



AITO Members Launch Project PROTECT to Help Nurture Destinations for Tomorrow's Travellers

The Association of Independent Tour Operators ([AITO](#)) has today launched **Project PROTECT** in recognition of the important role that destinations play in the future of the travel industry. **The PROTECT acronym stands for People / Resources / Outreach / Tourism / Environment / Conservation / Tomorrow.**

Twenty years ago, AITO was at the forefront of Sustainable Tourism (ST) practices. The membership devised a star classification system to evaluate each member's level of involvement. But, with the evolution of many sustainability classification programmes, AITO decided three years ago to leave this science to the experts and the star system was duly relinquished.

A review of AITO's sustainability ethos was carried out in subsequent years by Carole Favre through Leeds [Beckett](#) University, who also devised a series of fact sheets to support AITO members' ST work. The next stage of the review process was conducted last November when it was decided that, without supporting the delicate framework within the destinations in which members worked, they might well not have a business in a few years' time.

AITO has now engaged the support of **Professor Xavier Font** of [the University of Surrey](#) to lead the association in **Project PROTECT** over the next five years. A PhD student will be commissioned to run the project on a day-to-day basis, with the final study forming the basis of the student's thesis.

On behalf of AITO, [the University of Surrey](#) will develop a system to train, mentor, collect data and analyse the results of sustainability pledges made by AITO members. Each AITO member will appoint an ST Representative who will lead their company's learning programme and actively promote sustainability practices to their colleagues. Six short training videos will be made to accompany the AITO ST Factsheets on best practice, along with quizzes, awards and reporting.

Professor Font remarks: "The level of engagement in sustainable tourism practices amongst AITO members is quite varied and **Project PROTECT** can be adjusted to meet all requirements.

"Many AITO members are already very well versed in good ST practice but they are not qualifying or quantifying their projects year on year. Neither are they communicating their successes and learnings to their clients in a meaningful way. There are also AITO members who could use more support to instigate and promote sustainable tourism projects in their host destinations."

AITO Chairman, Derek Moore, says: "Protecting the destinations visited by our members' customers is an essential part of the AITO ethos and part of the overall AITO protection promise. AITO's Council is fully behind this project and believes that not only will each member benefit, but also the destinations which they serve.

"Staff will also grow in knowledge and in terms of practical skills within the personal skills development programme. This is a significant five-year investment programme with the aim of helping shore up the future of our travel businesses, for the good of one and all."

AITO now boasts 124 specialist tour operator members – see www.aito.com for more information.

Ends – 6 July 2016

Press: For more information on AITO, please call Sue Ockwell or Rebecca Milne on 020 8891 4440 or email s.ockwell@travelpr.co.uk or r.milne@travelpr.co.uk.