

## IMPACT SHEET: GreenTour: Promoting Sustainable Tourism in Kyrgyzstan

Replicating tourism industry best practices into the Kyrgyzstan and wider Central Asian tourism supply chain through integrated business led approach.



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*Promoting sustainable consumption and production (SCP) in the Kyrgyz tourism sector by adopting and replicating proven SCP practices, developing greener products, and obtaining competitive advantages within the global tourism market.*



## PROJECT BACKGROUND

Situated in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan combines natural beauty, cultural heritage, adventure, and authentic experiences, making it an increasingly popular destination for travelers seeking new experiences in the region. The Government of Kyrgyzstan has identified tourism as a priority sector for the sustainable economic development of the country. Studies have shown that despite positive macro-economic effects, sustainability awareness among MSME's within the sector is low. Sustainability standards exist but are hardly implemented in practice due to lack of market incentives. At the same time, opportunities arise for sustainable inclusive growth thanks to the growing expectations from international B2B and B2C markets. To support Kyrgyz MSME's to cater these opportunities, Helvetas jointly with partners KATO (Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators), KCBTA (Kyrgyz Community Based Tourism Association) and ECEAT (European Centre for Eco and Agro Tourism) with support of the GSTC and PATA have defined the GreenTour approach. Based on the participative project design, the project partners combined their expertise in sustainable tourism, the Kyrgyz business landscape and the policy environment to overcome the identified issues and support Kyrgyz Tourism MSMEs nationwide in creating green supply-chains leading to inclusive sustainable development.

## CHALLENGE

Tourism is a major and growing sector of the Kyrgyzstan economy and the second largest foreign exchange earner, contributing more than \$1 billion, 5 % of GDP, and 9,3 % of total employment. But rapid growth in the tourism sector creates sustainability challenges, including: poorly planned facilities; resource efficiency; waste management (food, plastics); carbon emissions; income inequality; over-tourism; social issues and limited access to green credits. Consumer awareness, sustainable consumption and production practices could contribute to the mitigation of these challenges but it has so far not yet been systematically mainstreamed among tourism MSMEs who lack awareness, Information, standards, implementation tools and (perceived) market interest.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The **overall objective** is to boost the transformation of Kyrgyzstan towards a green economy by enhancing the sustainability and competitiveness of tourism as a key sector thus contributing to the Kyrgyz National Development Strategy and the Development Program of the Kyrgyz Republic 2018-2022 "Unity, Trust, Creation", as well as SDG goals 8 and 12 by promoting SCP through sustainable supply chain development in the Kyrgyz tourism sector. The **specific objective** is to have proven SCP practices replicated and integrated into Kyrgyz tourism supply chain as a business requirement leading to greener products and integration of local MSMEs and communities, which is supported by enabling government policies leading to a competitive advantage within the global tourism market.

## TARGET GROUPS

- 40 Kyrgyz Tour Operators
- 800 Supply Chain MSMEs (hotels, local suppliers and producers (e.g., tour guides, drivers, caterers, homestays, activity and transport providers)
- 30 Local Communities
- 400,000 Consumers

## PROJECT ACTIVITIES

### Green services and products in the tourism

Green services and products were actively promoted among the European business and consumer markets leading to a stronger demand and further incentives to work towards sustainable consumption and production. The Kyrgyz tourism product has gained a more sustainable image acting as an example for other Central Asian countries. Activities in this cluster led to increased relative market share and demand for green products and services.

### Improving the capacity of travel associations

The project developed and tailored common suppliers' Corporate Social Responsibility standards and codes to fit the local context. Local audit and certification procedures were developed in alignment with international standards, and a pool of trained auditors and advisors was established in Central Asia. The project also created a shared supplier database and a global certified product database. Additionally, a carbon management and compensation tool was introduced, and food waste standards for hotels and restaurants were developed and incorporated into training packages.

### Integration of sustainable practices within tour operators

A pyramid approach with three scaling-up cycles was used to guide tour operators to three different performance levels (engaged > trained > committed > certified). MSMEs obtained technical advisory services on SCP issues (resource efficiency, eco-innovation, product life cycles, eco-labelling, sustainability reporting, marketing and trade opportunities). As a result, Kyrgyz tour operators have integrated SCP practices and became committed to engage their suppliers towards sustainability.

### Local food and handicrafts integrated in the tourism value chain

The project worked with food and handicraft producers to identify their unique offerings and integrate them into the tourism value chain. Overall, the food and handicrafts integration component covered 69 food and handicraft producers, artisans, and product owners. The product ideas developed by consultants were tested during the 2022 summer tourist season to collect feedback and make necessary adjustments. The successfully tested products and tours were included in the Catalogue of the Best Sustainable Tours, which the intervention further promoted at international and regional tourism events.



## Green financing support for tourism businesses

A green finance study identified obstacles faced by tourism businesses. The results were shared at a round table with banks and tourism associations. The SWITCH-Asia project PERETO's green credit scheme was promoted by Greentour, which also coordinated with other projects. A demonstration visit to Issyk-Kul oblast showcased sustainable practices involving 19 businesses. Participants observed cultural tours, green technology installations, waste management practices, and sustainable methods employed by Greentour trainees, while also exchanging ideas with green loan recipients.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The onset of the Greentour project coincided with the spread of COVID-19 in the Kyrgyz Republic and throughout the Central Asian region. Borders, businesses, and educational institutions were closed due to strict lockdown measures. This situation adversely affected the implementation of the new project, which focused on developing tourism—the sector hardest hit by the pandemic. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 restrictions, the project continued operations and implemented what was feasible in the “new normal.”

Achieving the supplier certification targets also faced several challenges. The initially proposed certification scheme, Travelife for Hotels, turned out to be infeasible in the Kyrgyz context due to issues related to cost, partnership cooperation, and the complexity of certification criteria. Due to these challenges, the Good Travel Seal from the Green Destinations platform was selected as the certification system for businesses. Thus, the initial scheme was successfully changed to the Good Travel Seal.

The collaboration between the Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators (KATO) and the Kyrgyz Community-Based Tourism Association (KCBTA) was essential to the project's success. Both organizations showed strong support for sustainable tourism initiatives, with KATO emphasizing the competitive advantage of Travelife certification and KCBTA advocating for green tourism products. Their extensive experience, gained from working together on various projects for over 12 years, facilitated effective cooperation and the successful implementation of project activities.

Involving representatives from KATO and KCBTA in the project design ensured motivation and support for greener and more sustainable tourism in Kyrgyzstan. The solid organizational foundations of KATO and KCBTA, including robust business plans and stable memberships, guaranteed their institutional and financial sustainability beyond the project's end. Their commitment to engaging local MSMEs and integrating quality and sustainability standards through training and support was crucial.

This partnership model underscores the importance of selecting partners with complementary strengths, established reputations, and shared goals to achieve a lasting project impact.

## PROJECT ACHIEVEMENT

- In 2022 and 2023, the Alai and Karakol districts were recognized among the **TOP 100 Stories of sustainable practices on the global Green Destinations platform**, becoming the first regions from Central Asia to be included in this prestigious list. This recognition will help Alai and Karakol attract new international tourists, significantly boosting the region's economy, creating new jobs, and promoting sustainable tourism in Kyrgyzstan.
- The project supported over **60 producers of handicrafts and gastronomic products** in promotion, participation in regional exhibitions/forums, and the adoption of sustainable practices.
- Over **1,500 representatives of the tourism sector**, including tour operators, guesthouse businesses, souvenir and gastronomy producers, guides, destinations, government agencies, municipalities, educational institutions, and consultants, have completed courses on sustainable tourism. Additionally, 23 individuals completed the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) course, and 26 Kyrgyz tour operators received basic-level certification in Travelife Partner sustainable practices, recognized by the GSTC.
- Following a review of the certification systems available for hotels and guesthouses in Kyrgyzstan, GreenTour selected the Good Travel Seal and Good Travel Scan powered by Green Destinations as suitable systems for the type and scale of hospitality businesses in Kyrgyzstan. **Fifteen guesthouses and hotels are in the process of achieving the GSTC Good Travel Seal certification** for sustainable practices, which focuses on environmental protection, social responsibility, and economic viability with four certification levels.
- **The first catalog of sustainable (responsible) tours in Kyrgyzstan** was developed and presented at world tourism exhibitions in Berlin, Beijing, and London. The catalog features ten winning tours from the Responsible Tour Contest organized by KATO and includes tours by companies that achieved Travelife Partner status through the project, recognizing their commitment to sustainable practices. Additionally, the catalog presents unique culinary tours and handicraft experiences developed to benefit local artisans and farmers, also supported by the project.
- With the project's assistance, a **Partnership Network of Tourist Destinations** of the Kyrgyz Republic was established. The purpose of this agreement is to unify efforts across all regions of Kyrgyzstan to develop tourism and attract investment in the sector.
- The project supported the Kyrgyz Republic's Department of Tourism in legal and program development, including the development of the Regulatory Impact Assessment of the new version of the Law on Tourism of the Kyrgyz Republic, a tourism development program for 2023-2027, and a Code of Conduct for Tour Guides.
- KATO, KCBTA, tour operators, and destinations from the Kyrgyz Republic participated in tourism exhibitions, conferences, and educational tours in Hungary, Greece, Germany, Estonia, France, and Uzbekistan.



**Damira Raeva**  
Helvetas in Kyrgyzstan



Being a pioneer in any activity is always a challenge. In fact, we became a pioneer who introduced international green standards in the tourism sector in the Central Asia region. It was difficult to convince the tour operators to change their management practices to greener way but as soon as they realized the benefits such changes might bring, not only to their business but also to the others, they became interested in taking the next necessary steps. This process takes time, especially for mindset changing, but as soon as this happens then the expected results come quicker. By now we could say that 54% of tour operators follow the Code of Ethics for Sustainable Tourism.



## Long-term project sustainability

GREENTOUR took a systemic approach to strengthening sector associations, enhancing their ability to provide improved services to their member base of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). This approach facilitated the adoption and replication of best practices within and across the tourism sector. The project's impact created a chain of cascade effects from the macro level (associations and institutions) through the meso level (MSMEs) to the micro level (local communities and environmental indicators).

The project improved the technical skills and tools of organizations like KCBTA, KATO, and other sectoral associations by enhancing quality, sustainability, and accreditation standards and expanding training and coaching capacities. This enabled them to offer better and more sustainable services and innovative sustainable consumption and production (SCP) products. These improvements created a positive cascade effect on the meso and micro levels, benefiting national associations' members and their suppliers, including over 30 tour operators and more than 2,000 local suppliers and service providers within the tourism associations' memberships and supply chains.

Improved sustainability skills among MSMEs increased business opportunities and gave them an international competitive advantage, leading to more clients and higher turnover. Furthermore, the project supported Kyrgyzstan's image as a sustainable destination, attracting more high-spending visitors. By promoting pro-poor tourism and community-based initiatives, the project created opportunities for developing rural populations in areas with high tourist potential. At this level, mainstreaming "environmental sensitivity" positively impacted the use and conservation of natural resources, cultural heritage, and practices. Additionally, since tourism is a highly attractive sector for youth and women, the project increased employment opportunities for these groups.

## Project contributions to Climate Change Mitigation and SDGs

The GreenTour project contributed to **SDG 12**—Sustainable Consumption and Production—by promoting the adoption and replication of sustainable practices within Kyrgyzstan's tourism sector. The project encouraged over 60 local producers of handicrafts and gastronomic products to integrate environmentally friendly techniques into their production processes. To improve the energy efficiency of tourist accommodations, popular measures such as installing energy-saving lamps, replacing light fittings, and installing double-glazed windows were implemented.

In support of **SDG 13**—Climate Action—the project provided carbon offsetting tools to participating businesses. These businesses were advised to use online tools to calculate their carbon footprint and plan offsetting actions. Overall, carbon footprint calculations and the use of carbon offsetting tools are in the early piloting stage for tourism and hospitality businesses participating in the sustainability certification process. Additionally, sustainable and carbon-neutral travel packages were developed in partnership with certified tour operators.

The CSR standards proposed by GREENTOUR go beyond environmental labeling by specifically addressing the rights of local communities and minorities, gender equality, labor rights, the prevention of child exploitation, and the rights of disabled people, such as ensuring accessibility within hotel offices.

The project directly contributed to achieving **SDG 8**—Decent Work and Economic Growth—by creating and promoting green jobs through training programs on entrepreneurship, business development, and more, thereby improving the economic conditions of beneficiaries and community members.

Focusing on ethnically diverse regions, the project paid particular attention to ethnic minorities and the rights of indigenous people by developing supplier and consumer codes of conduct and integrating them industry-wide into the tourism supply chain. As a service industry, tourism predominantly employs women, empowering them economically and reducing poverty. This aligns with **SDG 5**—Gender Equality—by promoting the economic empowerment of women. Furthermore, by supporting ethnic minorities and indigenous people, the project addresses **SDG 10**—Reduced Inequalities—ensuring that tourism development benefits marginalized communities. HELVETAS enhanced this approach with its rights-based Gender and Social Equity transformative program methodology, further supporting these goals.

# Impacts at a Glance

<b>Economic Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least by 19% increased the number of green jobs in the 81 tourism organizations</li> <li>• 30 new green tours were developed and published in “The Best Sustainable Tours Catalogue”</li> <li>• 26 tour operators received the Travelife certification, 15 hotel businesses received the Good Travel Seal certification and became more recognizable for the European customers</li> <li>• 6612 people were involved in the project, 2934 among them are women</li> <li>• 275 people were trained in business management and value chain development, 130 among them are women</li> <li>• 123 people received additional income due project interventions on Private Sector Development, 64 among them are women</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of tourist organizations guided in their activities by documents regulating the rules of environmental protection increased by 19.2%</li> <li>• The amount of waste and plastic waste per guest per day has decreased by 50.3% and 50.7%</li> <li>• The share of hotels and guest houses practicing separate solid waste (MSW) collection has increased by 25.4%</li> <li>• The share of accommodation facilities using solar panels for heating and hot water supply has increased by 15%</li> <li>• The percentage of tour operators guided by the Code of Conducts for Sustainable Tourism has increased from 0% in 2020 to 54% in 2023</li> <li>• Clean-up initiatives at Lenin Peak in 2020, and Kol-Tor and Kara-Koi in 2023 were supported, resulting in the removal of 6.8 tons of litter from these remote mountainous areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Social Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The percentage of tour operators with approved documents regulating occupational health and safety rules has increased from 30% in 2020 to 56% in 2023, representing a 26% rise.</li> <li>• 62.9% of tourism companies’ employees believe that salaries in their organizations are in line with other similar companies, and more than a quarter believe that salaries in their companies are higher than in other companies.</li> </ul>
<b>Climate Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The average greenhouse gas emissions per hotel have decreased by 12.6%, from 182 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year in 2020 to 159 tonnes in 2023.</li> <li>• The average electricity consumption per guest per day in a hotel has decreased by 60%</li> </ul>
<b>Target Group Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 123 tour operators and handicraft artisans attended international and local travel fairs</li> <li>• 30 tour operators were prepared for the Travelife audit and 26 of them received the certification statuses and were awarded during the ITB Berlin trade fair in 2023 and 2024</li> <li>• 19 hotel businesses were involved in the Green Destinations auditing process and 15 of them received the Good Travel Seal certification statuses and were awarded during the project final conference</li> <li>• 24 tour operators’ green tours were developed and published in the “The Best Sustainable Tours Catalogue”</li> <li>• Destination Alay participated in TOP 100 Good Practice Story competition of the global Green Destinations Platform in 2022. Greentour project facilitated preparation of the submission, story structure and stakeholder consultations in cooperation with the Swiss Bai Alay Project (Helvetas). Based on successful participation of Alay, Destination Karakol has also applied and won a place in 2023 competition. Greentour guided the initial stages of Karakol story submission which was further supported by the Swiss Winter Tourism Development Project (Helvetas)</li> </ul>
<b>Policy Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported the industry analysis for the new version of the tourism law before submission for parliamentary review</li> <li>• Assisted in reviewing the 2023-2027 draft tourism development program to include sustainability parameters based on international best practices</li> <li>• Facilitated stakeholder discussions on the drafts of the tourism law and tourism development program</li> <li>• Reviewed legislative requirements in the tourism and hospitality sectors and developed guidelines and tools to help businesses comply.</li> </ul>
<b>Europe-Asia Cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project presentation at ITB Berlin international tourism fair in 2023-2024, Budapest HUNGEXPO trade show in 2022 to disseminate project learnings and experiences to wider audiences. Kyrgyz tour operators held more than 100 B2C and B2B meetings with European customers.</li> <li>• Study tours in Athens (Greece), Tallinn (Estonia) were organized for the Kyrgyz tour operators’ and destinations’ representatives.</li> <li>• Training for the Good Travel Seal auditors was held in Bishkek and gathered participants from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan. 8 out of 16 passed the exam and successfully gained the Good Travel Seal auditor status.</li> <li>• Contract with Green Destinations was signed and 15 hotel businesses in Kyrgyzstan for the first time in Central Asia received silver and bronze Good Travel Seal certification statuses (the GSTC-recognized certification system).</li> <li>• MoUs between Kyrgyzstan and DMO Karakalpakstan, Tourism Department of Ferghana region, Shymkent Tourism Department were signed.</li> <li>• Project final conference gathered the representatives of Green Destinations, Samarkand Tourism Forum, Kazakh Tourism, Kazakhstan Tourist Association. The conference provided a platform to showcase the project’s achievements and discuss the future of sustainable tourism in the region among international experts, policymakers, industry leaders, and community stakeholders.</li> </ul>



## FUNDING

EUR 1,672,715  
(EU Contribution: 80%)



## DURATION

2020 - 2024



## PARTNERS



Helvetas Intercooperation gGmbH



Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators  
(KATO)



Kyrgyz Community Based  
Tourism Association "Hospitality  
Kyrgyzstan" (KCBTA)



Stichting European Centre for Eco  
and Agro Tourism - Nederland



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