

37 Sustainable urban tourism in Asia-Pacific

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Abstract

This chapter reviews sustainable tourism in countries and cities within the Asia Pacific region. It begins by providing a background on the region that consists of almost 50 countries, spanning from Afghanistan in the west to Kiribati in the east. Next, there is a general overview of sustainable development and sustainable tourism in the region and its associated challenges that include rapid urbanisation, poverty, climate change, frequent natural disasters and other crises. A general review of tourism and tourism trends in the Asia Pacific is given. The countries vary greatly in terms of volumes of international visitors and are recovering from the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus then moves to specific countries and cities within Asia Pacific and their sustainable tourism initiatives. Of these destinations, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), South Pacific, and Thailand are identified as some of the best examples in sustainable tourism efforts. The future prospects for sustainable tourism in Asia Pacific are discussed against a background of a significant level of uncertainty. The chapter closes with a set of conclusions and recommendations incorporating the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: APEC, ASEAN, CAREC, climate change, ESCAP, Indigenous tourism, marine tourism, medical tourism, natural disasters, PATA, religious tourism, SAARC, small island developing states (SIDs), SPTO, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustainable tourism, urbanisation

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to comprehensively analyse and describe the implementation of sustainable tourism in the countries and cities of the Asia-Pacific region. The specific objectives are to:

- a. Describe the status of sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific and the major challenges the region faces in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- b. Review the implementation of sustainable tourism in Asia-Pacific countries.
- c. Explain specific sustainable tourism applications in Asia-Pacific countries and cities.
- d. Identify the future prospects for sustainable tourism in the Asia-Pacific region.

This chapter contributes with an overview of sustainable tourism in the Asia-Pacific using a multi-source and multi-perspective lens. Many agencies and organisations are involved with tourism in this region including the national governments, multinational organisations such as UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UNESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), UNWTO and other UN agencies, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), CAREC (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation), SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), PATA (Pacific Asia Travel Association), SPTO (Pacific Tourism Organisation), multilateral banks (e.g., Asian Development Bank, World Bank), foreign aid agencies (e.g., GIZ, Swisscontact, USAID), and multiple NGOs.

The past five years of Asia-Pacific tourism from 2019 to 2023, can be characterised as 2019 – rapid growth; 2020-2021 – significant decline; and 2022-2023 – recovery. The chapter now provides a background on the region. It might also be called the “boom, bust, and bloom” eras with the current “bloom” being a period of realistic optimism tempered with a high level of uncertainty.

2. Background on the Asia-Pacific region

Figure 37.1 provides a map of Asia and Figure 37.2 shows the area known as Oceania; taken together they comprise the Asia-Pacific region as defined in this chapter.

ASIA



Figure 37.1 Political map of Asia. Photo: CIA World Factbook.

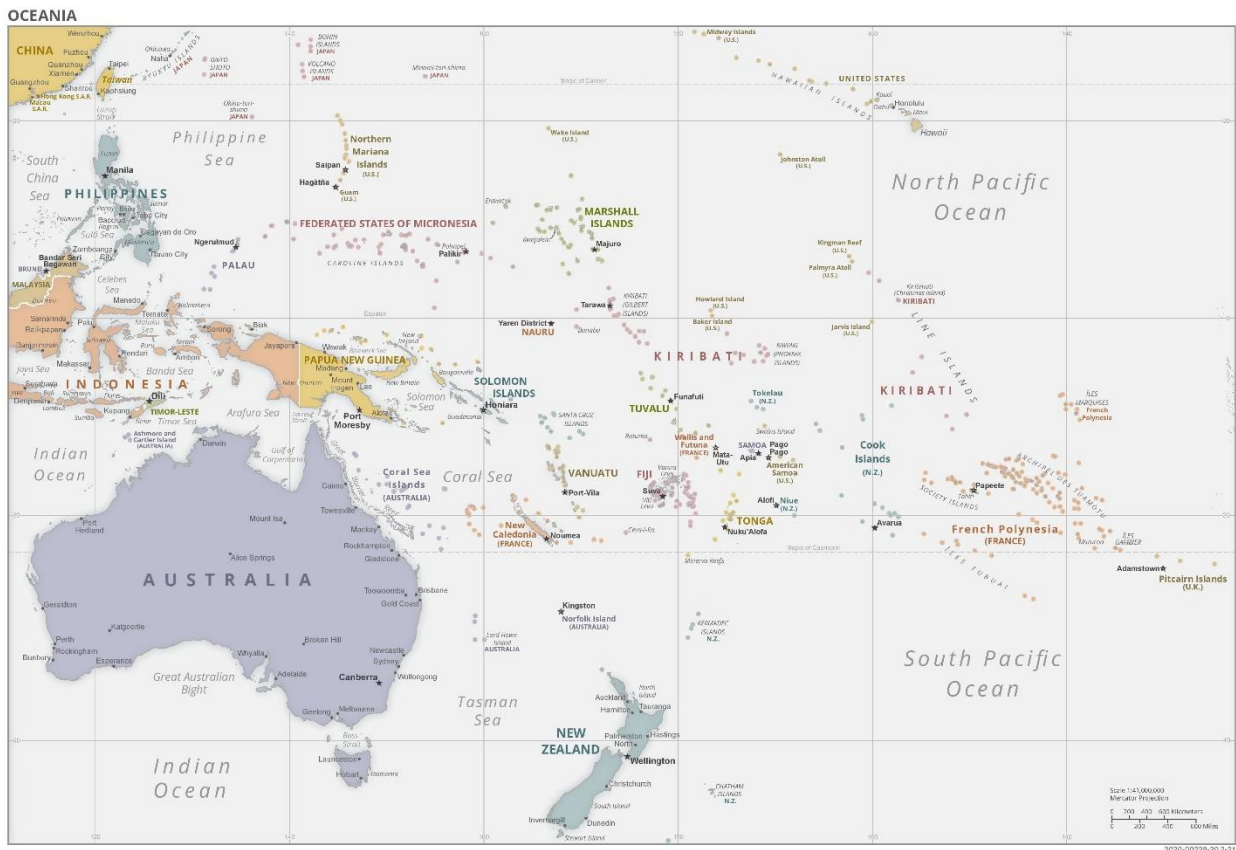


Figure 37.2 Political map of Oceania. Photo: CIA World Factbook.

Table 37.1 lists the countries in the Asia-Pacific along with their sub-regions, and the multi-country bodies of which they are members. With so many countries included, there is huge diversity among the nations. For example, the UN classifies Australia, Japan, and New Zealand as developed economies; the five Central Asian republics as economies in transition; and all others as developing economies (United Nations, 2022). They vary greatly in populations, from China with 1.4 billion people to Niue and Tokelau with less than 2,000 inhabitants; and size, from China at 9.7 million square kilometres to Tuvalu, Niue, and Tokelau all less than 30 square kilometres (CIA World Factbook, 2023). There are also major differences in geography and geology, climate, cultures and religions, and political systems. As mentioned later, there are significant variations in their tourism volumes and activities, and in the application of sustainable tourism. For example, the many island countries (including small island developing states, SIDS), in the region are particularly dependent on marine and beach tourism; mountainous countries such as Nepal and some of the Central Asian republics on adventure tourism (e.g., Kyrgyz Republic, Figure 37.3); countries with significant religious sites

including Bhutan, India, and Sri Lanka on religious tourism; and others, including Singapore, and the Hong Kong and Macao SARs in China, on urban tourism. They also diverge in the extent of sustainability challenges, although rapid urbanisation is a common reality throughout most of these nations.



Figure 37.3 Mountain range in Kyrgyz Republic. Photo: Unsplash.com, Mick Truys.

Table 37.1 Countries in the Asia-Pacific region (alphabetic order)

#	Country	Region	Membership
1	Afghanistan	South Asia	CAREC, ESCAP, SAARC
2	Australia	Oceania	APEC, ESCAP
3	Bangladesh	South Asia	ESCAP, SAARC
4	Bhutan	South Asia	ESCAP, SAARC
5	Brunei Darussalam	Southeast Asia	APEC, ASEAN, ESCAP
6	Cambodia	Southeast Asia	ASEAN, ESCAP, GMS
7	China, Peoples Republic	East Asia	APEC, CAREC, ESCAP, SPTO, GMS
8	Fiji	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
9	India	South Asia	ESCAP, SAARC
10	Indonesia	Southeast Asia	APEC, ASEAN, ESCAP
11	Japan	East Asia	APEC, ESCAP
12	Kazakhstan	Central Asia	CAREC, ESCAP
13	Kiribati	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
14	Korea, Democratic People's	East Asia	ESCAP

	Republic (DPRK, North Korea)		
15	Korea, Republic (ROK, South Korea)	East Asia	APEC
16	Kyrgyz Republic	Central Asia	CAREC, ESCAP
17	Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Laos	Southeast Asia	ASEAN, ESCAP, GMS
18	Malaysia	Southeast Asia	APEC, ASEAN, ESCAP
19	Maldives	South Asia	ESCAP, SAARC
20	Marshall Islands	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
21	Micronesia, Federated States	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
22	Mongolia	East Asia	ESCAP, CAREC
23	Myanmar	Southeast Asia	ASEAN, ESCAP, GMS
24	Nauru	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
25	Nepal	South Asia	ESCAP, SAARC
26	New Caledonia	Oceania	SPTO
27	New Zealand	Oceania	ESCAP, APEC
28	Niue	Oceania	SPTO
29	Northern Mariana Islands	Oceania	SPTO
30	Pakistan	South Asia	ESCAP, SAARC
31	Palau	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
32	Papua New Guinea	Oceania	APEC, ESCAP
33	Philippines	Southeast Asia	APEC, ASEAN, ESCAP
34	Republic of Korea, South Korea	East Asia	APEC, ESCAP
35	Samoa	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
36	Singapore	Southeast Asia	APEC, ASEAN, ESCAP
37	Solomon Islands	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
38	Sri Lanka	South Asia	ESCAP, SAARC
39	Tajikistan	Central Asia	ESCAP, CAREC
40	Thailand	Southeast Asia	ASEAN, ESCAP, GMS
41	Timor Leste	Southeast Asia	ESCAP, SPTO
42	Tokelau	Oceania	SPTO
43	Tonga	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
44	Turkmenistan	Central Asia	CAREC, ESCAP
45	Tuvalu	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
46	Uzbekistan	Central Asia	CAREC, ESCAP
47	Vanuatu	Oceania	ESCAP, SPTO
48	Viet Nam	Southeast Asia	APEC, ASEAN, ESCAP, GMS

Note: Other countries are sometimes classified as being in Asia, including Russia and Turkey. It is acknowledged that countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are often included in the term West Asia. Foreign dependencies and autonomous regions not included. GMS = Greater Mekong Subregion.

There have been multiple contributions to this chapter's topic from a variety of different sources. These have included several books and book chapters, including the books *Asian*

tourism sustainability (Balasingam and Ma, 2022), *Making cities resilient* (Sharma and Chandrakanta, 2019), *Managing Asian destinations* (Wang et al. 2018), *Sustainable tourism development in Asia: Evaluation of the potential and challenges* (Herath, 2017) and *Sustainable Asia* (Schroeder, Anggraeni, Sartori, and Weber, 2017), *Sustainable development: Asia-Pacific perspectives* (Low, 2022), and book chapters, *Tourism in ASEAN cities: Features and directions* (Oktadiana and Pearce, 2021) and *The rise of the Asian world tourism cities* (Morrison and Maxim, 2022). Mondal and Samaddar (2021) published a review article on responsible tourism emphasising the advancement of this research topic in the Asia-Pacific region. The six key research areas they found were environmentally responsible behaviour (ERB), pro-environmental behaviour (PEB), environmental knowledge and training, CSR agenda and responsible tourism, green tourism and environmental responsibility, and involvement and motivation in environmental management practices. A second review article by Santos et al. (2022), which did not have a specific focus on the Asia-Pacific, found there were several articles with a focus on sustainable tourism in the region.

Numerous academic scholars have made contributions through individual journal articles, among these Susanne Becken of Griffith University, Australia. Becken and Loehr (2022a) examined governance structures and climate action drivers, in which three examples are drawn of the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO), Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO), and Thailand's Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA). Stephenson and Dobson (2020), with a focus on Southeast Asia, reviewed smart city and smart tourism approaches in Phuket (Thailand), Vientiane (Lao PDR), and Yangon (Myanmar). They suggested that there was a lack of human capacity in Southeast Asia to implement smart city solutions and that economic priorities rather than sustainability were likely to be prioritised post-COVID. Simo-Kengne (2022) noted that environmental degradation had accompanied tourism growth in Asia.

Many contributions are available from multi-country organisations and individual government agencies. These include the *ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2016-2025* (ASEAN, 2021), *CAREC Tourism Strategy 2020* (Asian Development Bank, 2020), *Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework for the South Pacific* (Pacific Tourism Organisation, 2022), and *Sustainable tourism: Asia and Pacific Regional SCP roadmap* (United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2023). Agencies have also dealt with specific issues in sustainable tourism, including

the role of women in tourism (*Regional report on women in tourism in Asia and the Pacific*, UNWTO, 2022), low-carbon tourism (*Low carbon green growth roadmap for Asia and the Pacific - Ecotourism*, ESCAP, undated), and Indigenous tourism (*Innovate reconciliation action plan*, Tourism Australia, 2021).

3. Sustainability in the Asia-Pacific region

It is not surprising that sustainability is extremely challenging in the Asia-Pacific region given its high proportion of developing economies and geographic characteristics. Some of the poorest nations in the world are in this region, including Afghanistan, Kiribati, and Timor Leste (CIA World factbook, 2023). Also, the region is highly susceptible to natural disasters and other types of crises (Duan, Xie, and Morrison, 2022). These events have included the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004), Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011 in Japan, Typhoon Haiyan (Philippines, 2013), and Nepal earthquake (2015), and several wildfires in Australia and Indonesia, to name just a few natural disasters in the region. Political and civil unrest is often encountered in some countries including the current situation in Myanmar. Additionally, climate change, especially rising sea levels, poses a severe threat to many small island nations in the region, with the Maldives (Figure 37.4) often being cited in this respect.



Figure 37.4 Maldives tourism is threatened by rising sea levels. Photo: Unsplash.com, Ishan seefromthesky.

3.1 Sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region

Against a background of economic growth in the Asia-Pacific, there are sustainability issues associated with the expansion of industries, services, and urban areas. Some of these have

already been highlighted; so, here the focus is on increasing urbanisation and rising sea levels caused by climate change.

3.1.1 Increasing urbanisation

Asia is expected to experience the most rapid growth in urbanisation in the years ahead, coming with many opportunities and presenting some formidable challenges as well. The World Bank estimates that 70% of the world's population will live in cities by 2050 and that cities generate 80% of the world's GDP (World Bank, 2022). However, urbanisation creates pressure to have more affordable housing, better infrastructure (including transportation), more urban services and employment opportunities. Without adequate housing, temporary housing is often created in slum areas, such as the famous Dharavi slum in Mumbai, India.

3.1.2 Rising sea levels

With many island nations in this region, coastline and ocean trends have a great impact on life and tourism. For those with coral reefs, bleaching and other damage to corals (some as a direct result of tourism) have become major concerns and threats to sustainability. The pollution of oceans, especially with plastics and other human debris, is another major issue in the Asia-Pacific region. The threats posed by rising sea levels has been mentioned in the context of the Maldives and also apply to several other counties including Palau (Sustainable Travel International, 2023). Becker, Karpytchev, and Hu (2023) analysed sea-level changes and predicted particular vulnerability by 2021 for Chennai, Kolkata, Yangon, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Manila and the western tropical Pacific Islands.

There are other serious challenges for sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region including poverty and the availability and quality of food and potable water (Luo et al., 2022). Information from The Borgen Project suggests that “despite widespread economic success, Asia remains the worst continent for global hunger and contains more than half of the world's poorest people” (The Borgen Project, 2018).

3.2 Sustainable tourism in the Asia-Pacific region

There are some excellent examples of sustainable tourism implementation in this region, accompanied by many major challenges. Individual countries, developmental agencies (e.g., Asian Development Bank, ADB), multinational partnerships (e.g., ASEAN, CAREC, ESCAP,

European Union - EU, SAARC, SPTO), industry groups (e.g., PATA, Global Sustainable Tourism Council, GSTC), and NGOs are all involved in these efforts.

Morrison and Maxim (2022, pp. 292-296) identified challenges for sustainable tourism in Asian cities, including urbanisation, air pollution, globalisation, commodification, sharing economy, overtourism, crises, and unsavoury forms of tourism (e.g., orphanage tourism, sex tourism). Several examples of unsustainable tourism are reported in media posts and academic articles. For example, the closing of Boracay in the Philippines due the heavy (human-generated) pollution is discussed in the article by Canoy et al. (2020). Chong (2020) researched the side effects of mass tourism in Bali, which included traffic congestion, cultural dilution, and tourist misbehaviour. Scheyvens (2011) analysed the political and social challenges of sustainable tourism development in the Maldives, including the uneven distribution of economic benefits in the local population.

4. Sustainable tourism in Asia-Pacific countries and cities

The emphasis on sustainable tourism is increasing in Asia-Pacific countries and cities. Before discussing this trend, a brief overview of tourism and tourism trends in the region is provided.

4.1 Tourism in the Asia-Pacific region

The Asia Pacific region was the “growth star” of international tourist arrivals up to and including 2019. Thereafter in 2020 and 2021, as in all world regions, inbound tourist volumes plummeted as a result of COVID-19. For 2022, the Asia-Pacific gained back only 23% of its pre-pandemic visitor volumes due mainly to stronger pandemic-related restrictions (UNWTO, 2023). A recent forecast predicts growth in visitor volumes in Asia-Pacific for 2023, 2024, and 2025 (PATA, 2023a). The restrictions on outbound travel from China have had a significantly negative effect on inbound tourism to many other Asia-Pacific nations. These recent trends in 2020 to 2023 demonstrate how fragile is tourism in the region given its susceptibility to the effects of crises and disasters.

International tourists arrivals to sub-regions and individual countries are very unevenly distributed. In 2019, around 86% of these arrivals were to Northeast and Southeast Asia, and the remaining 14% to South Asia and Oceania (von Kameke, 2023). For 2022, the five most visited countries (international visitor arrivals) in Asia-Pacific were China, Thailand, Japan,

Malaysia, and Hong Kong SAR (Hotel Management Network, 2022).

How do Asia-Pacific countries perform in world tourism development rankings? Table 37.2 shows the Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI) rankings for 20 countries (World Economic Forum, 2022). It shows that Japan, Australia, Singapore, China and South Korea lead in these global tourism rankings. Eight of the 20 ranked counties were below the TTDI average in 2021, with Bangladesh and Nepal having the poorest performance.

Table 37.2 Travel & Tourism Development Index for Asia-Pacific: 2021

Country/Area	Global ranking	Regional ranking	Score	Difference from TTDI average
Japan	1	1	5.2	31.8%
Australia	7	2	5.0	25.6%
Singapore	9	3	5.0	24.6%
China	12	4	4.9	23.5%
South Korea (ROK)	15	5	4.8	21.4%
Hong Kong SAR	19	6	4.6	16.3%
New Zealand	27	7	4.5	12.6%
Indonesia	32	8	4.4	10.3%
Thailand	36	9	4.3	8.8%
Malaysia	38	10	4.3	8.4%
Vietnam	52	11	4.1	4.1%
India	54	12	4.1	3.6%
Sri Lanka	74	13	3.7	-6.0%
Philippines	75	14	3.7	-6.3%
Cambodia	79	15	3.6	-9.2%
Pakistan	83	16	3.6	-10.2%
Mongolia	84	17	3.6	-10.6%
Lao PDR	93	18	3.4	-15.0%
Bangladesh	100	19	3.3	-17.6%
Nepal	102	20	3.3	-17.8%

* Not all Asia-Pacific countries are included in TTDI rankings. Overall scores range from 1 to 7 where 1 = worst and 7 = best.

Source: Data from World Economic Forum, Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI) (2022).

4.2 Tourism trends in the Asia-Pacific region

The trends in international tourist arrivals in the region in 2019-2023 are previously mentioned. Selected other tourism trends are briefly described below:

- Community-based tourism (CBT) including homestays has been a prominent trend in many parts of Asia including Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam. This concept tends to align well with sustainable development and the SDGs, and primarily occurs in poorer, rural areas of countries (Responsible Travel, 2022).
- Domestic tourism growth has been a marked trend in the Asia-Pacific region and in some ways compensated for the international tourism declines in 2020-2022. This was especially noted in the most populated countries of China, India and Indonesia (Morrison, 2023, pp, 702-705).
- Medical tourism has enjoyed significant growth in several Asian-Pacific countries including Thailand and India. One source says, “Medical tourism in Asia is one of the fastest-growing industries that has seen tremendous growth in its economy and tourist visits. The main drivers of this growth are the high quality of healthcare facilities available in many Asian countries, high-tech advanced medical equipment, and the low cost of travel and accommodation” (Medical Trends Now, 2022). This tends to occur most in the hospitals and other medical facilities of major cities.
- Unfortunately, the occurrence of overtourism has not only been limited to the most popular tourism cities of Europe; it has also been an issue in parts of the Asia-Pacific region. This situation has been well publicised regarding Mount Everest (National Geographic, 2023), while also occurring in certain beach areas and wildlife habitats.
- There has been growth in many forms of special interest travel in the Asia-Pacific region. Some of these include adventure, culinary, and religious tourism. While these may, in general, be preferable to mass tourism, they can also exert pressure on specific ecosystems such as coral reefs and mountain peaks.
- Staycationing became more popular during the pandemic as people took holidays closer to home in their own countries. This trend occurred in many Asian-Pacific countries, including Indonesia (Eloksari, 2020).

There are several catalysts for these trends in Asia-Pacific tourism. Economic growth and the rise of the middle classes is an important driver of domestic and outbound tourism in many countries. More recently, and as earlier discussed, the global pandemic caused a variety of changes in tourism including the trends toward more domestic tourism and staycations. The increasing availability and popularity of low-cost airline carriers (LCCs), including AirAsia, has

spurred travel within the region, as have various sharing economy providers of short-term accommodation rentals. Improved transportation infrastructure, such as the high-speed rail system in China, has also supported significant growth of tourism. The daily pressures and stresses of urban life is another catalyst for tourism and particularly to rural areas where the pace of life is slower.

4.3 Sustainable tourism leadership in Asia-Pacific countries and cities

There are many laudable sustainable tourism efforts in the Asia-Pacific region, some at the regional and national levels and some in specific cities. Six of these examples are now briefly reviewed (in alphabetic order).

4.3.1 Australia

Australia places a high priority on sustainable tourism. Its national DMO, Tourism Australia (TA), states, “For TA, sustainable tourism includes protecting and restoring our natural environment, helping to conserve Australia’s natural wonders and cultures, so they can be enjoyed today and by future generations. It also means fostering a profitable industry that delivers employment opportunities and economic benefits to communities, and in turn helps improve the tourism experience for our travellers and the quality of life for Australians” (Tourism Australia, 2023).

Indigenous tourism is popular in Australia whose Aboriginal people are renowned particularly for their hunting and gathering lifestyles, dreamtime stories, art, and dance. In 2018, TA introduced the *Discover Aboriginal Experiences* (DAE) programme, which is part of its *Signature Experiences of Australia*. TA says that DAE, “builds on our existing work in promoting the diverse and rich cultural experiences of Aboriginal peoples across the country. This truly sets our country apart from other destinations in the world” (Tourism Australia, 2021).

Marine protection is another area in which Australia has shown leadership. This is especially so with the Great Barrier Reef, which is administered by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GRMPA). The careful zoning of each section of the Marine Park is integral to its success.

At the city level in Australia, there are several admirable efforts to further sustainability agendas. For example, in the capital city of Queensland, the Brisbane Sustainability Agency

has been created. It supports “Brisbane City Council’s long-term plan for a clean, green and sustainable city, while enhancing liveability outcomes for residents” (Brisbane Sustainability Agency, 2022).

4.3.2 New Zealand

With its *100% Pure New Zealand* destination branding, New Zealand is a strong advocate of sustainable tourism. One example is the *Tourism Sustainability Commitment* (TSC) that was developed by Tourism Industry Aotearoa, the major tourism industry association in New Zealand. TSC has the four elements of economic (economically sustainable, resilient and innovative businesses), community (communities which benefit from and are supported by tourism), environment (protecting and enhancing the natural environment), and visitor (world-leading experiences that exceed visitor expectations) (Tourism Industry Aotearoa, 2023).

As with Australia, the Indigenous Māori culture in New Zealand is integral to tourism (Figure 37.5). Locations such as Rotorua are particularly well known as places to experience the Māori culture (Tourism New Zealand, 2023).



Figure 37.5 Māori sculpture, North Island, New Zealand. Photo: Unsplash.com, Meg Jerrard.

4.3.3 Singapore

The city state of Singapore is a leader in the region in sustainable tourism, particularly in its urban greening efforts. The *Singapore Green Plan 2030* has the following targets: Plant one million more trees; quadruple solar energy deployment by 2025; reduce the waste sent to landfill by 30% by 2030; at least 20% of schools to be carbon neutral by 2030; and all newly registered cars to be cleaner-energy models from 2030 (Singapore Green Plan 2030, 2023). Another specific example of Singapore's innovation is the MICE Sustainability Roadmap (Singapore Tourism Board, 2023) with its focus on reducing, recycling and managing waste, and reducing energy and carbon emissions.

4.3.4 Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) is comprised of six countries (Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam) (Greater Mekong Subregion, 2023). One of the sustainable tourism projects of the GMS is the *Experience Mekong Collection* (EMC) in which smaller eco-oriented businesses have joined in a network consortium to promote sustainable tourism. The "Experience Mekong Collection" showcases responsible and sustainable travel experiences in the GMS (Destination Mekong, 2023)

4.3.5 South Pacific

The *Sustainability Policy Framework* was developed by the Pacific Tourism Organisation. The vision for sustainable tourism in the South Pacific is expected to be achieved through the following specific policies and actions (Pacific Tourism Organisation, 2022):

- Tourism accelerates climate action, protects our ecosystems and supports resilience (healthy islands and oceans)
- Tourism supports prosperous and resilient economies (prosperous economies)
- Tourism amplifies and promotes our culture and heritage (visible and valued cultures)
- Tourism supports the empowerment and wellbeing of our communities (thriving and inclusive communities)

This policy reflects the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the global standards for sustainable tourism as specified by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC).

4.3.6 Thailand

Thailand has adopted a rather unique approach to sustainable development through the creation of several *Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration* (DASTAs) (DASTA, 2023). There are currently nine DASTAs, several of which encompass cities, including Chiang Mai and Pattaya. The duties of a DASTA are “to formulate policies and administrative plans for designated areas for sustainable tourism, including coordination with government agencies in the capital, local agencies, and the civil sector, so as to forge cooperation in the development of tourist destinations in designated areas for sustainable tourism, striking a balance among economic, social and environmental developments, while retaining the natural beauty of the places, appropriate environment and fine culture and tradition, as impressive tourist destinations for Thai and foreign tourists to be reminded of and to revisit in the future” (DASTA, 2023).

In their article on enabling governance drivers for intensifying climate action, Becken and Loehr (2022a) discuss the above three examples from the GMS, South Pacific, and Thailand. They classified the South Pacific initiative as a supra-national governance structure; GMS as a network governance structure; and Thailand as a network/community governance structure. These examples demonstrate that there are different ways to administer the implementation of sustainable tourism, and that systems can be designed to match the realities of specific geographic areas.

Several Asia-Pacific urban areas have already been mentioned for their sustainability efforts, including Brisbane, Phuket, Singapore, Vientiane, and Yangon. Others such as Wellington, New Zealand (see Chapter 1) and several cities in Japan are also to be commended on their sustainability initiatives. Kobe, Kyoto, and Osaka are just three of the 100 smart, “digital garden cities” being developed in Japan (Valtasaari, 2022). There are many efforts in Mainland China to develop greener cities (Kang et al., 2019) and the Hong Kong SAR is more strongly emphasising green tourism (Legislative Council, 2019). A *Voluntary Local Review* (VLR) was published in 2023 on Jakarta’s progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Asian Development Bank, 2023). *The Green Bangkok 2030 Project* in Thailand is another major sustainable urban development project in the Asia-Pacific region (C40 Cities, 2020).

5. Stakeholder involvement

As emphasised throughout this book, there is a need for all stakeholders to contribute to the advancement of sustainable tourism. There are some outstanding efforts in the Asia-Pacific region of collaborative efforts toward greater sustainability, including the leadership demonstrated by the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) and multiple small businesses participating in the *Experience Mekong Collection*.

This idea of stakeholder involvement is well expressed by the Pacific Tourism Organisation who suggest that “Responsibility for the implementation of the (Sustainable Tourism Policy) Framework does not reside with one organisation or sector, but rather requires partnership and collaboration with stakeholders across Government, industry, civil society organisations, development partners and the community. The policies and actions apply to all tourism stakeholders” (Pacific Tourism Organisation, SPTO, 2022, p. 5).

There appears to be a need for greater private-sector involvement in sustainability initiatives in the region, in addition to what is being done by governments, international agencies, NGOs, and associations. Consumers also need to be involved in furthering sustainable tourism and they seem primed to do so as indicated in the following survey result, “An Economist Impact survey of more than 4,500 travellers in the region -- across Australia, Japan, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand -- shows that more than seven in ten (71.8%) respondents agree that COVID-19 has changed the way they think about sustainable tourism by making it more important to them” (Economist Intelligence Group, 2022). It is obvious that a multi-stakeholder approach is called for to advance urban tourism sustainability in the Asia-Pacific region. Now, the future prospects are discussed.

6. Future prospects for sustainable tourism and the SDGs in the Asia-Pacific region

There is a certain degree of uncertainty regarding the short-term future of tourism in the Asia-Pacific region (Becken and Loehr, 2022b), partly due to doubts about the recovery of the outbound market from China (Zhang, 2021). Uncertainty is exacerbated by the expectations that future crises and disasters will occur in the region, some of which will be caused by climate change and global warming. There are also unsettled political tensions as exists within the South China Sea and in Myanmar. The region is moreover in the recovery stages from the

ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic that devastated tourism in most countries.

The Asia-Pacific region is one of the most vulnerable areas in the world for the damaging effects of climate change and therefore, *climate action* (SDG 13) must be a higher priority in the future. This is especially the case for most small island developing states and for coastal and river cities that face the very real threat of greater flooding in the future.

It is likely that some parts of the Asia-Pacific will become “off limit” destinations or will have more restricted access in support of SDG 14 (*Life below water*) and SDG 15 (*Life on land*). These restrictions have already occurred in Thailand (e.g., Koh Tachai) and the Philippines (e.g., Boracay), as popular areas were stretched well beyond their physical carrying capacities. There have also been temporary closures of the national parks on Komodo and Rinca Islands in Indonesia. New and more restrictive rules have been introduced in Nepal for climbing Mount Everest.

Sustainable tourism can be a vehicle to bring more balance to *gender equality* (SDG 5) and to *reduce inequalities* (SDG 10), two issues that most definitely exist at the present time in the Asia-Pacific region. It is already a facilitator of cross-border partnerships; however, more effort is needed in future to form *partnerships for the goals* (SDG 17).

There are multiple societal issues in the Asia-Pacific region relating to poverty (SDG 1, *No poverty*; SDG 2, *Zero hunger*; SDG 3, *Good health and well-being*; SDG 4, *Quality education*; SDG 6, *Clean water and sanitation*; SDG 7, *Affordable and clean energy*). Although it cannot be the entire solution to these issues, sustainable tourism when implemented more fully and effectively can be one of the factors to address them.

With increasing urbanisation in the Asia-Pacific, it will be challenging for cities to achieve SDG 11, *Sustainable cities and communities*. For example, UNDP (2021) stated, “Managing SDG 11 is extremely challenging in SEA as it is one of the fastest urbanizing regions in the world. Urbanization affects all the SDGs, directly or indirectly since cities are where waste and pollution, energy use, and income and wealth divisions are most obvious and threatening”. SDG 11 will be partly attainable by putting greater emphasis on SDG 12, *Responsible production and consumption*, and in educating and convincing tourism suppliers and visitors to behave more responsibly. Sustainable tourism growth should embrace SDG 8, *Decent work and economic growth*, and SDG 9, *Industry, innovation and infrastructure*.

Better governance of tourism organisations is also required in the future in line with SDG 16 (*Peace, justice and strong institutions*). Corruption and unjust political actions and interference must be eradicated in several of this region's countries for sustainable tourism to flourish.

On the critical side, there is evidence that the Asia-Pacific region and many of its countries are already falling short in achieving certain of the SDGs, according to UNDP. UNDP (2021) found that Southeast Asia had regressed in its attempts to achieve the climate action goal (SDG 13). Therefore, it is wrong to presume that inevitable the Asia-Pacific region will achieve all the SDGs by 2030. Countries and cities must work harder in the future with higher levels of innovation and partnership to achieve these targets.

7. Conclusions

The Asia-Pacific region up until 2019 enjoyed the most rapid growth in international tourist arrivals in the world. Home to the largest outbound market in China, the region appeared to be the growth engine for tourism for many years to come. This all changed in 2020 with COVID-19 as most countries, including China, closed their borders to inbound and outbound tourism. Now, the region is in an era of recovery and reflection on how tourism should look in the future.

The region faces serious challenges, especially due to urbanisation, pollution, climate change, and the likelihood of various crises and natural disasters. However, there will be a greater emphasis on sustainable development and sustainable tourism. There are several exemplary sustainable tourism initiatives under way in the Asia-Pacific region and this chapter highlighted efforts in Australia, New Zealand, the Greater Mekong Subregion, South Pacific, and Thailand.

All of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals apply to this region. Substantial progress has been made on achieving several SDGs; however, greater collective and individual effort is required in the future. This is especially true with climate action.

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