Eco-Certification as a Tool of Sustainable Tourism: A Preliminary Approach

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Abstract: *As tourism is the fastest growing sectors of the global economy, environmental quality acquires a decisive role in sustainable tourism development. Tourism, like any activity, has environmental impacts that directly or indirectly affect and alter the resources that make up the tourism product. Adoption of the principles of sustainable development is essential in tourism since the protection and safeguarding of environmental quality is a prerequisite for the development and maintenance of tourism activity. Environmental management systems and ecolabel scan help business to minimize their environmental impact and furthermore to set a communication channel between actors. Also, may inform customers of new green features of tourism services, on in a visual way. The paper highlights the role of environmental certification in protecting and upgrading tourism product.*

Keywords: sustainable tourism, environmental management systems, eco-labels

1. Introduction

Tourism can be a profitable source of revenue for a destination, but it can also have a significant negative impact on it [1]. Tourism can put strong pressure on the environment [2] and tourism activities may cause significant deterioration of a region's natural resources, if are not managed in an environmentally sensitive way [3]. Environmental resources, is an integral part of tourism product [4], [5] and the relationship between tourism and the environment is so direct and decisive, so as when the natural environment is degraded the tourist product is affected. As tourism industry is composed of many different sectors (Fig. 1) is difficult to quantify the real impact of tourism on the environment [6].

Figure 1: Components of the tourism system [6]

As the number of tourists increases, according to World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) worldwide grew 4% in 2019 to reach 1.5 billion, and in 2020 a growth of 3% to 4% is expected [7], Environmental Management Practices in the tourism sector can help organizations to minimize their environmental impacts.

The article focuses on the examining the connection between environmental quality and tourism and the role of environmental certification towards sustainable tourism.

2. Environmental Quality and Tourism

In 1972, the first conference of the United Nations on human environment took place in Stockholm [8]. Twenty seven principles on how the natural and the built environment (social, politic, economic environments) should flourish together were stated [9]. Environmental awareness grew in the second half of the twentieth century [10]. Nowadays, environmental management systems and firm performance is a key issue [11], as also the strengthening of corporate environmental responsibility and practicing green sustainable practices [12].

Environment and quality is of a growing interest in recent years. Quality assurance has been the subject of study with industrialization and since then total quality management (TQM) and environmental excellence provides a framework to organizations to achieve improved environmental performance [13]- [14]. An Environmental Management Systems (EMS) provides a structured management process aiming to help businesses to reduce environmental impacts and to certify their achievements [15]. An EMS is being approached through the Deming's PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle [16]. Two well-known environmental management systems are the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) and ISO 14000 standards [17].

It has to be pointed out that for tourism the environmental quality of tourist destinations has been recognized of a fundamental importance and consideration of overall environmental quality includes measures for minimizing all kinds of environmental problems of the travel and tourism industry, and includes investments in environmental protection and restoration of already degraded environment [18]. Various environmental pressures from tourism services are given below (Fig. 2) [19]. Activities/Services in tourism organisations (hotels, campsites, restaurants and tour operators) that are associated with environmental pressures are Administration, Technical services, Restaurant/bar, Kitchen, Room use, Laundry, Purchasing, Activities,

Transport, Additional services, Building and construction [20].

Figure 2: Tourism service inputs and outputs [19]

In this context, we should consider both the concept of sustainability and sustainable tourism. Sustainability can be defined as the improvement of the quality of human life and exists in the inherent capacity of ecosystems to support their populations, thus taking actions simultaneously for biological system, economic system and social system [21]. In line with this, is the definition of UNTO for sustainable tourism: "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" [22].

3. Environmental Certification in Tourism Industry

The measurement of sustainability, is a complex task and has been a topic of study among researchers, policy makers and other stakeholder [23]. Certification systems and standards bring needed clarity to business strategy on sustainability and can drive business performance towards minimizing its environmental impacts. Environmental certification of tourism and hospitality operations states that the adopted practices are in line with environmental management rules. These methods have to be verified by a third party as to ensure that these practices and methods are not just a green wash [24]. As sustainability, is a key part of tourism policies in 101 UNWTO Member States [25], and environmental concerns have been increasing in tourism industry [26]certification programs in tourism sector are very important tools that enables businesses to consciously offer environmentally friendly services and products and to distinguish from those businesses that arbitrarily display an "eco-friendly" image. Standards can help private and public organizations to improve their tourist services. EMSs and eco- labeling schemes verify that tourism products and services comply with certain pre-determined environmental criteria.

3.1 Environmental Management Systems

ISO
In 1996, the family of ISO 14000 standards was introduced, in order to guide and support companies to monitor and

improve their environmental performance, while constantly transforming and moving their operational processes towards reducing their environmental footprint [27]- [28]. As tourism is one of the world's fasted developing sector with increasing growth forecasted for the coming years (Fig. 3) [29]- [30], ISO published standards for tourism and related services which cover the following areas [31]:

- Diving Services
- Health Tourism Services
- Adventure Tourism
- Yacht Harbours
- Bareboat Charters
- Sustainable Tourism
- Accessible Tourism
- Accommodation
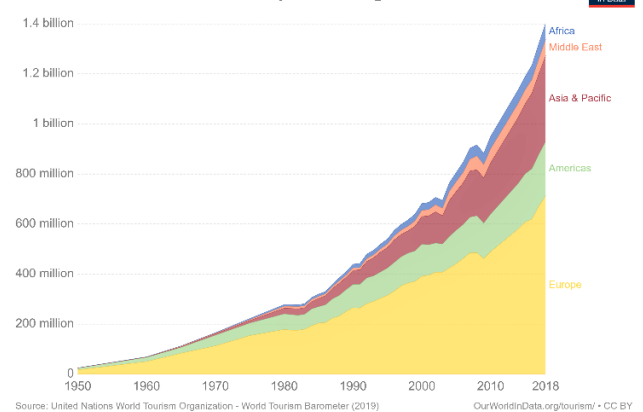- Restaurant
- Event sustainability management systems

**Figure 3:** International arrivals by world region [30]

EMAS
The EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) is a management instrument developed by the European Commission and is open to every type of organisation (e.g. tour operators, destinations and accommodation facilities). Akey element in EMAS Scheme is the environmental statement and report, which provides to stakeholders information on actual environmental performance of verified organisarions [31]. EMAS, differently from other EMS standards, an organisation has to manage and improve not only direct environmental aspects, but also ''indirect'' ones [32].

3.2 Ecolabels

Ecolabels addresses companies that provide services, produce products and / or market products under their own brand names for which specific compliance criteria for fewer impacts on the environment have been established. Ecolabelling schemes enhance transparency and consumer trust in environmental claims so as to help consumers to choose products that are acceptable from an environmental point of view [33]- [34]. In most cases Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA) is a key to eco-labeling schemes [35]. Ecolabels can act as a tool of environmental communication to guest hotels, for its efforts not to harm the environment

[36]- [37].

Generic criteria development process for eco-labelling is given in Fig. 4. [38]
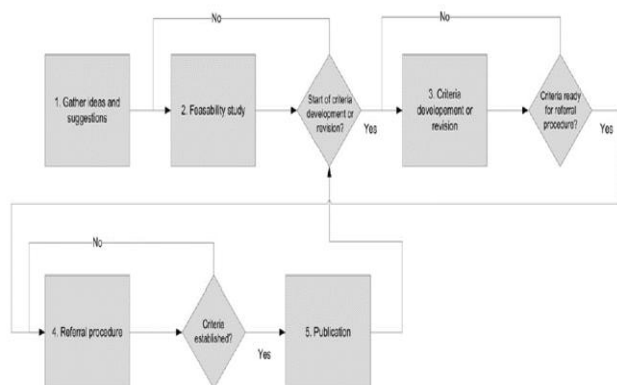
Figure 4: Generic criteria development process for ecolabelling [38]

Known ecolabels schemes are

EU Ecolabel
EU-Ecolabel promotes environmental excellence in products and services and provides a framework to hotel managers to the implementation of green practices [36] [39]. Receiving EU Ecolabel Tourist Accommodation, hotel is committed to protecting the environment [40]. Thera are 24 certified hotels in EU and 7 camp sites [41].

Green Globe
Green Globe is designed to cover all sectors of the tourism industry [42] and provide standards for the following industry categories [43]:

- Attraction
- Business (Whole Sale / Retail)
- Congress Center, Meeting Venues
- Cruise Ships (River & Ocean)
- Golf Course
- Hotel & Resort
- Meeting & Events
- Organization
- Restaurant
- Spa, Health Center
- Transportation (Mass Transportation, Bus Company, Limousine Service, Car Rental)
- Travel Industry (Tour Operators, Destination Management Company, Meeting & Incentive Industry)

Blue Flag
Blue Flag is a voluntary eco-label awarded to beaches, marinas, and sustainable boating tourism operators. Nowadays, has been certified 4573 beaches, marinas and boats in 47 countries [44]. To be awarded a Blue Flag, beaches must meet 33 criteria concerning four categories: environmental education and information, water quality, environmental management, and safety and services; three out of four categories have an environmental focus [45].

Green Key
Green Key, is an eco-label for tourism. Interested tourist entrepreneurs must comply with certain ecological requirements. Rewarding the Green Key signal requires that a number of ecological requirements be met. Green Key eco-label awarded to more than 3, 100 hotels and other establishments in 66 countries [46].

Today, there are criteria for:
- hotels
- hostels
- campings
- conference centers

Green Restaurant
To be verified restaurants have to be complied with standards in eight categories [47]:
- Water Efficiency
- Waste Reduction and Recycling
- Sustainable Durable Goods & Building Materials
- Sustainable Food
- Energy
- Reusables & Environmentally Preferable Disposables
- Chemical and Pollution Reduction
- Transparency & Education

4. Final Remarks

A destination tourism product depends on various attributes and one of these are physical and environmental attributes, such as natural attractions, built attractions, accommodation, restaurants climate, social life etc. [48]. Each one of these components may influence consumer choice when selecting a holiday because they contribute to a destination's attractiveness. EMS and ecolabelling as marketing tools have been addressed mainly to green consumers and reflect the change in social attitudes towards the environment, concerning both businesses and consumers. From an entrepreneurial point of view, this phenomenon creates new business opportunities. However, corporations should choose to perform in a sustainable way not just to enhance their brand name or just to take advantage of this trend, but also to contribute to the economic, social and behavioral environments in which they fit it. It is mandatory that companies understand that the long term preservation of the natural environment is totally linked to their own on-going growth.

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