



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TOURISM SECTOR TO **CONTINUE TAKING ACTION ON PLASTIC POLLUTION DURING COVID-19 RECOVERY**

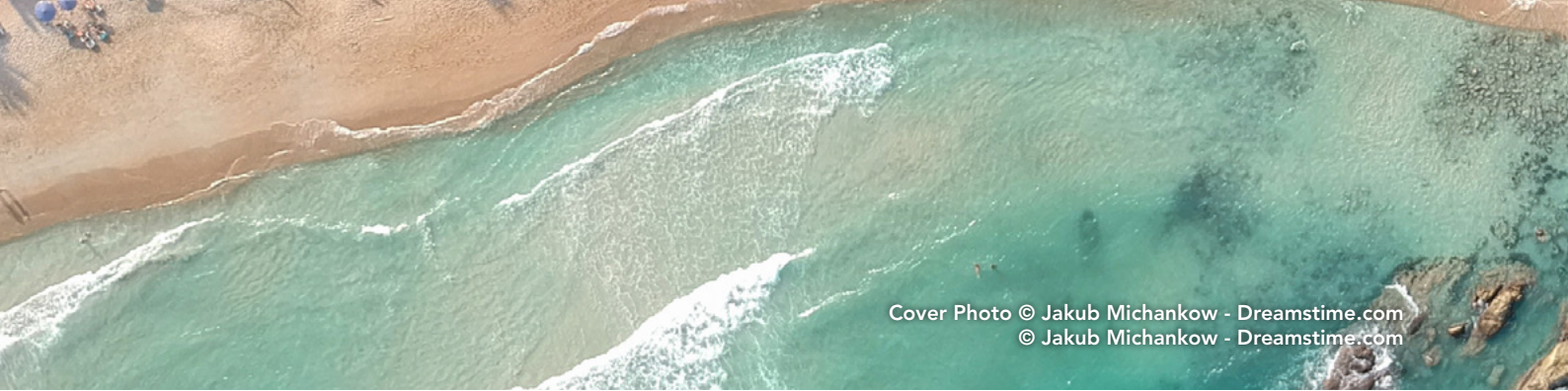


**COVID-19  
RESPONSE**

## **CITATION**

*Global Tourism Plastics Initiative (2020) - Recommendations for the tourism sector to continue taking action on plastic pollution during COVID-19 recovery*





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The COVID-19 pandemic is causing unprecedented socio-economic impacts and at the same time is demonstrating the crucial role that sustainability plays in societies; for all business models and individual behaviors. Tourism, one of the hardest hit economic sectors, representing 10% of global GDP, may face a decline in international tourist arrivals of 58-78% during 2020, putting 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs at risk<sup>1</sup>. Additional impacts such as pollution and threats to the conservation of wildlife and biodiversity remain difficult to quantify.

The sector's initial response to the pandemic has placed a strong focus on public health and hygiene and has often not considered these measures in the context of their environmental impact such as the additional waste generated, water consumed, and chemicals used.

Due to incorrect disposal and waste management, plastic products such as gloves, masks and hand sanitizer bottles have already been found in the natural environments of major tourism destinations<sup>2</sup>. The higher demand for disposable plastic items, which in many cases are unrecyclable, could mean more plastic waste ending up as pollution and thereby undermining the natural environment upon which much tourism activity depends as an invaluable shared

asset. As such, a sustainable recovery from this crisis is essential to avoid facing an environmental crisis connected to plastic pollution.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more complex to use plastics sustainably in many destinations and tourism businesses. At the same time, waste management systems, many of which were already under stress before this crisis, are not fully operational yet in many destinations. The pandemic has also shed light on the vulnerability of global value chains and on the relevance of circular business models in the use of plastics. Circular principles for single-use products provide credible, alternative solutions. Among these, reusability can, in many cases, increase the traceability and control of hygiene and sanitation by tourism companies while ensuring that tourism operates within the local recycling capacities of destinations to the largest extent possible.

Restarting tourism responsibly requires that future operations be guided by a science-based approach in order to support governments, business, and local communities to understand the trade-offs of decision-making processes that aim to align hygiene and health protocols with sustainability criteria. The Global Tourism Plastics Initiative, launched in January 2020 to provide a platform for the tourism sector in its fight against

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1 <https://www.unwto.org/news/covid-19-international-tourist-numbers-could-fall-60-80-in-2020>

2 As recently reported by the French non-profit organization in the Mediterranean <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jun/08/more-masks-than-jellyfish-coronavirus-waste-ends-up-in-ocean>

3 <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sustainable-tourism/global-tourism-plastics-initiative>



plastic pollution, recognizes that environmental challenges have been further exacerbated by the pandemic and that there is a need to come together to build the tourism sector back better<sup>3</sup>.

The following five recommendations are addressed to tourism stakeholders with the aim of supporting them to continue fighting plastic pollution during the COVID-19 recovery. This document illustrates how reducing the plastic footprint, increasing the engagement of suppliers, working closer with waste service providers, and ensuring transparency on the actions taken, can significantly contribute to a responsible recovery of the tourism sector. The document builds on the key concepts underlying the common vision for a circular economy for plastic<sup>4</sup>, the One Planet Vision for a Responsible Recovery of the Tourism Sector<sup>5</sup> and the latest available guidance from the World Health Organizations (WHO), World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), UN Environment Programme (UNEP), Ellen MacArthur Foundation, and leading business associations. These recommendations should be seen as complementary to national and local regulations.

1. *Remove unnecessary plastic packaging and items to reduce cross contamination touch points;*

2. *Develop robust cleaning and sanitization procedures that encourage the adoption of reuse models;*
3. *Evaluate the use of unavoidable plastic packaging and items, enquire about their recyclability and reassess needs on a regular basis; 3*
4. *Engage suppliers, waste management providers and local governments to improve the effectiveness of actions, coordination and resilience;*
5. *Ensure open and transparent communication with staff and clients.*

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4 [https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sites/default/files/vision\\_globaltourismplasticsinitiative.pdf](https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sites/default/files/vision_globaltourismplasticsinitiative.pdf)

5 One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme (2020) – One Planet Vision for a Responsible Recovery of the Tourism Sector. <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sustainable-tourism/covid-19-responsible-recovery-tourism>



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## REMOVE UNNECESSARY PLASTIC PACKAGING AND ITEMS TO REDUCE CROSS CONTAMINATION TOUCH POINTS

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According to the WHO, indirect contact with an infected person through touch points (i.e. by touching a surface or object that has been contaminated with respiratory secretions and then touching own mouth, nose, or eyes) is a route of transmission of COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> Reducing touch points that would allow this transmission to occur, and ensuring that materials/objects that could have been touched by a guest or staff are properly sanitized, is of utmost importance.

Single-use plastic items and packaging are not sanitization measures in themselves – the virus can survive on these - and can represent touch points as they could have been contaminated during their production, transport or handling. Single-use plastic items and packaging should therefore be sanitized before they are used by guests/clients. It is important to also consider whether the addition of single-use plastic as a protection mechanism will actually enhance protection. If not, regular and deep disinfection of the otherwise packaged item should be the recommended solution.

The use of disposable gloves is recommended only in occasions when it is necessary from a personal safety perspective, while “for cleaning surfaces in non-health care setting environments” it is recommended to apply sanitization procedures in accordance with the recommendations of the manufacturer of cleaning products or

disinfectants<sup>7</sup>. WHO indicates that disposable gloves should not be used as a substitute for handwashing as the latter is a greater protective barrier to infection. In addition, wearing disposable gloves can give a false sense of security and may result in staff not washing hands as frequently as required.<sup>8</sup>

Continuing to carefully remove unnecessary plastic packaging and items during COVID-19 recovery can contribute to reduce touch points. Making only the necessary plastic items accessible and available to the guests (or available upon request) will reduce touch points and avoid unnecessary cleaning and disinfection operational procedures while limiting (plastic) waste creation.

### Main takeaways:

- Reduce touch points where indirect contact with an infected person can happen
- Remove unnecessary plastic packaging and items to reduce touch points
- Single-use plastic items and packaging are not sanitization measures in themselves
- Every single use-plastic packaging/item should be properly sanitized
- Make only the necessary plastic items accessible and available to the guests (or available upon request) to avoid unnecessary sanitization

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6 World Health Organization. (2020). Operational considerations for COVID-19 management in the accommodation sector: interim guidance, 30 April 2020. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331937>. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

7 World Health Organization. (2020). Cleaning and disinfection of environmental surfaces in the context of COVID-19: interim guidance, 15 May 2020. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/332096>. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

8 World Health Organization & Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2020). COVID-19 and food safety: guidance for food businesses: interim guidance, 07 April 2020. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331705>. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO





## DEVELOP ROBUST CLEANING AND SANITIZATION PROCEDURES THAT ENCOURAGE THE ADOPTION OF REUSE MODELS

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An increased use of single-use plastic items and packaging in tourism operations can be perceived as an emotion-based response to the COVID-19, as a way of demonstrating to each guest/client that they are getting a “clean/safe/pristine” experience. However, ensuring hygiene and safety primarily depends on robust and reliable cleaning and sanitization procedures.

As seen in recommendation n°1, single-use plastic items and packaging require sanitization and therefore their use does not exclude an organization from having to apply cleaning and sanitization procedures. In this sense, with the integration of cleaning and sanitization protocols within operations being absolutely necessary, opting for reusable plastic products appears as a logical investment for stakeholders. In fact, reuse models allow stakeholders to directly ensure the application of sound hygiene and sanitization procedures and to gain greater control over such processes.

For specific working conditions that place the employee in close contact with others, WHO recommends the use of non-medical masks which should be washed frequently.

Cleaning and sanitization measures should take into consideration environmental, health, and safety risks of the products and procedures put

in place.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the WHO advises using the correct dosage of cleaning and disinfecting chemicals and checking the recommended operating temperatures of dishwashing/laundry machine<sup>10</sup>.

### Main takeaways:

- Develop clear and comprehensive protocols for staff to ensure successful implementation of health and sanitization procedures
- Safety and hygiene are critical for both single-use and reuse models
- Reuse models allow stakeholders to directly ensure the application of sound hygiene and sanitization procedures, gaining greater control over such processes
- Ensure that staff use single-use gloves/ masks solely when it is necessary from a health-related perspective
- Implement practices for sound management of chemical products to avoid impacts on human health (staff and guests) and the environment

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9 World Health Organization. (2020). Advice on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19: interim guidance, 5 June 2020. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/332293>. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

10 World Health Organization. (2020). Operational considerations for COVID-19 management in the accommodation sector: interim guidance, 30 April 2020. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331937>. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO



## EVALUATE THE USE OF UNAVOIDABLE PLASTIC PACKAGING AND ITEMS, ENQUIRE ABOUT THEIR RECYCLABILITY, AND REASSESS NEEDS ON A REGULAR BASIS

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Increased use of disposable items puts additional pressure on the waste management infrastructure of destinations, often exposed to the effects of tourism seasonality. This can also increase costs and liability to manage waste streams. When single-use plastic items or packaging are unavoidable, it is advisable to give preference to designs, materials and formats that can effectively be collected and recycled locally<sup>11</sup>.

The engagement of suppliers of plastic items and packaging on this topic is important. This engagement also enhances the understanding of local collection and recycling system challenges and opportunities, in order to ensure the right decision-making according to waste management capabilities/infrastructure at the destination. Options include techniques to reduce, sort and separate (plastic) waste and to prevent mixing non-hazardous and hazardous wastes.

When opting for a single-use plastic packaging or item, this measure should only be considered temporary and as much as possible be limited in time. In other words, it needs to be ensured that this decision to use a single-use plastic packaging or item is revisited at a previously-defined point in time. In this way, decisions that are made amid quickly getting-back-to-business

to address short-term needs can be reassessed with a long-term perspective, as additional scientific information becomes available.

### Main takeaways:

- If single-use plastic packaging/items cannot be avoided, give preference to recyclable/compostable plastic and/or plastic packaging/items with recycled content
- Consider the capacity of the available waste-management infrastructure to process the increased stream of plastic waste in a sustainable and circular manner (recyclable or compostable)
- Reduce, sort, and separate (plastic) waste to avoid mixing with hazardous waste
- Treat decisions to introduce single-use plastic items and packaging as temporary and review long-term operational needs on a regular basis in light of the latest available scientific and public health advice

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11 Ellen MacArthur Foundation, The New Plastics Economy (May 2020). Reuse - Rethinking Packaging





## ENGAGE SUPPLIERS, WASTE MANAGEMENT PROVIDERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ACTIONS, COORDINATION AND RESILIENCE

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The establishment of hygiene and safety protocols by tourism businesses has resulted in more control over what goes into their operations<sup>12</sup> and represents an opportunity to enhance (or establish where non-existent) communication mechanisms with suppliers to increase influence and coordination, thereby ensuring the application and monitoring of such hygiene and safety protocols. This influence from tourism business upon supply chains can be leveraged to reduce the amount of unnecessary plastic packaging and items going into tourism operations, which would need to be sanitized and properly disposed of. In the case of reuse models, when appropriate, joint protocols can be developed with suppliers to ensure successful implementation of health and safety measures.

Similarly, increased attention to what tourism operations generate as waste will demand a higher level of assurance and revised protocols. Within the context of COVID-19 pandemic, an increased flow of hazardous waste is likely to occur, especially in the event of a COVID-19 case. Hazardous waste has a higher liability than other waste streams, with more accountability expected from the waste generator and the waste management service. The UN Environment Programme emphasizes<sup>13</sup> the need for increased sorting and separation of waste, in order to avoid non-hazardous waste being treated as/mixed with hazardous waste. Furthermore, there is a need to increase engagement of waste service

providers to ensure non-hazardous (plastic) waste is collected and segregated until it is recycled or properly disposed of.

It is also advised that tourism businesses enhance coordination with key relevant authorities and peers to reduce hazardous waste. UNWTO recommends to “Introduce and adapt actionable and harmonized processes and procedures in line with public health evidence-based risk assessment and full coordination with relevant public and private sector partners.”<sup>14</sup> This coordination should lead to increased investment and innovation in the waste-management infrastructure.

### Main takeaways:

- Enhance (or establish where non-existent) coordination mechanisms with suppliers to increase influence and improve information flows in order to ensure application of established hygiene and safety protocols
- Leverage this influence to reduce the amount of unnecessary plastic packaging and items going into tourism operations
- Increase engagement of waste service providers to ensure non-hazardous (plastic) waste is collected and segregated until it is recycled or properly disposed of
- Enhance coordination with key relevant authorities and peers to reduce hazardous waste

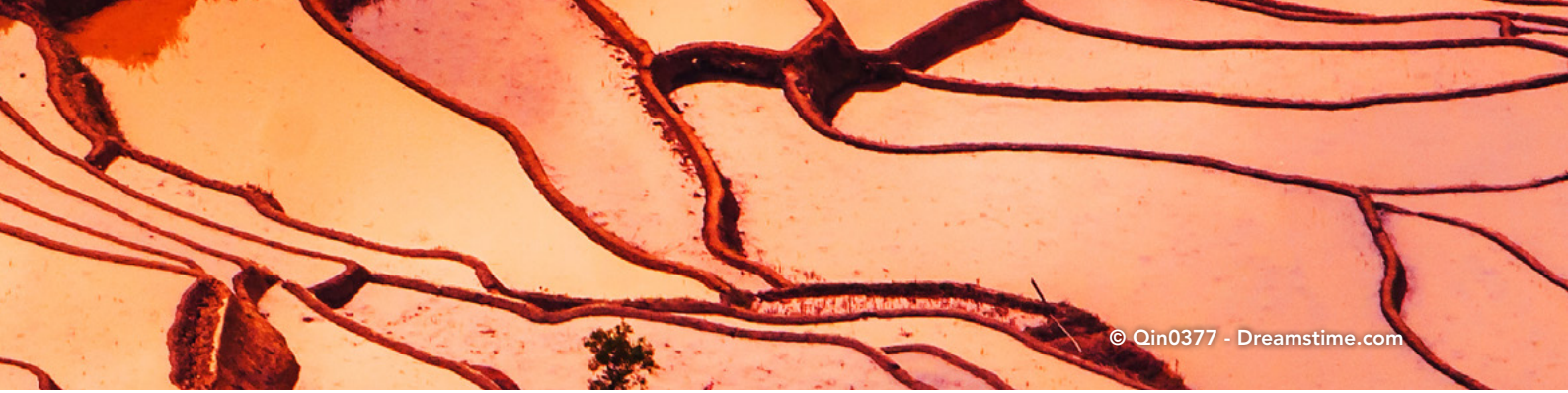
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12 World Travel and Tourism Council (May 2020). Hospitality - Global Protocols for the New Normal. <https://wttc.org/COVID-19/Safe-Travels-Global-Protocols-Stamp>

13 United Nations Environment Programme (May 2020). Covid-19 Waste Management Factsheet. <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/32282/COVIDWM.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

14 World Tourism Organization, UNWTO (May 2020). Global guidelines to restart tourism. <https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-05/UNWTO-Global-Guidelines-to-Restart-Tourism.pdf>





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## ENSURE OPEN AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF AND CLIENTS

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Consistent and transparent communication is key to successfully implement hygiene and safety measures and to rebuild trust among clients. It is recommended that communication reflects efforts to tackle plastic pollution in protocols and is addressed to staff and partners. Clear roles and expectations of staff (and suppliers, where relevant) on how to reduce plastic use and implement reuse models, while complying with hygiene and safety measures, should be established (e.g. via Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)).

It is recommended that tourism businesses communicate protocols to customers, both digitally and on site. Guests should be informed on how the planned measures are being implemented and advised on ways to safely make use of equipment/items (e.g. make cleaning timetables visible; provide instructions to operate water refilling stations).

Finally, destinations and tourism businesses should report in an open, transparent, and consistent manner on the actions taken to address hygiene via an enhanced plastics strategy.

### Main takeaways:

- Reflect your efforts to tackle plastic pollution in protocols and communication addressed to staff and partners

- Establish clear roles and expectations of staff on how to reduce plastic use and implement reuse models while complying with hygiene and safety measures
- Communicate to guests on how the planned measures are being implemented (e.g. make cleaning timetables visible; assign staff to operate water refilling stations; etc.)
- Provide guests with clear recommendations on use/hygiene protocols of equipment/items made available to them
- Report, in a rigorous, transparent, and consistent manner, on the actions taken to address hygiene via an enhanced plastics strategy

According to the WHO<sup>15</sup> *“The COVID-19 crisis has shown that people will support even difficult policies if decision-making is transparent, evidence-based, and inclusive, and has the clear aim of protecting their health, their families and their livelihoods - rather than serving special interests.”*

Taking ambitious action to reduce plastic pollution, while establishing the right procedures and assurance mechanisms, can support protecting human health now and in the future.

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15 WHO manifesto for a healthy and green COVID-19 recovery <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-manifesto-for-a-healthy-recovery-from-covid-19>



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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The following examples build on the multiple questions and discussions tourism businesses are facing as they prepare to restart operations. The objective of the below FAQ section is to shed light on how tourism businesses can advance with their ambitions to tackle plastics pollution when faced with very concrete questions coming from different teams. The objective of this FAQ section isn't to provide a comprehensive overview of questions that arise when tourism actors are implementing hygiene protocols, but rather to give examples of ways to apply the "Recommendations for the tourism sector to continue taking action on plastic pollution during COVID-19 recovery" and their underlying logic.

### IN THE ROOMS...

#### 1. Is 'wrapping up of the remote control in plastic film' a useful sanitization measure?

- Plastic film is not a sanitization measure in and of itself. If the wrapped-up remote control is touched by a member of staff who has not cleaned their hands, this could become a point of transmission of COVID-19.
- Instead of wrapping in plastics, all items available for guests to use should be properly sanitized.
- Equally, clear procedures should be developed to ensure that staff avoid touching any objects such as remote controls with un-sanitized hands.
- As a plus, this will avoid the need to properly dispose of the plastic film, which is a non-recyclable plastic material.
- Where items must be wrapped in plastic, these too need to be sanitized.

#### 2. Should the accommodation providers return to single-sized amenities, instead of existing refillable shampoo/soap/other dispensers?

- Using single-sized amenities will require safety protocols from the (1) supplier to the (2) preparation of room for guests and the (3) proper disposal of the content and plastic packaging left behind.





- Establishing cleaning protocols for refillable shampoo/soap dispensers can meet hygiene requirements, while having more control over the process of (1) cleaning the dispenser and (2) refilling it when necessary and reducing the burden on waste management processes.
- In addition, it is recommended to keep track of cleaning protocols and communicate those clearly to guests (e.g. control timetables, visual aids/tags, ...).

## IN FOOD AND BEVERAGE...

### 3. Should refillable water stations be taken out of the operations?

- Safety and hygiene of reuse models should be ensured through thorough sanitization protocols.
- No matter if it is a single use bottle or refillable container, any material/object that could have been in touch with a guest or staff needs to be properly sanitized/cleaned.
- Guests may consider bringing their own refillable bottles to avoid use of single use plastic bottles (when possible) and to have a direct control on sanitization of those.

### 4. Should restaurants and catering services give preference to disposable cutlery to respect hygiene standards?

- As long as dishes, silverware, and glassware were properly cleaned and sanitized, reuse models should be encouraged over disposable cutlery.

### 5. Is double packaging of food and beverage products a recommendable practice from hygiene perspective?

- Plastic film is not a sanitization measure, hence double packaging, beyond causing wasteful use of resources, gives a false sense of security/protection

