Blue Tourism Initiative

Towards sustainable coastal and marine tourism

Policy learnings from field projects in the Caribbean, Mediterranean and Western Indian Ocean

Towards sustainable coastal and marine tourism: Policy learnings from field projects in the Caribbean, Mediterranean and Western Indian Ocean

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Recommended citation

Sciacca, A., Fosse, J. and Rochette, J., Balestracci, G. (2026). *Towards sustainable coastal and marine tourism: Policy learnings from field projects in the Caribbean, Mediterranean and Western Indian Ocean*. Blue Tourism Initiative.

Publication date

September 2026

Design:

Alain Chevallier

Cover photo:

Khalil Yamoun, Tunisia, ©Unsplash

This publication was produced with the financial support of the French Facility for Global Environment (FFEM). The contents of this brief do not reflect the official views of the FFEM. Responsibility for the information and views expressed herein rests entirely with the authors.

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The Blue Tourism Initiative partners

IDDRI, eco-union, IUCN Med, Canari, Cordio East Africa

The Blue Tourism Initiative is supported by

French Facility for Global Environment (FFEM)

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About the Blue Tourism Initiative

The Blue Tourism Initiative is a global multi-stakeholder innovation program focused on the environmental management, governance, and planning of coastal and maritime tourism in three marine regions: the Mediterranean, the Western Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean. The project supports the participatory development of sustainable blue tourism initiatives through policy actions and a multi-stakeholder approach in order to inform the scalability of sustainable blue tourism initiatives in other regions.

The objectives of the Blue Tourism Initiative are to:

— assess the current global and regional state of blue tourism, focusing on challenges and opportunities, and recommend approaches for sustainable blue tourism development;

— support and monitor the implementation of sustainable blue tourism initiatives in the Mediterranean, Western Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean;

— integrate sustainable blue tourism management and governance at regional policy level, share best practices, and raise awareness among key local, national, and regional stakeholders.

The Blue Tourism Initiative is implemented by the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI) and think-and-do tank eco-union (lead partners); the International Union for Conservation of Nature – Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation (IUCN Med) in the Mediterranean; Coastal Oceans Research and Development in the Indian Ocean (CORDIO East Africa) in the Western Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) in the Caribbean. The initiative is co-funded by the French Global Environmental Facility (FFEM).

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KEY MESSAGES

Sustainable blue tourism requires coordinated governance across multiple levels and sectors

Fragmented governance and poor stakeholder coordination slow the transition to sustainable blue tourism through overlapping responsibilities, policies disconnection and administrative barriers. Addressing these challenges require aligning tourism with biodiversity, climate and development policies, while connecting land-sea planning and creating the regulatory, institutional, and financial conditions needed for coordinated implementation. At the destination level, these coordinated approaches can be supported by multi-stakeholder mechanisms. In Al Hoceima National Park (Morocco) for instance, the consolidated Ecotourism Cluster bringing together park managers, businesses, cooperatives, NGOs, and public authorities aims to coordinate ecotourism development and aligning priorities and responsibilities.

Locally-led sustainable blue tourism solutions are the foundation for governance transformation

Grounded in local realities and knowledge, these solutions generate practical evidence and models that can be replicated or integrated into policies, while strengthening livelihoods, ecosystem stewardship and destination resilience. These lessons can inform governance innovations, structural reforms and regional cooperation. Locally-led solutions have been central in Sainte Marie (Madagascar) where tourism operators, public authorities, and other local stakeholders jointly developed the Sainte-Marie Ecolabel for tourism businesses, with sustainability standards fully rooted in the destination context. Such initiatives can provide practical models for turning local experience into shared standards and approaches that can strengthen sustainable tourism governance.

Communities are key governance partners of sustainable blue tourism

When communities are actively involved in the co-design and decision-making processes throughout tourism development, destination stewardship, equity and long-term sustainable outcomes are strengthened. Thus, giving communities formal roles in planning, implementation, and monitoring and knowledge generation can turn participation into lasting local ownership, shifting their role from beneficiaries to active actors at the centre of tourism. The communities of Kinondo and Chale in the Diani-Shimoni seascape (Kenya) have fully adopted this approach by playing a leading role in designing tourism experiences drawing on their own knowledge, traditions, and priorities, showing how communities are owners of tourism initiatives. A similar approach was adopted in Laborie (Saint Lucia) for the development of locally relevant ecotourism experiences.

Governance infrastructure is as important as physical facilities

Investing in coordination platforms, clear institutional roles, knowledge-sharing and sustained technical support at local, national and regional levels can strengthen knowledge systems and institutional and local community-based capacity. With sustained technical support, such mechanisms are essential to foster cooperation for resilient, fair and sustainable tourism destinations and to sustain progress beyond individual projects and funding cycles. The Blue Tourism Stakeholder Forum in Diani-Shimoni (Kenya) is a multi-stakeholder coordination platform that has laid the foundation for a Blue Tourism Fund and Learning Hub, showing how investing in governance infrastructure can create the groundwork for lasting mechanisms supporting coordination, learning, and continued action.

Replication and scaling up of sustainable blue tourism is grounded in institutional learning and capacity building

Scaling up should be understood as the adaptation and transfer of enabling governance principles, tools, knowledge, and lessons rather than the duplication of individual projects. Such a shift requires these approaches to be embedded into national policies and institutions, as well as regional cooperation mechanisms and practical tools for destinations, businesses and communities. The Blue Tourism Initiative has shown how project lessons can inform and lay the basis for regional initiatives aimed at fostering cooperation for sustainable blue tourism. This is reflected in the MED Blue Tourism Flagship Initiative, integrated into the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development 2026-2035.

1. Why blue tourism requires a governance transition

Coastal and marine tourism, or blue tourism, is a major driver of coastal economies, generating **1.4% of global GDP and supporting 52 million direct jobs.**[1] Extending far beyond immediate coastal zones—where blue tourism activities are concentrated—the sector creates significant socio-economic links with many other sectors, including fisheries, transport, farming, cultural heritage, and infrastructure development.[2] Taken together, **blue tourism represents 3.2% of global GDP** through these interconnected coastal economies. In regions such as the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, where tourism is a major economic activity,[3] these socio-economic sectoral linkages create significant economic opportunities for communities and investors alike. However, it also increases governance and policy-making complexity.[4]

Tourism decision-making increasingly influences other policy processes in relation to marine conservation, infrastructure development, local livelihood creation and, more broadly, regional development. In turn, the condition of coastal and marine ecosystems and social acceptance of the sector increasingly determine the resilience, sustainability and competitiveness of tourism destinations.[5] Thus, as tourism becomes more interconnected with wider systems, the effectiveness of tourism policy increasingly depends on their ability to strengthen institutions capable of coordinating decisions across sectors and governance levels.

Over the years, sustainable tourism initiatives have been supported across regions; however, the **growth-centric policy model** that has largely guided destinations has limited the expected benefits from these initiatives. This is evidenced by the persisting impacts[6] that continue to be associated with the sector. While technical solutions have gradually improved tourism practices, tourism governance and policies have often failed to establish the institutional conditions necessary for their scalability and long-term sustainability.[7] This means that **the principal barriers to sustainable blue tourism remain the institutional arrangements** and their mandates through which tourism is governed.

Moreover, given that those institutional arrangements should increasingly be interacting with other governance spheres–most importantly ocean, climate change,[8] biodiversity, and community development–its **sectoral policies cannot be developed in silos,**[9] as they would struggle to address complex trade-offs that coastal and marine areas are facing and create the enabling conditions that a transition to sustainable blue tourism needs. In fact, fragmented institutional arrangements can lead to uncoordinated funding streams, planning cycles, administrative burdens, and conflicting legislative frameworks, which often reinforce the pursuit of individual policy objectives rather than shared territorial efforts, in addition to creating barriers for tourism businesses and destinations wishing to balance economic development, ecosystem protection and the wellbeing of its communities.

The Blue Tourism Initiative experience has shown how these governance shortcomings generate practical barriers for destinations and tourism operators, for example, when community-based organisations and businesses must navigate multiple agencies, administrative requirements to implement activities that depend on coordinated action across sectors. The initiative has also demonstrated how the transition to sustainable blue tourism is constrained by **inadequate cross-sector coordination, limited recognition of communities as governance partners, underinvestment in governance capacity, and weak mechanisms for knowledge sharing and institutional learning.**[10] [11] These issues are compounded by the **need to respond to broader environmental and institutional uncertainty,** making adaptive capacity an important dimension of effective blue tourism governance.

These persistent governance barriers raise an important question: **What institutional conditions enable destinations to reconcile tourism development with marine conservation and community wellbeing?**

As a global multi-stakeholder project focused on the environmental management, governance, and planning of coastal and marine tourism across three marine regions (the Caribbean, Mediterranean and Western Indian Ocean; Figure 1), the Blue Tourism Initiative supported the **participatory development of locally-led blue tourism solutions** across diverse ecological, institutional, cultural and socio-economic contexts. Designed and facilitated through collective actions, the Initiative brought together governments, coastal communities, civil society, the private sector, and regional organisations to generate practical experience and policy lessons relevant for other destinations and regions.

The value of the Blue Tourism Initiative lies not only in the diversity of these interventions (Table 1), but in the **comparative evidence** they have provided throughout their implementation. To this end, despite blue tourism solutions being piloted in different ecological conditions, institutional arrangements and socio-economic contexts, they repeatedly encountered **similar governance challenges** and helped identify similar enabling conditions for sustaining locally-led sustainable blue tourism practices.

Across the three project regions, this convergence was more evident in **enabling conditions**, including: the importance of community ownership in blue tourism development,

1 WTTC (2025). Coastal & Marine Tourism Quantifying Its Footprint and Funding Requirements for Mitigation and Adaptation. World Travel & Tourism Council.

2 Balestracci, G. & Sciacca, A. (2023). Towards Sustainable Blue Tourism: Trends, challenges and Policy Pathways. Blue Tourism Initiative.

3 IUCN, IATUR, IDDRI & eco-union. (2025). Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Mediterranean: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Pathways. Blue Tourism Initiative. IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation, Málaga, Spain.

4 Fosse J., Klarwein S., Kosmas I. & Gonzalez A. (2021). Ecosystem Approach for a sustainable coastal and maritime Tourism in the Mediterranean. eco-union.

5 Ocean Panel (2022). Opportunities for Transforming Coastal and Marine Tourism: Towards Sustainability, Regeneration and Resilience. High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy.

6 Ocean Panel (2022). Opportunities for Transforming Coastal and Marine Tourism: Towards Sustainability, Regeneration and Resilience. High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy.

7 OECD (2023). Driving Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development.

8 Plan Bleu (2026). Mediterranean Tourism Facing Climate Change: Towards a Redefinition of the Tourism Model.

9 Balestracci, G. & Sciacca, A. (2023). Towards Sustainable Blue Tourism: Trends, Challenges and Policy Pathways. Blue Tourism Initiative.

10 Kepher G., J., Baraka, P., Sciacca, A., Balestracci, G., Rambahiniarison, J., Atieno, L. (2024). Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Western Indian Ocean: Trends, Challenges and Policy Pathways. Blue Tourism Initiative.

11 Leotaud, N., Laidlow-Ferdinand, A., Clauzel, S., Vaughan, N. (2024). Towards sustainable blue tourism in the Caribbean: Policy pathways to support community-based coastal and marine tourism. Blue Tourism Initiative Diagnostic Study. CANARI: Port of Spain

Figure 1. Blue Tourism Initiative's pilot sites

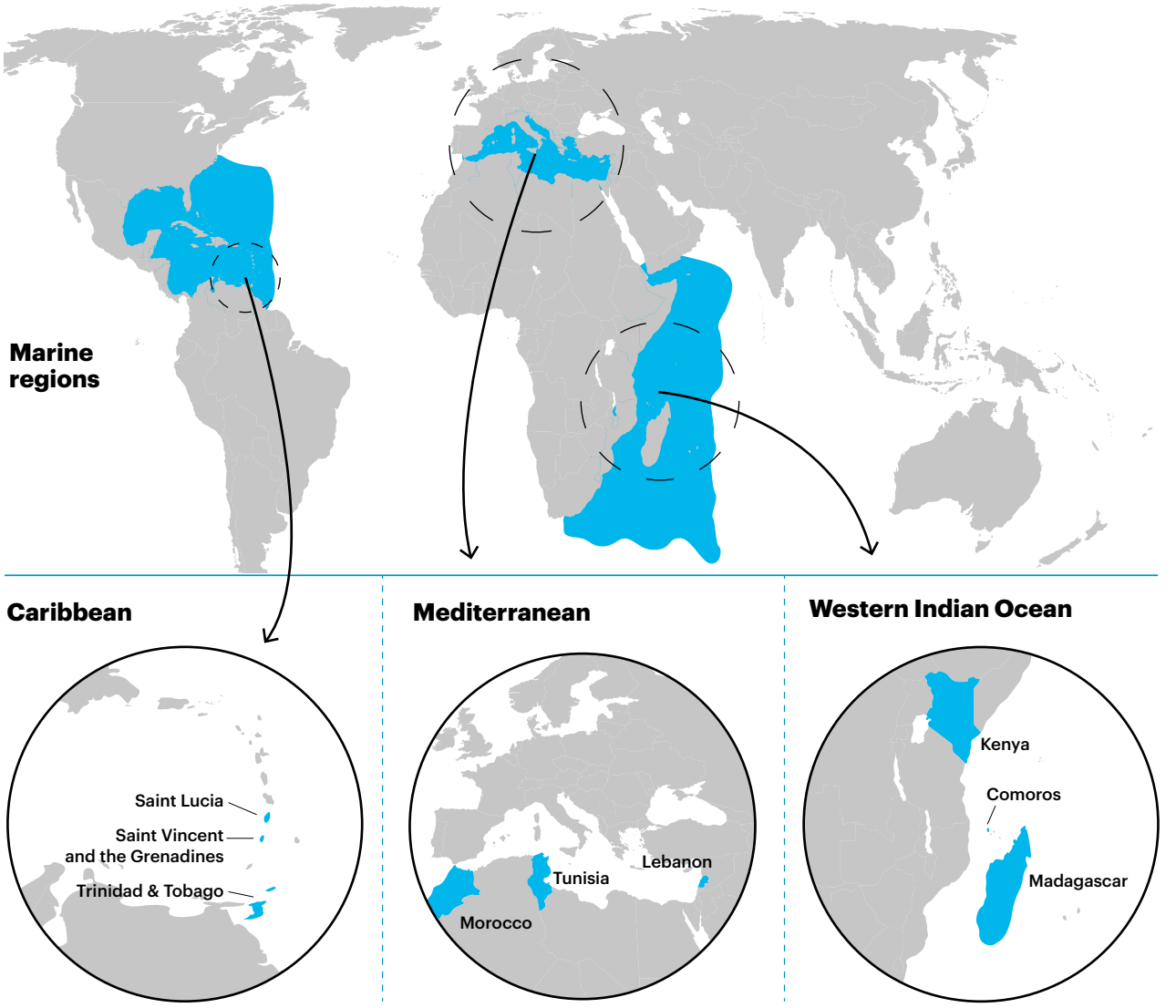

Table 1. Blue Tourism Initiative's pilot actions

Marine region	Pilot sites	Main type of actions
Caribbean	Laborie (Saint Lucia); Tobago; Nariva Swamp (Trinidad and Tobago); South Coast (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines)	Strengthening community-based tourism governance, planning and management of tourism in a Ramsar site, supported community-led micro projects linking tourism, biodiversity conservation and climate-resilient destination development and business practices.
Mediterranean	Tyre Coast Nature Reserve, Palm Islands Nature Reserve, Anfeh Salt Pans (Lebanon); Al Hoceima National Park (Morocco); Djerba (Tunisia)	Development of sustainable visitor management tools, ecotourism experiences and multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms in protected and ecologically sensitive areas, alongside capacity building and the promotion and adoption of biodiversity-friendly practices among tourism operators.
Western Indian Ocean	Diani-Shimoni (Kenya); Sainte Marie (Madagascar); Mitsamiouli-Ndroudé National Park (Comoros)	Supporting local governance through multi-stakeholder platforms, enhanced community participation in tourism planning and supported the creation of a sustainable tourism territorial certification system.

Further information on the pilot projects is available at: https://bluetourisminitiative.org/pilot-sites/

multi-stakeholder coordination needed at different levels, local institutional capacity to support integrated adaptive management and the presence of dynamic knowledge and monitoring systems. The specific solutions varied by context, but the governance principles underpinning their success were remarkably consistent. Most importantly, they also demonstrated that scaling sustainable blue tourism is not simply a matter of replicating individual projects but requires creating the **institutional conditions** that allow locally-developed solutions to be sustained, adapted, and embedded within wider governance systems.

Building on the Blue Tourism Initiative, this brief presents the **governance conditions** that can enable a swifter transition to sustainable blue tourism in destinations and recommends how they can inform wider policy reform across diverse marine regions.

2. Six conditions for sustainable blue tourism

The experience of the Blue Tourism Initiative across the Caribbean, Mediterranean, and Western Indian Ocean indicates that six interconnected and complementary enabling conditions are needed to support the sustainable blue tourism transition (Table 2). Together, these conditions address the main governance barriers, including disconnected planning and policy systems, limited community tourism participation, unclear agency and decision-making roles, insufficient local governance capacity, weak or unleveraged knowledge systems, and challenges in scaling blue tourism innovation beyond project sites.

The conditions should not be understood as standalone interventions but as a mutually reinforcing governance system in which **coordinated governance enables integrated planning, integrated planning creates space for community participation, local participation generates knowledge and ownership, and knowledge and institutional learning enable approaches to be sustained and scaled.**

Across the three regions, the pilots further demonstrate that these conditions need to be supported by **adaptive governance,** referring to the capacity of institutions and stakeholders to respond to environmental, political, economic and institutional change while maintaining progress towards shared sustainability objectives. Thus, adaptive governance should be seen as a cross-cutting principle.

Table 2. Six conditions for sustainable blue tourism

1. Overcome fragmented governance

Connect sectors, institutions and governance levels to support a more coordinated transition to sustainable blue tourism and create the enabling conditions for destinations.

2. Integrate land-sea governance

Connect inland, coastal and marine systems to enhance the role of tourism within the wider territorial management effort rather than being treated as an isolated sector.

3. Empower communities as governance partners

Enable co-design, decision-making and ownership by communities to enhance inclusivity, value creation and more context-based adaptive responses to tourism challenges.

4. Invest in governance infrastructure

Invest in coordination and cooperation mechanisms to support multi-sectoral collaboration, community-policy feedback loops and overall transparency and accountability.

5. Strengthen knowledge systems

Connect local knowledge, monitoring and decisions to strengthen decision-making while creating the feedback mechanism between stakeholders, essential for adaptive management for sustainable blue tourism.

6. Scale through institutional learning

Adapt and transfer lessons across places and levels by creating governance conditions that enable their application in different institutional and socio-economic contexts.

2.1. Overcome fragmented governance

Tourism is an intersectoral activity with direct links to several other sectors such as fisheries, food systems, water management, and coastal infrastructure. Moreover, sectoral policies are increasingly intrinsically related and relevant to climate adaptation, marine conservation, and community development efforts. Yet, isolated governance, a result of the largely unrecognised cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary nature of tourism by institutions and multilateral processes slows down or hampers the effective coordination required to address shared territorial, environmental, and social challenges.

The Blue Tourism Initiative has consistently highlighted this **governance and policy fragmentation** in regional diagnostic studies across the Caribbean,[12] Mediterranean,[13] and

12 Leotaud, N., Laidlow-Ferdinand, A., Clauzel, S., Vaughan, N. (2024). Towards sustainable blue tourism in the Caribbean: Policy pathways to support community-based coastal and marine tourism. Blue Tourism Initiative Diagnostic Study. CANARI: Port of Spain.

13 IUCN & ETC-UMA (2024). Mapping the Impact of Blue Tourism in the Mediterranean: Vulnerability Assessment of Coastal and Marine Destination. Blue Tourism Initiative.

Western Indian Ocean.[14] These flagship studies have mapped blue tourism trends, challenges, and opportunities for sustainability and proposed policy recommendations tailored to each region's context. According to the diagnostics, governance fragmentation can undermine the policy coherence and regional coordination required for integrated territorial planning and the implementation of environmentally and socially sustainable tourism practices. At the same time, fragmentation weakens institutional capacity to govern tourism across sectors and governance levels.

These gaps are not only a broader policy-level concern but also have direct consequences for local destination implementation of sustainable blue tourism practices. In the **Caribbean**, for instance, community organisations, tourism enterprises and local authorities often navigate multiple agencies, funding mechanisms and administrative requirements to implement activities that depend on broader coordinated actions and frameworks. Moreover, in the **Mediterranean**, the Blue Tourism Initiative similarly demonstrated that blue tourism requires coordination between tourism development, protected area management, biodiversity conservation and territorial planning. In the **Western Indian Ocean**, the importance of multi-stakeholder platforms capable of bringing together public authorities, communities, and tourism actors was a key learning.

Overcoming fragmentation requires implementing mechanisms at different levels that connect sectoral mandates, clarify roles and responsibilities, and create shared accountability for territorial outcomes. These can strengthen the institutional foundation for the other governance conditions, as without coordination connecting institutions and sectors, integrated land-sea planning, meaningful community participation and effective knowledge-sharing remain difficult to sustain.

2.2. Integrate land-sea governance

Blue tourism is interconnected with the wider coastal, marine, and inland systems within which it operates. As upstream and inland activities influence coastal and marine tourism, and tourism itself is connected to inland economic sectors, this calls for integrated and inclusive land-sea planning that is fully mindful of the increasing necessity to harmonise local environmental, social, and economic processes. The Caribbean blue tourism pilot solutions reinforced this land-sea perspective, demonstrating that blue tourism does not begin at the waterline. Various processes can directly influence the sustainability, quality and resilience of coastal tourism destinations and the livelihoods that depend on them, including land-based pollution, agricultural practices, waste management, as well as the status of wetlands, mangroves and inland biodiversity. To this end, the Blue Tourism Initiative, through targeted actions, has supported integrated land-sea planning through diverse governance and planning approaches.

In the Mediterranean, in the **Al Hoceima National Park (Morocco),** pilot projects have demonstrated how sustainability in blue tourism depends on effective integration of protected area management, biodiversity conservation, visitor management tools, and local livelihoods through collaborative territorial planning.[15] This is an example of how integrated land-sea planning can position tourism within wider territorial and conservation governance rather than treated as a separate economic activity. Similarly, in the Caribbean, at the Ramsar site of **Nariva Swamp (Trinidad and Tobago)**, integrated community-led ecotourism through **community-based micro-grant** projects was central to fostering conservation of the wetland while promoting better local climate resilience among small businesses. This experience has concretely shown how blue tourism, environmental stewardship, sustainable livelihoods and climate resilience can be advanced and harmonised through integrated territorial planning.[16] In **Mitsamiouli-Ndroudé National Park (Comoros),** the development of a **Destination Management Plan** using a bottom-up participatory method aims to position blue tourism as a central element of integrated management of the marine protected area, creating economic opportunities for the park communities while strengthening local governance through a multi-stakeholder co-management committee. The objective of this approach is to better align ecosystem protection with inclusive tourism development while informing the key elements for developing management frameworks that are fully balanced with local priorities and opportunities.[17]

However, these experiences demonstrate that land-sea governance is not simply a matter of integrating environmental considerations into tourism planning, but it requires planning on the functional relationships between ecosystems, economic activities, infrastructure and livelihoods across the territory supported by governance arrangements capable of managing these relationships. Integrated land-sea planning creates the space and need for meaningful community participation.

2.3. Empower communities as governance partners

Communities are central to tourism; however, while they are increasingly consulted in tourism processes, this does not always translate into decision-making authority and equitable benefit sharing. The implication is that continued limited community ownership of tourism, and its sustainability transition, remain a persistent challenge for the tourism sector. The comparative pilot experience also suggests that meaningful participation is strongest where communities have a genuine stake in both decision-making and the benefits generated by tourism. Institutionalising community participation through formal roles, mechanisms and processes can help embed this involvement within governance, moving beyond

14 Kepher Gona, J., Baraka, P., Sciacca, A., Balestracci, G., Rambahiniarison, J., Atieno, L. (2024). Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Western Indian Ocean: Trends, Challenges and Policy Pathways. Blue Tourism Initiative.

15 In the Al Hoceima National Park (Morocco) the Blue Tourism Initiative brought together local communities, businesses, cooperatives, and conservation actors to strengthen governance, improve visitor infrastructure and services, build local capacity, and develop authentic nature- and culture-based experiences rooted in the park's identity.

16 The Nariva Swamp pilot in Trinidad and Tobago strengthened the Experience Nariva Ecotourism and supported micro projects focused on community-based tourism, capacity building, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience and sustainable local livelihoods through collaborative planning.

17 In Mitsamiouli-Ndroudé National Park (Comoros) the Blue Tourism Initiative facilitated the development of a Participatory Destination Plan, strengthened the park's co-management committee through a multi-stakeholder tourism group, and linked community-based tourism (homestay programme) with marine protected area management through a coastal trail and local accommodation initiatives.

ad hoc consultation towards sustained participation in decision-making. Therefore, tourism is more inclusive where the role of communities moves beyond consultation and communities become formal active co-designers, implementers, and custodians of tourism activities, strategies and frameworks.

In the Blue Tourism Initiative, communities were central actors, enablers and knowledge holders rather than simply beneficiaries in a sustainable tourism transition. This was exemplified in Sainte Marie (Madagascar), where the island stakeholders jointly co-designed the **Sainte-Marie Tourism Eco-label standards,**[18] a locally rooted and owned certification framework aimed at fostering sustainability among tourism operators. Such an initiative shows how local stakeholders can co-design sustainability instruments that are relevant, feasible and locally owned. Similarly, the **participatory tourism planning** in Laborie **(Saint Lucia)**, demonstrates that inclusive ecotourism governance emerges when communities are not only recognised as governance partners but also become main leaders of tourism development.[19] In the Western Indian Ocean, the design of **community-based tourism experiences** by the communities of Kinondo and Chale in the **Diani-Shimoni** seascape similarly demonstrates how local knowledge, traditions and community priorities can inform tourism development and governance. Meanwhile, in **Anfeh Salt Pans** (Lebanon), a **cultural trail** was co-designed with salt producers, hospitality workers, fishers, artisans and local guides, enabling diverse stakeholders to collectively shape the tour narratives and the interpretation of their cultural heritage.[20]

These experiences show that local ownership is not simply an outcome of participation but an enabling condition for continuity where initiatives are more likely to be sustained when local actors have helped shape them, see their interests reflected in decisions, and can retain tangible social or economic benefits. This shifts the role of communities from stakeholders to governance partners: not only participating in decisions made by others, but contributing to the design, implementation, monitoring and adaptation of the systems that shape tourism in their territories.

2.4. Invest in governance infrastructure

Tourism policies and strategies have traditionally prioritised physical infrastructure, mainly aimed at supporting tourism growth, while underinvesting in the institutional, coordination and community capacities required to manage tourism pressures, maximise sectoral benefits and adapt to contextual changes. However, infrastructure alone cannot sustain coordinated and adaptive governance that tourism increasingly requires. To this end, the Blue Tourism Initiative has invested significant efforts in facilitating local governance mechanisms that enable coordinated sustainable blue tourism planning. These initiatives have demonstrated that governance infrastructure is transformative.

Governance infrastructure is a capable coordinating mechanism with clear roles and responsibilities for resolving tourism challenges, using digital and information systems, and fostering institutional links between local actors and public authorities and identity and supporting technical capacity development at the destination level. The Caribbean experience demonstrated that community organisations and SMEs can face significant administrative, technical and logistical capacity constraints, making sustained technical accompaniment an important condition for turning local ownership into durable results. Moreover, the **Blue Tourism Stakeholder Forum**[21] formed in Diani-Shimoni **(Kenya)**–established as an inclusive platform for coordination and collaborative decision-making at the county level–is improving transparency and accountability in tourism, along with communities becoming more central actors in blue tourism planning. In the Mediterranean, the **MEET methodology**[22] guided the establishment of the **Local Ecotourism Cluster** in **Al Hoceima National Park** aimed at improving the coordination of ecotourism activities within the national park, sharing resources and ensuring that ecotourism development benefits both the protected area and surrounding communities.[23]

Together, the regional experiences show that governance infrastructure needs to become key platforms that connect local capacity with wider institutional systems, providing the continuity, coordination and support needed to turn local initiatives into durable governance arrangements. Once such governance infrastructure is in place, it can also enable the systematic generation, sharing and use of knowledge for adaptive decision-making.

2.5. Strengthen knowledge systems for adaptive governance

Blue tourism planning needs to be informed by knowledge that is contextual, continuously updated, and responsive to changing environmental and socio-economic conditions. To this end, local stakeholders, and especially community members, are knowledge holders and knowledge producers who can inform and strengthen decision-making while creating feedback mechanisms between stakeholders that are essential for adaptive governance in sustainable blue tourism.

18 In Sainte-Marie (Madagascar) under the project the Sainte-Marie Ecolabel was developed, bringing together tourism operators, the Sainte-Marie Tourism Office and public authorities to jointly develop sustainability standards and strengthen local ownership of tourism governance.

19 In Laborie in Saint Lucia the project supported the development of community-based ecotourism experiences, strengthened stakeholder collaboration and participatory planning, and laid the foundations for locally led sustainability standards and long-term tourism governance.

20 As part of the Blue Tourism Initiative pilot project "Strengthening Tourism and Governance of the Cultural Heritage - Anfeh Salt Pans", implemented by Friends of Nature (FON), a cultural trail was co-designed with local community and tourism stakeholders to connect visitors with Anfeh's cultural heritage, natural assets and salt-pan landscape.

21 In (Kenya) the Blue Tourism Stakeholder Forum endorsed the Kwale County Tourism Council as a permanent multi-stakeholder coordination platform and agreed to establish a Blue Tourism Fund and a Learning Hub, laying the foundation for stronger institutional coordination, capacity building and collaborative destination governance.

22 The Mediterranean Experience of EcoTourism (MEET) methodology is a participatory approach for developing and managing ecotourism in protected areas. It brings protected area managers and local tourism stakeholders together through Local Ecotourism Clusters to co-design ecotourism products, while applying sustainability and quality criteria and monitoring their environmental and socio-economic impacts.

23 Building on the experience of the MEET Network, in Al Hoceima National Park, the Blue Tourism Initiative pilot established a Local Ecotourism Cluster, bringing together park managers, local businesses, cooperatives, NGOs, and public authorities. This collaborative platform is designed to coordinate tourism activities, share resources, and ensure that ecotourism development benefits both the protected area and surrounding communities.

In the **Caribbean**, community-based micro-grant projects supported community-generated biodiversity monitoring through citizen science to inform protected area management while enhancing ecotourism products.[24] The pilots demonstrate the value of creating formal feedback loops between community-generated knowledge, monitoring systems and institutional decision-making. For example, biodiversity monitoring undertaken by community practitioners can generate information that could simultaneously improve tourism experiences and contribute to conservation management. This suggests that knowledge systems should not simply collect information but should **connect local knowledge and monitoring activities to decisions** on visitor management, conservation and destination planning. In the Mediterranean, on **Djerba Island**, the Blue Tourism Initiative demonstrated how stakeholder knowledge can inform practical sustainability tools. The development of the biodiversity guidelines for hotel operators and a carrying capacity assessment for the Ramsar site of **Ras Raml** demonstrate how extensive consultation with local stakeholders can help shape instruments that are contextually relevant and locally owned.[25] In the **Western Indian Ocean**, the participatory development of community-based tourism experiences and management approaches in the communities of Kinondo[26] and Chale[27] demonstrates the importance and essential role of local knowledge and traditions not only to enrich tourism development but more broadly to foster more inclusive tourism governance.

Knowledge systems support adaptive governance only when **new evidence and changing conditions** can feed back into management and decision-making. The experience of **Tyre Coast Nature Reserve**[28] (in Lebanon), illustrates this process. Project implementation took place amid conflict, infrastructure damage and staff shortages. An assessment of the impacts of the conflict provided the needed evidence to inform adjustments to management approaches, while partnerships and local engagement supported adaptation to operational constraints. The experience demonstrates how linking knowledge generation to institutional learning and management responses can strengthen adaptive governance.

The objective is therefore to create knowledge systems that generate feedback between communities, tourism actors, researchers and public authorities, allowing policies and management approaches to be adjusted as conditions change. This is particularly important in coastal and marine destinations exposed to climate impacts, environmental degradation, geopolitical instability and rapidly changing tourism markets.

24 Across the Caribbean, the Blue Tourism Initiative awarded 17 community micro-grants alongside capacity building in sustainable business development, environmental stewardship, marketing and citizen science, strengthening the institutional capacity of community organisations and small tourism enterprises to lead sustainable blue tourism initiatives.

25 The Djerba pilot supported the development of hotel biodiversity guidelines and a carrying-capacity assessment, developed in consultation with local stakeholders. The guidelines aim to strengthen biodiversity performance and climate-friendly practices in hotels, while the carrying-capacity assessment provides a basis for managing visitor pressures and informing more sustainable destination planning in the Ras Raml Ramsar Site.

26 Kaya Kinondo Trails website: https://kayakinondotrails.com/

27 Chale Adventures website: https://chaleadventures.com/

28 The Blue Tourism Initiative pilot "EcoPeace: Revitalizing Tyre Coast Nature Reserve through Conservation, Community Empowerment, and Sustainable Tourism", implemented by Tyre Coast Nature Reserve aimed to support conservation, community resilience and sustainable tourism. Despite conflict, infrastructure damage and staff shortages, the reserve adapted through partnerships, local engagement and infrastructure rehabilitation, while assessments of conflict impacts generated evidence to inform adaptive management.

2.6. Scale through institutional learning

The experience of the Blue Tourism Initiative shows that scaling sustainable blue tourism practices depends on the transferability of enabling principles and institutional learning rather than the replication of individual projects. While individual pilot projects are context-specific, the enabling governance conditions are transferable across different institutional and socio-economic settings. They can inform wider policy frameworks, tourism strategies, and regional blue tourism cooperation initiatives.

The **MED Blue Tourism Flagship Initiative**[29] of the **Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development** (MSSD 2026-2035) exemplifies how governance lessons generated through the Blue Tourism Initiative have informed a regional blue tourism initiative aimed at supporting a more cohesive and integrated sustainable blue tourism approach across the Mediterranean basin. This Mediterranean experience is particularly relevant in demonstrating how lessons from local and regional experimentation can become embedded in a **wider policy framework**, providing an example of moving from individual interventions towards a regionally anchored approach, and showing the potential for pilot experience to contribute to institutional and policy change beyond the original project sites.

Scaling, therefore, would refer to a process of institutional adaptation and shared principles rather than project duplication, enabling governance innovations and enabling conditions to become embedded within policies, institutions, regional cooperation mechanisms and ultimately, translated into tools for destinations, communities and businesses. The **Caribbean** experience reinforces this distinction: while infrastructure, community monitoring mechanisms, SME clusters, and digital systems can provide useful models for other destinations, their transferability will depend on adapting the underlying approaches to local institutional capacity, environmental conditions and community priorities. The **Western Indian Ocean** similarly demonstrates how **destination co-management and stakeholder platforms** can provide principles that are adaptable across different community and institutional contexts. This is increasingly essential, as stakeholders and initiatives should progressively share enabling conditions and policies for sustainable blue tourism across borders.

Scaling should therefore be understood as a governance process: **learning from what works, identifying the principles that make it work, adapting them to different contexts, and embedding them within institutions, policies and cooperation mechanisms.**

Across the three marine regions, the central lesson is that the transition should not focus on replicating one model, but rather, driven by a **set of mutually reinforcing governance conditions** that can be adapted to destination institutional, ecological and socio-economic contexts.

29 The MED Blue Tourism Flagship Initiative forms part of the implementation of the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) 2026-2035 under the framework of the Barcelona Convention and the Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MAP).

3. From governance conditions to policy priorities

The six governance conditions enabling sustainable blue tourism identified through the Blue Tourism Initiative point towards a set of priorities to be considered at different governance levels. Together, they suggest that enabling sustainable blue tourism requires strengthening the governance systems within which tourism develops. To enhance their implementation, these recommendations should be embedded within existing governance processes and policy frameworks operating across global, regional, national and local levels. (Table 3).

Table 3. **Policy priorities for sustainable blue tourism transition**

Global

Integrate blue tourism into global environmental, ocean, biodiversity, climate, and sustainable development governance agendas.

Governance conditions

- Overcome fragmented governance;
- Strengthen knowledge systems for adaptive governance;
- Scale through institutional learning

Expected outcome

Strengthen global recognition of blue tourism's contribution to environmental, ocean, biodiversity, climate, and sustainable development goals, and create opportunities for evidence and lessons from regional and local practice to inform global governance on blue tourism.

Regional

Establish sectoral tourism and, where relevant, sub-sectoral or thematic, intra-regional cooperation and collaboration mechanisms and/or working groups.

Governance conditions

- Scale through institutional learning;
- Strengthen knowledge systems for adaptive governance;
- Overcome fragmented governance

Expected outcome

Strengthen regional cooperation on sustainable blue tourism by enabling more effective, structured knowledge sharing for cross-border learning and coordinated innovation; reducing policy fragmentation; and supporting the adaptation and scaling of locally tested innovations and governance approaches within and across marine regions.

National

Support local development by coordinating tourism plans with relevant sectors and actors and recognise community-based organisations as governance partners.

Governance conditions

- Overcome fragmented governance;
- Empower communities as governance partners;
- Integrate land-sea governance

Expected outcome

Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration, institutional capacity, and community participation to support more coherent and locally grounded national policy development, implementation, and sustained local action.

Local

Establish community co-management as a policy objective through participatory planning and decision-making, integrating community-generated knowledge into destination governance to ensure a meaningful role in shaping, implementing, and sustaining tourism initiatives.

Governance conditions

- Empower communities as governance partners;
- Strengthen knowledge systems for adaptive governance;
- Integrate land-sea governance

Expected outcome

Enable more inclusive, context-specific, adaptive destination governance to strengthen community ownership and legitimacy, and support the continuity and local sustainability of tourism initiatives beyond individual projects or funding cycles.

Cross-cutting

Provide sustained technical and financial support and mechanisms that help institutions and communities adapt to environmental, economic and institutional change.

Governance conditions

- Invest in governance infrastructure;
- Strengthen knowledge systems for adaptive governance;
- Empower communities as governance partners

Expected outcome

Strengthen governance capacity, financial resilience and adaptive capacity at all levels to support the long-term resilience and sustainability of blue tourism destinations and ensure that successful local initiatives are scaled up and sustained beyond project or funding cycles.

Project partners

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