Sustainable Hospitality Alliance

Water stewardship

This factsheet explores the issues of water risk and provides recommendations on how to reduce impacts on hotel operations and local supply.

What is the issue?

A quarter of the world's population face "extremely high" levels of water stress, and this leaves them highly vulnerable to the impact of drought or increases in water use.[6]

Effective water management is not just about direct water use, you should also consider the impact of the products you buy and the access your employees and local community have to clean water and sanitation facilities.

Water-related issues are likely to increase as climate change is expected to affect the water cycle. Some areas are likely to become drier while others will become wetter and there's a high chance that extreme weather events will increase in frequency.[7]

Why should hotels address this issue?

Water risks are faced on a global level and result from too little water (water scarcity and droughts), too much water (flooding) and water which is not fit to use (pollution). It can lead to:[8]

- Political and economic instability
- Higher energy prices (as water is often needed for energy generation processes)
- Higher food costs
- Lost economic opportunities
- Increased inequalities, hunger and poverty
- Loss of ecosystems which are vital for wildlife and can sometimes be important natural flood defences (such as wetlands)
- Reputational issues, especially where a business is using water needed by the local community

The industry has a role in managing its water consumption to protect the communities in which they operate and the future of their businesses. A hotel can use an average of 1,500 litres per room per day which can vastly exceed that of local populations in water-scarce destinations.[9] In some locations, tourism uses over eight times more water per person than the local population.[10] Even hotels located in regions with plenty of water could be sourcing products or services from water-scarce locations.

In recent years, we have seen major cities, from Cape Town to Sao Paolo and Chennai, needing to ration water to protect their scarce resources. This is not only having a dramatic effect on the local populations, but also on local economies and businesses.

31%
of global population is affected by water scarcity[1]

70%
of global freshwater use is from farming[2]

15,000 litres
(4,000 gallons)
to produce 1kg of beef[3]

2,500 litres
(660 gallons)
to produce 1kg of rice[4]

2,500 litres
(660 gallons)
to produce a cotton shirt[5]

How to get started

The six steps for hotels to action an effective water strategy are:

1. Understand your relationship with water

Quantify your current and future water use, identify its sources, impact and dependencies and share that information through reporting and engagement with local stakeholders. Identify the water-related risks that you may face in the future. The Sustainable Hospitality Alliance provides [research, tools and benchmarking](#) to help hotel companies with this step.

2. Set targets and create a plan of action

Prioritise areas where the best impact can be made and define long-term targets based in science and local contexts. Set indicators for progress with trackable metrics and transparent performance indicators that each property can report against.

3. Manage water sustainably in your operations

Identify water efficiencies at property level, ensure adequate wastewater treatment, reduce your pressure on freshwater resources by recycling water and involve your staff and guests to support your water stewardship measures.

4. Work with suppliers on water

Analyse products and services of highest spending and engage with suppliers regarding their water stewardship to better identify and address your indirect impacts on water in basins where they are operating. Products which can have a particularly high impact on water consumption during their production or manufacture include linens, food and drink.

5. Build resilience to extreme events and water shortages

A water stewardship strategy should include procedures and provisions to provide immediate relief effort, address recovery needs and help mitigate against future occurrences of extreme weather events. Properties should focus on improving their resilience to floods, managing their freshwater supply and protecting local communities in a crisis.

6. Collaborate on sustainable water management

Any hotel can impact on the quality of water and on other water users. Hotels need to understand the local water risks and opportunities, engage with existing water initiatives, share information with the public sector and other water users, and support access to clean water, health and sanitation.

Case studies

Radisson Hotel Group

The [Radisson](#) Blu Hotel Waterfront, Cape Town, spearheads the sustainable use of scarce resources as the region continues to look at ways to save water. The hotel has started supplying its entire building with fresh water produced in its own in-house desalination plant. The hotel can easily harvest sea water for desalination as it is located directly on the Atlantic Coast. A borehole was sunk underneath the hotel, allowing water to be pumped through a reverse osmosis plant to keep the hotel's freshwater tank full at all times without relying on the municipal water supply.

IHG Hotels & Resorts

[IHG Hotels & Resorts](#) have undertaken six water stewardship projects, the final two are just beginning in Hayman Island Australia and Shenzhen China. Through these efforts it has been clear that collaboration at basin level is key to tackle water stewardship in high-risk areas. To help drive this IHG is a signatory of the CEO Water Mandate and active participant of the Water Resilience Coalition.
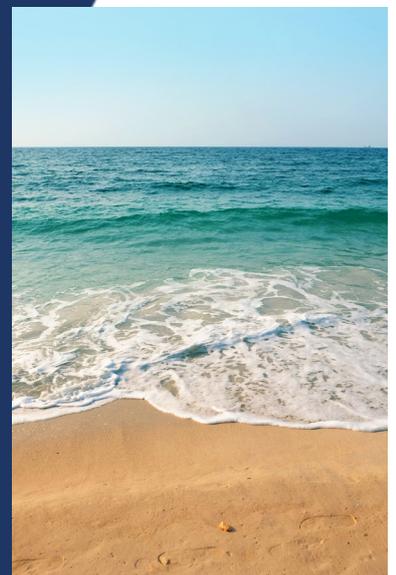
Water in supply chains

Two areas of your supply chain that might have particularly high water-related impacts are your linens and food and beverage (F&B).

- **Linens:** Cotton is a particularly water-intensive crop, however there are efforts which aim to reduce the environmental impacts e.g. farmers participating in the Better Cotton Initiative use around 16% less water than their peers.[11] Keeping linens clean can also consume a lot of water so asking laundry suppliers about this can enable you to understand your impacts and find a supplier with a low impact.

- **F&B:** All food products require water. Crops for human consumption and to be fed to farmed animals need to be irrigated and water is used in the processing of all meat, fruit and vegetables. You can assess the impacts of produce you buy using tools such as the Water Footprint Network's Product Water Footprint Assessment Tool. Meat is particularly water-intensive so reducing the volume of meat you serve can reduce your supply chain impacts.

Case study

Due to the high environmental cost of beef, such as the water needed to produce it, **Soneva** took the decision to remove it from their menus (only stocking a small amount to serve if requested) and encourage guests to consider other options. As a result, meat consumption dropped by 4% and fruit and vegetable consumption rose by 11%, equating to a 7% reduction in environmental cost and a 9% reduction in financial costs.

They also use profits from their 'Soneva Water' (which is filtered, mineralised, alkalised and bottled on site in reusable glass bottles) to fund over 500 clean water projects in more than 50 countries, providing clean water to over 750,000 people via charities such as Water Charity and Thirst Aid.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

Hotels should also consider access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) as part of their water stewardship plans. The lack of access to these basic services, puts employees, communities and, therefore, hotels at risk. Access to WASH facilities, especially those for hand washing, have become even more important since the beginning of the pandemic. Still, 1 in 3 people worldwide lack basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at home.[12]

As well as helping mitigate physical, regulatory and reputational risks, investing in WASH in the workplace and the communities where workers live, can also have benefits for your business, positively impacting your bottom line by increasing productivity, reducing absenteeism and increasing supply chain resilience.[13]

You can take action in different ways:

- **Assess the WASH risks in your key geographies.** Tools such as WASHdata can help you build an understanding for the countries in which you are operating and the potential risks.

- **Assess and improve workers' access to WASH facilities**, including handwashing, in your hotels as well as where they live (use WASH assessment and training tools to help you identify risks and potential actions).

- **Use local facilities to meet local water supply and treatment needs** by providing WASH solutions for employees and local communities (e.g. on-site water filtration and bottling systems).

- **Support local and international NGO action** on water, sanitation and hygiene by recycling bathroom amenities and donating to organisations such as Clean The World, WaterAid and others.

1 in 3
people worldwide lack basic handwashing facilities[12]

Communications

Letting your customers know what you are doing to reduce water consumption is almost as important as taking action.

Your communications should include what you are doing, what your achievements have been and how you are addressing some of the bigger, longer-term issues. A good start is to map your efforts against the relevant UN Sustainable Development Goals. There may not always be a specific goal for the exact issue you are addressing but the goals most related to water stewardship efforts are SDGs 6, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15.

Tools and resources

Risk assessment:
- The Water Scarcity Atlas provides an introduction to water scarcity and provides analysis across the world.
- The Water Risk Filter is an online tool designed to explore and assess water risk.
- Our *Destination Water Risk Index* provides key data for hotel companies about local water conditions and risks in key hotel development areas.

Monitoring and benchmarking:
- Our Hotel Water Measurement Initiative (HWMI) is a tool to measure and report water use.
- The Cornell Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking (CHSB) improves public knowledge on water use in the sector and can provide a bespoke report for your property.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH):
- WASH4Work is driving business action to address WASH challenges in the workplace, in communities where workers live, and across supply chains.
- ILO have created WASH@Work, a handbook to help employees learn more about WASH-related issues and best practices.

Further guidance:
- Our *Water Stewardship for Hotel Companies* provides further guidance on water management.
- The AWS International Water Stewardship Standard (AWS Standard) can be used to gain an understanding of your water use and impacts as well as find ways to work collaboratively with others in the same water basin to manage impacts sustainably.

1.   World Data Lab, Water Scarcity Clock, available from: www.worldwater.io
2.   WRAP, available from: www.wrap.org.uk
3-5. Water Footprint Network, Product Gallery, available from: www.waterfootprint.org
6.   World Resources Institute (2019), available from www.wri.org
7,8. WWF (2009), Understanding water risk, available from: www.wwf.org.uk
9,10. Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (2018), *Water Stewardship for Hotel Companies*, available from www.sustainablehosptalityalliance.org
11.   WWF (2014), Handle with Care, available from: www.worldwildlife.org/
12.   WHO (2019), available from: www.who.int
13.   WaterAid (2018), available from: www.wateraid.org

About Sustainable Hospitality Alliance

Sustainable Hospitality Alliance brings together engaged hospitality companies and uses the collective power of the industry to address key challenges affecting our planet and its people.

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