CHAPTER 19

Ecotourism certification: potential and challenges

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Introduction

New policy instruments to promote voluntary standards beyond legislation compliance have grown in popularity since the 1990s. Certification programmes are one such instrument that assumes market interest in the ethical forms of production and a desire for market transparency, and as such promotes market-based approaches to sustainable production. Tourism, not unlike other sectors, is moving ahead in the process of understanding and seeking ways to implement sustainability. From initial conceptualisations of sustainability and ecotourism, since the mid-1990s in Europe, and 2000 onwards elsewhere, we have witnessed the agreement of working definitions (Font, 2001; Honey and Rome, 2001; Buckley, 2002), the showcasing of good and best practices, and more attempts to measure eco and sustainable behaviour, set standards, certify those meeting the standards, and provide market benefits to them (Font and Buckley, 2001; Honey, 2002 for two collections of papers).

The process of setting voluntary standards and ensuring these are met is known as conformity assessment, and provides the context to outline the development and use of sustainable tourism standards (Font, 2002; Toth, 2002). The further identification of best practices has led to setting lists of common characteristics of such businesses that can be identified, with a managerial aspiration to transfer best practices. The next logical step has been that of setting criteria to assess sustainability, in the case of tourism either by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the public sector, or a combination of both (WTO, 2002). These criteria need to be industry relevant and achievable by a proportion of the sector, achieved through benchmarking best practice, either qualitatively (through cases) or quantitatively (through the measurement of indicators such as water and energy consumption and waste production). Part of the process includes setting indicators that can credibly and effectively measure the standards across the range of applicants they are intended for. These indicators are then assessed by an assessor who has been deemed as competent for the task (involving skills and no conflict of interest amongst others). If the assessment is successful, the applicant is certified as meeting the standards. The certification body could be subject to a procedure of accreditation, guaranteeing that the certification body has undertaken its tasks correctly. The overall aim is that the label of this certification programme will be recognised by consumers or distribution channels, and considered as added value that leads to its acceptance in the marketplace, to support the marketing of companies that meet standards. The process is the same across a number of
industries, although tourism is behind the experiences of forestry, organic, and fair trade (Font and Tribe, 2001).

Certification has been promoted as both improving the performance of tourism firms and promoting more sustainable consumption. More research is needed to explore the extent to which certified firms achieve the benefits promoted by certification programmes, and these programmes should be more accountable when they rely on government and donor funds. There is also very little evidence that companies are leaving certification programmes because of lack of benefits, on the contrary, Green Deal and SmartVoyager in Latin America, for instance, have had 100% reapplication every year (although this might relate to barriers to initial entry as mentioned later). There is an increasing interest in measuring the benefits that certification can deliver, particularly the potential to provide a market-based mechanism for small firms in developing countries. The early assessments from the World Tourism Organization in the context of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UN-CSD) in 1999 to evaluate the effectiveness of voluntary initiatives in the tourism sector (WTO, 2002) showed certification as an upcoming and promising tool, and the limited tourism literature also showed similar optimism (Font and Buckley, 2001; Honey, 2002). However later reports have questioned the ability to deliver the results promised (OECD, 2003; UNEP, 2005; World Bank, 2005), suggesting it is timely to consider the ability of certification to deliver what it has promised. It is in this context that this chapter aims to be critical of the potential for certification to be a successful policy tool to encourage more responsible behaviour amongst companies claiming to sell ecotourism. Because the literature in tourism certification is now fairly extensive, the chapter goes directly to key points of the debate without dwelling on the background (see Font and Buckley, 2001; Font, 2002, 2005; Honey, 2002; Black and Crabtree, 2006).

### The applicant

The number of applicants to certification programmes is not increasing as fast as it was initially expected. The average number of certified companies is 50 per programme, and the rate of growth is low. Most programmes attracted first the low hanging fruit, those firms that were already good in ecotourism, and were seeking recognition. It appears to have proved more difficult to change the behaviour of other firms. In this sense certification programmes need to be more market led, as the standards set are not sufficiently informed by understanding
the applicant firms. For example, it is not known whether a firm that applies many of the standards proposed will be financially better off or not, although we know that for some of the criteria such as water/waste/energy management there are eco-savings (particularly for resorts), but there are few examples of quantifying added costs from meeting other criteria, particularly labour and social standards, particularly for ecotourism small firms. A market-led standard would take this into account, and ensure that it can be accurately claimed that overall the firm does not increase its operational costs. The standards are set by benchmarking best practice, usually aiming very high, but there is no assessment of the commitment, cost, and time that a company is required to invest in order to meet such standards.

The demand for certification needs to be created (Rainforest Alliance, 2002). Market studies might say that the demand is not there, but it remains unclear as to whether this is because certification is not known, understood, or wanted. Demand will take time in tourism, just as it did in other sectors. Because critical mass is required (World Bank, 2005), programmes targeting key vulnerable areas (e.g. SmartVoyager with Galapagos) or the most vulnerable groups (ROC with indigenous people) is essential. Achieving pockets of critical mass and managing those pockets as learning networks both for sustainability and quality are necessary.

Monitoring market demand and particularly market satisfaction will give the data to prove some of the benefits of certification. Raising awareness of the tourism industry alone will not be sufficient incentive to increase applications. Certification programmes will need to collect evidence to prove what percentage of firms are making improvements to become certified, and when certification is of interest to those firms that already had high standards. It is likely that the applicants in the first years are of the latter group, and only when certification programmes have been operating for some time they will become attractive propositions to improve performance. Large firms do not want to be certified as a method to attract business, but to protect their brand for public relations reasons against possible negative publicity (Kahlenborn and Dominé, 2001; Fairweather et al., 2005). At present multinational hotels might not perceive the need for ecolabels and a Costa Rican study found that when they did, they scored low in sustainability criteria (Rivera, 2002). It is important to understand what increasing the trade/marketing benefits, and subsequently broadening the type of applicants, does to the credibility of the certification programmes.
Equity and small firms

Equity refers to the fairness of an instrument, which is here considered as the ability of tourism firms to access certification. Certification in Ecuador, Belize, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, has shown how useful certification standards are for capacity building and levelling the playing field (Ronald Sanabria, personal comment, October 2005). Programmes that encourage small firm participation usually receive financial support from their governments, in the form of access to capacity building, marketing, or less often physical investments, and these funders will need to assess the ability of certification to change practice in comparison with other policy tools such as taxing negative behaviour or rewarding positive behaviour through tax breaks, providing market-based incentives such as additional marketing, amongst others, although no study has been conducted to make comparisons of policy tools. Clearly all voluntary tools require an effort to ensure small firms benefit, certification is not an exception, and the analysis below needs to be understood in this context.

Small and medium firms, and particularly disadvantaged segments of society particularly in poverty, need equitable access to information, training, and technology, before being able to promote certified firms. Certification as a tool tries to promote equitable market access, by providing opportunities to promote good practice; the same can be said for accreditation. Even after acknowledging the benefits to sustainable or ecotourism certification, many questions remain on how to ensure these benefits reach a wide variety of businesses, as there is evidence that firms most interested in certification in the early days already have high standards (UNEP, 2006) which can inflate the value of the project in the short term and set unrealistic targets for future interventions. It is logical that these are the first companies targeted, to showcase models of good practice. The challenge comes when there is inequitable access to certification, as explained below, because inequitable access means that certification can be a trade barrier. This is still an issue for voluntary programmes if we find that tour operators request certification as a requirement to trade.

The first years of each certification programme are characterised by working with best practice firms to showcase the application of the standards. However there is little consideration of whether beyond the period of standard setting, other firms will be able to meet those standards based on the advice that can be provided through the training materials available via the certification programme, or whether meeting the standards will
increase costs to the firm (other than for those programmes focusing on environmental issues alone that emphasise eco-savings).

The point debated here is the extent of the benefits that firms should receive from certification, because tourism companies do not start from a level playing field that allows them access to be certified (Medina, 2005). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) own survey ‘of the US experts that had an opinion on whether the programmes either advantaged or disadvantaged small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), the sense was that the programmes were much more likely to be used by larger and foreign-owned firms. This is primarily because of the direct costs and management burdens of participating in these schemes’ (TIES, 2005, p. 9). A different study conducted for TIES concludes that:

The same structural problems of high costs, complexity, and lack of flexibility to reflect local conditions apply with special force to smaller enterprises. The SMEs can’t afford expensive programs, need simpler designs, and require latitude to adjust to management and physical limitations. The respondents were unanimous in their view that SMEs need comprehensive support if they are not to be disadvantaged by certification programs. Accordingly, governments, NGOs, industry associations and other potential donors should be prepared to provide integrated packages of financial, technical and marketing assistance to SMEs. The primary focus of this assistance should be to enable disadvantaged small enterprises to improve the overall quality of their offerings. A side benefit of this assistance would be to position them for higher sustainable travel certification rankings, but this should not be the primary objective of the assistance (TIES, 2004, p. 19).

In developing proposals for Western Europe, the issue of whether developed countries could have a certification programme has not been questioned and not seen as a hurdle, but this is a key concern when thinking of a global reach. The 2005 report from TIES notes that in fact European programmes do target small applicants, but ‘while this may cover the primary concerns of equity in Europe, it is likely that most people in the five target countries (Belize, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala) will remain concerned about equal access to certification opportunities in the region, especially for micro and community-based tourism firms’ (TIES, 2005, p. 10). The only data collected to back up this point are a survey from 2000 where participation in the Costa Rican programme correlated highly with the Chief Executive Officer’s level of education and environmental expertise – but no difference for Costa Rican nationals/expatriates as initially expected (Rivera and de Leon, 2005).
While scaled fees are suggested as one way to address this inequity (World Bank, 2005) there is no evidence to suggest that is more than an acknowledgement of the problem, rather than providing a credible solution. Increasing the number of companies that meet these standards allows in the medium term to reach the economies of scale to produce better training for applicants and marketing of their products. The key challenge is the potential impact this can have on those firms that are not suited to it, if it becomes a powerful tool for increased trade, or if governments and industry associations aim to enforce compulsory standards.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is a measure of how well an instrument achieves its objectives. ‘Certification schemes, although increasing in their number and scope over the past 10 years, have not enabled SMEs greater access to market opportunities, nor have they moved the tourism industry significantly forward towards sustainability’ (World Bank, 2005, p. 4). Certification was also found to be unsuccessful in allowing greater access to new market segments (World Bank, 2005, p. 31). Certification in other sectors such as forestry has focused on closing the gap between ‘very best’ and ‘good’ practice, while poor forest management is little affected (Bass et al., 2001). The claims that certified firms perform better have been used in promoting certification by TIES (i.e. Green Tourism Business Scheme having higher occupancy rates, or Costa Rica’s Certificate for Sustainable Tourism certified companies having higher room prices) are politicised: it is unlikely this is the result of certification, and instead it is more possible that better managed firms in the first place happen to have the resources and knowledge to get involved in certification. As put by the World Bank (2005, p. 5):

 certification programmes have enabled companies to reduce costs, mainly related to the environment (water, waste, and energy savings). This cost saving advantage or training aid has helped improve management practices and processes, however there is little incentive to continue being part of a certification label as there is no proven marketing benefit. Certification programmes are costly to run and most are subsidised by governments or international funding agencies. They are also costly to join for the individual operations, and so far have not delivered on promised marketing benefits and consumer awareness. Overall, industry awareness of such schemes is negligible.

Measuring and further improving effectiveness will be paramount. While ‘guidelines within the industry are becoming more
common, however, implementation and evaluation is still weak’ (World Bank, 2005, p. 4). Most ecolabel schemes are not ade-
quately resourced to undertake a scientifically valid monitoring 
of their effectiveness, but they seem to recognise its importance 
(UNEP, 2006). UNEP suggests that this is ‘integrated into the 
conformity assessment process, as long as means can be found 
to limit the impact of conflicts of interest’ (UNEP, 2005, p. 39). 
All that exists at present are excellent rich stories, usually col-
clected by the certification programmes themselves, and with little 
evidence of the added value that was provided by the process 
of certification. Anecdotally we know that many of those firms 
already performed well before considering certification, but we 
also have many examples of firms that have learned through 
the process of becoming certified. However we cannot quantify 
the added benefit of certification in itself. The challenge is to 
collect data independently from the actual certification pro-
grammes, which will have a vested interest in always showcasing 
exemplary practices. The methodology needs to be standard-
ised so comparisons can be made across different certification 
programmes. Because market access is a key benefit (although 
maybe only in the future) for certified firms, the author would 
suggest including an indicator on additional trade that can be 
directly attributed to being a certified firm.

Certification programmes must be publicly accountable when-
ever they use public or donor funds. More robust data are needed 
to report to donors or other funding bodies as well as stake-
holders in general, beyond numbers of certified firms. Without 
any further evidence, the ratio of number of certified firms 
divided by the investment on the certification programme is the 
only indicator of success of the project. During the 2005 World 
Tourism Forum (WTF) in Rio de Janeiro, a workshop with over 
30 certification specialists was conducted which brought up 
that this is not a good measure of the achievements of these pro-
grammes (UNEP, 2006). This issue is being addressed by the 
introduction of performance-related indicators to measure and 
communicate the achievements of certified firms through the 
process of certification.

Efficiency and financing

Efficiency is a measure of how well an instrument uses the 
resources available. Just as for other sectors (UNEP, 2005), at 
present there is limited scientifically reliable evidence of the 
value for money of standard certification as a policy instrument 
(Rivera, 2002) as costs are not clear and effectiveness cannot
be measured. Case studies of good practice usually report on experiences of companies that were already good before applying because these were the first target in setting up the certification programmes, and these programmes have not been operating for long enough to measure their cumulative impact on change in behaviour. In the next few years it is necessary to measure efficiency to allow comparisons with other sustainability tools.

To understand efficiency it is necessary to look at the financing mechanisms. There are hardly any certification programmes that can claim to be self-financing, here understood as the certification programmes’ ability to pay all of its fixed and variable costs through the revenues they generate from certification applicants. In some cases being self-financing was mistaken by having secured donor funds for the long term, the issue here is that certification is. Most rely on short-term start-up funds from governments and NGOs. Few have industry buy in from the outset, and they do not have clear funding strategies that in the next 5 years can make them self-sufficient. In many cases a firm’s application fee only covers part of the costs of the service they receive (training and verification), but the services received are not sufficient to reduce their operating costs (through eco-savings) or to increase turnover (through marketing) to offset the price paid and time invested, particularly for small firms. This is only possible because certification programmes are government (or NGO) subsidised (for the period of developing the certification programmes only), the main challenge being how to run certification programmes in the long term. Being self-financing might not necessarily have to be the goal, if funders (particularly governments) find that the improvements in sustainability performance are higher through certification than through other tools. There are however no data to compare the cost efficiency of certification against other tools.

**Business to consumer**

Companies adopting a sustainability label for tourism, just as when adopting the Forest Stewardship Council label, are co-branding their product. This is most important for small firms with no international market recognition, where they can use this label as a sign of quality and reliability. A label is a means to communicate and overcome lack of trust. In industries where the consumer does not have the capacity to undertake tests, a label ensures that a product is what it promises (e.g. organic). In tourism, the consumer can experience first hand
many of the aspects of the production of their holiday, but only when they have already paid for the product, and often cross-cultural borders means they cannot tell whether what they are experiencing is environmentally friendly or fair trade, according to local customs. Tourists are unable to tell either whether their enjoyment of the destination is contributing to the long-term deterioration of the site, although market research shows that this is a concern (Gordon, 2001).

A key challenge for tourism certification is that having a label does not necessarily equate to a higher-quality product than a competitor. Many high-performing tourism firms are not certified. The brand therefore loses meaning as tourists can find the same sustainability elsewhere. Certified products are not meaningful to the consumer because they do not have significantly different attributes. Consumers cannot tell from the available information whether a certified product is better than others in terms that matter to the tourist.

‘Case after case has demonstrated that consumer demand develops long after a certification programme is well established’ (Bien, 2005, p. 16), with consumer demand taking between 8 and 15 years (sometimes as long as 20) to develop. Certification programmes need further understanding of why companies apply, and why distribution channels might use certification as part of their supply chain. UNEP (2005, p. 35) concludes that the main drivers for sustainability are not linked to consumption, but to ‘employee concerns, access to capital and reputational risk management, or protecting the “license to operate”’. Tour operator experiences prove this point too, as put by Chris Thompson from the Federation of Tour Operators, ‘we want to sell holidays that happen to be sustainable, not sell sustainable tourism’ (personal comment, July 2005). This relates back to the issue of what is certification meant to achieve. Is it always keeping standards high to only certify the top-performing companies? Or is it to increase standards across all tourism firms?

The message of being certified is unlikely to make it to the final consumer either, just the benefits of a better holiday experience. UNEP (2005, p. 37) states that ‘what is important is not that consumers are willing to pay more for ecolabelled products, but simply that one of the market actors in the value chain has a financial incentive to promote ecolabelling’. The market incentive is easier in other sectors, such as organic products, where the retail price of the product is considerably higher than the cost of production. In tourism, where profit margins are low, it will be very difficult to market certified products at a price premium, and also the margins do not allow for absorbing increased production costs.
Business to business

There is agreement amongst experts consulted in preparation for this chapter, the World Bank (2005) study, TIES research (2004), and the outcomes from an increasing number of projects (Rainforest Alliance, 2003; Bien, 2005) that, business-to-business marketing, particularly through sustainable supply chain management, is the key avenue for marketing certified products. A recent study for UNEP shows that most distribution and communication channels are willing to give preference to sustainable tourism products, and for most this can be done without unmanageable additional costs (Font and Carey, 2005). Those reviewed were destination management organisations and tourist boards, tour operators, guidebooks, media, travel fairs, Internet retailers, and consumer associations. They all stated that they would need to develop guidelines of what sustainability meant for their suppliers, and then find ways to encourage those suppliers to meet these standards.

While this provides an opportunity, it does not mean that certification is necessarily the answer. For certified forest products for example, retailers did not need an ecolabel to green their supply chain, and ‘they are often content with a supplier’s declaration of conformity, a second-party audit or a third-party audit that does not lead to the application of an ecolabel’ (UNEP, 2005, p. 34). While the Federation of Tour Operators (UK) and ANVR (The Netherlands) are developing preferred codes of practice on sustainability for accommodation, wildlife tourism, animal attractions, marine recreation … they are seeking more cost-efficient forms of verification than those provided by the current certification programmes, and more tailored to their product and geographical needs (Chris Thompson, personal comment, July 2005, see also http://www.fto.co.uk/responsible-tourism/best-practice/). Their aim is to slowly mainstream sustainability by raising the bar for the majority of suppliers, while certification showcases best practice. Certification programmes need to capitalise on tour operators’ need for corporate social reporting but understand how the product they are after differs from what certification offers today.

If certification does prove to become a powerful tool, it is necessary to consider again whether certification can only deliver for best practice firms, or whether it is a transferable model for the industry as a whole. ‘While certification schemes may be described as ways for SMEs in lower income countries to obtain access to market, interviews with both major and specialist tour operators, travel providers and certification programmes do not support this view’ (World Bank, 2005, p. 30).
Particularly in the case that certification could become a requirement to trade, the challenge is to ensure that tour operators mainly, but also other distribution channels, provide help to suppliers to meet the required standards, ensuring equity, and no barriers to market access. It will be the way in which tour operators work with their suppliers, and whether standards are simply imposed or they are facilitated, that will determine the success of standard setting. These standards can be however introduced in ways other than certification as we understand it today (UNEP, 2005, pp. 35–36).

**Standards and the message to the market**

Certification relies on having a credible message that is remembered by the market and is meaningful in purchasing decisions. Most of the (tourism and otherwise) certification programmes have spent a large proportion of their start-up funds developing standards, and this increased understanding of what sustainability might mean and how it can be measured is already a key benefit from certification. The most frequent reason given for companies’ support of the Forest Stewardship Council (pioneer in timber certification and years ahead of the tourism experience) is not the environmental effectiveness of the standard, but the fact that it has been developed in a multi-stakeholder forum (UNEP, 2005, p. 35). Therefore only consensus-based standards can lead to a successful certification programme.

Global standards make sense in the marketplace. Transnational corporations can benefit from certification (Conroy, 2002) but they want to work to one standard that makes sense at corporate level regardless of operational location (Kahlenborn and Dominé, 2001). International trade rules favour international standards as these are believed to create an equal playing field that benefits competition (Bendell and Font, 2004). Markets want to be communicated one single meaningful message, and both small ecotourism firms, and the many current certification programmes trying to represent them, are fighting for a voice with their small budgets.

However, the politics of engaging different partners that are doing good work on the ground is leading to compromises that are different from rational market-based solutions. This is, the more politically palatable proposal of not having one international standard but many local standards and a process of mutual recognition, based on the common ground that has been found so far. Any international brand would be the result of an accreditation process to confirm compliance of transparency in
the way certification is conducted, but each label would keep their identity.

The author thinks that the need for local differences in standards will need to be well communicated to stakeholders that would instinctively prefer one standard. For example, when the Federation of Tour Operators has asked to compare their preferred suppliers code of practice against the VISIT standard, complex explanations about what VISIT is and the fact that there are as many standards as certification programmes had to be given, which slowed down the process of mutual recognition. On the other hand, within the Network of the Americas, members have successfully developed a baseline standard and they are now marketing jointly based on the criteria they have in common. Comparisons of this baseline standard have been made with the sustainability criteria of associations like ANVR and with individual tour operator’s requirements (like TUI Nederland) to help companies reach a better understanding on how to use certification programs in the Americas as a business-to-business tool.

It is easier to send one message with only one standard. A challenge from the author’s point of view is that even if only one logo exists, the products that will be under this umbrella will not be sufficiently homogeneous in quality and type of product. The small number of certified companies, and the fact that the basic-quality attributes are very different (a five star hotel and a guest house can have the same environmental label) makes the author think that choosing providers based on an ecolabel is not likely, but clearly this opinion could be disputed.

**Government support**

Certification programmes rely generally on government support. Font and Bendell (2002) analysed the data collected for the World Tourism Organization (2002) to find that 20 of the 59 standard certification schemes at the time were led by government agencies, and a further 18 had government involvement either through direct financial support, marketing support, expert know-how in standard setting, verification procedures, or surveillance of procedures being followed by the certification body. Government agencies involved generally include environment ministries or equivalent, tourist boards, and in fewer cases standards institutes. Government financial support is crucial to half the schemes from which data are available. Grants or loans are available through a variety of schemes for consultants and assessment process.
There are other costs that currently the applicant does not pay for and are generally subsidised by governments, donors, and NGOs, and it is expected that this will continue in the future (WTO, 2003). Examples are standard setting, consultation and maintenance, verifier training, marketing, administrative costs, and quality assurance of the certification programme. These costs make certification not equitable for those governments that do not have the funds to set up their own national certification programmes or to operate low-interest loans for efficiency improvements. In a survey conducted for the World Tourism Organization in 2001, 26 national tourist boards responded with many having an interest in running certification programmes, but reporting at the time that this was not their priority (Maccarrone-Eaglen and Font, 2002), while in other countries circumstances do not allow (there are examples from Fiji, Kenya, South Africa, Dominican Republic, Venezuela where early attempts of setting up a certification programme have failed).

Font and Bendell (2002) also found that 38 out of the 59 schemes had government involvement in highlighting and advising on best practice. Marketing is a key benefit promoted to applicants of most schemes, and government support can be the single most important incentive to apply. There is no evidence of changes in the legal regime from the data available, and it seems more probable that the opposite occurs; governments introduce voluntary measures to incentive industry to adopt higher standards as a method to test the feasibility of further legislation, or to encourage the adoption of recent legislation, as was the case of the Blue Flag in Europe, instrumental in the implementation of Bathing Water Quality legislation.

In this sense, certification would be more appealing to governments if it was integrated with other instruments for sustainability, several of which were recently outlined if not compared (UNEP and WTO, 2005). Its origin stems from the formalisation of industry awards and showcasing best practice, and in this sense is more representative of industry practice than from externally set agendas. Yet generally certification is only integrated with other instruments for sustainability only in as far as they are generally linked to voluntary initiatives and incentives to encourage a more sustainable approach to management. Certification does currently provide a mechanism to operationalise international treaties and agreements. The fact that half of the ecolabels receive government support suggests it is feasible to further integrate them with government sustainability targets and to be used as methods to implement
international agreements, as recommended by the WTO (2003), notwithstanding the challenge of funding. There are limited data available on the link between national sustainable tourism policies and certification programmes to comment on progress on this matter.

Accreditation

Many of the challenges faced by certification programmes have been explained because they are small, often regional or national programmes, that do not have sufficient visibility. As such, most of the current discussions are about setting up regional networks, peer recognition and quality assurance, and marketing. The accreditation function of a stewardship council has a very specific purpose: ensure transparency and due diligence, aimed at helping solve the problem of fragmentation, lack of credibility, and support marketing. The challenge is whether these functions from accreditation can turn around the inability of certification programmes individually to provide the benefits that applicants expect. The report from the World Bank (2005, p. 5) suggests that ‘if certification is to continue and be successful … there is a need for one global body to set and monitor the adoption of industry wide criteria’. This does not mean that accreditation is the solution, or that accreditation will be the answer to the many problems faced by certification programmes. ‘One brand would help certification to be internationally recognised and also comply with generally accepted international criteria, and thus have a stronger chance of brand recognition in the industry. However, no single approach has so far been put forward successfully due to the varying degrees of infrastructure in countries and the lack of sufficient markets to attract certifiable product’ (World Bank, 2005, p. 31).

The feasibility proposal for a Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) suggested there are a variety of governance structures widely accepted and potentially transferable to new accreditation bodies; however financial benchmarking has shown great weaknesses in the sector, over-relying on seed funding from donors and the general inability of the sector to be self-financing, which cast a shadow over the long-term survival of accreditation in its present form (Rainforest Alliance, 2003). The feasibility proposal explains that few, if any, environmental or social accreditation agencies were in 2002 financially sustainable through accreditation fees alone. These agencies are seeking alternate models such as segmenting accreditation functions from standard setting, education, and marketing, as well as new
ways to capture revenues. These agencies are finding that accreditation fees are not sufficient to cover expenses associated with providing the comprehensive services that an accreditation body must provide. Even in the long run, accreditation agencies may need to rely on significant outside commitments from governmental agencies and private foundations. In those proposals, the annual cost of accreditation was estimated at around $US900,000 but most of it would have to come from subsidies (Rainforest Alliance, 2003; Skinner et al., 2004). There is wide consensus that only a streamlined, cost-effective STSC can be supported, and the business plan should explain what this can mean in practice. Tourism certification, and accreditation in other industries, is however improving fast. This information is well documented in the STSC feasibility study and it will be used in the next phase of this initiative. The networks created have been successful in strengthening national programmes, the newly created programmes are showing they have learned from the weaknesses of past programmes and operate more efficiently from the outset, and there are transferable lessons from accreditation that should be fed into the STSC business plan.

Conclusions

Sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programmes are voluntary instruments to improve the environmental, social, and economic performance of tourism companies; they offer trade and marketing advantages to certified firms, provide credible information to suppliers and consumers, and encourage more sustainable consumption. Over 60 schemes have been operating mainly in Western Europe since the 1990s, with more developing in the Americas, Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania (the figures depend on actual definitions of what is a certification programme). These programmes have many good examples of how their actions have contributed to improvements in the field, in a variety of geographical contexts and for many types of tourism firms. However for these programmes to expand, they will need to address amongst others the issues of equity, effectiveness, and efficiency. Further data are needed to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of certification in comparison to other instruments and fully appreciate the potential of certification. Areas that need further development in order to make sustainable tourism certification more robust and effective include establishing performance indicators to measure the benefits of certification, developing market demand, and an adequate
supply of certified products to enable the demand to develop; harmonising standards among different programmes; assuring compliance with normalisation procedures; and reinforcing credibility and consumer recognition through standardised baseline criteria and accreditation.

Although there is scattered evidence of the effectiveness of some programmes, as well as the weaknesses of others, there is no systematic set of data that can demonstrate just how effective and cost-effective certification is for improving environmental, social, and economic performance. Many certification programmes do not publish articles or produce documents on how their actions contribute to their aims; hence there are little quantifiable or independent and scientifically reliable data available on their ability to promote sustainable change. Anecdotal reports from many programmes indicate that most businesses, after the first few already sustainable pioneers, show substantial improvement in their performance benchmarks as a direct result of the certification process. However, most programmes cannot demonstrate what part of the sustainable behaviour of the certified firms can be attributed to the process of being a certified firm, as opposed to sustainability actions that these companies were already taking before considering certification.

Experience from many other industries has shown that, in its early years, certification is not led by consumer demand, but rather by other forces. This applies to the present stage of sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification, with a few marked exceptions. At present consumer recognition is very low, and industry intermediaries are just beginning to consider certification as a tool for due-diligence and preliminary selection of suppliers. This is mainly for large tour operators speaking mainly to accommodation suppliers, and to a lesser extent areas where sustainability overlaps with health and safety, such as wildlife tourism. Without an effective strategy for increasing demand from businesses that wish to be certified, there will not be enough certified products to educate the consumer or enable tour operators to fill their catalogues with sustainable products. At present it would be misleading to promote certification as a way of directly increasing occupancy and sales, other marketing strategies should be used to encourage businesses to be certified and suppliers to use those businesses.

There are many instruments that can be used to promote more sustainable performance and that can contribute to ecotourism, but not necessarily providing marketing advantages. However, a closer inspection of certification shows that at present these trade and marketing advantages are not there. Direct consumer marketing is expensive and ineffective. Marketing to
communication and distribution channels, and below the line marketing in general, has not been sufficiently exploited, but has proven successful in several instances when tour operators have collaborated. Excess of logos, no consumer recognition, and no collaboration from tour operators were the main bottlenecks perceived. The need for differentiation, repositioning sustainability as more than quality, and designing simpler and well-communicated messages was stressed. In reflecting on these many challenges in this chapter, the author has aimed to provide an element of realism to the often overly enthusiastic claims of what certification can achieve. An element of differentiation for ecotourism providers in the marketplace is desirable and necessary, and promoting market-based systems to encourage more honest ecotourism claims and more responsible performance is preferable to alternative policy tools such as subsidies and legislation.

References


