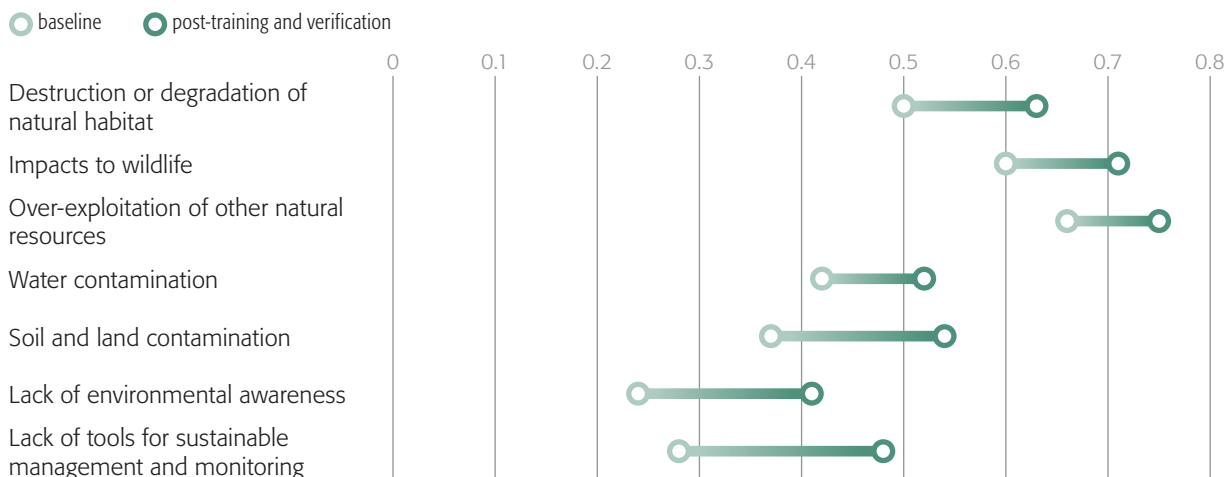


EVALUATING THE RESULTS OF OUR WORK

# Reducing Tourism's Threats to Biodiversity

## *Effects of a voluntary sustainability standard system on 106 Latin American tourism enterprises*



The tourism industry can harm wildlife, plants, and natural ecosystems through habitat destruction, pollution, over-exploitation of natural resources, and visitor traffic to sensitive ecosystems. One approach to mitigate such threats is the application of voluntary sustainability standards, supported by training for tourism enterprises and verified by external audits. We evaluated the effects of this approach as applied through the Rainforest Alliance's sustainable tourism training program and verification process. The standard used for Rainforest Alliance verification defines 78 criteria (requirements) for environmental and social best practices and has been adopted by more than 200 tourism businesses in eight countries.

We examined the performance of 106 businesses in six Latin American countries against 29 of the criteria most directly related to biodiversity conservation. These criteria address seven categories of biodiversity threats, shown in Figure 1.

We measured baseline hotel performance prior to training and verification, followed by a repeat assessment two years after these interventions. Performance was rated on a scale of 0 to 1, with 0

representing non-compliance and 1 full compliance. Mean hotel performance was significantly higher following training than at baseline across all seven threat categories (Figure 1), increasing from 0.44 to 0.58 on average. Improvements were greatest for businesses in the lowest third of performance at baseline (laggards) and smaller but still important for those in the middle third; the highest performers at baseline registered no net improvement (Figure 2). The results indicate that the Rainforest Alliance system is serving not only to recognize and reinforce good practices but also to drive incremental improvement in tourism enterprise sustainability.

### Destruction or degradation of natural habitat

Businesses complied with the three habitat-related criteria to a moderate degree. The criterion requiring hotels to conserve and responsibly manage local natural areas through actions that support biodiversity is important as it potentially extends the standard's environmental benefits far off the hotel grounds. Auditor feedback suggests that hotel performance in this area depends heavily on a country's expectations and legal frameworks for participation, and whether local protected areas are a tourist attraction.

### Exploitation of wildlife

The standard contains three wildlife protection cri-

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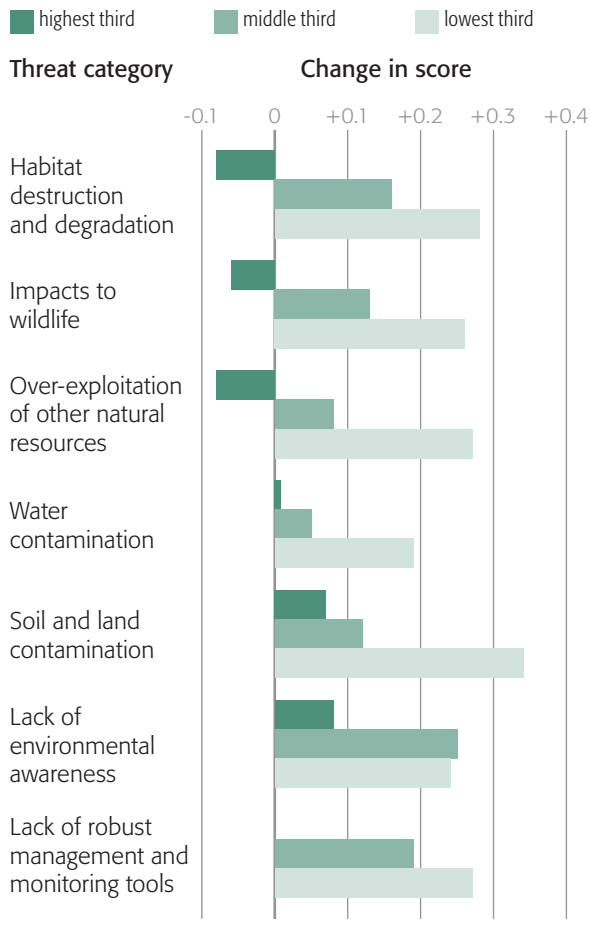
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**Figure 1**  
Average conformance score of hotels before and after training on sustainable tourism practices, for seven biodiversity threat categories. All before-after differences are significant at  $p \leq 0.01$ .

The Rainforest Alliance works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior.  
[www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org)

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**Figure 2**  
Average change in hotel conformance score, for three groups of hotels sorted by baseline performance.



teria that were characterized by high levels of conformance post-training; these include prohibitions on selling or trafficking endangered species, keeping wild animals in captivity, and disturbing wildlife with noise and lighting.

### Over-exploitation of other natural resources

Hotels were generally quite proactive in their resource protection efforts related to water conservation, energy conservation, organic waste management, and sustainable sourcing. The relatively high baseline performance for these criteria suggests that there may already be a strong business case for investing in such practices, even in the absence of a sustainability standard.

### Water contamination

Conformance scores for the four criteria related to water contamination were only middling, overall. Businesses were more apt to adopt specific prescribed products or equipment for protecting water bodies than to address water quality, sewage, runoff,

and waste liquids comprehensively. Barriers appear to be a lack of infrastructure to collect and manage toxins and other waste, and insufficient guidance on practical water conservation measures.

### Soil and land contamination

In the three criteria for soil and land contamination (i.e., solid waste management), we observed a substantial increase in conformance associated with implementation of the sustainability standard and training. However, limitations in local infrastructure such as recycling facilities may have limited some hotels' ability to conform to these criteria..

### Lack of environmental awareness

The environmental awareness threat category was characterized by the lowest baseline and posttraining performance—and the greatest incremental improvement. Interestingly, the environmental awareness criteria that required the most concerted effort to establish and implement had higher baseline conformance levels than the criteria that involved seemingly straightforward internal policies.

### Lack of tools for sustainable management and monitoring

Baseline conformance with the criteria related to management and monitoring tools was quite weak but registered some improvement following training. Developing these tools will be most important for larger operations, where sustainability initiatives require substantial coordination and planning.

### Looking forward

While the sustainability performance of most hotels after participation in the program still left room for improvement, we documented substantial increases in key practices and outcomes, including: wildlife protection, support for nearby protected areas, improved waste management, reduced water pollution and improved environmental awareness on the part of visitors and employees. Taken together, these improvements are expected to reduce the negative impacts of tourism operations on local biodiversity. And since a high proportion of the 106 businesses we studied never proceeded to use the Rainforest Alliance Verified™ seal for marketing or communication purposes, it appears that the training was useful for reasons other than recognition through certification. These reasons likely included cost savings, improved operational efficiency, improved visitor experience, and contribution to the overall brand and image of the operation.

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