



**EUROPARC**  
Sustainable Tourism  
in Protected Areas

**AWARDING SYSTEM  
FOR TOUR OPERATORS AND TRAVEL AGENCIES  
TO IMPLEMENT PART 3  
OF THE EUROPEAN CHARTER FOR SUSTAINABLE  
TOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS (ECST)**

**A EUROPEAN LEVEL METHODOLOGY**

**EUROPARC Federation**

To be applied worldwide in countries that do not have the full ECST award in place

### Scope:

To provide for Tour Operators and Travel Agencies (from now on referred to as TO) from countries worldwide that do not have in place the full ECST methodology, a European level methodology that allows them to be awarded with ECST Part 3 and thereby operate in Sustainable Destinations across Europe awarded with the ECST Part 1 and 2.

### Background:

The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism is a sustainable tourism participatory planning methodology set up by the EUROPARC Federation that recognises Protected Areas as Sustainable Destinations since 2001, and has in 2023 a network of 92 Sustainable Destinations in 15 countries (<https://www.europarc.org/sustainable-tourism/network-sustainable-destinations/>).

The ECST has a methodology that awards tourism businesses as ECST Partners that operate in accredited Sustainable Destinations. This recognition has been operating since 2008 and includes in 2023 about 768 tourism businesses in 6 countries (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Estonia).

Finally, since 2014, tour operators and travel agencies can also be awarded ECST Part 3 in countries where there are protected areas and tourism businesses awarded with the ECST Part 1 - Sustainable Destinations, and Part 2 - ECST Partners. At the present moment in 2023, there are 6 TO awarded as ECST Partners in 1 country (Spain).

Having created Sustainable Destinations with public and private entities, businesses, and communities working together, agreeing on sustainable practices with TO who bring visitors to the Protected Areas completes the ECST cycle.

Despite the efforts and success of the ECST, being the largest and oldest European Sustainable Destinations Network, we recognise the need to reinforce its visibility within the main outbound markets, where the main Tour Operators and Travel Agencies that work in and prefer this niche market of Protected Area working with sustainable standards are based.

Within the conclusions of the 11th ECST network meeting in 2019, the need was highlighted to award ECST Part 3, TO from the main visitor source markets of Northern Europe (DE, NL, UK, etc.) who are interested in working with Sustainable Destinations where Partners have been awarded ECST Part 2 (Businesses) and ECST Part 3 (Travel Agencies and Tour Operators).

This European-level methodology provides an opportunity for TO worldwide interested in working with the ECST network but who are based in countries without the full Charter implemented, to be awarded as a Charter Partner and be recognised under the ECST.

This requires TO to commit to the ECST vision, mission, and principles and to demonstrate a significant commitment to sustainability criteria and actions in their own operations and

management. They should also be engaged in partnership working with Protected Area authorities, communities and local businesses.

The ECST award is the registered property of the EUROPARC Federation. The ECST Part 1 awarding the Protected Areas as Sustainable Destinations is led directly by the Federation. The ECST Part 2 awarding the Tourism Businesses as Charter Partners is led directly by each Section/Country with the proper methodology approved by the Federation. This is the same for the ECST Part 3.

In the proposed European-level methodology for TO, the process will be led directly by the EUROPARC Federation, in close cooperation with the Section/Countries where the ECST Network operates with awarded Sustainable Destinations and ECST Partners (Estonia, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Sweden).

## 1. SCOPE

### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

- Encourage marketing of tourism in Protected Areas that respects the principles of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, and therefore contributes to conservation and socio-economic local development.
- Contribute to the recognition of the benefits of this specific tourism offer for conservation and socio-economic local development.
- Improve the visibility and recognition of the Sustainable Destinations and the ECST Partner Businesses that commit to Sustainable Tourism.
- Recognise and differentiate the Tour Operators and Travel Agencies for their commitment to sustainable tourism in the Protected Areas in which they operate, giving them the opportunity to collaborate with environmental authorities and local stakeholders, and to benefit from working together to prepare unique and attractive offers for tourists.

### 1.2 TARGET BUSINESSES

- Businesses that could be awarded ECST Part 3 are Tour Operators and Travel Agencies<sup>1</sup> that fulfill the requirements and complete the process of the European award system.

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<sup>1</sup> (According to the EU legislation this definition of “tour operator” and “travel agencies” should comply with the following) DIRECTIVE (EU) 2015/2302 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 25 November 2015 on package travel and linked travel arrangements, amending Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 and Directive 2011/83/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Council Directive 90/314/EEC. Adopted by Italy by DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 21/05/2018, n. 62.

#### Article 3 - Definitions

(7) **‘trader’** means any natural person or any legal person, irrespective of whether privately or publicly owned, who is acting, including through any other person acting in his name or on his behalf, for purposes relating to his trade, business, craft or profession in relation to contracts covered by this Directive, whether acting in the capacity of organiser, retailer, trader facilitating a linked travel arrangement or as a travel service provider;

(8) **‘organiser’** means a trader who combines and sells or offers for sale packages, either directly or through another trader or together with another trader, or the trader who transmits the traveller's data to another trader in accordance with point (b)(v) of point 2.

- The entire business will be awarded with the ECST Part 3 – as an ECST Partner – and could communicate this, but in terms of the publicity of tourism products the TO can only show the ECST logo on those products that are developed in Sustainable Destinations with whom they have a Partnership Agreement, involving ECST Partner businesses.
- The conditions of use of the ECST logo by TO awarded with ECST Part 3 will be included in the Partnership Agreement.

### 1.3 TERRITORIAL SCOPE

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The businesses that could be awarded with the ECST Part 3 (European level) are TO located worldwide in countries which do not have in place the full ECST methodology (Parts 1,2 & 3).

### 1.4 ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DIFFERENT ENTITIES INVOLVED

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#### EUROPARC Federation is committed to:

- Be the guarantor of the system and its implementation in Europe.
- Provide the necessary documentation to the Protected Areas interested in implementing the ECST Part 3.
- Provide information to the TO interested in being awarded the ECST Part 3 (European Level).
- Set-up and coordinate a **Joint Evaluation Committee** of the ECST Part 3 -European Level.
- Approve the award of Tour Operators and Travel Agencies – upon recommendation of the Joint Evaluation Committee - and deliver the Certificate of ECST Partner.
- Coordinate, monitor, and disseminate the evolution of the award system in Europe.
- Include on the website the list of awarded TO with the ECST Part 3 - European Level.
- Enhance the coordination with EUROPARC Sections in order to promote the development of the ECST Part 3 at European level and achieve its goals.
- Provide the necessary information to the TO for their award of the ECST Part 3 (about the implementation methodology, protected areas and the ECST Partner Businesses).
- Admit applications from the TO.
- Make an initial evaluation of the activities of the TO.
- Communicate to the Sustainable Destinations of the ECST Network any TO candidates in order that the TO can establish Partnership Agreements with Tourism businesses.
- Approve proposed Partnership Agreements between TO candidates and Tourism businesses from Sustainable Destinations.
- Monitor implementation of the Partnership Agreement signed with the TO and, in particular, the adequacy of the activities of the TO with the conservation objectives of the Protected Area in which the TO wishes to operate.

- Review the adequacy of the Tourism products designed and marketed by the TO in the Sustainable Destination.
- Promote and disseminate the awarded TO with the ECST Part 3, and the Sustainable Tourism products they sell.
- Involve the awarded TO in the ECST Network, encouraging contact between TO and Tourism businesses across countries and organising meetings and workshops at European level.

**Travel agencies and Tour Operator (as defined in the EU Directive 2015/2302) are committed to:**

- Be the recipients and beneficiaries of the Award System.
- Comply with the requirements of the System to be awarded with the ECST Part 3.
- Submit a proposal to become a Charter Partner Part 3, and a Partnership Agreement with the Tourism Businesses awarded Charter Partner 2 in the Sustainable Destinations.

**EUROPARC Sections and PA awarded with the ECST Part 1 are committed to:**

- Provide the official text of the Charter and the European Methodology for the Award System to implement the ECST Part 3.
- Provide basic information about the Protected Area(s).
- Provide information about the Charter Partner businesses in the Protected Area(s).
- Provide the necessary information about the TO candidates to the Sustainable Destinations from their area.
- Facilitate possible Partnership Agreements between TO candidates and Sustainable Destinations of their Area.

**1.5 VALIDITY OF THE AWARD**

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- The “Certificate of Award” of the Travel agency shall be valid for five years.
- At the end of the third year, there will be a mid-term self-evaluation check done by the subscribers of the Partnership agreement (the TO and the tourism businesses), to evaluate the progress made.
- If in the course of those five years, the Sustainable Destination does not renew its ECST Award, the TO will maintain its award until the date of validity of its certificate, but after that, the TO should sign a Partnership Agreement with Tourism Businesses from other Sustainable Destinations.
- If in the course of the five years, EUROPARC Federation or the Sustainable Destination have objective evidence that the TO is not fulfilling its commitments, the ECST Part 3 award of the TO could be invalidated and the certificate could be withdrawn.

## 2. PRIOR CONDITIONS

### 2.1 PRIOR CONDITIONS TO BE MET BY THE PROTECTED AREAS

Protected Areas that wish to propose the award of ECST Part 3 to a TO or to sign a Partnership Agreement with a TO already awarded must:

- Be awarded with the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas by the EUROPARC Federation (ECST Part 1).
- Have implemented ECST Part 2, and have enough ECST Part 2 local tourism businesses willing to establish a Partnership Agreement with the TO candidate.

### 2.2 PRIOR CONDITIONS TO BE MET BY THE TRAVEL AGENCIES AND TOUR OPERATORS (TO)

A TO that wishes to join the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism Part 3 shall:

- Have a commercial license in force or a document certifying its registration in the corresponding Register.
- Comply with the applicable legislation.
- Develop its activities in accordance with the ECST Principles.
- Undertake activities in the Sustainable Destination which are compatible with the Protected Area's management plans and sustainable tourism strategy.

## 3. THE AWARD PROCESS

### 3.1. SUBMISSION BY TOUR OPERATOR AND TRAVEL AGENCY CANDIDATE

The Travel Agencies and Tour Operator award process is structured as follows:

- The awarded ECST Part 1 Protected Area and Part 2 tourism businesses identify a TO who intends to develop activities in their geographical area.
- The TO receives all the information needed for its application process. The TO compiles the documentation requested regarding prior conditions, fills in Annex 1: "Identification document of the TO and application submission" and submits to EUROPARC Federation its registration as a TO Candidate.
- EUROPARC Federation confirms that the TO candidate fulfills all prior conditions to become a Charter Partner.
- EUROPARC Federation communicates to the TO candidate and Protected Area the decision and encourages the next step of submission.
- With the support of the Protected Area, the Tourism Businesses and the TO candidate together define a Partnership Agreement.
- The Tourism Businesses and the TO candidate fill out the necessary documentation for submission of the proposed Partnership Agreement that will be submitted via the Protected Area.

- The EUROPARC Federation, through its Joint Evaluation Commission, evaluates the documentation received.
- The EUROPARC Federation communicates the result of the evaluation, requesting any additions relating to the activities or documentation.
- The EUROPARC Federation communicates to both the TO candidate and the Protected Area the decision and delivers to the TO the Certificate of ECST Part 3 Partner.
- The TO can begin to promote accredited sustainable tourism packages as part of its business.
- Costs will be charged for the award and recognition process by the EUROPARC Federation in order to ensure the financial sustainability of the system.

**Note 1:** The initiative of becoming an ECST Part 3 Partner may also come from a TO. In this case, the TO must contact the ECST Part 1 Protected Area with whom they wish to work as a Sustainable Destination. The Protected Area gives the go-ahead to this request (consultations with the Charter Forum and ECST Part 2 Partners are needed) and communicates to EUROPARC. Next steps will follow the same procedure.

**Note 2:** A TO already recognised through the European methodology for ECST Part 3 and with a Partnership Agreement with Tourism Businesses from a Sustainable Destination, may work with other ECST Part 1 destinations as long as they agree with the new Protected Area and its Tourism Businesses a new Partnership Agreement. The procedure is similar to the first recognition but without the need to be recognised again by the EUROPARC Federation as an awarded TO.

**Note 3:** In order to encourage the European network of Sustainable Destinations of Charter Part 1 and Part 2 to work together in a full network, TO that have been already recognised originally as ECST Part 3 in their own countries of origin (TO from Spain, France and Italy) may also become recognised in other Sustainable Destinations. In this case these TO are exempted from this European methodology, they only need to submit a new Partnership Agreement to the Section of the new Sustainable Destination with which they wish to work according to the Section procedures of the PA.

**Note 4:** A TO located in a country/Section already awarded ECST Part 1 Sustainable Destinations and ECST Part 2 Partners, but for any reason has not yet implemented the ECST Part 3 methodology, can apply to the European awarded ECST Part 1 Sustainable Destinations and ECST Part 2 Partners only where they wish to work with the network of Sustainable Destinations outside their own country/Section.

**Note 5:** TO that wish to operate in their own country/Section that have already awarded ECST Part 1 Sustainable Destinations and ECST Part 2 Partners will have to submit their applications to the existing national/Section ECST Part 3 methodology, approved by EUROPARC.

### 3.2. VALIDATION BY EUROPARC

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The EUROPARC Federation receives the application dossier, reviews it and sends it to the members of the Joint Committee for the Evaluation of the ECST Part 3, composed of:

- a) A representative from the country/Section from where the Sustainable Destination involved in the submission of the Partnership Agreement is located;
- b) A representative of Protected Areas awarded with ECST Part 1;
- c) A representative of Tourism Businesses awarded with ECST Part 2;
- d) A representative of Tour Operators and Travel Agencies awarded with ECST Part 3;
- e) An Environmental NGO with relevant work in Sustainable EcoTourism and Environmental Education.

EUROPARC will assign a staff member to provide secretariat to the Committee.

The Joint Committee for the Evaluation of the Charter Part 3 is responsible for taking the final decision to validate, postpone or refuse the award to the TO.

If/when the decision is positive, the EUROPARC Federation proceeds with the registration at European level.

### **3.3 PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT CONTENT**

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Once the award to the TO has been validated by EUROPARC, the TO and the Tourism Businesses with the support of the Protected Area finalise their Partnership Agreement for the next five years. This Partnership Agreement should include joint actions to:

1. Design and / or market ecotourism products in the Protected Area.
2. Support conservation and socio-economic local development in the Protected Area.
3. Continuously improve the sustainable management and practices of the TO.
4. Ensure proper communication and transmission of information between the TO, the Tourism Businesses and the Protected Area.

Some criteria and guidelines for each of these areas of collaboration are set out below:

#### **1. Design and / or market ecotourism products in the Protected Area**

Ecotourism products designed and promoted under the framework of the ECST Part 3 must meet, as far as possible, the following criteria:

- Be based on the discovery of the Protected Area and its natural and cultural values, with an important component of communication and interpretation of those values.
- Be formed by services of ECST Part 2 Businesses in the area. If a service cannot be offered by an ECST Partner business, the TO may include other tourism businesses but always with close attention to sustainability criteria.
- Promote respectful behaviour of tourists and visitors towards natural and cultural resources and towards the local community.
- Cover different themes: e.g. ecotourism, agrotourism and traditional products, and cultural and historical heritage.
- Avoid bringing customers to more sensitive or crowded parts of the Protected Area, and minimise the impacts of the activities of customers.



- Contribute to improving the quality of life of the local community and have a positive impact on the local economy.
- Promote a balanced development of the area, covering all activities and services in the municipalities where there are ECST Partner Businesses.

**2. Support conservation and local development in the Protected Area:**

- Support monitoring and conservation activities of the natural and cultural heritage of the Protected Area.
- Support socio-economic development activities in collaboration with local stakeholders.

**3. Continuously improve the management of the TO, applying sustainable development criteria in its activities and developing actions for the environmental, social, and economic improvement of the business.**

**4. Ensure proper communication and transmission of information between the TO and the Protected Area. To do this, the following actions for the TO are suggested :**

- Provide information about any incidents detected during the TO's activities.
- Provide information about the ECST ecotourism products sold, the type of customers, and their satisfaction.
- Report about the outcome of the actions committed by the TO within the Partnership Agreement.

For its part, the Protected Area and the local partners of the Sustainable Tourism Forum will develop actions to support the TO, such as:

- To give support in the design of sustainable tourism products.
- To facilitate the use of the public facilities of the Protected Area and the region.
- To promote the TO and the sustainable tourism products designed.
- To support the identification of possible collaborative actions to contribute to conservation and local development.
- To provide training on the Protected Area and the region for the personnel of the TO.
- Provide updated information on the Protected Area.

When the Partnership Agreement is drawn up and signed, the Protected Area will send it to the EUROPARC Federation.

The Tourism Businesses and the TO engaged in the Partnership Agreement will jointly prepare an annual report on the progress with the actions developed with the support of the Protected Area. The report should specify:

- The actions developed by the Protected Area and its local partners and the results.
- The actions carried out by the TO, indicating at least:
  - Number and type of sustainable tourism products (or packages) designed.
  - Number of those packages sold (number of customers).
  - Number and type of promotional activities of those products and number of tourism businesses (total and ECST Part 2) that have participated.

- Actions developed to support conservation and local developments, and results.
- Actions to improve sustainable management of the travel agency, and progress.
- Actions to improve communication and information sharing with the Protected Area.

#### 4. RENEWAL PROCESS

At the end of five years of collaboration, the engaged partners (TO and Tourism Businesses) will prepare under the supervision of the Protected Area a final evaluation report and a new Partnership Agreement for the next five years. To renew the award of the Charter Part 3 to the TO, the Protected Area will send the EUROPARC Federation the following documentation:

- Mid-term self-evaluation check done by the subscribers (the TO and the tourism businesses) of the Partnership agreement, evaluating progress made.
- Final evaluation report with the results of the collaboration during the five years and proposals to improve the sustainability, conservation, and socio-economic development of the Sustainable Destination area.
- Dossier of the sustainable tourism packages designed and marketed under the Charter framework.
- A new Partnership Agreement for the next five years.

The EUROPARC Federation will review the renewal dossier, will send it to the Joint Committee for Evaluation of Charter Part 3, and will follow the established procedure to make the decision and to inform the interested parties about the outcome.

Then the EUROPARC Federation will issue a new Certificate of award for the TO and will update the European Register of Charter Part 3.

#### **In annex: (to be developed based on the Spanish methodology)**

Annex 1 - Identification document of the TO and application submission

Annex 2 – Self-Evaluation Checklist for TO Charter

Annex 3 – Declaration of TO concerning the data provided

Annex 4 – Request for Admission of the TO to become a Charter Partner

Annex 5 – Partnership Agreement between TO and Tourism Businesses

Annex 6 – Charter Partner Certificate for TO

Annex 7 – Charter Partner outdoor plaque