



Sustainable Tourism and Stakeholder Networking for SIDS Policy Makers

- Online-Course Transcript –

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WEEK 3

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Week 3: Sustainable Tourism Standards

List of Acronyms

CREST	Center for Responsible Travel
CST	Certification for Sustainable Tourism
GSTC	Global Sustainable Tourism Council
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
ROI	Return on Investment
SSTL	Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label
STAR	Situation, Task, Action and Result
TIES	The International Ecotourism Society
UN	United Nations

Introduction to Sustainable Tourism

In this unit you will learn to:

- ✓ Identify and understand sustainable tourism standards as well as the different tiers of certification
- ✓ Understand the role of quality assurance in tourism
- ✓ Describe the Global Sustainable Tourism Council

Standards, quality assurance systems, and certification bring about a more sustainable tourism sector because they provide participating organizations with an action plan for improvement and give consumers a baseline from which to make sound decisions about travel. We will learn in this unit about sustainable tourism standards and criteria, how certification works and the latest efforts to consolidate quality assurance standards and make them more accessible on a global scale.

Quality Assurance in Tourism

Standards, quality assurance systems, and certifications can bring about a more sustainable tourism industry because they provide participating organizations with a baseline and action plan



for improvement and give consumers a method of comparison for making sound decisions about responsible travel. Quality assurance is the systematic evaluation of a project, service, or facility to ensure that minimum standards are being met. A recognized body approves a standard which details the use of a prescribed set of rules, conditions, or requirements. A tourism quality standard provides customers with an assurance that a tourism operator's facilities, services, or practices meet third-party, verified levels of quality. It is important to remember when dealing with quality assurance issues, that sustainability is not an end in itself, but a process, continually evolving and requiring regular monitoring and attention.

Useful for both destinations and businesses alike, a tourism sustainability standard provides customers with the additional assurance that the organization or destination is operating in accordance with agreed-upon and verified sustainability criteria. Standards provide businesses and destinations with a framework to move towards more sustainable practices and operations. Sustainability standards encompass far more than just environmental best practices. They also include:

- sustainable business policy
- inclusive planning
- workplace practices
- supply chain management
- resource use
- community impact
- cultural heritage

Types of Sustainable Tourism Certifications

Coinciding with an increase in the use of sustainable tourism *standards*, there was an increase in *certification* programs that contain their own criteria for business or destination sustainability. Certification is the process of assuring stakeholders and consumers that the assessed destination or organization has met or exceed a set of minimum baseline standards. Certification involves a verification process (i.e. auditing) that proves the standards are in place. Certification programs in the tourism industry use sustainability standards to distinguish responsible destinations or businesses from those that use 'eco' or 'sustainable' as a marketing tool to attract consumers (TIES, 2018). Certification programs can be national and international. National programs are linked to a country's sustainability vision while international programs apply criteria globally, and there are also programs which operate regionally.

It is important to note that certification has largely been targeted at tourism suppliers (e.g. accommodation, tour operators, attractions), while destination certification has been limited.

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However, destination certification is beginning to achieve more recognition, particularly in the organizations listed below.

Some of the better known international sustainable tourism certification organizations are Green Destinations, Green Globe, EarthCheck, Rainforest Alliance, Travelife and Biosphere. National programs targeting tourism suppliers include Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label (SSTL), Costa Rica's Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), Ecotourism Kenya and Australia's ECO Certification. Each of these organizations have their own criteria, standards process, and tiers for certification. For example, Costa Rica's CST has 5 tiers, or leaves, reflecting the percentile of criteria a company has reached (with level 5 indicating 95%+ scoring in sustainability measures), while EarthCheck's tiers range from Silver to Master status and reflect consistent achievement over the years (with Master status reflecting 15+ years).

Regarding destination programs, few destinations have achieved certification. However, the list is growing and examples include:

- Barcelona, Spain (the first city in the world to have received "*Biosphere*" certification)
- Huatulco, Mexico (the first destination on the American continent and third in the world to be certified by Green Globe; and then first in world to reach Gold certification by EarthCheck)
- Huangshan Mountain, China
- Kaikoura District Council, New Zealand
- Rottnest Island, Australia
- Snæfellsnes Peninsula, Iceland
- Schouwen-Duiveland, Netherlands
- Vail, USA
- Ixtapa, Mexico

The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria

By 2010, there were over 150 sustainable tourism certification programs globally, and most U.S. states had some sort of green travel certification program. In essence all of these programs were defining "sustainability" for themselves, and for a while there had been limited attempts to consolidate the disparate efforts. The travel industry and consumers did not have a common lens for what it means to be green or sustainable. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) was created to manage the challenges resulting from various certification programs. "The sheer number of programs that exist has led to significant confusion about the relative benefits of each.



To resolve this problem, a process has begun for accrediting certification programs that comply with baseline standards” (Bien, 2006).

In October 2008, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council announced the first ever global sustainable tourism criteria. Based on thousands of best practices, the GSTC guides and helps businesses, consumers, governments, NGOs, and educational institutions ensure that tourism industries around the world are aligned with the triple bottom line. In all, more than 4,500 criteria were analyzed, more than 80,000 people were invited to comment on them, and 1,000 actually sent in comments. The intent of the GSTC is to:

- Define sustainable tourism criteria
- Accredit certification standards to certify tourism destinations and businesses
- Create international recognition and build credibility around accredited sustainable tourism certification program

There are two sets of GSTC Criteria: Destination Criteria and Industry Criteria (for Hotels and Tour Operators) (GSTC, 2018). These criteria “serve as the global baseline standards for sustainability in travel and tourism. The Criteria are used for education and awareness-raising, policy-making for businesses and government agencies and other organization types, measurement and evaluation, and as a basis for certification. The Criteria are the minimum, not the maximum, which businesses, governments, and destinations should achieve to approach social, environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability” (ibid).

This section focuses on the criteria for destinations, which is similar to criteria for businesses and includes four overall themes (GSTC, 2018)[1] :

Demonstrate effective sustainable management:

- Sustainable destination strategy
- Destination management organization
- Monitoring
- Tourism seasonality management
- Climate change adaptation
- Inventory of tourism assets and attractions
- Planning regulations
- Access for all
- Property acquisitions
- Visitor satisfaction
- Sustainability standards
- Safety and security



- Crisis and emergency management
- Promotion

Maximize economic benefits to the host community and minimize negative impacts.

- Economic monitoring
- Local career opportunities
- Public participation
- Local community opinion
- Local access
- Tourism awareness and education
- Preventing exploitation
- Support for community
- Supporting local entrepreneurs and fair trade

Maximize benefits to communities, visitors and cultural heritage; minimize negative impacts.

- Attraction protection
- Visitor management
- Visitor behaviour
- Cultural heritage protection
- Site interpretation
- Intellectual property

Maximize benefits to the environment and minimize negative impacts.

- Environmental risks
- Protection of sensitive environments
- Wildlife protection
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Energy conservation
- Water management



- Water security
- Water quality
- Wastewater
- Solid waste reduction
- Light and noise pollution
- Low-impact transportation

More information available at:

<https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-destination-criteria/>

<https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-industry-criteria-for-hotels/>

<https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-industry-criteria-for-tour-operators/>

To date the GSTC has “recognized over 2-dozen global standards programs that adhere to and are equivalent to the GSTC Hotel & Tour Operator Criteria” (CREST, 2018). The GSTC Criteria take into account numerous guidelines and standards from around the world, including the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). ISO “creates documents that provide requirements, specifications, guidelines or characteristics that can be used consistently to ensure that materials, products, processes and services are fit for their purpose” (ISO, 2018). There are many ISO standards and many are widely used in tourism, including ISO 9001 Quality Management, ISO 14001 Environmental Management and ISO 22000 Food Safety Management. There is even a [safety management system standard for adventure tourism activity providers](#). More information at <https://www.iso.org/home.html>

The Controversial Nature of Global Certification

A “one size fits all” approach cannot possibly suit the unique needs of any given destination, culture, or region. Sustainable tourism certification programs must take a multi-stakeholder approach to address needs, issues, and complexities of the destination in which they are offered. Work is now afoot to put minimum standards in place, tailored to local circumstances. But there is strong opposition to certification that addresses several contentious issues. Some who oppose certification feel that a business cannot be truly sustainable since it cannot guarantee that its clients’ actions will be kept in check. While this is valid, it is important to note that certification programs only certify what businesses can control: their own operations, supply chain management, staff, and guide training.

Another argument is that global criteria oversimplify the impacts and undermine the complexity of tourism, lulling consumers into submission upon seeing the eco-label, and keeping them from

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thinking for themselves. Some opponents of global certification programs perceive them solely as a marketing opportunity. Compliance with a credible certification standard is definitely a way to differentiate in the market from those that merely claim to be green. But as a certification matures and its certified members uphold its standards, it will gain credibility in the marketplace just like any successful brand might.

Finally, there is the argument that certification is not guaranteed to deliver on its promises, and that a lot of money and effort are expended for little or no return on investment, especially for small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises. Fortunately, voluntary global standards have demonstrated return on investment (ROI) in many industries time and time again, from forestry to fisheries to organic and natural food (Conroy, 2007). If a company has a system in place to measure and manage their impacts, ROI can be proven. The business case for sustainability is stronger than ever and taking a systematic approach makes sustainability more accessible.

CASE STUDY: National Eco-Label / Sustainable Tourism Certification Program - Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label (SSTL)

The Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label is a program that “mainstream[s] sustainability practices,” specifically among hotels in Seychelles, to protect and preserve the country’s vulnerable environment, culture and biodiversity (SSTL, 2014). The program has achieved Recognition-status from the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. Compliance with the program is optional and voluntary and can be applied to hotels of any size. Currently, five hotels are certified, of which three (Berjaya Beau Vallon Beach Resort & Casino, Constance Ephelia Resort and Hanneman Holiday Residence) “have completed the first term” of certification (SSTL, 2014). Specific attention is paid to electricity and water usage and waste management practices. There are five steps to attaining the label: communication, application, assessment, verification and award recommendation. Criteria for assessing the label follows eight guidelines including “commitment to sustainable policies, energy conservation, water conservation, waste management, community involvement, staff welfare, guest satisfaction and engagement in conservation practices” (SSTL, 2014).

More information available at:

- <http://www.sustainabletourismalliance.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/case-studies-sstl-11.pdf>
- <http://www.sstl.sc/>

Exercise: GSTC Criteria Examples



Based on this weeks training booklet inputs, please define a vision and concrete goals for your destination (your chosen SIDS).

We would kindly like to ask you to share your insights in text-form and to avoid uploading any presentation, pictures or videos - Thank you for your understanding!

References

Bien, A. (2006) A Simple User's Guide to Certification for Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism. Washington, DC:Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development Inter-American Development Bank's Multilateral Investment Fund.

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(CREST) Centre for Responsible Tourism. (2018) The Case for Responsible Travel: Trends and Statistics. Available at: https://www.responsibletravel.org/docs/The_Case_for_Responsible_Travel_2018_FINAL_FOR_WEB.pdf Last accessed December 2018.

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