

Ecolabelling, certification and accreditation: elements of a possible model for the ecotourism industry in southern and eastern Africa.

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Ralph Felix Pina

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Supervisor: Prof JH van der Merwe

I hereby certify that this report is my own, original work and has not been submitted for any other purpose to this or any other institution.

Signed: _____

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Abstract

The paper examines the evolution of ecolabelling/certification in tourism in the context of the evolution of the concepts of sustainable development and tourism, certification's definitions, motivations, international practices and challenges, and focuses on its intended function as a voluntary market mechanism. Parallels are drawn with the African experience and consideration is given to the particular problems of certification in Africa as a member of the Third World. Evidence is examined, including a local tourist survey that points to certification's ineffectiveness as a means to influence consumer choice, at least in its current form as a voluntary, self-regulatory tool. An attempt is also made to disprove its effectiveness as a source of competitive advantage for tourism companies by considering it within the framework of competitive strategy theory. It is concluded that certification is a poor market mechanism. Consequently, elements of a model for the effective use of ecolabelling as a tool in a suite of sustainability tools in tourism in Africa, are proposed.

Introduction

In recent years ecolabelling, or certification, in tourism has emerged as a market mechanism for tourism companies to regulate themselves voluntarily in order to minimise the industry's impact on the environment. The phenomenon is especially relevant to Africa as much of the certification effort is aimed at the ecotourism sector, which generally involves nature travel from the First World to developing countries like those in Africa.

The report, which is largely a literature study, traces the emergence of tourism certification in relation to the evolution of the discourse around ecotourism, sustainable tourism and the other "new tourisms". The problems around commonly accepted definitions of these concepts are highlighted.

It examines the definitions of certification and discusses its characteristics as it is currently practised. Parallels are drawn with certification's embryonic application in southern and eastern Africa. The problems associated with different stakeholder perspectives on certification, especially the emerging fault-lines along the "North-South" divide, are examined and stressed.

The focus of the report is on critically investigating certification's efficacy as a market mechanism. Evidence is presented, including a survey of tourist motivations for product choice, that suggests that certification is ineffective at influencing consumer demand. Additionally, an argument is made that certification is ineffective as an element in companies' competitive strategies.

Consequently, conclusions are drawn and recommendations made concerning certification's application in ecotourism in southern and eastern Africa.

Definitions of concepts

In the next sections the evolution of the terms ecotourism and sustainable tourism is traced with a view to arriving at succinct definitions. Their relationships to tourism certification, or tourism ecolabelling, are examined and definitions of the certification and accreditation are distilled.

Ecotourism and sustainable tourism

If ecolabelling schemes, or certification of tourism products, destinations and practices, are tools for ensuring that "true" ecotourism or sustainable tourism are being practiced, it follows that if the latter concepts are vaguely defined and contested, then the criteria for judging and certifying practices and products will be vague (Diamantis & Westlake, 2001: 37). It will become clear from the following discussion, however, that "ecotourism" and "sustainable tourism" are indeed hotly contested concepts and that analysing and defining these concepts has provided fertile ground for academic debates and publication.

Evolution of ecotourism and sustainable tourism

The emergence and evolution of the related concepts of sustainable tourism and ecotourism has closely shadowed the burgeoning concern for the environment and the consequent emergence of the concept of sustainability or sustainable development. During the 1970s rising concern amongst Western nations about the negative environmental effects of industrialisation and its attendant patterns of consumption and production, culminated in the first Earth Summit in 1972. By the early 1980s the initial articulation of the concept of ecotourism had started to form. In 1980 the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) adopted the Manila Declaration on World Tourism,

which included references to environmental concern in the tourism agenda for the first time (Perez-Salom, 2001).

The United Nations' (UN) World Commission on Environment and Development report (WCED), *Our Common Future* (commonly known as the Brundtland Report) (WCED, 1987), marked a watershed in environmental discourse and reflected poor countries' rebellion against Western nations' preoccupation with the importance of the environment (Hattingh, 2002: 5). The emphasis of world debate consequently shifted from "limits to physical growth" to "development", mainly of the poor, within the physical constraints of ecological systems that sustain life (Hattingh, 2002: 5). In addition, the needs and interests of future generations would be considered.

The 1989 World Tourism Conference produced The Hague Declaration on Tourism, which recognised the interrelationship between tourism and the environment and established unspoilt natural, cultural and social environments as preconditions for tourism development (Perez-Salom, 2001). The UN's Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 (the Rio Summit), adopted the sustainable development approach and produced the action plan known as Agenda 21. Consequently, the WTO and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) arranged the World Conference on Sustainable Tourism in 1995, which adopted the Charter for Sustainable Tourism and was followed by the WTO's Male Declaration on Sustainable Tourism Development and the Manila Declaration on the Social Impacts of Tourism in 1997 (Perez-Salom, 2001).

The year 2002 was declared the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) by the UN General Assembly. UN states, members of specialised agencies, governmental and intergovernmental organisations and NGOs were invited to participate. UNEP and the WTO were mandated to organise IYE events and The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) co-ordinated preparatory conferences. Much criticism, mainly from NGOs in the Third World, was directed at IYE (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 276-279). IYE culminated in the World Ecotourism Summit that produced the Québec Declaration on Ecotourism (World Ecotourism Summit, 2002). The declaration made various calls to action to various stakeholders, recognised that ecotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism and generally attempted to address the criticisms

emanating from the Third World. It also called on the UN's World Summit on Sustainable Development, later that year, to apply the principles of sustainable development to tourism and integrate tourism, including ecotourism, into its outcomes.

Much debate and work by industry, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and universities, and the WSSD in 2002, have established sustainable tourism as a derivative of the concept of sustainable development (or sustainability)¹. However, these concepts are widely contested, variously interpreted and abused.

Mowforth and Munt (1998: 24-7; 123) argue that sustainability is a concept "charged with power", a finding echoed by Hattingh (2002: 18). It is defined, owned and propagated by the First World, and that it is "hijacked by the prevailing model of development, capitalism, and will increasingly fall into the service of the controllers of capital, the boards of directors of major transnational companies" (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 113). While this may represent an extreme view, it is so that sustainability is contested from different stakeholder perspectives. Hunter (2002: 8) in summarising recent sustainability theory research admits that a "universally acceptable definition of sustainable development" is probably unattainable. Consequently, the concept is often represented by a range of possible positions. Such a device, unsurprisingly, is also evident in attempts to elucidate the concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism (Orams, 1995; Diamantis 2001; Acott, La Trobe & Howard, 1998; Weaver, 2001).

¹ There are dissident views on the links between sustainable development and sustainable tourism such as those of Sharpley (2000).

Table 1 The new tourisms (adapted from Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 95).

Ecotourism	Focuses on protection and conservation of the natural environment, and to a lesser extent on the wellbeing and cultures of local communities.
Sustainable tourism	Emphasises the three “pillars” of sustainability: environmental, economic and socio-cultural sustainability. Relative weights of the “pillars” and intersubstitutability of natural and human-made capital are debatable.
Community-based tourism	Seeks to promote local communities’ participation and ownership at the destination end of tourism.
Fair trade and ethical tourism	Seek to create social, cultural and economic benefits for local people at the destination end and minimise economic leakages. The emphases are on changing consumption patterns in the First World, social justice and trade equity for local communities and businesses.
Pro-poor tourism	Focuses on poverty reduction in the South through tourism development.
Responsible tourism	Sustainable tourism by another name, but perhaps with more emphasis on justice, equity, participation and ethics, such as highlighted by “fair trade” (Republic of South Africa, 2002; Republic of South Africa, 2003).

Table 1 shows the more important types of “new tourisms”, more or less in order of evolution in recent years. The evolution reflects a similar trajectory to that for environmental discourse where concern for the environment was augmented with economic and socio-cultural concerns, and in some respects has been superseded by these, especially social and cultural concerns, and “North versus South” developmental concerns.

Ecotourism and sustainable tourism definitions

While ecotourism may have evolved, broadened or been diluted into the concept of sustainable tourism, depending on one’s perspective, most stakeholders who advocate

and promote ecolabels are at pains to differentiate ecotourism from other forms of tourism, and position it relative to sustainable tourism, in particular. In fact, these stakeholders have developed very precise definitions of ecotourism ranging from the succinct to detailed expositions of principles.

Ecotourism is generally considered (Sirakaya & Sasidharan, 1999; TIES, 2003: 5-6; Crabtree, O'Reilly & Worboys: 2002: 4-5; Epler Wood & Halpenny, 2001: 122; Honey, 1999: 25) to be a special form of tourism that involves purposeful travel to natural areas, but is a distinct subset of conventional *nature tourism* because it should at least also:

1. Benefit or contribute to conservation of the natural environment (although some definitions suffice with “minimum negative impact” on the environment)
2. Benefit local communities
3. Promote understanding of natural and cultural environments by, and education of, tourists.

Sustainable tourism principles, however, should apply to *all* tourism, including ecotourism, in the view of the WTO (TIES, 2003: 5). As the Mohonk Agreement states: “ecotourism is sustainable tourism with a natural area focus” while sustainable tourism “seeks to minimize ecological and socio-cultural impacts while providing economic benefits to local communities and host countries” (2000). This definition of sustainable tourism is more restrictive than the norm where the “(very) weak sustainability” position that assumes the intersubstitutability of natural and human-made capital (Hunter, 2002: 10; Hattingh, 2002: 6), could be interpreted by some. It is this problem with interpretations of sustainability that allows authors such as Weaver (2001) to argue that ecotourism and *mass tourism* are not incompatible, and that the former could be a form of mass tourism.

It is perhaps for this reason that advocates of ecolabelling, such as the Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA) (Crabtree et al, 2002: 4) re-emphasise the primacy of *ecological* sustainability in ecotourism definitions. The EAA defines ecotourism as:

Ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.

The most comprehensive, yet value-laden definition has been developed by Honey (1999: 25):

Ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveller; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.

Ecolabelling, certification and accreditation definitions

The International Standards Organisation (ISO) defines Type I² “ecolabelling” as (Global Ecolabelling Network, 1999):

a voluntary, multiple-criteria based, third party program that awards a license that authorises the use of environmental labels on products indicating overall environmental preferability of a product within a particular product category based on life cycle considerations.

The above definition applies generally to ecolabelling of all kinds of products and services. An often-quoted definition of ecolabelling, as applied to tourism, is (Synergy, 2000: vii):

² “Informative environmental self-declaration claims” are classified as Type II ecolabelling.

An officially sanctioned scheme in which a product or service may be awarded an ecological label on the basis of its acceptable level of environmental impact. The acceptable level of environmental impact may be determined by consideration of a single environmental hurdle or after undertaking an assessment of its overall impacts.

While defining ecolabelling would appear to be straightforward, Buckley (2002: 184-185) points out that it has developed far more specific meanings in other industry sectors. Furthermore, the absence of an internationally recognised definition for a term like ecotourism, amongst others, exacerbates the lack of consensus about ecolabelling in tourism. The roots of ecolabelling in manufacturing and trade logically indicate an emphasis on environmental *impacts*. However, increasingly ecolabels in tourism are also focused on environmental *quality* (of destinations) – “green” as opposed to “grey” aspects (Mihalič, 2001: 68; Honey & Rome, 2001: 27; Buckley, 2001: 20; Buckley, 2002: 205).

Two fault lines are revealed in the literature. Firstly, although “ ecolabelling” and “certification” are often used interchangeably in a tourism context, some authors attempt to draw a distinction between them. Honey and Rome (2001) simply provide slightly different definitions. TIES (2003: 14-15) attempts to distinguish ecolabelling from certification by stating that the former is a process by which an award is “given to a business or activity” based on a comparison with the “best performance” in the sector, while the latter determines compliance with a set of “minimum standards”. A review of literature does not indicate that this distinction is commonly accepted at all.

Secondly, different meanings attached to the terms “certification” and “accreditation” in some countries could cause confusion, such as in Australia where “accreditation” sometimes means “certification” (Honey & Rome, 2001: 5). It is now generally accepted, however, that *accreditation* is the procedure by which an authoritative body verifies the competence of, endorses, qualifies or licences those doing the certifying – it “certifies the certifiers” (Honey & Rome, 2001: 5; McLaren, 2002).

Analysis of definitions of certification reveals a certain lack of consistency (or perhaps evolution) in definitions from authors representing the same organisation,

such as TIES (TIES, 2003: 7; McLaren, 2002), and even from the same author (Honey, 2003; Honey & Rome, 2001: 5; Honey, 2001: 1). One of the reasons for the evolution could be consensus about a proposal by Chester, Crabtree, Hundloe and Lee (2002: 3), and Crabtree et al (2002: 7-8) that businesses as entities should not be certified, but that each of their products should be. An aggregation of these definitions produces the following definition of *certification* in the context of tourism:

A voluntary procedure that assesses, audits and gives assurance that a business, facility, product, process, service or management system meets specific standards. It awards a marketable logo to those that meet or exceed baseline standards.

It is important and helpful to distinguish between three types of tourism certification, namely, mass tourism, sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification³ (Honey & Rome, 2001: 33-45). Mass (or conventional) tourism certification is applied in the mass market or conventional tourism industry. Such schemes are typically well funded and marketed and the best known, but also the most narrow, often focusing on environmentally-friendly and cost-saving processes.

Sustainable tourism certification measures sustainability according to environmental, socio-cultural and economic criteria, both internal and external to organisations. As such it is broad and holistic enough to cover many types, sectors and market segments of tourism.

Ecotourism certification covers businesses that claim to be involved in ecotourism and thus sets higher standards, with an emphasis on ecological sustainability. This paper will largely concentrate on ecotourism certification.

Like the term ecotourism, the ecolabel is subject to misuse. Although ecolabels can also be awarded on the basis of membership of a scheme, or selectively through

³ Diamantis and Westlake (2001: 35) offer a refined classification of types of ecolabelling specifically for ecotourism: very weak (nature-based emphasis only), weak (nature-based emphasis, less educational and sustainability component emphasis), strong (nature-based, sustainability and educational component emphasis) and very strong schemes (same as strong except that economic aspects are ignored).

private schemes, amongst others, for the purposes of this paper, the awarding of an ecolabel is regarded as the outcome of a successful certification process. An ecolabel is thus the marketable logo, or seal. The terms certification and ecolabelling will be used interchangeably in this paper.

The purpose of ecolabelling

In a critique of the certification movement Petropolous (2003) argues that “ecotourism is not a movement for certifying tourism, but a movement to change it”. However, the argument can be reversed: in order for ecotourism to realise its revolutionary potential, it needs to move from imprecise conceptualisation to codification – to a set of tools, standards and criteria (Honey, 2003).

Many tools, mostly voluntary, have evolved over the last twenty-five years to improve standards and practices in the tourism industry; to promote environmentally, socially and culturally responsible behaviour; and to provide information to travellers about “green” companies, services and attractions (Honey & Rome, 2001: 19). These include sustainable tourism and ecotourism statements of definition and principle, codes of conduct, manuals and self-help guides, award programmes and competitions, best practices, certification, sustainability indicators and benchmarks, and lifecycle assessments (Synergy, 2000: 57-62; Honey & Rome, 2001: 19). Certification is thus a complementary tool in a suite of tools.

Certification’s primary purpose is to indirectly reduce the environmental impacts of tourism or to ensure that tourism benefits the environment, by creating awareness in travellers with a view to influencing their behaviour⁴, and specifically their selection of tourism products and services (Buckley, 2002: 185; Buckley, 2001: 20; Sasidharan, Sirakaya & Kerstetter, 2002: 163; Sasidharan & Font, 2001: 105).

As such it is market-driven mechanism (Honey, 2002; Buckley, 2002: 185) designed to influence demand on the one hand by placing the “responsibility for improving environmental management in the hands of individual customers” (Buckley, 2002:

⁴ Sharpley (2001: 41) points out that greater awareness does not necessarily result in the adoption of sustainable behaviour.

197), and supply on the other (Global Ecolabelling Network, 1999) by being a potential source of competitive advantage (Font & Harris, 2004: 3; Middleton & Hawkins, 1998: 108; WTO, 2003: 3; TIES, 2003: 9) to businesses and destinations.

The drive for certification has been fuelled by the prevalence of “greenwashing” (TIES, 2003: 6; Font, 2003) or “ecotourism lite” (Honey, 1999: 51), and pseudo-ecolabels (WTO, 2002b: 34) or quasi-ecolabels (Mihalič, 2001: 67).

Certification can also have a range of ancillary purposes and potential benefits to various stakeholders, ranging from tourists/consumers, through governments, local communities and tourism businesses to broader society (TIES, 2003: 9-10; WTO, 2003: 2-3). Chief amongst these are improving industry standards and practices (TIES, 2003: 9; Crabtree et al, 2002: 2) and raising awareness in local host communities (WTO, 2003: 2; Flores⁵, 2002).

The history and proliferation of ecolabels

The first operational ecolabel in a tourism-related sector was Blue Flag, first awarded in 1985 to beaches to encourage compliance with European Commission (EC) bathing water regulations. While the intervening years saw the appearance of many ecolabels, the next significant milestone was the launch of Green Globe, an international certification programme, in 1998 by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). In the same year the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) published a report in support of ecolabels as a self-regulation method (Font, 2002: 198-200).

Interest in ecolabels and concern at their proliferation escalated rapidly. In November 2000 international representatives of tourism certification programmes reached agreement on a framework and principles for ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification – the Mohonk Agreement. During 2001 the first books on tourism certification started to appear and two e-conferences were convened. In the same year a feasibility study on a proposed Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) as

⁵ Flores dismisses “greenwashing” as a “Northern issue”.

an international accreditation agency for certification schemes, was commissioned (Font, 2002: 198-200).

In 2002, the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE), the WTO published the results of an international study on certification systems. It reported that (WTO, 2002a):

- ❖ 500 voluntary initiatives, many relevant for tourism, were identified and 104 studied in detail;
- ❖ of the 104, 59 were regarded as comprehensive certification schemes (ecolabels), 17 as awards and 28 as “self commitments”;
- ❖ as of 2001, 7000 tourism products had been certified, 6000 of these in Europe;
- ❖ 47% of the ecolabels were implemented between 1996 and 2000, 47% were older and 6 % in testing and implementation phases;
- ❖ 68% were for accommodation, with a growing number covering facilities, destinations, transport, tour operators and naturalist guides (Honey, 2003);
- ❖ 78% focused on tourism products in Europe.

In May 2002 delegates to the World Ecotourism Summit adopted the Québec Declaration, which amongst other resolutions, endorsed the use of certification as a tool for ensuring sound ecotourism and sustainable tourism practice (World Ecotourism Summit, 2002). In January 2003 the Rainforest Alliance, UNEP, TIES, the WTO and the Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development formed a partnership to implement the blueprint proposed by the STSC feasibility study (Honey, 2003).

Bendell and Font (2004), in analysing the WTO study data, note that fewer than 2% of the potential number of companies have been certified. Furthermore, very few schemes have more than 5% of market share of firms for a tourism sub-sector in a given destination. Blue Flag is the only programme with a relatively large share of its niche market (beaches and marinas) (Bendell & Font, 2004).

Some of the more important certification programmes can be roughly classified as follows (Honey, 2003; Honey & Rome 2001: 33-50):

- ❖ Conventional or mass tourism types: Green Globe 21, ECOTEL;
- ❖ Sustainable tourism types: CST⁶ in Costa Rica, Australia's NEAP⁷ (nature tourism category), Blue Flag;
- ❖ Ecotourism types: NEAP, PAN⁸ in Europe, Smart Voyager for tourist vessels in the Galapagos.

A brief history of African ecolabels

In Africa, in common with much of the developed world, ecolabels have been slow to appear, although many African countries have endorsed ecotourism as a means of conserving biodiversity. In 2000 ecoQuest, a private ISO Type II ecolabel, was launched in South Africa (Pieterse, 2003: 10; see Appendix A). As is common elsewhere, ecoQuest⁹ has concentrated on the accommodation sector, albeit in a specific niche, and could be regarded as an ecotourism type of ecolabel.

In 2002, Qualitour, a privately owned South African firm, launched the Heritage Environmental Classification Programme (Koch, Massyn & Spenceley, 2002: 244-245). Heritage may be classified as a mass tourism certification as it tends to concentrate on efficient resource usage and cost saving, the latter being a selling point, for conventional tourism establishments. However, social responsibility criteria are increasingly evident according to Greg McManus, the managing director (2004). To date it has certified thirty-five establishments in South Africa comprising mostly hotels, some resorts and game reserves, and one zoo (McManus, 2004). Although Qualitour's goal is that Heritage becomes *the* tourism certification scheme for the subcontinent, a proposed link with Green Globe 21 failed to materialise, and attempts to engage the South African government's Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT), have been unsuccessful (McManus, 2004).

⁶ Certification for Sustainable Tourism.

⁷ National Ecotourism Accreditation Program

⁸ Protected Area Network

⁹ EcoQuest is owned and operated by ecoAfrica Travel (Pty) Ltd, a South African inbound tour operator, of which the author is chairman of the board of directors with direct access to sales and

Footnotes continues on next page.

In the same year Blue Flag was launched for South African beaches (Pieterse, 2003: 10). Eight beaches have been certified to date with a further twelve in the one-year pilot phase (*African Wildlife*, 2003: 10-11). Blue Flag South Africa is a partnership between the CoastCare programme of the DEAT and the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA), a conservation NGO.

The Ecotourism Society of Kenya (ESOK) implemented the Eco-Rating System in 2002 (Honey, 2003). TIES played a significant role in facilitating forums that called for certification, and a workshop of stakeholders, including donors, tourism associations, NGOs, conservation organisations and community representatives decided to initiate a domestic, ecotourism type certification scheme to be developed and operated by ESOK (Koch et al, 2002: 256). To date the Eco-Rating has certified twenty-one accommodation establishments, representing 15% penetration of the potential market, according to Judy Kepher-Gona, ESOK's Executive Officer (2004). Links with international schemes are being sought and the intention is to eventually certify tour operators and destinations (Kepher-Gona, 2004).

In the same year Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FTTSA) launched the Fair Trade in Tourism Trademark although it has been active in South Africa since 1998 (Koch et al, 2002: 248). FTTSA is "an independent initiative of the IUCN (the World Conservation Union) South Africa that works towards equitable and sustainable tourism growth and development in South Africa" (FTTSA, 2003a). According to its own users guide (FTTSA, 2003b: 8), FTTSA focuses on fairness, justice and equity in tourism business practices and aims to address "North-South inequalities" in trade (Koch et al, 2002: 248). It is not a "conventional eco-label" and is "compatible with other labels, brands and grading systems" (FTTSA, 2003b: 8). It is clear, however, that FTTSA is endorsed and promoted by the South African government in its responsible tourism guidelines (Republic of South Africa, 2002; Republic of South Africa, 2003: 10). Although FTTSA acknowledges the need for "environmental responsibility" it differs fundamentally from what would be regarded as an ecotourism certification scheme and leaves space for that void to be filled. Qualitour, for instance, does not regard FTTSA as competition for Heritage (McManus, 2004).

To date, FTTSA has awarded its mark to five accommodation establishments and ground operators (FTTSA, 2003a). Its objectives are relatively modest, aiming to award the trademark to thirty products by May 2005 and to attain a good geographic distribution of products, including a mix of rural, urban and peri-urban locations, of 'mainstream' and 'emerging' businesses and of product type" (Seif, 2004).

The government of the Seychelles has indicated that a national "eco-certification" scheme will become compulsory for all tourism establishments (Marengo, 2002; WTO, 2002b: 38).

Characteristics of certification schemes

Substantial effort has been expended in recent years on refining and defining the certification process, given the history of varying and less-than-rigorous implementations. Figure 1 shows a certification process that ideally should be common to all certification schemes.

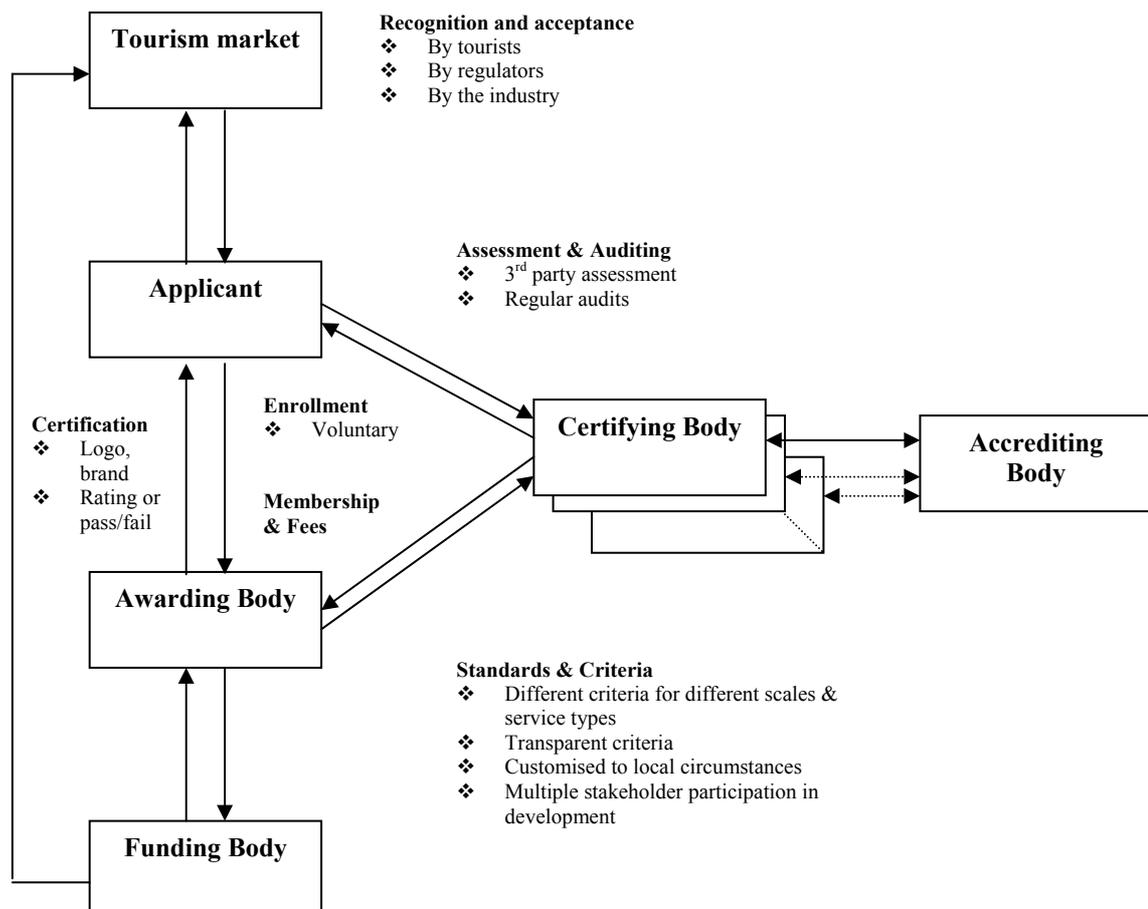


Figure 1 : The certification process. Adapted from Font (2002: 201) using Buckley (2002), Honey (2003) & McLaren (2002).

The following discussion, structured according to the model shown in Figure 1, is based on the work of Font (2002: 200-3), Buckley (2002: 186), Honey (2003) and Toth as quoted in McLaren (2002).

The funding body's goal is usually to influence the environmental performance of the tourism industry or industry sub-sector. Sometimes the funding body can be a private

company, where it and the awarding body are one and the same, as in the case of Qualitour and its Heritage programme. But more often the funding body will be an aid agency, a government agency or a non-governmental organisation (NGO), which is the case with FTTSA (FTTSA, 2003b), and one suspects with ESOK's Eco-Rating¹⁰ too. The cases where the funding body is an aid agency or NGO are considered economically unsustainable in the long term, and the challenge is to make certification schemes self-supporting. Enrolment and membership fees are considered a partial response to this problem. All the operational African schemes, except ecoQuest, require enrolment and membership fees (FTTSA, 2003b; McManus, 2004; Kepher-Gona, 2004).

In order to ensure credibility and thus widespread acceptance of the scheme, it is important that all parties are involved in development of criteria and standards, that criteria and procedures are transparent, that criteria are customised to reflect local circumstances as well as varying scales and types of tourism services, and that the product, service or business is assessed and audited by a third-party certifying body. However, the greater rigour and credibility conferred by a third-party certifier comes at a high cost that impacts negatively on the equity of the scheme. Often the certifier and awarding body will be one and the same – second-party assessment. None of the African schemes employ third-party certifiers, and each has developed or derived their own criteria and standards (FTTSA, 2003b; McManus, 2004; Kepher-Gona, 2004).

International accreditation of multiple certifying bodies (certifying the certifiers) has been proposed to ensure comparability amongst schemes, improve credibility, address market confusion and ensure uniform standards. At present no global accreditation body exists in tourism, although they are common in other industries. It should be mentioned that certification programmes are also often classified according to their geographic application: international, regional, national and subnational. According to Buckley (2002: 195) only Green Globe 21 may be regarded as truly international in scope.

¹⁰ ESOK acknowledges that the Eco-Rating scheme is partially funded by an external entity (Kepher-Gona, 2004).
Footnotes continues on next page.

Most often, enrolment is voluntary, a practice that is preferred by the industry, but there is a discernible movement towards compulsory enrolment and regulation that will be discussed later.

As certification is a market-driven mechanism, a critical success factor is the recognition of the ecolabel (logo, brand or seal) by tourists and the tourism industry, and increasingly by regulators. The ecolabel may be a rating where different labels signify different levels of achievement, or a single label that is awarded upon compliance with minimum standards.

In its groundbreaking report on tourism certification for the WWF-UK¹¹, Synergy (2000: 10-11) observed that certification may be conferred along a continuum of increasing likelihood of attaining sustainable tourism. At the unsustainable end of the continuum one finds certification for merely giving a commitment to improve practices. Certification for implementing a *process* (e.g. an environmental management system (EMS)) advances sustainability objectives more, while certification for meeting or exceeding environmental *performance* objectives is considered superior¹². Tourists and businesses alike must understand *what* is being certified in order for schemes to avoid confusion. The objectives and agendas of the initiators or sponsors of the scheme largely determine its methodology i.e. process or performance based (Honey & Rome, 2001: 23). Most certification schemes are either process-based or performance-based, but the hybrid model is expected to become the norm (Honey, 2003).

However, there is a further distinguishing factor amongst certification schemes, as alluded to earlier. Both process-based and performance-based schemes are more concerned with what a business does to minimise and manage the environmental *impacts* of its operations and how it does it – the “grey” aspects. Tourists, however, are often more concerned with the *quality* of natural resources in a destination,

Gona, 2004).

¹¹ Worldwide Fund for Nature – United Kingdom

¹² A company may achieve EMS certification by following the steps laid out in ISO14001, for example, but is only showing that it has conformed to its own stated environmental policy. By contrast, performance-based certification requires that specific performance levels are met or exceeded and “criteria make their attainment a prerequisite for certification”. (Synergy, 2000: 10).

whether its unspoilt, pristine, beautiful, peaceful, quiet, etc. – the “green” aspects (Mihalič, 2001: 68; Honey & Rome, 2001: 27; Buckley, 2001: 20; Buckley, 2002: 205). Blue Flag is an example that incorporates performance criteria and standards, requires environmental management systems of beach authorities *and* measures environmental quality (Honey, 2003). In order to address market demand, the experts contend that certification programmes will have to increasingly address tourists’ “green” concerns.

Certification and its stakeholders

Concepts in the “new tourism”, as Mowforth and Munt (2003: 94) refer to emerging types of tourism, are most often contested between those who study tourism, the academics, and those who operate the industry, the tour operators and service providers. The latter are often also ranged against conservationists and both could find themselves at odds with government officials. However, it appears to be the academics and certain interest groups that “own” certain definitions of tourism and certification (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 94).

As this constituency has largely advanced the idea of certification, it is unsurprising that certification, its applications and its outcomes are sharply contested amongst the same groups of protagonists.

In general terms, the stakeholders in tourism certification may be grouped as follows:

- ❖ the tourism industry representing the private sector and those who have an interest in promoting tourism
- ❖ governments and government agencies of the host countries
- ❖ host communities
- ❖ environmental groups, conservationists, conservation NGOs
- ❖ academics and consultants
- ❖ tourists or consumers.

The tourism industry

The industry's response to Agenda 21 has clearly positioned free trade, privatisation and government deregulation as necessary for sustainable development (Honey, 1999: 32). Industry associations promote self-regulation and oppose international or government regulation and as McKercher observes (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 184) such a diverse and unregulated industry, operating in a free market system, will continue to defy efforts to limit its expansion. Bendell and Font (2004) note that larger tourism companies, as represented by the WTTC, advocate "greater liberalisation of the tourism industry world-wide" to "help promote the sustainability of the industry"¹³.

It is commonly accepted now that the WTTC launched Green Globe¹⁴ mainly to forestall any attempts at regulation (Mowforth & Munt, 1998: 185), and Honey & Rome (2001: 22) confirm that the large players in the industry especially, embrace certification with a similar motivation. Large tourism interests have, furthermore, been known to pressurise governments and defer the implementation of certification efforts (Honey, 1999: 93).

In this regard it is perhaps instructive to note that although a significant number of certification schemes are led by the private sector (two-thirds are led by private tourism associations, NGOs and consultancies), and private concerns have financed a third of the schemes (WTO, 2002a), only 7% of schemes are aimed at tour operators (Font, 2003). And of these most are applicable to ecotourism ground operators and not the (large) outbound tour operators in the tourism generating countries of the developed world (Font, 2003). This could be because, as Epler Wood (2002: 135) observes, outbound tour operators realise that as service consumption is in different location from the market, there are too many suppliers globally to try and certify and it would be prohibitively expensive. Consequently, they believe that inbound tour operators should carry the certification burden

¹³ Such wording could be misinterpreted to mean, as some commentators charge, that organisations like the WTTC and WTO are rather in the business of sustaining tourism itself (Hunter, 2002:7).

¹⁴ Originally Green Globe 21 awarded its logo to businesses for simply exhibiting a *commitment* to employ sustainable practices. The WWF, acting on the findings of the Synergy report (2000) subsequently accused Green Globe 21 of facilitating "greenwashing" (WWF-UK, 2000).

It is doubtful whether many tourism companies view certification as a source of competitive advantage in the marketplace, although this is one of the bases on which certification has been promoted to the industry (certification, competitive advantage and branding will be dealt with later). Despite this the WTO recommended in its Final Report on the World Ecotourism Summit (2002b: 37) that certification should be industry-driven and financed by tourism operators because it can be used as a marketing tool and a potential source of competitive advantage.

There are undoubtedly companies who promote certification out of a genuine desire to achieve sustainability objectives and improve the industry's environmental performance. An example that is often quoted is the scheme operated by Touristik Union International (TUI), the largest outbound tour operator in Germany (Middleton & Hawkins, 1998: 193-195). Such large tour operators are able to enforce self-regulation throughout their value chain, even in host countries, by virtue of their sheer size and buying power. However, all tourism companies, large or small, are subject to the same immutable laws of the marketplace: they have to be profitable to survive and economic priorities will always triumph over social and environmental responsibilities.

Mowforth and Munt (2003: 184) quote a Tourism Concern/WWF study that highlights the apparent paradox of companies opposing regulation but simultaneously believing that national governments have (total) responsibility for tourism. Forsyth's survey of UK tourism companies (1997) suggests that they feel "powerless to introduce change" (such as self-regulation) partly because they believe that regulation is the ultimate responsibility of governments. The phenomenon is perhaps indicative of the diversity of opinions to be expected from a fragmented industry. Mowforth and Munt interpret this as characteristic of a need for "authorised regulation rather than voluntary self-regulation".

It is important to recognise that the tourism industry as relevant to tourism to the Third World, spans the North-South divide. Tourists from the First World consume tourism in the Third World; the market is remote from the place of consumption. Travel agents, outbound tour operators and carriers are located and operate out of the

developed world, while inbound tour operators, ground operators and destinations are located and operate in the developing world. It would be reasonable to assume that their respective approaches to certification (and regulation) would differ.

Governments and the public sector

Even though the tourism industry is dominated by the private sector, destinations, where ecotourism mostly takes place, are generally owned and managed by the public sector (Maccarrone-Eaglen & Font. 2002b). Perhaps this partially explains why governments play a significant role in certification schemes. The WTO (2002b) reports that governments lead 20 of the 59 “comprehensive certifications schemes”, another 18 have government involvement and that financial support from the sector is crucial to half of the schemes. Bendell and Font (2004) estimate that two-thirds of schemes would not survive, and many would be impossible to introduce in many countries, without government support. Government support for certification can range from a “hands-off” approach, through the creation of an enabling framework and providing incentives, to making certification mandatory (Maccarrone-Eaglen & Font. 2002a: 5-6).

In South Africa, for example, the government’s approach is to place emphasis on responsible practices “in the investment phase of new tourism developments”, partially through initiatives like FTTSA, rather than attempting to regulate the industry (Koch et al, 2002: 260).

A reason often advanced for governments’ interest in certification is the fact that it can help position a country - especially a less developed country – favourably in the global tourism market as a destination (Honey & Rome, 2001: 22; Buckley, 2002: 183) - certification as a market mechanism again. It is largely for this reason that the STSC feasibility report concludes that the STSC is likely to succeed in countries where no certification schemes exist, such as in most of the developing countries (Maccarrone-Eaglen & Font. 2002a: 2).

As Honey (1999: 87) asserts, however, the growth of ecotourism requires more, not less government. Yet the governments of developing countries’ role and authority are

diminishing as a result of decreasing income and lack of resources. Nevertheless, voices from these countries, such as Flores (2002), argue that public sector leadership and control is vital in certification efforts but that their immediate objectives should rather be to create awareness in and train local communities. The Seychelles government has stated that compulsory certification and compliance is essential in sensitive ecosystems such as theirs (Marengo, 2002). Even the WTO (2002b: 39) admits that there should be obligatory certification at least at regional and national levels and the Québec Declaration on Ecotourism (World Ecotourism Summit, 2002) recommended a regulatory framework as a necessity. Tourism's global impact is so extensive, its industry structure so complex and fragmented that only the public sector has the potential to resolve the issues and impose globally binding regulations. However, as in the case of industry, nations' economic self-interest often overrides other concerns (Perez-Salom, 2001).

Host communities

Third World¹⁵ critics regard tourism as the “new imperialism” or an “extension of colonialism” as it is largely the tourism industry in the developed world that determines the nature and scale of tourism to the Third World (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 50-54). As host communities are often marginalised and exploited it is argued that certification will make responsible forms of tourism, that should benefit local communities, more evident, measurable and accountable (WTO, 2003: 2). It could be a tool to gain or increase ownership in tourism developments for these communities and strengthen their hand in negotiations with developers, investors and managers of tourism facilities (Honey & Rome, 2001: 22).

However, it is questionable whether such benefits will accrue where certification is driven by private industry, and specifically tourism entities from the developed countries. Nor will the benefits be felt where local communities have not yet developed an awareness of sustainability and especially ecological sustainability.

¹⁵ Most ecotourism takes place in the “Third World”.

Certification schemes like FTTSA are geared towards the empowerment of host communities and are examples of “the linkages between tourism growth and social development” that developing countries seek to create (Koch et al, 2002: 238).

Environmental groups and NGOs

It should be self-evident that environmental groups and NGOs would wish that certification raises standards and improves practices in the tourism industry so that negative impacts on the environment are minimised, and that ecosystems are able to maintain their integrity over the long term. Furthermore, where certification helps educate and raises awareness amongst tourists, companies and host communities alike, they will support its implementation. It is surmised that this group is more concerned with the outcomes of certification and will endorse the means, whether mandatory regulation or voluntary self-regulation, that is more likely to achieve these outcomes. Managers of protected areas, however, would doubtless welcome more regulation.

Academics and consultants

Members of this group are the ones, often as members of NGOs, who have promoted certification as a means of combating “greenwash” in ecotourism. They have successfully piloted it onto the agendas of world tourism and environmental forums. In recent years there has been, and continues to be, an explosion of articles, papers and books on the subject.

Some of the more extreme forms of backlash, especially from the least developed countries and small tourism businesses in those countries, criticise them for creating an industry for themselves - for creating a field of study, consulting opportunities or positioning themselves as certifiers (*Planeta.com*, 2003). Most of the backlash relates, however, to the perceived ineffectiveness of certification as a marketing tool.

Mowforth and Munt (1998: 136, 139) obliquely criticise this group in their discussion of the “appeals to ... professionalism” as one method that is “used to define and legitimise contemporary tourism”. They point out that these professionals, mostly

from the developed world, have positioned themselves, through membership of organisations like TIES, Tourism Concern, the Campaign for Environmentally Responsible Tourism (CERT), WWF, IUCN, etc., to be the “opinion formers, the teachers, the advisers, and even the ones who take decisions” on how to do ecotourism “right”.

Nevertheless, it should be assumed that concern for the environment and the impacts of tourism on it, is held dear by the members of this stakeholder group, albeit informed by developed world values.

Tourists and the demand-for-certification issue

It has been established that tourists (or consumers) are the main targets of certification schemes. In order for certification to influence tourists in the way that they select their holidays and holiday products, there has to be awareness and demand.

Given the immaturity of the certification industry and the proliferation of ecolabels, it follows that tourist awareness of certification will be negligible. This fact is simply emphasised by the admission by one of NEAP’s proponents (Crabtree, 2003) that consumer recognition of NEAP’s ecolabels, widely regarded as a model, is non-existent. However, a matter for real concern is the apparent lack of demand for certified tourism products by the consumer. A common reprise in certification literature is the absence of evidence in support of certification as a means of influencing consumer selection of tourism products (Epler Wood, 2003; Buckley, 2002: 183; Font, 2004: 14-15; Synergy, 2000).

Often the lack of demand is blamed on confusion amongst tourists caused by the proliferation of certification schemes (Toth as quoted in McLaren, 2002; Synergy, 2000; Maccarrone-Eaglen & Font. 2002b). Proponents of certification quote consumer surveys that indicate that tourists *do* place importance on environmental responsibility (Koch et al, 2002: 252; Stueve, Cook & Drew, 2002). However, there are more studies that suggest that even though many tourists may exhibit environmental concern and are prepared to pay a premium for environmentally responsible products when their attitudes are surveyed, it does not necessarily

translate into changes in behaviour (Font, 2004: 14-15; Sharpley, 2000: 14; Mihalič, 2002: 59; Synergy, 2000: 5). Buckley (2002: 185) speculates that there are three reasons for this gap between concern and buying behaviour: “environmental concerns and priorities may differ amongst countries and socio-economic groups”; public concern about tourism impacts is lower than concern for impacts of traditional consumptive industries, like logging; relevant and comparative environmental information about competing products is difficult to obtain and “less clearcut” than for manufacturing industries. Sharpley (2002: 42) points out too that often the attitude surveys that are quoted are of a general nature and not specific to tourism.

Perhaps the ultimate indictment of the certification industry in its current form is Font and Tribe’s (2002: 93) statement that few certification schemes consider how they will impact behaviour because the “organisers” may not be able to reach and do not understand, the market. In Africa all the schemes are young and have not yet collected sufficient empirical data about their influence on buying behaviour (McManus, 2004; Seif, 2004; Kepher-Gona, 2004), although FTTSA does have a monitoring and evaluation plan that will measure certain indicators via the travel trade (Seif, 2004). EcoQuest is perhaps in a unique position as the label is operated by a business that sells directly to the tourist and is therefore in a position to measure the effect. It may be assumed that third-party schemes will be unlikely to easily obtain empirical sales and survey data from the industry.

Research shows that for many a developed world tourist the traditional criteria for selecting a holiday, namely, price or value for money, the destination, the quality of facilities and the weather, are still the most important (Font, 2002: 203; Synergy, 2000: 5). An online survey of tourists who selected South African game lodges to visit, rated the location of the lodges within a specific protected area or ecozone, the facilities and experience offered by the property, and price as far more significant than the ecoQuest ecolabel, although the inherent shortcomings of this ecolabel should be kept in mind in interpreting the results (Appendix A).

Even when the environment does feature as a criterion, Lübbert’s research with German tourists (2002: 79-80) shows that they are more concerned with the current environmental quality of the destination than with any management processes or

practices that may have contributed to or maintain that quality. Surveyed tourism companies in the UK have indicated that they are pessimistic about market demand for sustainable tourism without the “redefinition of ‘sustainable’ as ‘quality’” (Forsyth, 1997), thereby explaining why certification schemes are paying more attention to environmental quality from tourists’ perspective.

In the light of the above, it is perhaps not surprising when a consultant like Epler Wood (2003), a member of TIES, admits that “certification is not a marketing tool”.

Certification as a source of competitive advantage

As has been established, certification is regarded as a market mechanism not only because of its hoped for influence on tourist demand, but also because it can be a source of competitive advantage to firms whose products are certified. The validity of this latter assertion will be examined using Michael Porter’s Five Forces Model (1985), which is still regarded as a useful model for understanding competitive strategy.

Porter identifies two fundamental determinants of a firm’s profitability:

1. industry attractiveness and
2. a firm’s relative competitive position within its industry.

An industry’s inherent attractiveness is in turn determined by the collective strength of five competitive forces at play in that industry (Porter, 1985: 4-5) - its structure - namely:

1. the threat of entry of new competitors
2. the threat of substitute products or services
3. the bargaining powers of buyers
4. the bargaining powers of suppliers
5. the rivalry among the existing competitors.

If most or all of these forces are powerful, the industry is unattractive to companies.

However, “a firm is usually not a prisoner of its industry’s structure” and can influence the five forces through adopting competitive strategies, thereby changing

the industry structure and/or improving its competitive position within the industry (Porter, 1985: 2, 7). There are three generic strategies for achieving sustainable¹⁶ competitive advantage according to Porter (1985: 11-17), namely: cost leadership; differentiation; and focus on a target segment using cost leadership or differentiation in the target segment.

If certification is a source of competitive advantage then its adoption as part of a competitive strategy in the tourism industry, or in one of the many target segments of the industry, should influence industry or segment structure, or competitive position positively for the adoptee. The following discussion involves much simplification of the tourism industry's complex structure(s) and value chain(s) and is by no means exhaustive. But it does highlight some issues about the assertion that certification is a source of competitive advantage.

In mass tourism certification, resource efficiency, which can lead to cost leadership, is often part of the value proposition (Honey & Rome, 2001: 33), as is the case with Qualitour's Heritage programme (McManus, 2004). However, as Lynton Burger¹⁷ (2004), an environmental consultant to corporations observes, the better firms do not need certification to show them how to save costs. Furthermore, tourism certification such as Green Globe 21 (Synergy, 2000: 45) can be expensive. In an industry such as tourism where profit margins are paper-thin, it can be concluded that cost leadership is often not a viable strategy for sustainable competitive advantage. Consequently, strategies of differentiation and focus on differentiation in a target segment would more likely be preferred competitive strategies for companies in tourism, especially ecotourism.

As this paper largely focuses on ecotourism, which most often involves travel from the developed world to the Third World, it is also important to broadly distinguish in the discussion between members of the tourism value chain that are located in the tourism-generating countries of the developed world, and entities that are located in destination countries. The former would include outbound tour operators and large

¹⁶ Here "sustainable" refers solely to commercial sustainability.

¹⁷ Burger also helped design ecoQuest and completed an MBA dissertation on environmental management and competitive strategy in tourism (1999).

transport carriers. The latter would comprise inbound tour operators and service providers in the destination like establishments, ground operators, guides, members of the informal economy, etc. As Mowforth and Munt (2003: 171) point out, the former group would comprise larger businesses and would be able to exercise more power and control, and apply more capital. These facts would suggest that the two groups might exhibit different approaches to competitive strategy, and consequently to certification. For the purposes of the discussion, the former group will be referred to as the “Northern firms”, and the latter as the “Southern firms”.

Buckley (2002: 202) has observed that ecolabels are likely to be insignificant in consumer choice if hardly any products are labelled (which is generally the case at present, especially in Africa) or secondly, if almost *all* products are labelled. Private firms understand well the dangers of the latter argument, especially where differentiation is the chosen strategy. They would want to create barriers to entry to the industry for competitors. Southern firms view certification initiatives that emanate from Northern countries as “eco-protectionism”, as attempts to position Northern firms competitively at the expense of their Southern counterparts (Sasidharan et al, 2002: 170; Honey & Rome, 2001: 66). However, the proponents of ecolabelling in wanting certification to fulfil its promise of changing environmental practice would prefer all products to be certified, or see those that are not, be expelled by market forces, with the same ultimate result of saturated certification. Such a result runs counter to the logic of differentiation strategies.

On the other hand, regulatory requirements for certification (to operate in a given destination, for instance) would be the ultimate barrier to entry and may explain why Northern firms have proposed voluntary, self-regulation as a means of forestalling government regulation (Mowforth & Munt, 1998: 185), thereby maintaining their options to operate in the South. Southern firms, conversely, may welcome regulation that favours local firms through regulation of carrying capacity, for instance. But such steps may be countered by Northern governments in terms of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) which guarantees the right of new firms to enter a market (Bendell & Font, 2004), thereby promoting the free trade perspective. The debate about GATS and certification is an emerging debate that is laced with much uncertainty at present.

Another of Porter's five forces where North and South may differ in their approach to certification, is the bargaining power of suppliers. In this context the suppliers would be the Southern firms. The power of suppliers is weak because of their dependence on Northern markets, their diversity and small size¹⁸. They may, however, choose to use certification to increase their bargaining power with Northern firms by reducing the latter's ability to select substitute products, for example. Such an approach would once again require mandatory certification in the destination, however.

The issue of the threat of substitute products and more specifically "pseudo substitute" or "greenwash" products, has been one of the driving forces behind certification initiatives, as discussed above. The paradox, however, is that firms, especially in the South, will resist self-regulating certification because it places them at a disadvantage relative to the so-called "free riders" - those firms that do not voluntarily comply (Forsyth, 1997). Once again, as Forsyth (1997) points out, government intervention or legislation may be required to prevent "free riders".

As has been discussed above as well, Southern governments view certification as a potential differentiator between nations' tourism offerings (Honey & Rome, 2001: 22; Buckley, 2002: 183). However, buyers, whether they are Northern firms in global tourism distribution networks, or First World consumers who are increasingly directly accessible via the internet, hold all the bargaining power. Porter (1985: 14) holds that a successful differentiation strategy means that a firm (or nation) is "rewarded for its uniqueness with a premium price". Differentiation, and certification, cost more and if buyers are price sensitive or able to easily switch to cheaper substitute products, then the strategy fails. As Lübbert (2002: 84) has found, German tourists already believe that ecolabelled products are more expensive. The previous discussion about demand suggests that ecolabels are insufficient differentiators to influence consumer buying behaviour.

Competitive rivalry within the industry or a segment can be countered through strong brands and brand identity. However, certification can be considered the opposite of

¹⁸ Honey & Rome (2001) estimate that 97% of the global tourism industry consists of small and
Footnotes continues on next page.

differentiation if many or most products in an industry or segment share an ecolabel that represents a “lowest common denominator” of standards. In such a case certification would imply commoditisation of products, anathema for differentiation strategies. Koch et al (2002: 246) in recounting large hotel groups’ resistance to the previous South African quality grading system, note that these groups placed more value on the effectiveness of their own brands in the marketplace. Burger (2004) has experienced a similar phenomenon in other industry sectors where corporations actually downplay their use of environmental management system certification in favour of their brands. As he asks rhetorically: “if ‘green’ is a differentiator, why share it with the world?”. There is no reason to think that successful tourism companies have not come to similar conclusions.

This discussion has shown that the premise that certification is a source of competitive advantage to ecotourism companies is fraught with problems. Different approaches to using certification for competitive advantage, especially as part of a differentiation strategy, will be obtained depending on the source of certification initiatives and to whom certification is applied. The different approaches are informed by the differing imperatives of governments and companies in the First and Third Worlds, and to a lesser extent, of large businesses and SMEs.

Conclusions and recommendations

It has been shown that tourism certification, whether of the mass, sustainable or ecotourism varieties, has thus far failed in its main function as a market mechanism to limit the environmental impacts of or improve environmental practice in the industry. It does not significantly influence tourists’ buying behaviour, even though tourists may exhibit environmental concern in other spheres of their lives, and it is not regarded as a source of competitive advantage by tourism companies in an industry where differentiation is usually the preferred competitive strategy.

Nevertheless, much effort, energy and money continue to be expended on literature, reports, workshops, conferences and practice about the subject. At present there are

two concurrent streams of effort: one sees the harmonisation of practices and consolidation of disparate schemes through alliances; the other involves the creation of the STSC as a global accreditation organisation (Honey, 2003). It is perhaps still the wish of certification proponents that larger, globally recognised certification programmes will fulfil their potential as effective market mechanisms. However, the STSC may still be resisted by the industry as it suggests regulation (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 198).

If certification is to be an effective marketing mechanism, then it should become a tool of real differentiation. As Sharpley (2001: 52) observes, it is probably impossible to segment tourists by their level of environmental concern and it is consequently difficult to target specific ecolabels at traditional market segments. He proposes that ecolabels be specifically developed to target segments based on various types of consumption practices (Sharpley, 2001: 53-54). For instance “experiential” tourists may be more receptive to ecolabels that emphasise the environmental quality of a destination, as suggested by Lübbert (2001: 83) and Buckley (2002: 205). No doubt various initiators of ecolabels have already realised this and it may explain the quantity and diversity of ecolabels already in existence and their predicted growth in numbers. Private companies will almost certainly see the competitive advantage of developing their own ecolabels as company brands, rather than join a scheme that effectively commoditises their offering.

Should certification schemes never become effective market mechanisms, are they then destined to be imperfect tools in a suite of sustainability tools, as Honey and Rome have suggested (2001: 74), or merely a “blueprint” for companies to voluntarily and partially improve practices and standards by (Crabtree, 2003)? An alternative application of certification is as a regulatory tool, where government agencies restrict an ecolabel’s use (Buckley, 2002: 188). Buckley (2001: 26) has argued that “it makes better sense for the tourism industry to lobby for effective environmental legislation than to pursue ecolabel schemes as a substitute” because, unlike in other industries, environmental legislation in the destination applies equally to local and foreign companies and therefore does not place either group at a competitive disadvantage.

Porter and Van der Linde (1995) in trying to address the “ecology versus economy” stand-off, assert that regulation is necessary to create pressure for companies to innovate; to raise the likelihood that such innovations will be environmentally friendly; and to create demand for environmental improvement until companies and customers are able to perceive and measure environmental impacts better.

Governments in destination countries can make certification mandatory by either refusing to licence a particular activity unless companies comply with a (voluntary) standard, or by requiring all companies to comply with a (voluntary) standard (Maccarrone-Eaglen & Font. 2002a: 6). Some African countries, such as the Seychelles, intend making certification compulsory, as has been noted above. Even some tourism businesses in Africa, such as certain game lodges, appear to support compulsory certification (Pieterse, 2003: 65).

As most African countries (South Africa is a prime example) have made biodiversity conservation financially dependent on successful ecotourism, their governments cannot abdicate responsibility to regulate ecotourism activities in their sensitive protected and wilderness areas. Certification could be the ideal vehicle. However, issues of capacity and finance, local participation, conditions and needs will have to be taken into account and will present challenges. To this end it would be advisable for African governments and industry not to re-invent the wheel, but to build on the STSC model and adopt global best practices, while customising certification schemes for local conditions and requirements.

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Appendix A: The ecoQuest survey of tourists' motivations for the selection of game lodge(s) in South Africa

EcoQuest is an ecolabel operated by a South African inbound tour broker, ecoAfrica Travel, on the ecoafrica.com website. The ecolabel is awarded to game lodge properties that have voluntarily submitted answers to a questionnaire regarding their environmental management practices, environmental quality features and local community involvement. The lodges' responses are processed by an environmental consultancy and published on the website in the context of the property's promotional information. The scheme has operated since August 2000. Of the 61 properties on the site, 11 have been awarded the label.

Web visitors initiate a booking process for a game lodge by submitting a request form where they select the lodge(s) they are interested in. Lodges that participate in ecoQuest are clearly marked. Immediately following successful submission of the request form, a quick, optional survey form that seeks their reasons for the specific selection(s), is presented to the requester. Each survey form can therefore be correlated with a valid booking request form.

Survey results cover the period 1 September 2003 to 2 February 2004, during which 170 valid survey forms were submitted, representing a response rate of 80%. The results are as follows:

The requester chose the lodge(s) because:	Agree	Strongly Agree
The price is right	39%	14%
The lodge is located in a specific national park, nature reserve or ecozone	45%	32%
The ecoQuest feature had an influence	31%	6%
The lodge is a well-known or admired brand	21%	10%
Of a referral by somebody who is trusted	16%	15%
Of the specific facilities, wildlife or experiences offered by the lodge	36%	25%
The lodge is known to the requester or has been visited before	9%	9%

The results indicate that on balance buying decisions in this wildlife tourism sector are based on location of the property, the experiences and facilities on offer, and to a

lesser extent, price. In only 5 out of 11 instances where ecoQuest was rated highly significant, was it the only highly significant criterion.

Surprisingly, the power of a lodge brand was rated to be of similar significance to ecoQuest's, and further analysis of these two factors indicated that they are mutually exclusive in terms of significance in the same survey responses, i.e. where ecoQuest was significant, brand was not, and vice versa. A similar relationship is revealed between ecoQuest and price, yet far stronger correlations were revealed between location and ecoQuest, and facilities/experience and ecoQuest.

Earlier analysis of sales data for these lodges via the site has shown no preference, in terms of sales value, for the labelled lodges.

These results should not be considered without recognising the inherent shortcomings in the ecoQuest scheme. EcoQuest essentially reflects “informative environmental self-declaration claims” making it Type II ecolabelling as defined by the ISO. As such there is no assessment or audit, independent or otherwise. Consequently, although it allows properties to voluntarily make claims about their environmental management practices in a structured manner and although these responses are sometimes queried and clarified by the environmental consultancy prior to publication, the label will lack a certain amount of credibility and may well be ignored by tourists. Secondly, ecoQuest has no brand profile outside the context of the ecoafrica.com website. Thirdly, a survey of 8 lodges in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve, adjacent to the Kruger National Park, by Pieterse (2003: 52), revealed very low recognition by lodge managers or owners of ecoQuest relative to FTTSA and Qualitour's Heritage, although 3 lodges in this reserve are ecoQuest lodges.

Source: The author, who is the chairman of ecoAfrica Travel.