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Blue and Circular Tourism in the Mediterranean - The RECIRCLE MED Blueprint





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RECIRCLE MED Blueprint for Blue Action Plans for Circular Tourism Executive Summary

Blueprint Responsible:

The Energy and Water Agency (EWA) & Association of the Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASCAME)

Partners Involved:

University of Thessaly (UTH), Municipality of Cefalu, National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB), Municipality of Ohrid, Municipality of Bar, Living Prospects

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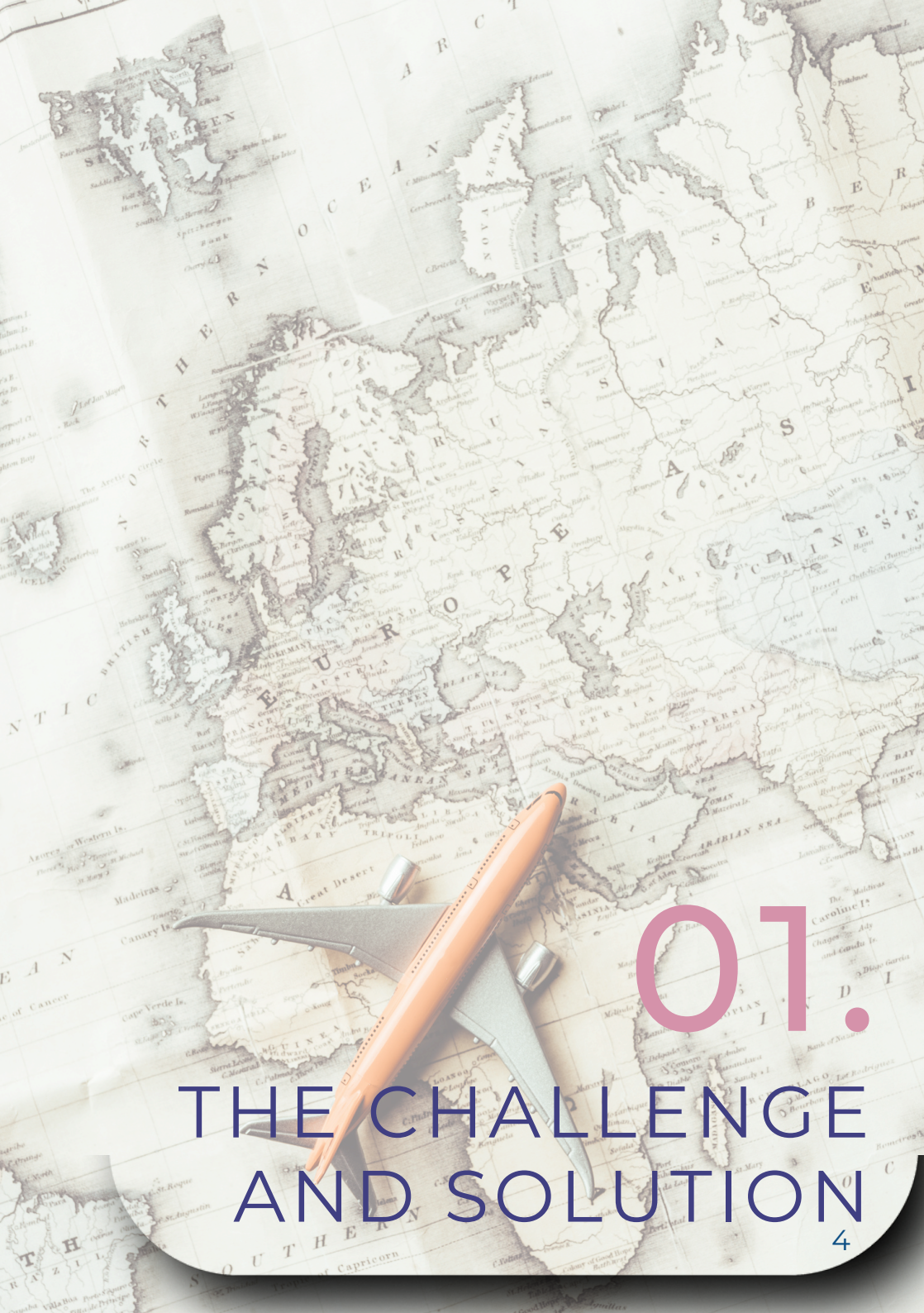
Design:

Living Prospects



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01.

THE CHALLENGE
AND SOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean region—already strained by the economic impacts of COVID-19 and accelerating climate change—is pursuing more sustainable and responsible tourism to secure long-term community benefits. Tourism offers major opportunities but also poses a **critical challenge**: the traditional mass-tourism model concentrates visitors in fragile coastal areas, causing environmental degradation, resource depletion, and stagnation in innovation. As millions continue to be drawn by the region’s nature, business, and cultural assets, the pressure on natural and cultural resources intensifies, making it essential to shift toward tourism models that are environmentally restorative, socially inclusive, and economically resilient.

Two complementary approaches have emerged in response to these systemic challenges: the **circular economy (CE)** and the **blue economy (BE)**. The CE in the tourism sector promotes sustainable practices across all related activities and seeks to keep materials in use for longer, while the BE focuses on the sustainable use, governance, and conservation of ocean and coastal resources to support economic development and protect marine ecosystems. However, despite their alignment with broader European and Mediterranean sustainability agendas, these two frameworks are still only marginally implemented together in tourism policy and practice due to fragmented sectors, governance challenges, and the lack of standardized tools and methods.



INSPIRATION

The RECIRCLE MED project seeks to bring these two models together by co-creating an integrated blueprint for tourism destinations that combines the circular economy's focus on resource efficiency with the blue economy's commitment to protecting marine and coastal ecosystems.

It builds on two major projects, INCIRCLE and REBOOT MED, to establish a practical, evidence-based path toward more sustainable, resilient, and circular tourism for islands and coastal destinations in the Mediterranean.



WHY BLUE AND CIRCULAR TOURISM?

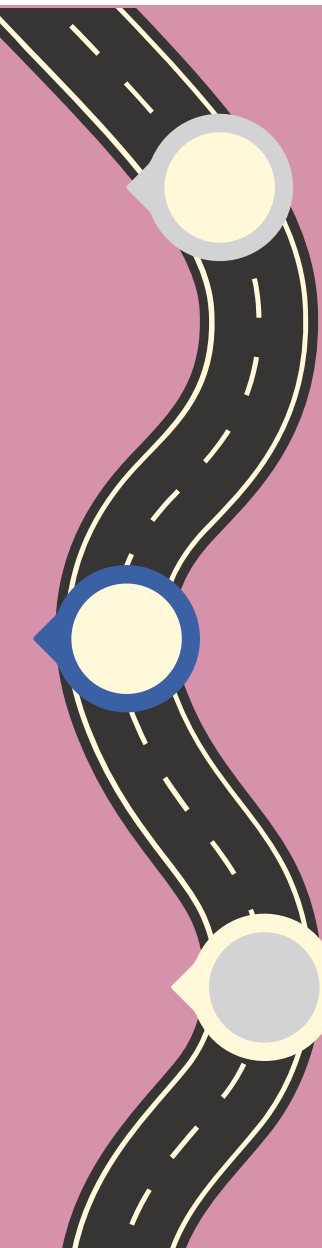
Mediterranean tourism generates significant **economic benefits** but also **demands careful management of resources** such as water, energy and waste to ensure long-term sustainability and fair access for local communities.

Blue and circular tourism brings together the blue economy's focus on conserving and responsibly managing marine and coastal resources with the circular economy's principles of resource efficiency, waste reduction and lifecycle thinking. By shifting from linear, resource-intensive practices to more restorative, place-based development, this approach helps maintain a balance between economic development and the preservation of environmental and social systems.

At the same time, travellers increasingly seek environmentally responsible, authentic and experience-based tourism. Blue and circular tourism can therefore strengthen destination image, improve visitor satisfaction and support premium market positioning. Promoting local supply chains also encourages community engagement, supports SMEs and fosters more inclusive opportunities, helping address inequalities and reinforce social cohesion.



RECIRCLE MED THREE-STEP PROCESS



Blueprint implementation

01. Each territory gathers information on what they're already doing through the implementation of a simple, ready-to-use toolkit.

For example: are hotels using water efficiently? Is there a recycling program? Are renewable energies or heritage events being promoted?

Territorial and SWOT analysis

02. A simple SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) is used to help stakeholders benchmark practices across destinations, identify successful approaches, recognize gaps, and find opportunities for innovation to improve sustainability performance.

Development of Blue Action Plans for Circular Tourism

03. Based on the lessons learned, each territory sets goals, proposes new actions (such as incentives for reducing water consumption), and plans for improvement, with milestones that can be tracked.

EXAMPLES

A Mediterranean island noticed plastic pollution increasing during the tourist season. By working with the Blueprint, they introduced refillable water bottle stations, banned plastic bags in shops and encouraged restaurants to offer tap water. The result was **cleaner beaches, happier tourists, positive recognition and media coverage.**



A coastal destination struggling with overcrowding might use the Blueprint to create more pedestrian areas, encourage the use of electric buses, set up bike rental services, and manage visitor numbers by directing people to less crowded spots.

These steps help **reduce traffic and pollution, spread tourists out more evenly, and improve the experience for both visitors and locals.**



02.


HOW THE BLUEPRINT WORKS

WHAT IS THE RECIRCLE MED BLUEPRINT?

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



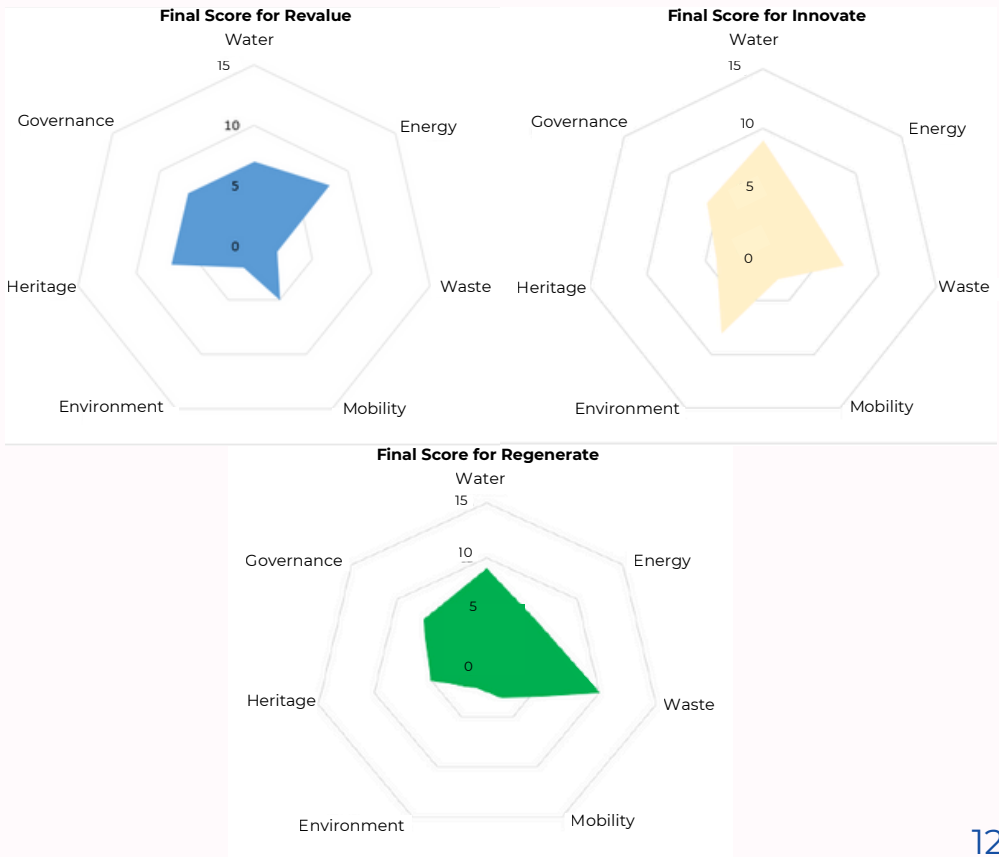
Seven pillars of the Blueprint

- 1**  **Water:** Saving, reusing, protecting and restoring water as a resource.
- 2**  **Energy:** Using less, switching to renewables, rewarding smart choices.
- 3**  **Waste:** Reducing, separating, recycling, and upcycling.
- 4**  **Mobility:** Promoting walking, biking, public transport, and clean mobility options.
- 5**  **Environment:** Safeguarding nature on land and at sea.
- 6**  **Heritage:** Valuing and modernising local culture, crafts, and stories.
- 7**  **Governance:** Coordinating efforts, engaging communities, and tracking results.

HOW IS EACH PILLAR ASSESSED?

Each pillar is assessed using six “principles” (**Reduce, Regenerate, Rethink, Innovate, Revalue, Reinvest**), translating strategies into practical actions that produce measurable outcomes. Based on these principles, several **blue and circular measures** are proposed to guide tourism territories towards improved environmental practices and awareness.

Indicative results



Measuring territorial performance

The Blueprint uses a **clear scoring system to measure how well different areas perform on sustainability and circularity**. This **helps destinations** see where they are doing well and where they can improve. Each region gets a score based on the number and quality of measures in place, such as the presence of:

- Relevant legislation (and its application),
- Financial rewards and incentives for green actions,
- Awareness campaigns,
- Voluntary “beyond-the-law” benchmarks (e.g., maximum water per hotel guest, minimum recycling rates, etc.).



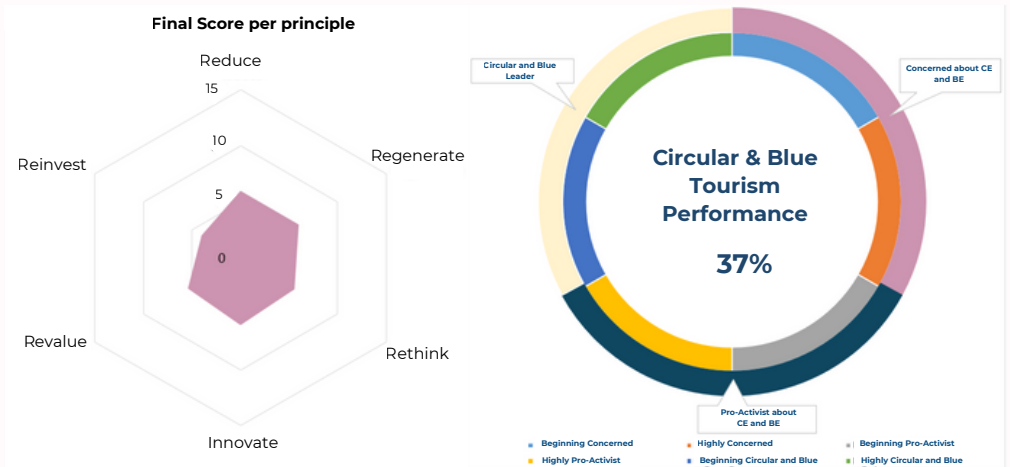
Performance categories

The scoring system considers both circular economy (CE) practices (resource efficiency, renewable energy, waste reduction and preservation of local heritage) and blue economy (BE) practices (sustainable use of marine and coastal ecosystems, maritime mobility, and ocean related innovation).

Based on the score received, a territory is characterized as:

- **Concerned:** Just getting started (0–33%),
- **Pro-Activist:** Solid progress, with visible actions (34–67%),
- **Circular and Blue Leader:** Top performers, setting a good example for others (68–100%).

This framework encourages collaboration, knowledge exchange and recognition of achievements among communities and stakeholders.



WHAT TYPES OF ACTIONS ARE ENCOURAGED? A FEW EXAMPLES:



Water: Hotels installing water-saving taps, rainwater harvesting, and promoting re-use of towels.



Energy: Resorts switching to solar or wind, electric ferries, and LED lighting in ports.



Waste: Bans on single-use plastics, composting food scraps, smart bins in beaches.



Mobility: Discounts for public transport, electric shuttle buses, bike lanes, traffic-free zones.



Environment: Establishing marine protected areas, planting endemic trees, green rooftops, and protecting fragile habitats.



Heritage: Hosting food festivals, restoring historic buildings, cultural storytelling workshops.



Governance: Bringing together government, business, residents, and tourists to co-design solutions, with transparent tracking and reporting of results.



03.

STAKEHOLDER
ENGAGEMENT

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT: EVERYONE HAS A SAY!



From **tourism organizations, planning and development departments, waste and water authorities, energy and transport providers, parks and port authorities, hotel and tour associations, NGOs, chambers of commerce and academic institutions**, everyone is included in the collaborative planning process. By gathering ideas and highlighting local solutions, meaningful change can occur!

Active stakeholder engagement at every stage is crucial to ensure sustainable, circular and blue economy initiatives are grounded in local realities and supported by those who implement them. Residents and tourists should also be engaged to ensure strategies reflect community needs and visitor perspectives.

This governance-driven approach strengthens accountability, enhances coordination across sectors, and builds a foundation for replicating successful strategies in other territories. Engagement may range from informing stakeholders of planned actions, to consulting them for feedback, to fully involving them in designing and implementing the plans. Meaningful and continuous participation across these levels is essential to ensuring that the Blue Action Plans for Circular Tourism remain realistic, relevant and widely supported.

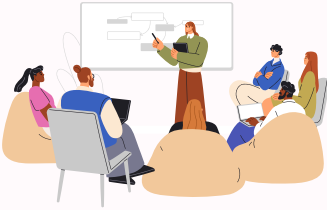


HOW TO ACHIEVE ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION?

Mobilisation Workshops

Designed to kick-start local action, these workshops bring stakeholders together to adapt the Blueprint to each territory's needs, explore challenges and identify opportunities for blue and circular tourism. They set the foundation for co-creation and align local priorities with wider frameworks.

Objective: To engage stakeholders early, gather insights and shape locally tailored Action Plans.



Capacity Building Workshops

These workshops strengthen the knowledge and skills of local actors through targeted training, practical tools and real-life examples. They ensure stakeholders are equipped to implement the Blueprint and advance blue and circular tourism in their territories.

Objective: To build the competencies needed for effective Action Plan implementation.



Transferring Workshops

Aimed at scaling impact, these workshops present and validate Action Plans, foster dialogue and support the wider adoption of the Blueprint across regions. They encourage policy integration, cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Objective: To promote uptake of the Blueprint and facilitate its transfer to new contexts and territories.





04.

RECEIVING
TERRITORIES

"From the Adriatic to the Black Sea, diverse coastal and lakeside destinations apply the Blueprint for sustainable blue and circular development. Each territory adapts it to their unique local context, engaging stakeholders and shaping tailored Blue Action Plans for Circular Tourism."

CEFALÙ MUNICIPALITY (ITALY)



Implementing the Blueprint for a sustainable coastal future

Located on the northern coast of Sicily, Cefalù is a popular coastal tourism destination, especially during the spring and summer months, known for its unique beauty and charm. As an awarded destination for sustainable tourism, the Municipality actively applies blue and circular economy principles. In the project, Cefalù plays a central role in **testing the Blueprint**, coordinating local stakeholders, and **co-developing its Blue Action Plan**. It hosts workshops and events that gather input, build local capacity, and ensure that project outputs are adapted to its specific needs and characteristics.

OHRID MUNICIPALITY (NORTH MACEDONIA)



Adapting the Blueprint to a lakeside tourism context

Located in the southwestern part of North Macedonia, Ohrid is a renowned tourist destination, celebrated for its beautiful lake, rich history, and vibrant culture. With strong experience in tourism and sustainable development, the Municipality leads activities to **apply the Blueprint to its lakeside setting**. Through targeted workshops and engagement actions, Ohrid **shapes its Blue Action Plan** by integrating stakeholder feedback, addressing environmental and tourism challenges, and adapting project results to its unique local characteristics.

BAR MUNICIPALITY (MONTENEGRO)



Advancing the Blueprint in a dynamic Adriatic gateway

Situated on the Adriatic coast in southern Montenegro, Bar is the country's maritime gateway and a coastal town where modernity, tradition, and natural beauty come together. Building on its strong economic base and extensive experience, the Municipality actively **implements the Blueprint**, involving local actors in refining priorities and testing tools. Bar works **to develop its Blue Action Plan**, using project outputs to strengthen eco-friendly tourism and support blue economy opportunities tailored to its coastal realities.

POMORIE MUNICIPALITY (BULGARIA)



Applying the Blueprint to a Black Sea tourism destination

Located in southern Bulgaria, Pomorie is a medium-sized municipality that plays a significant role in the country's tourism sector thanks to its strategic position on the Black Sea coast. Supported by the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, Pomorie actively engages in **applying the Blueprint** and contributes to the co-creation process. As a receiving territory, it **develops its Blue Action Plan** by adapting project tools and solutions to its local needs and specific characteristics.



05.

CHALLENGES,
OPPORTUNITIES &
BENEFITS



Key Challenges

- Limited local data or technical expertise in some regions.
- Varying levels of readiness among authorities and businesses to invest in new approaches.
- Slow and complex coordination across regions with different governance systems.



Key Opportunities

- Strong EU policy backing and diverse funding opportunities to support adoption.
- Growing demand for green, blue, and circular tourism that values authenticity and local culture.
- Cross-country exchange creates shared knowledge and a common Mediterranean approach to sustainable tourism.



BENEFITS



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.

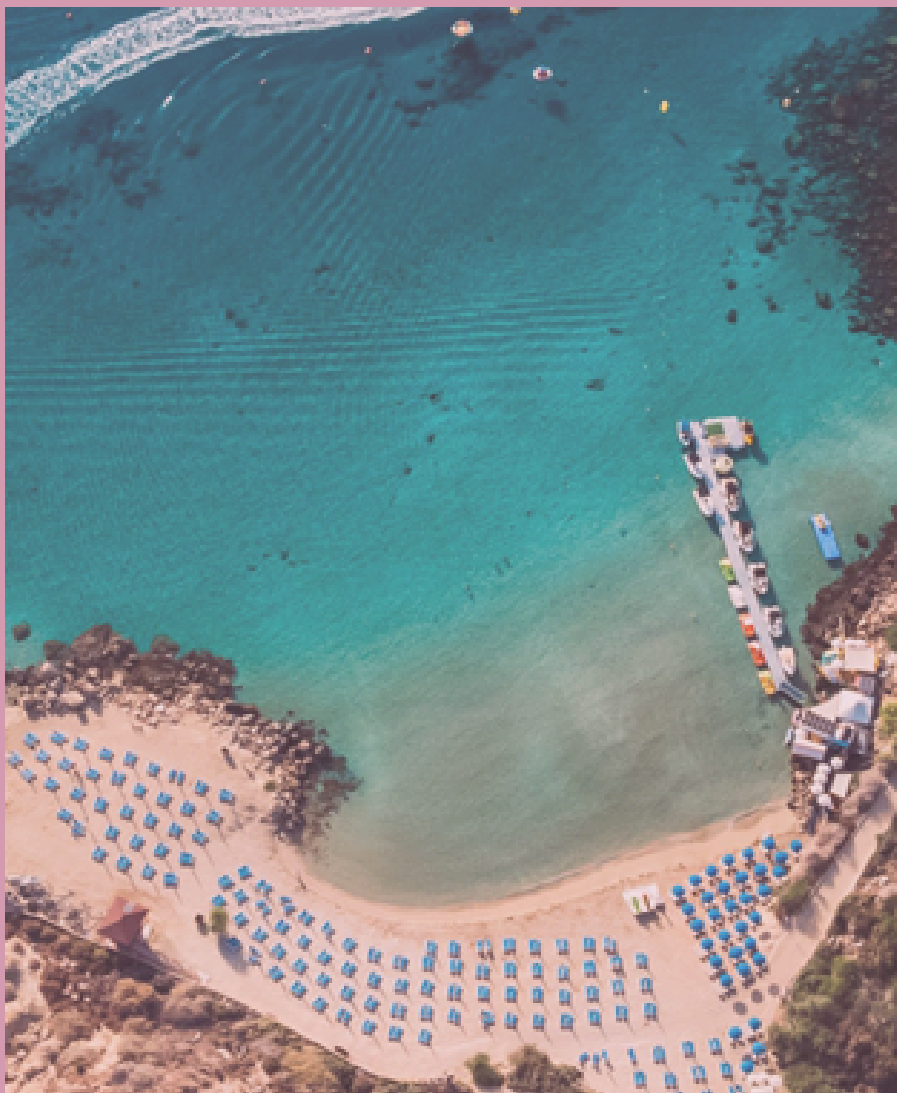
By fostering the **exchange of experiences across countries with different governance systems**, the Blueprint creates a shared framework for addressing common challenges. This collaborative approach adds value by strengthening regional coherence and supporting the adoption of innovative circular and blue economy practices in tourism.

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.
- ◆ Establish clear SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) objectives that ensure realistic, measurable, and impactful results.

The Blueprint empowers destinations to **optimise resources, reduce environmental impacts and enhance 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.

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