

Making and Breaking Sustainability Habits

Behavioural insights for sustainable tourist behaviour

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Workshop summary

Tourism and hospitality businesses invest heavily in sustainability through guest messaging, staff training, signage and awareness campaigns. Yet much of this effort does not change behaviour, or delivers only short-term results before behaviour drifts back. One reason is that many of the actions driving energy use, water consumption and waste are not deliberate choices: guests and staff often act on autopilot, following habits, routines and the defaults built into how a property runs. When people go on holiday, they leave behind their everyday environments and routines, and may develop new behaviours that do not match what they do at home. In particular, pro-environmental behaviours are often neglected when people enter a more hedonic holiday mindset. This creates a challenge for the hospitality industry, but also an opportunity for academics to help by applying behaviour change and habit theories to systematically deconstruct staff and guest behaviour in hotels and develop interventions that support more sustainable practices.

Held at the University of Surrey on 29 April 2026, this one-day workshop brought tourism and hospitality partners together with behavioural scientists and tourism researchers to tackle a practical question: How do we get sustainable behaviour to stick without relying on constant persuasion? Using a “focus groups within a workshop” design, the day combined short expert inputs from academics in tourism and psychology with facilitated small-group discussion and collaborative exercises, moving participants from problem to action. Representatives from 20 organisations took part, spanning hotels, tour operators, certification bodies, sustainability consultancies, technology providers and sector-wide initiatives.

The shared conclusion was simple but demanding: to make sustainable behaviour last, organisations need to redesign the behaviour, not just the intention. For behavioural change to happen, the tourism and hospitality industry needs to be specific about who does what, where and when, management needs to understand the cues and routines that keep an unsustainable behaviour going, and a change in environments, defaults and processes is key so that the sustainable option becomes the easy, automatic one.

Workshop aims

The academic-industry exchange workshop set out to explore how habits shape sustainability behaviours in tourism and hospitality, and to identify how behavioural science can support more effective, practical and lasting behaviour change. More specifically, it aimed to:

- identify priority sustainability behaviour challenges faced by tourism and hospitality organisations;
- understand how habits, routines, cues and operational defaults contribute to these challenges;

- examine why some existing sustainability interventions fail to create lasting change;
- co-develop practical ideas for habit-based interventions with industry partners; and
- identify opportunities for piloting and industry–academic collaboration, and the research that would support them.

Emerging themes

The workshop followed a single thread from problem to action, and the discussion that emerged across the day grouped naturally into five connected themes.

Priority behaviour challenges. Participants began by naming the sustainability behaviours they most wanted to change. A recurring framing was that the problem is rarely that people fail to care, but that routines, defaults and the holiday context push them towards the unsustainable option. Several participants observed that guests deliberately behave differently on holiday, treating it as a break from normal routine and feeling entitled to comfort and plenty (“I’m paying for this”), so home habits such as hanging up a towel do not carry over. Two cross-cutting issues ran throughout the conversations around staff and operational behaviours: Sustainability is widely experienced as a burden bolted onto “real” work, and there is little consistency in what counts as “sustainable” across brands and standards.

Why interventions fail. Reflecting on initiatives that had not lasted, participants kept returning to one pattern: many interventions rely on information, signage, awareness campaigns or appeals to motivation. These do little when the target behaviour is automatic, fast or embedded in a busy operation. Guests and staff may fully intend to act sustainably, yet revert to familiar routines whenever the environment makes the unsustainable option easier, quicker or more obvious.

Habits and defaults as the real barrier. This led to the central theme of the day which was explained during a presentation of habit theory by Professor Benjamin Gardner: Sustainability behaviour is best understood as part of a wider system of cues, routines and defaults. Mapping behaviours by who performs them, where they happen, what triggers them and what they produce helped move the conversation away from broad goals such as “reduce food waste” or “save energy” towards precise, diagnosable behaviours in specific contexts.

Opportunities for habit-based intervention. Building on this presentation, participants developed ideas for making sustainable behaviours easier and more routine while disrupting unsustainable ones such as changing the physical environment, altering operational defaults, prompting people at the critical moment, making the unsustainable option less accessible, and substituting a better behaviour into an existing routine. The most promising ideas were consistently those that changed the conditions under which behaviour occurs, rather than relying on guests or staff simply caring more.

From ideas to testable action. Finally, participants translated ideas into minimum viable tests: defining an intervention in a single sentence, pinpointing the setting, identifying who would need to act differently, and deciding what to measure. Participants were guided to apply a structured framework to develop small, feasible pilots assessed for real-world feasibility (acceptability, practicability, cost and possible side-effects) before any wider rollout.

Taken together, the themes pointed to a single shift in mindset in sustainability practice that is not currently widely adopted but clearly relevant, both from an industry and academic perspective. It is relevant to treat sustainability as a behaviour-design challenge rather than a communication one, and redesigning the behaviour rather than just the intention.

Participant perspectives

The workshop drew positive and reflective feedback, much of it shared publicly in the days that followed. Participants valued the chance to explore habit and behaviour change with Professor Benjamin Gardner, the breadth of industry expertise gathered in one room with sustainability leaders from Hilton, De Vere and easyJet holidays among those taking part and a shared insight that the biggest gains come from making the sustainable choice the default rather than asking people to try harder. They particularly valued the academic-industry exchange that was possible during this workshop. A selection of comments is included below.

“Thank you so much for an engaging and insightful workshop at the University of Surrey. It was a pleasure to join such a dynamic group and explore practical ways to encourage sustainable behaviour in tourism. I really appreciated the chance to learn from everyone’s perspectives, and I’m looking forward to reading and sharing the upcoming white paper and academic publication.” - Fiona Lally, Group Sustainability Director, MHL Hotel Collection

As an early career researcher, the most valuable part of the workshop was seeing directly how my research can translate into real change in industry, and through that contribute to environmental outcomes that matter. It was especially insightful to hear first-hand from industry leaders in sustainability where their priorities lie and which barriers they keep running up against, something that is rarely so visible from within academia. The day was also an amazing opportunity to widen my network at an early stage in my career, connecting with both practitioners and fellow researchers. – Safina Naz, PhD researcher, University of Surrey

Next steps – outcomes

The workshop generated a clear set of outcomes and a shared appetite to continue working together:

- An industry white paper, *Making and Breaking Sustainability Habits: Behavioural Insights for Sustainable Tourist Behaviour*, translating the workshop’s insights into practical guidance that tourism and hospitality organisations can apply.
- An academic publication on habit theory in tourism, led by Dr Marion Karl and Professor Benjamin Gardner, to be submitted to *Annals of Tourism Research*.
- Continued industry–academic collaboration to co-design and test small-scale, real-world pilots based on the behaviour challenges identified during the day.

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