

IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions

A user-friendly framework for the verification, design and scaling up of NbS (Nature-based Solutions)

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A Milestone in Sustainability Thinking - Feedback on the Newly Released Nature-based Solutions (NbS) Standard from IUCN

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Attention policy makers, destination planners and administrators, tourism businesses, certification bodies, consultants & academics! Sometimes a true milestone of understanding occurs that enables the professionals involved in that field to move forward with greater common clarity: – the IUCN's **NbS (Nature-based Solutions) Standard** released this May 2021 is just such a moment. Finally a territorial management system that puts the ecosystem and landscape as the fundamental framework of socio-economic, environmental and cultural sustainability has been collaboratively elaborated with sufficient clarity and usability.

It gives us all a structured process to benchmark responsible stakeholder territorial interventions so we can face up to the current multiple challenges civil society, businesses and governments alike need to deal with - in partnership and in full knowledge of how to be sustainable and responsible at a time when

we need to develop innovative mitigation and adaptation measures. Our contemporary unparalleled and irrepressible appetite for terraforming for socio-economic gain can be put through this governance filter in order that we deliver peace, prosperity and a planet worth living for.

Being old enough to have been following the turgid process of the empirical development of *territorial sustainability indicators* since 1996, I recognise the contemporary and timely importance of the formulation of this standard to support the much-needed **value system of responsibility and sustainability** that is the foundation of our common global sustainable development agenda. A management tool has arrived to give us the means to genuinely deliver the SDG goals whenever we need to undertake mitigation and adaptation measures that involve spatial planning, infrastructure development or landscape management. The tourism sector, especially destination policy makers, spatial planners and both public and private sector developers, should take advantage of this ground-breaking body of work on



Fig 1 IUCN' s Ecosystem-based approach to societal challenges

sustainable planning and territorial management related to the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

'The main objective of NbS is to support the achievement of society's development goals and safeguard human well-being in ways that reflect cultural and societal values and enhance the resilience of ecosystems, their capacity for renewal and the provision of services (IUCN, 2016). Alongside the IUCN definitional framework for NbS launched in 2016, in which NbS were defined as "actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits" (IUCN, 2016), eight Principles were adopted by IUCN's members (IUCN, 2016) as shown in Figure 5. Since then, a strong published literature base has also rapidly emerged which further substantiates this role of NbS in conservation.' (NbS Manual, p11)

Improving Tourism Sustainability Certification

Moreover, It can be used to improve the accuracy and realisation sustainable destination development, management and monitoring systems that currently give destinations a 'green' stamp. NbS provides **a territorial management standard that can be applied to existing sustainable destination certification standards** to ensure their knowledge is brought up to this new level of holistic or 'joined up' understanding.

Specifically, the work to be done in the tourism sector by sustainability certification developers is in relating the overarching Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and International Standards Organisation ISO sustainable tourism criteria for destinations to the NbS standard in order to arrive at a convincing territorial sustainability plan/management process for tourism infrastructure development on the ground. With this work it would be possible to truly define green tourism destinations, even though the standard itself is aimed at ensuring future interventions in the landscape are made with this sustainability thinking at the foreground. (For those looking at the NbS quality assurance, note it is registered with ISEAL).

It was not developed in order to align existing destination development and management systems to a greater level of territorial sustainability analysis, but it's a great tool to do this much-needed job in order to improve the credibility of such systems. After all – we are now getting very used to hearing the word 'green' alongside 'destination' at every turn, and the IUCN tool offers more than just a wash for those who wish to do a proper job of sustainable development on their patch.

Getting to Know the Standard

Though no substitute for reading the manual this section provides a quick walk-through the standard in the IUCN's own words and will familiarize you with the 8 key criteria:

' The NbS Standard aims to equip users with a robust framework for designing and verifying NbS that yield the outcomes desired, in solving one or several societal challenge(s). Based on the feedback of actual and potential NbS users, it has been developed as a facilitative Standard, purposefully avoiding a rigid normative framing with fixed, definitive thresholds of

what NbS ought to achieve. Rather the Standard is designed to support users to apply, learn and continuously strengthen and improve the effectiveness, sustainability and adaptability of their NbS interventions. It also serves as a mechanism for developing a consistent approach to designing and verifying concrete solutions-orientated outcomes.

The Standard consists of 8 Criteria and 28 Indicators (Figure 2).

Criterion 1 focuses on identifying the societal challenge to which the NbS is a response. While the scope of societal challenges currently includes climate change (adaptation and mitigation), disaster risk reduction, ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss, food security, human health, social and economic development and water security, as NbS evolve in their scope, there may be other specific challenges recognised within this scope. One or more societal challenges can be the entry point; however, the priority is to leverage the potential NbS to provide multiple benefits, whereby one intervention addresses several challenges.

Criterion 2 guides the design of the solution responding to the scale of the issue. Scale in this context primarily refers to geographic scale across land and sea, as well as the economic, ecological and societal aspects of the land/seascape. The target area where the societal challenge is being addressed is often a part of a bigger system, be it ecological, economic or social. While intervention activities can be focused at the site scale, the robustness, applicability and responsiveness of the solution should take into consideration the broader systems at play.

Criteria 3, 4 and 5 correspond to the three pillars of sustainable development – environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and economically viable. For each Criterion, some understanding of the current resources and context, in the form of a baseline, and sustainable actions going forward is required for implementation of a strong NbS.

Criterion 6 addresses the balancing of trade-offs and choices that need to be made to achieve short and long-term gains, and how to ensure that there is a transparent, equitable and inclusive process to determine such trade-offs. Given the dynamic nature of the systems that influence the solutions (Criterion 2), it is important to manage the implementation of NbS systematically against established baselines. NbS harness the services of ecosystems, which are complex, dynamic and self-organising systems. Ecosystems may respond in desirable ways to an NbS intervention or the intervention could create unintended, unforeseen and undesirable consequences. Consequently,

Criterion 7 responds to the need for adaptive management, which facilitates continuous learning about system-wide processes and adapting the NbS according to systemic changes.

Criterion 8 addresses the need for mainstreaming and sustainability, ensuring that NbS interventions are integrated into broader development plans and policies, and that they contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

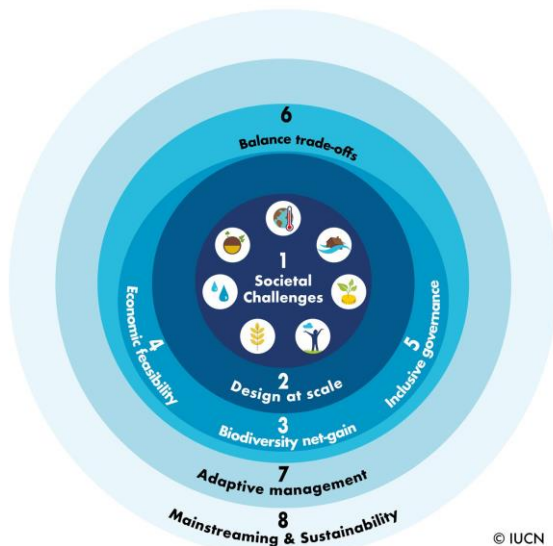


Fig 2 The 8 Criteria in the NbS Standard

The true potential of NbS is realised through its long-term implementation at scale. Embedding the concept and actions into policy or regulatory frameworks as well as linking to national targets or international commitments can enable this, as promoted by Criterion 8.’ (IUCN p11)

How the Tool can be Used

The NbS Standard can be applied at first as a **self-assessment tool** in order that those responsible for the development can assess what’s best for nature in the context of the requirements of human spatial development. As a decision-support tool the process takes stakeholders through the criteria and indicators in order to follow a science-based rationale for territorial planning and arrive at better decisions, choices and options for stakeholder interventions. All with the SDGs firmly in sight and nature at the centre of the conservation-led development process.

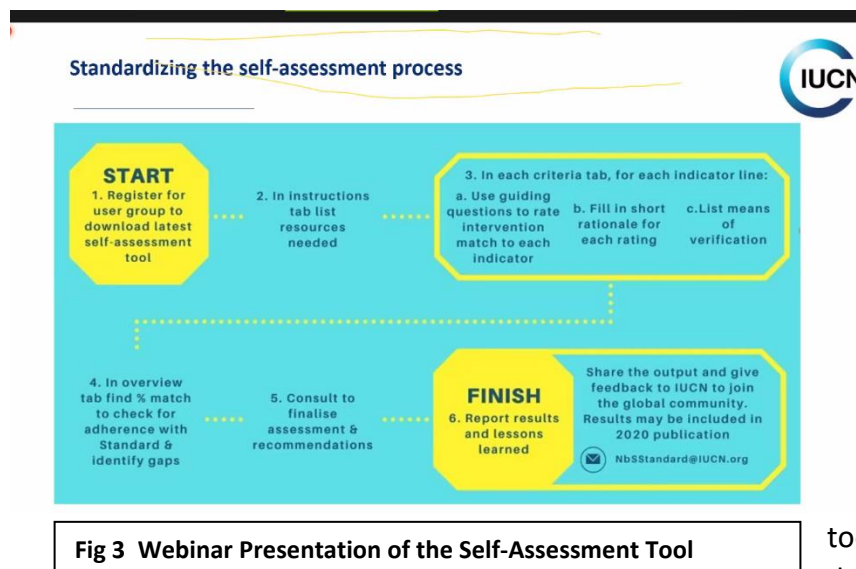


Fig 3 Webinar Presentation of the Self-Assessment Tool

In the application of this tool, there is a need to link it to the long term and ongoing biodiversity action planning process. In particular the NbS Standard will give local biodiversity action plans greater depth and effectiveness. In the webinar Iberostar, who have been piloting the tool with IUCN, were able to demonstrate how many of

their sites have implemented the tool at the local level in this way. Other tourism development chains would do well to manage their destination impacts, and incorporate this approach to give them the knowledge to make a better contribution to the collective sustainability effort.

Mainstreaming the NbS Standard in the 2030 Agenda

This year we will see a convergence of two critical Agenda 21 processes – the conventions on Biodiversity and Climate Change - occurring in with 2 months of each other. At the forthcoming Cop15 on biodiversity in China in October and the Climate Cop 26 in Scotland, this tool should be given both recognition, promotion and implementation by the signatories and their stakeholders as a means of ensuring we have less rhetorical targets and more sustainability implementation. In the longer term, **the Decade for Ecosystem Restoration** within the framework of the 2030 targets should ensure this approach is embedded in destination development around the world.

Link to Travel Green Planet

Existing tourism initiatives focus on territorial conservation – eg work in protected areas - should also rise to the challenge of putting this tool into practice. The NbS tool will be promoted on the **Tourism 2030 portal** to tourism stakeholders within the framework of our **Travel Green Planet** and **2030 Countdown Clock Programmes**. These programmes have the ability to reach out to stakeholders to promote the tool, then map and cross-reference the uptake of the tool by tourism destinations seeking a green governance process, enabling sustainability stakeholders – which is all of us! - to appropriately plan, shape and monitor any given mitigation or adaptation development that needs to be undertaken in the face of Global Change.

Conclusion – a Tool for the Integration of Science and Sustainability

As I said at the beginning of this article, for the tourism sector and regional planners, IUCN have produced a milestone on the way to measuring, mapping, managing, marketing and monitoring sustainable destinations. In the past decades of Agenda 21 and now the 2030 Agenda implementation, we can note 3 or 4 similar milestones of knowledge improvement, for example: 1 -the development of the **Global Reporting Index (GRI)** in 2001, and its recognition at the 2002 WSSD, being the first NGO action ever mentioned in a UN Declaration at that level of governance. 2 - the development of the **Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)** for the forestry sector standard for sustainably managed wood products, bringing the issues of sustainability practically to both the supply chain and the consumer. 3 - the development of the **Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)** in 2009 as a global standard to agree the difficult measurement of tourism sustainability. 4. the elaboration of the **Agenda SDG 2030 targets** in 2015 as a common agenda for 8 billion people organised as civil society, businesses and governments.

It is the partnership of these interest groups to which the NbS Standard self-assessment tool can be applied to any territory in any nation state to bring current and future infrastructure investments into line with the many short and long term needs of both nature and society

The IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions manual can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.CH.2020.08.en>

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