

# Costs of and barriers to sustainability assessments in tourism destinations

## Literature review WP1.2

SASTDes – Smart Assessment Sustainable Tourist Destinations

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Project SASTDes

Project SASTDes aims to resolve key issues in the sustainability assessment process of tourism destinations, with the objective to reduce the costs of assessments both in time and money, and to use the results of assessments for destination branding and marketing. The project's core research question is: *'How can sustainability assessments effectively and efficiently contribute to the sustainable development of tourism destinations and tourism products?'*

The large growth in tourism not only brings economic progress, but also causes negative effects on destinations and beyond, environmentally, socio-culturally and economically. The tourism industry has responded with a number of sustainable tourism initiatives. A much used method is to subject tourism products to a sustainability assessment, frequently leading to a label. The goal here is to motivate destinations to perform more sustainably and to stimulate consumers to make more sustainable touristic choices. Until now, participation in sustainability assessments in tourism is limited. Hence the effect on consumer choices is also small.

Most assessments suffer from limited participation and interest from tourism businesses. Conducting assessments is too costly for them, costing too much time, and the added value is unclear to them. Moreover, the assessments hardly lead to behavior changes among the relatively small group of end users interested in sustainability. Finally there is a problem with the content of the assessments: the impacts from transport to destinations is not accounted for, whereas these are often of great importance when determining the environmental impact of tourism trips.

## 1.2 Objective for this report

The objective of Work Package (WP) 1 is to analyse specific barriers to participation in sustainability assessments such as that of Green Destinations (GD)<sup>1</sup>. This report is a literature review into these barriers, amongst others, and deliverable of project activity 1.2. It provides an overview of the reasons why businesses and organisations in tourism, and beyond, participate (or not) in assessments and which barriers and costs they perceive. Next to the literature review, a number of GD destinations will be analysed and measured as to such costs and barriers. This step will be supported by a number of interviews with the relevant persons at these destinations.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://greendestinations.org/> for more information on GD. The GD Standard and Reporting System is explained in this document: <http://greendestinations.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Green-Destinations-Standard-1.4.2.pdf>

## 2 Literature review

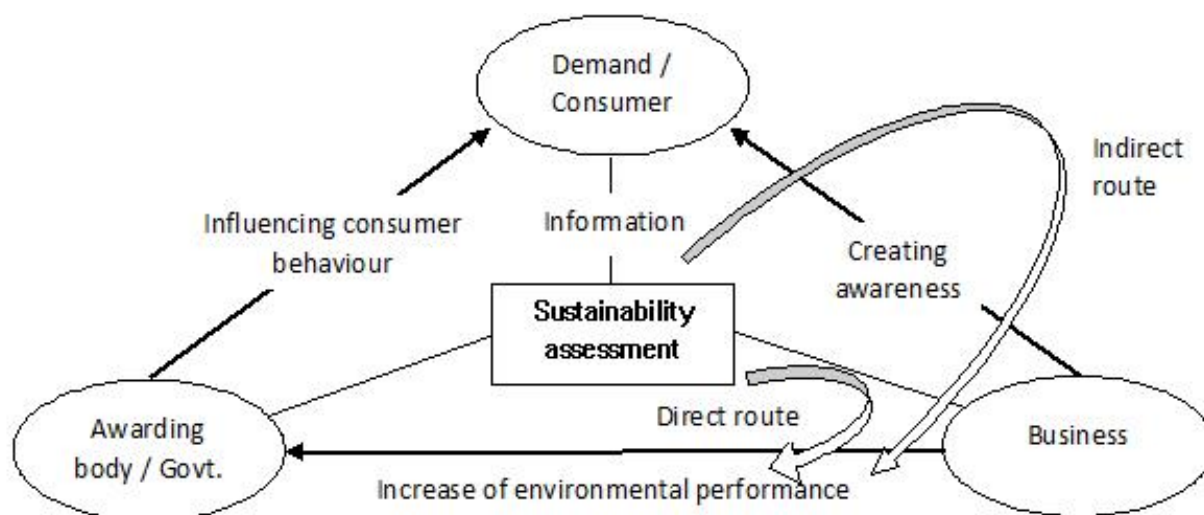
### 2.1 Sustainability assessments in tourism

Note that we use the term 'assessments' to cover eco-labels, eco-certification schemes, environmental management schemes, quality schemes, et cetera.

#### 2.1.1 History and definition

The development of ecolabels in the tourism industry responded to the need to regulate the green message by identifying those tourism organizations that actively promote tourism that does not damage the environment (Mihalic, 1996, 1999, in Font & Buckley, 2001). The United Nations Environment Programme once stated that ecolabels are "one of the most promising voluntary approaches [...] to attain high environmental standards" (UNEP, 1998, p. 1). Ecolabels are methods to standardize the promotion of environmental claims by following compliance to set criteria, generally based on third party, impartial verification, usually by governments or non-profit organizations (Font & Buckley, 2001). The definition of eco-labels by Mihalic (1998: 33, in Kozak & Nield, 2004) is of "an effective market-based instrument, capable of reducing the negative impacts of tourism products, production methods, services and processes on the environment, whilst at the same time improving the environmental quality of tourism places". Ayuso (2007, p. 156) notes that, "at a conceptual level, ecolabels and EMSs [environmental management schemes] are the only instruments that guarantee an improvement of the company's environmental (and sustainable) performance beyond strategic commitment, isolated practices, and monitoring mechanisms." In many sectors, eco-labels and certifications are used to influence consumer choices, causing consumers to shift preferences to purchase more sustainable products, which helps organisations to produce these products more sustainably; an indirect route towards product improvement. As a more direct route, eco-labels, certifications and particularly environmental management systems may help organisations and enterprises to work in a more sustainable way and change their processes toward sustainability (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Functions and effects of sustainability assessments



Source: adapted from Lübbert (1999, p. 125)

Quality assessments in tourism go back to at least 1953, with the foundation of the „Qualitätsstandards für die Prädikatisierung von Kurorten, Erholungsorten und Heilbrunnen“ in Germany. But only in the late 1980s assessments that many would call eco-labels started, with the Blue Flag (for clean beaches) in 1987. The Blaue Schwalbe was the first eco-label for tourist accommodations, starting in 1989. International labels Green Globe and GreenKey started in 1994 (Strasdas, Balas, & Zeppenfeld, 2016). In tourism, there are now at least 120 ecolabels (Gössling & Buckley, 2016), and over 150 quality labels (Núñez & Hamele, 2016). Worldwide, Ecolabel

Index, a global directory of ecolabels, has tracked 465 ecolabels in 199 countries and 25 industry sectors as of November 2017 (Ecolabel Index, 2017). Tourism assessments vary from ones for tour operators and travel agents (e.g. Travelife), to accommodations (e.g. GreenKey), to beaches (Blue Flag) and destinations (e.g. Green Destinations). The geographical scope varies from international (e.g. Golden Globe, Green Destinations), to regional (e.g. European Blue Flag), national, and sub-national. During the last decade the call to create more unity in the 'tourism label jungle' grew, resulting in the development of several projects, such as the European ETIS (European Tourism Indicators System for sustainable destination management) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) (Buckley, 2012).

In Dutch tourism, a number of sustainability assessments is being used. Some of the most important, i.e. most applied ones are: GreenKey, international label for sustainable businesses in the recreation and leisure sector (ca. 400 certified Dutch businesses; 2500 worldwide); Blue Flag (3500 destinations for swimming, as well as harbours, in 30 countries); Natuurkampeerterreinen (132); Travelife for Tour Operators and Travel Agents (19 in NL and worldwide about 1000).

### 2.1.2 Development process of sustainability assessments

Buckley (2002) provides insight on the evolution of ecolabels and quality schemes. He sees a common pattern in a wide range of sectors, illustrating the social processes behind them. He describes the chronological order of major components or steps in an early phase as follows:

- 1) universities, nongovernment organizations, or private research groups identify an environmental issue as significant.
- 2) mass media coverage and public debate raises public, industry, and government awareness of the issue.
- 3) if sufficient consensus and public concern is generated, the issue may reach the agendas of government policymakers and corporate board members.
- 4) individual companies start to ecolabel products in relation to the issue concerned.
- 5) other companies follow suit, perceiving a market advantage with no attendant costs.
- 6) companies commonly charge a premium for ecolabeled products.
- 7) individual consumers, followed by watchdog organizations, complain that the label is meaningless and that people are being duped.
- 8) legal actions for misleading advertising may be brought under fair trading legislation.
- 9) if such actions are brought successfully, the next steps are accelerated; but they may also occur without any legal action [presumably in some cases labels will be abandoned].
- 10) either government or industry or both act to formalize the meaning and use of the ecolabel. (Buckley, 2002, pp. 187-188)

At this point, Buckley (2002) sees at least two essentially different paths, with often the same end result. The first path is that government agencies act to define the meaning of the ecolabel and restrict its use. This may happen in various ways. Broadly, either the government may prohibit particular actions except for individuals or companies which have met legislatively defined procedural and/or substantive criteria, described by means of an ecolabel. Alternatively, the government may simply restrict the use of a particular ecolabel, e.g., by establishing a legislative standard<sup>2</sup>. For example, in many countries there are national standards for ecolabels on manufactured consumer goods. Alternatively, use of the ecolabel may be formalized by a private sector organization, either by co-opting an existing term or by establishing a new label related to an existing public concern. There are two main reasons why industry associations or other groups of private companies establish ecolabel schemes. The first is to forestall or delay government intervention, potentially more restrictive. The second is to provide a market advantage for the particular companies which belong to the ecolabel scheme, or those which operate it.

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<sup>2</sup> Something like this happened in 2015, when the Dutch government did not allow the Dutch tour operator sector to implement a carbon label inspired on the EU energy label, as the latter was meant for products only, and tour operator packages were seen as a service.

### 2.1.3 Types

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has identified three types of environmental labelling (Golden et al., 2010; ISO, 2012):

- **Type I - environmental labelling:** The “classic” ecolabelling schemes, i.e. voluntary, multiple-criteria-based, third-party programs that award a license, mark or logo based on the fulfilment of a set of criteria, and authorize the use of environmental labels on products indicating overall environmental preference of a product within a particular product category based on life cycle.
- **Type II - self-declared environmental claims:** (Informative) environmental claims which were made by manufacturers and businesses, and could be seen as being “self-declared”
- **Type III - environmental declarations:** Voluntary programs that provide formalized sets of (quantified) environmental data describing the environmental aspects of a product, under pre-set categories of parameters set by a qualified third party and based on lifecycle assessment, and verified by that or another qualified third party

### 2.1.4 Issues and limitations

#### *Market penetration*

While 15 years ago, Buckley wrote that “few tourists routinely search for ecolabels in product purchasing decisions” (Buckley, 2002, p. 203), more recent evidence shows that these labels still only interest a very small group of tourists and do not have a big impact on general tourist demand (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016). Moreover, they hardly lead to behavioural change among this minority (Gössling & Buckley, 2016). In a Dutch consumer research, tourism ecolabel use was 4% at the most (Eijgelaar, Nawijn, Barten, Okuhn, & Dijkstra, 2016). One reason might be that in most countries, they simply do not have a large market coverage. For instance, for Germany, Strasdas et al. (2016) estimate the share of German accommodations with an ecolabel at around 5%, with market penetration higher for nature parks and golf courses, but much lower for tour operators, travel agencies and tourism destinations (see also 2.1.4). Ayuso (2007) mentions 1.5% for Spain’s accommodations, albeit for 2004. Hotel booking site bookdifferent.com works with 22 quality tourism ecolabels, and less than 1% of all their 1.1 million accommodations carry on or more of these labels (Bookdifferent, 2018). Strasdas et al. (2016) also found that the bulk of certified enterprises are of small and medium size, greatly exceeding those of certified tourism corporations or large hotels.

#### *Communication and consumers*

Whereas energy labels are quite effective in a sector like the white goods (Michel, Attali, & Bush, 2015), this does not appear to be the case in tourism. Some studies do mention apparent positive effects, for example of the Blue Flag on foreign visitor numbers (Capacci, Scrocu, & Vici, 2014), but these reports are few. The energy label for white goods works well because there is only one label, and because it delivers a direct (financial) advantage for consumers. For tourists, a multitude of labels exists, and the consumer advantage is not made clear. Tourism stakeholders taking action on sustainability often find it difficult to communicate about this and about consumer advantages (Font, Elgammal, & Lamond, 2016; Villarino & Font, 2015), and there is still little knowledge about how to communicate sustainability actions more convincingly. See further under section 2.3.

#### *Indicators*

A frequently heard limitation of many sustainability assessments is the measurability and applicability of criteria in practice. Quantitative indicators do not always provide the full picture and qualitative ones are often vague (Font & Harris, 2004). Many assessments focus on management processes instead of performance or quality (Buckley, 2012), whereas tourists place more importance on the latter, as those affect them and their holiday experience directly (Lübbert, 1999; see also 2.3).

#### *Destination perspective*

A next point of critique is the fact that nearly all assessments in tourism analyse sustainability from a local/destination perspective, not taking environmental impacts of tourism transport to the destination, amongst others, into account (Buckley, 2004). Those impacts vary widely depending on distance travelled and transport mode used (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2015), and can easily exceed local external costs (Peeters, Szimba, & Duijnvisveld, 2007). If assessments seriously want to contribute to large-scale sustainable development of tourism, regional and global impacts need to be taken into account (Haaland & Aas, 2010).

### 2.1.5 Analyses of sustainable tourism assessment schemes

A number of reports and articles provide deeper analyses and overviews of sustainable tourism assessment schemes. Here, we list some of their conclusions.

Strasdas et al. (2016) have provided an overview and initial assessment of certification schemes for sustainable tourism in Germany. Their quality assessment focused on the range, depth and degree of detail of certification criteria as well as on the schemes' transparency, credibility and their actual impacts. Experts and stakeholders were asked to give their own opinions and discuss how sustainable tourism certification can be improved. We include their executive summary in Table 1, due to its high relevance for the SASTDes project. We note that this analysis did not include Green Destinations. Destination assessments included were: Europarc-Charta, Prädikatisierung Kurorte, , Qualitätsoffensive Naturparke, Region Wanderbares Deutschland, and TourCert (Nachhaltigkeitscheck Baden-Württemberg).

Table 1: Main outcomes assessment of certification schemes for sustainable tourism in Germany

<p><b>Inventory results</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. In Germany there are 33 certificates offering 43 different certification schemes that award a broad range of tourism businesses and organisations for their sustainability or environmental performance to various degrees. The majority of the certification systems are for accommodation.</li><li>2. Some certificates such as the Blue Flag or the state recognition of health resort towns have been around for several decades, but the majority was created after the year 2000.</li><li>3. In total, at least 4,360 businesses or organisations are currently certified, having been awarded at least 4,862 certificates. This figure is higher than previous estimations, even when taking into account that a large proportion of the certificates is segment-specific (<i>Wanderbares Deutschland</i>, a quality label for hiking tourism, and the partners of <i>Nationale Naturlandschaften</i>, a Europarc initiative).</li><li>4. The number of certified small and medium enterprises greatly exceeds those of certified tourism corporations or large hotels.</li><li>5. The degree of market penetration in the hospitality sector is estimated to be up to 5% of all companies. It is higher for nature parks and for golf courses, but extremely low for tour operators, travel agencies and tourism destinations.</li><li>6. There is a broad range of organisations offering certification. Their organisational structures comprise for-profit companies and tourism associations as well as governmental institutions and non-profit NGOs.</li><li>7. On average, certification organisations in Germany have awarded only slightly over 50 certified members or awardees (median). Eleven have awarded over 100 certificates, and only three over 250.</li><li>8. There are no publicly available reports on the financial situation of certification organisations. Thus, only general assumptions can be made.</li></ol> <p><b>Results of the quality assessment</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The majority of the analysed certification systems are classical environmental labels with a focus on ecological criteria.</li><li>2. Only one tenth of the schemes cover all sustainability dimensions in a balanced way. The social component in particular is underrepresented.</li><li>3. Granting a label is almost always subject to fulfilling certain minimum performance criteria. However, this is rarely coupled with the obligation to establish the necessary management structures and processes.</li><li>4. The certification organisations use different compulsory criteria. There are no general patterns under what conditions sustainable tourism labels are being granted.</li><li>5. A continuous performance improvement is required by about half of the systems.</li><li>6. The majority of certification systems use independent auditing methods. Overall, the verification procedures of most systems can be regarded as credible. Only one tenth has insufficient procedures (desk assessment without verification and validation).</li><li>7. Overall, one third of the assessed certification systems show clear weaknesses regarding certain aspects, whereas five schemes can be regarded as excellent due to their content and structures.</li><li>8. So far, only two schemes have been formally evaluated and recognized by the GSTC.</li></ol>
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### **Analysis of the impacts of certification**

1. There are no benchmarking systems that would allow to compare the sustainability performance of certified companies/organisations with those that are not certified. According to certified businesses, the certification process has resulted in an enhanced sustainability performance and certain advantages for themselves. However, the positive effects are reported to be minor.
2. An improved sustainability performance could be observed mainly in internal management and sometimes through reduced energy and resource consumption as well as through more local procurement. Advantages for the certified businesses were mostly an improved image, to a lesser degree cost savings or increased demand.
3. Nevertheless, the majority of the surveyed companies/organisations was satisfied with their certification system and would like to get recertified. They prefer systems that “fit” their organisation. The main reasons to get certified are reported to be a sense of responsibility for the environment as well as the expectation to gain reputational benefits and achieve a better quality. That means that both societal considerations and self-interest play a role.
4. Less ambitious certification systems that focus on a narrow range of criteria, especially in the nature tourism segment, appear to be more successful in terms of market penetration than those who have higher aspirations to achieve sustainability in a broader sense.
5. The interviewed experts and stakeholders share the view that certification has had limited effects regarding the sustainable development of tourism in Germany. However, they concur that certification is indispensable as a measurement and orientation tool.

### **Possible solutions**

1. A high quality of certification systems as well as transparency and credibility are regarded as important by all experts and stakeholders. Exceptions should only be allowed initially in order to make it easier for businesses/organisations to gain access to certification.
2. However, there does not appear to be a clear consensus on how high-quality sustainability certificates can be made more effective in the marketplace. As a tendency, environmental and social organisations demand more government intervention whereas most tourism associations reject it.
3. A government-backed accreditation of certification systems, based on an obligatory minimum standard, does not seem to be realistic in the near future. However, as a compromise and with the support of the federal government, a non-binding standard for the certification of sustainable tourism companies could be developed, similarly to the recently developed standard for sustainable destinations.
1. 4. As supporting strategies, all stakeholders were in favour of communication and awareness-raising measures in order to better reach businesses and customers that are inclined to sustainability. A clear quality standard for certificates would be a precondition for this.

Source: Strasdas et al. (2016, pp. IV-VI)

The study by Strasdas et al. (2016) was followed-up by Georg, Teusch, Strasdas, and Balas (2017). In the first report, a majority of experts considered sustainability assessments as important tools for identifying sustainable tourism offers and promoting sustainable tourism in general, in spite of the aforementioned shortcomings. The conclusion was that sustainability certificates should be made better known amongst consumers and the tourism industry itself in order to promote their spread and effectiveness. A prerequisite for this was to assess and publish the quality of each certification system. The assessment should be based on a coherent and demanding quality standard. These tasks were taken up by Georg et al. (2017). Their evaluation scheme was based on relevant international standards and guidelines, such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), ISO 26000 for corporate responsibility and the criteria of the ISEAL Alliance for the quality of sustainability standards, where necessary adapted to the German context. Green Destinations was not assessed. The individual assessment results show that only four certificates reached an overall compliance of over 75%. A good third of them scored over 50% (see Appendix 1 for the assessed schemes and their scores). All other certificates displayed various shortcomings or had a rather narrow thematic focus. As a general rule, internationally oriented certificates (some of them with GSTC recognition) scored best. Labels that are restricted to Germany often focused on environmental or quality aspects only and could be regarded as weaker in terms of sustainability. Based on their results, Georg et al. (2017) give a number of recommendations (Table 2).



Table 2: Recommendations for sustainability assessments in tourism

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. It is desirable to <b>broaden the thematic scope</b> of most certificates towards an encompassing concept of sustainability. Sustainable development is the prevailing paradigm of the 21st century. For an international sector such as tourism it is no longer up to date to focus on certain environmental aspects or service quality alone.</li><li>2. In particular, aspects of <b>social sustainability</b> should be more emphasized by most certification schemes. These should include staff concerns (wages, work hours, diversity) and fair trade practices, among others.</li><li>3. But there is also a need for catching up in some <b>environmental fields</b>, especially regarding climate change and biodiversity. Furthermore, there should be attempts to measure environmental criteria in quantitative terms by using benchmarking rather than just working with yes/no options.</li><li>4. The certification organisations should pay more attention to <b>strategic sustainability management</b> among their certified companies by developing corresponding criteria.</li><li>5. Apart from broadening their thematic approach, some certification systems could <b>improve</b> their <b>certification structures</b> and <b>procedures</b> towards more transparency and credibility.</li><li>6. The actual <b>implementation</b> of the certification procedures could not be verified in the scope of this study. This would be an interesting follow-up research project.</li><li>7. For consumers, the high number of certificates with different levels of quality is confusing, especially in the accommodations sector. It would therefore be desirable to <b>consolidate this market</b> by various measures.</li><li>8. By contrast, <b>tour operators</b> and <b>travel agencies</b> (incl. online booking platforms) are seldom certified, thus offering a very limited choice to consumers. It is desirable to guide these sub-sectors towards more sustainability since they have an important multiplier function.</li><li>9. In general, the certification standard developed in the course of this study and its evaluation results should be broadly <b>disseminated</b> and <b>communicated</b> to its target groups (consumers, tourism companies and organisations) in order to help those certification schemes with a higher quality to have a greater impact in the tourism market.</li><li>10. Finally, the authors of this study maintain that a <b>national minimum standard</b> for certification would be conducive to the further promotion of sustainable tourism in Germany, similarly to what has been successfully implemented in the food sector. The standard developed in this study, which has already been discussed with relevant stakeholders, would be a substantial basis for such an endeavor.</li></ol>
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Source: Georg et al. (2017, p. Executive summary)

### 2.1.6 Discussion

In Table 1, under possible solutions, Strasdas et al. (2016) write that a government-backed accreditation of certification systems does not seem to be realistic in the near future. However, this does seem to have been the case with the national Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST), managed by the Slovenian Tourist Board (STB), although it is not clear what exact role the Slovenian government has had in this campaign (see STB, 2018). The call by Georg et al. (2017) to broaden the thematic scope of assessments (pt.1 in Table 2) is surprising, as this would possibly make labels even more difficult to 'achieve' and difficult to understand. Our position would rather be that an effective label is one that is uni-directional and easy to understand, like an energy label for instance. We may try to identify those aspects that are fully caused by the flow of tourists at or to a certain place and stick to that. Or have a couple of labels for different things.

## 2.2 Assessments: Reasons, costs and barriers

### 2.2.1 Reasons for participation

This section provides a literature-based overview of the reasons that tourism business and organisations have reported for engaging in sustainability assessments. Tasci (2017, p. 376) notes that "sustainable practice benchmarks come with a price in money, time and effort for the potential pursuant organizations. For a private business where inputs and outputs must be measured and weighed for effectiveness and efficiency, there needs to be a strong reason or motivation to invest in acquiring these sustainability benchmarks".

A useful side-step here is to also briefly look at the literature as to why organisations or companies engage in CSR activities, as this can also be seen as a form of embracing sustainability. Some of the reported reasons here exceed the scope of sustainability assessments, like being able to rectify any 'harms' done by the organisation, to stakeholders (Campbell, 2007). But most appear relevant when thinking of sustainability assessment: a sustainable competitive advantage, compliance, market and financial strategies, system and process improvements, stakeholder pressure and communication, increasing employee awareness, image, transparency, and good citizenship (see e.g. review in Kuo, Kremer, Phuong, & Hsu, 2016). We use the literature review of Lynes and Dredge (2006) to elaborate on this topic. These authors refer to Khanna and Anton (2002), who "find that total quality environmental management and environmental reporting are principally motivated by perceived competitive advantages in the marketplace, and internal environmental policy, corporate environmental standards and environmental auditing are predominantly influenced by the degree of regulatory standards in place" (Lynes & Dredge, 2006, p. 120). In the CSR literature, Lynes and Dredge (2006, p. 120f.) find a number of reasons why businesses participate in voluntary environmental initiatives:

- to reduce costs and increase efficiency, especially by cutting resource use and waste generation
- to avoid or delay regulatory action
- to gain a competitive advantage
- to enhance or reinforce a positive image in the marketplace as a 'good corporate citizen'
- to comply to pressures imposed by banks, insurers, clients and suppliers who do not wish to inherit environmental liabilities
- to conform to pressures from community groups, environmental organisations and industry members, and
- to encourage employee productivity through improved corporate culture and employee 'pride'.

Lynes and Dredge (2006, p. 121) also refer to Miller (2001) who, in a similar vein, "examines factors driving environmental responsibility among tour operators and identifies five major drivers to this effect:

- industry structure and the level of competition that exists;
- legal requirements;
- market advantage and public relations benefits of 'being green';
- perceived importance of cost savings over the long term balanced against short-term nature of tourism business operations; and
- moral obligation."

While these factors provide an overview of the drivers for environmental activity within a company, Lynes and Dredge (2006, p. 121) point out that recent research "suggests that there are different drivers for different sectors and drivers can also be dependent on the nature of the decision that needs to be made [...]. As a result generic lists of drivers are open to criticisms of reductionism, consolidating the argument that further research is required on specific sectors".

In their analysis of assessments in Germany, Strasdas et al. (2016, p. VI) report the main reasons to get certified "to be a sense of responsibility for the environment as well as the expectation to gain reputational benefits and achieve a better quality. That means that both societal considerations and self-interest play a role."

Bonilla Priego, Najera, and Font (2011) investigated 27 EMAS-certified hotels in Spain, and found that a quarter uses EMAS strategically, with the rest taking a rather opportunistic approach, related to legal compliance, stakeholder expectations, cost savings, and funding opportunities. They also found a preference for less demanding assessments. These findings are similar to an earlier analysis of Spanish certified hotel managers (Ayuso, 2007) and this author's literature analysis **of commonly identified incentives for the implementation of environmental practices in hotels:**

- Financial gain (reducing costs or increasing efficiency)
- Ethical stance (altruistic or personal concern for the environment)
- Response to customer demand
- Improved hotel image ('green image')
- Marketing advantage

### 2.2.2 Barriers to and costs of participation

Limited participation (market penetration) of sustainability assessments appear to come down to the costs and time investment involved, limited or no access to data, as well as the perceived missing of the return on investment, profitability and competitive advantage (Bramwell & Lane, 2010; Chan, 2008; Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001; Geerts, 2014; Rowe & Higham, 2007), although a small number that shares these barriers does see marketing/branding opportunities (Jarvis, Weeden, & Simcock, 2010, & previous section). These are actually very much the same barriers that are also reported by companies for engaging in CSR activities (e.g. Kuo et al., 2016). The reason for these barriers is partly the lack of marketing expertise and/or budget of – frequently – the NGOs that issue the assessments. Then there is of course the fact that sustainability assessments only appear to appeal to a small share of tourists and do not lead to behavioural change among this group (Gössling & Buckley, 2016; see 2.1.3). Ayuso (2007), in her literature analysis, sums up the following **commonly identified obstacles for the implementation of environmental practices in hotels:**

- Costs too high (investment and running costs)
- Lack of time and knowledge
- Jeopardise customers satisfaction
- Difficult to involve staff
- Belief that hotels are not responsible for environmental impact

## 2.3 Consumer aspects

Consumers do seem to associate tourism actors having engaged in an assessment with better performance (Esparon, Gyuris, & Stoeckl, 2014; Peiró-Signes, Segarra-Oña, Verma, Mondéjar-Jiménez, & Vargas-Vargas, 2014). Blackman, Naranjo, Robalino, Alpízar, and Rivera (2014) find that Blue Flag certification spurs significant new hotel investment, particularly in luxury hotels and in economically advantaged communities. This is confirmed by Fraguell, Martí, Pintó, and Coenders (2016), who show that 25 years of Blue Flag labelling did provide a good start for destinations to pick up environmentally friendly management. Based on a literature review, Esparon et al. (2014) see contradictory results on whether certified tourism businesses have a better environmental performance than non-certified ones.

But where energy labels are quite effective in a sector like the white goods (Michel et al., 2015), this does not appear to be the case in tourism. Some studies do mention apparent positive effects, for example of the Blue Flag on foreign visitor numbers (Capacci et al., 2014), but these reports are few. The energy label for white goods works well because there is only one label, and because it delivers a direct (financial) advantage for consumers. For tourists, a multitude of labels exists, and the consumer advantage is not made clear if existing at all. Tourism stakeholders taking action on sustainability often find it difficult to communicate about this and about consumer advantages (Font et al., 2016; Villarino & Font, 2015), and there is still little knowledge about how to communicate sustainability actions more convincingly.

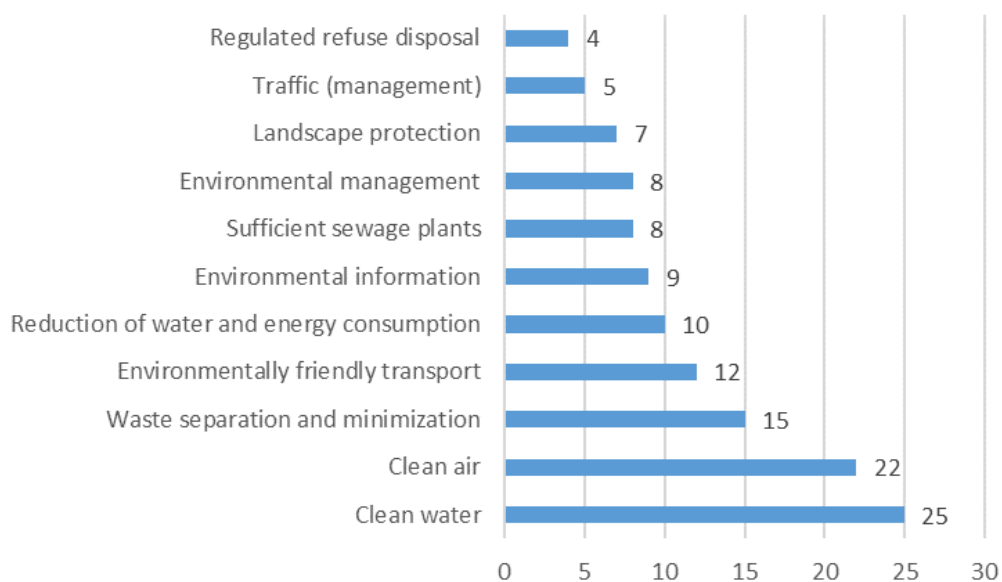
More in general, Heberlein (2012) points to the following aspects being important for behavioural change: (1) the label or its advantages need to get noticed by the consumer (attention), (2) the label should be easy to understand and unambiguous (cognition), (3) the consumer needs to see which (personal) advantages are attached to the label, (4) the consumer has a clear overview of available choices (transparency). Next to that, consumers are sensitive to information about the (sustainable) choices that others make (peer pressure). Explicitly mentioning sustainability is shown to be ineffective and can even induce resistance among some large market segments (see Leenheer, Elsen, van der Wagt, Mikkola, & Lloyd, 2014; but also experiences of TUI, where attributing green thumbs to sustainable destinations led to lower bookings). A Dutch research from 2010 also found that explicitly calling a tourism product 'sustainable' does not go well with the main public (NBTC/NIPO, 2010). Typically, a US consumer study "revealed consumers' short-term focus on self-related benefits, rather than long-term-oriented sustainability concerns, and thus a lack of awareness and demand for sustainability-related benchmarks", i.e. assessments (Tasci, 2017, p. 375). Consumers focus more on their own comfort, quality and the price of the products and services, and when they show awareness it is more of tangible impacts (e.g. littering) than intangible ones like global warming (Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010). Perhaps not surprisingly then, a study of Dutch consumers into sustainability communication in tourism points towards the effectiveness of emphasizing consumer advantages (Hardeman, Font, & Nawijn, 2017). Yet this does not rule out the usability of

a sustainability assessment in tourism. Some assessments, like the National Park label, do offer an attraction to tourists (Eagles, 2001; Sharpley & Pearce, 2007). Tourists are certainly interested in the quality (of e.g. the environment) of their destination (Buckley, 2012), so there appears to be an opportunity for improving the marketing of a destination based on sustainability assessments. It could be more effective to show the direct consumer advantage that result from a sustainability assessment, such as clean water and air, quietness, special natural or landscape values, higher quality, visitor groups that match destination qualities, and possibly cost savings. This was already shown by German consumer research on tourism ecolabels in the 1990s (original publication: Lübbert, 1999):

*“German tourists place importance on the award criteria which reflect the current condition of the environment in the destination as far as they are affected directly (e.g. cleanliness of air and lakes, intact nature, etc.). The feeling of quality is especially important to the tourists (e.g. waste disposal). Environmental management systems are not very important in comparison to other aspects.” (Lübbert, 2001, p. 84)*

Lübbert (1999) used a triangulation process of explorative focus groups followed up by a representative survey and finally semi-structured interviews, the latter of which resulted in Figure 2, amongst others.

Figure 2: Elements for inclusion in a tourism ecolabel



Source: Lübbert (2001, p. 81). Question: Which of the following elements should be included in the award criteria for an ecolabel in tourism? (in-depth interviews, prompted answers; N=40) (Lübbert, 1999: 193).

Lübbert (1999) writes that communication is key in order to create consumer awareness of the label, but also because she deems communicating environmental and quality aspects vital for consumers to grasp the immaterial performance (of a label). Interestingly, German consumers most strongly recommended labels for destinations and holiday parks, more so than e.g. hotels or tour operators (Lübbert, 1999, 2001). The introduction of an article by Kozak and Nield (2004, p. 138) is also enlightening in this context:

*“It is widely accepted that the future competitiveness of destinations will be based on the extent to which they are concerned about the sustainability of their natural, economic and cultural resources (Gunn, 1997; Laws, 1995). The importance of environmental quality is apparent when, for example, the degradation of beach quality at ‘sea, sun and sand’ holiday destinations brings about a negative impact on the number of tourist arrivals, number of bednights and the number of repeat visits and, as a consequence, generates a low level of tourism income (Dharmaratne & Brathwaite, 1998).”*

Further in their article, Kozak and Nield (2004, p. 144) state that “the minimum standards of services and facilities covered by quality and eco-labelling systems can be regarded as critical success factors, important in determining the strengths and weaknesses of the destination in general and its facilities in particular”. In Table 3, some of these critical success factors as a main part of quality and eco-labelling standards and awards to be regarded as benchmark elements are presented.

*Table 3: Selected examples of critical success factors*

**Physical and service quality**

- a welcoming attitude
- friendliness
- customer care and attention
- atmosphere and environment
- quality of food and drink
- hygiene and sanitation
- safety and security
- level of service
- tourist information
- furnishings or furniture

**Environmental quality**

- sea water and beach quality
- access to beaches
- water supply and water-saving measures
- waste water disposal and utilisation
- solid waste disposal and recycling
- energy supply and energy-saving measures
- traffic, air, noise and climate
- landscape and built environment
- nature conservation
- environmental information

Source: Kozak and Nield (2004, p. 144)

**Note:** later on in the project, the literature on destination competitiveness and the role of environmental quality therein needs to be checked (e.g. Artal-Tur & Kozak, 2016; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2004; Knežević Cvelbar, Dwyer, Koman, & Mihalič, 2016; Kozak & Nield, 2004; Mihalič, 2000, 2013).

## 2.4 Conclusions literature review

Tourism businesses engage in sustainability assessments because of several reasons: an improved image/reputation, cost savings, competitive advantage, and to a somewhat lesser extent stakeholder pressure, compliance and/or moral/ethical obligation. In any case it is a very mixed bag of societal, economic and self-centred considerations.

Costs and barriers are more straightforward: costs and time investment involved, limited or no access to data, (perceived) missing of the return on investment, of profitability and of competitive advantage.

The literature shows that using quality for communicating sustainability assessments is the way forward in reaching more consumers. It is vital for consumers to grasp the immaterial performance addressed by sustainability assessments.

## 3 Student interviews and reports

### 3.1 Introduction

Late 2017, 4<sup>th</sup> year ITMC student groups have worked on SASTDes assignments for the module Challenging Tourism Futures 2. Three groups worked on research questions related to the Green Destinations Standard:

- What are the developments in the context of sustainability labels and certificates in tourism?
- How can you best define destinations in the Green Destination Standard?
- What sustainability aspects of a destination are interesting to consider for all travelling markets?
- Why would destinations want to participate in the GDS, and why not?
- What are the benefits/ obstacles (economic barriers) of getting through the Green Destination Standard procedure?
- How can Green Destinations attract more destinations to participate in the GDS (marketing)?

Three further groups worked on research questions about consumer motivation for sustainable holidays:

- Which market segment is most likely to make conscious travel choices with regard to sustainable travel, and why (and other not or less)?
- How can consumers be implicitly triggered to make sustainable choices for holiday destinations and transport types?
- What sustainability aspects of a destination are interesting to consider for all travelling markets?
- Does a destination sustainability award or certificate influence the client while making a decision for a holiday destination?
- How can a consumer directly benefit from making sustainable holiday choices?
- What nudging terms could DMOs use to pull people to sustainable destinations?
- What recommendations can you formulate with regard to media, marketing and promotion to reach the market segment most likely to make sustainable travel choices?

Key outcomes of the six final reports are presented below.

### 3.2 Green Destination Standard reports

The three student groups (Bakanovaite, Karakitsos, Blom, Witkamp, & Eggert, 2018; Bausewein, den Braanker, Hovinga, & Luijten, 2018; Burger, Peeters, & Verkelij, 2018) working on this topic each interviewed around three key stakeholders in GD member and non-member destinations (mostly in the Western part of the Netherlands), plus one interview with a GD staff member. Here, we mention some of their main findings relevant to this WP.

- Desire to be more sustainable is one of the prime motivations for participation in sustainability assessments (three interviewees). Another main motivation for destinations to become a GD member is to gain revenue and attract more tourists. The GD label may offer a competitive advantage. However, these hoped-for benefits are difficult to measure, as to whether they are achieved. Between interviewees there was disagreement over having certification and using that to attract more sustainable market segments. Some interviewees agreed that participation in GD would result into positive publicity, and therefore an increase in arrivals; hence a strong reason to join GD. One interviewee acknowledged that getting Quality Coast and Blue Flag labels helps the destination to attract German tourists, who are their main target group.
- Some interviewees welcome the fact that GD offers guidance in the sustainable development of their destination.
- The most common named motive against participation is the high cost that goes with membership. Two municipalities argue whether it is reasonable to spend money from its inhabitants on something that does not seem to be highly effective in terms of revenue. Two other municipalities argued that the costs are not high at all and no issue for them.
- Interviewees find it difficult to see the added value of participating in a sustainability assessment. The exact purpose of GD is not clear and destinations do not see how it can help them to enhance their

tourism operations. One interviewee was a member of Green Key, but did not see the value of this label at all. One municipality believed it to be enough to participate in one certification programme, such as Blue Flag, which has a clear purpose and helps them with their goals.

- Both municipality and entrepreneur interviewees find the amount of administrative work connected to certification high. The GD Standard certification procedure is perceived as lengthy, challenging and costly. Not all GD members find the paperwork process very transparent. Audits can apparently ask for additional information in English, increasing workload.
- One GD member perceived the GDS and its online platform as easy and clear. The expertise of GD is beneficial for destinations, helping them to become more sustainable faster.
- Some GD members see a need for more coaching and assistance from GD.
- GD(S) was found to have a low brand awareness.

### 3.3 Consumer behaviour reports

Of these three student groups (Eckardt, Perschel, Peters, & Witte, 2018; Schoorl, Verstappen, D'andrea, & Janmers, 2018; Wegener, Schalkwijk, Voorsmit, van der Baan, & Garzia, 2018), two used small surveys (N=50-60) amongst millennials, distributed through social media, added with a number of interviews or a focus group. One group used a combination of interviews and a focus group. Some of the more relevant findings are presented here:

- Many prejudices against sustainable travel (offers), e.g. greenwashing (transparency needed), expensive, requiring effort finding products, unrealistic ("travel can never be sustainable").
- Price key factor in holiday choice. Sustainable products should not be more expensive than regular offer.
- Value sustainability but small share looks at sustainability aspects when searching for a holiday (attitude-behaviour gap).
- Little use of ecolabels.
- Self-esteem/satisfaction an important factor for sustainable holiday choices. Main draw to a destination is own hedonistic experience.
- (Perceived) limited availability of sustainable holiday products is seen as a barrier.
- Governments need to implement regulation in order to achieve more sustainable tourism development and behaviour.

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# Appendix 1: Ranking and score of sustainability assessments in Germany

Ranking	Zertifizierung	Typ	Gesamt-Abdeckung in %	Infos nicht verifizierbar / vorhanden	Zertifizierungsverfahren gesamt	Transparenz	Vergabe- und Prüf-system	Anspruch an das Zertifikat	Inhalte gesamt	Unternehmens-führung	Ökologie	Sozio-Kultur
1	TourCert - Zertifizierung für Reiseveranstalter	N	84%	5%	91%	92%	95%	87%	76%	78%	59%	92%
2	TourCert-Zertifizierung für Unterkünfte	N	82%	5%	93%	92%	95%	92%	70%	76%	63%	72%
3	Travelife Gold certification	N	76%	20%	84%	80%	90%	82%	67%	51%	61%	90%
4	Green Sign / InfraCert	N	75%	18%	87%	89%	82%	89%	64%	61%	60%	70%
5	TourCert-Zertifizierung für Tourism Businesses	N	74%	15%	85%	68%	95%	92%	63%	67%	48%	72%
6	Green Globe Standard – Hotels & Resorts	(N)	69%	19%	63%	76%	67%	47%	75%	64%	72%	89%
7	EMAS mit Referenzdokument Tourismus	(U)	63%	1%	76%	81%	76%	71%	50%	56%	79%	15%
7	Green Key	N	63%	21%	77%	84%	76%	71%	49%	51%	56%	39%
9	EU Ecolabel (Beherbergungsbetriebe, Campingdienste)	(U)	62%	5%	72%	90%	72%	56%	52%	61%	78%	17%
10	Viabono - Kategorie Hotel	U	57%	18%	79%	88%	71%	79%	35%	38%	45%	22%
11	Bio Hotels	(U)	55%	23%	88%	81%	86%	97%	23%	35%	23%	11%
12	Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitskodex (DNK)	(N)	54%	11%	51%	66%	30%	57%	58%	48%	55%	70%
12	Qualitätsoffensive Naturparke / Qualitäts-Naturpark	(Q)	54%	7%	63%	72%	61%	58%	45%	60%	41%	33%
14	DIN EN ISO 14001	(U)	53%	24%	66%	73%	78%	48%	39%	26%	75%	15%
15	Ökoprofit	(U)	50%	14%	56%	45%	82%	42%	44%	40%	48%	44%
16	Wellness-Baum (Wellnesshotels & Resorts GmbH)	(Q)	49%	19%	74%	60%	85%	77%	23%	22%	25%	22%
17	Green Pearls	N	48%	17%	45%	48%	42%	46%	51%	43%	50%	61%
17	Ecocamping - Klimafreundlicher Betrieb	(U)	48%	19%	58%	75%	55%	44%	39%	27%	67%	22%
17	Wellness Stars Hotel	(Q)	48%	17%	69%	62%	75%	69%	27%	34%	18%	28%
20	Tripadvisor Green Leaders	(U)	47%	25%	52%	78%	42%	34%	43%	39%	57%	33%
21	ehc = eco hotels certified	(U)	42%	22%	64%	50%	61%	83%	20%	18%	42%	0%
22	Umweltgütesiegel Alpenvereinschütten	(U)	41%	26%	39%	53%	40%	23%	43%	51%	67%	11%
23	Certified Green Hotel	N	40%	3%	42%	39%	70%	19%	38%	24%	47%	44%
34	Bayerisches Umweltsiegel für das Gastgewerbe	(U)	39%	2%	57%	76%	62%	33%	22%	15%	40%	11%
25	Qualitätsgastgeber Wanderbares Deutschland	(Q)	38%	12%	65%	65%	69%	60%	12%	6%	3%	26%
26	DEHOGA Umweltcheck	(U)	37%	13%	54%	79%	45%	38%	20%	19%	30%	11%
27	Blaue Flagge (Sportboothäfen)	(U)	35%	23%	51%	70%	62%	22%	20%	14%	28%	17%
28	Qualitätsweg Wanderbares Deutschland	(Q)	34%	15%	64%	66%	67%	60%	5%	7%	3%	4%
29	Partner der Nationalen Naturlandschaften	(U)	33%	4%	45%	61%	51%	23%	21%	31%	11%	22%
30	Qualitätsmanagement Wassertourismus (QMW) Kanu	(Q)	32%	21%	45%	70%	51%	15%	19%	38%	10%	10%
30	bett+bike	(Q)	32%	10%	57%	79%	64%	28%	6%	15%	3%	0%
	Gesicherte Nachhaltigkeit - Prüfsiegel (di-no.eu)	N	81%	80%	70%	35%	80%	94%	93%	96%	83%	100%
	Deutsche Gesellschaft für nachhaltiges Bauen (DGNB)	(N)	48%	34%	60%	61%	75%	44%	35%	63%	43%	0%
	Qualitätsmanagement Golf & Natur	(U)	42%	33%	46%	57%	55%	27%	38%	35%	48%	30%
	Ecocamping - Management für Campingplätze	(U)	29%	50%	31%	50%	36%	8%	26%	35%	43%	0%
	Blaue Schwalbe	(U)	18%	34%	19%	24%	15%	20%	17%	13%	24%	15%

N = Nachhaltigkeitsausrichtung; U = Umweltfokus; Q = Qualitätsfokus; ( ) = Einschätzung nach Eigenrecherchen

Source: Georg et al. (2017)



Games



Media



Hotel



Facility



Built Environment



Logistics



Tourism



Leisure & Events



Mgr. Hopmansstraat 2  
4817 JS Breda

P.O. Box 3917  
4800 DX Breda  
The Netherlands

**PHONE**  
+31 76 533 22 03

**WEBSITE**  
[www.buas.nl](http://www.buas.nl)

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