Planning for recreation and tourism in forests: results from the consultation stage of the EU’s Tourfor project

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Abstract
This research note outlines the results from a consultation exercise carried out by Tourfor, a European Commission project aiming to develop an ecolabel for forest-based recreation and tourism, based on implementing an environmental management system. The paper will first present the rationale of the project and then discuss the willingness of providers and agencies to apply for this ecolabel, perceived benefits, criteria, and the ecolabel management methods. The paper concludes that there is a critical mass of sites willing to apply for the ecolabel, and outlines suggestions from the respondents regarding the ecolabel.

Keywords: ecolabel, tourism, recreation, forests, Europe, environment
The measurement of sustainability and the certification of sustainable management have attracted considerable attention in the recent past. Ecolabels, awards and a variety of other methods to endorse good practice have been developed as a method of self-regulation to promote certain sub-sectors of the tourism industry, in the absence of formal requirements. Since the mid-1980s, around one hundred ecolabels have been developed for the tourism industry, with many overlaps both geographically and in terms of focus. Most ecolabels are organized at the sub-national level within Europe, and approximately one half of the ecolabels are for accommodation providers (Font and Buckley 2001). Besides tourism-specific labels, there are also generic certification systems such as ISO 14000 and EMAS which are well established in the manufacturing industries, but are considered too complex for most tourism and hospitality firms. However, the cyclical nature of an environmental management system (EMS) makes this appealing due to its flexibility, and it has recently been applied to some sub-sectors of the tourism industry, for example, by Green Globe, Green Tourism Business Scheme, Committed to Green, the Nordic Ecolabelling of Hotels, and – currently being developed – the Blue Flag (Font and Buckley 2001).

The project presented here is known as Tourfor, an EU-funded three-year LIFE project seeking to encourage forest-based tourism that can support sustainable forest management and is environmentally sensitive (Tribe and Font 2000). The principal outcome from this project is a proposal for a new ecolabel for forest sites that implement an EMS to control visitor impacts. Tourfor aims to increase the exposure of tourism and recreation in forest areas that can prove they have met certain environmental management and performance criteria. These criteria are planned around the implementation of EMSs, aiming to ensure that their principles are incorporated into the corporate management system of the target organization.

This ecolabel will be applicable to forest owners and managers, and tourism and recreation operators based in forests. It has been developed to include any defined forest area in the EU with identifiable boundaries and a management unit, and this may contain other natural areas as well as woodland. Since it recognizes sustainable tourism and recreation, it is not applicable to all forest sites. For a site to be a forest destination, it should have one or more of the following features: a focal point for visitors such as facilities or infrastructure, organized/fee-paying activities, and a significant number of visitors per year (Tourfor 2000).

Tourfor has developed case studies, benchmarks and methodologies specific to forest tourism and recreation, with two aims. First, to increase awareness of the multiple use of forests, not only for timber production
and conservation, but for tourism and recreation. Forestry produces low economic returns and the use of forest land is highly regulated. However, forests have considerable potential mostly for recreation but also for tourism, which can encourage conservation (Font and Tribe 2000; Mantau et al. 2001). Second, the definition of forest tourism and recreation-specific impacts and the development of benchmarks will fill a gap in the criteria currently available in ecolabels, based on an EMS model; most labels focus on hotels and there are limited examples of land management labels. This is of particular relevance to tourism geographers.

The remainder of this paper addresses the authors’ review of sites and consultation of stakeholders with respect to the feasibility of the ecolabel. In order to prepare a feasibility proposal for the EU, Tourfor undertook a consultation exercise on the eco-label management and criteria in Portugal, the UK and Finland by teams of local experts in forestry, tourism and environmental management, in order to embrace a variety of forest, tourism and economic typologies. A non-probability sample yielded over 100 responses from sites involved in recreation and tourism in forests, and tourism, recreation and environment stakeholders. The overall response rate was 25 percent; Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of questionnaires sent and received by country and ownership. Details of the planning process for this ecolabel are published in Font and Tribe (2001), and the methodology for the consultation summarized in this report can be found in Font et al. (2001), together with results from the consultation on the ecolabel’s criteria.

Table 1 Nationality of sample frame and respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sent (%)</th>
<th>Received (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Ireland</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Type of organizations: sample frame and respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sent (%)</th>
<th>Received (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Trust</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Site and stakeholder consultation

The majority of respondents felt that this ecolabel is beneficial, and well over half the respondents (over 60) felt they would be willing to work towards an ecolabel such as Tourfor for their site. The key benefits expected by site managers that might apply to Tourfor are listed in Figure 1 (multiple options were allowed). Besides the reasons prompted in the questionnaire, respondents mentioned a range of benefits relating to financial and new business opportunity reasons arising from the recreation industry. Enhancing competitiveness is only mentioned in some instances; this is of little importance to most sites since they are operated on a not-for-profit basis, as shown in Table 2. Peer pressure and justification of good management to the parent organization are more likely to act as an incentive.

Respondents consider that using EMSs as the framework for the eco-label criteria represents a significant advance, and owner/managers of smaller sites in particular thought that this was ‘ahead of its time’. In an already over-stretched industry, with little tradition of writing management plans,

Figure 1 Perceived benefits of the Tourfor award (%, multiple answers allowed).
there were comments that it is essential to ‘make applicant input as simple and acceptable as possible’. Those sites which favour using an EMS system as the basis for securing an ecolabel, consider that this will help to demonstrate good stewardship, promote good practice and encourage innovation. Some sites view it as ‘a means to achieve an acknowledged standard of environmental management’, but in general it is thought that an EMS ‘will benefit sites with most visitors’ and with ‘the management structures to deal with the paperwork’. Some of the established recreation and tourism operations in the countries researched have opted for ISO/EMAS schemes, which are internationally established systems primarily targeting large companies. For example the Finnish Forest and Park Service, the largest landowner providing organized tourism and recreation in Finnish forests, was certified under the ISO 14001 standard in 1998. Center Parcs UK were certified under ISO14001 in 1999. Although the EMS proposed by Tourfor is a simplification of the original ISO and EMAS systems, it is true that it still requires a certain amount of paperwork in ensuring that sites can justify management cycles, and it will be less relevant to the management of sites with small numbers.

Sites with more visitors also tend to focus less exclusively on timber production and therefore favour a tourism/recreation EMS such as Tourfor, whereas respondents combining recreation with conservation and timber production consider one single EMS should encompass the three activities, and the Tourfor ecolabel should be linked to established schemes. Several respondents felt there was a similarity between Tourfor and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the UK Forest Standard, and a relation with ISO9000, ISO14000, EMAS and the Charter mark (the latter was mostly quoted by public sector sites in the UK). These sites would prefer to incorporate the Tourfor suggestions and criteria into the management systems they are already working towards, and therefore favour timber certification as part of the criteria for Tourfor certification. Tourfor aims to complement, rather than replace, such schemes, and special efforts are being taken to ensure this.

Respondents consider that the EMS should embrace the determination of impacts from all recreational, tourism and educational activities, their economic viability, space and time zoning and quality. Monitoring impacts and the efficiency of actions towards them are referred to as important criteria, assessed against available expertise and funds, together with specific local and regional characteristics or needs. Respondents identified many non-negotiable criteria for the ecolabel, mainly related to maintenance of biodiversity, flora and fauna conservation, energy consumption, waste production and restriction of the use of toxic products. These points were not directly prompted in the questionnaire, yet were suggested by more than one site owner. Over 60 percent of the sites consider that public accountability encourages the fulfilment of commitments, and 55 percent
think that stakeholder input should be a requirement, which is also a requirement in EMAS and Green Globe, for example.

Respondents consider that the verification process should consist of a combination of site and desk review in order to ensure transparency and credibility, to take place between every 2 to 5 years. Site visits will make this ecolabel more costly to administer, yet it is necessary to provide critical appraisal and feedback to the site manager, part of the learning process in the initial stage. In relation to the desk review, respondents generally agree to share documents with the verification body, notably their environmental policy and the results of their audit and review process. They are less willing, however, to share certain data in relation to day-to-day operations, partly due to confidentiality but also because no records are kept. Self-assessment could provide an interim report halfway through the cycle which could provide a ‘useful reminder’; this is also valuable since it is unlikely Tourfor will have the resources to inspect annually. This idea was more popular in the UK than in Finland and Portugal, probably due to processes already required for the Woodland Grant Scheme and Local Authorities demanding some self-assessment and documentation.

**Conclusions**

The report on the Tourfor project was provided to the EU in 2000, with the endorsement of the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe (FEEE), currently operating the Blue Flag, that it would be willing to operate Tourfor if funds were made available. Tourfor’s final proposals included recommendations from this consultation, in relation to the criteria for submission, the verification process and the relation of the Tourfor ecolabel to complementary schemes.

Despite a willingness to consider applying for the Tourfor ecolabel, sites fear that using an EMS as the framework for the criteria will be very complex and create a large volume of additional work, and that too much emphasis is placed on the management of the resources rather than on the environmental quality of the site. For this reason, in the first stage of implementation emphasis should be placed on providing examples of sites that can receive the label, together with ‘how-to’ guidelines and suggestions on how to utilize any previous work on sites as components of an EMS. Close cooperation with public sites, non-profit organizations and forward-looking privately owned sites should provide the critical mass necessary to make progress on the adoption of EMS in land management for recreation and tourism. The experience at FEEE suggests that once a core group of 50 sites has been labelled, this generates enough peer pressure and pockets of good practice to self-perpetuate the label [Tansley-Thomas, pers. comm.], and therefore the positive responses from 60 sites
in this initial consultation provide a useful starting point for this label. Tourfor generated a high profile PR event at the Millennium Dome in London in 2000, where good practice awards were given to sites in all three countries, although none of those sites had a complete EMS. Subsequent marketing campaigns would be expected to ensure the sites find the effort worthwhile, and the label is recognized. Engaging these initial sites in the adoption of an EMS approach, recognized through an ecolabel, will provide a benchmark for other sites to aim for, and raise the profile of forest tourism and recreation throughout Europe.

References


Biographical notes

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Résumé: Planifier pour les délations et le tourisme en forêt: résultats de la phase de consultation du projet Tourfor de l’Union Européenne

Cette note de recherche décrit brièvement les résultats d’un exercice de consultation organisé par Tourfor (projet d’une commission européenne qui cherche à développer un label éco pour les délations et le tourisme en forêt) sur la base d’un système de gestion de l’environnement (EMS dans le texte) à mettre en œuvre. Cet écrit présentera d’abord la raison d’être du projet et discutera ensuite du désir des entrepreneurs et des organismes de recourir à ce label éco, les bénéfices qu’ils devraient en tirer, les critères et les méthodes de gestion du label. Cet écrit conclut qu’il existe une masse critique de lieux qui désirent recourir au label et indique des améliorations pour le label suggérées par les répondants.

Mots-clés: label éco, tourisme, délations, forêts, Europe, environnement

Inhaltsangabe: Planung von Naherholung und Tourismus in Wäldern: Ergebnisse der Befragungsphase des Tourfor-Projekts der EU


Schlüsselwörter: Ökolabel, Tourismus, Naherholung, Wälder, Europa, Umwelt