

European Sustainable Tourism Labels: A tool to inform and educate consumers?

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Consumers' engagement with sustainable tourism practices and labels is lacking. However, there is limited understanding of the reasons behind this. In order to explore the topic, this study examined the views expressed by sustainable tourism labelling organisations about consumers' engagement. This includes obtaining an insight into the level of awareness and understanding that sustainable tourism label certifiers have about consumers; exploring the level of consumer education currently undertaken by sustainable tourism label certifiers; and examining the perceived benefit and limitations that these certifiers have on engaging consumers in the development of their labels. The results suggested that consumers are considered the key initiator of sustainable tourism practices. However, the level of communication of these organisations with consumers is limited. Recommendations to improve communication and to integrate consumers in the sustainable tourism development cycle are presented.

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1. Introduction

Mass consumption is endangering the future of our world, and tourism has contributed significantly to this situation. However, tourism can also bring extensive benefits to society. In an attempt to promote sustainable practices labelling has been developed (Font, 2001). Nevertheless, businesses only seem to support sustainable labelling initiatives if they perceive a financial benefit, such as increased demand for their products (Harris, 2007). But the literature also suggests a limited engagement of consumers with sustainable tourism labels (Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007). This suggests that a significant research effort is needed to address this limited engagement.

In order to provide a robust baseline for major research in the area, The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland has funded this preliminary study. The aim of this initial work is to examine the level of engagement that sustainable tourism organisations across Europe have with consumers, and their views on this engagement. The findings are expected to be of value in their own right, but very importantly, they will also inform the research approach of a longer term study. The following outlines the main objectives of this project:

- To obtain an insight into the level of understanding that sustainable tourism label certifiers have of the potential consumers of the products they label.
- To explore the extent of consumer education which is currently undertaken by sustainable tourism label certifiers.
- To examine certifiers' perceived benefits and limitations regarding consumer involvement in the development of their labels.

2. Background

Tourism has been defined as "... the sum of the phenomena and relationships resulting from travel and stay of non residents..." (Hunziker and Krapf in: Burkart and Medlik, 1972). And sustainable tourism development encompasses economic, ecological and local sustainability (Hunter, 1995), with key features such as a community's resources, both natural and cultural, and its amenities. Hence, sustainability is not only concerned with the natural environment but also with wider questions of social need and welfare, economic opportunity and equity in terms of the tourism destination.

It has been argued that tourism businesses, as well as consumers themselves, are demonstrating their willingness to embrace more environmentally friendly policies, placing a strong focus on labelling aspects (Font, 2001). However, despite consumers' increased awareness of sustainability issues over the last two decades, sustainability values still fail to significantly influence tourist behaviour (Sharpley, 2001). But the impact of consumers' engagement would not only be determined by their responsible consumption. In turn, Harris (2007) suggests that businesses only seem to support sustainable labelling if they perceive a financial benefit. An increase in the demand for their products is an obvious financial benefit for businesses. Therefore, if consumers engaged more actively in the demand of sustainable products, a more proactive approach in the adoption of responsible practices by businesses could be expected.

According to Font (2001) labelling methods have helped to standardise the promotion of responsible practices through a set of criteria which is then assessed by a third party. However, the question is whether these labels are communicating their message to consumers, and if this communication is taking place effectively. Questions related to consumers' understanding of sustainable tourism and labelling can only be answered by asking them directly. Nevertheless, an investigation into the labelling organisations their nature and how they envision consumer role can help understanding this communication substantially.

3. Methods

Due to the nature of the research, which is mainly exploratory, a constructivist approach has been adopted for this study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The purpose of the study is to explore the views of Sustainable Tourism Label certifiers on consumer engagement with their schemes. In order to do that, five interviews with representatives of major Sustainable Tourism Labels across Europe were undertaken. The selection of sustainable/green tourism labelling organisations to interview responded to their engagement in the origination of VISIT (Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism). VISIT is a European level association created within the frame of a WTO-commissioned study for the "promotion and mutual co-operation of international, national and regional certification schemes... for sustainable tourism at an international level" (VISIT, 2004). Representation of Sustainable Tourism Labels from diverse countries was considered appropriate, as means to capture potential differences across European areas.

Representatives from five of the VISIT originators were interviewed, namely, Legambiente Turismo (Italy), Green Business UK Ltd (Scotland, UK), Latvian Country Tourism Association Lauku Celotajs (Latvia), OE Plus (Switzerland) and Green Key (The Netherlands). The interviews took place between 20th August 2010 and 15th September 2010, and most of them were face-to-face with only one exception. This related to the interview with the representative of Steinbock (Switzerland). Due to time constraints, which prevented their participation in a face-to-face discussion, this interview took place by email. Additional material with background information about the organisation was also provided, which generated information of value to the project.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. An outline of the interview questions was sent to participants in advance, and these same questions were used for the email interview with the Swiss organization (see Appendix 1). The questions covered the following major topics: 1) Nature, Background and Principles of the Sustainable Tourism Labels; 2) Their Development Process; 3) Perceived Drivers of Sustainable Labelling Adoption; 4) Views on Consumer Engagement, 5) Communication with Consumers; and 6) Trends/Challenges of Sustainable Tourism Labels.

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed of the specific aims of the project and the purpose of the interview. During the interviews notes were taken. The thematic analysis of the data supported the identification of relevant information aligning with the aims and objectives of the project. Additionally, the findings also provided the researcher with in-depth understanding of the nature and structure of these organisations, and the sustainable labels that these organisations operate. These altogether provided rich information which was deemed essential for the exploration of this topic.

4. Results

This section presents the results from the interviews with representatives of the sustainable tourism labels. The section has been organised attending to the major themes covered through these interviews, i.e. 4.1) Nature, Background and Principles of the Sustainable Tourism Labels; 4.2) Their Development Process; 4.3) Perceived Drivers of Sustainable Labelling Adoption; 4.4) Views on Consumer Engagement, 4.5) Communication with Consumers; and 4.6) Trends/Challenges of Sustainable Tourism Labels.

4.1 Nature, Background and Principles of Sustainable Tourism Labels

4.1.1 Green Tourism Business Scheme

The Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) is the only eco-label in the UK which is accredited by the International Centre for Responsible Tourism. The scheme has been in operation for the last 13 years. The concept of the certification scheme arose from the Sustainable Tourism Forum (a partnership between VisitScotland and Shetland Environmental Agency). And Shetland Environmental Agency Ltd (SEA Ltd) holds the primary copyright and intellectual property rights to all scheme material. Green Business UK Ltd is a Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) and the sole authorised advisory & auditing company for the Green Business UK Ltd. This company currently employs 16 people and has accredited 202,000 businesses across the UK.

The certification criteria are based upon the principles of the triple bottom line (environmental preservation, as well as economic and social benefit). They are now operating version 4 of the criteria. Social aspects, which are now 15-20% of the overall criteria, were already introduced in the second version of the scheme. These relate to aspects such as supporting the local community, bringing kids into the businesses, creating employment and facilitating tourists' engagement with the local culture. Businesses can achieve, from bottom to top, the following status: Green, Bronze, Silver and Gold.

Businesses have to demonstrate a number of measures of social engagement of their own initiative. The criteria are flexible, aimed to avoid a "box-ticking" approach and specifically adapted for each different sector. This means that business from any tourism sector can aim for certification. The assessor plays an active role in the evaluation, working more as a consultant, and providing advice to businesses on how they can improve their practices.

4.1.2 Green Certificate

The Green Certificate was funded in 1993. It is managed by the Latvian Country Tourism Association Lauku Celotajs, a NGO supporting the development of rural tourism in Latvia. As part of this role they run the Green Certificate and undertake marketing activities. Furthermore, the association also undertakes educational activities with businesses through lectures and written documentation.

Funding for the organisation is mainly generated through membership fees (between 15 and 50 Lats, i.e. around £13 and £42), and the European Commission. However, this latter only comes for specific projects. From 2007 the Ministry of Environment co-founds the certification scheme and takes part in the decision-making process.

Both the association and certificate were generated responding to an environmental concern of some leading individuals. Working very closely with the tourism industry, these individuals learned about environmental good practices undertaken by neighbouring countries such as Finland and other Baltic states. Furthermore, they realised that green tourism could be an important source of income. Therefore, they considered that generating a sustainable brand, through protection and promotion could benefit rural tourism development. The scheme aims to cover the three elements of sustainability: social, environmental and economic. An example of how the scheme covers the social aspect is by enhancing that by businesses source themselves with local resources and education of green practices. Examples of environmental aspects include the efficient use of energy and other resources and waste management, and the economic criteria relates to cutting costs through energy efficiency. Additionally, part of the criteria ensures that businesses must have an environmental plan.

Around 300 businesses are currently members of the Latvian Country Tourism Association Lauku Celotajs, and 80 establishments have been certified with their Green Certificate.

The scheme does not include a grading system. Businesses may or may not obtain the certification. However, the criteria are classified in three levels: 1) essential, 2) desirable, and 3) merit. In order to receive the Green Certificate, a tourism accommodation must have fulfilled all essential criteria and received the minimum score (19 points) in the fields of desirable and merit criteria.

Any type of rural tourism business could be certified. Although only accommodation establishments have adopted the label so far, it is expected that others will join in.

Only rural establishments are part of the association. However, the Green Key (EU level) also has started to operate in Latvia, and certifies accommodation establishments regardless of their location. Also the European Flower operates in the country, but it has more detailed criteria that would not suit the working operation procedures of rural tourism establishments.

4.1.3 Steinbock

The Scheme was developed in the 90s by Oe Plus, a Swiss Tourism Association. The purpose of Steinbock was to certify those hotels which adopt sustainable tourism practices. It covers the following areas of sustainability: Ecological Performance, Economical Performance, Social Performance, Sustainability Management, Regional Anchorage and Management Systems. The first hotel was certified in 1994. Currently, the label focuses on businesses offering overnight stay and meals.

Funding for the organisation is obtained through contributions of members and donations. Certification fees range between CHF 2,500 and CHF 4,000 (£1,600 and £2,500 respectively), depending on the size of establishment. Currently, there are 50 hotels certificated with one to five ibexes (maximum). The certification is based on mandatory and voluntary criteria. These criteria make reference not only to the current situation but also involve measurements of projected improvements. The certification process is a combination of self-declaration and on-site audit. The ibex-label includes all five spheres of sustainable development (economy, ecology, society, management and regional anchorage).

4.1.4 Legambiente Turismo

Legambiente Turismo is a department of Legambiente, an Italian environmental NGO running the label of the same name. The beginnings of Legambiente Turismo were determined by an “environmental conflict” in Riccione. This is a seaside resort whose water quality check results were very poor in 1997. The local hotel association identified the need to look after the environment and to start a greener approach to manage their hotels. This led them to joining forces with Legambiente and Riccione’s municipality, and the creation of Legambiente Turismo (department and scheme).

The focus of attention of this ecolabel has traditionally been on the environment, and originally, they only focused on this area of sustainability. However, more recently they adopted criteria focusing on some additional aspects (i.e. social and economical). Nevertheless, Legambiente Turismo considers that all three aspects (environment, economy and society) are interconnected. Additionally, it defines itself as humanistic environmentalist, rather than naturalistic environmentalist, in the sense that they do not specialize in wildlife but they also consider man and its activities as part of the natural context. Legambiente Turismo does not define itself as an accreditation scheme. They consider that giving accreditation could be interpreted a permanent status, regardless of lacking continuous development. In turn, the label encourages a philosophy of continuous improvement. Therefore, they prefer using the term “label” or “scheme”. Monitoring takes place yearly, which reflects this continuous relationship between the label and the establishments/destinations. They are aware of the limitations of their approach (“box-ticking”). Nevertheless, their main aim is to provide businessmen with a framework which can support them in developing their own ideas to look after the environment.

While the largest number of establishment participating in the scheme relates to accommodation establishments, restaurants are currently the fastest growing sector. Additional labelled establishments include marinas, tourist guide services, boat excursions, diving, sale excursions, restaurants and alberghi diffusi (i.e. special e establishments with a historical or heritage value). The ecolabelling criteria come from the Decalogue of Legambiente Turismo. The Decalogue lied down a number of criteria and forms integral part of the protocol agreement that are signed with communities and business groups when establishing a local Legambiente Turismo project for tourist services. Each section is developed into several criteria and specific practical measures. However, only those elements which are applicable to the nature of the different businesses are adopted during the evaluation process.

The label does not consist of a rating scheme. By joining the scheme, businesses are committing to sustainable development. Therefore, they have to address all the sections included in the Decalogue and relevant criteria and measures.

Legambiente used to obtain funding from the Province of Rimini, but this has recently been discontinued. The organisation also undertakes projects with funding from the EU Commission. However, the only regular source of funding relates to the fees paid by members. Prices for joining the scheme range between 100 € and 300 € (i.e. £85 and £250), depending on the size and type of establishment.

Currently, 426 businesses are part of the scheme. These are mainly accommodation establishments, and they mostly have between 20 and 40 bedrooms. The interviewee suggested that this may be

because chain hotels tend to have their own environmental programmes or they may join labels which are internationally recognised, such as EU Flower or maybe the Green Key. However, smaller hotels cannot join something this type of labels, because their fees are restrictive (ca 1,800 Euros per establishment). When asked about the percentage of penetration, the interviewee suggested that this would be of the range of 0.2% of the industry.

4.1.5 The Green Key

The Green Key label has been operating since 1994. It is one of the FEE (Federation for Environmental Education) campaigns, together with the internationally recognised Blue Flag. It operates in 62 countries, managed by local/national NGOs.

The aim of the organisation is to provide education about environmentally-friendly tourism practices to entrepreneurs and tourists.

Its funding sources vary across countries. In some countries the Green Key is fully funded by their member, but the Dutch branch accounts with two years funding from their Minister of Agriculture.

All the countries participating in the scheme follow some compulsory international criteria. And in addition to this, each country sets its own national criteria. Furthermore, each country is also entitled to decide their membership price. But as an example, the fee in the Netherlands is 695 € per year.

At the operational level, there are also some differences across countries. In some countries, businesses submit their application to the national jury once per year. In other countries the application is only submitted the first year. Afterwards, the monitor and submit their own figures to the Green Key, who undertakes an audit at least every three years.

The type of business which can be certificate also varies across countries. In Netherlands any type of tourism business can apply for the scheme. However, anywhere else, only hotels, campsites and attraction parks can get this certification. In total, the Green Key certifies around 1,500 businesses worldwide, the majority located in France, Netherlands and Denmark.

In the Netherlands, the Green Key has established a grading scheme, with bronze, silver and gold. In all the other countries, there is only one set of criteria that needs to be fulfilled and this does not include a grading scheme.

The scheme specially focuses on issues related to energy efficiency and the environment. However, in the Netherlands they start to consider the inclusion of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), in an attempt to stimulate the protection of people.

4.2 Scheme Development Process

4.2.1 Green Tourism Business Scheme

The principles of ISO 14001 were used as a framework for developing the first version of the criteria. One of the principles of ISO is the need to continue improving the procedures through feedback and ongoing reviews. Following this, the criteria establish the need to continuously improve their

environmental practices. The principles of UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme developed in 1997) were also taken into consideration when developing the criteria.

In-house experts developed the scheme, and this was subsequently piloted on 30 businesses. Since then, the criteria have been updated every 3/5 years. The assessors are trained not only to assess the compliance of businesses compliance with the scheme, but also to identify additional criterion that may be relevant to each type of businesses. Additionally, input from sector experts is gathered to support the customisation of the criteria for new sectors joining the scheme. There is a one year transition period before the criteria changes. This aims to give businesses time to adjust. And the change of criteria will follow consultation with stakeholders, which includes various tourism, environmentalist bodies and businesses. However, no consumer input was obtained for the development of the scheme.

The scheme includes four different categories, namely green, bronze, silver and gold.

4.2.2 Green Certificate

The project was developed gradually and through a substantial number of meetings and consultations with stakeholders. The criteria were selected by a group of tourism and environmental experts who consulted other major environmental associations, examined other schemes and obtained input from the European Federation of Farm and Village Tourism (Eurogite), of which the Latvian Country Tourism Association Lauku Celotajs is a member. On the other hand, the association encourages businesses to acquire supplies from businesses complying with ISO. However, the scheme was not influenced from ISO in any way.

From 2007 onwards they reviewed the criteria in a few occasions. Changes may be determined by the emergence of new technology, or because of experts learning about new trends. However, no consumer input was obtained for the development of the label or criteria.

4.2.3 Steinbock

The label was developed by members of Oe Plus. The certification process is a combination of self-declaration and on-site audit. The Steinbock label is based on a classification system (1-5 ibexes) and its development was influenced by other quality systems such as ISO. An example of this input is the idea of continuous improvement, the criteria include not only measurement of the current situation but it also requires measurement of engagement with improvement.

4.2.4 Legambiente Turismo

The label had limited influence from ISO, any other quality system or eco-label during the development process. This is because it was felt by hoteliers that quality systems like ISO did not reflect the needs of the sector, were too expensive, and required a great load of paperwork, expertise and money for their implementation.

The three organisms initiating the scheme (the Municipality, Legambiente Turismo and the association of hoteliers) developed together the Decalogue with the criteria for hotels. A group of hoteliers from this association travelled to Nordic countries in order to inform themselves of hotel environmental practices. They selected hotels in Nordic countries because these were commonly

perceived as more advanced in their level of commitment with the environment. Their observations from the fieldtrip to Nordic countries undertaken by the hoteliers informed their Decalogue. And the scheme emerged from the negotiation among the Municipality, Legambiente Turismo and the association of hoteliers. Legambiente's challenge became learning about what was feasible for hotels, set the bottom line and try to raise this progressively.

4.2.5 Green Key

The development of the criteria was informed by experts. The experts' committee was composed of technical people, including the Ministry of Environment, Environmental NGOs, Campsite Association, Tourist Organisation, and Hotel Association. The system originated in Denmark, and then expanded to France and Netherlands. And these three still remain the main areas of operation for the scheme.

The principles behind the scheme are to balance between the protection of the environment and a good hospitality offer. There was no consumer involvement in the establishment of the criteria, because it was felt that businesses had an understanding of what consumers were willing to do for the environment. They examined other labels to inform the Green Key criteria, but they did not obtain input from anyone in particular.

4.3 Perceived Drivers of Sustainable Labelling Adoption

4.3.1 Green Tourism Business Scheme

Both legislation and consumers are essential drivers of adoption. And within consumers, a very important group is the corporate market. Their importance relates to the fact that their quality systems requires to conform to their quality policy. Very frequently the quality policy of corporations, especially in the public sector, establishes that employees have to use providers with green practices.

Related to this is the carbon reduction commitment. This is a policy by which government department staff only travels to places/businesses where there is clear commitment towards sustainability. And this is a major driver for businesses' adoption. An additional driver is the development of new technology, such as Light-Emitting Diode (LED) lights, which facilitates businesses' involvement in greener practices.

During the interview, some work undertaken by VisitEngland was discussed. Apparently, this related to research suggesting that 84% of businesses adopt sustainable practices because it is considered a marketing advantage. This is the second factor of adoption, which follows "having a personal commitment towards sustainability". This indicates that they consider that more business will be generated when adopting more sustainable practices.

4.3.2 Green Certificate

The drivers of adoption of the certificate seem to be a set of complex reasons. Primarily, businesses adopt the certification because they have the personal believe that they need to preserve the environment. These responsible entrepreneurs want tourists to also look after the nature, so they try to educate consumers. Consumers are also important drivers of sustainable practices. In turn, government rules are just too general (i.e. not specific for tourism).

4.3.3 Steinbock

The support of important tourism organisations and the government, together with nation-wide recognition of the label are crucial drivers of adoption.

4.3.4 Legambiente Turismo

Legambiente Turismo undertook some research, which is still unpublished, where business men who had an ecolabel were asked what they think would help more businesses to engage in sustainable practices. While this data has not been reported yet, apparently, the work suggests that a high proportion of these businesses consider that a higher request from the public would be the answer. So, this suggests that if the public makes a higher request then more business men will adopt greener practices.

In relation to the question of whether Government and/or Consumers were the main drivers of sustainable development in tourism, the interviewee suggested that the engagement of all the stakeholders helps. In Italy the Government provides some incentives for businesses to go green. As an example, in 2010 a 55% tax credit on the cost of installing solar roof panels, photovoltaics, and special energy efficiency appliances could be obtained. Important drivers are also those businesses with a long-term view on engaging with tourism.

4.3.5 Green Key

According to the Green Key's representative whatever becomes enforced by the Law stops being part of their criteria. The scheme is always one step ahead of legislation.

On the other hand, businesses' engagement is all determined by consumer demand. As an example, camping sites is a group of businesses which shows less increment in their level of certification. Apparently, managers of camping sites have stated that this certification does not bring any commercial benefit because their customers don't care. Therefore, the number of camping sites which get accredited is not growing.

4.4 Views on Consumer Engagement

4.4.1 Green Tourism Business Scheme

The view of Green Business Ltd. is that consumers want to see that someone is looking after sustainability. When they are on holidays they are interested in coming across products that they can introduce in their normal lives. However, they don't want to be lectured, and it is very unlikely that they will make an effort to dig in and find out more about how sustainable a product is. Examples of things that hotels can do is providing real nappies for the babies of guests, telling consumers about their green practices or giving them information about practices that they can adopt, such as their "Visitor Charters" (a leaflet containing 6 activities that can make a difference).

4.4.2 Green Certificate

According to the interviewees those consumers who are truly interested on sustainability will find a way of obtaining information about how to be green. So only those who are not interested will not be aware. In their own words: "You cannot force them".

When asked if they thought that consumers knew the label they answered that it varies from tourist to tourist. If the tourist cares about the environment then they will try to inform themselves and they will certainly be aware of the label. "Normally families with children, as well as elderly people tend to look after the place". But if they do not care then it will be very likely that they won't be familiar with the label.

4.4.3 Steinbock

Involving all the stakeholders in sustainable tourism development is really important, including consumers, suppliers and their employees. For customers, certifications are a supportive factor in the decision-making process. The demand for labels is increasing, but still many consumers do not know the different schemes or are sceptical about them. Additionally, there is still a problem and a real threat for the label that the concept of sustainability is not well-known. People have no clear idea of to what to expect. This goes for guests as well as for companies. Sustainability is either thought of as environmental conservation or continual improvement.

4.4.4 Legambiente Turismo

The representative of Legambiente Turismo pointed out some headings from the Eurobarometer 2009 to answer questions related to this section. According to this report, only 10% of tourists are concerned about the environment when listing the main factors affecting their choice. When asked directly, a 33% reports an interest on this. Just over a quarter of the respondents (27.7%) had actually undertaken any green holidays, and there was significant lack of consistency about what they understood by green holidays.

4.4.5 Green Key

The Green Key considers that there is a great difference on the level of demand for sustainable tourism between leisure and business customers. Business consumers actively look for establishments with environmental certification. This is because in some countries, like The Netherlands, public services have to use environmental friendly suppliers. And this also applies to accommodation establishments.

On the other hand, they consider that the leisure traveller demonstrates lesser commitment. This is the audience that requires further education and encouragement to adopt environmentally-friendly practices. During the interview, it was estimated that only 8% of travellers are really environmental friendly, 42% think this is important but if it is that important then others will do it, and finally, there is the largest group (50%) who simply doesn't care about the environment.

Finally, in relation to the knowledge about the label, according to some research undertook by the Dutch Tourism Board among their German market, the Blue Flag is known by about 25%-30% of this market, while the Green Key is only known by around 8%.

4.5 Communication with Consumers

4.5.1 Green Tourism Business Scheme

In the last few years there has been a change in the perception of green practices by businesses. IN their eyes, consumers now give more importance than ever to the adoption of these practices. This implies further emphasis on informing consumers about business practices. As an example, Gleneagles Hotel adopted the GTBS certification scheme as a system for improvement a few years ago. Originally it had no interested on promoting its adoption. However, nowadays information about the scheme is placed on the website.

The criteria establish the need to communicate the GTBS adoption to consumers. As an example, businesses have to display their status as accredited businesses. Furthermore, businesses have to display copies of “save the planet for a fiver”, and give them a pot with seeds of a tree. Similarly, at the beginning the criteria required that businesses to provide local food, but it made no requirements about communicating this to consumers. But currently, businesses also have to inform consumers about the place of origin of their food.

The organisation itself gets very little feedback from guests. In fact this only happened once. They comments were negative and the case was followed up.

Apparently consumers are not really interested in finding out what is really behind the scene. Customers need “light information”. Otherwise “they might be lost”, turned off. They don’t want to be “taught”. At the end of the day they are on holidays. They just want to be able to trust that those businesses which have been accredited have truly engaged into sustainable practices. This is why credibility and branding of accreditation schemes are key factors from the consumer point of view.

What is very important, on the other hand, is to give them the option of being green. Being green has to be made easy for them. They must be able to access this type of information easily. And this is why GTBS cooperates with VisitScotland. However, there is area for improvement on the clarity of information regarding sustainability in VisitScotland’s promotional material. An example of good practice pointed out during the interview was the Soutwest tourism website, where the information about what is green is handy to consumers. This website makes being green easier. One idea that came up during this discussion was the possibility to partner with tripadvisor.

GTBS has developed a green tourism business website for placing bookings. No information regarding the volume of traffic to the website was available at that point.

4.5.2 Green Certificate

Rural businesses do have direct communication with consumers, and they undertake consumer research. Subsequently, the association gets feedback through them. Apparently, the association works very closely with businesses, so it does not need any formal structure of communication, informal channels work well. In addition, the association runs a significant number of meetings with businesses throughout the year, and here owners are welcomed to suggest changes to the scheme during these meetings.

The interviewees explained that the businesses association cooperates with are operating in rural areas. Rural tourism in Latvia is more a life-style than a business. Formal ways of communication would be translated into more bureaucracy and the owners of rural accommodation would not be willing to engage.

No formal quality system is in place, but the label is reviewed occasionally, when the Commission of Green Certificate identifies the need.

4.5.3 Steinbock

No consumer research has been undertaken by Oe Plus in order to feedback into the Steinböck label. To reach a high result it is necessary to have a quality management system that usually contains customer feedback. The communication with customers is clearly the weakest point of the label and National recognition is missing!

4.5.4 Legambiente Turismo

No input was obtained from consumer associations at the stage of criteria development. However, Legambiente Turismo is part of Legambiente, whose national statute also includes protection of consumer rights. During the interview it was pointed out that in Italy consumer associations are not sufficiently representative yet, since the existing consumer leagues are mostly influenced by the labour union. Therefore, the feasibility of their input could be questioned.

However, the direct communication with consumers needs to be worked out. Credibility is essential, and this is the reason why Legambiente Turismo decided to make the label completely transparent. This can be seen in the website. Clicking into Business details you can get a list with icons of all measures adopted by the hotel to get the label. They did this to address some of the criticisms suggesting that they had adopted a “bland” approach and also to avoid confusing customers: in this way they would know what to expect in that ecolabelled hotel. There is a risk related to the Intellectual Property, as this could be copied. Nevertheless, after extensive consideration, Legambiente Turismo decided that this is the only way to maintain a relationship of trust with the consumer.

The adoption of specific criteria is considered to increase transparency and, subsequently, credibility.

4.5.5 Green Key

The criteria for accreditation make reference to the aspect of communication, both internally and externally. Internal communication here refers to that one which takes place with employees working for the company. The criteria establish that employees need to be aware of the label, the environmental compromise of the company, and any related practises. The purpose of this is to ensure that anyone working in the company engages in these practices. And this includes both full and part time staff.

In addition, certified businesses also have to engage in external communication. This means informing consumers about their green certification and practices, and it consists of:

1- Display of certification (plaque), together with explanatory brochures. This has to be visible to customers.

2- Hotels have to provide information of what they do to protect the environment. This has to be visible (e.g. screen in the lobby, in the room...).

3- Signs – they have to use signs about recycling and any other environmental activity.

Additionally, consumers can access information about the criteria, as well as about businesses which are certified online, through the Green Key website (<http://www.green-key.org/>). And finally, businesses with their certification are listed in the ANWB, and different “green accommodation” websites which is a motoring guide similar to AA in the UK.

They do have a quality system to get input from businesses. For example in The Netherlands, they have 4 independent auditors. These send the criteria to the certified hotels and invite them to a workshop for debate. This takes place every two years in The Netherlands. New criterion starts as optional, and then moves up to the next mandatory level. In other countries, updates take place at least every 3 years.

4.6 Challenges/Trends of Sustainable Tourism Labels

4.6.1 Green Tourism Business Schemes

The interview suggested that one of the main issues affecting ecolabel developments at the moment related to the criteria established by Global Sustainable Council. Their deliver of the service is a problem as they want to standardise criteria. However, this is not possible because every country works differently. For example, Less Developed Countries need to work at different levels to be sustainable. For example, human rights will be a more important issue for them than for those nations in the developed world. The Global Sustainable Council may promote a “box-ticking” approach.

One other important area of development relates to developments in Information Technology. These are key in helping businesses spreading information, and they can play a very important role in supporting the communication with consumers.

Threads for eco-labels relate to the inflows of accreditation schemes which rely on self-assessment by businesses. This thread is followed by the emergence of intrusive, untrained and not reputable organisations who are establishing themselves as certifiers and which may damage the reputation of the entire green label sector.

4.6.2 Green Certificate

Lauku celotajs suggested that the labels will continue operating in the same way. However, it was pointed out that people in the cities are becoming greener and more aware of the need to look after the environment. This means that there will probably be an increment in the demand of eco-labelling.

A new review was underway. Therefore, interviewees suggested that changes, such as the introduction of a grading scheme, may be suggested for the upcoming revision.

4.6.3 Steinböck

The competition from other labels is increasing. So to survive, the label has to clearly delimit itself from others. To manage this, support of important tourism organisations and the government, as well as a nation-wide recognition of the label are thought to be crucial.

4.6.4 Legambiente Turismo

The Global Tourism Sustainability Council, whose criteria are abstract and vague. On the other hand, the adoption of specific criteria can be considered to increase transparency and, subsequently, credibility.

4.6.5 Green Key

The Green Key considers awareness of the label by consumers as one of the key areas that needs further development. Additionally, the importance of building and maintaining the credibility of the scheme was also highlighted as a key requirement.

A very important development also relates to the integration of criteria focusing on Corporate Social Responsibility, and this will take place in the near future.

Finally, one other type of development relates to the expansion in number and types of services which may obtain certification.

5. Conclusions

Interviews with representatives of sustainable tourism labels were undertaken to examine their views on consumer engagement with their practices. The rationale for the study emerged from the suggestion that the perception of a financial benefit increases the adoption of sustainable practices by businesses (Harris, 2007). Since consumer demand leads to financial benefit, the request of sustainable practices by consumers may lead to extended commitment of businesses. Additionally, the nature of sustainable labelling, which grants accreditation to responsible businesses, could enlighten consumers' demand for sustainable business practices.

The study suggested that these labels consider that consumers are the key drivers of adoption of sustainable practices by businesses. This is because it is expected that their demand of sustainable practices and labels will determine a higher interest on the adoption of these practices by businesses. Governments seem to be able to support sustainable tourism labels through incentives and legislation, but to a lesser extent. Despite of the importance given consumers as drivers of adoption, their engagement with sustainable tourism practices is considered limited. It was suggested that they have little awareness of what sustainability actually means, and that they hardly ever take into consideration sustainability issues when making decisions about their travel arrangements. Similarly, these organisations consider that consumers have very limited awareness and understanding of their labels. It is believed that consumers may be sceptical about their practices, suggesting potential lack of credibility.

Should this be the case, findings from the interviews suggested that the following could be some of the reasons. Firstly, the communication with consumers is considered very important by all the organisations participating in this research. However, no input from consumer representation was

obtained for the development of the labels. Furthermore, there are limited channels supporting the direct communication between consumers and these labels, and existing ones (e.g. websites) do not target consumers. Secondly, there is discrepancy over the approach for assessing sustainable practices, and whether this should be done through the use of indicators (i.e. box-ticking approach) or by adopting a more qualitative approach. This latter may be more efficient when aiming to address specific issues which are of relevance to individual businesses or sectors. However, the use of indicators was described by some participants as the baseline of transparency and credibility. Thirdly, there is no consistency on the areas of sustainability included in their criteria. Some of these organisations have moved towards a holistic conceptualisation of sustainability. However, the focus seems to be heavily placed on environmental issues. Finally, although there are some exceptions, their development process suggests limited transparency and thoroughness. Finally, the development of sector and region-specific criteria is considered essential by all these organisations. Although standardisation across countries and sectors could increase transparency, it was reported as counterproductive.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that these are organisations run with limited resources. They are all NGOs, emerging from the environmental concerns of a few individuals. Although some of them reported that they currently receive or have received in the past financial support from their governments (national or local levels), their funding mainly emerges from their membership, and they all employ a limited number of staff.

6. Recommendations and Further Research

The results suggested that sustainable tourism labels consider consumers as key drivers of sustainable tourism development. However, communication with consumers seems to be limited, suggesting that consumers may lack **awareness**, **understanding** and **credibility** on sustainable tourism labels. Therefore, the following recommendations are suggested to strengthen the communication between sustainable tourism labels and consumers:

- 1) Seeking accreditation by other organisms with an established reputation to enhance own **credibility**.
- 2) Development and provision (on their website) of both light and detailed information about the criteria to enhance transparency and subsequent **understanding** and **credibility**.
- 3) Development of customised websites for consumers, and in the language of their nationalities. Furthermore, enhance website navigation to ensure the usability of the website. This should improve the level of **awareness**, **understanding** and **credibility**.
- 4) Provision (on their website) of detailed information about the development process to enhance **understanding** and **credibility**.
- 5) Extension to all tourism businesses to increase **awareness** and recognition, which may lead to enhance **credibility**.
- 6) Branding development to increase consumer **awareness**.

7) Work towards the integration of information about sustainable tourism labels in the “normal” distribution channels, and not only in “responsible” distribution channels. This will help increasing **awareness**.

Maintaining individual schemes across countries may be beneficial to reflect differences across countries. However, strengthening existing links among labels and developing this network further is highly recommended. Given the limited resources of these organisations this approach may be the only way to adopt the above recommendations. And this is of especial relevance for services like tourism, serving international consumers who may not be aware of labels operating in different countries.

Finally, it should be noted that these recommendations are based on the discussions with representatives of sustainable tourism labels. Further research should examine the actual awareness, understanding and motivations of consumers for engaging with sustainable tourism practices/labelling. It is expected that the findings will support the generation of more efficient educational and promotional material to facilitate consumer engagement into sustainable tourism practices

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Appendix 1



Queen Margaret University

EDINBURGH

Sustainable Tourism Labels to Educate and Inform Consumers

Draft Interview Questions

Thank you very much for your interest in the project entitled “Sustainable Tourism Labels to Educate and Inform Consumers” and for your willingness to collaborate with us.

This is a draft introducing the themes that we will be covering through our interview. The format corresponds to a semi-structured interview. Therefore, while the points below will be guiding our conversation, I will welcome any further information about the scheme that you may be willing to share with us.

For your information the main aim of the project is to explore the views that certifiers of sustainable tourism labels have on consumers’ involvement. And the specific objectives are:

- To get an insight into the level of awareness that sustainable tourism label certifiers have about the potential consumers of the products they label.
- To explore the level of consumer education which is currently undertaken by sustainable tourism label certifiers.
- To examine the perceived benefit and limitations that these certifiers have on engaging consumers in the development of their labels.

The following lines collect the main points that we aim to cover during our interview.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sofia Reino', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr. Sofia Reino
School of Business, Enterprise and Management
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

1 – Nature, Background and Principles of the Scheme

- Where the idea came from? Who was the initiator?
- What is the main aim of your eco-label?
- What areas of sustainable development does your eco-label cover? Does it cover any economical and social aspects? Can you tell us some examples of how these areas are covered?
- What type of businesses do you accredit?

2 – The Scheme Development Process

- How was the eco-label developed?
- Where are the roots of the eco-label?
- How did you make decisions about the areas and approach of the eco-label?
- Did you take examples from other labels? If so, which?
- Did it build upon any other certifier? E.g. ISO, Green Globe?
- Did you hold an experts' panel? If so, who was included in this? Did any consumer participate?

3 – Drivers of Adoption by Businesses

- What do you think are the reasons driving the adoption of your eco-label by businesses?
- What do you think is the answer to sustainable tourism development: further involvement by consumers or governments?

4- Views on Consumer Involvement

- What are your views on consumer involvement into sustainable tourism development? Do you think that this is taking place?
- How relevant do you think that consumer involvement is for sustainable tourism development?
- How relevant do you think that eco-labels are to consumers? Do you think that they actually use information about eco-labels for making decisions about travelling? What do you think are the reasons for this involvement/ lack of involvement?
- How knowledgeable do you think that consumers are in the area of eco-labelling?

5 – Communication with Consumers

- Have you (or your organisation) undertaken at any stage any research into consumers' views?
- Do you have a quality system in place for reviewing your scheme? If so, does this involve consumers' feedback at any stage?
- Do you provide customers with information regarding the scheme? If so, how do you do this?

6- Trends and Issues of Tourism Eco-labelling

- How do you see tourism eco-labels evolving? What are the main trends?
- Are there any important threats to their development? If so, which ones? And opportunities?
- Can you see their adoption growing? If so, can you make any estimation of how this might grow?
- Do you see scope for your organisation expanding their accreditation to other types of businesses? If so, which ones?

Appendix 2



Queen Margaret University
EDINBURGH

Information Sheet for Potential Participants

My name is Dr. Sofia Reino and I am a Lecturer in Tourism, Hospitality and Events from the School of Business, Enterprise and Management at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh. And I am the principal researcher of a small research project, entitled “Sustainable Tourism Label to Educate and Inform Consumers”.

This small project is a preliminary study into sustainable tourism labelling. The findings are expected to be of value by themselves, but very importantly, they will also inform the research approach of a three-year study. The aims of the long term study are to examine consumers’ understanding of sustainable tourism practices and sustainable tourism labelling. It is expected that this will support the generation of more efficient educational and promotional material for engaging consumers into sustainable tourism practices.

With this longer term project in mind, the current preliminary study aims to explore the views that certifiers of sustainable tourism labels have on consumer’s involvement. In order to achieve this main aim, the following points outline the main objectives of this project:

- To get an insight into the level of awareness that sustainable tourism label certifiers have about the potential consumers of the products they label.
- To explore the level of consumer education which is currently undertaken by sustainable tourism label certifiers.
- To examine the perceived benefit and limitations that these certifiers have on engaging consumers in the development of their labels.

The findings of this current project will be of use to tourism eco-labels taking place in this study, as they will help them to identify potential areas of development as regards to consumer involvement.

This project is being funded by The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

I am looking for volunteers to participate in the project. Due to the nature of the research and in order to ensure the use of a consistent criterion for selection, potential participants will represent a former member of the Voluntary Initiative for Sustainability in Tourism (VISIT) eco-label.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview. The researcher is not aware of any risks associated with the study. The whole procedure should take no longer than 1 hour. You will be free to withdraw from the study at any stage and you would not have to give any reason.

All data will be anonymised as much as possible, but you may be identifiable from tape recordings of your voice. Your name will be replaced with a participant number, and it will not be possible for you to be identified in any reporting of the data gathered.

The results will be published in a report and they may also be presented to a journal and/or at a conference.

If you would like to contact an independent person, who knows about this project but is not involved in it, you are welcome to contact Mr. Trevor Laffin. His contact details are given below.

If you have read and understood this information sheet, any questions you had have been answered, and you would like to be a participant in the study, please now see the consent form.

Contact details of the principal researcher

Name of researcher: Dr. Sofia Reino

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Contact details of the independent adviser

Name of adviser: Mr. Trevor Laffin

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Appendix 3



Queen Margaret University
EDINBURGH

Consent Form

“Sustainable Tourism Label to Educate and Inform Consumers”

I have read and understood the information sheet and this consent form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage without giving any reason.

I agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Contact details of the researcher

Name of researcher: Dr. Sofia Reino

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