

## AN OVERVIEW ON QUALITY CERTIFICATION OF ECOTOURISM SERVICES

Roxana Elena Popo<sup>a</sup>, Virgil Nicula

**Abstract:** *In the current economic environment, many countries are making significant efforts to develop and operationalize a number of certification schemes designed to confirm that a tourist company improved its performance in terms of a number of indicators including: health and safety, conservation and biodiversity, environment, product management, quality, etc. Thus, many tourism companies oriented their activities towards these criteria to obtain ecologic certification of the business and the products they sell. In these circumstances, the work is based on an extensive study of the literature, in order to provide a overview on quality certification of ecotourism services.*

**Key words:** *certification system, ecotourism, ecologic performance, environment, ecolabel*

### 1. Introduction

Currently the society is going through a period marked by major changes due to global environmental issues and environmental pressures, health concerns, etc.. It is not new that the environment is both "support" and "raw material" for tourism, so that environmental degradation results in lowering the attractiveness of a particular area.

According to some specialists (Chafe 2005) there is a close connection between the eco-label and consumer behavior. Thus, 69% of Dutch tourists, staying in hotels Green Key Eco-Label certified, mentions they would be willing to pay more to benefit from facilities that have implemented an ecolabel. At the same time, 86% - of Dutch tourists - would prefer a star clasification system that combines the ecologic performance and quality of service. The same specialist, reveals that over 62% of Italian tourists and 42% of German tourists consider that ecologic performance is a key factor for a successful holiday.

At the same time, studies carried out by WTO (World Tourism Organization) have identified the main megatrends that are recorded in tourism and which will increase for the years 2020. Among the most significant aspects are: the increasing number of tourists concerned about environmental issues; increasing demand for new destinations; tourists become more experienced and sophisticated, expect good

quality attractions, facilities and services, as well as quality and suitable tariffs on their travels (National Tourism Authority).

Thus, the essential condition for the continued development of the tourism phenomenon in a particular territory is quality certification of ecotourism services.

In this context, the literature review, reveals the existence of numerous studies designed to lead to a better understanding of the decisive role that quality certification of ecotourism service has on organizational performance (Honey:2002; Font: 2002; Blumer: 2007; Eriksen: 2007).

## **2. Quality certification of ecotourism services**

Certification is defined as a voluntary process which assesses audits and provides written assurance that a facility, a product, process or service reaches specific standards. It offers a commercial logo for those who meet or exceed basic standards (Honey 2002: 37).

In this context, ecotourism certification has a educative character, both by improving the environmental performance of ecotourism operators and the awareness of local authorities, local people and tourists on sustainable tourism opportunity.

With all the opportunities that it offers and the conditions imposed for its proper deployment, certification is an effective marketing tool because consumers are trained to recognize credible brands with certain notoriety. Thus eco-certification is a sine-qua-non condition in choosing, promotion and preservation of an eco-destination (Hornoiu; Zamfir 2008: 285).

Thus, certification helps ecotourism operators to obtain economic benefits on one side by reducing consumption of water, electricity, etc., and secondly by implementing new technologies with financial and technical assistance provided by various institutions.

At the same time, *certification leads to the increase of industry standards regarding health, safety, environment, social stability*, as well as reduce the cost of ambiantal protection, through environmental protection and limiting the negative impact on its, by protecting the cultural and social values of local human( ũuclea; Pădureanu; Hornoiu 2008).

Considering these aspects, and the fact that ecotourism has emerged as a business opportunity since the early 70's – in Kenya – it becomes necessary the quality certification of ecotourism services. In this respect, the main initiatives in the domain of ecologic certification of hotel business are synthesized in the table no. 1

Tabele no. 1 Voluntary environment tools applied to the hotel industry

<b>Tools</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Codes of conduct	In order to show observance of the basic principles by a sustainable and environment friendly business	Agenda 21 for the tourism and travels industry; WTTC environment Guidebook
Best environment practice in this area	In order to take actual steps for improving the company's ecologic performance	Electricity and water saving approaches; diminishing the quantity of waste and its adequate management
Ecolabels	In order to ensure the ecologic performance of business in close connection to the set out criteria and for informing the client	European ecolabel, Green Globe 21, Öko-Proof-Betrieb, Spanish ecolabeling systems
Environment Management Systems (EMSs)	In order to guide the company's environment performance and for its continuous improvement in close connection to the planned strategy	ISO 14001; European Regulation EMAS
Ecologic performance indicators	In order to set out and communicate the company's ecologic performance	Total electricity and water consumption; resulting quantities of waste per type

Source: Ayuso, S., 2006. Adoption of Voluntary Environmental Tools for Sustainable Tourism: Analysing the Experience of Spanish Hotels. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, p. 209

Worldwide, according to the World Tourism Organization, there are over 80 ecotourism certification programs, which can be grouped according to various criteria, including the number and types of criteria on which they incorporate (see table no. 2); the most relevant of these are presented in the following paragraphs.

*Green Globe 21* (GG21) is an international standard focused on certification of tourism business, destinations and activities of local communities (Green Globe International, Inc, Information on Green Globe's benchmarking and certification).

*Nature's Best* was released by Swedish Ecotourism Association in cooperation with the Swedish Travel & Tourism Council, for certification of ecotourism tour operators and tourism products that they offer for sale (Nature's Best. About Nature's Best ecolabel).

International experience in the domain of quality certification of ecotourism services, confirm the extent of this form of expression of sustainable tourism, but also the efforts of some organizations and associations for the planning, organization and development of this marketing tool.

Referring to these efforts, globally are known a number of portals designed to offer information and assistance necessary to ecologic certification, thus:

- In Europe, the DestiNet Portal for Sustainable Tourism provides links to numerous websites of certification programs in sustainable tourism and ecotourism, including environmental and sustainability requirements. Association of Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism (VISIT) includes seven ecolabels in Holland, Italy, Denmark, Latvia, UK, Switzerland and Luxembourg. Similarly, the European Union Ecolabel (European Flower) certifies the quality of tourist accommodation and camping spaces in the European Union and other European countries (European Commission. Environment. Ecolabel). In this direction, through the collaboration of ECOTRANS (Germany), ECEAT-Projects (Holland), Association of Ecotourism in Romania (RO) and PRISMA Centre for Development Studies (GR), as well as through the financial support of the European Commission the European Ecotourism Labelling Standard (EETLS) was developed. This is composed of 40 specific criteria divided into four categories:
  - The group of criteria. A. Demonstrate an efficient sustainable management;
  - The group of criteria. B. Maximizing the social and economic benefits for the local community and minimizing the negative effects;
  - The group of criteria. C. Maximizing the the benefits for cultural heritage and minimizing the negative effects;
  - The group of criteria. D. Maximizing the environmental benefits and minimizing the negative effects.
- *The portal of the American Network of Sustainable Tourism Certification* has links to websites of certification programs in sustainable tourism and ecotourism in North America, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean (Rainforest Alliance: Sustainable Tourism).

- In Africa, *Ecotourism Society of Kenya (ESOK)* certifies the accommodation facilities based on social and environmental criteria. Thus, Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FTTSA) ensures that the tourism products and services respect the business ethics, human rights, culture and environment. (Eco Tourism Kenya: The Eco-rating Certification Scheme).

*SmartVoyager* – The Galapagos, Islands, Ecuador – was released by NGOs Conservacion y Desarrollo and Rainforest Alliance to certify in ecotourism the floating hotels (Conservacion y Desarrollo: Standardization/ Verifications).

Tabele no.2 Representative certifying systems in sustainable tourism and ecotourism

No.	TITLE	NUMBER OF CRITERIA
1.	Mohonk Agreement	26 for sustainable tourism; 7 for ecotourism; 19 for accreditation
2.	STC Network Draft Base	Total 76 of which: 46 for environmental, 9 socio-cultural, 6 economic, 5 for quality, 1 for health and safety
3.	EcoCertification, Australia	Total 62 of which: 8 for company management and operational planning, 1 for business ethics, 1 fair marketing, 1 tourist satisfaction, 1 focus on natural areas, 31 for environmental, 4 for interpretation and education, 2 for contribution to conservation, 3 regarding the local communities, 1 regarding the culture
4.	Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council	7 based on process, 23 on the performance, of which: 12 for environmental, 5 socio-cultural, 4 for quality, 1 for health and safety
5.	Climate, Community and Biodiversity Project Design Standards	8 general, 5 regarding the climate, 5 regarding the community, 5 biodiversity
6.	Nature’s Best, Sweden	Of the total of 132 criteria based on process and performance: 47 are for tour operators and 85 for their products
7.	National Responsible Tourism Guidelines for South Africa, Dept of Environmental Affairs and Tourism	Total 104 of which: 26 for environmental, 41 socio-cultural, 37 economic
8.	Green Deal Generic Standard, Asociacion Alianza Verde (Guatemala)	Total 101 of which: 44 for environmental, 11 socio-cultural, 12 economic, 17 for quality, 14 for health and safety
9.	Meios de Hospedagem – Requisitos para Susteintabilidade, NH-56:	Total 102 of which: 36 for environmental, 25 socio-cultural, 20 economic, 21 for sustainable management

	2004, Instituto Hospitalidade (Brazil)	
10.	Certificacion Sostenibilidad Turistica (CST), Instituto Costarricense de Turismo	Total 168 of which: 119 for environmental, 16 socio-cultural, 17 economic, 5 for quality, 7 for health and safety, 5 for sustainable management
11.	Green Globe (GG) International Ecotourism Standard	Total 110 of which: 40 for environmental, 40 socio-cultural, 5 economic, 2 for health and safety, 10 for training and information, 13 other
12.	GG21 Company for Travel and Tourism	Total 95 of which: 70 for environmental, 10 socio-cultural, 5 economic, 5 for training and information
13.	The ECOTEL Criteria	35 for environmental
14.	Managing Environmental and Social Issues In The Accomodations Sector	Total 98 of which: 69 for environmental, 17 socio-cultural, 4 economic, 8 for conservation and biodiversity
15.	Global Reporting Initiative /UNEP, Tour Operayors Sector Supplement	Total 45 of which: 9 for product management, 9 internal management, 16 distribution chain management, 7 customer relations, 4 for cooperation with destination
16.	Green Key (Europe) Standard for Hotels	Total 92 for environmental of which: 64 obligatory, 28 optional
17.	Health&Safety Standards, British Airways Holidays	Specific minimum criteria for hotels regarding the fire safety, food management, pools, beaches and water sports
18.	Green Seal Product Standard for Lodging Poprerties (SUA)	38 for environmental
19.	Audubon Green Leaf Rating Program for Hotels	Evaluation eco-efficient for energy, resource conservation, pollution prevention and ambient management
20.	Hotel Benchmarking Tool, International Hotel Environmental Insitute, WWF-UK and Razol Society of Wildlife Trusts	Tool for measuring energy consumption, water, wastewater quality, waste minimization, using and purchasing chemical products
21.	ESOK Eco-rating Scheme, Ecotourism Society of Kenya	Focused on the environmental matters and the socio-economic, and particularly on the efforts to cooperate with local communities
22.	Blue Flag Beach Criteria	27 for Europe, 24 for Caribbean
23.	SmartVoyager Standard for Tourist Boat Operations in Galapagos Island	Total 141 of which: 46 for environmental, 20 socio-cultural, 2 economic, 23 for health and safety, 19 for training and information, 31 other
24.	Gold Standard, The Climate Neutral Network	Develops principles for large companies to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to zero impact

25.	Romanian Association of Ecotourism	Of the total of 75: 2 are focused on natural areas, 15 for interpretation, 45 for environmental, 3 for conservation, 1 regarding the local communities, 3 regarding the culture, 2 for tourist satisfaction, 3 fair marketing
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*Source: Horoiu, R.I.: Ecotourism – priority orientation in sustainable development of the local community, Ed. ASE, Bucharest, 2009*

*Blue Flag* is an exclusive ecolabel granted to beaches and ports that meet a number of conditions, such as: environmental education and information; water quality; environmental management; security and services – warning people about the quality of services, etc. Currently, more than 3850 beaches and ports from 48 countries across Europe – including Romania – South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Brazil, New Zealand, Canada and the Caribbean benefits from this ecolabel (Blue Flag Programme eco-label for Beaches and Marinas).

The ecotourism certification system of the Romanian Association of Ecotourism is an adaptation of the Swedish certification system – Nature’s Best – and ecotourism accreditation program – EcoCertification – to the Romanian specific. Thus, the program certifies the ecotourism programs offered by tour operators or guides – maximum of 15 participants – and the small accommodation units – maximum 25 rooms for accommodation (Association of Ecotourism in Romania. Certification System).

Finally, we can say that the current socio-economic environment requires orientation towards sustainable business, environment-friendly. Tourism companies, thus being motivated to implement a system of quality certification in order to obtain cost reductions and the global recognition of the quality of ecotourism services.

### 3. Conclusion

Worldwide, the population expresses more intense concern about the environmental issues. They are being aware, of more and acute need to know the service quality certification schemes applicable to ecotourism, and how they can be implemented. It also notes that on this segment of the market, obtaining the competitive advantage involves identifying and meeting current and future customer requirements regarding service quality.

In this context, by implementing a system of quality certification of ecotourism services, companies in the area might get a better image and an element of differentiation from competition, resulting beneficial effects on the profile market by reducing costs and improving

performance. Thus, certification schemes can turn into a source of income through the loyalty of ecotourism service users.

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#### **Notes on the authors**

**ROXANA ELENA POPȘA** is an Assistant professor Ph.D. student, at Faculty of Economic Sciences, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania, [popsa\\_roxy@yahoo.com](mailto:popsa_roxy@yahoo.com). She is the author of a large number of articles, such as “*Evaluating the degree of understanding of the concept of tourist ecoguesthouse and green village*” IECS 2011; “*Analysis of how ecotourism in protected areas influence the development of local communities*” Spiru Haret University International Symposium, 2012; *Need and opportunity for biodiversity protection and conservation*” IPC 2013.

**VIRGIL NICULA** is an Associate Professor Ph.D. Faculty of Economic Sciences, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania [niculavirgil@yahoo.com](mailto:niculavirgil@yahoo.com). He is the author of a large number of articles, such as “*Evaluating the degree of understanding of the concept of tourist ecoguesthouse and green village*” IECS 2011; “*The role of tourist information centers for development of rural tourism in protected areas*” IECS 2012; “*Evolution of tourist accommodation structure in Romanian's developing regions in the context of new challenges at european level*” IECS 2013.