RESEARCH NOTE

Eco-tourism Certification – Does it Make a Difference? A Comparison of Systems from Australia, Costa Rica and Sweden

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ABSTRACT In the current context of climate change, discussions about tourism sustainability are gaining increased momentum. Over the past decade, some operators worldwide have started to certify their products and services as ecotourism or sustainable tourism. A certification or approval is considered to be a sign of general high product quality as well as an indication of environmentally and socially sound products. In this research note, we examine three different ecotourism certification and approval systems – from Sweden, Costa Rica and Australia. The note is based on a literature review of three different approval systems, conducted parallel to the planning of the Norwegian approval system for ecotourism launched in 2008. We outline the criteria and standards required in the different programmes as well as the basic principles of how the three systems are organised, financed and implemented. The programmes' strengths and weaknesses are briefly discussed, keeping a Scandinavian context in mind.

KEY WORDS: Ecotourism, sustainability, certification, approval system, criteria, standards

Introduction

Since the Year of Ecotourism in 2002, a range of stakeholders have positioned ecotourism as one way to achieve a more sustainable tourism industry. Despite the lack of a consensus of its content and definition, some operators have over the past years started to certify their products and services as ecotourism or sustainable tourism. A certificate is considered to be a mark of general high product quality as well as an indication of environmentally, economically and socially sound products. Certification within the tourism industry thus refers to a procedure of auditing and
giving “written assurance that a facility, a product, service or management system meets specific standards” (Honey & Stewart, 2002, p. 4). A logo or a seal is then given to the applicant who meets the required standards. To ensure high quality and to provide sufficient credibility and transparency, programs should be subject to regular assessments and auditing (Buckley & Crabtree, 2007). In a Scandinavian context, the focus on ecotourism certification has been relatively limited compared to other regions, but the situation is currently changing. Whilst well established certification schemes such as the Danish Green Key and the Nordic Swan have certified hotels for several years, there is currently growing attention paid to the labeling of eco-products, events, and ecotourism operators. A Norwegian approval system for ecotourism was established in 2008. However, it is also beyond doubt that current discourses about climate change and the need for sustainable industries support arguments of certification and eco-labeling within the tourism sector as a whole.

The number of eco-certificates, labels and approval schemes is substantial and has grown continuously over the last two decades (Honey, 2002; Skinner et al., cited in Gössling & Hultman, 2006). It is turning into a field where it is difficult to gain an overview and where various labels are difficult to distinguish from one another. The jungle of labels and the lack of systematic reviews is a challenge, not only for the customers, but also for the industry itself, in terms of overall credibility (Buckley & Crabtree, 2007), market values (Font & Epler Woods, 2007) and actual environmental effects and impacts. There is a need to more systematically assess and evaluate these programs, not least so that new initiatives can build on systematic assessments of previous efforts.

The purpose of this note is to meet some of the need for systematisation of information about certification schemes as well as to discuss well known schemes with reference to a Scandinavian context where ecotourism and the focus on quality labels currently seems to be growing. Given our base in Scandinavia, we compare the Swedish program “Nature’s Best” with the Australian Ecotourism Program and the Costa Rican program for Sustainable Tourism (CST), programs that have existed for several years and hence have been discussed in the academic literature on the subject. We present their background, establishment and operation, discuss general strengths and weaknesses whilst paying particular attention to needs in a Scandinavian context.

**Methods**

Ideally, certification programs and labels should be subject to extensive research, for instance through using longitudinal designs of multidisciplinary nature. A longitudinal, multidisciplinary design would provide a more thorough assessment and understanding of the potential impact labels and programs can make in terms of environmental, social and economic impacts over time, as well as of potential market effects, for instance by comparing costs and benefits over time. However, this kind of research design is expensive and requires extensive planning. In the context of our project which this note is based upon, the resources did not allow for extensive research. Hence the overview presented in this article is based on a document review of systems frequently referred to in the literature. The examples from Costa Rica
Comparison of Eco-tourism Certification

(CST) and Australia (Ecotourism Australia) are well-known and interesting cases in the sense that for a long time they were the only national tourism certification programmes. We chose the Swedish approval system for Ecotourism; “Nature’s Best” as an example from the Scandinavian context as well as an illustration of a more recent system, launched in 2002. Although there are many books and articles discussing tourism certification in general, there are few peer-reviewed articles analysing specific programmes in detail. Hence for this review we had to rely mostly on the documentation given at the websites of the organisations, unpublished reports (grey literature) as well as on personal and email communication for this study. Whilst we were able to get in touch with representatives from the Costa Rican and the Swedish Program, we did not get any response from the Australian program staff. In our review we particularly looked for information on the background for organisation of the programs, operation and financial organisation, auditing and assessment. These aspects were considered important for the larger project in which this research took place, a project focusing on the potential for increased tourism activities in Norwegian protected areas and which took place parallel to the process of establishing a Norwegian ecotourism label.

Results

Ownership and Establishment

The major organisational aspects of each certification system are summarised in Table 1. In the following we comment and expand on this information. According to the UN World Tourism Organisation (WTO), 2/3 of all eco-labels are established and run by private tourism organisations and non-governmental organisations, whilst the other third have been developed by government agencies (WTO, 2002). Our examples from Sweden and Australia are examples where private and public interests have cooperated during the phase of establishment, while they are run by private tourism organisations. Costa Rica is different as the government authorities had the main responsibility for both establishing and running the CST program (Honey, 2008, p. 203).

The Eco-certification Program

The Australian government launched its ecotourism strategy in 1994, and public funds were also provided for its implementation. The first steps towards the establishment of a certification programme were taken by the tourism portfolio in the Australian federal government (Font & Buckley, 2001). The first scheme, described as overly bureaucratic and top-heavy, had to be reworked and reframed. The result, the Australian Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) was completed by 1996. The program is currently run by the association “Ecotourism Australia”. In 2001 the program was expanded to include certification of nature tourism and also to offer an EcoGuide program. It is considered as an initiative developed and run by the tourism industry itself (Font & Buckley, 2001), but initial work was done by an interdisciplinary team (Chester & Crabtree, 2002).
The Costa Rica Certification for Sustainable Tourism was developed in the mid to late 1990s (Bien, 2002). The initiative for establishing a certification system was taken by the Costa Rican Tourist Board (ICT) in 1995. The framework was then further developed by the Costa Rican Tourist Board, which has its own sustainability department, and the Costa Rica National Accreditation Commission. The program was probably the first performance-based voluntary environmental program created by the government in a developing country (Rivera, 2002). Since the first CST edition for hotels was released in 1997, an edition for tour operators was added in 2005, called CST-TO (Honey, 2008). Certified tour operators have announced that they will eventually only make use of certified hotels, which is expected to have a positive impact on numbers of hotels wanting a certification. The CST program has been accused of “mixing apples with oranges” in the sense that it waters down other, small scale ecotourism

### Table 1. The three systems compared.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Costa Rica</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Launched</strong></td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Owner</strong></td>
<td>Cooperation between tourism organisations and NGOs</td>
<td>Authorities</td>
<td>Cooperation between tourism organisations and NGOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Certifies</strong></td>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td>Hotels and tour operators</td>
<td>Products/activities Operators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financing – development</strong></td>
<td>Public and private</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public and private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financing – regular operations</strong></td>
<td>Private (self sustained) (government grants for further development of program)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public and private (also use of sponsors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of certified businesses/products as of 2009 (according to websites)</strong></td>
<td>Tour operators (products): 223</td>
<td>Hotels: 2007: 61 (Honey, 2008)</td>
<td>Products/activities: 206 Operators: 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Auditing</strong></td>
<td>External</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levels</strong></td>
<td>Nature tourism</td>
<td>5 levels (1–5 leaves awarded)</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specifically addressing protected areas</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fees</strong></td>
<td>Annual fees and application fees based on annual turnover</td>
<td>Annual fees: unknown Application fees: sponsored</td>
<td>Annual fees and application fees based on annual income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CST

The Costa Rica Certification for Sustainable Tourism was developed in the mid to late 1990s (Bien, 2002). The initiative for establishing a certification system was taken by the Costa Rican Tourist Board (ICT) in 1995. The framework was then further developed by the Costa Rican Tourist Board, which has its own sustainability department, and the Costa Rica National Accreditation Commission. The program was probably the first performance-based voluntary environmental program created by the government in a developing country (Rivera, 2002). Since the first CST edition for hotels was released in 1997, an edition for tour operators was added in 2005, called CST-TO (Honey, 2008). Certified tour operators have announced that they will eventually only make use of certified hotels, which is expected to have a positive impact on numbers of hotels wanting a certification. The CST program has been accused of “mixing apples with oranges” in the sense that it waters down other, small scale ecotourism
places in Costa Rica (Honey, 2008). Therefore, ecotourism operators and experts have pushed towards the establishment of a version more specifically aimed at ecotourism for smaller lodges.

Nature’s Best

Important contributors to the establishment of the Swedish label launched in 2002 were the Swedish Ecotourism Association, the Swedish Travel and Tourism Council, and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. The Swedish Agricultural Authorities provided funding and the labelling system is developed by several business and interest organisations in close cooperation with public actors like the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. Preliminary studies included consultations with a broad range of interests; operators offering nature-based tourism, public management agencies, and organisations representing the tourism industry as well as environmental organisations (Jiborn, 2001).

Organisation and Financing

The Eco-certification Program

The Australian program was given a new governance framework in 2001 (Chester & Crabtree, 2002), where separate independent auditing groups were established addressing management, assessment, and audits of the program. The certification period runs for three years and fees are based on gross annual income. It is a self-funding program where administration, assessment and auditing costs are funded by the application and annual fees. However, ongoing development of the program is funded through government grants (Chester & Crabtree, 2002).

CST

The Costa Rican Tourism Institute is responsible for the program implementation, along with INBIO, the national institute for biodiversity. The program is also supported by the National Accreditation Commission. The application process is free as a result of government funding (Font & Harris, 2004). The Ministry of Tourism markets the certification program in national and international campaigns, and applicants are provided technical support in the initial application process. In 2007, 61 hotels of the estimated 400 hotels in Costa Rica were certified, that is, approximately 15% (Honey, 2008). Considering the relatively long history of CST and the low costs associated with certification, the number of certified hotels is low. Possible reasons for the slow progress are found in modest government funding as well as limited marketing (Honey, 2008).

Nature’s Best

Private sector funds as well as money from local, regional and national authorities financed the establishment of the Swedish label. EU funds were also granted. The
costs of running the label are covered through membership fees, sponsoring, and also through some public funds (Jonasson, personal communication, 2006). The fee paid for the application process is based on the annual turnover of each applicant. An annual fee is paid once a product is certified, also based on annual turnover. According to a press release from Nature’s Best more than 200 products have been labelled as Nature’s Best standards (Naturens Bästa, 2009). The products are offered by 75 operators.

Auditing and Assessment

The Eco-certification Program

Applicants applying for certification in Australia are asked to make an initial self-assessment and present supporting materials, as well as appointing two referees who can be consulted by the auditors. The application is then forwarded to an independent environmental assessor. Applicants that succeed are given a certificate, logos and decals to assist in developing the product further. According to its website, Ecotourism Australia has an onsite verification audit and maintaining credibility is a central task for the program. The program was revised in 2001, a revision which addressed the fact that the same team of experts managed most parts of the certification process and thus having an impact on the credibility of the program (Chester & Crabtree, 2002). The new governance structure is thought to provide a “third party aspect, as each assessor and auditor is usually an ecotourism professional (academic, consultant or public service) rather than a tourism operator” (Chester & Crabtree, 2002, p. 177). Since 2004, two specialised independent auditors have been contracted, because costs of using professional auditing firms were too high (Thwaites, 2007).

CST

Evaluation of applicants is made by an interdisciplinary team of auditors, reflecting the criteria of the CST. The results are reported to the national Accreditation Commission, a multidisciplinary certification and accreditation board. The commission makes the final decision about certification, about the accreditation of auditors as well as possible system modifications. The CST website makes all rating criteria and scores publicly available on the CST website (Bien, 2002). Costa Rican applicants are also asked to go through a process of an initial self-evaluation, a process similar to that of the Australian scheme.

Nature’s Best

Self-evaluation before application is also central to the Swedish program. If the applicant is found eligible, a representative of the ecotourism society makes an on-site visit to the applicant. She produces a report which is sent to a market committee elected by the board of Nature’s Best. The committee members have different background and skills within the field of ecotourism. Approved applicants are subject to frequent reviews and controls, but Nature’s Best has no third part evaluation, because of the high costs.
Criteria: Structure and Overall Goals

The structure, content and operationalisation of the criteria are the core of any certification system. No system is better than the goals it establishes, and to what extent criteria are quantitative/operable or purely good intentions without liability. A criteria system should also be able to communicate outwards (to customers, employees and owners) as well as create a fundament for tedious assessment and control. To develop a realistic yet binding system and create consensus about it, is often the most costly part of developing a good certification system, and includes assessment of state-of-the-art knowledge as well as negotiations among the involved stakeholders. Table 2 presents the main ways into each of the system’s criteria.

The Eco-Certification Program

The Australian program has 10 principles (Table 2) that are detailed through specific criteria; basic and bonus criteria. Ten main principles are more than on any of the other two programs; however this makes each of the principles more self-explanatory. The Eco-Certification Program does not only certify ecotourism, but also nature-based tourism and advanced ecotourism and is as such a more ambitious and refined program than the other two. The distinction between being certified as ecotourism,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main criteria</th>
<th>Ecotourism Australia</th>
<th>Costa Rica CST</th>
<th>Sweden’s Nature’s Best</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Business management and operational training</td>
<td>Physical and biological environment</td>
<td>Respect for the limits of the destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Business ethics</td>
<td>Infrastructure and services</td>
<td>Stimulate local economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Responsible marketing</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Greening of the overall activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
<td>Socioeconomic environment</td>
<td>Contribute actively to protection of nature and culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Natural area focus</td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhance good experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Environmental sustainability</td>
<td></td>
<td>Quality and safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Interpretation and education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Contribution to conservation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Working with local communities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cultural respect and sensitivity</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
nature tourism and advanced ecotourism is made through the requirements of the criteria to be met.

**CST**

The CST was originally designed for hotels – medium-to-large lodging facilities, but was later expanded to tour operators. The criteria assess sustainability along three axes – social, economic and environmental organised in a matrix (Bien, 2002). The four main topics (Table 2) are further divided into subtopics representing positive or negative impacts of the accommodation activity. There are a total of 153 checkpoints in the certification system, each rated from 1 to 3. The sustainability of the applicants is rated according to a scale from one to five “leaves”, according to how they meet the four main criteria.

**Nature’s Best**

The Swedish label has six basic principles as criteria (Table 2). For each basic principle, there is a list of basic criteria and bonus criteria. For approval, all basic criteria must be met, as well as at least 25% of the bonus criteria. The basic and bonus criteria are as such not leading up to different levels of approval, as in the two other systems. The criteria will be renewed in 2010; according to Nature’s Best criteria document (2006–2010) a revision can imply that many of the current bonus criteria are made basic.

**Discussion**

Certification programmes are business-imbedded, light-handed measures that also are supposed to provide benefits to the business and not only costs, such as to communicate constructively with important market segments and impose a more efficient operation. As such, these programmes are in line with the view that the tourism industry in general can be considered as being relatively free from regulations (Tepelus & Cordoba, 2005). The development of mature, efficient, and professional certification systems might reduce the need for stricter regulations as well as optimise the benefits from these systems. Through our review we have seen that all three programs have a history of changes and restructuring, indicating how reaching goals of professionalism and efficiency can be a long and tedious process. A seemingly chronic need for subsidies for further development and operational costs supports an impression that it is also a costly process. Yet we still believe ecotourism may be a step closer to ecological and social sustainability through a good certification system.

**Auditing Procedures – The Soul of a Good Certification System**

Accusations of greenwashing are probably the most important debate in driving demands for certification of ecotourism. This is mostly rooted in the fact that many certification schemes have limited credibility due to lack of external auditing and accreditation (Font & Harris, 2004). In our study, this is the situation for Nature’s
Best, while both Costa Rica and Australia (Thwaites, 2007) now have external evaluation, providing more credibility to the program. A lack of third-party evaluation means that it is often the same body handling the marketing, the applications for certification as well as issuing certificates. To establish systems without independent accreditation and audition bodies is often justified by the higher costs of a system with independent auditing, and too high costs might lead to too few companies joining the system (Font, 2002). The structure of the ecotourism industry escalates this problem, as it is dominated by many small businesses (which in itself might be a pro in terms of making it socially sustainable), with limited resources to invest in certification. The structure of many small operators can increase the possibility that some operators might be tempted to be free riders, particularly if there are no legal powers of enforcement in place. The consequence of this trade-off might be that the certification schemes are not subject to control and critical review, that they lack transparency which again might affect the trust (from authorities, conservation interests and customers) in the certified products and services. This might end up in a negative spiral with the potential to jeopardise the main goal of the certification. We believe that certification in tourism must learn from certification in other sectors, where independent auditing has been a major reason for the success of certification in other sectors, for instance forestry (Auld, Gulbrandsen, & McDermott, 2008). Choosing easy and simple solutions in the short term might become costly in the not too distant future, yet the financial aspect is a problem for most programs when it comes to auditing. Australia is a good example of how third party auditing became increasingly required with a maturing program, but that costs remains a problem (Thwaites, 2007). Ways to address this dilemma need to be highlighted and experiences must be exchanged between countries and systems. We would argue that if some government support is needed also on a permanent basis to make certification systems for small scale ecotourism viable, they might target auditing specifically for the extra costs of ensuring independent, third-party processes.

Good Criteria – The Body of a Good Certification System

All three systems assessed have criteria established in processes which involve many stakeholders and actors. Broad representation in the planning process is important to ensure two things: first, it contributes to optimal use of knowledge, and secondly ensures that the result reflects a negotiation between the stakeholders. While the leading role is held by representatives for the tourism industry in Australia and Sweden, the government tourism authorities have taken the lead role in Costa Rica. We find it natural that, as a main rule, the key role should be held by a representative or an organisation representing the tourism industry that the system is directed towards. Principally, tourism authorities should encourage and support the development of certification systems however, taking on the role as the responsible operator of such systems might complicate other roles that the tourist authorities need to take. If for some reason the authorities decide to take a more active role this should be done for a restricted period of time. However, a lead role does not imply that the funding of the system must remain with the authorities. If certification systems are to be
financially sustainable and to be a tool providing the industry with environmental credibility they should be self-sustaining at least after some years of operation.

The criteria are the essence and the most concrete part of any certification system and the part which is subject to the most detailed assessment. Criteria are most often a result of a process which includes assessment of scientific and topical knowledge on issues from ecology to small-size business economics, negotiations among stakeholders often centering on levels and ambitions, sometimes with a glance to other established approval systems. The use of criteria that are not operationalised is one of the most voiced critics against eco-certification (Font & Buckley, 2001). The need to balance between complexity and simplicity, realism and ambitions, tailor-made vs. standardisation can lead to criteria which are no more than intentional statements with little ability for monitoring or improvement measurement. Exchange of experiences of criteria development between systems is important in order to improve the quality. Through our review we have found that scientists with backgrounds from environmental, social and economic studies have participated in the development of the criteria system in Costa Rica, but also to some extent in Australia. The involvement of professionals for developing criteria is likely to add to the quality.

Dilemmas of striking a balance between simplicity and complexity with criteria are all clearly seen in our three cases. To be able to address the many dilemmas, techniques such as operating with certificates at different levels (Eco-Certification Program) and certification of single products and events (Nature’s Best) instead of whole businesses are common. These techniques however make certification programs subject to further critique. Approval at low levels gives the applicant a certificate, while getting a higher level-approval might not be considered worth the costs. Approval of one product within a business might give customers the impression that the whole business is certified. This again justifies critiques of greenwashing.

The certification systems we have assessed in this article all look at consequences from tourism and aspects of sustainability primarily from a local or destination perspective. The more fundamental environmental critique against ecotourism; that ecotourism generally is based on extensive use of resources often including overseas transportation with large CO₂ emissions (Buckley, 2004); and that ecotourism might act as a door-opener for less-sustainable mass-tourism (Rogers & Aitchinson, 1998) are so far to a limited extent addressed in the reviewed systems. However some attempts to address impacts from long-distance aerial transport by trying to award the use of train transport to the destination are seen for instance in Nature’s Best. The regional and global consequences of tourism needs to be included if the certification systems are to have an impact in terms of enhancing sustainable tourism on a larger scale.

Since the tourism industry in general is focusing on sustainability aspects and the new, greener economy, eco-certification schemes need to distinguish themselves from the overall industry by setting more ambitious goals. To avoid accusations of greenwashing, the Scandinavian eco-certification schemes should strive to achieve a third party auditing, learning from the successes in forestry certification.

There are a range of potential improvements to be addressed for the certification programs discussed. Of course, certification systems will never be perfect but must strive for continual improvement. More research is needed to assist this process.
Despite several scholarly discussions, there is, as yet, a genuine lack in terms of “process research”, empirical studies documenting changes and improvements resulting from certification systems. The infant nature of ecotourism in general and certification more specifically in Scandinavia should represent a good opportunity to instigate such research.

References


