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# Supporting Tourism Micro-enterprises and SMEs in their Transition to Circular Economy Practices

## THEMATIC PAPER



*by Community4Tourism*



**NECSTouR**  
European Regions for  
Competitive and Sustainable Tourism



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**Mediterranean  
Action Plan  
Barcelona  
Convention**





This document has been developed in the framework of the Thematic Community Project of the Sustainable Tourism Mission of the Interreg Euro-MED Programme 21-27 (Community4Tourism project) and its activity of the Mediterranean Clusters.

The Mediterranean Clusters are the main project's proposal for the support of the transferring of practices and results to other actors and territories, and their integration into local, regional, national and European policies and strategies, covering the 4 main topics that the Sustainable Tourism Mission integrates: innovation, circular economy, climate change and nature & biodiversity.

This document is the Thematic Paper of the MED Cluster on Supporting Tourism Micro-enterprises and SMEs in their Transition to Circular Economy Practices. It aims to:

- to provide in-depth technical insights and perspective on the selected topic;
- to showcase tools, methodologies and solutions available, considering also the ones developed by the Thematic Projects or other Mediterranean destinations to respond to the mentioned topic;
- to support transferability of project outputs to other stakeholders and destinations;
- While it is not intended as a policy recommendation document, the TP may contribute relevant inputs to future Policy Papers.

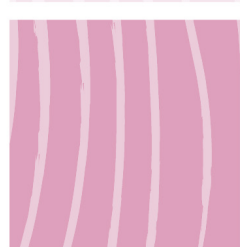
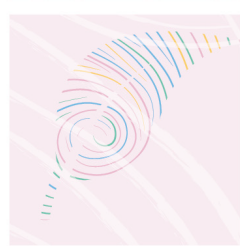
The MED Cluster on Circular Economy is co-coordinated by Barcelona Provincial Council and UNIMED.





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## 1. The challenge: Boosting the circular transition in the Mediterranean tourism business fabric

Tourism has become one of the most influential sectors of the global economy, generating employment, stimulating regional development and producing strong multiplier effects across numerous economic activities (Elgin and Elveren, 2024). According to data reported by the [World Travel & Tourism Council](#) (WTTC, 2025), the sector represents around 10,3% of global GDP, illustrating the scale of its economic relevance and its extensive interconnections with sectors such as accommodation, gastronomy, transport and leisure services. This economic significance is nevertheless accompanied by growing environmental pressures, as tourism activities depend heavily on natural resources such as water, energy, land and raw materials while simultaneously generating substantial volumes of waste and greenhouse gas emissions. In this context, Jaroszewska et al. (2019) underline that the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations increasingly depends on how efficiently these resources are managed, particularly in regions where tourism development intensifies pressure on local environmental systems (Gössling and Scott, 2025).

The Mediterranean is the world's leading tourism region, welcoming around 510 million international arrivals in 2025 according to [UN Tourism](#). However, this economic vitality coexists with a critical reality: the region is a climate change hotspot, warming approximately 20% faster than the global average. These environmental pressures are closely linked to the persistence of a predominantly linear model of production and consumption that continues to shape many tourism activities. As Manniche et al. (2021) explain, although tourism is generally classified as a service-based sector, it depends on substantial flows of physical resources and infrastructure, which leads it to reproduce dynamics like those observed in material-intensive industries. As a result, tourism systems frequently follow the conventional “take–make–dispose” pattern associated with linear economic models. Growing recognition of these impacts has consequently intensified the search for alternative approaches capable of reconciling tourism development with environmental sustainability. Within this context, the circular economy has increasingly been proposed as a relevant framework, promoting regenerative and restorative production systems that seek to retain the value of materials and resources within economic cycles through strategies such as reduction, reuse, repair and recycling (Vargas-Sánchez, 2018).

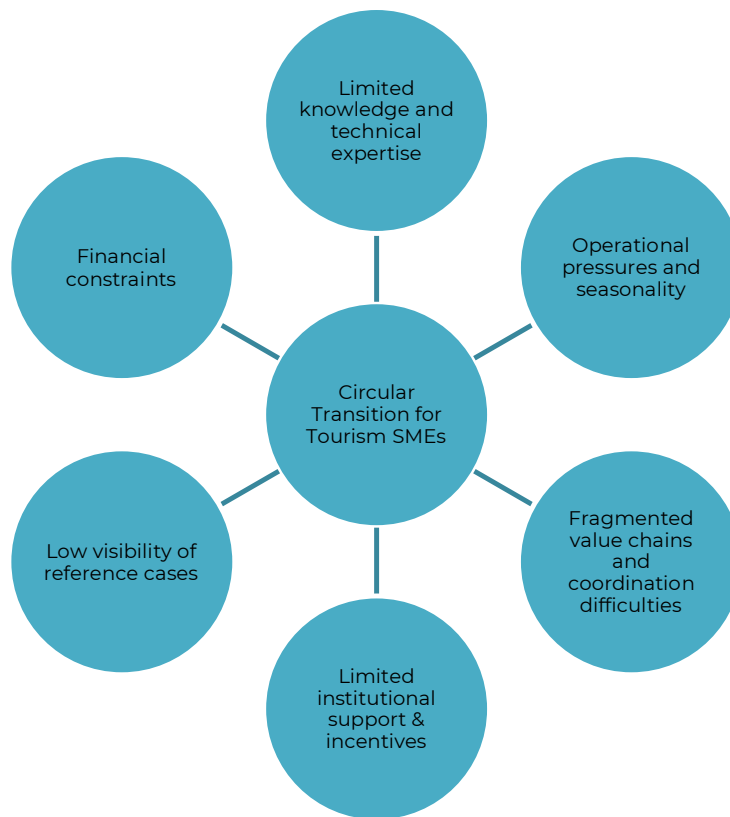




## The weight of micro-enterprises and SMEs

The true challenge for Mediterranean sustainability lies in its business structure. The sector is overwhelmingly composed of small and medium-sized enterprises; for instance, in Spain, SMEs account for more than 96% of tourism-related companies ([Dataestur, 2025](#)). While these businesses are the engine of employment and local development, their transition to circular economy practices faces severe structural barriers:

Figure 1. Key challenges affecting the circular transition of tourism SMEs



Source: own elaboration

### The challenge addressed by this paper is therefore two-fold:

1. How can Mediterranean destinations provide practical and accessible tools for their micro-SMEs to start this transition without compromising their economic viability?
2. How can the results and solutions already tested by the Mediterranean Cluster projects be effectively transferred to the day-to-day operations of hotels, restaurants, and tourism activity providers?





## 2. Operationalizing Circularity in Tourism SMEs

Research indicates that the adoption of circular economy practices in tourism SMEs remains low due to structural barriers such as limited financial resources, a lack of qualified personnel, and insufficient access to information about potential partners. Managerial commitment and organizational constraints also hinder implementation, even when the benefits of circular approaches are recognized. Furthermore, the sector's seasonality and operational volatility complicate long-term strategic decision-making, as companies prioritize immediate adjustments to staffing and supplies over structural sustainability initiatives.

### **Circular economy as a systemic management of the enterprise**

The transition toward circularity requires a gradual transformation through incremental operational adjustments compatible with the financial constraints of SMEs. The starting point is to integrate circular principles into core business management rather than treating them as isolated environmental actions. An initial analysis of water, energy, food, and material flows helps identify inefficiencies and allows for the prioritization of interventions that reduce operational costs while improving environmental performance.

### **The implementation gap**

A persistent gap exists between conceptual frameworks and their effective application in small tourism businesses. Therefore, sectoral manuals emphasize structured processes: assessing current practices, defining a strategic vision, and developing roadmaps adapted to the organizational context. Tools such as [Circular Transition Indicators](#) or [Circulytics](#) offer methodologies to measure performance and evaluate circularity across all organizational operations.

### **A shifting regulatory and market paradigm**

Circularity has moved from being a voluntary option to a necessity for competitiveness and regulatory compliance. Although tourism policies have traditionally prioritized growth, European advancements such as the Green Deal, mandatory ESG reporting, and the [Digital Product Passport](#) are shifting this landscape. New regulations, such as EU [packaging restrictions](#) for 2030 and Spain's Law 1/2025 on food waste, establish binding targets that link circularity directly to market positioning and access to finance.





## Initial involvement

Establishing a baseline through indicators—such as energy consumption per room or the volume of food waste—allows companies to identify resource-heavy areas and inefficiencies. This diagnostic stage provides the foundation for measurable action plans and realistic improvement targets that guide the progressive implementation of circular initiatives.

## Water and energy management

Resource efficiency offers immediate environmental and economic benefits. SMEs can implement low-flow technologies and LED systems, while preventive maintenance programs are essential for detecting leaks and preventing losses from faulty equipment. Adjusting climate control schedules based on occupancy and improving insulation are simple and effective entry points for circularity.

## Waste management and prevention

Circular practices address waste by replacing single-use items with reusable alternatives, such as refillable hygiene dispensers or durable service materials. These adjustments reduce both waste generation and procurement costs for consumables. Destination-level coordination can support these changes through refill networks and common supplier agreements.

## Food systems

Food waste often reflects inefficiencies in procurement planning and portion sizes; reducing it requires systematic inventory management and demand forecasting. Menu adjustments and recipes that utilize surpluses significantly reduce kitchen waste. Local and seasonal sourcing strengthens short supply chains and aligns with regulatory frameworks such as those in the Balearic Islands. Partnerships for redistribution and composting close the nutrient cycle.

## Life extension

Prioritizing durable and repairable equipment, along with regular maintenance programs, reduces material consumption and long-term procurement costs. This recommendation can be operationalized through local repair networks, supplier take-back agreements, or shared equipment pools for seasonal use.

## Staff involvement

Employee routines directly influence resource consumption, so integrating sustainability into training ensures that operational guidelines are applied consistently. Internal communication strategies reinforce this commitment by highlighting the environmental and economic benefits associated with circular practices.





### Customer engagement

Visitors influence consumption through their behaviour during their stay. Providing clear information on responsible practices—such as minimizing towel replacement or food waste—reinforces the effectiveness of company initiatives and responds to the growing demand for responsible tourism experiences.

### Digitization

Digital tools provide operational data for informed decision-making, while booking systems and paperless procedures reduce material use. Dashboards and indicator templates help SMEs monitor their progress and communicate their actions in a credible way.

### Public-private partnerships

Collaboration within destinations—through shared waste recovery systems or joint procurement schemes—allows SMEs to achieve economies of scale. Participation in destination-level sustainability programs facilitates knowledge exchange and provides access to technical expertise that is often difficult to obtain independently.





### 3. Policy Frameworks and Economic Drivers for Circular Tourism

The transition to a circular economy in the Mediterranean tourism sector is supported by a robust and evolving multi-level governance framework. For tourism SMEs, understanding this context is vital, as it defines the “rules of the game”—from mandatory regulations on waste to new opportunities for sustainable financing.

#### 3.1. European Strategic Framework

The [European Green Deal](#) serves as the primary roadmap for making the EU’s economy sustainable. Under this umbrella, several key initiatives directly influence the tourism ecosystem:

- [Circular Economy Action Plan \(CEAP\)](#): This plan targets the entire life cycle of products, focusing on design and production with the goal of ensuring that resources are kept in the EU economy for as long as possible.
- [EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism](#): Currently under development, this strategy aims to support the green and digital transition of the tourism ecosystem, emphasizing the need for resource-efficient services and infrastructure.
- [Transition Pathway for Tourism](#): Co-created by the European Commission and stakeholders, this document outlines the specific steps needed to achieve a more resilient and circular tourism sector by 2030.

#### 3.2. Emerging Regulatory Trends and Compliance for SMEs (2026-2030)

The regulatory landscape is shifting from general guidelines to binding requirements. The [Basque Ecodesign Center](#) identifies several critical trends for 2026 that tourism SMEs must anticipate:

- [Digital Product Passport \(DPP\)](#): A tool to provide information about a product’s environmental sustainability, facilitating repair and recycling.
- [Mandatory ESG Reporting](#): While initially for large firms, voluntary [Environmental, Social, and Governance \(ESG\)](#) information is becoming increasingly relevant for SMEs to maintain their position in supply chains and access finance.
- [HORECA Packaging Ban \(2030\)](#): New EU regulations will prohibit single-use packaging for food and beverages consumed on-site in hotels, restaurants, and cafés, forcing a systemic shift toward reusable systems.
- [Food Waste Legislation](#): Regulations like [Spain’s Law 1/2025](#) on food waste prevention require operators to prioritize the donation of surplus food and adopt formal prevention plans.





### 3.3. The Mediterranean Regional Context

The Mediterranean basin requires specific governance due to its unique environmental vulnerabilities.

- **The Barcelona Convention**: Through the **Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) Protocol**, it promotes ecosystem-based planning that integrates tourism into coastal protection.
- **Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD)**: A regional roadmap that explicitly links circular economy practices with the protection of the Mediterranean's biodiversity and the resilience of its tourism-dependent economies.
- **MedECC Reports**: Scientific assessments highlighting that the Mediterranean is warming 20% faster than the global average, which serves as a critical driver for urgent circularity in water and energy management.

### 3.4. Financing the Transition: Instruments and Opportunities

As requested by stakeholders, identifying pathways to fund circularity is essential for micro-enterprises with limited capital.

- **EU Funding Instruments**: Programs like **Interreg Euro-MED** and **LIFE** provide support for testing and replicating circular solutions in tourism destinations.
- **Sustainable Finance and Green Taxation**: Emerging financial models are increasingly linking interest rates and credit access to a business's environmental performance. Green taxes on waste or carbon can also serve as incentives for SMEs to adopt resource-efficient practices.
- **Innovative Financing Models**: Beyond traditional bank loans, **reward-based crowdfunding** has emerged as a viable tool for tourism SMEs to finance circular solutions by engaging directly with conscious consumers.
- **National and Regional Grants**: Many Mediterranean regions offer small-scale subsidies or "vouchers" for energy audits, water-saving devices, and the digitalization of resource monitoring.





## 4. The Cluster Proposals: Solutions and Tools from Thematic Projects

This section presents a selection of tools and methodologies developed by the Thematic Projects of the MED Cluster on Circular Economy under the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission. These solutions are designed either to directly support tourism SMEs or to strengthen the enabling environment required for their transition towards circular economy practices.

### Sustainability Protocol for SMEs Accommodation and Self-Assessment Tool

Project  
MAST

**Category:** Methodology / Management tool / Certification support

**Maturity:** Finalised (2023 - 2026)

**Target users:** Tourism SMEs, public authorities, destination managers, Mediterranean regions

**Keywords:** ISO 21401 – Self-assessment – Sustainable management – Certification – SMEs

### The solution at a glance

The MAST solution consists of a structured self-assessment tool and sustainability protocol based on the ISO 21401:2018 standard, designed to support tourism SMEs in evaluating their sustainability performance and progressively adopting responsible management systems.

It translates a complex international certification framework into a practical, accessible and step-by-step diagnostic instrument, enabling businesses and destinations to identify gaps, prioritise actions, and align their operations with recognised sustainability standards

### Why this solution matters

Tourism SMEs represent the backbone of the Mediterranean tourism ecosystem, yet they often face significant barriers in accessing and implementing sustainability and certification frameworks, such as limited technical capacity, lack of resources, and complexity of standards.

The MAST solution directly addresses this gap by providing





an **operational entry point into sustainability management**, allowing SMEs and destinations to:

- assess their current sustainability performance in a structured and standardised way;
- bridge the gap between theory (ISO standards) and daily business practices;
- prioritise feasible actions adapted to their operational and financial capacity;
- move progressively towards certification and improved market positioning;
- strengthen alignment between private sector practices and destination sustainability strategies.

By simplifying access to internationally recognised frameworks, the tool contributes to **scaling up sustainable practices across the Mediterranean tourism system**.

### How it works on the ground

The MAST approach follows a practical and gradual implementation process focused on usability for SMEs and replicability at destination level:

- **Translation of ISO 21401 requirements** into a simplified and operational assessment framework tailored to tourism SMEs.
- **Development of a digital self-assessment tool**, enabling businesses to diagnose their sustainability performance across key areas (environmental management, governance, operations, etc.).
- **Generation of tailored outputs and strategic guidelines**, supporting companies and destinations in developing improvement roadmaps.
- **Dissemination and transfer** across Mediterranean regions through project partners and cluster networks.

At destination level, the tool can also support collective diagnosis exercises, enabling public authorities and DMOs to better understand the maturity of their business fabric and design targeted support measures.

### Key success factors

- Accessibility and simplification of complex standards, making ISO-based approaches usable for SMEs.
- Practical orientation, focusing on actionable outputs rather than theoretical compliance.





- Applicable at both company and destination level.
- Alignment with recognised certification frameworks, increasing credibility and transferability.
- Transnational collaboration, supporting adaptation and uptake across different Mediterranean contexts.

### Learn more

- [MAST Website](#)
- **Catalogue of solutions:** [Sustainability Protocol for SMEs Accommodation](#) and a Sustainability Self-Assessment tool
- **Contact:** University of Urbino Carlo Bo - UNIURB

## Transnational Strategy for Circular and Sustainable Tourism through Eco-Itineraries

Project MED-Routes

**Category:** Methodological framework / Strategy / Governance model

**Maturity:** In progress (2024–2027)

**Target users:** Destination managers, Cultural Routes, public authorities, tourism SMEs, local communities

**Keywords:** Eco-itineraries – Cultural routes – Circular tourism – Stakeholder co-creation – Green Label

### The solution at a glance

The MED-Routes Transnational Strategy provides a structured framework to develop eco-itineraries that integrate sustainability and circular economy principles into tourism activities. It combines a methodology for eco-itinerary creation, a set of sustainable and circular practices and tools for implementation, promotion and replication of the strategy. The strategy builds on outputs from previous projects (INCIRCLE and EMBLEMATIC) to support the application of circular economy principles in tourism, through practical guidelines and operational tools.

### Why this solution matters

The strategy identifies key challenges in Mediterranean tourism, particularly the strong concentration of tourism flows and the limited development and visibility of small-scale sustainable tourism models. It highlights the need to promote tourism models that reduce impact while supporting local economies and communities.





The MED-Routes strategy positions eco-itineraries as a practical approach to applying circular economy principles in tourism, connecting environmental practices, cultural heritage and local economic activities within a coherent and place-based framework.

### How it works on the ground

The MED-Routes approach is implemented through a structured process that combines the design of eco-itineraries with the application of shared sustainability and circular economy criteria, supported by a set of methodological guidelines and operational tools adapted from previous projects.

At territorial level, implementation is driven by collaboration among local stakeholders and reinforced by mechanisms such as certification and monitoring, which support the consistent application of these practices and enable their transfer to other contexts across the Mediterranean

### Key success factors

- Strong stakeholder involvement and co-creation processes with local stakeholders.
- Introduction of a Green Label certification to support adoption and visibility of the itineraries.
- Focus on replication and transfer across Mediterranean destinations and transnational visibility of the routes.
- Incorporation of existing circular economy knowledge (INCIRCLE).

### Learn more

- [MED-Routes Website](#)
- **Catalogue of solutions:** Mediterranean eco-itinerary guides:  
[Package for sustainable practices and eco-itineraries in Mediterranean Cultural Routes](#)  
[Transnational Strategy for sustainable tourism and eco-itineraries in the MED area](#)
- **Contact:** Unione Romagna Faentina (Italy) / Cultural Routes Network [benedetta.diamanti@romagnafaentina.it](mailto:benedetta.diamanti@romagnafaentina.it)





## 3-pillar action model for reducing single-use plastics on Mediterranean islands

Project Loop Zone

**Category:** Circular economy / Waste prevention / Systemic model

**Maturity:** In progress (2025 – 2029)

**Target users:** Public authorities, tourism SMEs (HORECA), local stakeholders, island communities

**Keywords:** Single-use plastics – Low Plastic Zones – Circular economy – Islands – Local action plans

### The solution at a glance: Creation

Loop Zone will develop and test a structured 3-pillar action model to support Mediterranean islands with high tourism dependency in reducing single-use plastics (SUPs) and transitioning towards a circular tourism economy. The model is implemented through the creation of low-plastic consumption zones, where public authorities, tourism businesses and local stakeholders collaborate to prevent SUPs, supported by tools, guidelines and a one-stop-shop platform that enables transfer and replication.

### Why this solution matters

Mediterranean islands are facing an increasing plastic waste challenge driven by tourism pressure, with more than 200 million visitors each year and single-use plastics accounting for over 60% of marine litter. At the same time, local waste management systems often struggle to cope with strong seasonal peaks, which exacerbates the problem. There is a need to adopt approaches that reduce waste generation at source while supporting circular systems at destination level. Loop Zone focuses on the tourism sector—particularly the HORECA industry—as a key lever to reduce plastic consumption and enable systemic change

### How it works on the ground

The Loop Zone model is built on a 3-pillar approach combining policy, business support and innovation. Local public authorities develop and implement Local Action Plans, supported by technical policy guidelines that help align local measures with national and regional frameworks for reducing single-use plastics. At the same time, tourism businesses are supported in assessing their plastic use and adopting reusable alternatives.





The model is tested in pilot islands (Formentera, Salina, Gozo, Vis, and Skiathos) and transferred to other territories through a cross-border island network and a one-stop-shop digital platform.

### Key success factors: Gradual

- Strong involvement of local administrations through Local Action Plans.
- Focus on tourism SMEs as key actors in reducing SUP use.
- Creation of a digital platform for knowledge transfer and scaling to other islands regions.

### Learn more

- [LooP Zone Website](#)
- **Catalogue of solutions:** Low Plastic Zones implementation manual (to be published).
- **Contact:** Waste Agency of Catalonia - MedWaves. Ignasi Mateo imateo@gencat.cat

## Blueprint for Blue Action Plans for Circular Tourism

Project  
RECIRCLE MED

**Category:** circular and blue tourism

**Maturity:** Initial phase (2025–2028)

**Target users:** Public authorities, destination managers, private sector and business support organisations

**Keywords:** Circular tourism – Blue economy – Assessment tool – Action planning – Governance

### The solution at a glance

The Blueprint is an innovative supporting guide for tourism destinations to create their own “Blue Action Plans for Circular Tourism”, that balances the needs of visitors, residents, businesses, and nature. Instead of one-size-fits-all rules, the Blueprint allows each territory to adapt its plan to its unique challenges and opportunities.





## Why this solution matters

The RECIRCLE MED Blueprint offers Mediterranean destinations a powerful set of tools to reimagine tourism for the future. More than a plan, it serves as a practical guide, adaptable toolkit, and source of inspiration, helping territories set tailored goals and transition toward sustainable, circular, and blue tourism models.

## How it works on the ground

The Blueprint's outcomes directly feed into the development of the Blue Action Plans, helping destinations to: address weaknesses and identify new opportunities through evidence-based analysis, Introduce improved measures that support the shift toward circular and blue tourism systems and establish clear SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) objectives that ensure realistic, measurable, and impactful results.

## Key success factors

It optimises resources, reduces environmental impacts and enhances long-term community benefits. It offers a clear pathway for Mediterranean regions to turn challenges into opportunities—making tourism more enjoyable for visitors, more rewarding for local communities, and more respectful of the environment.

## Learn more

- [RECIRCLE MED Website](#)
- **Catalogue of solutions** Circular economy strategies for tourism
- **Contact:** Spiros Niavis, [spniavis@uth.gr](mailto:spniavis@uth.gr) University of Thessaly-Department of Planning and Regional Development





## MED Sustainable Service Innovation Methodology (MEDSSIM)

Project  
GreenSET

**Category:** Circular economy / Innovation / Digital and green transformation

**Maturity:** Initial phase (2025 - 2028)

**Target users:** Tourism SMEs, Business Support Organisations (BSOs), local and regional authorities

**Keywords:** Circular transformation – Service innovation – SMEs – MEDSSIM – Competitiveness

### The solution at a glance

GreenSET equips Business Support Organisations (BSOs) with tools, training, and the MEDSSIM methodology to help SMEs adopt sustainable and competitive practices.

The MED Sustainable Service Innovation Methodology (MEDSSIM) works as a standardized and scalable approach designed to support the circular transformation of tourism services. It combines methodology, practical tools, capacity-building resources, a best practices library and a certification scheme, enabling the development and improvement of more sustainable and competitive tourism services.

### Why this solution matters

Tourism SMEs face increasing pressure to respond to resource-efficiency challenges and the growing demand for sustainable services, while often lacking the capacities and structured support needed to implement these transformations. At the same time, BSOs require stronger tools and methodologies to effectively guide SMEs. GreenSET addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive framework that equips BSOs to support SMEs in adopting more sustainable and competitive tourism services.

### How it works on the ground

GreenSET uses the newly developed MEDSSIM methodology & innovation tools, which guides SMEs in redesigning existing tourism services or developing new ones with a stronger focus on sustainability. This process is supported by BSOs, which





are equipped with training, tools and resources to apply the methodology and accompany SMEs in their transformation. The approach is reinforced by a system that includes a best practices library, a certification scheme and continuous capacity-building actions, as well as collaboration with public authorities and stakeholders.

### Key success factors

- Strengthening of BSOs as key intermediaries in supporting SMEs transformation.
- Development of a standardised methodology (MEDSSIM) for circular service innovation.
- Provision of a comprehensive support framework (tools, training, best practices, certification).

### Learn more

- [GreenSET Website](#)
- **Catalogue of solutions** [MEDSSIM methodology and toolbox](#) for the development of sustainable tourism services.
- **Contact:** STEP RI Science and Technology Park of the University of Rijeka [greensset@uniri.hr](mailto:greensset@uniri.hr)





## 5. Transferable Practices and Recommendations: The Destination-Level Support Framework

The most significant takeaway from the work of the MED Cluster on Circular Economy is that **SMEs cannot become circular in isolation**. Their success is intrinsically linked to the support structures provided at the destination level by DMOs and public administrations.

The analysis developed throughout this thematic paper indicates that advancing circular economy practices within tourism SMEs requires a **pragmatic and operationally grounded approach**. Structural constraints, including limited financial capacity, reduced managerial resources and the operational intensity of tourism services, frequently restrict the ability of small businesses to undertake large-scale sustainability transformations. Under these conditions, circular strategies tend to be more effective when they are introduced through **progressive adjustments** that become embedded within everyday management routines and operational practices.

Accordingly, the following recommendations focus on practical actions that tourism SMEs can realistically implement to strengthen resource efficiency, reduce environmental impacts and gradually integrate circular principles into their business models. At the same time, **these recommendations should be understood within a destination-level support framework**, since the effective adoption of circular practices by SMEs often depends on the availability of technical guidance, financial support, shared infrastructure and coordination mechanisms provided by public administrations and destination management organizations. From this perspective, the recommendations are presented as **transferable areas of intervention** that can be adapted to different Mediterranean tourism destinations.

### 1. Diagnosis and smart monitoring

Before acting, it is essential to understand resource flows to base decisions on reliable data.

- **Baseline and KPIs:** Establish consumption indicators (water/energy per guest) and waste volumes and composition to identify critical areas.
- **Digitalization:** Implement real-time monitoring tools and paperless processes to immediately detect leaks and operational inefficiencies. Data collection (environmental, economic and social (ie. organisations involved) from the measures implemented. Planning which measures, how and when are going to be implemented.





## 2. Technical resource optimization (Water and Energy)

Operational efficiency is the most accessible and cost-effective entry point.

- **Advanced water management:** Go beyond basic savings (low-flow taps) by incorporating resource recovery, such as rainwater harvesting or greywater treatment (phytopurification) for non-potable uses.
- **Energy efficiency and decarbonization:** Combine structural upgrades (LED, insulation, sensors) with smart planning to adjust climate control and lighting based on real-time occupancy.

## 3. Food model transformation

Redesign the gastronomic offering to minimize waste and support the local environment.

- **Service redesign:** Consider shifting from buffet formats to plated service to drastically reduce food waste per guest.
- **Product management:** Adopt a “root-to-stalk” philosophy and align procurement with the seasonality of local suppliers.
- **Closing the loop:** Redistribute food surpluses and transform organic waste into compost to return nutrients to the local soil.

## 4. Material circularity and supplies

Extend product lifespans and eliminate the concept of “waste.”

- **Eliminating single-use items:** Replace disposable consumables (amenities, packaging) with refillable systems and reusable packaging or products. Also, for food and cleaning products, where reusable options are not available, prioritize large-capacity containers and concentrated products to reduce packaging waste.
- **Repair culture:** Prioritize the purchase of durable and repairable equipment, establishing preventive maintenance programs to avoid premature replacements. When replacement is needed, prioritize donations to organizations that prepare equipment for reuse.

## 5. The human factor: Engagement and governance

No technology is effective without the involvement of people.

- **Organizational culture:** Train staff not only in technical tasks but also in the core purpose of circularity so they can apply it to their daily routines (housekeeping, kitchen, maintenance).





- **Guest communication:** Provide transparent information to guests so their behaviour (towel reuse, conscious consumption) aligns with the establishment’s strategy.
- **Destination synergies:** Participate in joint procurement networks and shared waste management systems to achieve economies of scale.

### 5.1. Operational and Transferable Circular Practices

This section provides a structured overview of the practical pathways for circularity within tourism SMEs. By focusing on resource efficiency and operational adjustments, small businesses can achieve direct economic benefits while reducing their environmental footprint.

To make these recommendations more operational and transferable, Table 1 summarizes concrete circular practices that tourism SMEs can progressively implement, together with the type of destination-level support required to facilitate their adoption. In this way, the table also identifies the conditions that enable these practices to be replicated in other Mediterranean tourism contexts, including common indicators, accessible suppliers, shared services, staff training and coordination by destinations and public administrations.

The table synthesizes the core operational areas where SMEs can implement circular practices, ranging from immediate technological fixes to deeper strategic shifts.

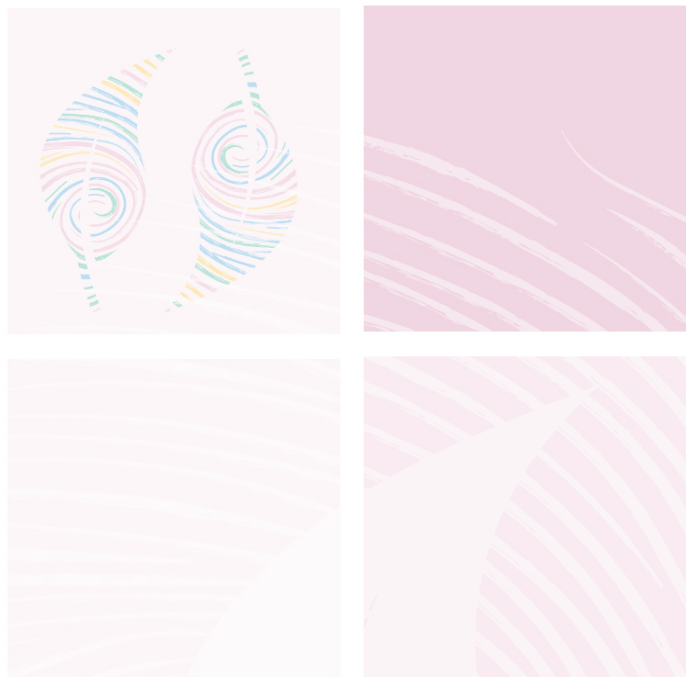




Table 1: Circular Economy Implementation Measures

Intervention Area	Circular Challenge Identified	Specific Practices for SMEs	Expected Impact	Destination-Level Support (DMO/Admin)	Conditions for Replicability
1. Diagnosis, Planning & Digital Monitoring	Lack of precise data on resource use and operational priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Track monthly consumption (water, energy) and waste (total and food).</li> <li>Use indicators: water/guest, energy/room, waste/meal.</li> <li>Implement digital menus and simple dashboards.</li> </ul>	Improved operational transparency and early detection of inefficiencies through real-time data.	Provide checklists, indicator templates, and short advisory sessions.	Common indicators, simple templates, and staff assigned to data collection.
2. Water Efficiency (Water Management)	High water use, undetected leaks, and inefficient irrigation systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Install aerators, low-flow taps/showers, and dual-flush toilets.</li> <li>Weekly meter checks for leak detection.</li> <li>Use drip irrigation and greywater/rainwater recovery.</li> </ul>	Immediate reduction in consumption and savings on supply and treatment costs.	Offer water audits, small grants for devices, and guidance on rainwater use.	Affordable devices, clear local rules, and basic maintenance routines.
3. Energy Efficiency (Energy Management)	High costs from lighting, HVAC, and laundry equipment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Switch to LED lighting and motion sensors.</li> <li>Install programmable thermostats and improve insulation.</li> <li>Schedule high-demand equipment uses for off-peak hours.</li> </ul>	Significant lowering of utility costs and carbon emissions.	Support energy audits, joint purchasing of efficient equipment, and renewables guidance.	Technical advice, financing for initial investment, and staff commitment to routines.
4. Food Systems & Waste Prevention	Over production, buffet waste, and inefficient inventory management.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transition from buffet to plated service.</li> <li>Use smaller plates/trays to nudge behaviour.</li> <li>"Nose-to-tail" cooking and dynamic menus based on local seasonal availability.</li> </ul>	Drastic reduction in food waste per guest and lower procurement costs.	Coordinate donation agreements, local composting, and inventory management training.	Clear food safety guidance, donation partners, and organic waste collection.
5. Material Management & Circular Procurement	Reliance on short-life products, single-use packaging, and lack of durability criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Replace mini amenities with refillable dispensers.</li> <li>Remove single-use plastics and adopt reusable packaging.</li> <li>Integrate durability, reparability, and recycled content into purchasing.</li> </ul>	Reduced waste volume and extension of the lifespan of business assets.	Create "green supplier" directories, refill networks, and circular procurement guidelines.	Verified suppliers, standard green clauses, and collective purchasing groups.





<p><b>6. Visitor Experience, Mobility &amp; Engagement</b></p>	<p>Visitor concentration, high transport footprint, and low visibility of good practices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design itineraries outside congested areas using local providers.</li> <li>• Promote electric mobility, cycling, and public transport.</li> <li>• Active guest communication on responsible resource use.</li> </ul>	<p>Diversified tourism flows, retention of value in the local community, and enhanced brand image.</p>	<p>Support mobility hubs (e-bikes), multi-lingual signage, and awareness campaigns.</p>	<p>Mapped local providers, safe routes, and official destination promotion channels.</p>
<p><b>7. Transformation of services and business models in tourism</b></p>	<p>Limited long-term business sustainability of circular and sustainability-driven initiatives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce business-driven and commercially validated circular and sustainable service transformations.</li> <li>• Apply best practices and validated sustainable service patterns.</li> <li>• Use support from the MED-wide network of experts and BSOs to create sustainable service innovation.</li> </ul>	<p>Increased capacity of BSOs to support circular service innovation, and increased uptake by SMEs of new or improved services.</p>	<p>Facilitate cooperation between SMEs, BSOs, experts, and local stakeholders to test, validate, and scale circular and sustainable service transformations.</p>	<p>Access to MED academy, trained and certified experts from BSOs, validated methodology, engaged SMEs, and comparable destination-level sustainability challenges</p>





## 5.2. Success Stories: Circular Pioneers in the Mediterranean

To facilitate the transfer of knowledge, these real-world examples illustrate how SMEs have successfully navigated the circular transition.

### Circular Economy applied to the tourism sector (SEGITTUR)

This initiative represents a strategic consultancy and tourism sustainability project aimed at tourism destination managers, industry SMEs, and public administrations. Active and consolidated since its inception in 2019, with recent updates in 2025, the solution focuses on key roadmaps, technical manuals, best practices, and sustainable competitiveness. At a glance, it offers a comprehensive proposal to drive the transition of tourism toward a circular model through the publication of specific manuals for destinations and companies, best practice guides, and self-diagnostic tools. This solution matters because it allows destinations and businesses to optimize resource use, reduce operating costs, and align with the requirements of the European Green Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals. On the ground, it operates via a three-phase methodology that includes the introduction of concepts, the analysis of the current situation, and the development of a roadmap with concrete actions such as improving energy efficiency and waste reduction. The key success factors include the active participation of all stakeholders in the value chain, the application of over 30 documented real success cases, and seamless integration into the Smart Tourism Destination model. Further resources include SEGITTUR manuals and guides on sustainability and circular economy, accessible via their [website](#). A dedicated catalogue of solutions provides a best practice guide with 30 case studies from destinations and companies. The primary contact is SEGITTUR (State Mercantile Society for the Management of Innovation and Tourism Technologies).

### Finhava (Mallorca)

Finhava is a technological platform designed for the promotion of the circular economy, focusing on waste management and local agriculture. It targets Mallorca hotels, local farmers, waste managers, and responsible tourists. Having achieved effective implementation, the project has been fully operational following the 2018 “Circular Hotels” initiative, prioritizing traceability, blockchain, organic waste, composting, and zero-kilometre principles. At a glance, this technological platform utilizes blockchain technology and 5G connectivity to close the food cycle on the island, directly connecting hotel consumption with local agricultural production. The solution is crucial as it achieves





a drastic reduction in hotel food waste and its transformation into a valuable resource (compost) for the island's own soil. On the ground, it works as a four-step cycle: hotels purchase local vegetables; they separate organic matter using smart containers; the waste is transformed into organic fertilizer at the Tirme plants; and this is ultimately returned to farmers for their crops. Key success factors rely on guaranteeing traceability through secure digital records, the direct involvement of the public waste company, and providing an immediate economic return to the local agricultural sector. Detailed information on this circular economy project in Mallorca promoted by Tirme can be found on their [website](#). The catalogue of solutions features a closed-cycle model for organic waste management in island environments. The primary contacts are Tirme (Majorca Waste Management) and Circulare.

### Plastic Busters MPAs: Reusable Cup System for Coastal SMEs

Categorized under material circularity and waste prevention, this initiative targets beach bars (chiringuitos), restaurants, and local waste authorities. The core tool consists of a managed reusable cup system designed for sensitive coastal areas. In practice, instead of purchasing single-use plastics, participating businesses enter a closed-loop system. Used cups are collected, industrially washed, sanitized, and redistributed to the establishments for reuse. The primary SME benefits include reduced waste management costs, guaranteed compliance with emerging EU single-use plastic regulations, and an enhanced business image among eco-conscious visitors. The model shows high transferability in coastal areas, where single-use plastics and packaging account for up to 80% of marine waste, threatening ecosystems due to their non-biodegradable nature. Under this model, customers pay a one-euro deposit for their cup, which is refunded upon its return, giving the object an immediate perceived value that prevents littering while covering the business's costs if kept as a souvenir. Successful implementations include Barcelona's Residu Zero initiative, the Ebro Delta's participation in the [European Plastic Buster MPA project](#)—where a local non-profit employing people with intellectual disabilities handles the washing—and eleven beach bars along the Orihuela Costa in Alicante. Other prominent venues in Huelva, Girona, and Cádiz have also successfully adopted this practice. Ultimately, the true ecological value of the initiative relies on an industrial washing and recycling cycle, provided by companies like Ecofestes, which ensures the cups can be reused safely multiple times to minimize the environmental footprint.





### **Integrated Resource Autonomy (Can Buch, Spain)**

Located in Girona, this [rural hotel](#) case study exemplifies closed-loop management by successfully combining water, energy, and food systems. Water management is handled via rainwater harvesting, natural filtration, and greywater treatment through phyto-purification. Energy resilience is achieved through a combination of photovoltaic energy and biomass-based heating. Food sustainability relies on a strict farm-to-table model where organic remains are systematically composted and returned to the soil.

### **Innovation in Water Scarcity (Hotel La Badira, Tunisia)**

Addressing acute water stress, this establishment utilizes atmospheric water generators ([kumulus-1](#)) to produce drinking water directly from ambient humidity. This solution significantly reduces the hotel's reliance on bottled water and eliminates the transport emissions typically associated with traditional supply chains.

### **Zero-Waste Gastronomy (A Cozinha, Portugal)**

Acknowledged by the [Mission Zero Academy](#), this [restaurant](#) operates on a strict circular model defined by three pillars: digital monitoring, waste transformation, and a plastic-free environment. Digital monitoring utilizes real-time waste tracking to optimize inventory, while waste transformation focuses on turning culinary scraps into high-end gastronomic resources. The establishment operates completely plastic-free, achieving the total elimination of single-use plastics in a fine-dining setting.

### **Employee engagement and culture at Seminaris Hotels**

The success of circular initiatives heavily depends on cross-cutting enablers like employee engagement and culture, which ensure that sustainable practices are deeply embedded into daily organizational routines. A critical component of this framework is targeted staff training, exemplified by specific programs implemented at [Seminaris Hotels](#) that focus on food waste reduction and resource-saving kitchen practices. To complement these educational efforts, structured incentive systems are utilized to actively involve employees in meeting sustainability goals, effectively fostering a workplace culture driven by continuous environmental improvement.

### **Visitor awareness and active participation through CopenPay**

Visitor awareness and active participation serve as a vital engine for sustainability, as the behaviour of guests directly influences the effectiveness of onsite circular measures. By treating visitors as active participants in the circular cycle rather than passive consumers, destinations can drive behavioural change





through strategic nudging, such as providing clear information near showers, bins, and buffets to encourage responsible resource use. This engagement is further amplified through innovative reward frameworks like the [CopenPay](#) initiative, which incentivizes sustainable behaviours by rewarding visitors for actions such as cycling or participating in local clean-ups, successfully transforming them into proactive contributors to the destination's ecosystem.

### 5.3. Strategic Recommendations for Destination Managers

To accelerate the scaling of these solutions, the work developed within the **MED Cluster on Circular Economy**, through the tools and solutions generated by its Thematic Projects, highlights the following strategic pillars:

- 1. Integrated Governance:** Move beyond fragmented policies by fostering coordinated action across tourism, water, waste and other relevant sectors. Institutional alignment is essential to ensure that circular SMEs operate within a supportive regulatory environment.
- 2. Participatory Platforms:** Promote the use of **Living Labs** or **Territorial Working Groups** to co-design solutions with local stakeholders. This ensures that the tools developed meet the daily operational needs of small businesses, increasing their feasibility, adoption and long-term impact.
- 3. Capacity Building:** Knowledge transfer is the greatest barrier. Destinations should provide targeted and role-specific training equipping workers at all levels (e.g., for housekeeping, kitchen, management) with the skills needed to embed circularity into daily routines and operations.
- 4. Targeted Funding:** Beyond general subsidies, funding should be strategically directed towards the implementation, scaling and replication of solutions developed within European cooperation projects, such as the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission. By building on tested results and engaging directly with local stakeholders, this approach strengthens the territorial impact of these initiatives and accelerates the transition towards circular tourism models, as demonstrated by pilots such as the Plastic Busters reusable system.





## 6. Conclusions

The growing environmental pressure from tourism has made it necessary to shift from the traditional linear “take-make-dispose” model **toward a circular economy model**. As a resource-intensive sector reliant on water, energy, and land, tourism must embrace circularity not only as an environmental necessity but as a **strategic opportunity to build long-term resilience** for destinations and businesses alike.

Within this transition, **tourism SMEs play a pivotal role**. Although they represent the majority of the industry and manage the daily resource flows that shape its environmental footprint, they often face structural barriers such as limited access to finance, restricted managerial capacity and fragmented supply chains. Despite these challenges, circularity can be integrated progressively through practical, day-to-day management rather than radical technological shifts. Simple actions focused on **resource efficiency, waste prevention, and extending material lifespans** can significantly lower environmental impacts while providing immediate economic incentives through reduced operational costs.

This transition is inherently gradual and adaptive. SMEs typically begin with incremental improvements in areas like water saving, energy efficiency, and the elimination of single-use plastics. As benefits become visible, these principles expand into procurement policies and service design. However, the success of such initiatives depends heavily on the human factor. **Engagement from both business owners and staff is critical**, as daily routines in housekeeping or food preparation directly influence resource management. Similarly, educating visitors about responsible behaviour helps align guest consumption with the establishment’s sustainability goals.

Ultimately, **circularity must go beyond individual enterprises and be addressed at the destination level**. Since SMEs operate within complex networks, collaboration through shared waste systems or joint procurement is essential to achieve economies of scale. Supported by coherent institutional policies, practical guidance, and knowledge-sharing networks, this **collaborative approach enables circular practices to be embedded within the broader local ecosystem and across the destination**, contributing to a more sustainable and resilient tourism system.





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This document has been developed in the framework of the Thematic Community Project of the Sustainable Tourism Mission of the Interreg Euro-MED Programme 21-27 (Community4Tourism project) and its activity of the Mediterranean Clusters.

The Mediterranean Clusters are the main project's proposal for the support of the transferring of practices and results to other actors and territories, and their integration into local, regional, national and European policies and strategies, covering the 4 main topics that the Sustainable Tourism Mission integrates: innovation, circular economy, climate change and nature & biodiversity.

This document is the Thematic Paper of the MED Cluster on Supporting Tourism Micro-enterprises and SMEs in their Transition to Circular Economy Practices. It aims to:

- to provide in-depth technical insights and perspective on the selected topic;
- to showcase tools, methodologies and solutions available, considering also the ones developed by the Thematic Projects or other Mediterranean destinations to respond to the mentioned topic;
- to support transferability of project outputs to other stakeholders and destinations;
- While it is not intended as a policy recommendation document, the TP may contribute relevant inputs to future Policy Papers.

The MED Cluster on Circular Economy is co-coordinated by Barcelona Provincial Council and UNIMED.

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