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PROMOTING GREEN TOURISM FOR FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Green tourism is defined as environmentally friendly tourism activities with various focuses and meanings. In a broad term, green tourism is about being an environmentally friendly tourist or providing environmentally friendly tourist services. The green tourism concept would be highly appealing to tourism enterprises and operators owing to increasing governmental pressure to improve environmental performance by adopting effective and tangible environmental management techniques. Furthermore, achievement and promotion of internationally recognized environmental awards would be instrumental to the tourism enterprises in marketing their services. As a result, many concerned and responsible parties put forward recommendations for green tourism products to regulate tourism's negative impacts. This conceptual paper attempts to discuss green tourism concept, green tourism certification and its processes as well explain the comparative approaches of green tourism in a few countries. Towards the end, by this green labeling, the industry can legitimately open up new areas for the more discriminating and wider range of the market, and tourists or visitors can enjoy the holiday they want with a clear conscience.

Keywords: green, tourism, certification, sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of tourism as a major industry is one of the most remarkable changes that have taken place in the global economic activity (Sinclair, 1998). Tourism is the third largest economic activity in the world (after oil and automobiles), and it is one of the fastest-growing activities (Batta, 2009). The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2008) projects that by the year 2010, international tourist arrivals will have increased to 1.018 billion and a direct receipt is expected to US\$1.55 trillion. Receipts from tourism make an important contribution to the economies of the developing countries in terms of income,

employment, and balance of payments effects. Because of this, many developing countries have begun to actively pursue tourism as a means to create jobs, diversify their economies, and earn foreign currency.

Among the three major impacts of tourism—economic, socio-cultural and environmental—the economic impact played a dominant role in policy-making (Sinclair, 1998). With the focus on the economic benefits that accompanied the development of tourism, the adverse socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism were relatively ignored. Based on the economic benefits, tourism development was prescribed as a panacea for many social and economic problems. This led to the indiscriminate and unplanned growth of tourism infrastructure in many countries, and soon the negative effects in the form of social and environmental degradation began to emerge. Due to enhanced awareness of the negative impact of tourism on the environment, efforts have been made to develop approaches for making tourism sustainable. The last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the relationship between tourism development and environmental quality (Erdogan and Tosun, 2009), with the emergence of special interest tourism including green tourism.

2. GREEN TOURISM CONCEPT

The concept of a green product is one that is easier to use than to define. Green tourism is used to indicate environmentally friendly tourism but have different focuses and meanings. Often such claims use terms which lack of accepted or standard definitions, or utilize extravagant language to wash the emptiness of the claim being made (NCC, 1996). These terms are used for two purposes: first, to tell customers that the holiday destination they are going to is beautiful and unspoilt. Green tourism or another term related to environmental concern is mostly used to label nature holidays to exotic destinations (Wight, 1994). Second, green tourism claims can be used to signal that tourism operations taking place in that area do not harm the environment (Font and Tribe, 2001).

In loose terms, a product or service can be said to be green when it is beneficial to the producer and consumer without harming the environment. The difficulty starts when a stakeholder attempts to measure the negative effects of their activities on the environment. Even in cases where measurement seems possible, the next difficulty arises at agreeing the criteria to be considered and the threshold levels of unacceptable effects. Tourism traditionally has been considered a relatively green industry, with the exception of its transport and land development implications, and for this reason it has only recently become an area of concern (Font and Tribe, 2001).

In this paper, green tourism, which is an important component of sustainable tourism, is defined as “travel to destinations where the flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions.” This definition is further expanded to include environmentally sustainable travel to destinations where climate impacts are minimized with the aim of respecting and preserving natural resources and adapting programs to fit the context of fragile resources (NCC, 1996; Graci and Dodds, 2008). Green tourism is important to encourage travel that would help support natural and cultural aspects, while encouraging respect for and conservation of urban resources and cultural diversity. According to Dodds and Joppe (2001), the green tourism concept can be broken down into four components.

- Environmental responsibility—protecting, conserving, and enhancing nature and the physical environment to ensure the long-term health of the life-sustaining eco-system.
- Local economic vitality—supporting local economies, businesses and communities to ensure economic vitality and sustainability.
- Cultural diversity—respecting and appreciating cultures and cultural diversity so as to ensure the continued well-being of local or host cultures.
- Experiential richness—providing enriching and satisfying experiences through active, personal and meaningful participation in, and involvement with, nature, people, places and cultures.

3. GREEN TOURISM CERTIFICATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The damaging impacts of tourism development in developing countries have been well discussed in past research. Recognizing the natural environment as a vital tourism resource, public and private sectors of the tourism industry are increasingly adopting and implementing environmentally compatible development measures in order to limit the negative environmental impacts associated with tourism development. Key elements of environmentally sensitive tourism development, in general, include restricting and regulating new development, preserving and protecting areas of outstanding natural beauty and biological diversity, and rehabilitating older resorts and destinations (Lockhart, 1997).

According to Middleton and Hawkins (1998), the tourism industry uses green tourism certification or environmental awards as trademarks or logos to communicate the environmental qualifications of a company, with the hopes that customers develop positive attitudes toward their product or service. In the market place, this type of strategy can give companies a differential advantage over their competitors. The use of green tourism certification issued by respected body is usually intended (Sasidharan et al., 2002): (i) to control tourism's negative environmental impacts on the natural resource

base of destination areas by encouraging tourism enterprises to achieve high environmental standards, (ii) to educate tourists regarding the impacts of their actions and decisions, and (iii) to develop standards for environmentally friendly tourism products and services.

The utilization of green tourism certification in developing countries would slot in with policies relating to natural resource management, environmental conservation and protection, and pollution control while conforming to the concept of environmentally friendly tourism development (Hashimoto, 1999; Erdogan and Tosun, 2009). The green tourism concept would be highly appealing to the tourism enterprises of developing countries owing to increasing governmental pressure on the tourism industry to improve environmental performance by adopting effective and tangible environmental management techniques (Zhang et al., 1999). Furthermore, achievement and promotion of internationally recognized environmental awards would be instrumental to the tourism enterprises of developing countries in marketing their services (Mihalic, 2000).

In recognizing the need to maintain the balance between tourism development and the environment through appropriate planning and management of tourism resources, many concerned parties in developing countries put forward recommendations for green tourism products to regulate tourism's negative impacts (Middleton and Hawkins, 1998; Sasidharan et al., 2002; Batta, 2009). As mentioned earlier, the green tourism certification may be applied to hotels, resorts, marinas, travel agencies, tour operators, ground and water transportation services, airlines, and may also be extended to certify the environmental soundness of tourist destinations and the natural resources at these destinations (Mihalic, 2000). While tourism enterprises of developing countries are predominantly comprised of privately owned, large, internationally franchised chains on one hand, and small-scale entrepreneurial businesses on the other, tourism resources in these countries are largely controlled and operated by the public sector (Brohman, 1996; Zhang et al., 1999). Certification efforts would be stressed by issues such as conflicts of interest among stakeholders distrust in scientific accuracy of assessments and industry pressure for relaxation of certification criteria (West, 1995; Hemmelskamp and Brockmann, 1997).

4. GREEN TOURISM CERTIFICATION PROCESSES

Certification is defined as a voluntary procedure that assesses, audits, and gives written assurance that a facility, product or service meets specific standards and awards a marketable logo to those that meet or exceed baseline standards. The purpose of certification has been to achieve voluntary standards of performance that meet or exceed baseline standards or legislation. The process starts with a body that sets credible certification standards. The certification body has to be without conflict of interest, and the

indicators for meeting standards should be recognized by an accreditation body. The applicant or business then is assessed according to the indicators and, if successful, receives recognition, usually in the form of a logo, which informs the consumer that the business has met minimum criteria (Honey and Rome, 2000).

TABLE 1: GREEN TOURISM CERTIFICATION BENEFITS

Agent	Benefits
Governments	<p>Certification helps governments protect their market niches as sustainable tourism destinations, especially when the credibility of the destination is threatened by green washing.</p> <p>Certification raises industry standards for health, safety, the environment, and social stability.</p> <p>By requiring economic benefits to communities, certification can help reduce poverty, especially in rural areas.</p> <p>Certification lowers the regulatory costs of environmental protection.</p>
Environment and local communities	<p>Certification of sustainable protects both the environment and the social and economic structure of local communities near the certified businesses.</p> <p>Certification requires the businesses to protect the environment and do little or no damage to it.</p> <p>Certification requires businesses to respect local culture and provide real economic and social benefits for it.</p> <p>When the business is economically sustainable, it is likely to continue offering high-quality service and benefits to the community for the long term.</p>
Businesses	<p>Certification helps businesses to improve their knowledge about elements of sustainability in their operations and focus their attention on the changes needed in their businesses. A well-operated business tends to be more efficient and to attract more clients.</p> <p>Certification tends to reduce operating costs. This has been found in almost every type of business certification. In tourism, it has been shown to dramatically reduce the costs of water, electricity, and fossil fuels, without reducing the quality of service.</p> <p>The process of implementing certification of sustainable tourism is often accompanied by easier access to technical assistance and financing for businesses to implement new technology. The business is educated about these technologies, for which donors and financial institutions offer low cost financing.</p> <p>Potentially, certification can provide a marketing advantage to certified businesses, as consumers learn to recognize credible certification brands.</p>
Consumers	<p>Certification provides tourists with environmentally and socially responsible choices. It helps consumers to know which businesses are truly socially and environmentally responsible and to make choices on this basis. As certification programs become better known, this may produce tangible benefits for a business's reputation and popularity.</p> <p>Certification in general increases public awareness of responsible business practices. It can alert tourists to the environmental and social issues in an area, allowing them to act more respectfully or contribute to solutions.</p> <p>Certified businesses tend to offer higher-quality service.</p>

Source: Adapted from Batta, 2009

The aim of certification is to foster responsible environmental, social, and cultural behavior and provide a quality product to consumers. To be considered reliable, certification programs need to have a third-party audit and effective assessment as well as clearly defined accreditation criteria. A distinction is

often made between certification and accreditation. Certification applies to the awards given to businesses, products, processes, or services; while “accreditation” applies to the process of qualifying, endorsing, and licensing the entities that perform certification. In other words, accreditation is certifying the certifier (Font and Tribe, 2001).

Certification sets standards and helps distinguish sustainable tourism businesses from others; this process helps to protect the integrity of these concepts. However, it is not an end in itself; rather, it is one of a number of tools for motivating businesses and others to improve their environmental, social, and economic performance, while rewarding them for doing so. According to Batta (2009) there are four reasons why certification is important (Table. 1):

Tourism industry stakeholders may consider the implementation of green tourism certification as a viable option to control tourism’s direct negative (environmental) impacts on the natural resource base of host destinations. In practice, a tourism enterprise seeking a certification is required to meet specified standards and fixed criteria identified by the third-party environmental accreditation scheme offering the certificate (Mihalic, 2000). The procedures in green tourism certification may be broadly classified into six central steps, as shown below in Figure 1 and Table 2.



FIGURE 1 - GREEN TOURISM CERTIFICATION PROCESS
Source: Adapted from Sasidharan et al., 2002

The certification for the tourism industry would assess the environmental impacts of tourism enterprises through their entire life cycle. Owing to the multi-resource dependence of the tourism industry, life-cycle assessments would not be effective in identifying the entire scale and range of environmental impacts generated by tourism enterprises. Certification body would have to be well acquainted with the range of

impacts produced by various sectors of the tourism industry before performing the impact analysis and improvement analysis phases of life-cycle assessment (Tzschentke et al., 2008).

TABLE 2 - GREEN TOURISM CERTIFICATION PROCESSES IN DETAILS

Steps	Explanation of Processes
Step 1: <i>Tourism sector selection</i>	Strong involvement from a panel representing an collection of tourism stakeholders, including tourism planners and government officials, private tourism enterprises and associations, environmentally oriented non-governmental organizations, local citizens' groups and tourists. Stakeholders select a particular category from list of tourism sectors (tour-operators, travel agencies, resorts, hotels, and other tourism services).
Step 2: <i>Environmental impact evaluation</i>	All possible environmental impacts of the tourism sector would be documented. This step would include environmental impacts (e. g. air and water pollution, noise pollution, solid waste, changes in the composition of flora and fauna, soil erosion, geophysical changes, utilization of raw materials, and energy consumption) and next, the most critical environmental impacts produced by the tourism sector are identified.
Step 3: <i>Criteria development</i>	A preliminary index of criteria for reducing the environmental impacts associated with the tourism sector, identified in Step 2 are reviewed by the panel of tourism stakeholders involved in Step 1.
Step 4: <i>Final criteria selection</i>	Based on a consensus of the stakeholder reviewers, a final index of limited multiple attribute criteria for environmental impacts associated with the tourism sector is determined by the green tourism agency.
Step 5: <i>Green tourism certification</i>	A tourism enterprise applying for a green tourism award would be awarded only if the business either surpasses or at least meets the final criteria of environmental impacts associated with its sector of the tourism industry. If the tourism enterprise meets the final criteria, it would then pay a licensing fee to the agency for the use of its certification, symbol or logo its marketing and promotional efforts as well as day-to-day operations.
Step 6: <i>Periodic recertification</i>	The index of environmental impact criteria are re-evaluated, usually every three years to determine whether the existing criteria match technological and innovative advancements in the tourism industry. If new reinforced criteria (for inducing additional environmental improvements) are adopted by the green tourism agency, previously certified tourism enterprises would be required to apply for recertification.

Source: Adapted from Sasidharan et al., 2002

5. COMPARATIVE APPROACHES OF GREEN TOURISM

The concept of green tourism in developed countries such as in Japan is similar to rural tourism concept, where it is conducted within the natural environment, and offers tourists opportunities to experience local culture and rural lifestyle (Arahi, 1998). Rural residents are involved in agriculture and forestry industry play important roles in managing the environment. Green tourism in Japan is more concentrated on the sustainable environment of rural areas, and is managed by the residents, although the capital needed for businesses is shared by the central and local governments as well as rural residents. The key to revitalizing local economies is interaction with urban citizens, in which buying and

selling, such as the direct sale of agricultural products, is critical. While the sale of rural products is important, more emphasis is placed on human interactions. In this respect, programs providing urbanites opportunities to taste the host community's unique home-made food and to enjoy the farming experiences of the destination are important attractions, and a useful tool to promote exchanges between rural and urban citizens. Japan's green tourism is a type of rural tourism that utilizes both the rural culture, which has been cultivated under the long tradition of agriculture and forestry, as well as the nature of rural areas, such as forests and secondary nature in the form of farm lands as attractions (Knight, 1996; Arahi, 1998).

In United Kingdom, the Green Tourism Business Scheme was established in 1997 and covers the whole country. It is the largest and most established scheme of its type in the world with the main aims to ensure that the country remains at the forefront of sustainable tourism in the future. By using businesses accredited by the Green Tourism Business Scheme for the holiday or overnight stay, visitors or tourists can be assured that certain environmental criteria have been met by the accommodation establishments that they choose. The establishments will be assessed every two years against rigorous criteria, covering areas such as energy efficiency, waste minimisation and recycling, use of local produce, and support of public transport. Businesses that meet the required standard receive a Bronze, Silver or Gold award, based on their level of achievement. Improving sustainability whilst still delivering a high quality service is imperative, and all accommodation providers have to attain a star grading before they can gain a green grading.

In Malaysia, the practice of green tourism is relatively new and limited to encouraging the use of green products, providing training programs on environmental management and introducing waste management techniques such as recycling particularly by participating resorts (The Star, 2010). Participating resorts in green tourism trained and educated their staff to be eco-friendly although the comprehensiveness of the training program was not consistent among resorts (Abdul Khalid et al., 2010). The main aims are to conserve water, energy and minimize waste, and resorts that actively monitored this practice managed to substantially cut their operating costs. Examples included switching to energy efficient devices, using key cards, constructing water treatment plant, separating solid and liquid waste, and recycling. Resort guests were also encouraged to reuse their towels and bed linens with a notice in the room to save resources like water and laundry detergent. Some resorts also used sustainable building materials and local materials in the architectural designs and construction.

As Malaysia is rich in many species of wildlife, a few resorts to a certain extent do conserve or care for wildlife. Organic gardens or nursery do exist in some resorts where one resort even has a system that encourages each department to take turns to care for the garden (Abdul Khalid et al., 2010). A good

example in sustainable management practices is The Frangipani Langkawi Resort and Spa, which among others implement a water treatment plant to recycle the resort's waste water, use more sustainable building materials to reduce energy needs, create an organic garden to produce fresh vegetables for guests' consumption, and recycle or reuse existing leftover materials in other forms. See Figure 2 on the use of solar panels and Figure 3 on the cultivation of organic plants at the resort's premise, respectively. The resort, which has been tagged as 'The Greenest Resort in Malaysia', won a number of prestigious awards including 'Winner of ASEAN Green Hotel Standard Award 2008-2009', 'PATA Grand Award 2009 on Environmental Education', and 'Virgin Holiday Responsible Tourism Award 2008'.



FIGURE 2 – SOLAR PANELS AT FRANGIPANI RESORT



FIGURE 3 – ORGANIC PLANTS AT THE RESORT'S PREMISE

Educating local community and the public to promote green tourism and to develop environmentally responsible behavior could further be enhanced through active participation in environmental-related activities such as enrolment in nature-related activities, environmental seminars, campaigns and involvement in outdoor activities and hobbies. In order to ensure successful implementation of environmental education to the community and younger generation, the relevant stakeholders need to

fully equip themselves with adequate knowledge, proper attitude and appropriate consumption pattern and lifestyle (Aini et al., 2003).

6. CONCLUSIONS

By this green labeling, the industry can legitimately open up new areas for the more discriminating and wider range of the market and tourists can enjoy the holiday they want with a clear conscience. Yet only half of the green tourism product claims in the World Congress of Adventure Travel and Ecotourism were supported by factual details, and none of the advertisers made cash contributions to conservation (Buckley and Clough, 1997). A key problem is that few consumers understand environmental claims, and many claims are not regulated. Brands and labels are used by customers to form an opinion about the environmental soundness of such products. It is common in the tourism industry however, to include descriptive information about tourism products and eco-denominations for tourist products such as green, soft, sustainable or eco in the form of environmentally labels (Mihalic, 1996). The result is that many of the claims made on products are unverifiable, and/or vague, woolly, specious or misleading. Most are accompanied by a bewildering range of logos and symbols (NCC, 1996).

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