ECOLABELS IN ECOTOURISM

ECOETICHETAREA ÎN ECOTURISM

M. IELENICZ[1], SMARANDA SIMONI[2]

[1] University of Bucharest, Faculty of Geography, Bucharest, Romania
[2] University of Piteşti, Faculty of Economics, Piteşti, Romania;
tsmaranda@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Ecolabels are environmental certifications or accreditation schemes that lead the tourism industry towards sustainability. They provide reliable information and guarantee the quality of products and services in the tourism industry for tourists, tourism managers, government agencies, or policy makers. The use of ecolabels and certification systems in the tourism industry leads to an increasing awareness among tourists and communities, reducing environmental impacts of tourism and protecting local environment.*

Key words*: ecolabel, certification system, ecotourism*

INTRODUCTION

Ecolabels are usually environmental certifications or accreditation schemes established by government agencies, voluntary organizations, or companies. There is a wide range of ecolabels and certification systems for ecotourism, from tourist spots, single activities, to entire destinations. An ecotourism ecolabel refers to the quality or the „green" character of a tourist destination or product.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on desk and internet research. The theoretical research is based on the papers mentioned in the references below. Other reliable information was taken from trustworthy contacts as UNWTO (World Tourism Organization), TIES (International Ecotourism Society), EAA (Ecotourism Association of Australia) and then processed into pertinent conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUTIONS

Ecolabels in tourism are marketable logos that result from certification processes (procedures that assess, audit and ensure that a certain tourist product, service, facility or business meets standards of ecological best practices). Ecolabels and environmental certification schemes (programs, systems) are commonly used in ecotourism, a sustainable type of tourism defined in 1990 by TIES as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people."

Certification systems for ecotourism target tourism suppliers such as accommodation, restaurants, leisure facilities, tour operators, transport companies, tourist associations, etc. on terms of environmental performance of companies, operations and destinations, product quality and corporate social responsibility. The certification programs refer to three aspects of sustainability: environmental, socio-cultural and economic. From the environmental point of view, the use of ecolabels and certification systems in the tourism industry leads to an increasing awareness among tourists and communities, and a better protection of local environment.

Most certification programs are lead by governmental agencies or have government involvement. Therefore WTO supports governments and stakeholders in applying, verifying and awarding national certification programs for ecotourism. WTO also provides consulting services, marketing and communication, exchange of experience for stakeholders, fees and funding for sustainability certification in tourism.

The ecolabels are instruments that lead the tourism industry towards sustainability. They provide reliable information and guarantee the quality of products and services in the tourism industry for tourists, tourism managers, government agencies, or policy makers. Ecotourism has developed significantly over the last decades since the consumer choice of travel has been influenced by ecolabels, while tourism companies use ecolabels as tools of competitive advantages.

There are more than 500 certification schemes and ecolabels worldwide, referring to environmental impacts of operations, environmental performances objectives and practices or processes. These great number and

diverse ecolabels in ecotourism may be confusing, though there are some comprehensive and internationally applied ecolabels: Green Globe 21, NEAP, ECO Certification Program, ECOTEL, STEP.

§ Green Globe 21 is considered the only truly global certification on the tourism market. It is is owned by Green Globe Ltd. and WTTC (The World Travel and Tourism Council), and based on Agenda 21 principles for Sustainable Development (Earth Summit, Rio De Janeiro, 1992). It relates operations and environment management, assessing the sustainability performance of tourism businesses and their supply chain partners. Green Globe 21 include four areas: sustainable management (sustainability management system, legal compliance, communications strategy, customer satisfaction), environmental (conserving biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes, reducing pollution) socio-economic (community development, respect local communities, support local entrepreneurs and employment), cultural heritage (anthropic tourism sites and their protection, code of behavior, incorporation of culture);

§ The ECO Certification Program owned by Ecotourism Australia guarantees that the certified products are in compliance with the best sustainable practices and provide high quality nature-based tourism experiences. It is also now being exported worldwide as the International ECO Certification Program. The EcoGuide Australia program ensures an authentic, environmentally responsible, and professional ecotourism experience;

§ NEAP is Australia's Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program, functioning under the authority of the Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA). The program has been developed for three ecotourism sectors: accommodation, tours and attractions and is based upon eight principles: experiencing natural areas for their better understanding and appreciation, best practice for ecologically sustainable tourism, contributing to the conservation of natural areas, providing constructive ongoing contributions to local communities, involving different cultures, particularly indigenous culture, meeting customer expectations, accurate marketing resulting in realistic expectations (Quick Start Guide to a Tourism Business, 2006);

§ ECOTEL is an environmental certification for hotel businesses, providing competitive advantages and bringing benefits to local communities. First headquartered in the USA, ECOTEL is now based in India, having members in South America and Asia;

§ STEP (The Sustainable Tourism Education Program) is a sustainability management program for tourism businesses. It promotes responsible travel, greening workplace practices and welfare of local people.

Other examples of ecotourism certification programs are Europe's PAN Parks, Smart Voyager in the Galapagos, Eco-Rating in Kenya. There are also more specific ecolabel schemes. They are awarded to hotels, lodges, tour operators, tour guides, or natural resources and destinations (such as beaches and marinas – e.g. Blue Flag is the world-renowned ecolabel for over 3,200 beaches worldwide).

CONCLUSIONS

Certification programs are mechanisms for reducing environmental impacts of tourism and ensuring that it benefits the natural environment. Ecolabels are environmental certifications or accreditation schemes that lead the tourism industry towards sustainability. They provide reliable information and guarantee the quality of products and services in the tourism industry for tourists, tourism managers, government agencies, or policy makers. The use of ecolabels and certification systems in the tourism industry leads to an increasing awareness among tourists and communities, and a better protection of local environmental. There is a wide range of ecolabels and certification systems for ecotourism, but some are comprehensive and internationally applied: Green Globe 21, NEAP, ECO Certification Program, ECOTEL, STEP.

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