Environmental certification in tourism and hospitality: progress, process and prospects

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Abstract

Attempts to promoting sustainable tourism and ecotourism as quality products suffer from the lack of methods to ensure these are not just a green wash. The current proliferation of awards, labels and endorsements has confused consumers to the extent of preferring to ignore these green messages. Several initiatives have emerged to address the proliferation of small, little known, limited value ecolabels in tourism and hospitality, and to ensure that the larger ones meet internationally accepted criteria. This paper will review progress made by a wide range of public, private and non-profit agencies in developing environmental standards and method to measure them, which will be set against the internationally agreed process for compliance assessment. From the above experiences, the author will outline the prospects to environmental certification in tourism and hospitality, which are the development of an international accreditation system, following agreed standards, and linked to national, regional or sector-specific certification programmes.

Keywords: Environmental certification; Ecolabels; Accreditation; Tourism; Hospitality

1. Introduction

There is no regulation to limit which tourism, hospitality and ecotourism businesses self-declare themselves as being sustainable, green, environmentally friendly, eco-friendly and so on. With the many definitions for sustainability and ecotourism, and disagreements around what is in and what is outside tourism, it is a difficult industry to regulate. Even in the case of governments taking an active attitude towards regulating claims, this is limited to governmental boundaries, which make it inefficient due to the international nature of the tourism industry. Increasingly there has been a proliferation of voluntary schemes setting up guidelines for good practice, and methods to recognise those companies meeting such standards. There are over 100 ecolabels for tourism, hospitality and ecotourism, with many of them overlapping in sector and geographical scope, starting in the mid-eighties but mainly developed in the nineties (Font & Buckley, 2001; Ecotrans, 2001). There is a myriad of ecolabels of varying quality, criteria, contents and scope, causing customer confusion to the point of preferring to ignore them (Lübert, 2001).

This paper will review the current situation in environmental certification of tourism and hospitality business, by using secondary sources and reviewing key dates and facts in the sector. It first presents an overview of the key dates and events in the environmental certification of tourism and hospitality operations, such as the proposals for a single European label for tourism, the progress made by Green Globe, the outcomes of the Mohonk workshop, the position of the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) and the proposals for an international accreditation system. This sets the scene to then consider the process internationally accepted for certification programmes. The process here outlined is that of conformity assessment, i.e. setting up a system to which companies need to conform to, and then assessing whether this takes place, as outlined by Toth (2000). This process starts with the definition of standards, the paper will discuss how these standards can be turned into criteria, current thinking around performance and process criteria and cases where benchmarks and Environmental Management Systems (EMSs) have been used. The second step is the assessment process, and up to which extent criteria are assessable, and the methods
available to do so. The certification of assessments is the third step, focusing on who should be allowed to verify environmental management and performance. Verifiers need to be accredited, and other industries have systems in place; the tourism industry is currently considering their own. The aim of this whole process is to lead to recognition of the value of certification, and therefore the acceptance by the industry and target markets of the meaning of this certification. The author finally considers how the environmental certification of tourism and hospitality operations is likely to evolve in the near future, on the basis of developments in other sectors and the current proposals within the tourism industry. This has implications for both the current ecolabels and those governments aiming to develop their own environmental-quality schemes.

2. Progress in environmental certification in tourism

The origins of certification are in the manufacturing industry, with greater, direct and measurable environmental impacts, clearer operating systems and larger organisations (Tribe, Font, Griffiths, Vickery, & Yale, 2000). Manufacturing standards were set by the European Commission, and recognised through the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) in 1993. This is based on the implementation of EMSs, with clear benchmarks only specified for some industries. LA EMAS was devised for local authorities, and is the only version for the service sector. In 1996, the International Standards Organisation set ISO 14001, which awards whole organisations for any industry (Tribe et al., 2000), and it has been achieved by a handful of tourism organisations, such as Center Parcs UK (Collins, 2000).

Because the original EMAS and ISO systems are only feasible to larger companies, the tourism industry has usually preferred to work with its own systems, usually a much softer approach (Synergy, 2000). Codes of practice, industry manuals and awards precede ecolabels in their efforts to improve industry and tourist actions and awareness towards the environment. Ecolabels were introduced as a more formalised method to focus on environmental efficiency. They require verification by an independent third party, they are linked to technical advice, the label can be regained through a cyclical review, and criteria evolve in stages. Criticisms of tourism ecolabels are that they are expensive, they require time, usually they focus on hotels or ecotourism providers, the ecolabel organiser has limited marketing power, and the criteria focus on environmental management, not environmental performance (Synergy, 2000).

Fig. 1 is a quick overview of key dates in the development of tourism ecolabels. This is useful to understand the process followed, the key players, and also to be aware of the recent nature of the discussions around the need for tourism certification, and more recently, accreditation. The first milestone in environmental certification was in 1985, when the first Blue Flags were awarded as a method to encourage the compliance to EC legislation on bathing waters quality. Since then the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe (FEE) has expanded, to the extent of currently certifying over 1800 beaches and 600 marinas in 2000 (Font & Buckley, 2001), and in 2001 expanding outside of Europe, to South Africa and the Caribbean (Font & Mihalić, 2002), coupled with dropping the word Europe from the organisation’s name to Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). Many other labels have developed, mainly in the early and mid-nineties, mostly within Europe. Germany has the highest number, but Spain and Italy are introducing several others, most of these are at sub-national level, with differences in criteria and management between them (Hamele, 2001).

Although there were some international initiatives up to the mid-nineties, it is only in the last five years that there have been efforts to create truly international umbrellas for environmental certification. Green Globe launched its environmental standard in 1998, allowing companies to sign up to it and use their logo on the basis of commitment, not performance. In December 1998, the United Nations Environmental Programme published the first report on tourism ecolabels (UNEP, 1998), which welcomed them and encouraged governments and NGO’s to develop them further. At the same time, the growing number of ecolabels was seen with caution by the WTO, who proposed at the United Nations seventh session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (UN-CSD7) to investigate their effectiveness.

Green Globe continued its expansion plans to become the international environmental accreditation system, by associating itself with CRC Sustainable Tourism in Australia, and setting worldwide alliances with PATA, Green Leaf, the Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism and Green Key; these gave Green Globe working platforms in the UK (headquarters), Australia, South-East Asia, Caribbean and Scandinavia. Green Globe suddenly became the largest network in the field, and the only one with a true international coverage, although it has little market penetration to date. Most reports on newly certified hotels and resorts emphasize being the first one in their country, which shows the magnitude of the task ahead, specially when working at international level, since it will take much longer to make a visible impact at any destination, since results are spread long and thin. Currently the Asia-Pacific branch seems to be the most active, strengthening links with industry associations such as the Tourism Industry Association of New Zealand (TIANZ), collaboration...
that now permeates through to the New Zealand Tourism Strategy, which singles out introducing Environmental Management Systems Meeting internationally agreed benchmarks as an industry priority (OTSp, 2001). Although it does not explicitly say Green Globe, this is the most aggressive ecotag in New Zealand at the moment, and this is one location where Green Globe has a good chance to make an impact.

In this expansion process, Green Globe has taken decisions that have put them in the firing line of conservation and environmental NGOs for reasons such as becoming a for-profit organisation, certifying improvement and not performance, and allowing companies to use the logo without certification, just commitment. Green Globe, mainly through CRC Sustainable Tourism, developed a set of benchmarks specific for sub-sectors of the industry, which were released in CD-ROM format in April 2001 as part of an overall package called “The GREEN GLOBE Path to Sustainable Travel and Tourism—As simple as ABC” (Green Globe, 2001a), and responded to the criticisms from WWF-UK, the report they commissioned (Synergy, 2000). Training courses for external assessors in the ABC to Green Globe are being undertaken in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event/Action</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>First Blue Flags awarded</td>
<td>FEEE starts expansion campaign, currently over 1800 beaches and 600 marinas</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Green Globe Standard launched</td>
<td>Companies sign up to principles and use logo</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 1998</td>
<td>UNEP publishes milestone report on tourism ecotags</td>
<td>Supports development of ecotags as self-regulation methods</td>
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<td>April 1999</td>
<td>WTO concerned with quality and reliability of ecotags, certification systems, awards</td>
<td>WTO proposes at UN-CSD-7 to investigate their effectiveness</td>
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<td>March 2000</td>
<td>ITB (Berlin) ecotag labelling panel, organised by ECOTRANS</td>
<td>Little enthusiasm for single European ecotag</td>
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<td>May 2000</td>
<td>Green Globe 21 associates with CRC Sustainable Tourism (Australia)</td>
<td>Strengthen image, increase scientific/ academic background</td>
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<tr>
<td>Throughout 2000</td>
<td>Green Globe increases world-wide alliances</td>
<td>PATA Green Leaf, Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism and Green Key</td>
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<td>August 2000</td>
<td>WWF published critical report of Green Globe 21</td>
<td>Green Globe forced to publicly respond and take action</td>
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<td>September 2000</td>
<td>FEMA TOUR report to the EC Ecolabelling board</td>
<td>European hotels do not support single label, Campsites and hostels to be targeted</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2000</td>
<td>WWF published critical report of Green Globe 21</td>
<td>Green Globe forced to publicly respond and take action</td>
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<td>January 2001</td>
<td>First e-conference on ecotourism certification</td>
<td>Allowed open participation, but not managed.</td>
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<td>March 2001</td>
<td>First book on ecotags published (edited by Font &amp; Buckley)</td>
<td>Creates theoretical body of knowledge and baseline data</td>
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<td>April 2001</td>
<td>GG21 benchmarking CD-ROM</td>
<td>Development of sector specific benchmarks in a user-friendly format</td>
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<td>May 2001</td>
<td>Rainforest Alliance offers to the WTO to be in the Advisory Board for the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council</td>
<td>WTO accepts the offer, proposal strengthened</td>
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<td>May 2001</td>
<td>WTO seminar on Certification systems and standards in tourism seminar</td>
<td>Latin American and Caribbean WTO member governments request WTO to take a leading role in setting international standards</td>
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<td>June 2001</td>
<td>Second e-conference on ecotourism certification</td>
<td>Follow up planned, aiming to reach agreements</td>
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<td>June 2001</td>
<td>ECO-LAB proposal to EC’s LIFE</td>
<td>ECOTRANS will benchmark environmental indicators for ecotags, and strengthen cooperation between labels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2001</td>
<td>WTO commissioned inventory of ecotags and codes of practice in tourism</td>
<td>Over 500 identified, 130 studied in depth to draw conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2001</td>
<td>Rainforest Alliance commissions a feasibility study of the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council</td>
<td>15 month research period will generate discussion and interest in the topic. Outcomes unknown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2001</td>
<td>Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism commissions a report on the value of ecotags to tour operators</td>
<td>Certification accepted as one method to inform supply chain management for tour operators, but not sufficiently widespread to be the only method.</td>
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Fig. 1. Ecolabels: calendar of events. Source: updated from Font (2001b).
Australia and New Zealand since May 2001 (Green Globe, 2001b).

At a European level, there were talks about comparability between labels since 1998, when the EC commissioned a first study to consider how a single European label to classify environmental performance of hotels could be developed. Results were not encouraging, and the work was slowed down until 2000 when the EC commissioned a second report, which was presented in September under the title of FEMATOUR (CREM, 2000). The report still found limited support from the industry, Horesta, the European Hotel and Restaurant Association did not consider it appropriate when this new label will not link in with current systems at the national level (CREM, 2000; EC DG ENV, 2000). Besides, the target of these ecolabels is not willing to apply, the ecolabelling bodies and key tourism operators did not see a way forward for a single label due to the costs, bureaucracy and hurdles in overcoming the current fragmented system, as it was made clear in ITB in Berlin last March 2000, when the German consultancy Ecotrans brought together a panel of experts to discuss the relevance of a single European ecolabels for tourism.

At the international level, the Institute for Policy Studies and the Ford Foundation gathered a team of experts from different backgrounds in Mohonk, New York, for the first international Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Certification workshop. This took place in November 2000, and the outcome was the development of Principles of Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Certification, agreed by the participants. The Rainforest Alliance used this forum to table proposals for the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, and in subsequent months it offered to the WTO to be in the Advisory Board, which was accepted. The Rainforest Alliance has commissioned a team of experts to study the feasibility of the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, a 15-month project that started in July 2001 and that will capture the current interest in certification but also encounter many political and budgetary difficulties on the path to accrediting certifiers. The Mohonk workshop triggered further discussion, this time through an e-conference, on the issue of ecotourism certification, with two rounds during early 2001, the first one allowing for open participation, the second one more managed and aiming at some consensus so outcomes can be taken forward, which was not achieved.

The WTO stepped up their participation in the debate in several ways. First, they commissioned Ecotrans and Oceans Blue an inventory and analysis of ecolabels and codes of practice; over 500 were found and 130 studied in depth. The WTO dedicated its 37th meeting of the WTO’s Commission for the Americas (CAM) to the topic of “Tourism Certification systems and standards”, covering not only environmental certification but other areas such as food hygiene, quality, education and internet distribution (Font, 2002). Members of the CAM asked for leadership from the WTO in setting an international accreditation system that sets standards for certification programmes, and helps clear the current confusion. The WTO plans to commission a feasibility study to this purpose later in 2001.

3. The process of compliance assessment

The progress made in the development and establishment of ecolabels in tourism and hospitality needs to be understood in the context of how an ecolabels works; it is for this reason that internationally agreed principles of compliance assessment will be reviewed; these have been modeled in Fig. 2. Tourism, hospitality and ecotourism ecolabels will be used as examples of how this process works, and this will be linked to the current progress in the sector. Not all ecolabels follow the whole process, showing gaps and linking these to the current progress will raise issues for the prospects in this sector.

The funding body aims to influence the environmental performance of the industry as a whole, but usually of a specific sub-sector of the industry that has been identified as problematic. For this reason, it contracts out a team or a company that will act as the awarding body, on the basis of a grant in aid to cover planning and management costs. This awarding body will usually have expertise in project management, marketing and lobbying, as well as experts in the criteria of the label or the area it aims to change. An external verifying body will be contracted to prepare the detailed outline of the criteria for the label, and to develop the manual to verify if the applicant meets the criteria. Applicants will usually pay a fee that covers verification costs, but since verification is quite costly and most applicants still only see a limited competitive advantage to an ecolabel, the fee cannot cover the awarding body costs (Font, 2001a).

Once the verification method has been agreed, the awarding body promotes the ecolabel to applicants, to create a critical mass that allows for economies of scale in the verification process and that can be credibly presented to the tourism market. The aims of the ecolabel are usually to improve the environmental performance of the applicants; the means by which this can be achieved vary, some focus on peer pressure, others on the provision of subsidised support, others on market pressure, which determine which of the relationship arrows is going to be the driving force in the system (Font, 2001a). These relationships mentioned in Fig. 2, can be further expanded by considering the process of compliance assessment that an ecolabel should work against, stated in five steps: setting standards, undertaking assessment, certifying this assessment, accrediting
certification, recognition of the value of the certificate, and acceptance by the industry.

3.1. Standards

A standard is a document approved by a recognised body that provides for common and repeated use of a prescribed set of rules, conditions or requirements (Toth, 2000). If a standard is not documented, companies will not be able to comply to it because their understanding will vary, and therefore defeat the purpose. There are several types of standards, some of them voluntary, others mandatory, others developed by the consensus of all parties. They can vary in their degree of formality, from informal standards to very prescriptive ones, such as those developed as part of EMAS. Tourism ecolabels will have to wrestle with the difficulty of setting up standards for every tourism sub-sector where impacts are different, but at the same time allowing for site-specific differences. These standards can be based on achieving a certain environmental performance, or in implementing an EMS. The FEMATOUR report (CREM, 2000) shows the process used to determine the environmental criteria for the accommodation sector for the single European label.

Ecolabel criteria are an area of disagreement, and therefore a cause for concern in the tourism industry (see Honey & Rome, 2000; Synergy (2000); Font & Buckley, 2001). Performance standards mean that every company receiving that ecolabel will have committed to a threshold level and reached a pre-specified benchmark, guaranteeing a basic standard. Yet benchmarks need external updating and are very context-specific, most of them designed for hotels. For example, the Benchmarking Best Practice exercise from the Canadian Tourism Commission can be a useful guide to companies in other countries (Wight, 2001), but it cannot be applied as a benchmark to Finland or Scotland without...
understanding the differences between these countries. And for this reason, an increasing number of ecolabels are focusing on the process, the ability of a company to take control of introducing and implementing their own EMS. The company commits not to reach a certain threshold level, but to make an improvement in every management cycle, according to their own plans and resources. It is a self-updating method that is generic enough to be transferred across companies, but critics suggest that this is no guarantee of sustainability (Synergy, 2000).

EMS as ecolabel criteria are currently used by Green Globe 21, the Green Tourism Business Scheme, the Nordic Ecolabelling of Hotels and Committed to Green, and they are proposed for the Tidy Britain Group’s Seaside Awards and FEEE’s Blue Flag (see Font & Buckley, 2001). The current trend is to develop benchmarks specific to each tourism sub-sector, which fit within the structure of an EMS, as Green Globe is currently doing. This would be closer to meeting the requirements tabled by a working party at the Mohonk workshop for a possible agreement of principles of ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification, where participants emphasized the need to meet performance, not improvement standards (not published).

3.2. Assessment

Applicants will need to be assessed against the criteria. Assessment is the process of examining, measuring, testing or otherwise determining conformance with requirements specified in an applicable standard (Toth, 2000). Obviously, the assessment process will vary depending on the criteria, since these criteria will determine the type of evidence necessary to prove conformity. Assessment can take place at several levels and according to more than one method: a company can self-score itself to pre-screen their conformity. The actual assessment can consist of a triangulation of methods: a site visit, a desk review of the paper evidence of management, and the hands-on measurement of impacts. The assessment method will partly determine the cost, and also the credibility.

The assessment of the criteria needs to be verified. Verification can take place by three parties. First-party verification is basically self-evaluation. This is a first step to encourage ownership of process, but cannot be the only verification. Second-party verification is that undertaken by the organisation in charge of both recruiting members and deciding if to award logo, which is not transparent as the organisation has a vested interest in increasing membership. Third-party verification is undertaken independently of either the applicant or the awarding body; it is more expensive, but more reliable, and it is a key element of a credible ecolabel for any sector. Simpler ecolabels allow for mostly first-party verification, with only spot checks; organisations like the National Ecotourism Accreditation Programme (NEAP) in Australia use a mixture of second- and third-party verification, due to the costs of hiring and training verifiers, and the distances between applicants. Costs and funding available, will force tourism ecolabels to use a combination of these methods of verification.

3.3. Certification

The certification process is the procedure by which a third party (i.e. the awarding body) gives written assurance to the consumer (and the industry in general) that a product, process, service, or management system conforms to specified requirements (Toth, 2000). Certification schemes have an important role, since these should provide the action plan for improvement for the next cycle. But is the certification a green wash? Some schemes, like Green Globe, make little difference in the logo the company is allowed to use between those companies that made a commitment to meeting standards and those that have implemented an EMS that has been certified (Synergy, 2000). Some certification systems insist that the awardees should publish their results (both strong points and areas for improvement). This is not taking place.

Small systems assume that there will be only one company undertaking all verifications. More complex systems, or systems like in the tourism industry where awardees are geographically spread, will have to use more than one verification company. The procedure by which an authoritative body or peers verify that a body is competent to carry out specified tasks is known as accreditation. Basically, a certification company has to be accredited by an accreditation body in order to carry out recognised audits against standards in a particular country. Yet, there are certification programmes like the Australian Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Programme (NEAP) that use the work accreditation meaning certification, which adds to the confusion of terminology.

3.4. Accreditation

Accreditation Bodies ‘audit the auditors’ and their capacity to certify companies and/or products. There are a variety of accreditation bodies that are respected within their own industrial sectors, and some across sectors. Toth (2000) reports that there are about 1500 bodies globally who accredit 140,000 certification bodies, each one of which is only licensed to work in a particular country and context. But this is not the case in tourism, since this is where costs start adding up, and most tourism ecolabels miss this step. The Forestry Stewardship Council is a good example of a recently
created accreditation body that provides all certified products with one single marketing umbrella and quality standard. Can this happen in tourism? Results in Europe are discouraging (Hamele, 2001; CREM, 2000) but recent international initiatives show that there is enough interest to continue looking for avenues (Font, 2002; Honey & Rome, 2000).

An overarching accreditation system is the only way these local labels will stand in a competitive position against international initiatives. Few labels will ever reach a critical mass that is likely to influence national tourism, let alone international. An accreditation system can allow the setting of international standards that make certification somewhat comparable; the use of this internationally accredited logo can create a stronger brand that has a fighting chance to reach the ever-important international tourist. Yet accreditation comes with its own weaknesses. First, this might force small, regional or sub-industry specific labels to comply with external, more stringent criteria and processes in the medium- to long-term. Second, most ecolabels are subsidised by regional governments, their willingness to fund them might change once they feel out of control, or find that their local labels will not meet criteria, therefore refusing to participate. Third, accreditation is one more layer of verification, and therefore becomes an added expense, and finding a volunteer to absorb this cost will not be easy: should it be the tourist, the applicant, the certification body or an outside agency? The feasibility study of the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, commissioned by the Rainforest Alliance and part-funded by the Ford Foundation, will have to find answers to these questions.

3.5. Recognition and acceptance

The purpose of such systems is to lead to recognition and acceptance by the industry as a strong voluntary standard, met by a crucial mass of players, and by the market as a quality symbol and a meaningful difference that influence purchasing behaviour. This is question-able even for the most popular of schemes: how many tourists in Europe use the Blue Flag as a method to choose a beach destination? There are opinions at both ends of the balance. One the one hand, the Blue Flag has had an impact on destination choice, to the point that today having a Blue Flag means something, and not having one also means that the beach does not meet the standards. Also, the Scottish-based Green Tourism Business Scheme has reported an almost 10% higher occupation rate from the establishments that are certified than those that are not, according to internal data from the Scottish Tourist Board (Jonathan Proctor, personal comment). However, it could be said that these are very topical cases, the first one influenced by the health and safety message that Blue Flag sends, and the strong support from the public sector, despite no evident support from tour operators; the second one is successful because the Scottish Tourist Board is supporting the Green Tourism Business Scheme by adding the logo to the promotion of certified businesses in their official accommodation listings, emphasizing the need for support from distribution channels, or it could also be because green hotels are also better hotels in other aspects or marketing and management, not necessarily having higher occupancy for being green. On the other hand, market research shows that currently price, destination and activities are the key reasons for choice (CREM, 2000), and tourists believe that ecolabelled products are more expensive (Lübbert, 2001).

4. Prospects for environmental certification in tourism and hospitality

The lack of methods to enforce sustainable management and regulate green messages in tourism has lead to an increasing number of voluntary initiatives in the form of codes of conduct, manuals, awards and ecolabels. The latter have been the focus of this paper; the key players, relationships and processes have been examined by taking into account the most recent developments in the industry. There are too many ecolabels, with different meanings, criteria, geographical scope, confusing messages, limited expertise and expensive systems, only partly meeting the requirements of the process of compliance assessment. These rely on governmental funding and start-up aids from NGOs, and the nature of most of these labels restricts their ability to grow beyond the narrow target groups for which they were created.

International labels are creating strategic alliances to allow them to penetrate local markets more quickly in those countries where labels already existed. Recent developments suggest that takeovers, mergers and alliances are the most likely method to create stronger brands. This is crucial to gain a market share that allows economies of scale in communicating the green message to the international tourist market. International labels are the only ones likely to make a difference to the tourist, and if ecolabelling is meant to influence purchase as well as being a tool for peer pressure, then international labels are here to stay (Kahlenborn & Domíné, 2001). Green Globe’s worldwide expansion, the proposals for a European label and the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council seem the framework within which the current ecolabels need to wrestle to maintain their identity but ensure exposure and credibility. These developments are introducing another layer in the process of compliance assessment, that of accreditation above the current certification, which will
increase the cost but also the transparency of the ecolabels. This is bringing the environmental certification of tourism closer to the original ISO 14000 principles, but tailoring the performance criteria to the sector.

International accreditation and certification in tourism will have to negotiate the difficulties of site-specific and sub-sector requirements, different legislations and levels of support. To do so, they are likely to use either very generic and vague standards and criteria, or focus on process (based on EMSs) and leave performance benchmarks to the national certification authorities, but this will have to be managed carefully to ensure equity, as suggested in the WTO’s seminar on certification in Oaxaca (Font, 2002).

Countries and tourist destinations that still do not have an ecolabel will be considering whether starting their own scheme is a viable option (Font, 2002). These should consider the reviews of the systems that are currently operating in countries with a similar tourism infrastructure and environmental performance. In those instances where the new destination can benefit from a simple extension of a currently well-managed operation, this will be beneficial to the creation of a new system, since the latter will only add further confusion in the marketplace, and can only be justified on political, but not operational grounds. In those instances where new labels are being created, these should mirror the successes from neighbouring countries or the tourism generating countries, but ensuring that the new label will be in a position of competitive advantage in the case of a possible accreditation process being introduced, by ensuring that the new label conforms to the processes and elements that have been previously outlined in this paper.

Current certification programmes in tourism should consider their position against the process of compliance assessment presented here, in order to forecast whether they are likely to succeed in being accredited, and which changes they need to put forward in terms of their criteria, assessment, verification and certification to meet international criteria. The feasibility study for the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council will undertake consultation with current certification programmes to ensure that standards are realistic, yet it is likely that there will be winners and losers in the process, and the environmental agenda will cross paths with the political one many times over.

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References


