
**The four main objectives of this chapter are to:**

- Overview the certification process, and how it relates to ecotourism
- Outline of the meaning of ecotourism certification and the benefits from a stakeholder’s perspective
- Discuss how the ecotourism industry is engaging in the certification debate
- Provide evidence that well managed ecotourism certification in a favourable context can be beneficial to the planning and management of a tourism destination

**Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of how ecotourism certification has the potential to be a powerful tool in the planning and management of ecotourism. When reading this chapter, it is important to establish a conceptual ground of the principles of ecotourism and sustainable tourism. There is a wide variety of literature available that outlines such principles, including Honey (1999), Wight (1993), Fennell (1996), Mowforth and Munt (1998) and Goodwin (1996). As such, for the ease of understanding in this chapter, the following set of principles for sustainable ecotourism, proposed by Wallace and Pierce (1996) provide a useful summary:

- Ecotourism entails the type of use that does not degrade the resource and minimises negative social and environmental impacts;
- Ecotourism increases awareness and understanding of an area’s natural and cultural characteristics, and how visitors engage within the system;
- Ecotourism contributes to the conservation and protection of natural areas
Ecotourism maximises the participation of local people at all stages of the decision making processes that determine the amount and type of tourism development in a place;

Ecotourism should complement rather than overwhelm or replace traditional practices of a community (for example, fishing, farming and social structures), and bring about direct economic and other benefits to local people.

Page and Dowling (2001) refine these points to identify five core principles considered fundamental to ecotourism, namely that ecotourism should be nature based, ecologically sustainable, contain environmental education, be locally beneficial and generate tourist satisfaction.

Much debate has taken place over the potential and merits of ecotourism certification as a tool to help attain these principles. Over the last decade, programmes to certify environmental performance and activity have been introduced within the tourism industry, mainly in Europe and linked to accommodation provision, with more recent efforts to certify ecotourism in Southern hemisphere countries. In a recent report published by the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2002) on voluntary initiatives in sustainable tourism and ecotourism, some 104 programmes were identified ranging from detailed and complex systems that demonstrate environmental performance, to those used merely as a promotional umbrella, such as awards. In all, some 59 programmes globally could be classified as certification programmes, although only a handful of these are specifically designed for ecotourism. Certification programmes, regardless of whether they address sustainable tourism or ecotourism, however, lack common baseline standards, procedures, criteria and exposure, creating customer confusion and with limited marketing value, and limiting their effectiveness in promoting positive environmental and social benefit.

The tourism product offered by ecotourism relies on geographic and cultural diversity – the celebration of local differences – yet at the same time the tourism industry tends expect a degree of standardisation of the physical presence, operational procedures and staff-customer interaction to ensure consistency of service delivery (Burns & Holden, 1995). This is further exacerbated by the Western markets and political processes, which require tour operators to meet certain standards to meet Western
legislation requirements. This often makes it difficult to apply Western ideals in the very countries that rely most heavily on ecotourism – developing countries.

Thus there are challenges in setting global sustainability standards. Firstly, there are disparities in the priorities of the tourism industry in the North and South Hemisphere countries differ, just as the economic, political, social and environmental situations in these countries differ (Font and Sallows, 2002). Despite most efforts for a participative process, some sectors of the tourist industry, particularly at the smaller scale, which is most often ecotourism operations, are less likely to be represented in the discussions, therefore rendering one of the very principles of ecotourism – local participation and consultation - void. Additionally, most certification programmes are operational in the developed world, leaving many parts of the world that rely on ecotourism for income generation often without access to certification, even if they would want to enter the process. Reasons for this lack of access can be attributed to lack of local skills in certification, and costs associated with certification where it does exist – few programmes cater for the SME sector, which is more often than not, the size of ecotourism operations. Thus the argument that certification is the only way forward in achieving sustainable tourism and ecotourism is a tenuous one, and it could be asked where the demand for certification is coming from. Mowforth and Munt (1996) use the term ‘neo-colonialism’ – in this light it could be argued that certification demand is coming from the developed world, as they see it as a tool to control negative impacts on the environment and culture of a place, therefore placing western values upon other cultures. Honey and Rome (2001) support this concept in suggesting certification standards prescribed by developed countries may be used as protectionist strategies, which will in effect preserve the business interests of the developed countries at the expense of the relative prosperity in developing countries.

The year 2002 represents a significant time for ecotourism, with the declaration of the United Nations International Year of Ecotourism (IYE 2002). This special designation has provided some impetus to consult more widely on the potential for certification as a tool to assist ecotourism planning and management. This chapter will outline part of the consultation with the ecotourism industry during the IYE 2002 events organised by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) late 2001 and early 2002 in Central America (Belize), South Asia (India), Andean South America (Peru)
and South East Asia (Thailand). These events included workshops to assess the perceptions of stakeholders in ecotourism on the feasibility of ecotourism certification and accreditation.

**Ecotourism certification**

There has been increasing interest in ecotourism certification in recent years, which has been reported on by numerous commentators (Font and Buckley, 2001; Honey, 1999; Sasidharan et. al., 2002; Issaverdis, 2001; Epler-Wood, & Halpenny, 2001). There remains considerable confusion over that certification actually means, and how it links into a global set of guiding principles. Further publications like the ones above mentioned will contribute to reduce confusion, and show the key challenges that ecotourism certification faces. Despite growing interest, acknowledgement of its potential benefits and many examples of good practice, published sources and practice acknowledge that ecotourism certification cannot be unquestionably accepted as “the thing to do”, and become a widespread requirement to trade (see the conclusions of Epler-Wood & Halpenny, 2001, for a useful list of reasons why ecotourism certification is not more widespread). At this point it is pertinent to examine what is meant specifically by the term ecotourism certification, and the terminology associated with it.

**Ecotourism certification terminology and procedures**

The processes and terminology of conformity assessment are important to set the scene of ecotourism certification standards (Toth, 2000; Font, 2002; Honey, 2002). Importantly, it must be recognized that the terminology extends beyond just the tourism industry. The certification industry is global, and certifies a virtually endless selection of products and processes to a large number of agreed standards. Key words to be understood include standard, process based, performance based, Environmental Management System (EMS), assessment, verification (first, second and third party), certification body, accreditation body, ecolabel.
Tourism *standards* are found in a variety of forms, and may consist of company internal standards, industry codes of practice, guidelines, awards and certification programmes, as well as some more general international ‘agreements’ and proclamations. Since the early 1990s there has been a huge growth in the number of tourism standards, with some 104 ecolabels, awards and self-commitment styled standards identified by WTO (2002). The basic pre-requisite for something to be called a standard is that it documented and establishes as set of rules, conditions or requirements (Font and Bendell, 2002). Some standards can be as simple as an expression of principles, without establishing any systems for implementation, monitoring or verification of compliance. In general internal standards, industry codes of practice, guidelines and awards would fall into this category. Certification programmes, on the other hand, are monitored and/or assessed. This is the process of examining, measuring, testing or otherwise determining the conformance of a person, organisation or group of organisations with the requirements specified in the standard. This can be done in three ways:

1. First party, or self-assessment, where the organisation makes its own assessment of its conformance
2. Second party assessment, where the purchaser (the organisation buying the service from another person or organisation) assesses the performance of the seller (the person or organisation selling the service)
3. Third party assessment, where an external third party assesses the performance of an organisation and verifies its conformance with the standard.

*Certification* is the process by which third party assessment is undertaken, written assurance is given that the product, process, service or management system conforms to the standard. There are very few true tourism certification programmes of the 104 voluntary initiatives identified by the WTO and the majority of these focus on accommodation certification (Font and Bendell, 2002; WTO, 2002).

**Recent developments in tourism certification**

The origins of certification within international industries date back to 1993 when manufacturing standards were set by the European Commission, and recognised through the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS). This model, based on
Environmental Management Systems could be applied only in some fields with an application to the service sector limited to local authorities. A wider set of standards, applicable to any industry, was prepared by the International Standards Organisation in its manual ISO 14001 (see Sheldon & Yoxon, 2001, for an example of an implementation manual).

The tourism industry, including ecotourism, however, is characterised by a large number of small firms and cannot easily apply EMAS and ISO systems, tailored only for large companies. The sole references for the industry were codes of practice, industry manuals, awards and finally ecolabels, mainly focused on demonstrating environmental efficiency (Synergy, 2000).

Ecolabels, as a result of certification are subjected to proof of standard requirement management by a third party and to periodical re-examination. Acknowledgement for the success of tourism certification ecolabels has taken some time as many programmes have had to fight against disapproval for being expensive and time consuming, that they are too focussed on hotels, do not assess performance and have a limited influence on marketing competition (Synergy, 2000).

Nevertheless, ecolabels and certification programmes seem to be the best method to communicate to ecotourists about environmental issues. However the excessive fragmentation and confusion is needs to lead to the creation of strategic alliances to have a stronger voice in the international market and greater market penetration (currently less than 1% of all tourism operations world wide are involved with certification), especially in terms of economies of scale (Kahlenborn & Dominé, 2001). Within these developments the necessity for credibility is taking on more importance with the need of accreditation of certifiers and regulation of sub-sectors. This will increase the cost of certification and a revision of the current status of certification schemes but on the other hand, it can assure transparency.

Increasingly countries and NGOs are supporting new, mainly ecotourism certification programmes. These range from EU programs such as the WWF Artic, and the Ecotourism Society of Sweden, to Latin American programs such as in Brazil and Peru, to the Fair Trade for Tourism Network in Africa. At the same time current
programmes are looking for commonalities, with Green Globe entering into a working agreement with the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (Ecotourism Association Australia), when the International Ecotourism Standard was launched at the World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec as part of IYE 2002. The debate as to whether ecotourism certification can and should be a market-based mechanism or requires subsidising will not be solved here, but it is interesting to note that the great majority of ecotourism certification programs currently only survive for as long as there is an injection of cash through donors or external funding. Font & Bendell (2002) found that a large proportion of programs rely on government or NGO funding, and Epler-Wood & Halpenny (2001) comment on the impossibility to run ecotourism certification programs that are self-financing. Some programmes, such as the Fair Trade for Tourism Network decided to not certify operators due to the cost and difficulties in verification, and the fact that funds could be used more effectively elsewhere (Patricia Barnett, personal comment).

**Issues covered by tourism certification programmes**

Tourism certification programmes criteria for meeting a standard are *process based* or *performance based*, or a combination of both. Those which follow accepted processes and procedures that can be justified for the location and characteristics of the organisation are process based management standards that focus on a company’s ability to make year on year (continuous) improvements. Generally these programmes are based on an Environmental Management System (EMS). With this approach, a company makes a commitment not to reach a certain ‘level’ of performance, but to make an improvement in the way in what they manage identified issues, according to their own resources and capacity. By their very nature, process based certification programmes are self-updating, as year on year improvement is an integral aspect of conforming to the standard. Some critics argue that process based certification programmes are no guarantee of sustainability (Synergy, 2000; Honey and Rome, 2001). Furthermore, process-based criteria to meet standards might not be applicable here to assess firms that have little ability nor incentive to keep paper records of actions taken.

Criteria that are entirely based on processes are justified to have such criticisms, and yet it is justifiable to combine process and performance criteria, as found in the WTO
report (2002) that surveyed 59 tourism certification programmes. Over 40% of the individual criteria used to measure conformity to a standard related to management actions and systems being in place to deal with sustainability, therefore emphasising that the role of management is considered vital for a successful tourism certification programme. The global nature of tourism as an industry is fuelling process approaches, not only due to the increasing number of multinational companies aiming to use the same processes across the board, but also due to the international nature of travelling, which favours internationally recognition.

Performance based ecotourism certification programmes on the other hand require every company to reach a threshold level and reach a pre-specified targets, guaranteeing a minimum level of performance. Performance based standards are complex and require detailed context-specific adaptation (see table 1). For example, what is considered appropriate consumption of a natural resource in one region is not necessarily the same in another. Thus any effort to set international standards based on performance and reaching set targets inherently requires regional adaptation, or else very broad and basic standards which have the potential to lose meaning and impact. With widespread criticism that certification programmes are already too expensive, there are some questions over whether performance based standards are achievable, as they inevitably increase the cost of the certification process due to a lack of streamlining.

The trend is to develop programmes that combine process based mechanisms with performance measures, so as to ensure sound management practices within an actual performance based framework. This approach has the added benefit of allowing for sub-sector specific criteria to be developed, such as for accommodation, tour operators, transport providers, tourist attractions and so on, as each sub sector has different priorities. In terms of ecotourism, this is important as different aspects of an operation can be taken into consideration.

Another key issue is the need for phased participation in ecotourism certification programme, also referred to as ‘stepped versus one level certification’. There is some debate that phased participation, say from bronze, to silver to gold level encourages more companies to become involved in ecotourism certification programmes, as it is
perceived as tangible to enter at a low level, with the aim of striving for the high level. It could be argued that the difficulties with managing a phased tourism certification programme are too great; that the management costs become unmanageable; and the consumer is sent a confused message about what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’. However, phased participation does have a benefit in that it can encourage greater participation from those companies who might want to become more sustainable in their operations, but feel the need to start ‘small’ and aim for the top over a longer period of time. Some companies decide they will never proceed to the higher level however, which can degrade the perceived quality of the programme, as other companies question the point of striving further if others are not – why should they bare the cost burden?

**Involvement in tourism certification programmes**

The WTO report (2002) identified that despite the large number of tourism (including ecotourism specific) programmes that exist globally, there is still negligible impact of the programmes on changing industry behaviour to be more sustainable, and a low number of certified companies per programme. At best a programme will have 5% of the market share of companies for a tourism sub-sector in a given destination, with the exception of the Blue Flag programme, which has a large market share due to its niche market nature for beaches and marinas only. However, most schemes acknowledge they are running to resource capacity, and would not be able to cope with an increased number of companies as the fees would not cover the costs.

Certification of sustainable tourism and ecotourism is perceived as providing competitive advantage (Mihalič, 2000), and this is one of the key reasons for industry interest in the proposed Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council. Competitive advantage is however relative to the share of competitors meeting those standards, and any efforts to increase the number of applicants for certification should consider at which point they need to promote benefits other than marketing competitiveness as their selling point. Also competitive advantage is relative to the customer’s perceived link between sustainability, or environmental quality, and the core of the product being purchased. Currently less than 1% of the world’s tourism industry is involved with certification, which does not indicate there is a competitive advantage associated
with certification. Nevertheless, ecotourism companies are more likely to show an interest in proving their sustainability than more generalist tourism businesses that rely less directly on environmental quality of destinations.

Voluntary standards in ecotourism are a valid method to show best practice and industry leadership. They provide a range of capacity building benefits on environmental management, eco-savings and support to green marketing claims. There is no data to suggest whether ecotourism businesses perceive the internal benefits (eco-savings and environmental management) are greater than the external benefits (green marketing), but this would provide evidence to suggest the potential for expanding the current standards across the industry. WTO (2002) shows that certification schemes are struggling to increase the perception of benefits from certification beyond the committed few, and this is a costly and time-consuming exercise. Government incentives to introduce voluntary standards are required for a more meaningful share of the industry take up.

Thus the question of effectiveness of such a large number of relatively small programmes must be asked – is the fact there are so many programmes in fact contributing to the lack of effectiveness on a broader scale? How could this current situation be resolved, so as to increase consumer recognition of ecotourism certification and positively influence consumer choice of holiday product or service for a more sustainable option? It is now pertinent to examine the role accreditation could play in improving the current low take up rate of tourism certification programmes.
Current Issues and Problems with Certification

Industry Issues
It is mainly accommodation providers, such as hotels in the mainstream tourism industry, and ecolodges in the ecotourism industry that have been targeted for their overall quality, and also environmental quality issues, since it is easier to manage a single ‘operation’. Accommodation providers working towards certification are generally doing it with eco-savings as the incentive, although it is fair to say many ecolodges do so out of a drive to provide an environmentally responsible tourism product. In countries such as Costa Rica, several lodges have become certified through the CST programme. The Serena Group operates ecolodges and larger hotels throughout Kenya and Tanzania, and is using the Green Globe programme to certify their properties. These are however exceptions, and in the Costa Rican example the application and verification process is subsidised.

The Market
Ecolabels are meaningless in the majority of cases, and tourists perceive that certified products are more expensive. The most successful campaign is the Blue Flag, since they have linked environmental quality with health and safety in a way that tourists can see the benefits to themselves as individuals. The majority of other programmes are not widely recognised or understood by the average tourist. Similarly, there has been a reluctance by the tour operators to become involved in certification as many see it as too cumbersome and expensive to implement within their organisations. Instead, the Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development, a UNEP/UNESCO/WTO initiative, has determined Corporate Social Responsibility as a more suitable path.

Governments
Some governments have introduced programmes of certification as a voluntary initiative tool, to generate interest and create industry leaders. The WTO data shows that 20 out of 59 programs are lead by government agencies, and 38 out of 59 have some government involvement (Font & Bendell, 2002). The possibility of an international accreditation body might help governments become more involved, since a variety of governments that do not have a national system at present might
consider developing one. Maccarrone-Eaglen and Font (2002) conducted a survey of WTO-government members, and the 26 governments responding were positive to the benefits of certification and accreditation, although for some Southern hemisphere governments this was not a priority.

**Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)**

NGOs have used self-created certification systems to reward pilot projects for conservation programmes, but these are usually small scale and do not make a difference to the market unless they take a product or destination cluster. NGOs are more likely to be involved in ecotourism programs than governments, and also NGO programs tend to be in developing countries. Often the programmes operated by NGOs are seriously under-funded and under-resourced. Once the initial funding grant to develop a certification programme dries up, the NGOs are left with a system to administer and manage but without the necessary ongoing financial support to make it successful. The main interest from NGOs revolves around ecotourism and fair trade tourism, rather than eco-efficiency. Of particular note is the launch and expansion of the Fair Trade Through Tourism initiative under the auspices of Tourism Concern. Again, just as with the tour operators, there is some concern that certification might not adequately meet the goals of fair trade, so it is more than likely the Corporate Social Responsibility model will take precedence as the programme rolls out. This Network folded up in September 2002 when external funding dried out and could not continue as a self-financing program.

**North-South Divide**

From a geographical/economical perspective, ecolabels in northern countries tend to be run by governmental or quasi-governmental organisations focusing on eco-savings as the key issues in their criteria, mainly around energy and water conservation, while ecolabels operating in southern countries are run by NGOs focusing on a mix of social and environmental issues. Seen in this context, setting international standards on environmental and social performance can be seen by the countries of the South as another method for countries of the North to attach conditions to trading agreements that limit their economic and social development (Font and Sallows, 2002).
Results of the IYE 2002 Consultation

Widespread consultation was undertaken as part of the IYE 2002 preparations. Essentially consultation consisted of preparatory meetings, and it was during these breakout sessions were held to concentrate on certification issues. This paper uses the results of four workshops out of a longer list of consultation methods, available at the Rainforest Alliance’s website for the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council’s feasibility study. The workshops reported in this chapter include:

- Mesoamerica - Belize City, Belize
- Andean South America - Lima, Peru
- East Africa - Nairobi, Kenya
- South East Asia - Chiang Mai, Thailand

Mesoamerica

There were 23 participants at the Mesoamericas workshop, representing countries such as Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama.

The perception from the participants in Central America is that certification is not an effective tool to generate consumer demand, that consumers are not aware of certification, and that in those cases where certification is known, this is perceived to make the facilities more expensive or cheaper. Certification does play a role in consumer choice, with price, convenience and an overall perception of quality being more important. Although environmental and social certification is quality, this is not a message that is meaningful to the consumer, and the way that the message is packaged to the consumer should be reviewed. Without a product differentiation that is meaningful to the consumer, the certified tourism provider cannot justify a higher price. It is believed (or rather hoped) that some tourists such as the European market are more sensitive to the certification message than the American.

For industry, certification is a source of criteria of sustainability and quality standards, in the form of manuals and advice. Certification is also perceived as a method to
differentiate the quality of the service or product, and to differentiate it from the traditional tourism packages (Central America). It is hoped that this differentiation will mean access to government incentives, particularly for microfirms.

In Central America there were divided opinions about the type of benefits that the government should provide to certified companies. For example, the Costa Rican government runs marketing activities specifically promoting the companies certified by the CST. Those against this considered that funds raised through taxes should be used to benefit all taxpayers equally. An underlying issue around this point is the fact that different companies will not all have the same access to knowledge and potential to become certified, hence the perception of imbalance. Those in favour thought this is an incentive to improvement, and therefore those companies that have made an investment to become certified should be rewarded. It was perceived that governments in Central America are only introducing what they see it is done elsewhere as a fashion, not through real conviction.

Issues arise in the certification of community-based ecotourism development programs, which not only will not have the economies of scale to apply for certification, but possibly will not be making profits or these will be invested back into community. This is the case of the Guatemalan Green Deal programme. Proposals for a certification programme in the Dominican Republic, called Kiskeya Alternativa, have been abandoned due to the low efficiency of resources that certification supposes as opposed to other methods of community development.

**Andes**

There were 90 participants from Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. The Andean region is familiar with a wide variety of certification processes, although it can be assumed that Ecuador and Peru are the most familiar with all of the issues, while Bolivia, Colombia and Venezuela had the least experience. This is possibly due to the current activity in both Ecuador and Peru to develop suitable certification programmes. The private sector was under-represented at the meeting, which was largely comprised of representatives from NGOs, academics, and the community.
Community issues loom very large in this region. Amazonian areas of all the Andean countries represent vast ecotourism potential, however communities in these regions have little access to good educational systems and capacity building for community-based tourism projects has been sparse, though highly significant in certain areas. Communities in this region are very interested in being part of the ecotourism economy. They are justly concerned about being left out of national planning and development process. Certification could be viewed as just one more way to disenfranchise these communities, as they will have difficulty taking part in certification projects without a great deal of technical assistance.

The industry members that were present came with a strong interest in certification and understood the need for accreditation. They want to use certification to help them compete in the market, as currently they are competing against their central American counterparts, many of whom are actively involved in certification. The major concern expressed was cost and feasibility of certification in the region, which links to concerns outlined in the literature earlier in this chapter.

However, several certification programs are being launched in the region, mainly with government support. An overriding concern is how certification might engage SMEs and communities, as there is a perception these organisations and individuals will be excluded to an extent. Also, there is a question mark over the potential success of certification in the region, as there is a large number of businesses operating without financial buffer, and how will certification be seen as a priority business issue when there are so many other financial and business concerns. This can lead to larger firms affording the cost and time to work towards certification, and rewarding larger firms as ecotourism flagships.

It was felt that any certification programme should not be politicised and that it should maintain neutrality. A clear system of norms for all certification programmes needs to be established to ensure a level playing field, and that all sectors of society can participate. In particular, this region is concerned that ecotourism certification could become part of the system of political favours and corruption that is typical of their experience with government projects. In addition, there is considerable concern that the market for certified products might not be present, and consider that the market
should be prepared for certification. Furthermore, for certification to be successful in the region, there is a strong need for training of personnel that will be auditing against the standards set.

East Africa

The workshop consisted of thirty participants from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. This region has a mixed level of awareness about certification and the role it can play in delivering sustainable ecotourism. This is of interest, given a large percentage of the total tourism product within the region is ecotourism. Kenya has a much greater knowledge of certification, but this is due to a major study undertaken by the Kenya Ecotourism Society into the potential to develop a Kenyan ecotourism certification programme. Thus, at a national level, there is greater understanding, and many consider the international realm is not relevant to their own situations. Interestingly, there is a high awareness of the role of national standardisation and normalisation bodies (Bureaux of Standards), which indicates that there is some acceptance of a more regulatory approach to certification.

However, a number of challenges were recognised in the region. Firstly, there is an absence of regulatory systems on the whole. Secondly, there is a lack of criteria for ecotourism certification, as well as a lack of financial and technical resources (including a skilled labour force of auditors and managers) to properly implement any form of ecotourism certification. Thirdly, the political situation in the region is such that there is no legislation to cover certification and environmental performance/social accountability, and without this there are no powers of enforcement, rendering certification impossible, as tourism operations will not participate without being forced to.

Nevertheless, the time may come in the near future where this reluctance turns into business imperative. There is a sense that all stakeholders demand certification - consumers, donor agencies, investors, governments and tourism operators. However, until there is a demonstrated awareness at the consumer level and better marketing of ecotourism certification, it is unlikely the situation will change. Should this situation
arise, there are a range of costs and benefits which could be brought to the region through ecotourism certification, namely:

**Benefits:**

- Environmental and social improvement;
- Improved efficiency;
- Developing product goodwill through marketing of certification;
- Access to better markets of tourism;
- Improved sustainability -- social, environmental and economic;
- The Development of consumer-friendly products; and
- Credibility.

**Costs:**

- Enormous financial costs in terms of technology and technical expertise;
- The need for capacity building
- Developing reliable, effective baseline data;
- The establishment of an auditing framework;
- Limitations to the size of the ventures, reducing the amount of revenue from certification; and
- Time required for implementation.

A key issue raised was the potential inequities between SMEs and larger businesses, as the latter, with their substantive revenue bases, could benefit from certification more than SMEs.

In terms of accreditation, East Africa saw a range of benefits, primarily due to the different pace of development and priorities amongst countries in the region, however, and due to the transmutability of the border at certain points, there needs to be cross-border policies applied to different types of tourism products. The diverse range of organisations involved in certification would also benefit from a system that would allow comparison between different certification programmes, in terms of consistency, objectivity, transparency, credibility and acceptability. However, such a system would have to be provided with very minimal bureaucracy and financial input.
There should, however, be coordination between countries/regions and international systems to ensure regional sustainability, profitability and benefit sharing, while at the same time, enhancement of the social, cultural and natural environments.

The implications of the results are such that there is widespread consensus within East Africa that certification and accreditation are useful tools in encouraging a triple bottom line approach to sustainable ecotourism management. There are a range of issues that still need to be resolved in terms of land tenure, competition for resources and human-wildlife conflicts, however given the tourism product in the region is essentially ecotourism based, the potential for certification to act as a management tool is great.

**South East Asia**

The South East Asian workshop was held with 18 participants from Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The level of knowledge of ecotourism certification was variable, largely correlating to the level of development in place, that is, newly-industrialised countries (NICs) such as Malaysia and Thailand versus that of less-developed countries like Cambodia and Laos. What participants did agree on is that process and performance oriented standards were useful.

However, there are some significant challenges facing the region in terms of implementing widespread ecotourism certification, including cost and the time needed to implement certification. Other challenges that were raised by the participants included the need to maintain standards and some kind of monitoring system in place to ensure that this remains so when the standards have been established. As well, standards need to be continuously rising to match the improvements in performance and process to ensure that there is always a higher standard to be attained.

On the consumer and there is a need to better educate the consumer and industry on what the performance indicators are and why they are in place, to ensure an overall appreciation of their value and acceptance.
Unlike other workshops, this one was interesting as there was a perceived market demand for ecotourism certification in terms of defining the quality or security of the product on offer. It was considered that the consumer will pay more for a guarantee that the tourism product is of a high quality (the term quality includes environmental quality), however at this point in time the consumer and the tour operator alike are not adequately informed about certification and consequently it is difficult to charge higher rates. Another interesting point is that is was not felt SMEs were disadvantaged over larger enterprises, however, unlike in other regions, it was felt the governments need further training on the benefits of certification so they can help promote the development of regionally applicable programmes.

The costs and benefits of certification were recognised as including:

**Benefits:**
- Consumers benefit by having a sustainable product offering;
- It represents the development of a new tourism market segment development;
- Fosters a good reputation for a business;
- Effective for branding tourism products; and
- Promotes a higher value clientele.

**Costs:**
- The benefits derived from current certification programs come at too high a cost; and
- Lengthy development and application in terms of training, process, systems, facilities, promotion and capacity building.

In terms of accreditation of certification programmes, there was a strong consensus that accreditation was important as it would allow for the development of common core standards and market certification. Importantly, it was considered that accreditation has the potential for further work with governments who may be encouraged to set up of national certification products and policies, therefore contributing to the triple bottom line of sustainable tourism in the region.
Participants felt that accreditation will also have the added benefit of assisting protected area managers, local communities and tourism businesses. Thus overall, again considering the broad range of ecotourism products in the region, certification has the potential to aid planning, development and management of ecotourism.

Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism

The World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec, May 2002, was the culmination of the preparatory meetings. The workshops reported on in this chapter represent one sub set of these preparatory meetings. The significant outcome of the Quebec Summit was the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism. Several key recommendations made in the Declaration refer specifically to ecotourism certification and include:

- For national, regional and local governments
  ‘Use internationally approved and reviewed guidelines to develop certification schemes, ecolabels and other voluntary initiatives geared towards sustainability in ecotourism, encouraging private operators to join such schemes and promoting their recognition by consumers. However, certification systems should reflect regional and local criteria. Build capacity and provide financial support to make these schemes accessible to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In addition, monitoring and a regulatory framework are necessary to support effective implementation of these schemes.’

- For the private sector
  ‘Adopt as appropriate a reliable certification or other systems of voluntary regulation, such as ecolabels, in order to demonstrate to their potential clients their adherence to sustainability principles and the soundness of the products and services they offer.’

- For inter-governmental organisations, international financial institutions and development assistance agencies
  ‘Develop or adopt, as appropriate, international standards and financial mechanisms for ecotourism certification systems that take into account the needs of small and medium sized enterprises and facilitates their access to those procedures, and support their implementation.

Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism (2002)
Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to review the recommendations of the Quebec Summit in any depth, it should be recognised that these recommendations have significant implication with regards to the use of certification as a tool to contribute to better planning and management of ecotourism.

**Implications for ecotourism planning**

There are roles for both the public sector and private sector to take on greater responsibility in planning ecotourism in such a way it can be managed in a sustainable way in perpetuity.

Overall, the workshops reviewed show there was a strong feeling that the public sector will have to absorb some of the costs to incentive companies to 1) invest to improve quality standards, and 2) pay the price to be regularly verified as meeting those standards. The push for certification at national level needs to be an integrated system that not only gives the opportunity to be certified, and the support to apply for certification through soft credit schemes, training and access to markets. Companies entering certification will require a start-up subsidy in the form of grants to invest on capacity building, marketing and green technology to meet the standards in the first place or to have clear proof that the investment can be offset in a medium term through reduced operational costs coming from eco-savings. It was acknowledged that usually grants are for product development and upgrading, not marketing. However start-up funds will have limitations in time and overall amount and this is desirable, since certification programmes need to become financially sustainable. Exactly how this will work is still an issue, but it is likely the solutions will vary between regions. As an example, the CST is currently subsidised by the Costa Rican government and the success of this program has meant a growth in number of applications and therefore cost of running the program.

**Implications for ecotourism management**

The workshops also demonstrated a perception that the current organisations applying for certification are not doing it for marketing purposes, and that certification will not
solve the applicant’s marketing problems. More needs to be done by certification programmes to market their seal, and this must be done in conjunction with the certified companies. This is also where accreditation of certification could come into play, as an accreditation body could perform marketing and lobbying functions that would potentially benefit all certification programmes. Finally, a key underlying issue is the reduction of operating costs through eco-savings, which can be reinvested in paying for the process of certification, but this requires economies of scale to make it workable.

If certification becomes a source of competitive advantage, this might change the way in which ecotourism companies market themselves, and ultimately their management. Two possible avenues are for governments to undertake specific marketing campaigns to promote certified producers, and accreditation programs to promote the use of certified suppliers as part of distribution channels’ chains of supply. If either of these methods is effective, ecotourism companies might redirect some of their marketing efforts to showing how they meet certification criteria, and in effect pass on part of their marketing work to other organizations. These are tentative thoughts and only time and examples will prove just how feasible it is.

**Conclusion**

The use of the word ecotourism, and also sustainable tourism, should be limited to those products or services meeting the characteristics of the definition of either term. Unfortunately there are no means to regulate their use, and they are often used for greenwashing. In the short-term governments, non-profit organisations and industry associations have started voluntary initiatives to identify those companies with high standards, but there are many difficulties in the process of managing processes to verify those companies that meet standards of ecotourism. This paper has reviewed the current literature and experiences of a variety of ecotourism certification programmes through the primary research collected during workshops organised as part of the preparatory meetings for the International Year of Ecotourism across a variety of locations in Southern Hemisphere countries with ecotourism operators and experts.
The conclusions from this chapter are that across the world there is an acceptance that ecotourism certification can be a beneficial tool, and if it could be implemented given the appropriate context, it could help in providing a level playing field for all businesses and governments in managing the impacts of ecotourism on the environment and community. The facts are less encouraging, and when reviewing challenges on a region by region, it is clear that many of these challenges cannot be dealt by certification, and in some cases certification will only worsen current inequalities by promoting those who have the capacity to fulfil assessment requirements.

The success of, and hope for, ecotourism certification however relies on three key players: governments, the private sector, and the international community such as inter-governmental organisations, international financial institutions and development agencies. The recognition that all these players need to be involved is of paramount importance, as until the Quebec Declaration, there was little or no recognition that the expansion and adoption of these programmes is the responsibility of all, not just the green movement. At this stage we would like to add a fourth player, the tourism distribution channels who have a corporate social responsibility for promoting sustainable suppliers over non sustainable ones, in absence of a market demand for sustainable products.

**Questions**

1. Discuss the benefits of the certification process to ecotourism sites
2. Outline the current status of the certification programs
3. Evaluate the implications of creating certification programs in ecotourism settings.
4. Suggest 4 factors that will influence the success of the certification programs in the future.
References


International Year of Ecotourism (2002), *Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism*, Madrid: WTO


**Consultation workshops**

Mesoamerica International Year of Ecotourism preparatory meeting, Belize City, Belize, November 2001,
Andean South America International Year of Ecotourism preparatory meeting, Lima, Peru, 7 February 2002
East Africa International Year of Ecotourism preparatory meeting, Nairobi, Kenya, 23 March 2002
South East Asia International Year of Ecotourism preparatory meeting, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 8 March 2002

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TABLE 1: Performance criteria for ecotourism certification.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Waste: solid and water (consumption-reduction-recycling-disposal)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Energy (consumption-reduction-efficiency)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Water (consumption-reduction-quality)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Hazardous substances (reduction-handling-use of nature friendly cleaning products)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Noise (reduction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Air quality (quality-improvement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transport (public transport- green alternatives provided)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Specific standards for impacts specific to diving, golf, beaches and other sub-sectors</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Creation of local employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Supply chain management through green and sustainable purchasing policies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Creation of networks of “green businesses” within a given destination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Use of locally sourced and produced materials and food.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Use of organic food</td>
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<tr>
<th>Social accountability</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Community (relations-welfare)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Community (participation-organization-involvement)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Personnel: fair treatment</td>
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<tr>
<th>Cultural</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasis and conservation of local/regional culture, heritage and authenticity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• In keeping aesthetics of physical development/architecture</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Customer satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Health and safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Services and facilities provided (environmentally friendly and/or for environment/wildlife observation/enjoyment)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Employee capacity building/education/ qualifications  
| Overall business competence |
| Destination resource protection  
| Habitat/eco-system/wildlife maintenance and enhancement  
| Environmental information/interpretation/education for customers  
| Overall environmental protection |

Source: Font and Bendell, 2002