

Northern Sparsely Populated Areas' (NSPA) views on the EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism

The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network, NSPA, represents the interests of the four northernmost regions of Sweden (Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland), seven northernmost and eastern regions of Finland (Central Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, Lapland, North Karelia, Northern Ostrobothnia, Pohjois-Savo and South Savo) and North Norway (Finnmark, Troms and Nordland).

[The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas, NSPA](#), would like to highlight the following messages regarding the future EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism:

1. Introduction and Background

Tourism has for the last 10-15 years grown to become a key sector in the NSPA regions and the wider European Arctic, offering opportunities for local value creation, employment, innovation and cultural exchange. The region is home to unique and vast natural landscapes, rich biodiversity, and Indigenous Sámi heritage, which together form the foundation for nature and experience-based tourism.

However, the European Arctic and its sparsely populated regions face persistent structural challenges: long distances, limited transport and digital infrastructure, fragile ecosystems, strong seasonality, and a predominance of micro-enterprises and SMEs—including destination management organisations (DMOs) with limited capacity and resources. The region is also increasingly exposed to climate-related risks, including extreme weather events, which affect infrastructure, mobility, and tourism operations.

The NSPA welcomes the European Commission's ambition to make Europe the world's leading destination for sustainable and smart tourism and support the development of a new strategy that reflects the diversity of European regions. The NSPA welcomes a strategy adapted to Arctic realities and contributing to broader EU goals for territorial cohesion, climate and social resilience, and geopolitical stability.

Tourism in the NSPA is not only an economic sector, but also a **pillar for settlement, preparedness, and resilience** in regions of strategic importance for Europe. By creating jobs, sustaining services, and supporting cultural and social cohesion, sustainable tourism development is closely linked to the EU's cohesion objectives, to long-term regional viability and should therefore be recognised as a strategic sector in the Clean Industrial Deal.

This process offers a unique opportunity to align the new tourism strategy with the objectives of the **EU Arctic Policy**, particularly in light of the NSPA's recent [call for an updated and forward-looking Arctic strategy](#). Tourism can play a strategic role in strengthening local preparedness, supporting green transition, and reinforcing cross-border cooperation in the European Arctic.

2. Key Recommendations

1. Promote a shift from volume-driven growth to regenerative and inclusive tourism models

The EU should support a shift from volume-driven growth towards regenerative tourism that restores ecosystems, empowers local communities, and integrates Indigenous perspectives. This includes embedding Sámi culture and traditional knowledge in strategy design, preventing cultural exploitation, and drawing on best practices such as Canada's Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas. Regenerative tourism should benefit local residents by ensuring participation, acceptance, and improvements in quality of life. Ensure tourism strengthens rather than burdens local communities, with explicit co-creation models between residents, businesses and authorities. The NSPA has strong potential to be positioned as a frontrunner in health-promoting tourism, building on nature and culture-based experiences, in line with EU initiatives such as the European Capital of Health Destination proposal, and programmes such as Interreg Europe and COSME-supported wellbeing tourism products.

2. Stronger support for SMEs, DMOs and stable year-round employment

Targeted support is needed for SMEs and DMOs, including execution funding (not only planning), capacity building, and simplified access to EU programmes. Tourism should be recognised as a driver of competence supply, youth integration and gender equality, helping young people and women build careers and remain in the region. EU action can promote long-term operator engagement and regulatory models that prevent short-term exploitation (e.g. Iceland's licensing system), while addressing seasonality through skills development and workforce stability. This can be addressed through the **EU Pact for Skills**, aiming for public-private partnerships to upskill workers in key sectors, including tourism. It furthermore supports the goals of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, particularly principles on secure employment, equal opportunities, and access to lifelong learning.

3. Promote internationally recognised and verifiable sustainability standards

We recommend the EU to not only encourage participation in voluntary schemes but actively support the adoption of standards approved by international tourism organisations such as GSTC. Models like Norway’s “Sustainable Destination” label, linked to GSTC, U4SSC, and the European Travel Commission’s indicators, provide consistency, comparability, and credibility across Europe. Strengthening such standards will ensure predictability and create incentives for businesses and destinations to engage in rigorous sustainability certification.

4. Improve data, research and knowledge for sustainable tourism

We encourage the EU to support research and data collection on subjects such as Arctic tourism, climate change and visitor flows. Scientific knowledge is essential to develop responsible and place-sensitive certification schemes and smarter management of tourism. Better data on carrying capacity, climate footprint and seasonal patterns will support resilience to environmental and economic disruptions. Arctic universities already offer dedicated education in these fields and should be included in future initiatives. This effort could be aligned with the development of the **European Tourism Data Competence Centre (ETDCC)** and the **European Tourism Data Space**, to ensure that destinations—especially in remote regions—can access and use high-quality data for better decision-making and visitor flow management.

5. Address regulatory gaps in seasonal establishment and commercial use of common lands and conflicts of interest

The EEA establishment rights combined with national rules such as Norway’s “*allemannsretten*”, Sweden’s “*allemannsrätten*” and Finland’s “*jokaisenoikeudet*” create loopholes where foreign operators can establish seasonally without local registration, extract value from nature, and avoid reinvestment in local communities. This undermines the tourism sector and has negative impacts across all three sustainability pillars. The NSPA urge the EU to review these implications and ensure frameworks that safeguard local ownership, responsible practices, and sustainable development.

Furthermore, tourism often overlaps with traditional land-use sectors such as forestry and reindeer husbandry, creating complex land-use conflicts. We encourage the EU to promote systematic conflict management frameworks to balance competing interests and protect Indigenous and rural livelihoods.

6. Invest in infrastructure, accessibility and digital connectivity

Green transport corridors (air, sea, rail, road) and digital infrastructure (broadband, 5G) are prerequisites for sustainable tourism and resilience in remote communities. Improved connectivity also enables e-health, e-learning, remote work, and data-driven tourism. These investments will strengthen social and climate resilience and support diversification of Arctic economies.

7. Ensure cross-border cooperation and long-term financing

Cross-border cooperation can be reinforced through programmes such as Interreg Aurora, Horizon Europe, ERDF, ESF+, and the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme, fostering innovation, youth engagement, and sustainable regional development. At the same time, the strategy should explicitly reference and strengthen these instruments, ensuring long-term and comprehensive financing for implementation and for supporting territorial cooperation networks. These instruments should also be made more flexible and less bureaucratic to lower the threshold for participation by SMEs – particularly micro-enterprises that dominate the Arctic tourism sector – and ensure that funding opportunities are truly accessible.

3. OECD Insights on the European Arctic regions

The OECD's 2025 report *"Navigating Global Transitions in European Arctic Regions"* highlights the shared challenges and opportunities facing the **14 Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA)** in Northern Finland, Sweden, and Norway: demographic decline, aging populations, geographic isolation, and limited infrastructure, which constrain productivity and service delivery. At the same time, these regions hold strong potential for green growth and innovation.

OECD recommendations particularly relevant for this strategy include:

- **Investment in infrastructure, accessibility and digital backbone**, also vital for resilience and security of supply.
- **Tailored SME and DMO support adapted to Arctic conditions**, building on the regions' strong export and GDP growth performance.
- **Stronger Indigenous inclusion and participation** in regional planning, cultural heritage projects, and community-based tourism.
- **Increase investments in research in Arctic tourism** to provide scientific knowledge for the development of a responsible and sustainable tourism sector

- **Education and workforce measures adapted to local conditions**, including remote learning to improve recruitment, retention, and population growth.
- **Reinforced multi-level governance** to improve coordination across municipal, regional, national and cross-border levels is crucial.

These align with our call for Arctic-adapted EU instruments.

4. Examples and Experience

- [Visit Arctic Europe \(VAE\)](#) – An ongoing Interreg project connecting tourism actors in Northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland, focusing on joint marketing, nature-based tourism, improved transport, and global competitiveness. The [Arctic Europe Tourism Cluster \(AETC\)](#) is a part of VAE, working to build regenerative, year-round tourism that benefits businesses, communities, and visitors.
- [RETURN - Regenerative Economic Transfers for Universal Resilience in the North](#) – An ongoing Interreg NPA project that explores innovative models for channeling tourism revenues into local climate adaptation, nature protection, and community resilience.
- The [INCREMENTAL](#) initiative (Interreg Europe) focuses on enhancing cultural competences, regional cooperation, and access to heritage through tailored policy instruments—offering a model for culturally sensitive tourism governance
- [SAINT – Slow Adventure in Northern Territories](#): An earlier Interreg NPA project that aimed to support SMEs in remote northern regions by developing and promoting nature-based, low-impact tourism experiences known as "slow adventure." The project focused on marketing, clustering, and branding to attract high-value visitors, extend tourism seasons, and strengthen sustainable rural economies.

5. Conclusion

We call on the European Commission to ensure that the forthcoming **EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism** fully integrates the perspectives of regions with low population density, vulnerable nature, and strong cultural traditions. This will create stronger local communities and year-round jobs, safeguard nature and cultural heritage, broaden participation in EU programmes and build resilient communities prepared for climate shifts and geopolitical threats. The NSPA regions are ready to contribute expertise, tested models,

and innovative projects to shape a sustainable, regenerative, and inclusive tourism future for all of Europe.

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