Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism Certification: Raising Standards and Benefits

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While the increasing number of tourism certification programmes has allowed for bottom-up initiatives among local players involved with sustainable tourism efforts, in doing so, it has led to market confusion, and high start-up costs. In order to understand how to best set high standards for sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programmes around the world, and to make these programmes widely beneficial, the Rainforest Alliance has spearheaded a feasibility study for a global tourism accreditation body, entitled the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council.

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Introduction

Certification of sustainable tourism and ecotourism is the process of providing documented assurance that a product, service or organisation complies with a given standard (Font, 2002; Toth, 2002). Certification has the potential to reduce tourism’s negative environmental and social impacts, ensure that the tourism industry is held accountable to stakeholders and provide marketing benefits to those firms that meet the certification standards. Reports by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Tourism Organisation cite the benefits of certification, and many governments, NGOs and other stakeholders are introducing national, regional and international certification programmes (Font & Buckley, 2001; Honey, 2002).

However, the proliferation of these programmes now exceeds an assortment of good practice showcases. Today, more than 70 similar programmes exist, yet they lack comparable standards and criteria (WTO, 2002). Meanwhile, there is a growing consensus within the industry that the rapidly increasing number of certification programmes would benefit greatly from shared functions such as marketing, training and development, while supply chains and consumers would benefit from the setting of standards (Font, 2002; Honey, 2002; Sanabria, 2002; Synergy, 2000). This is where accreditation plays its role in ensuring rigour to both industry and markets, by guaranteeing the competency of certification programmes and the validity of the standards they work to. It does, in effect, certify the certifiers (Sanabria, 2002; Toth, 2002).
Nearly three years ago, Rainforest Alliance, with funding from the Ford Foundation and help from its Advisory Committees of NGOs, intergovernmental agencies and industry representatives, initiated a study to examine the feasibility of establishing an international Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC). If endorsed, the council would promote globally recognised, high-quality certification programmes for sustainable tourism and ecotourism through a process of information sharing, marketing and the assessment of standards (Sanabria, 2002).

Rainforest Alliance is well placed to undertake such study, as it operates certification of timber and organic products, and supports tourism certification, mainly in developing countries. The Alliance has hands-on experience of how the introduction of accreditation has changed a sector as controversial as timber production as its timber certification programme, SmartWood, is accredited by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Rainforest Alliance does not, however, manage the FSC, and the STSC is not modelled on the FSC (Buckley, 2002). The distinction is important first because FSC is a non-profit organisation independent from the organisations it accredits, and second because the STSC feasibility study reviewed a number of accreditation organisations from other sectors and the outcome does not resemble the FSC.

Feasibility Study

Rainforest Alliance recently published a report documenting the growing international agreement on the need for a sound accreditation programme that would assess and help standardise the rapidly growing number of sustainable and ecotourism certification programmes. The report focuses on the organisational blueprint, the financial feasibility and the activities that an organisation such as the STSC would undertake. The feasibility study also acted as a dissemination platform to raise awareness of certification.

The study involved a broad range of experts from around the globe, including grassroots and indigenous community activists, key tourism firms, and high-ranking officials in the UN and international environmental organisations. These experts met during a series of six workshops linked to the International Year of Ecotourism, as well as another eight workshops held at major and specialist travel trade fairs. Surveys were conducted with stakeholders not able to participate at workshops, as well as World Tourism Organisation member governments regarding their views on developing national certification programmes that would be subject to accreditation. A database of over 1000 organisations consulted was developed, linked to a number of contributions recorded in either questionnaires or participation at workshops, all of which are published on the Rainforest Alliance’s website.

The report highlighted a number of technical challenges in both certification and accreditation. Because of these challenges and concerns raised through the consultation phase of development, the proposals suggest to work towards progressive implementation, aiming towards final consensus, information sharing and skills transfer. Key challenges include views that, (1) it would add a new layer of bureaucracy, (2) the fact that accreditation is costly and that certification programmes already face financial difficulties, (3) that promoting the benefits of
certification is a challenge, particularly when tourism companies do not start from a level playing field with equal access to certification, and (4) that to gain support of all relevant stakeholders is a time-consuming process, especially when some of these have vested interests (Rainforest Alliance, 2003). The rest of the research note outlines the proposed phases.

**Phase 1: Network**

The first proposed step is the development of a network designed to share information and gain consensus on priorities and processes. It is recommended that the STSC function as a network for a period of two years, during which a wide range of stakeholders have the opportunity to consider the results of the feasibility study and its applicability in different regions, discuss the contents of a possible international standard and its applicability to different regions. Ford Foundation has allocated funds to a partnership of four key organisations (United Nations Environment Programme, Rainforest Alliance, The International Ecotourism Society – TIES, and the Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development – CESD) to partly roll out this first phase under the project name of ‘Partnership for Effective Implementation of Tools for Monitoring Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism.’ The certification-related component of this partnership will be developed by the Rainforest Alliance, TIES and CESC in coordination with the World Tourism Organisation.

The network phase will also provide tourism certification programmes with a vehicle upon which to build trust and to take ownership of the systems proposed. This phase is a bottom-up and cost-effective approach to developing standards and to raising the bar in sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification. It is a natural progression from the current discussions and it will increase general awareness of certification and provide a platform for further activities. The inherent weaknesses of this approach are that some groups may be under-represented, particularly since there is no clear mechanism by which to determine who should be included. Furthermore, the agenda could possibly be overly influenced by only those organisations that can afford to participate, as already identified in the development of this project (Font & Sallows, 2002). These potential weaknesses will be taken into account through the development of cost-effective on-line based methods of discussion and consultation, using the resources developed during the feasibility study.

The network will act primarily as a regional clearinghouse for information on certification, but it can also provide technical assistance and information on standards and certification processes, inform key stakeholders about certification and accreditation and continue to build the case for the STSC. The initial phase will be used to share information among certification programmes in order to identify best practices and to help transfer experiences to new contexts. The network will generate and share information electronically, hold regional multi-stakeholder workshops (depending on budget), and sponsor one international forum annually. This will permit countries without certification programmes to introduce necessary institutional arrangements and training.

The network will research criteria for an international standard and would develop a policy on regional and local differences. At this stage of development, certification programmes will not be assessed against criteria/standards,
however, they can first consider their operations against the ISO 65 Guide on procedures for operating a certification body (ISO/IEC, 1996) and the ISO 14024 standard on environmental standard development (ISO/IEC, 1999). Tourism-specific standards will be used such as the Mohonk Agreement (Honey, 2002), the VISIT standard (VISIT, 2002) and the Tour Operators Initiative report on certification as a tool for supply chain management (TOI, 2002), as well as the criteria, standards and procedures from tourism certification programmes.

**Phase 2: Association**

The second phase is to move from a network to an association, which we envision as an opportunity to market certified products, provide guidance to countries seeking to establish or upgrade certification programmes, and reach an agreement on standards and processes. This phase would allow tourism certification programmes and other stakeholders to reach an agreement on the international standards, as well as establishing the criteria and methods necessary to assess how programmes could best meet these standards. Certification programmes would benefit from joint marketing and training, thereby increasing the exposure of the tourism certification programmes and improving their performance.

The association phase is a necessary stepping-stone toward enabling tourism certification programmes to make the improvements necessary to meet accreditation requirements. This phase, like the network, assumes that the certification programmes need time to develop to their full capacity and expertise in order to improve their performance. The association phase focuses on creating systems for international marketing of different certification programmes. The association provides a mechanism to harmonise international standards and methods, and to assess those standards and the certification procedures against accreditation criteria. It also helps tourism certification programmes to improve their systems through information sharing and training, which would enable the certification programmes to save on consultancy costs.

The major strength of the association phase is that it would provide valuable added services that could help improve the functioning and sound development of tourism certification without the added financial and organisational burden of accreditation. Two key services – marketing and training – are to be provided to tourism certification programmes, while continuing the process towards setting performance standards. Key weaknesses of this phase are that it relies on subsidies, it prolongs the process towards the creation of a full accreditation system, and it does not guarantee that standards will be met. However, the experience of VISIT, the European partnership of tourism certification programmes, is encouraging in this respect. Through rolling out benefits of cooperation between labels, it has led participating organisations to work through quality assurance processes similar to accreditation (VISIT, 2002; VISIT, 2003).

**Phase 3: Accreditation**

The two previous phases would have led to the preparation of tourism certification programmes for accreditation. The inclusive development of accreditation standards and procedures in the previous phases aims to facilitate the acceptance of accreditation by certification programmes. The final step is
therefore to accredit and market certification programmes that meet the agreed upon standards and demonstrate the capacity to certify. Accreditation is planned as voluntary, with accredited certifiers having additional benefits and voting rights, although the specifics will be discussed and agreed in previous phases.

It is envisaged that the STSC would maintain structures from the association in order to make transitional processes as smooth as possible. The accreditation function will be outsourced to avoid conflicts of interest between, on the one hand, training certification programmes and marketing the certification programmes that are accredited, and on the other hand, the procedures and decision-making of accreditation. In doing so, the accreditation guarantees independence and transparency, ensures the accountability of certification programmes and improves the confidence of consumers and distribution channels on certification.

Conclusions

This research note aims to disseminate the results of the consultation process that has considered the feasibility of a Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, a body that would raise the standards of sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programmes, while delivering benefits from joint marketing, training and information sharing. The feasibility study has proposed three phased steps, and the first step has been initiated with funding from Ford Foundation, with the aim of facilitating a process to harmonise the criteria of ‘green’ certification programmes within the tourism industry. If conditions make it advisable, the partnership would eventually and gradually create an international tourism accreditation body or ‘stewardship council,’ which would ensure that certification systems conform to mutually agreed upon environmental and social standards. Careful consideration has been given to the nature of the sector and its ability to move across phases. These have informed the development of organisational charts that allow for such progression and additional tasks. It is believed that this initiative will set important precedents in the industry’s ability to move to agree and implement standards for sustainability.

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