

Report for Explorers' Edge

# Sustainable Tourism Pilot Project Green Step Certification

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## Introduction

Starting in 2021-2022, as part of its [Business & Operational Plan](#), Explorers Edge began to focus its work around regenerative tourism development. This concept has become a central tenant in their work that reflects sustainability as a strategic approach that will help the region thrive. Regenerative tourism development adopts a region-centric model with a long-term outlook. It includes important KPIs in multiple sectors like workforce

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development, housing, communications, partnerships, products, infrastructure and more (as outlined in detail in Explorers Edge/RTO 12 Business and Operational Plans).

As part of these efforts, the Sustainable Tourism Pilot Project was launched in 2021. Explorers Edge partnered with seven regional businesses to have them become certified in sustainable tourism by [Green Step Sustainable Tourism](#).

GreenStep Sustainable Tourism provides assessments, programs, and certifications to help tourism destinations and businesses measure and improve their sustainability performance. The Green Step program is recognized and aligned with the [Global Sustainable Tourism Council \(GSTC\)](#), a UN-established organization. GSTC establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism and provides international accreditation and recognition for sustainable tourism Certification Bodies.

As defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Sustainable tourism is “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.” The following graphic illustrates the interactions between the multiple facets of sustainable travel.



While the Green Step sustainable travel certification is focused on “sustainability”, Explorers Edge has elected to focus on the more robust “regenerative travel” framework. Regenerative Travel “moves beyond sustainability to create a net-positive impact” ([regenerativetravel.com](http://regenerativetravel.com)).

### **About the Pilot Project**

Seven regional tourism businesses participated in the Sustainable Tourism Pilot Project to work through the Green Step Sustainable Travel certification program.

Five regions of RTO12 are represented in the pilot project: Parry Sound, Algonquin Park, Bracebridge, Muskoka Lakes and Gravenhurst.

The industries represented include recreation (golf and sailing), museum, accommodation, food & beverage, and tour operator. Many of the businesses cover more than one of these areas in their offerings.

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At a high level, the program includes the following steps:

1. Self-Assessment (87 questions in 4 categories)
2. Review of assessment with Green Step
3. Submit evidence
4. Get certified (score and action plan)

The businesses that are taking part in the pilot project all underwent an initial assessment of current practices in the following categories which consists of 87 questions in total:

1. Management;
  - a. Sustainability Management System
  - b. Compliance
  - c. Employee Engagement
  - d. Guest Engagement
  - e. Marketing & Communication
  - f. Building & Infrastructure
  - g. Destination Management
2. Social and economic impacts;
  - h. Community Support and Infrastructure Projects
  - i. Local Employment & Labour Rights
  - j. Ethical, Fair Trade, and Local Products
  - k. Accessibility
  - l. Social and Economic Monitoring
3. Natural and cultural interactions;
  - m. Cultural Heritage
  - n. Biodiversity, Ecosystems, and Landscapes
4. Environmental impacts
  - o. Energy Conservation

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- p. Water Conservation
  - q. Solid Waste
  - r. Minimizing Pollution
  - s. Environmental Monitoring

As evidenced by the broad nature of the themes included in the assessment, sustainable travel includes much more than environmental sustainability that is typically associated with the term.

After completing the assessment, review, and evidence submission, the seven pilot project participants were then scored by Green Step, and assigned a corresponding certification (bronze, silver, gold, platinum) for their current practices and given a custom action for moving forward. Four of the participants achieved silver status and three of the participants achieved bronze status.

Under the agreement with RTO12, the seven participants will now work with RTO12 staff to ameliorate their practices and scores. These will be reassessed every 2 years by Green Step. The agreements end in 2026 which will allow for 2 cycles of re-assessment by Green Step staff. This is a multi-year project to track year-over-year indicators. Feedback and results from the assessments are discussed in subsequent sections of this report.

Additionally, participants will assist in building a greater business case for sustainability, in order to educate additional regional operators on the benefits of introducing sustainability.

### **Process Feedback**

The Green Step Sustainable Tourism certification is advertised to take most applicants under two hours to initially complete the self-assessment. From there, they are evaluated and given a score and a list of suggested actions for next steps in order to improve sustainability in their business and possibly achieve more points in time for their next assessment in 2 years. The assessment process includes a one-on-one meeting with a Green Step consultant to talk about the specific scoring and suggested actions for each

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business. Each of the 7 participants in the Explorers Edge pilot project have completed these activities as of early 2023.

Participants reported that the assessment took the suggested allotted time and most found some value in the action items that the assessment outlined. There was feedback about Green Step and the process of certification that is important to note should other businesses choose to embark on the certification path. They are:

- Participants had a high level of confidence in the expertise of Green Step staff and the robust process
- While the initial self-assessment was not time consuming (typically 2-hours), the response from GreenStep was not timely in return
- Process dovetails nicely with other standards being set within their specific industries (e.g. Safe Sport, Sail Canada)
- Reporting can be onerous at first (it was noted that this could become less of a factor once it is an established process with their business)
- Found the process much easier to implement once a mindset was taken to view sustainability as a way of doing business instead of a side project that must be completed
- Recognition that certification and sustainability is a journey and not a one-time task
- Would like to network with the other pilot project participants to find common-ground on actions items and possibly collaborate to share resources and explore group purchasing opportunities
- Would have liked the Green Step process to include a review of the initial assessment before a score was assigned, as some of the questions were not clear in their intent
- Would like questions to include a point value so the respondent knew upfront how weighted each question was

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- Criticism of the process not being locally-appropriate in terms of some of the Ontario-specific context in some areas (the program and staff are based in British Columbia)
  - Some expressed concern at the on-going cost of certification should they continue past the pilot project (during which costs are covered by RTO12)

### **Assessment Results**

As a group, the 7 pilot project participants obtained 4 silver certifications and 3 bronze certifications.

The grading rubric is as follows:

- Platinum: 90-100%
- Gold: 75-89%
- Silver: 55-74%
- Bronze: 35-54%

The following is a summary of average grades in each of the four categories and a summary of the strengths and opportunities of the group. Strengths were listed when the average of the group scores were in the Gold-range. Opportunities were listed when the average of the group scores were below the Silver-level range.

Section	Average Score	Strengths	Opportunities
<b>Management</b>	48%	B. Compliance G. Destination Management	A. Sustainability Management System C. Employee Engagement D. Guest Engagement E. Marketing and Communication
<b>Social &amp; Economic Impacts</b>	48%	I. Local Employment and Labour Rights	J. Ethical, Fair Trade and Local Products K. Accessibility L. Social and Economic Monitoring
<b>Natural &amp; Cultural Interactions</b>	64%	Scores in this category were in the middle range of scoring	
<b>Environmental Impacts</b>	54%	Q. Solid Waste	R. Minimizing Pollution S. Environmental Monitoring

**Action Plan Recommendations**

Green Step created an action plan for each pilot project participant. These actions are recommended for each business to complete in order to improve their sustainability performance.

There were some common recommendations among participants, as outlined in the table below. These may be considered as possible common points for collaboration and resource-sharing in order to improve scores.



Section & Question Number	Measure	Recommendation Summary
A1	Does your entity have an ongoing sustainability management system and/or in what ways is sustainability integrated into your entity's management system?	<p>Create a vision,mission and/or commitment statement pertaining to sustainability</p> <p>Establish a written action plan with measurable goals for sustainability</p> <p>Develop a system to track and measure you sustainability performance</p>
C8	How are employees of your entity engaged in the ongoing development and/or implementation of your sustainability efforts?	<p>Increase employee engagement on sustainability through training</p> <p>Consider forming a green/sustainability team</p> <p>Develop an employee feedback process for your sustainability efforts</p> <p>Encourage employee-led sustainability initiatives</p>
D13	How does your entity engage support of guests in on-site sustainability initiatives and environmental management practices during their experience with you?	<p>Include information on your website, social media,visitor communications about natural and cultural areas in your region</p> <p>Provide interpretive material about key tourist sites and by they're important</p> <p>Add tips on appropriate visitor behaviour and way to minimize your footprint when visiting sensitive natural and cultural heritage sites</p> <p>Consider creating a "visitor code of conduct"</p>

J41	Does your entity have a documented purchasing policy that prioritized environmentally and socially sustainable suppliers and products?	<p>Solidify consideration for sustainable purchasing behaviours in a public-facing policy document</p> <p>Consider using your policy and checklist as a vendor screening tool</p>
K46	What aspects of your entity's marketing and communications for staff and guests meet accessibility requirements for those with diverse abilities (including physical, sensory, cognitive and other)? (I.e. materials are available in audio, visual or other formats)	<p>Upgrade your website to meet Level A requirement under the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines</p> <p>Work to provide accessible programs for your clients with diverse abilities</p>
K47	Does your entity offer activities and/or services catering to those with diverse abilities, where appropriate?	<p>Look at ways to improve the accessibility of your property, starting with marketing and communications (including website)</p> <p>Consider building and infrastructure upgrades to meet provincial codes for accessibility</p>
M51	How does your entity contribute to protecting, preserving, and enhancing sites, traditions, and communities of cultural, historical, archaeological, and spiritual significance?	Create a visitor code of conduct for sustainability behaviours and cultural heritage
M52	How does your entity contribute to the protection and promotion of traditional and contemporary indigenous culture and heritage?	<p>Provide information to your guests about local indigenous cultures and upcoming events</p> <p>Look at ways to collaborate with local indigenous communities</p>
Q75	Has your entity conducted a waste audit in the past three years to quantify solid waste streams, including food waste?	Conduct a formal waste audit, record results and make goals for improvement

R84	Has your entity identified and calculated your carbon footprint, including significant greenhouse gas emissions from Scope 1, 2, and 3 sources?	Begin measuring your carbon footprint. Use results to validate your energy and carbon initiatives when sharing your story with guests and stakeholders
S87	What aspects of environmental sustainability performance does your entity track?	Monitor positive and negative effects of your conservation initiatives on ecosystems  Consider getting guests involved in citizen science to assist efforts

There are also some areas where most participants scored in the silver and bronze range, indicating a collective need for improvement. These could be suggested as areas where collaborative efforts would be beneficial. These areas are:

- F. Building and Infrastructure
- H. Community Support and Infrastructure Projects
- M. Cultural Heritage
- O. Energy Conservation
- P. Water Conservation
- Q. Solid Waste

Some participants scored below bronze level in certain categories. This presents an opportunity for mentorship from another participant who scored high in that area, expertise from Green Step, assistance from Explorers Edge or potentially (as the sustainability program at RTO 12 evolves) eventual collaboration with or mentorship from another local operator.

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One of the pieces of feedback from the participants was the desire for more networking among the pilot project participants so this could be an avenue for resource sharing that may improve sustainability practices and scoring.

Another piece of feedback from participants questioned the possibility that the Green Step process could have been more transparent in what they were looking for and that perhaps the operator has useful information to contribute to certain questions that was not included but could have yielded a higher score. These areas are worth reconsideration in future assessments.

On the whole, the assessment results provided a wonderful snapshot of many worthwhile sustainability initiatives on which to build in RTO 12. The pilot project participants are commended for their openness to the framework and working through the process. The principle take-home message from the feedback and the areas where scores were highest is that these practices are most beneficial to the financial, social/cultural and environmental bottom lines when they are put into day-to-day business operations.

### **Next Steps**

Based on feedback from pilot project participants, assessment scoring and in keeping with the Explorers Edge Operational and Business Plan, the following are recommended as next steps for the Sustainable Tourism Pilot Project.

1. Networking Webinar:
  - a. review the high-level results with pilot project participants
  - b. Opportunity to network, collaborate, share resources and planned/implemented activities from action plan
2. Focus actions
  - a. Explorers Edge to provide assistance with action plan items on request.  
Suggest areas with highest yield for return on investment and value-add to

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operators (sustainability management system and energy, waste and water conservation)

3. Green Step re-evaluation 2023/2024
  - a. Provide suggested next steps and timeline for Green Step re-assessment
4. Explorers Edge Sustainability Checklist and Certification Path
  - a. Create a made-in-Explorers Edge sustainability checklist that is concise, locally relevant, and provides an entry point to sustainability for a wide-range of operators in RTO 12.
  - b. Consider making a suite of checklists for different types of operations common in RTO 12 (e.g. food waste, energy conservation, employee engagement, cultural heritage, environmental monitoring, etc)
  - c. Create a Sustainability Certification Path that is locally relevant to RTO 12 operators and outlines simple and easy-to-follow steps (checklists, consultation with Explorer s Edge staff, possible Green Step certification) and rationale for each

It should be expected that as the above next steps are implemented, there will be opportunities for other meaningful paths forward. These should be encouraged where they provide meaningful results for RTO 12 operators, collaboration opportunities and the furtherment of Regenerative Tourism in the region.

## **Conclusion**

The Sustainable Tourism Pilot Project continues to evolve and has been meaningful for operators participating and for RTO 12 as an organization. The participating operators have found value overall.

Operators were grateful to have participated in the pilot project but may not continue beyond 2026 given the associated costs. There is interest in a more local approach.

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The collaborative opportunities available as a result of the program are robust both in the short-term among the pilot project participants and in the long-term as potential for other operators as Explorers Edge further develops their sustainability offerings. These efforts will inform and support the regenerative tourism focus of RTO12.