanks to the precious collaboration of the representatives of the Parties and Observers to the Alpine Convention, the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention as well as of many other experts who actively cooperated with the Presidency of the Working Group in collecting, elaborating, interpreting the materials and data, and drafting the contents of the following pages.
We want to acknowledge their unique support and wish to thank them for the invaluable contribution given to the successful completion of this report.

## 2. Summary of the *status quo* from the analysis of case-studies

From a first monitoring exercise focused on awards for the sustainability of tourist centres, towns or destinations, a diverse set of initiatives have been found. They range from the local to the national, EU and international level.

Until now, there is apparently no clear sign of any Alpine (and even mountainous) focus or feature in the tourism-oriented awards we analysed. In Italy no trace of sustainable mountain tourism-oriented awards neither is detectable.

Specifically, the information collected in the frame of the WG does not allow to identify any significant international experience addressing sustainable tourist sites or initiative localised in the mountains, or focused on distinctive mountain characteristics of tourist centres.

A variety of procedures for application seems to be present across the analysed case studies (that have been collected in the Forms found in the Annex).

Sometimes calls for proposals are set up for the purpose of collecting proof of the implementation of suitable practices on the territory, requiring a varying degree of detail.
They can be more or less demanding for the applicant subjects or institutions – that may need time and resources to engage in the preparation of the modules and information needed for participation. On other occasions, procedures foresee a freer and looser approach of voluntary submissions by municipalities, towns, villages, other territorial areas, or the private sector (usually tourist operators), aiming at incentivising the disclosure and sharing of existing practices in a thematic area.

Some awards retain a strict sectorial nature and address specific categories of tourist products (e.g. tourist packages).

The types of awards analysed in the field of tourism are particularly diverse among each other.

The most common ones include the following categories:

1) *Assignment of a label, or special award being formally recognised by an awarding organisation*

2) *Promotional activities focused on the awarded sites through uniform branding (e.g. networks)[1]*

3) *Allocation of a monetary reward sometimes earmarked to some investment in sustainability-oriented actions*

4) *Certification schemes undergoing a third party evaluation, being often associated to a label that qualifies a destination as a part of a network oriented to a sustainable and socially responsible type of tourism[2].*

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[1] For instance "Bandiere Arancioni" (Orange Flags) awarded by the Italian Touring Club as a label recognising tourist and environmental quality of a small village in a inner area, or the Network of "Borghi più belli d'Italia" (The most beautiful villages in Italy) where candidate towns undergo a selection procedure based on a diverse set of criteria.

[2] Towns and villages being members to the Network "Borghi sostenibili in Piemonte" (Sustainable Villages in Piedmont) (Italy) undergo a procedure including audit, assessment and promotional activities on good practices in tourist sustainability that is managed by a technical partner responsible for the release of the "label" (Environment Park). The municipalities in the network use the label as a tool for enhancing their territories as oriented to a sustainable and responsible type of tourism.

## 3. Possible developments

Three main hypotheses concerning the aspect and typologies that tourist awards for mountain destinations could assume will be analysed here. The categories found below represent the outcome of a study and collection of good practice conducted on experts, tourist operators, local administrations and other constituencies and stakeholders in regions all across the Alps – and in strict cooperation with the members of the Sustainable Tourism WG and experts from NGOs, universities and research institutions.

## 3.1 Concession of a generic Award to Alpine Tourist Destinations

The award could be granted to tourist destinations by means of a call for proposals.

For a proper assessment of the characteristics of the destinations being suitable to be awarded, a sound information on the "sustainability" of the destinations themselves would be of great support.

Under this point a view it seems advisable to develop and deepen studies and research on sustainability indicators (and on the ones being more suitable for application in mountain sites) in order to build a set of criteria to be met by the listed destinations.

Even though a comprehensive award to a destination (where different activities, styles and attitudes to sustainability are likely to coexist) shall take into account the local or regional economy (i.e. production, supply-chain, services, etc.) as a whole, the award could be extended to include also the private sector – namely tourist operators and other local stakeholders, e.g. in a following phase. However, destinations with wide tourist access or similar figures (e.g seasonal peaks) could be facing bigger challenges to sustainability especially if using indicators such as occupancy rate, or land use by tourist infrastructures (e.g. ski domain, bike trails, etc.).

The decision to set up an award based on a scheme recognising and assessing the overall sustainability of a tourist destination requires to consider a composite set of characteristics of local tourism including overall quality, level of innovation and ecological or environmental quality – that need to be applied even to the private sector.

Measuring the performance of individual companies under specific respects, by running different sector-focused awards (or brands) at the same time could help identify good practices also within regions and destinations not qualifying as particularly sustainable in a wide sense. This approach could help collect lighthouse projects suitable to be spread about the whole Alpine region.

## 3.2    Award of a label or brand to Alpine Tourist Destinations

A possible solution could consist in awarding a label or a brand being easy to recognise for actual and potential visitors of the destination. The awarded destination may use it for promoting its tourist offer and facilities on the market, but also feel it as properly representing the type of tourism it actually offers.

The concrete conferment of a label or a brand should undergo a process of voluntary adoption of environmental management systems at the destination level, the application of voluntary norms and standards of quality and the involvement of third parties for verification, assessment and assurance on the quality of the implementation of standards, norms and management systems at the destination level.

Alternatively, a destination could also incentivise or promote the adoption of voluntary standards and norms by (a certain share of) local tourist operators, according to rules agreed upon and set at the level of the destination, or at another more suitable territorial level.

The label or brand could, in this case, be directly conferred to local tourist operators and businesses through a simplified procedure or by means of the standard process foreseen for a full certification scheme.

Some forms of support, technical assistance or incentive can also be put in place, depending on the context and resources available.

## 3.3　Adoption of a voluntary Charter for sustainable tourism



A voluntary management scheme as the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST), that is widely applied in European and Alpine parks[3], would provide a strong incentive to a participatory approach and a stricter cooperation among the interested subjects living in, and managing a giver territory. In the case we discuss here the territory subject to the Charter would correspond to the tourist destination under inquiry, while usually the scope of application of ECST corresponds to the surface of a Park as defined by national or subnational law.
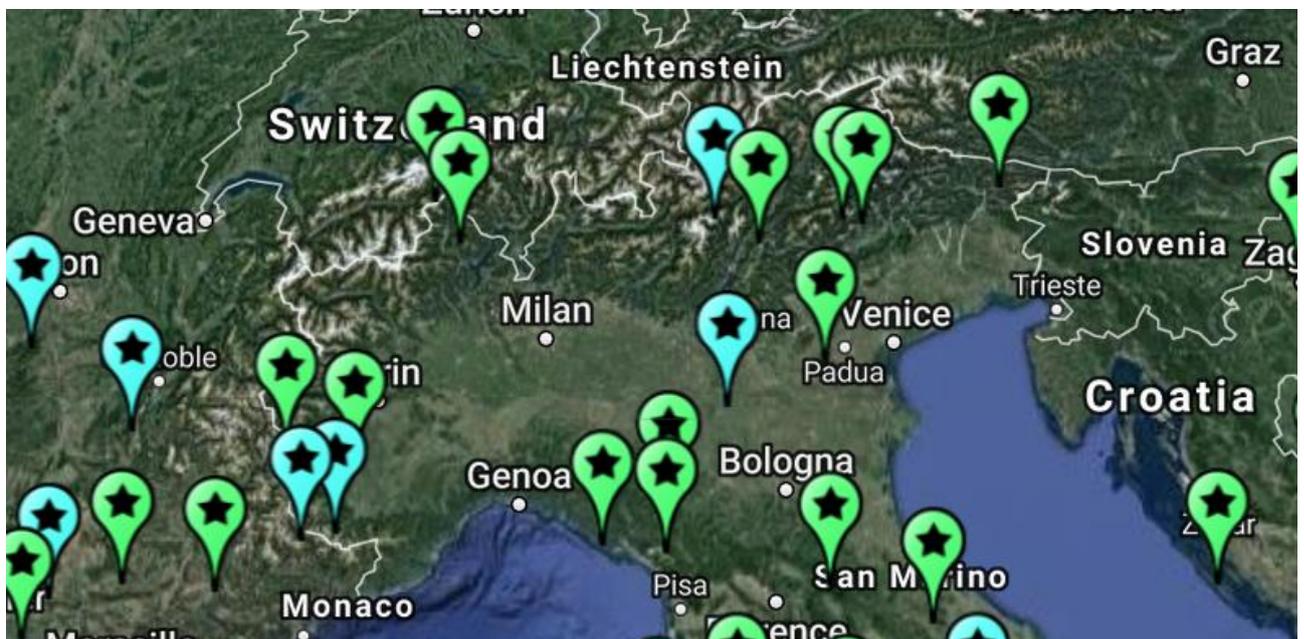


ECST is a practical *management tool* that enables a territory (in this case: a park or protected area) to develop tourism sustainably.

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[3] The European Charter Network now counts with 102 Sustainable Destinations from 16 countries involving a growing number of local tourism businesses as Charter partners, local and regional government authorities, NGOs and many more (EUROPARC 2018).

In the case of ECST, the parties cooperate with each other for developing a common strategy and an action plan to be applied especially in the territory under the legal jurisdiction of a park as defined by the law, but also beyond this border depending on the agreement among the involved territorial actors.

It is worth noting how ECST provides a framework for starting and institutionalising a multi-stakeholder dialogue and decision making structure where businesses operating on-site as well as tour operators operating outside and towards the certified site hold a well-recognised role.

The core element of the "Charter" is working in partnership with all relevant stakeholders to develop a common sustainable tourism strategy and an action plan on the basis of a thorough situation analysis (ECST 2019).

A foreseeable outcome of applying a ECST-like tool would be a spur to local stakeholders' participation in the process, independently from their specific interest in getting an individual certification for their business activity. Business behaviour in ECST-areas tends to be consistent to the management style applied on the territory under the Charter's scope –individual businesses localised within the scope of application of ECST can apply for gaining the "Charter Award" in the second certification phase.

# 4. Sources

Forms on good practices and suggestions on awards, certification schemes, and other relevant initiatives, have been collected by the Parties to the Alpine Convention, the Observers and all the other contributors to this report.

They provide detailed information on the investigated practices and can be made available to interested readers for more detailed research and analysis.

*List of good practices and awards in the field of sustainable tourism*

- Bandiera Arancione (Orange Flag) Touring Club Italiano (Italy)
- Borghi Sostenibili del Piemonte (Sustainable Villages in Piemonte Region) (Italy)
- European Capital of Smart Tourism (European Commission)
- Oscar Ecotourism (Italy)
- EDEN (European Destination of ExcelleNce) Tourism award (European Commission)
- Sustainable and innovative tourism projects in the Alpine Region (Alpine Convention)
- Federal Award for sustainable tourism destinations (Germany)
- ITACA Sustainable Tourism Award (Italy)
- Tourism meets Agriculture (EUREGIO)
- Award Responsible Tourism Cristina Ambrosini (Italy)
- The Jakob Award for quality and excellence in tourism in the Alps-Adriatic region. (Slovenia)
- Clima Host (Alpine Convention) (Germany)