

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CERTIFICATION SCHEMES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM

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*Abstract. Environmental certification and ecolabels represents controversial topics in tourism. Hotels and tour operators use them in marketing, land management agencies in allocating operating permits, government agencies in promoting national interests, and ecotourism associations for education, lobbying, and revenue generation. Ecolabels have recently attracted the attention of multilateral tourism and multilateral environmental organizations alike. There are more then 150 tourism certification programmes all over the world, some of them at national or regional level, and some at international level, recognized by the most important tourism organizations. It is important to know that such an accreditation is ensuring tourists, that the tourism products and services they are buying are of good quality, professional and according to the sustainable development policies and principles.*

*Cuvinte cheie: tourism accreditation, certification, ecolabels.*

## **Introduction**

Service and product quality are vital to the reputation of any tourist destination. Tourists are becoming more discerning about the tourism experiences they are seeking. Standards in other countries are rising. Each destination must strive for continuous improvement and best practice if it is to be considered a platinum plus destination. One way of raising the professionalism and standards of the tourism industry is through accreditation, that is, by developing a quality mark, brand or logo that can be displayed by tourism businesses who meet or exceed the requirements or standards prescribed by a program.

Certification and accreditation programs provide tourism business with an action plan for improvement that can include enhanced management, improved tourism product and higher customer satisfaction. Accreditation programs can be beneficial to consumers as a means of providing information and greater assurance of product and service quality.

This paper reviews some of the more significant issues which influence what accreditation can achieve in tourism and under what circumstances, and whether existing ecolabels are likely to live up to this potential.

## **A brief history of tourism certification**

The social, political and economic context plays an important role in establishing the type and the level of a tourism certification programme. Some of the most relevant factors are: the particular environmental issue or parameter to which the label refers; the level of knowledge and concern among potential clients and other users in relation to environmental issues in general and the ecolabel parameters in particular; the degree of consensus regarding the meaning and significance of terms used in the ecolabel; and the existence, number, and level of acceptance for competing ecolabel schemes.

Ecolabelling process's based on the assumption that there is public demand for green labels (products and services). In order to encourage businesses to take part, there needs to be effective and widespread publicity of both the certification programmes and of those businesses and products that have qualified for ecolabels.

The evolution of ecolabels and other quality programmes followed a common pattern in a wide range of sectors. While not all conform to this pattern, it seems to illustrate a number of social processes which form part of the context for any certification programme. In the earliest stages, there are several major components in chronological order (1):

- universities, nongovernmental organizations, or private research groups identify an environmental issue as significant for the tourism development;

- mass media coverage and public debate raises public, industry, and government awareness of this issue;
- if sufficient consensus and public concern is generated, the issue may reach the agendas of some government policymakers and corporate board members;
- individual companies start to ecolabel products in relation to the issue concerned;
- some other companies follow suit, perceiving a market advantage with no attendant costs;
- companies commonly charge a premium for ecolabeled products;
- individual consumers, followed by watchdog organizations, complain that the label is meaningless and that people are being duped;
- legal actions for misleading advertising may be brought under fair trading legislation; if such actions are brought successfully, the next steps are accelerated; but they may also occur without any legal action;
- either government or industry or both act to formalize the meaning and use of the ecolabel.

The evidence indicates that many of these ecolabelling programmes have not been very effective in publicizing their programmes to consumers. Although a number of guidebooks and magazines promote them, studies have found that the vast majority of holidaymakers are unaware of the existence of the environmental certification schemes in the tourism sector. It is unlikely that any tangible results will be obtained until the major tour operators, tourist clubs, tourist information and reservation networks, and the media publicize ecolabel programmes and the individual awardees.

According to the current sustainable development practices, it has been suggested that there are four different approaches of the certification schemes (2):

- very weak – these are the certification scheme that aim to preserve the current practices of the tourism products and services;
- weak – certification schemes that aim to preserve only the new forms of development in the destination or surrounding areas;
- strong – that aim to apply an environmental management system in the destination and services;
- very strong – they are certification schemes that aim for the absolute preservation of tourism products and services.

The oldest and the most successfully certification programmes are in Europe. In the 1990s, an increasing number of tourism associations, consumer groups, and governmental bodies began to pay attention to ecologically sound tourism. By 2001, there were about 60 environmental certificates and awards in Europe covering nearly all types of tourism suppliers, including accommodation, beaches, protected areas, restaurants, handicrafts, golf courses, tour packages, and various other tourism-related businesses. A majority of the ecolabels in Europe - more than 30 - certify accommodation: hotels and restaurants, campsites, youth hostels, farm houses, alpine huts, holiday houses, guest houses, and bed and breakfast lodgings (3).

Regional and national environmental certificates and awards exist in Austria, Germany, Denmark, Luxemburg, England, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Spain, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. International ecolabels have been developed and implemented in the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Denmark) and the European Union is developing the criteria for a single Europe-wide ecolabel for accommodation. These programmes are intended to stimulate better environmental performance by increasing both competition among suppliers and building consumer demand.

North America is rather reluctant to introduce ecolabels as a whole and few programmes can be found; Australia is unique in its tourism accreditation development, by creating the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Programme (NEAP) as one of the strongest programme that can be found.

The majority of certification schemes accredit accommodations (approximately 63%), whereas only 7% address tour operators, mainly ground operators specifically dealing with ecotourism (4). Approximately 40% of the criteria or indicators in standards relate to management issues and the remaining 60% relate to specific actions such as environmental benchmarking (34%), economic indicators (8%) or socio-cultural criteria (12%).

## Specialized certification programmes

**Blue Flag programme** is an exclusive eco-label awarded to over 3300 beaches and marinas in 36 countries across Europe, South Africa, Morocco, New Zealand, Canada and the Caribbean. The Blue Flag Programme is owned and run by the independent non-profit organisation Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). The Blue Flag works towards sustainable development at beaches/marinas through strict criteria dealing with water quality, environmental education and information, environmental management, and safety and other services (5).

This certification programme is widely regarded for its rigorous enforcement of 29 beach criteria and 23 marina criteria subsumed under the four areas of water quality, environmental education and information, environmental management, and safety and services. Some of the criteria are designated as obligatory “imperatives”, while others are designated as “guidelines” that may or may not be adhered to depending on circumstances (6).

**Green Globe 21** certification programme was originally established in 1994 as an entity of the WTTC to pre-empt further government regulation over the tourism industry. Green Globe is the world’s only Benchmarking, Certification and Performance Improvement programme based on the Agenda 21 principles for sustainable development agreed to by 182 Heads of Government at the United Nations Rio Earth Summit of 1992. Green Globe is supported by the science and technology of the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre, the largest source of sustainability research in the world (7).

Over the years, Green Globe has been aligned with a number of important industry associations. The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) has endorsed the programme as part of its commitment to sustainable travel and tourism. The Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism (CAST) markets the Green Globe programme in that region. The Green Key programme in the Nordic countries has previously worked closely with Green Globe, as has the Green Seal programme in the United States. The New Zealand Tourism Industry Association, Bali Greenery, the International Hotel and Restaurant Association, the China Environmental Protection Agency, the West Virginia EPA and Ecotourism Australia have also had formal alliances with Green Globe.

**Certification for Sustainable Tourism** it is a program that seeks to categorize and certify each tourism company according to the degree to which its operations comply to a model of sustainability. The official entity in charge of this program is the Costa Rica Tourist Institute (ICT). Participation in the program is entirely voluntary and is open to all hotels, inns, bed & breakfasts services, and cabins that may wish to do so, without restriction as to their location (beaches, mountains, etc.) or their size (8).

Inscription in the program and the initial categorization are offered at no cost to the companies. The only requirement is to fill out the attached inscription form and send it to our offices, to the address provided on the form.

**Green Key** is an international eco-label for tourism products. It was originated for hotels in Denmark in 1994 and in 1998 France joined and started labelling camping sites. Today, criteria are available for hotels, camping sites, hostels, summer houses, restaurants, leisure facilities, and conference facilities. Not all criteria are available in all countries. It is an ongoing work to develop criteria for the international campaign. The Green Key has been made available to all 37 countries in the FEE network. At this point, the Green Key is established in six countries and a number of other countries are preparing to run the campaign. See “upcoming countries” for details on the national situations (9).

The Green Key campaign is co-ordinated in a co-operation between FEE France and the Danish Green Key organisation. An international steering group with representation from both organisations develops the campaign.

## Tourism certification in Romania

In Romania there is a lack of this kind of certification programmes. Unfortunately, only one of these programmes can be found in our country, *Blue Flag*. Responsible for the introduction of this certification it is “Centrul Carpato-Danubian de Geoecologie”, sustained by the National Authority of Tourism. In 2006, the International Jury has decided to give the Blue Flag certification to 5 beaches and 1 marina: „Mojito Beach” in Mamaia, „Europa Beach” in Eforie Nord, „Adras Beach” in Saturn, „Perla Venusului Beach” in Venus, „Sun Paradise” in Neptun and „Yacht Club Europa Marina” from Eforie Nord.

There are also, some efforts to develop and implement the principles of sustainable development in hotel management (so called „green hotels”), but until now there are little changes made in this way.

## **Conclusions**

Even if the efforts in promotion of tourism ecolabeling were considerable, there is a major weakness – the continuing lack of consumer recognition, which reduces the incentive for tourism companies to become involved in such scheme, and thus leads to another problem of lacklustre corporate participation levels. This is associated with a combination of factors, including the proliferation of ecolabels, their geographically and topically specialized character, the low profile of most funding and certification bodies (10).

The success of tourism ecolabeling depends upon efforts to increase cooperation and consolidation among the certification programmes, including joint marketing activities and a mutual confidence that programmes include similar criteria, standards, and auditing practices. The challenges facing tourism industry ecolabeling programmes in Europe are largely the same as those of facing certification programmes in other parts of the world.

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