

WORLD EARTH DAY SPECIAL: India's role and the way forward to sustainable hospitality

As the world pauses today on World Earth Day to reflect on its environmental responsibilities, India's hospitality sector finds itself at an important crossroads – one where sustainability is no longer optional, but essential. With the country's booming travel and tourism industry contributing significantly to the economy, the need to embed green practices into every corner of hospitality has never been more urgent.

India, known for its warm hospitality and diverse culture, is also emerging as a key player in sustainable tourism. From luxury resorts in the Himalayas to beachside retreats in Kerala, more and more hotels are adopting eco-friendly practices. Hotels today understand that being environmentally responsible is not just good for the planet, it's good for the business too. Eco-conscious travellers are on the rise, and they prefer staying in places that align with their values. Green certifications like LEED, Green Globe and EarthCheck are becoming common in hotel brochures and websites.

In a significant move towards shaping this greener future, the India Travel & Tourism Sustainability Conclave was held in New Delhi recently. Jointly organised by the MakeMyTrip Foundation and the World Travel & Tourism Council India Initiative (WTTTCII), the event witnessed more than 30 influential voices from the government, industry and civil society. One of the most compelling moments came during the keynote address by Union Minister for Tourism and Culture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, who shared inspiring examples of sustainability in action. Among them was the story of Piplantri village in Rajasthan — a once barren land transformed into a lush, eco-friendly tourist village, thanks to a simple yet powerful initiative: planting 111 trees for every girl child born. This model has led to ecological restoration, improved groundwater levels and new economic opportunities for the villagers. "It's time we stop talking and start doing. What began with planting trees for every girl child has grown into a model of sustainable tourism for the entire nation. The tourism sector must act as the bridge between traditional wisdom and modern sustainability," the Union Minister said.

Shekhawat also proposed a new initiative aimed at tackling plastic waste — starting with four tourist destinations where both tourists and locals are encouraged to collect, manage and monetise household plastic waste. “We are aiming to turn a challenge into an opportunity that can be replicated across India,” he added.

The Indian Government has been supporting green efforts. Through campaigns like *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* and *Incredible India 2.0*, there’s a growing emphasis on clean tourism and eco-certification. Shekhawat revealed that sustainability has been embedded as a key criterion under Government funding initiatives like *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*. “Embedding sustainability into Government schemes is not enough. We need collective commitment to turn policies into real success stories that can inspire generations to come,” shared the Minister. He also called upon stakeholders to turn policy into practice and create at least a dozen success stories that could be scaled across India in the coming decade.

Meanwhile, industry associations such as FHRAI, HRAWI and SIHRA are raising awareness and pushing for sustainable policies. Recently, FHRAI hosted the second edition of the Tourism Sustainability Summit 2025. Highlighting the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in transforming the tourism industry, the then Additional Secretary – Tourism, Government of India and the newly-appointed Director General – Tourism Suman Billa said, “The world is growing but not as fast as India is growing. If the tourism sector is left unmanaged, it may lead to cultural dilution. We have to ensure that tourism empowers our cultural heritage. We must focus on ensuring that the tourism industry is climate resilient.”

But sustainability isn’t only about what we throw away, it’s about how we design the entire travel experience. Shekhawat spoke about shifting the narrative from cost-focussed tourism to experience-driven tourism, where India’s rich cultural tapestry becomes the true highlight. He said, “We must enrich our tourism offerings beyond the usual to truly showcase the depth of the country’s heritage and natural beauty.” He even applauded Goa’s *Beyond Beaches* campaign as an example of how destinations can ease pressure on

overcrowded areas while offering fresh, immersive experiences that tourists crave for.

Challenges aplenty

Despite these progresses, challenges remain. The cost of green technology, lack of awareness and limited access to sustainable suppliers, especially in smaller cities, still act as hurdles. Many independent hotels struggle to adopt sustainable practices due to budget constraints.

Noting down the challenges, Satyen Jain CEO, Pride Hotels Group, Executive Committee member HRAWI said, "In several states, regulatory frameworks either do not allow hotels to procure green power at all or impose restrictive conditions that make access nearly impossible. Even in states where green power is permitted, sourcing it from other states becomes financially unviable due to the prohibitively high cost of inter-state power transmission".

Adding to this is the lack of a uniform policy or incentive framework across India. "Without clear, centralised guidelines or benefits for adopting sustainable practices, compliance becomes fragmented and inconsistent. Infrastructure gaps in Tier II and III cities—particularly around waste management and water conservation — further complicate implementation of green initiatives," he added.

The way forward

Today, India's hospitality sector is at a turning point and the future lies in collaborations and innovations. Hotels can even drive sustainability by using ecofriendly materials and designs that blend with Nature. Jain opined, "Embedding sustainability into hotel design and operations including using renewable energy to efficient water and waste systems must become standard. Additionally, the industry must empower smaller players with access to affordable technologies, training and Government support. Lastly, education and awareness campaigns both for staff and guests can drive behavioural shifts towards conservation."

“The hospitality sector can truly be a leader in shaping India's sustainable tourism future — and honestly, we're already on the right track. It starts with small, consistent changes: using less plastic, conserving water, sourcing local

produce, and designing hotels that work with nature, not against it. These are practical steps we can all take, and many in our industry are already doing it. With a bit of collaboration — between hoteliers, policymakers, and travellers — we can create a system where sustainability isn't a goal, it's just how we operate. India has everything it takes to lead this change — we just need to believe in it and move together,” concluded Surendra Kumar Jaiswal, VP, FHRAI.