



## 2025 USTOA Sustainability is Responsibility (SIR) 4.0 Summit in Valencia

### Executive Summary

#### 1. Background and Purpose

Starting with SIR 1.0 in 2022, the USTOA SIR summits were designed in collaboration with Innovation Norway to bring together sustainability champions within our community while also showcasing a destination where real sustainable innovation is taking place, giving attendees first-hand experiences and knowledge to return to their organizations with. The SIR summits create unique opportunities for attendees to engage and collaborate with fellow sustainability leaders and staff members in the travel and tourism industry who find themselves facing similar obstacles. The SIR summit atmosphere provides a safe space for transparency and support to help each other advance in individual organizations' sustainability journeys while also establishing roadmaps to address our collective challenges as an industry.



#### 2. The Host Destination: Valencia

Norway and Singapore provided concrete case studies of what is possible in responsible travel. Norway's innate drive for sustainability and Singapore's realistic approach to development have inspired past SIR attendees to focus on collaboration and partnerships. Valencia was a welcome host destination, as it provided a contrast by incorporating four different elements: the port, the orchards, the city, and the nature park. Valencia is no stranger to challenges, as the region has been widely impacted by overtourism, natural disasters such as heat waves and floods, and other events that USTOA members find themselves facing in other destinations as well. This allowed the SIR 4.0 summit to have a backdrop city that experiences these hurdles annually while also discussing how their future roadmaps address and work through these challenges in a responsible way. In 2024, the city was designated as the first Green European Capital of the Mediterranean, a recognition that strengthens its commitment to the sustainable future of tourism. Valencia's current transformation focuses on its growing prominence as a conscious tourism destination, a story that was woven into the SIR 4.0 curriculum in various ways to demonstrate the value of transparency in overcoming challenges.



### 3. Educational Content and Summary of Findings and Learnings

The SIR summits encourage attendees to foster collaborations, participate in cross-sector learning, and continue to set the path for a more responsible future for the travel industry by bringing member representatives from across the travel industry value chain together for interactive dialogue, educational content, and case study learnings.

#### Key themes from SIR 4.0:

- Our industry needs more action rather than just greater awareness surrounding sustainability.
- There needs to be required transformative impact rather than just linear change.
- There is no lack of enthusiasm and determination to keep doing the right thing amongst USTOA members.

#### Learning Sessions

##### a. Day 1: Connecting People and Places

- i. Our first learning session focused on challenges with the status quo – not meeting the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals and running business as usual isn't going to help us. Our industry needs to be bold, think differently, and engage people in the solutions.

1. Our case study for this discussion was the city of Chattanooga's transformation into a National Park City.
- ii. Threads discussed throughout this session:
  1. Leadership
  2. Clear willingness to look at the longer-term challenges
  3. Reimagination of product: creating curated experiences in a responsible manner
  4. Recognition that some problems are wicked and need a whole change of system to be able to fix
- iii. We heard tangible solutions from the following USTOA members:
  1. Visit Finland demonstrated the importance of commitment to action before any measurement even starts.
  2. Intrepid Travel discussed harnessing the passions of staff to support wider advocacy, which then leads to better business.
  3. The Untours Foundation explained how their investment in projects helps social enterprises play a part in solving problems. An example they provided is their partnership with Invisible Cities, who offer walking tours run by people who were formerly homeless, which provides a unique perspective of a place.
- iv. Later that afternoon, we acknowledged that thinking differently and engaging people may need us to have difficult conversations – Ciaran Armstrong from Sustainability Pathways gave us some tools to use and ran an exercise to help us develop the skills to have these conversations. We learned that the challenge is to really listen to where people are coming from. Learning to communicate effectively is key to this.
- v. Lastly, we had a guest speaker from Illunion hotels display what is possible when a company really sets about trying to solve a societal problem, in this case, the stigma of disability. The 3-4 star hotel group operates with an average of 40% of its staff with disabilities.

**b. Day 2: Circularity and Problem Solving**

- i. The day kicked off with a conversation focused on waste by hearing examples of companies moving to circular solutions, including one of USTOA's members, MaCher. SIR attendees were encouraged to share what challenges they faced that prevented them from cutting waste. From there we discussed how we might be able to move to zero waste within 18 months, before hearing the case study of Iberostar hotels who did just that. The town of Kamikatsu, Japan was given as an example of a place that has taken significant measures.
- ii. After a paella cooking class where we learned about the challenges that the local rice industry is currently facing due to climate change, we transitioned the room into a sprint hackathon, which was focused on group-sourcing questions to big

problems – recognizing the need for diversity of thought. The hackathon focused on the following prompts:

1. How can your organization decarbonize while balancing commercial need?
2. How can your organization significantly contribute to biodiversity gain?
3. How can your organization contribute meaningfully to reduce pressure on destinations?
4. How can you get greater buy-in for sustainable transformation from everyone in your organization?

**a. Day 3: Going Further by Working Together**

- i. Our final learning session was an open discussion focused on next steps. We asked SIR attendees: 1) What are you going to do with the knowledge that we have? 2) What can USTOA do to support its members on their individual sustainability journeys, while also advancing our industry as a whole? A few common themes arose:

1. Carbon

- a. There are numerous ways that biofuels are being generated as well as offsetting opportunities. We need to be talking to our customers about this and explaining what we are doing on their behalf.
- b. We need to be careful not to let people know that offsetting isn't just a singular solution. We need to help companies learn where emissions are coming from and understand how they can minimize the impact. This helps them make better decisions.
- c. Accommodations account for a significant portion of carbon footprints on trips, alongside transit. They identify their biggest opportunity against their spheres of influence. They know they don't have influence with airlines, so they would rather focus on the supply chain. It is challenging to look where to invest but very rewarding. Even with reporting, it's hard to know where to start, so we need to look as deep into our data as possible.

2. Destinations

- a. Tourism is an industry that can revitalize areas affected by war in a sustainable way.
- b. Investing in destinations and their biodiversity is a great way for Tour Operators to get involved without relying on carbon offsetting.
- c. Growth can be good but also a challenge. We need to spread it out and take advantage of it to benefit the locals as well as the visitors. We need to measure value creation in addition to carbon footprints.
- d. Some members as tour operators want to exercise total control of the tour / travel experience in destination in order to create more competitive product in the market; by establishing their own local

offices & in-house experiences, deploying their own foundations to invest in experiences, along with hospitality products, are using chosen sustainability campaigning issues to justify political exercise & proprietary sustainability projects in destination - to the exclusion of local & indigenous sustainable & regenerative travel experiences or other challenges that need to be addressed. In this context, we should raise the below questions:

- i. How do we ensure that sustainability initiatives in tourism do not become a new form of neocolonialism — where external actors control narratives, resources, and experiences under the guise of responsibility?
- ii. What safeguards are in place to prevent the exclusion of local and Indigenous-led projects from sustainability branding and tour development - how are these voices being authentically centered, rather than appropriated or bypassed?

### 3. Airlines

- a. It is essential to figure out the most direct way they can get to destinations by avoiding layovers. Working with airlines to see who is investing in new fleets that are more fuel efficient would be a great next step.
- b. The tax for SAF is so large and they can't afford it even though they want it.

### 4. Reporting

- a. The biggest progress in our industry is on sustainability reporting, which means perhaps action is coming or measurement doesn't lead to action. Reporting is going up while progress is going down. measurement has to happen in parallel with action.

### 5. Working Together

- a. We should be utilizing spheres of influence, which entails changing core product, changing suppliers, and changing the way we behave as ambassadors of our businesses.
- b. When it comes to funding, certain projects need to be written correctly in order to get the money. We need to sit down and listen. The problems are political and institutional. We need to explain better what can be done for the industry and where the money can be spent. We should be using the same tools that we use for other areas of the government to measure travel and tourism to get the funding for those projects.
- c. It's all about communication and explaining how we talk to people. Everyone understands the word sustainability differently. Find out

what is important to the leadership and solve their problems with sustainability.

- d. Egos are getting in the way. Everyone wants to do something unique and not repeat. Let's put that aside and create something together or utilize what is already being done.

## **2. Actionable USTOA Items Discussed at the SIR 4.0 Summit**

The following two items have been added to the USTOA 5-year Sustainability Plan based on SIR attendee requests during the summit.

- i. USTOA Carbon Fund – coming together to fund projects of relevance and offsetting as an industry and not individually.
- ii. Suggested Working Groups
  - 1. Alignment on carbon conversion factors, and influence UN Tourism tools.
  - 2. Hotel sustainability, we should agree on a minimum standard, e.g. the WTTC one and use our network to promote it.
  - 3. Transportation, both flights and land transportation – working on lobbying with airlines.
  - 4. Ways to support individual destinations' sustainability needs. Different destinations need different resources.
  - 5. Collecting data from our supply chains.
  - 6. Reporting and stakeholder engagement, and leadership buy-in
  - 7. Decarbonization strategies

## **3. The Future of SIR Summits**

USTOA's Global Social Impact Manager, Molly Laycob, takes pride in creating opportunities for members that reflect their current needs. Since responsible travel and the various successes and failures accompanying it are constantly evolving, USTOA aims to create SIR summits that consistently provide new curriculum and experiences for members, especially since there are quite a few attendees that have attended multiple summits. The following are ways that we plan to evolve the SIR summits for continued learning:

- i. Focus on collective learning as well as working together towards common goals.
  - a. Facilitate using our collective voice to move the needle on some big-ticket issues.
  - b. Find a practical, collaborative response to implementation.
  - c. Understand ways to support individual destinations' sustainability needs. Different destinations need different resources.
  - d. Utilize year-round member working groups to present their findings at SIR.
  - e. Bring in a serious airline representative and a true expert on SAF to hear about how we can contribute to more research, more production, and ultimately loftier goals from airlines to incorporate from the 2-3% of fuel needs using SAF as of now.
- ii. Member case studies:
  - a. A stronger focus on what changes participants can make in their business. Stronger focus on tour operators taking action. What has changed since we are 5 years in of SIR?

- b. Focus on concrete topics - it's time to shift from talking *about* impact to *demonstrating* it. Quality over quantity when it comes to focus areas.
  - c. Gaining more realistic views of the very real challenges a more developing destination has and how they are working towards overcoming them.
- iii. Impact:
  - a. SIR should be used as an opportunity to create a commercially viable and sustainable tourism strategy for host destinations. Wouldn't it be incredible if with each SIR, a concrete action is committed to ensuring a legacy is created.
  - b. SIR should give attendees an opportunity to make a direct impact that can turn into a series of adaptation/mitigation efforts across multiple destinations.
  - c. We should focus on building resilient companies and value chains that take climate action seriously, and take that into account when planning products and programs.

#### 4. Testimonials from Attendees

- a. *"Attending my first SIR Summit was a real eye opener. It provided a space to connect with people in the industry on the same journey, the opportunity to learn from each other and build relationships, it provided knowledge and tools that support my sustainability work, and the destination experience gave renewed motivation to continue this important work. This is an absolute must attend event for any organisation serious about sustainability."* Ken Lyons, Sustainability Manager, CIE Tours
- b. *"SIR 4.0 in Valencia was a true reflection of what makes this initiative so impactful — a cross-sector gathering of passionate leaders, willing to confront challenges honestly and collaborate on real, scalable solutions. For Innovation Norway, it reinforced the value of global exchange and inspired new ideas for driving systemic change at home. Every year, SIR continues to raise the bar — and I'm proud to be part of a movement that puts people, planet, and purpose at the heart of tourism."* David DiGregorio, Senior Advisor, VisitNorway
- c. *"The Sustainability is Responsibility Summit was a powerful reminder that we're not alone on this journey. By being present, engaged, and open, I connected with peers who share the same roadblocks and frustrations. The summit struck the perfect balance between learning, sharing, and seeing sustainability in action. It created space for vulnerability and honest conversations, and reinforced how impactful it is to be part of a collective driving real change across our industry."* Emma Cottis, General Manager – Business Systems, Goway
- d. *"Overall, SIR has been an invaluable asset in my journey towards sustainability. It has provided me with the energy and support to tackle environmental challenges head-on and achieve my goals with confidence. I highly recommend SIR to anyone looking to enhance their sustainability efforts and stay energized throughout their journey."* Patrick Preiano Head of Sustainability Globus Family of Brands

