

A study into the motivations for participation in environmental certification schemes by the tourist accommodation sector

Abstract

Ecolabels are management tools which have the potential to improve the environmental performance of the tourism industry. Success in achieving this objective is dependent on the strictness of the assessment criteria employed, and participation rates among the myriad existing service providers. However, more than twenty years after the inception of the first touristic ecolabel, market penetration remains extremely low.

Individual schemes have primarily been marketed by appealing to the bottom line, but the business case for certification is weak at best. Customer demand for ecolabels is virtually non-existent, and much touted cost-savings can be shown to actually result from effective management rather than certification. Certification has been shown to help new businesses in attracting investment and in obtaining permits to operate in protected areas, yet these benefits are applicable to only a minority of the SMEs which dominate the tourism industry. A chronic lack of reliable data on these economic impacts makes an accurate cost benefit analysis impossible, thereby further detracting from the appeal of eco-certification.

A small proportion of accommodation businesses are becoming certified despite the current market conditions. Some of these managers are motivated by egoistic values, pursuing certification for the strategic development of their brand due to the conviction that consumer demand is set to increase in the medium term. Others are driven by altruistic and biospheric values. They become certified to reconcile their business operations with their personal values regarding social equity and the environment.

Enrolment in certification schemes could be encouraged by public agencies through the implementation of financial incentives or by requiring certification before operating permits are granted. Certain distribution channels have the potential to spread awareness and influence the level of customer demand. The schemes themselves could promote participation through greater and better focussed marketing efforts. Research and communication of actual economic impacts and the use of accreditation to increase credibility and recognition would encourage membership on egoistic grounds. Marketing communications may also be successful in appealing to the emotions and personal values of decision makers.