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Sustainable development

Sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the World Tourism Organization pursuant to Assembly resolution [66/196](#).

* [A/68/150](#).



Report of the World Tourism Organization on sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [66/196](#), in which the Secretary-General was requested to report to the Assembly at its sixty-eighth session on developments related to the implementation of the resolution, taking into account the reports prepared by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in that field. UNWTO sought input from its member States and States Members of the United Nations in Central America on what has been achieved in the region in the past five years.

In preparing the present report, the secretariat of UNWTO sought and used input from the tourism authorities of the Central American Integration System and each of its seven member countries (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama), as well as from the tourism bureaux, other private sector entities and non-governmental organizations in each country.

Sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. It applies to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism subsectors, including ecotourism. The Central American Tourism Integration Secretariat (SITCA) and the tourism authorities of the seven member countries have adopted the principles of sustainable tourism, as defined by UNWTO and as set out in the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria, as a framework for tourism development in their strategic planning. SITCA has also adopted the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, to which the tourism bureaux of some of the countries are requiring their members to adhere, especially with respect to eliminating the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

The countries of Central America, in implementing Millennium Development Goal 1, on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, have emphasized poverty alleviation through tourism as a key objective in their strategic planning. They are focusing on strengthening ecotourism, community-based rural tourism and micro and small businesses in the tourism supply chain in particular the financing, marketing and quality aspects. Two of the countries have emphasized social tourism and recreation as a societal good. Community-based cultural tourism is seen as a way of strengthening indigenous communities, while historical and archaeological tourism is seen as a tool for restoring and conserving those resources. All of the countries propose major investments in conventional tourism and infrastructure, in accordance with the principle of sustainability.

Adaptation to climate change and the associated risks has become a growing focus of regional tourism strategies, along with mitigating tourism-related greenhouse gas emissions. Ecotourism to protect natural habitats and biodiversity is one component of such strategies, as well as being a competitive advantage for the region.

Key lessons learned are that regional integration in tourism in Central America has been successful in areas where individual initiatives in each country are not cost-

effective, especially those in the areas of climate change and security. Similarly, the joint marketing efforts of the region have been successful where nearby countries have complementary attractions. In areas where the countries are competing for market segments with similar offerings, however, integration and joint marketing have been ineffective.

The present report concludes that: (a) the joint and individual activities of Central American countries have relevance for many other countries and subregions, especially those with similar natural and cultural attractions, risks and socioeconomic conditions, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean; (b) there should be increased cooperation to replicate successful cases within and outside the region; and (c) the policy recommendations of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism should be considered in the policy framework for Central American integration in tourism.

I. Introduction

1. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is the specialized agency of the United Nations system vested with a central role in promoting the development of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 66/196, UNWTO took the lead in preparing the present report. An overview of the Central American region and its institutional structures is provided below.

2. Central America consists of seven small countries,¹ Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, with a total land area of 522,700 km² and a population of about 42.7 million. The location of Central America, as a land bridge between North and South America and as a barrier between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, has given it extraordinary but vulnerable natural and cultural resources and attractions. It is here that the flora and fauna of two continents first met and continue to blend and the rising of Central America out of the ocean floor changed the world's climate dramatically. As one author stated, the formation of the Central American isthmus was the pivotal event of the last 10 million years of Earth history.² As a result, Central America is home to approximately 8 per cent of the world's biodiversity. This is threatened, however, by the encroaching agricultural frontier and unsustainable practices. Modern ecotourism was born in Central America in the early 1980s as a tool for conserving biodiversity by enlisting the poor rural population in conservation efforts, using employment in tourism as a source of family income.³

3. In Central America the cultures of Mesoamerica and South America met and exchanged ideas and goods; it is here that maize and many other crops were domesticated, and this was the heart of Mayan civilization. Today there are extraordinary archaeological sites, dating back 12,000 years, as well as a multitude of living cultures. These cultures include a large and diverse Mayan population, Chibchan peoples and Afro-Caribbeans, in addition to the dominant culture in each of the countries. Unfortunately, many live in poverty and are culturally vulnerable. The national estimates of poverty levels range from 24 to 60 per cent, with a regional average of 46 per cent, or 19.8 million people.⁴ Archaeological and historical tourism has existed in the region since at least the 1960s, but only recently have local indigenous populations been taken into account as beneficiaries. Community-based tourism has developed since the 1990s, contributing to the reduction of poverty in these vulnerable communities.

4. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the five original members of the Federal Republic of Central America (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua) made sporadic efforts to establish some form of common political organization. Those efforts culminated with the formation of the Central American Integration System (SICA), which included the five original States and

¹ All but Belize were full members of UNWTO as at May 2013.

² Jeremy B. C. Jackson and Luis D'Croze, "The ocean divided", in A. G. Coates (ed.), *Central America: A Natural and Cultural History* (New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1998).

³ Martha Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C., Island Press, 2008).

⁴ Index Mundi, Population below poverty line (Central America and the Caribbean), available from www.indexmundi.com/map/?v=69&r=ca&l=en.

Panama, upon the signing of the Tegucigalpa Protocol to the Charter of the Organization of Central American States in 1991. The creation of SICA was endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 48/161, allowing the regional bodies and institutions of SICA to interact with the United Nations system. Belize joined SICA as a full member in 2000.

5. The institutional structure of SICA includes 10 secretariats, of which the most relevant to sustainable tourism are the Central American Tourism Integration Secretariat (SITCA) and the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD). SITCA is governed by the Central American Tourism Council (CCT), consisting of the ministers of tourism of the seven member States. SITCA is associated with the Federation of Central American Tourist Bureaux (FEDECATUR), whose members are the tourism chambers of commerce of each country. The members of CCT and FEDECATUR also constitute the members of the Central American Tourism Agency (CATA), based in Madrid.

6. Sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. It applies to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism subsectors, including ecotourism. The 12 aims of sustainability in tourism have been defined by UNWTO as: economic viability, local prosperity, employment quality, social equity, visitor fulfilment, local control, community well-being, cultural richness, physical integrity, biological diversity, resource efficiency and environmental purity.⁵ In order to make these aims operational, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), hosted since 2013 by UNWTO, has developed the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria, consisting of some 40 guidelines for hotels and tour operators, as well for destinations, under the categories of sustainable management and socioeconomic, cultural and environmental impacts. In each case, the emphasis is on promoting positive impacts while minimizing negative ones. The criteria have been adopted by SITCA as the sustainable tourism principles for Central America and are the basis for the creation of a tourism policy for integration and sustainable development in Central America. They are expressed in the strategic plans for sustainable tourism development, 2003-2009 and 2009-2013.

7. Further international programmes in sustainable tourism include the Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism, launched in 2011 with the participation of UNWTO, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Members include the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, as well as national Governments, non-governmental organizations and businesses. The goal of the Partnership is to make sustainability principles part of the mainstream of tourism policies, development and operations. In Central America, regional members include SITCA, the Costa Rican Tourism Board, the National Cleaner Production Centre of Nicaragua, Peninsula Papagayo (Costa Rica) and the Rainforest Alliance. One of the principal activities of the Partnership is to replicate and scale up successful projects from one region to other similar places where they

⁵ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UNWTO, *Making Tourism More Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers* (Paris and Madrid, 2005).

could be successful. Costa Rica acted as vice-chair of the Partnership from 2011 to 2013. The Certification for Sustainable Tourism programme of Costa Rica is listed as a project of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism and is in the process of being replicated in the rest of Central America through SITCA.

8. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012, Member States emphasized the importance of sustainable tourism for creating decent jobs and generating trade opportunities. To accomplish this, the outcome document recognizes “the need to support sustainable tourism activities and relevant capacity-building that promote environmental awareness, conserve and protect the environment, respect wildlife, flora, biodiversity and ecosystems and cultural diversity and improve the welfare and livelihoods of local communities”, particularly in developing countries. The Conference also encouraged “investment in sustainable tourism, including ecotourism and cultural tourism, which may include creating small and medium-sized enterprises and facilitating access to finance, including through microcredit initiatives for the poor, indigenous peoples and local communities (see General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex, paras. 130 and 131). Central American States made no voluntary national commitments at the Conference, but there is an initiative to empower 500 women entrepreneurs in “green economy” businesses in Guatemala.

9. Of the eight Millennium Development Goals established by the United Nations in 2000,⁶ sustainable tourism has had demonstrable direct impacts on the realization of Goals 1, 3, 7 and 8, as well as indirect impacts on Goal 6.⁷ The SITCA policy framework for Central America emphasizes reducing poverty through tourism, promoting micro and small businesses, ensuring environmental sustainability and combating the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (Goals 1, 6, 7 and 8). The adoption of the GSTC criteria for the region by SITCA reinforces those and relates also to Goal 3. UNWTO has collaborated in the region through its Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty programme in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua in the framework of Goal 1. The policies and programmes of SITCA are largely concordant with the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, especially with respect to combating the exploitation of human beings, particularly children.

10. The seven countries of Central America, as part of such regional entities as SITCA as well as independently, have converged on sustainable tourism as a fundamental pillar of regional integration and social and economic development. Inbound tourism provided \$8.7 billion in foreign exchange and 5.2 per cent of the region’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011,^{8,9} and it depends largely on natural and cultural attractions. This was reinforced by the declaration of 2012 as the Year of Sustainable Tourism in Central America, proposed by the ministers of tourism

⁶ The Millennium Development Goals are: 1, Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2, Achieve universal primary education; 3, Promote gender equality and empower women; 4, Reduce child mortality; 5, Improve maternal health; 6, Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; 7, Ensure environmental sustainability; and 8, Develop a global partnership for development.

⁷ See UNEP, “Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication — A Synthesis for Policy Makers” (2011) and UNEP and UNWTO, *Tourism in the Green Economy: Background Report* (Madrid, 2012).

⁸ UNWTO, *Compendium of Tourism Statistics, Data 2007-2011* (Madrid, 2013).

⁹ Inbound tourism as a percentage of GDP ranges from 17.5 per cent in Belize to 2.9 per cent in Guatemala.

and ratified by the heads of State of the seven countries, as well as the outcome document of the Workshop on Sustainable Tourism in Central America, held in June 2011 with the participation of ministers of tourism and UNWTO. The resulting regional tourism strategy is based on conserving the region's biodiversity and natural and cultural attractions, reducing poverty through employment and entrepreneurial tourism development (emphasizing the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises that dominate the industry), addressing climate change impacts (emissions and adaptation) and using tourism as a tool for improving the quality of life of the region's inhabitants. In the 1980s, Belize and Costa Rica positioned themselves as major ecotourism destinations while Guatemala emphasized cultural tourism to iconic sites. El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama entered those markets later, after political problems had been laid to rest. Now all seven countries have moved towards a mix of tourism products strongly emphasizing nature and culture, while including other sectors, such as business travel, adventure tourism and medical tourism.

II. Overview of sustainable tourism programmes

A. Belize

11. The key tourism institutions of Belize are the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the Belize Tourist Board, the Belize Tourism Industry Association and the Belize Hotel Association. The Ministry focuses on the enabling environment and policy development and the Tourist Board on implementation, while the Tourism Industry Association and Hotel Association represent the private sector. Belize derived 17.5 per cent of its GDP from tourism in 2011, by far the highest percentage in the region. Belize reports 13,200 persons employed in tourism, or 4 per cent of the population.⁸ The institutions are acutely aware of both the importance of tourism for the country's economy and the vulnerabilities of its key attractions: the coral reef and other marine attractions, the tropical rainforest and other terrestrial ecosystems, Mayan archaeological sites and the varied living cultures. The tourism institutions and actors, in broad consensus, developed the national sustainable master plan for Belize, 2030. The strategic goals are to support Belizean stakeholders in taking leadership over sustainable tourism development, optimize socioeconomic benefits from tourism, undertake sustainable and planned tourism development and achieve competitiveness as a world-class destination. The plan designates areas for development and protection, sets density limits and special requirements for cruise tourism and sets out a proposed framework for quality and sustainability in all sectors, particularly for hotels, tour operators and tour guides.

12. To make the overall plan operational, three-year action plans have been established for the periods 2010-2012 and 2013-2015. They have established carrying capacity for some coral reefs and other marine sites, cruise tourism (limited to 66 per cent of passenger arrivals) and archaeological sites. A coastal zone development plan (undertaken by the Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute) is currently under review. Research is being conducted on the ecosystems of southern Belize as a component of the master plan. Turneffe Atoll has been set aside as a key protected area and funds have been obtained for its management. Service providers, especially tour operators, are being trained by the Tourist Board to reduce the ecological footprint of tourists in and near protected areas, and the

Board, in conjunction with the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Fisheries, Forestry and Sustainable Development, is looking to develop a low-carbon and climate-change policy.

13. A hotel classification system is being implemented for 750 properties throughout the country. For hotels and tour operators outside of any certification system, a sustainability checklist has been established. Under a rural development project benefiting communities adjacent to archaeological sites (funded by the European Union in conjunction with the National Institute of Culture and History, the Tourist Board and the Ministry of Tourism), nine archaeological sites have been targeted for improvement of infrastructure, health and safety standards and the quality of local artisanal products as well as the development of community guides.

14. With respect to emergency preparedness and response to natural disasters, the Board, the Tourism Industry Association and the Hotel Association have established emergency protocols and a systematic training programme in safety and security. The Board, together with the National Emergency Management Organization, have established close coordination and information exchange, which includes a system of emergency communication to all hotels, an inventory of guests and tracking of emergency responses and guest locations. Tourist security is being enhanced through the tourism police section of the national police, with implementation under the Belize Tourist Board. Security training is coordinated with SICA initiatives, most recently to develop a regional security plan.

15. Visa facilitation remains problematic in some respects. Tourists from the European Union, the United States of America, Canada, nearly all members of the Caribbean Community and most Commonwealth countries do not require a visa. In addition, the nearby countries of Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico are exempted from the visa requirement.¹⁰ While visa requirements are still too high for the increasing number of tourists arriving from newly emerging economies, the recent introduction of a waiver programme for Argentina and Brazil shows that the issue of visa facilitation for tourists is being addressed.

B. Costa Rica

16. The key tourism institutions are the Costa Rican Tourism Board, whose president is the Minister of Tourism, the national tourism bureau (CANATUR) and the National Ecotourism Bureau. There are numerous other organizations, representing tour operators, hotels, car rental agencies, airlines and local regions, all of which are represented in CANATUR, the national member of FEDECATUR. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work in the field of sustainable tourism, and the sustainable tourism programme of the Rainforest Alliance is headquartered in Costa Rica. Tourism in Costa Rica provided 5.8 per cent of GDP in 2011 and reportedly employed 1.8 per cent of the total population.⁸

17. Costa Rica serves as Chair of the UNWTO Commission for the Americas, and a representative of the Ministry of Tourism has a seat on the World Committee on Tourism Ethics. It was also Chair of the Sustainable Development of Tourism

¹⁰ For further information, see UNWTO, *Visa Facilitation: Stimulating Economic Growth and Development through Tourism* (revised April 2013).

Committee. Costa Rica actively promotes in these different forums sustainable tourism, the upholding of cultural values, quality and tourism education. Costa Rica currently holds the rotating chairmanship of CCT.

18. The goal of the 2010-2016 national sustainable tourism plan for Costa Rica is to promote tourism development that encourages the sustainable use of resources, both natural and human, the equitable distribution of benefits and the human development to which the nation aspires. As a principal objective, tourism will be a vehicle of choice for the country's sustainable development and human welfare and will promote opportunities for direct local participation. The clear focus of the strategic objectives is to maintain the world leadership of Costa Rica in high-quality nature-oriented tourism, blending the beach, adventure, rural community tourism and other activities to offer a variety of tourism options within a thematic context of sustainability and authenticity.

19. In 1997, Costa Rica established one of the earliest certification systems for accommodations, the Certification for Sustainable Tourism, which has served as a model worldwide and was recognized in 2011 by GSTC as being aligned with the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria. The certification was updated in 2013 to include such aspects as golf, archaeology, indigenous peoples and cultural resources. To date, 212 hotels, 65 tour operators, 5 rental car companies and 3 theme parks are certified. The certified companies represent nearly 30 per cent of the duly registered businesses in each sector. Two more standards are currently under development, for coastal and marine tour operations and for restaurants.

20. The Ecological Blue Flag programme of Costa Rica, initiated in 1996, evaluates water quality, sanitary conditions and sustainability of coastal areas, as well as in communities, schools, protected natural areas, small watersheds, carbon-neutral communities and organizations and homes. It granted recognition to 90 beaches in 2013. Except for the beach certification component, which is similar to the international Blue Flag awards, the programme appears to be unique in its scope and is being proposed for implementation in Ecuador and Panama.

21. Costa Rica has developed several initiatives for mitigating climate change in the tourist industry. The country has set the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2021 and has an active national strategy for climate change. It was the first country to institute a carbon tax (1995) and payment for environmental services (1996), through the National Forestry Financing Fund, with the aim of avoiding emissions from deforestation and establishing sinks from reforestation and forest regeneration. These strategies have been used to establish the first carbon-neutral domestic airlines and automobile rental agencies that mitigate 100 per cent of their emissions. The National Ecotourism Bureau and the National Forestry Financing Fund have developed the climate conscious traveller programme to offset emissions from air travel by averting deforestation and replenishing forests with native species in areas with poor social development indicators, indigenous territories, rural communities and areas with high biological diversity. On a regional basis, Costa Rica is closely coordinating its climate-change strategy with SICA and CCAD.

22. The Costa Rican Association of Rural Community Tourism (ACTUAR) and the National Ecotourism Network (COOPRENA) are the leading organizations for promoting micro, small and medium-sized tourism enterprises in rural communities, especially those run by women and indigenous people. Both organizations provide training in quality and sustainability, as well as effective marketing.

23. Emergency preparedness and the response to natural disasters are coordinated among the Tourism Board, the National Meteorological Institute, the National Seismological Network and the National Emergency Commission. A strong seismic construction code is enforced for all buildings, hurricane warnings are issued in timely fashion and a tsunami warning system is being tested by the National Emergency Commission along the principal tourist areas on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. Tourist security is being coordinated with SITCA, but the regional strategy has confronted legal and bureaucratic barriers in implementing a streamlined system for recording crime reports from tourists.

24. Visitors with a passport or visa from Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United States or the Schengen area of Europe, as well as nationals of all Central American countries except Nicaragua, are exempt from visa requirements. In the rest of the Latin American and Caribbean region, only nationals of Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Jamaica, Paraguay and Peru are required to have visas.

C. El Salvador

25. The Ministry of Tourism of El Salvador is responsible for carrying out and ensuring compliance with national tourism policy. Associated with it are the Salvadoran Tourism Corporation (CORSAATUR), an autonomous institution charged with managing tourism development and coordinating among sectors, and the Salvadoran Tourism Institute, whose function is to stimulate family tourism for Salvadorans, especially in recreational parks. The private sector is represented by the Salvadoran tourism bureau (CASATUR), which represents the country in FEDECATUR. There are at least 13 other industry associations. The Ministry of Tourism is designing a sectoral policy that includes the issues of quality and sustainable tourism. The themes of quality and sustainability are also embodied in the design of a new tourism law, which is currently in the consultation stage. Tourism in El Salvador provided 3.2 per cent of GDP in 2011 and reportedly employed 0.7 per cent of the population.⁸

26. The National Council for Science and Technology of El Salvador has established a national quality standard for tourist services and facilities in small and medium-sized hotels, hostels and apartment hotels, as well as standards for restaurants, tour guides, tour operators, adventure tourism (such as canopy zip lines, tree climbing and canoeing). A number of hotels and restaurants have now been certified and are promoted by CORSAATUR. The Ministry has also supported SalvaNatura ecological foundation, which is offering sustainable tourism certification with the Smart Voyager and Green Globe programmes, as well as its own diagnostic tool “SalvaCERT”.

27. The Ministry has organized 10 tourism round tables with the private sector, universities, local governments and other ministries to arrive at a consensus about strategic proposals and policies for government and the tourism industry. The ninth round table, held in February 2012, dealt with sustainable tourism. There are training activities in promotion and product development in tourist destinations aimed at strengthening the entrepreneurial tourist sector. The Ministry of Tourism, through CORSAATUR, held a forum on cooperation and funding opportunities for the development of sustainable tourism in 2012 to discuss financing options for the

development of micro, small and medium-sized tourism enterprises and training to help them become more competitive in the marketplace. CASATUR, with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), has implemented a project to sensitize the private sector regarding the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

28. The Ministry of Interior, through the General Directorate of Civil Protection, including the tourism police, has a programme to ensure the safety, security and health of tourists as well as programmes aimed at preventing the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, protecting consumers and ensuring food hygiene. In some destinations there is cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of the Environment and committees representing the private sector. The national plan for health and tourism addresses health services for tourists, food hygiene, water, solid waste management, emergency preparedness and tourism security.

29. A regional agreement on procedures for extending the unified Central American visa of July 2005 establishes the free movement of citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (the "CA-4" group) without a requirement for passports. Citizens of other countries are divided into two groups: A (no visa required) and B (visa required). Most countries of the Americas, the Schengen area and most other developed countries are in group A. Nationals of the following countries who already have a valid visa issued by Canada, the United States or a Schengen-area State, while in group B, are exempt from the visa requirement: Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Granada, Guyana, Jamaica, Peru and Suriname. Cuba falls in group B.¹⁰

D. Guatemala

30. The principal institutions for tourism in Guatemala are the Guatemalan Tourist Board (INGUAT) and the private sector tourism bureau (CAMTUR). The National Council of Protected Areas has been active in promoting ecotourism as part of its conservation strategy and has produced information, brochures and books about ecotourism in protected areas. The Universidad del Valle offers a graduate programme in sustainable tourism administration, with about 30 receiving degrees in the past five years. Tourism in Guatemala provided 2.9 per cent of GDP in 2011.⁸

31. The national policy of sustainable tourism development of Guatemala, 2012-2022, has among its primary strategic areas sustainable tourism, social and accessible tourism and diversification of the country's portfolio of tourism offerings. In sustainable tourism, the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria are considered the fundamental framework, along with classification and certification. With respect to diversification, the policy focuses on living and ancient Mayan culture, congresses and conventions, Pacific and Caribbean cruise ports and community tourism. INGUAT, with the support of the National Community Tourism Board, developed the national community tourism strategy, 2011-2015.

32. INGUAT, in cooperation with the National Council of Protected Areas and the Technical Committee on Tourism in Protected Areas, created a tourist development programme for protected areas. It promoted the voluntary accession by tourism businesses to the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism and conducted a programme for tourism operators, communities and tourists based on the project "Maya peoples".

CAMTUR issued a code of ethics for its members, which includes many of the aspects of the UNWTO Code.

33. Numerous local and international organizations have implemented sustainable tourism projects throughout the country. The Association of Private Nature Reserves of Guatemala promotes the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity through nearly 100 privately owned nature reserves. It provides technical assistance and training to its members in a variety of projects involving rural, nature and agricultural tourism. Many other local organizations, such as the Foundation for the Development of Guatemala, the Mayan organization Ak'Tenamit, the Association of Forest Communities of Petén, Aj Quen, an association of craftsmen, Viva Atitlan, a network of indigenous associations, and the Foundation for Eco-Development and Conservation have supported community-based tourism activities in local and indigenous communities. The Rainforest Alliance provided technical and financial support for best management practices and the certification of 140 micro, small and medium-sized tourism enterprises and community-based organizations; it signed marketing agreements with inbound and outbound tour operators in Europe, the United States and Latin America that agreed to use verified and certified businesses. Counterpart International implemented the Guatemala Community Tourism Alliance from 2007 to 2012, in which it generated over \$6 million in additional sales, created 6,692 new jobs and strengthened 1,245 small and medium-sized private and community enterprises. It worked with INGUAT to support communities and an association of women handicraft producers. Counterpart International also supported INGUAT and the Ministry of Culture and Sports in promoting and maximizing the potential of Guatemala as the epicentre of the 2012 Maya commemoration.

34. “Great Green Deal” is a Guatemalan sustainable tourism certification programme largely aligned with the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for the certification of hotels and tour operators. A comprehensive quality certification programme, “Q Quality”, was released by INGUAT in 2013 as a standard for internal management and service delivery in the tourism industry.

35. The National Disaster Reduction Coordinator coordinates emergency preparedness and response among all relevant institutions at the national and local levels, including INGUAT. It has a national response plan, as well as established procedures for coordination during emergencies.

36. INGUAT has strengthened a programme that assists domestic and foreign tourists; created the Tourism Safety Division to protect tourist destinations and the multi-sectoral inter-agency Tourism Security Technical Committee to resolve tourism security problems; and established a tourist assistance call centre. Under the Safe Taxi programme, 204 taxi drivers were trained to provide better service to tourists and improve their safety in Antigua, Puerto San Jose, Puerto Barrios and Guatemala City. The Safe Routes programme, carried out jointly by INGUAT, the Ministry of the Interior and the Volcán de Agua project, including the maintenance of safe trails and training of the municipal tourism police, eliminated or greatly reduced criminal incidents against tourists in the Rio Dulce basin, the Volcán de Agua zone and the borders with El Salvador and southern Mexico.

37. The visa requirements for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are identical (see the corresponding section on El Salvador for details).

E. Honduras

38. The principal national tourism entities in Honduras are the Ministry of Tourism, the Honduran Tourism Institute (IHT) and, for the private sector, the national tourism bureau of Honduras (CANATURH, member of FEDECATUR). Tourism in Honduras provided 4.0 per cent of GDP in 2011 and reportedly employed 2.2 per cent of the population.⁸

39. A national strategy for sustainable tourism, developed by the Ministry of Tourism and IHT, establishes a model of sustainable tourism development with a philosophical and conceptual model that affects all levels of society in different regions. It aims at strengthening tourism as well as developing and diversifying products and destinations. In a competitive advantage analysis, the strategy concludes that of the seven Central American countries, only Honduras has world-class attractions in nature, living cultures, beaches, diving, archaeology and colonial cities. Unlike many tourism plans, the strategy has strong baseline diagnostic and monitoring components, which allow for the objective measurement of compliance with the objectives.

40. The Inter-American Development Bank provided the Honduran Government with \$35 million for the 2005-2012 period to implement aspects of the strategy. The completed projects include: (a) contribution to the rehabilitation, maintenance and development of the rich cultural and tourism heritage of the Copan archaeological park; (b) research and enhancement of the Río Amarillo archaeological site, with the establishment of basic infrastructure for the surrounding community of La Castellona; (c) rehabilitation of the San Fernando de Omoa fortress; (d) establishment of the Fortress Museum and restoration of historical heritage objects; (e) in Tela, a design plan to improve and manage the beach area; (f) installing a visitors centre in the Lancetilla botanical garden and a plan and design to improve protected areas neighbouring Tela Bay; (g) establishment of basic infrastructure and utilities in the Complejo Los Micos and neighbouring communities of Tornabé and Miami; and (h) 77 projects funded and implemented to support small tourism businesses.

41. In April 2013, UNWTO signed a memorandum of intentions with the Ministry of Tourism, CANATURH and the National Autonomous University of Honduras to establish the first member of the Global Observatory of Sustainable Tourism network in the Americas. The observatory will be based in La Ceiba and will initially focus on data collection in La Ceiba and the Bay Islands. The Ministry will provide financial, human and administrative resources, and the University will provide researchers, international academic contacts and training, in conjunction with CANATURH, for the private sector, especially micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. CANATURH will provide other necessary resources, and, for its part, UNWTO will lend its expertise in the use of sustainable tourism indicators to establish and improve policies. This pilot project may serve as a model for the rest of Honduras, Central America and the Americas in general.

42. The Tourism Communities Network of Honduras is a community-based organization that promotes sustainable tourism principles to ensure the development and well-being of its members. The organization has implemented a series of projects since 2009 to strengthen communities and the biodiversity on which their tourism activities depend.

43. The ProParque project of the United States Agency for International Development has funded the economic growth of micro, small and medium-sized rural tourism enterprises to improve the competitiveness of the tourism sector in the national parks of Honduras by providing technical assistance through local NGOs and other service providers to increase productivity, in particular to increase the access of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to financial services.

44. The Multilateral Investment Fund of the Inter-American Development Bank, with CARE International and support from the Honduran Social Investment Fund, financed a project on the development of a sustainable tourism model on the north-eastern coast of Honduras to provide technical assistance or microcredit to 500 tourism businesses owned by Maya Chorti, Afro-Caribbean and Garifuna entrepreneurs.

45. The Permanent Contingency Commission of Honduras was established to provide early warning and relief in the event of a natural disaster. It is organized within the national risk management system, which in turn is affiliated with the SICA Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America.

46. The visa requirements for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are identical (see the corresponding section on El Salvador for details).

F. Nicaragua

47. The Nicaraguan Tourism Board (INTUR) is the principal government tourism entity, although the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources plays an important role in tourism policy and actions. The private sector is represented by the national tourism bureau of Nicaragua (CANATUR), which is a member of FEDECATUR. There is also a very active network of small hotels that has provided sustainable tourism training for its members and evaluated and promoted sustainable tourism certification systems. The Network of Private Wildlife Reserves of Nicaragua, with 62 private nature reserves, has undertaken to train its members in voluntary conservation and sustainable tourism. Tourism in Nicaragua provided 5.2 per cent of GDP in 2011.⁸

48. Nicaragua has implemented at least 24 projects related to sustainable tourism under the auspices of INTUR within the scope of the national plan for sustainable tourism development, 2010-2020, and its development strategy, as well as the national plan for human development. The projects include several tourism routes that incorporate natural, historical or agricultural landscapes, with components of interpretation of natural history, ethnography and history; historical restoration; and training in the areas of environmental protection, climate change and gender equity. A number of projects focus on strengthening the competitiveness of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and training in environmental responsibility and adaptation to climate change. Another project of INTUR focuses on combating the abuse, sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and adolescents. A strategic plan has been developed for sustainable tourism on the Caribbean coast, including reinforcing cultural identity.

49. The Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources has taken a leading role in responding to natural disasters and emergencies and adapting to climate

change. Particular emphasis has been placed on the risk of and vulnerability to floods and droughts, to increasing water capture and forest cover in 75 ecotourism circuits and protecting infrastructure from extreme climate events.

50. The visa requirements for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are identical (see the corresponding section on El Salvador for details).

G. Panama

51. The governmental authority in tourism resides in the Panamanian Tourism Authority (ATP), which is governed by the nine-member National Tourism Council, of whom five are from the Government and four are from the private sector tourism bureau (CAMTUR). CAMTUR resigned as the representative of Panama in FEDECATUR in late 2012. The National Environmental Authority has been active in regulating the sustainable use of the country's natural resources for tourism. Tourism in Panama provided 9.5 per cent of GDP in 2011.⁸

52. The master plan for sustainable tourism development, 2007-2020 emphasizes poverty alleviation as one of its principal objectives. Of the 26 tourism destinations in the country, 12 have been prioritized. In 2011, the implementation of a project for sustainable rural development was identified in the Ngäbe Bugle Comarca and poor neighbouring districts and another in Kuna Yala in Destino de la Miel, Puerto Obaldía. Also in Kuna Yala, a project is under way to determine tourism carrying capacity. In 2010, under a joint project of the Government of Panama and the United Nations system to develop the private sector, the Business Opportunities Network for Poor Families programme was developed in order to improve the distribution of income by supporting action to increase labour income, improve the quality of employment and reduce child labour. ATP is implementing, together with the National Environmental Authority, an ecotourism programme to strengthen nine protected areas, with funds from the Global Environment Facility. Projects and capacity-building with community organizations have been implemented in Bocas del Toro and are under way in several other destinations, including the Golfo de Montijo. Activities include strengthening the local organizations and promoting micro, small and medium-sized enterprises for craftsmen and other workers. Projects with municipal governments include creating sanitary landfills and dealing with solid waste management, restoring historic city centres and promoting crafts and gastronomy. Coastal ecotourism projects for observing marine mammals and nesting turtles are under way, along with the development of codes of conduct for those activities.

53. CAMTUR implements the "Service Best" programme, developed by the Government of Canada for the Central American tourism bureaux, for training tourism personnel in quality service. "Panama Best" is a programme developed by CAMTUR for the operational and managerial personnel of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises.

54. The Panamanian Association for Sustainable Tourism is a non-profit association directed by a group of pioneers in the fields of tourism, science and development that intends to spread sustainable tourism across both the private and public sectors. The Fundación Chagres has implemented a number of programmes to conserve Chagres National Park while facilitating sustainable tourism projects in poor surrounding communities.

55. A manual for tourism security is being developed with support from UNWTO and the UNDP Millennium Development Goals Fund. The Department of Tourism Security is developing protocols for beach monitoring and safety, as well as for the protection of tourism activities in Panamanian destinations.

56. With respect to visas, Central Americans and most nationals of South American countries can enter Panama without a visa or tourist card. Citizens of Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Suriname are required to have a visa. Nationals of the Schengen area and a number of developed countries can enter without a visa.¹⁰ Panama and Costa Rica initiated discussions to allow their citizens to travel with only their national identity cards.

III. Overview of regional initiatives on sustainable tourism

57. As mentioned in section I, most regional initiatives on sustainable tourism are centred in SITCA and CCAD, both of which are part of SICA. SITCA coordinates closely with FEDECATUR, the regional federation of tour operators and CATA.

58. The Fondo España-SICA (FES) has offered financial and technical support to SITCA since 2004 to promote the development of sustainable tourism in Central America in the areas of lending institutional support, developing a regional tourism strategy, improving the promotion and marketing of tourism, building capacity, developing new tourism products and fostering rural tourism. Among the many projects that have been implemented are the Colonial and Volcano Route in Central America, the strengthening of CATA, FEDECATUR and the national tourism bureaux, the development of the Central American web portal and geographic information system, rural tourism initiatives and capacity-building to include local communities in the economic benefits of tourism. Current programmes include tourism security and support for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.

59. SITCA has developed two successive strategic plans for the development of sustainable tourism in Central America, for the periods 2003-2009 and 2009-2013. The current plan serves as the conceptual framework and programme of work for the region as a whole and for the seven member countries individually. It describes a vision of an integrated, sustainable multi-destination region of high quality. In 2011, the Heads of State of the region reaffirmed their commitment to support sustainable tourism policies that contribute to responsible and inclusive tourism, strengthen regional identity and protect the natural and cultural heritage, especially the Mayan world and colonial cities, while promoting the development of micro, small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, especially in rural communities. They also decided to instruct CCT to implement programmes to promote sustainable tourism in the region, coordinate measures to jointly promote Central America internationally, implement mechanisms and actions to improve competitiveness, connectivity and the investment climate in the tourism sector and promote initiatives to facilitate visas, air travel and tourism security, in coordination with SICA.

60. Some of the key activities of SITCA carried out under the current strategic framework during the past five years are summarized below.

61. Since 2008, SITCA has been developing a programme to promote an action plan for tourism and climate change as a component within the regional strategy on climate change, with support from CCAD. The actions contemplated to reduce

vulnerability in the tourism sector and promote adaptation to climate change include methodologies and information systems to measure vulnerability levels, diversification of tourism products, development of tourism in areas not vulnerable to climate change, increasing capacity to respond to emergency situations and improving the use of natural resources, especially water. At the same time, measures are being promoted to monitor and establish baselines for emissions, reduce energy use, develop projects that reduce or eliminate emissions and create awareness and social responsibility on climate change in the tourism industry. The working plan is expected to be completed in 2013, when implementation will begin.

62. A programme to promote quality in tourism services in Central America (PROCAPCA), financed by FES, served from 2007 to 2009 as the basis for an action plan to be implemented by the national tourism administrations and FEDECATUR on a national level. The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria were adopted as the regional structure for sustainable tourism. Within that framework, a regional committee on tourism quality and sustainability has developed a model for the certification of tourism quality and sustainability based on successful initiatives in the region, the Certification for Sustainable Tourism programme of Costa Rica (formally aligned with GSTC) and the Panamanian standard for tourism quality. Five standards will be developed, for micro, small and medium-sized lodging enterprises; restaurants; terrestrial transport; tour operators; and thematic activities.

63. SITCA, with support from UNICEF, completed its programme for the prevention of sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, with a focus on ethics and corporate social responsibility in tourism, by sensitizing stakeholders in tourism from Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala and Panama in 23 workshops with 698 participants.

64. To support micro, small and medium-sized rural tourism enterprises, SITCA, through an agreement with FEDECATUR and with support from the UNWTO Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty programme, developed electronic marketing tools.

65. With regard to health and tourism, SITCA established a memorandum of understanding between the Pan American Health Organization, CCT and SITCA to support the implementation of a permanent regional forum, which will include UNWTO, other United Nations agencies, the Organization of American States and private sector representatives. Among the objectives are establishing epidemiological vigilance systems, evaluating risks and establishing an emergency response system for health emergencies related to the tourism sector. In parallel, SITCA developed a regional implementation manual on health and tourism and used it to train 80 trainers in workshops in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras.

66. In cooperation with the Austrian Development Cooperation, FEDECATUR and other partners, organic waste biodigestors were installed in rural inns in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

67. In the area of security, a consulting firm was hired to implement a system for processing, monitoring and tracking complaints and crime reports. Some 100 tourist police were trained in a new approach to skills development based on tourism culture, safety and security, and 4,000 copies of a regional handbook on best practices in tourism security were distributed. In addition, UNWTO carried out a seminar aimed at media and tourism authorities focusing on the importance of

tourism as an engine of sustainable development and on crisis and risk management, including the management of risk perceptions for tourist destinations in the region.

68. “Heritage-based Tourism: Conserving our Treasures for Tomorrow — Tools for Central America”, an interactive tool to teach Central American cultural and natural heritage managers techniques for sustainable tourism, was developed with support from UNWTO, UNESCO and UNEP in 2009.

69. CCAD leads a number of projects relevant to tourism. Of particular importance is the regional strategy on climate change of the countries of SICA, mentioned in paragraph 61 above. Projects were carried out on the tourism impacts on the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, the strengthening of national parks, the Mesoamerican coral reef and integrated ecosystem management in indigenous communities.

70. CCAD, together with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, developed a methodology for streamlining the environmental and social impact assessment of low- to medium-impact tourism development in the 2008-2009 period entitled “Guide for Tourism: An Environmental and Social Management Instrument”. Such manuals, based in large part on the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria, are designed to replace traditional impact assessment tools with ones that are faster and less expensive but more precise, oriented towards mitigating the specific impacts of tourism construction and infrastructure (hotels, golf courses, swimming pools, etc.).

71. The United States Agency for International Development has funded the Management of Aquatic Resources and Alternative Development (MAREA) project to reduce unsustainable fishing practices and coastal development and strengthen the management of marine and coastal biodiversity in Central America while improving the standard of living of the communities that make use of those resources. The project has a sustainable tourism component for the Gulf of Honduras, Bocas del Toro and the Miskito Coast.

72. The Trifinio region, at the headwaters of the Rio Lempa, consists of eight municipalities in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, as well as the Montecristo Trifinio National Park in Honduras, the Montecristo National Park in El Salvador and the Guatemalan Trifinio biosphere reserve. The SICA Trifinio plan includes numerous projects for the sustainable development of the region, with a community-based tourism component.

73. FEDECATUR is undertaking projects in training micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in quality of service, best practices, project management and financial tools.

74. The Rainforest Alliance has conducted sustainable tourism training and verification throughout Central America to bring hundreds of small and medium-sized enterprises up to best practice standards of quality and sustainability. Most enterprises that have passed through the verification process are eligible for third-party certification. In addition, the Rainforest Alliance has established an alliance of tour operators to promote sustainability, which serves as a platform on which to position businesses and destinations as sustainable in the international marketplace and which will continue to coordinate and oversee joint marketing and communications efforts, such as familiarization trips and participation in trade shows.

75. The Central American Markets for Biodiversity Project (CAMBio) of the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, with support from UNDP and the Global Environment Facility, was designed to promote the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity by micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Central America from 2006 to 2013. The project was conceived to support, among other things, ecotourism and community-based tourism projects with the potential to conserve biodiversity. However, nearly all of the resources were used for agriculture and forestry-related projects.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

76. **In general, the policies and activities of SITCA and the other regional integration organizations of SICA are working well, with numerous projects for the development of sustainable tourism having been successfully carried out in the region. Increasing regional emphasis is being placed on climate change adaptation and related natural disaster response systems. Tourism safety and security, as well as the health of travellers, have become priority areas of regional cooperation.**

77. **Advances are uneven among the seven countries, each of which has emphasized different approaches to tourism development. All have underscored poverty alleviation through tourism and rural tourism development in their strategic planning and have implemented projects to assist community development, but in practice some countries are investing far more in cruise ports and convention centres. Social tourism for local citizens is being emphasized in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In some areas, such as preparedness and mitigation of the effect of natural disasters, as well as the most successful examples of biodiversity conservation, rural and indigenous community tourism and cultural enhancement, SITCA could consider establishing an inventory of these projects and enhancing cooperation in replicating them in the other countries.**

78. **Although the Central American countries share a joint marketing programme, through SITCA and CATA, there are several subregional marketing efforts. All share similar biodiversity attractions, while Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras share Mayan cultural attractions. Belize, because of its more recent cultural history, also works with the Caribbean Tourism Organization. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, which have living colonial cities, have formed the “CA-4” group, with open borders and free movement of their citizens, and have integrated some tourism routes. Costa Rica and Panama have increased links with each other and there is increasing tourism between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Panama, because of the canal and its history as a centre of international commerce, has commercial attractions not found in the other countries. Costa Rica, because of its longstanding positioning as a nature destination, tends to market itself independently from the rest of the region.**

79. **Quality and sustainability training and certification, within the framework of SITCA and through independent verification and certification programmes, are growing rapidly, as international tour operators increasingly require environmental, social and cultural sustainability.**

80. The sustainable tourism observatory that is being established by UNWTO and Honduras may well serve as a model for the rest of the region and the Americas in general by using data on sustainable tourism to improve policies and offer capacity-building assistance to enhance the sustainability of destinations. SITCA should support this effort and consider participating further in the UNWTO Global Observatory of Sustainable Tourism network.

81. Central America has extraordinary natural and cultural resources, which it has learned to manage sustainably for tourism in many cases. Well-managed tourism attractions include the Mesoamerican coral reef, rainforests, cloud forests, active volcanoes, national parks, private nature reserves, historical cities, ancient cities and vibrant, but very poor, rural, traditional and indigenous communities. The lessons learned from the best-managed of each of these cases are being transferred among the seven countries, but are also applicable to similar communities and habitats around the world, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean. These best-management case studies could be used as the basis of Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism projects for replication under the coordination of UNWTO. The benefits of regional cooperation in Central America should be considered a successful example for other regions that share cultural and natural attractions.

82. Several policy recommendations were developed by the International Task Force on Sustainable Tourism Development, the predecessor of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism. These policy recommendations could be taken into consideration by SITCA in the course of the development of its tourism policies.
