

ASPECTS OF SERVICE QUALITY AND ECO LABELLING OF ROMANIAN LODGING SERVICES

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Tourism has a significant environmental, economic and socio-cultural impact, which makes it important for environmental initiatives.

The Rio Earth Summit (1992) was a milestone for these initiatives, having introduced the concept of sustainable development, its major principles and recommendations of implementation. So, the ecological movement grew globally more and more by widely disseminated actions among various bodies such as governments, associations, businesses, academics, NGOs and communities.

In the European Union eco-labelling scheme, is "a voluntary initiative to promote products and services which have the potential to reduce negative environmental impacts, as compared to the other products and services in the same product or service group, thus contributing to the efficient use of resources and a high level of environmental protection. This shall be pursued through the provision of guidance and accurate, non-deceptive and scientifically based information to consumers on such products and services". In fact this is official approach known as EU-Ecolabel Scheme, launched in 2005.

In general, the idea of sustainable development, and eco-attitude of many of the activities carried out in different economic sectors have been encouraged to be certified, and to adopt sustainable practices to improve their environmental practices, and to inform and educate their clients regarding their friendly-environmental policies. The tourism sector adopted all of these.

One by one in hospitality industry have emerged new trends, new destinations. Some of these trends are as well connected to environmental policy, eco-initiatives that certify EMS (Environmental Management System) and to use of eco-label in hospitality industry.

For years, the tourism sector in Romania was declared a strategic sector. Within this framework, we decided to examine this area, the specific topic of eco-labelling and quality of lodging services in Romania.

This paper proposes a short examination by observation of studies dedicated to lodging eco-label services and their quality based on a comparative analysis between Romanian supply of tourism "green services" and international one.

This study has as a result a synthetic perspective on eco-label services and some aspects on the state of art of this topic in Romanian and international context of lodging services.

Keywords: environmental policy, environmental management system, tourism, lodging services, quality of services, eco-labelling, Romania.

JEL Code: Q5, Q57, L15, L83

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine and to present a short synthesis of literature, which is indicative of the quality and importance of factors which may lower the environmental impact during tourist product life cycle. The main focus is on lodging services / hotels which adopt a pro-natural and eco-label use (**EU-Ecolabel**), while examining the eco-labelling initiative in contemporary Romania¹⁶.

¹⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/about_ecolabel/revision_of_ecolabel_en.htm

All products and services have an impact on the environment from one or all stages of their life cycle, starting during the extraction of raw materials, then going through the design, manufacture, assembly, marketing, distribution / sale, ending the use of and / or final disposal as waste¹⁷.

The **Rio Earth Summit** (1992) was a milestone for organic initiative, with the concept of sustainable development as its major principles and recommendations for implementation, and in recent years the movement has grown more and more.

In general, **sustainable development initiatives**, eco attitude and many activities in different economic sectors have been encouraged to be certified and such practices have been adopted to improve environmental practices, along with informing and educating the public about the environmental friendly policies.

Tourism has a great impact on the environment during its life cycle. The concept of "sustainable development" has been extended in this area, and the term "**sustainable tourism**" is becoming more present. The tourism sector has adopted these practices and initiatives. In the hospitality industry new trends have emerged, new destinations. Some of these trends are very well connected to **environmental policy, initiatives and eco-certified EMS** (Environmental Management System) and use eco-labelling in the hospitality industry. Higher levels of income cause consumption of goods and services so that they reach unsustainable levels that threaten the natural resource depletion. The Annual Report 2004 [1] of the World Watch Institute¹⁸, which focuses on consumer society, states that currently there are certain goods and services that have long term consequences for human wellbeing and the planet.

During its life cycle phases, tourism interferes with the environment, having a significant impact on natural habitats, urban environment, etc. The relationship between tourism and the environment is complex, because these two factors are interrelated. Fundamental principle regarding a friendly environment and quality tourism is axiomatic in ecology, and sustainable development from the viewpoint of the organizers (tour operators, hoteliers etc.), and partly to a proper use of the facilities from the point of view of tourists.

The court must first consider the effects of tourism on the environment, exploiting resources, but also by locating tourist structures (natural attraction of the area where a hotel is located is very important, so it is essential to be monitored and protected).

Many tourism-related activities directly or indirectly have an impact on bio-diversity.

Natural areas are affected, sometimes damaged by the arrangement of tourist facilities and the presence of tourists can destroy the local flora and fauna. It appears possible that environmental pollution and the use of large quantities of water contribute to desertification.

Attention should be focused on different phases of activity, which if they have been identified as environmental hazards, must be dealt with by proposing solutions that take into account the following objectives¹⁹:

- Major tourism operators;
- Education for Eco-living;
- Minimizing the impact of integrating environment and saving resources structures;
- Promoting and supporting responsible tourism;
- Protect the beauty of the countryside and biodiversity;
- Reduce production costs;
- Reducing waste.

For years, the tourism sector in Romania was declared a strategic sector. In this paper, we decided to examine, in the light of these assumptions stated above and in a comparative manner,

¹⁷ World Resources Institute -Global Ecolabel Monitor – 2010 http://pdf.wri.org/2010_global ecolabel_monitor.pdf

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worldwatch_Institute

¹⁹ Inițiativa VISIT: <http://www.ecotrans.org/visit/brochure/fr/100.htm> □ <http://www.istaygreen.org/>

the relationship between eco-labelling and the situation of lodging services in Romania as compared with other countries.

II. Hospitality and the natural environment

Interest in an area is always in close contact with expectations of attracting more and more tourists, so hoteliers can recover the money invested. Most of the investors' interests often conflict with environmental interests. Investors tend to prefer quantity over quality. The result is a structure which continuously affects the environment, even in some ways it changes the socio-cultural elements. Do not forget that each tourist site has a different level of tolerance (number of tourists visiting an area, following a lifestyle), so operating over the limit can create environmental changes, compromising its appeal. In the tourism industry through the tourist-hotel relationship, sustainable development became a priority, which is achieved via careful application of new environmental management tools. Most environmental management systems are geared towards sustainable development and their application in the hotel industry is increasingly required, by its stated objectives and the instruments used to conduct a series of advantages (saving resources, prevent pollution, lower costs, attractiveness a particular segment of consumers, etc.).

Hospitality is an activity with a wide variety of high resource consumption, which requires environmental impact and hence the need to protect the environment.

In recent years, several studies have shown that people/tourists are more cautious to the environment, but also feel the need for a formal attestation of 'quality hotel', which is achieved through certification. Operators' interest in the industry stems from the need to differentiate the quality of services from those traditionally offered on the market. Quality must be certified. There is a tendency to amplify the importance of certification in accordance with standards of ISO 14000 and the Environmental Management and Audit Scheme EMAS and EU-Ecolabel.

Thus, the hotel business moves towards the introduction of environmental management tools, tools that are more credible and visible because they operate on an international level and are publicly recognized. **Applying the principles of EMS and its implementation is helping the hotel management to establish and assign responsibilities to motivate staff to implement best practices and monitor performance.**

At present, there are numerous national initiatives, even if, at first, they were strictly voluntary initiatives, and some operators have launched their own regulations and thus codes of conduct, guidance, quality label for tourist-oriented environment and structure arose.

One example is an Italian initiative, known in Italy as environmental label Jesolo, respectively and Green Hotel Riccione tags for the environment, but these initiatives have official recognition, so there is the risk of this kind from his own declaration of intent public hotels.

In the **hotel business these initiatives are likely to improve the quality**, the use of the following measures:

- a) Use of compatible eco-products (e.g. use clean products whose quality was recognized by certification and EU-Eco-labelling; or by national eco-labels instead of traditional).
- b) Streamlining services so that improvements to services may include either new technology or a better organization. Examples with optimization:
 - Discovery of loss or defects;
 - Flexible change of linen;
 - Reducing laundry costs by using paper products production;
 - Installing soap dispensers;
 - Use energy saving bulbs with low energy consumption;
 - Use of alternative sources of energy for water heating / solar panels);
 - Using sensors to turn on water and light;

- Electrical devices that operate with magnetic keys;
- Reducing the purchase of products such as soap, useless decoration;
- Increased use of recyclable packaging;
- Adoption of environmental criteria, etc. supply.

However the problem of protecting the environment should allow the service level offered in the hotel to remain high and to ensure customer satisfaction.

Practice shows that it definitely would be easier if the customer/tourist should be sensitized on the issue and would also become involved. The idea that the customer should be informed about the initiative taken by the hotel for environmental protection, might lead to cooperation between the two.

There have been studies aimed at discovering the criteria necessary for obtaining EU-Ecolabel environmental quality label.

These studies were based on the analysis of tourist services offered by hotels in the phases of life cycle.

In terms of life cycle phases of the environmental service that ought to draw the interested customer's attention are those foregoing the services (site and buildings) and the actual service. Location is considered important, except that, in general, when it comes to private operators, they often neglect this aspect in particular, something which should be evaluated during the planning phase through an environmental impact study.

The actual service stage is divided into elementary activities grouped into product life cycle phases of hotels, with relative impact on the environment; the impact of each of these phases on the environment and proposals for improvement can only be assessed once an overview of the whole stage exists.

III. Eco-Labeling the Hotels

In the European Union (EU) we note a modern trend of following "a voluntary initiative to promote products and services that have the potential to reduce negative environmental impact compared with other products and services in the same group of services, there by efficient use of resources and a high level of environmental protection. This is done by providing guidance to consumers and accurate, fair and scientifically based on such products and services" (EU-Ecolabel Scheme)²⁰.

The EU-Ecolabel is considered to provide certain economic benefits, as well as competitive aspects of differentiation and has a positive image in this area, outlining certain advantages when used [HoraBlaga A. 2010, 256]. In fact, eco-labelling:

- Is an internationally recognized collective mark;
- It may be a marketing tool promoting image quality, addressing certain segments of consumers;
- Is developing an environmental strategy that proposes to change consumer behaviour in the sense of environmental protection is increasingly sought.

Eco-label is granted for products and services with reduced environmental impact. "EU-Flower" is a distinctive sign recognizable at European level [Serbulescu L. 2005, 165].

Quality Certification is more increasingly common practice; even in tourism, it is presented as certification according to ISO 9000, ISO 14000, ISO 22000 etc. standards. However, for several years, lodging and restaurants were adapting to the market demanding certification of higher quality, and started following the ecological trends and their desire to modernize according of new standards. For this reason, we are witnessing a proliferation of brands in order to certify the

²⁰ Present the ecolabel of various eco business /products:<http://www.ecolabelindex.com/ecolabels>, for tourism sector: http://www.ecolabelindex.com/ecolabels/?search=turism&as_values_032= for hotels: http://www.ecolabelindex.com/ecolabels/?search=hotel&as_values_023=

environmental management system facilities relatively more countries. Germany, Denmark, Austria, USA, Italy.

Regulation no. 1980/2000 approved by Parliament and the Council reviewed the first EU-Ecolabel criteria, and is now expanding its scope and tourism focusing on all the hotel business. The hospitality industry is interested to certify that an accommodation meets some conditions within the rules of low environmental impact (use of renewable resources, has a waste collection system, etc.).

More specifically this kind of label can be applied to hotel units, provided in particular those related to improving the quality of service provided by the hotel relative to where²¹:

- Tourism demand is sensitive to environmental issues;
- Service providers are concerned about the environment and potentially interested in using eco-label;
- Series of five standards (ISO 14020 -14024) are dedicated to eco-labelling activities (Environmental labels and declarations)²²;
- Increasing interest in using eco-labels when the competitive advantage obtained by using labels, creates a chain effect of copying, the market should continue to encourage permanent improvements;
- Lodge/hotel operators sensitivity to environmental issues can be measured by the presence of policy, instruments and methods oriented to protect the environment;

The first specification for environmentally friendly tour operators, accommodation establishments and various tourist spots in 1991 was the brand / logo Green Suitecase / Der Grune Koffer created in Germany by Ökologischer Tourismus in Europa e.V²³ (OTE) to provide the tourism sector, a mark similar to Blau Engel²⁴ used for industrial products in 1978; now, the German mark used for ecological tourism is Viabono. There are other initiatives of this kind in Denmark (Den Gronn Nogle²⁵ The Green Key & Destination 21²⁶), USA (for 18 years, the Green Hotel Association²⁷), Austria (Das Österreichische Umweltzeichen Tourismusbetriebe seal²⁸), Italy (Legambiente Turismo²⁹), Portugal, the Netherlands (Milieubarometer /Green Key), Estonia and Sweden (Den Gronn Nogle) Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Finland (Nordic Swan³⁰), France (La Clef Verte³¹), Estonia (Estonian ecotourism Quality), Switzerland (Stainbock³²), United Kingdom, Ireland and Scotland (The Green Tourism Business³³), Hungary (1994-Hungarian Ecolabel/Környezetbarát Termék Védjegy³⁴).

At this moment it may access Ecocolabel Index³⁵, a database which lists 25 sectors, 377 eco products and services category, out of 211 countries, of which numerous are national, regional and global, including 44 dedicated to strictly eco-tourism.

²¹Manual for accommodation services eco-labelling http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/ecolabelled_products/categories/pdf/appack_0904.pdf

²²http://www.iisd.org/business/markets/eco_label_iso14020.aspx

²³<http://www.oete.de/de/oete.html>

²⁴<http://www.blauer-engel.de>

²⁵<http://www.green-key.dk/>

²⁶http://www.cic-wildlife.org/uploads/media/Dest.21_-_a_labeling_scheme_for_tourist_2001_eng.pdf

²⁷<http://greenhotels.com/index.php>

²⁸<http://www.umweltzeichen.at/cms/home233/content.html>

²⁹<http://www.legambienteturismo.it/>

³⁰<http://www.nordic-ecolabel.org/>

³¹<http://www.laclefverte.org>

³²<http://www.oe-plus.ch/>

³³<http://www.green-business.co.uk/>

³⁴<http://www.kornyezetbarat-termek.hu/>

³⁵<http://www.ecolabelindex.com/ecolabel/eu-ecolabel>

As noticed in the literature, around 2001-2004 an increasing Eco-labelling trend appeared; in the year 2004, the total number of accommodation units labelled with the EU-Ecolabel was 20, while in the year 2010, there are hundreds across Europe, and thousands in the world.

Since 2002 in Romania, in accordance with EC Regulation no. 1980/2000 Eco-labelled Schemes and European Community eco-label criteria for product groups, the necessary legislative framework for eco-labelling was created and was valid until EU accession when Romania took all legal regulation and procedures of EU.

In year 2009³⁶, in Romania a number of 1170 hotels were functioning, of which only two were eco-labelled (representing 0,17% of the total)! We consider this result extremely modest, in spite of an existing legal framework, and also although there are professional concerns in this area. In 2009 we can identify the initiative of the Romanian Green Building Council (RoGBC)³⁷ that is interested to sustain this type of policy, beside NGOs aware of ecological aspects concerning tourism.

We note that the first hotel was certified only in 2008, when Hotel Saturn from the same name sea-side resort on the Black Sea. This was the first accommodation certified unit as green in Romania, and received the Eco-label from the Tourism Ministry at that time. After a year, another was certified; this is Vega Hotel in Mamaia, also on the Black Sea. Vega Hotel in Mamaia has been tagged by TUV Reihart and is the first hotel in Mamaia aligned to the European Eco-Hotel Management System standard³⁸.

The hotels have been awarded and certified, which demonstrates that they are trying to protect the environment using eco-friendly technologies, products etc. We remark that with only two eco-labelled hotels in Romania, this is a very modest result!

There is a procedure with 84 mandatory and optional criteria to be met in a proportion of 30%. In general, the criteria focus on reducing energy consumption, the reduced use of chemicals and selective waste collection, waste minimization, recycling and reuse of some resources/waste.

The objective of those who adopt this mode is to be a model for communities, consumers and other businesses.

IV. Conclusions

The presence of specific conditions that support the use of the EU-Ecolabel is linked for example to techniques adopted by hotels, and these able to improve the environment, besides economic and commercial opportunities for those lodging units who qualify as environmental quality.

Inclusion of EU-Ecolabel for the tourist facilities in a wide program of sustainable tourism, such as those for environmental management, namely in general EMAS, and/or in particular according to standards ISO 14000.

The ability of tourism operators to promote environmental protection and conservation is one of the main objectives of the job. This is a strong point of interest in business development and competitiveness.

Undoubtedly, the use of environmental labels increases the visibility of the business, and tourism Eco-labelled services can be seen by operators, as well as hoteliers as a positive thing, but only if it is accompanied by economic, competitive and commercial advantages that can add value to this initiative.

³⁶ Breviar statistic 2010 http://www.insse.ro/cms/files%5Cpublicatii%5Cbreviar%20turism_2010.pdf

³⁷ <http://www.rogbc.org/en/home>

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