From Ancestral Knowledge to Collective Action: Building Sustainable Governance on Combu Island

Rota Combú, Brazil
Rota Combu
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Visitor Experience & Destination Management

Summary of Good Practice Story
Combu Island, a riverside Amazonian community minutes from Belém, Brazil, faced rising land prices pushing families to sell property, açaí and shrimp becoming scarcer as plastic-bottle traps replaced traditional woven ones, boat noise and oil spills degrading the rivers, and outside-led climate debates about the Amazon that had little bearing on daily island life. Ahead of COP30 in Belém, local leaders formed the Combu Sustainable Tourism Committee in December 2024, running technical exchanges that turned competing entrepreneurs into partners, training tour guides and boat operators in hospitality and cultural mediation, and producing the Official Combu Route Map as a territorial statement of identity and self-governance — all supported by Sebrae, universities and public agencies who strengthened rather than replaced local leadership. This produced Green Destinations certifications across the island (from Bronze to Gold for individual businesses, Silver for the Route itself), ten planned or installed waste collection points, nine rainwater treatment units, and new income for artisans now offering workshops rather than relying solely on market fairs. The lesson: sustainability cannot be imported as a ready-made formula — international moments like COP30 should be treated as a window of opportunity rather than the source of a destination's vision, with governance and community trust built before marketing.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Combu Island is an Environmental Protection Area located just a few minutes by boat from Belém, at the gateway to the Brazilian Amazon. Yet this short crossing reveals a territory where boats are the main form of transport and daily life follows the rhythms of the tides, rainfall, harvesting seasons and relationships among neighbouring families.

Over generations, Indigenous, Afro-Amazonian and riverside knowledge have come together to shape a distinctive local identity, expressed through food, language, traditional medicine, forest management, religious celebrations, music, dance and community cooperation.

In Combu, the forest is not simply a landscape but a source of food, work, medicine, memory and belonging. Açaí, cacao, fish, fruits and medicinal plants connect local livelihoods to nature, while knowledge of the tides, plants, animals and harvesting cycles is passed down through generations. Residents also deeply value time spent together during harvesting activities, football matches, birthdays and religious festivities, reflecting a way of life in which well-being is measured not only by income but also by freedom, proximity to nature, family bonds and belonging to a living community.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

The turning point came when Combu's economic growth began to reveal clear signs of imbalance. Rising land values and living costs pushed some families to sell their properties. Pressure on local food systems increased: açaí became more expensive, while shrimp grew scarce as demand rose and traditional woven traps were replaced by plastic-bottle traps that also captured juveniles. More boats brought noise, oil spills and waste into the rivers, leading some residents to move to quieter areas. Wildlife retreated from busy trails, trees were cleared to expand açaí production, and ancestral knowledge risked disappearing as elders passed away.

At the same time, climate and sustainability debates about the Amazon were often led by outsiders, with little effect on everyday life in the territory. This created frustration, fear and a growing sense that decisions about Combu's future were being made without those who lived there.

The realisation was simple and urgent: no one would do it for us. Tourism could not be allowed to destroy the silence, rivers, food systems, knowledge and community life that visitors came to experience. Change had to begin from within, through collective action, local leadership and a commitment to make tourism generate more benefits than harm.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The vision began to take shape in December 2024, one year before COP30 in Belém, when local leaders decided that Combu could not wait for outside solutions. Mário Carvalho, Dona Nena, Prazeres and Ana de Sá brought together residents, entrepreneurs and partners to create the Combu Sustainable Tourism Committee.

The first goal was not to sell a destination, but to build trust. The group wanted to reduce tensions, encourage dialogue and create a shared sense of responsibility for tourism, waste management, local knowledge and the island's future. COP30 was seen not as the cause of change, but as a window of opportunity to create a model rooted in Combu's own reality.

The Combu Route later emerged as the practical expression of this vision: a form of tourism that helps visitors see the forest, cacao, riverside work and local products through new eyes. By understanding the people, knowledge and effort behind each experience, visitors could value them culturally and economically. The ambition was to build genuine community-based tourism, where ancestral knowledge supports innovation and the community collectively governs its own future.

The Journey: How change happened

The transformation began not with a tourism product, but with the slow work of building trust. In January 2025, enterprises such as Maloca Império de Maria, Terraço da Ilha, Biojoias do Combu and Casa do Chocolate/Dona Nena Café took part in a technical and gastronomic exchange. For many, it was the first time they looked beyond their own businesses and saw themselves as part of one territory. This simple shift—from competitors to partners—became the foundation of the Combu Route.

The Combu Sustainable Tourism Committee then organised its work around environmental sustainability, hospitality, Amazonian culture and identity, river mobility and community governance. Meetings turned scattered concerns into shared priorities. Workshops addressed composting, organic waste, sustainable crafts, food safety, territorial storytelling, communication and professional conduct. Tourism guides were trained to interpret Belém's role as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, while COOPETRANS boat operators received training in river hospitality, safety and cultural mediation. Technical discussions on water, environmental compliance and inspections brought public authorities and local actors into the same conversation.

The process was not free of tension. Some participants were accustomed to working alone, and cooperation required overcoming mistrust, different business interests and unequal levels of organisation. Progress often came through small moments: one entrepreneur visiting another's kitchen, a boat operator recognising his role as a cultural host, or a meeting in which a disagreement became a practical agreement. The Route was never imposed from above; it was woven through workshops, crossings, kitchens, gardens, maps and repeated conversations.

Partnerships made this possible. Sebrae, Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Abrasel Pará, Rotary Club of Belém-Northwest, Composta Belém, SESMA, SEMMA, SECTUR, COOPETRANS, COPEMIC, universities, tourism guides and specialist consultants contributed

tools, training and technical support. Their role was not to replace local leadership, but to strengthen the community's ability to make decisions and act collectively.

One of the most symbolic outcomes was the Official Combu Route Map, in printed and digital formats. More than a visitor guide, it became a territorial statement: "We have a route, governance and identity; we are a destination, not an accident." Its creation involved territorial surveys, community meetings, spatial validation and a visual language inspired by Amazonian cartography, with rivers, canoes, palms, cacao, riverside architecture and biodiversity.

The Green Destinations certification process provided further structure and evidence. Vida Caboca Turismo and Filha do Combu achieved Gold certification; Saldosa Maloca and Olaria River Hostel achieved Silver; Biojoias do Combu and Canto dos Pássaros achieved Bronze. Chácara da Ana later joined the movement, while the Combu Route itself received Silver certification. This showed that the island was not only telling a compelling story, but creating measurable evidence of governance, sustainability, cultural protection and socioeconomic value.

During COP30, the Route became a showcase for a contemporary Amazon that speaks for itself. It welcomed delegations, technical teams and institutional leaders, including representatives from Sebrae across the Amazon and national tourism authorities. The challenge now is to convert visibility into stronger tourism products and fair economic opportunities without losing the principles that inspired the movement. The journey continues, but one change is already clear: Combu has stopped merely reacting to tourism and has begun to govern its own future.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The breakthrough was that Combu stopped being merely a scenic backdrop and became an organised destination with its own voice. The Combu Route earned Silver certification from Green Destinations, while local enterprises achieved Gold, Silver and Bronze certifications. Training in food safety, composting, sustainable crafts, river hospitality, safety and territorial storytelling strengthened businesses, guides and boat operators, turning isolated initiatives into a more qualified network.

Environmental improvements also became visible. Ten waste collection points were planned or installed, nine rainwater treatment units were introduced, and local enterprises adopted autonomous systems for water, sanitation and energy. The Dona Nena Chocolate Factory now stores about 17,000 litres of rainwater. Off-grid energy systems increased autonomy, while biodigesters converted organic waste into methane for riverside kitchens, reducing both waste and dependence on cooking gas.

The Route also created new income opportunities. Artisans and extractive workers who once depended mainly on fairs began offering workshops and experiences on the island, earning from their knowledge as well as their products. Visitors, especially from the United States, France and Switzerland, now receive deeper interpretation of cacao, trees and riverside work, leaving with “new lenses” through which to understand the Amazon.

The most profound result is symbolic: residents feel increasingly recognised as authors of their own future. Combu is no longer presented only as a place to visit, but as a living territory that creates knowledge, protects nature, generates opportunities and governs its development.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

The deepest lesson from Combu is that sustainability cannot be imported as a ready-made formula. Climate debates shaped mainly by outside perspectives often have little impact on everyday life in the Amazon. We learned to “peel back the layers” until we reached what the community truly needed to protect: its geography, culture, autonomy, knowledge and ability to decide its own future.

This required moving beyond the traditional economic, social and environmental pillars. Our strategies also had to include territorial, cultural, political-institutional and knowledge-building dimensions, combining science with ancestral wisdom. The Sustainable Tourism Committee proved essential: without legitimate local governance, the island would remain dependent on fragmented aid and short-term solutions.

We also learned that timing matters. Actions taken too early may lack trust and support; actions taken too late may only respond to damage already done. Next time, we would invest even earlier in community listening, shared indicators and clearer economic data.

Our advice to other destinations, especially in the Global South, is simple: use international events as a window of opportunity, not as the source of your vision. Start by recognising your own resources and capabilities, build governance before marketing, and create solutions from within. No one understands—or will defend—a territory better than the people who live there.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The ripple effect of the Combu Route is visible in the political recognition gained by the island’s residents. Riverside leaders now speak at public events, join decision-making spaces and represent the territory beyond Belém’s rivers. The Route also encouraged entrepreneurs, boat operators, guides, artisans and institutions to see themselves as part of one destination, with shared responsibilities and a common voice.

Its influence extends beyond tourism products. Composting, rainwater systems, biodigesters, certifications, cultural interpretation and community-based experiences have become references

for other island businesses. Partnerships with universities, Sebrae, public agencies and international networks have expanded, while local knowledge has gained legitimacy.
The most lasting impact is a new culture of autonomy. Combu has shown that creative bioeconomy and hospitality can be built from local capabilities, without waiting for outside solutions. The Route seeks not to replicate itineraries, but to inspire other territories to create their own forms of sustainable governance. Its future rests on a conviction: when a community recognises its knowledge, organises collectively and speaks with its own voice, tourism can become resilience, pride and lasting opportunity.

Awards or Certifications
Green Destinations Silver Certification – Combu Route, recognised as a sustainable tourism destination.

Good Travel Seal – Gold:
• Vida Caboca Turismo
• Filha do Combu Chocolates

Good Travel Seal – Silver:
• Saldosa Maloca Eco-Restaurant
• Olaria River Hostel

Good Travel Seal – Bronze:
• Chácara da Ana
• Canto dos Pássaros Restaurant
• Biojoias do Combu

Related recognition:
• 2023 Brazilian National Tourism Award – Mário César Carvalho, winner in the Private Initiative – Micro and Small Entrepreneurs category, in recognition of his work with Vida Caboca Turismo and Filha do Combu Chocolates.

Web Articles
Embratur – “Combu Island: Embratur participates in the launch of a route promoting sustainable tourism and riverside culture in Pará”
https://embratur.com.br/2025/09/23/ilha-do-combu-embratur-participa-de-lancamento-de-roteiro-que-promove-turismo-sustentavel-e-cultura-ribeirinha-no-para/

Agência Brasil – “Tourism route in Belém will offer visits to Combu Island”
https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/meio-ambiente/noticia/2025-10/roteiro-turistico-em-belem-oferecera-visita-ilha-do-combu

Belém City Government – “Belém launches Combu Route and strengthens sustainable tourism in the Amazon”
https://agencia.belem.pa.gov.br/belem-lanca-rota-combu-e-fortalece-turismo-sustentavel-na-amazonia/

Brazilian Ministry of Tourism – “Tourism in Action: Combu Island and Bahia cases show how to generate income and protect the forest”
https://www.gov.br/turismo/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/turismo-em-acao-cases-da-ilha-do-combu-e-da-bahia-mostram-como-gerar-renda-e-proteger-a-floresta

Sebrae – “Technical visit to Combu Island strengthens the exchange of knowledge on community-based tourism in the Amazon”
https://ap.agenciasebrae.com.br/cultura-empreendedora/visita-tecnica-na-ilha-do-combu-fortalece-troca-de-saberes-sobre-turismo-de-base-comunitaria-na-amazonia/

Varejo S.A./CNDL – “The entrepreneurial Amazon: Combu Route strengthens its position as a model of local development”
https://cndl.org.br/varejosa/amazonia-que-empreende-rota-do-combu-se-fortalece-como-modelo-de-desenvolvimento-local/

https://institutodel.org.br/ilha-do-combu-lanca-rota-turistica-e-conquista-certificacao-internacional-em-sustentabilidade/

https://embratur.com.br/2025/09/23/ilha-do-combu-embratur-participa-de-lancamento-de-roteiro-que-promove-turismo-sustentavel-e-cultura-ribeirinha-no-para/

https://agencia.belem.pa.gov.br/belem-lanca-rota-combu-e-fortalece-turismo-sustentavel-na-amazonia/

Other Relevant Links
National Council of Justice – Preservation rules for Combu Island, including the protection of traditional knowledge:
https://www.cnj.jus.br/ilha-do-combu-no-para-ganha-regras-de-preservacao-com-apoio-do-judiciario/

Academic article – “Tourism and Development: Opinions and Perspectives of Different Stakeholders in the Combu Island Environmental Protection Area”:
https://www.redalyc.org/journal/2610/261080889005/html/

Brazilian National Tourism Award – Official announcement:

https://www.gov.br/turismo/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/premio-nacional-do-turismo-conheca-os-vencedores-do-grupo-201cprofissionais-de-destaque201d

Tourism2030/DestiNet – Vida Caboca Turismo:
https://destinet.eu/who-who/market-place/certifiers-section/good-travel-seal/vida-caboca-turismo

Tourism2030/DestiNet – Filha do Combu Chocolates:
https://destinet.eu/who-who/market-place/certifiers-section/good-travel-seal/filha-do-combu-chocolates-e-doces-regionais

Tourism2030/DestiNet – Saldosa Maloca:
https://destinet.eu/who-who/market-place/certifiers-section/good-travel-seal/saldosa-maloca

Tourism2030/DestiNet – Olaria River Hostel:
https://destinet.eu/who-who/market-place/certifiers-section/good-travel-seal/olaria-river-hostel

Quotes or Testimonials

“The Combu Route was born first as a pact of coexistence, and only later as a tourism product. We first had to learn how to cooperate, recognise one another and care for the territory together. Only then could we transform this collective commitment into a meaningful experience for visitors.”

“We realised that tourism needed to generate more positive outcomes than negative change. If it threatened our rivers, food systems, silence, ancestral knowledge and community life, it would be destroying exactly what visitors came to experience.”

“No one would do it for us. We understood that the future of Combu had to be shaped from within, through local knowledge, collective courage and the decision to govern our own territory.” — Mário Carvalho, Combu Sustainable Tourism Committee

“The Combu Route has brought together businesses that share the same purpose: offering tourism that goes beyond passive sightseeing. We want visitors to interact, listen, taste, learn and understand the people and knowledge behind each experience. By working together, we can present a more meaningful, participatory and responsible way of discovering the island.” — Ana Paula, Vida Caboca Turismo

“What I see today is something I dreamed about many years ago: tourism creating economic opportunities for our community without sacrificing the environmental balance of the island. We do not want tourism to grow at any cost. We want more conscious visitors, better-prepared businesses and a community that continues to mature in its commitment to sustainability.” — Prazeres, Saldosa Maloca Eco-Restaurant

“Tourism has brought opportunities. In the past, the lack of income made life much harder for many families, and today more people can work, produce and remain on the island. But we need to accelerate our collective awareness and strengthen leaders who care about the environment, social well-being and the future of every resident—not only those directly involved in tourism.” Dona Nena. Filha do Combu.