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Coming to terms with sustainability

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With all the information on being green or sustainable barraging us, it seems important to understand the terms, expressions and acronyms related to these important topics:



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Sustainable Development

It all started with this term, defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition was set forth in 1987 by a United Nations "World Commission on Environment and Development" in a report entitled "Our Common Future". This commission was led by Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former prime minister of Norway who eventually gave her name to the [Brundtland report](#).

Sustainability

This usually defines a situation that is long-lasting. It is often used synonymously with Sustainable Development, prompting occasional confusion.

Corporate Social Responsibility (or Corporate Responsibility)

CSR (or CR) is the same concept as Sustainable Development (SD) but is specific to the corporate world whilst SD can apply to countries or other entities. Some companies have incorporated CSR into their strategy since the early '90s but most international companies started to integrate more recently. They publish a Sustainability report (or Corporate Social Responsibility report) once a year, generally at the same time or right after their annual financial report. There are several ways of reporting a company's SD strategy ; the most common one is based on the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)'s framework.

Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)

[GRI](#) is an offspring of the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies ([CERES](#)) and the United Nations Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) Launched in 1997, this non-for-profit organization's mission is to offer companies and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) a framework to measure and report their economic, environmental and social performance.

Green

Green is the color for everything, from buildings to meetings to food.

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).

The US Green Building Council ([USGBC](#)) is now the most recognized entity in the US to certify a new building to be green (or [LEED certified](#)) with four different levels: certified, silver, gold and platinum.

[LEED EB](#) - for Existing Building. Recommended for existing hotels. It helps focus on costs reductions while taking care of the environment.

Green Seal - Green Seal (<http://www.greenseal.org/programs/lodging.cfm>) is an organization that bestows environmentally friendly certification on all types of products and processes, from tissue paper to paint, and which recently extended its certification to the lodging industry.

ISO 14001 - The International Organization for Standardization created a certification for environmental management systems in 1996. [ISO 14001](#) is recognized internationally and helps create an environment policy and an action plan dedicated to making it a success.

Green Globes - [Green Globes](#) certification was in effect in Canada before being introduced to the U.S. Its advantage is that its Web site provides clear guidance on how to create an eco-friendly and cost-efficient building or adapt an existing one. A self-assessment helps the candidates to see where they stand and a third-party verification is then necessary to obtain from one to four Green globes.

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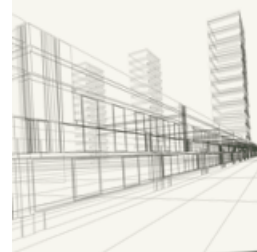
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- 2/19/2009 - Buy Italy (BIT)
- 2/20/2009 - Boston Globe Travel Show
- 2/22/2009 - BITAC Food & Beverage
- 2/23/2009 - Upper Midwest Foodservice and Lodging

Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria – 32 companies and organizations published the [GST Criteria](#) in 2008 to help businesses become more sustainable.

Sustainable Tourism Eco-Certification Program (STEP) – It can be used by hotels, tour operators, transportation companies and attractions. One can obtain a self-assessment certificate but it would be better to request a third-party visit to obtain a full certification in order to help mitigate the perception of “green washing” (green marketing without any genuine concern nor application).

Green Meetings

Nowadays most hotels offer green meetings. The greenest type of meeting, of course, would be a video/conference call, but hopefully, meetings will still represent an important component of our revenue. There are many ways to help a company lower its carbon footprint, including offering hybrid transportation, offsetting their travel carbon footprint via a third-party organization, paperless meetings, local/organic food, tap water, and “sustainable” break-out sessions focused on the local environment and biodiversity. A good source of information is the [Green Meeting Web site](#): or the [EPA guide to greening a meeting](#).

Carbon Footprint

This refers to the impact we have on the environment measured in units of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) emissions produced when burning fossil fuels: coal, oil and natural gas. Every time we use electricity, gasoline, etc. we increase our carbon footprint. The CO₂ emitted - called Green House Gas (GHG) emission- remains trapped in the atmosphere, keeping the infrared radiations, which bounce on the earth, from escaping to space. We need a certain level of Green House effect to maintain life on earth, but it is now admitted by almost everyone that human activity has in the last 50 years increased GHG emission to a level which causes global warming. Methane is another gas that produces GHG ; so are some synthetic chemicals, much more potent than CO₂ but relatively lighter in overall emissions ;fossil fuel burning represents around 75 percent of the increase of CO₂ production over the past 20 years and the balance is mostly the result of deforestation. Specialized companies can help hotels calculate their carbon footprint by establishing measurements and reporting. It involves the supply chain, too, as well as our clients' transportation.

Carbon Offset/Carbon Neutral

Once the carbon footprint measurements are in place and the carbon footprint of the hotel calculated, it can be divided by a common denominator (occupied room, available room, square footage) to offer clients the opportunity to offset their personal carbon footprint and even make their stay carbon-neutral. Clients would have to pay a premium to a professional third-party carbon-offset provider who aims to reduce global carbon emission through, say, investing in renewable energy or forestry projects. The total premium paid corresponds to the specific CO₂e amount of the guest's carbon footprint to be reduced or sequestered by the project and the dollar value per unit offset, as adapted from the cap-and-trade structure introduced by the Kyoto Protocol. Some properties start offsetting their own carbon footprint so that they can sell “carbon-neutral stays” that become an attractive selling point.

Renewable Energies

These refer to energies that are produced by inexhaustible sources such as wind, water, sun, geothermal and biomass, for example. One can now buy RECs (Renewable Energy Certificates) from one's energy provider. Without buying its electricity directly from a windmill, a company can claim that it is buying wind energy by simply purchasing RECs.

Environmentally Friendly Lighting

CFL (Compact Fluorescent Lamp) bulbs use 75 percent less energy than incandescents and last 10 times as long. They cost a bit more to purchase but you get your money back very quickly by reducing your energy bill immediately and not having to replace the bulbs as often. They should be recycled properly as they contain some mercury. The European Union decided to phase out incandescent lighting starting this March. Australia has passed a law which bans incandescent lighting starting next 1 January. The U.S. Congress passed a bill in December 2007 that bans all incandescent light bulbs by 2014. LED stands for light emitting diode, a semi-conductor device that transforms electricity into light. It is extremely energy-efficient and recommended for outside lighting. It is better at positioning light in a single direction than incandescents or CFLs.

These terms and expressions are but a few that we encounter when reading magazines and newspapers. There are many more and particularly in the Food & Beverage operations that we will consider in [a subsequent article](#).

Hervé Houdré began his tenure as general manager of the Willard InterContinental Washington D.C. in 2004. He is recognized for introducing refinements which impact profit and increase market share. Under his leadership, the Willard InterContinental has embarked on a sustainability program, Willard InterContinental - The Next 100 Years. Houdré, who has written a white paper, Sustainable Hospitality© : Sustainable Development in the Hotel Industry, and his team, have put into place a five-year roadmap that defines and quantifies the mid-term SD goals for the hotel. The hotel published its first GRI Standard Sustainability Report available at www.willarddc.com/sd.

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