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An ocean of labels

Navigating the world of
tourism certification

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INTRODUCTION



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Over the past two decades the tourism industry has increasingly turned towards environmental certification as a tool to reflect its growing compliance, legitimacy and visibility in the sustainable field. However, the myriad of certification schemes (believed to be over 400 in total) has to some degree overwhelmed consumers and tourism groups alike. A study conducted by Consumer Focus revealed that the current versions of green labelling aren't working well to engage consumers.

Sustainability consultancies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and country or state-level tourism bodies have endeavoured to harmonize the situation while also developing yet more certification schemes.

This in itself has exacerbated the problem, and there remains a broad array of certification schemes on the market place, all of which face the challenge of visibility and recognition.

The EarthCheck Research Institute brings together leading scientists, postdoctoral fellows, staff and students working in and across university research centres around the globe. Its role is to identify the opportunities and challenges that are likely to impact on the tourism industry over the next five to ten years with a focus on scientific research, education and capacity building to solve real-world challenges.

We have attempted to map out diagrammatically some of the major sustainability certification schemes that are available in the tourism sector. We've also developed the "[The certification 4 way test](#)" which can be used for assessing a sustainability certification scheme, and a glossary of frequently used terms.

A FRAMEWORK AND PRINCIPLES FOR THE CERTIFICATION OF ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

The Mohonk Agreement lists the general principles and elements that should be the components of any certification program for sustainable tourism or the smaller niche of ecotourism.

The architecture of any certification programme

The objectives of the programme should be clearly stated. The development of a certification programme should be a participatory, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral process (including representatives from local communities, tourism businesses, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations, government, and others).

The Mohonk Agreement requires:

1. The programme should provide tangible benefits to tourism providers and a means for tourists to choose wisely.
2. The programme should provide tangible benefits to local communities and to conservation.
3. The programme should set minimum standards while encouraging and rewarding best practice.
4. There is a process to withdraw certification in the event of non-compliance.
5. The programme should establish control of existing/new seals/logos in terms of appropriate use, an expiration date and, in the event of loss of certification, withdrawal.
6. The programme should include provisions for technical assistance.
7. The programme should be designed such that there is motivation for continual improvement—both of the scheme and of the products/companies to be certified.

Criteria Framework

1. Criteria should provide the mechanism(s) to meet the stated objective(s).
2. Criteria used should meet and preferably exceed regulatory compliance.
3. Criteria should embody global best practice environmental, social and economic management.
4. Criteria should be adapted to recognising local/regional ecological, social and economic conditions and local sustainable development efforts.
5. Criteria should be subject to a periodic review.
6. Criteria should be principally performance-based and include environmental, social and economic management process elements.

CATEGORISATION OF CERTIFICATION SCHEMES

Certification schemes in the tourism sector can be categorised into:

1. **Performance-based:** focused on progress and compliance with both internal and external goals. The awarding body applies criteria, and benchmarks performance rather than intent.
2. **Process-based:** focused on setting up management systems within business, and using internal systems for monitoring and improving procedures and practices.

*IMEX Nature Research Survey**

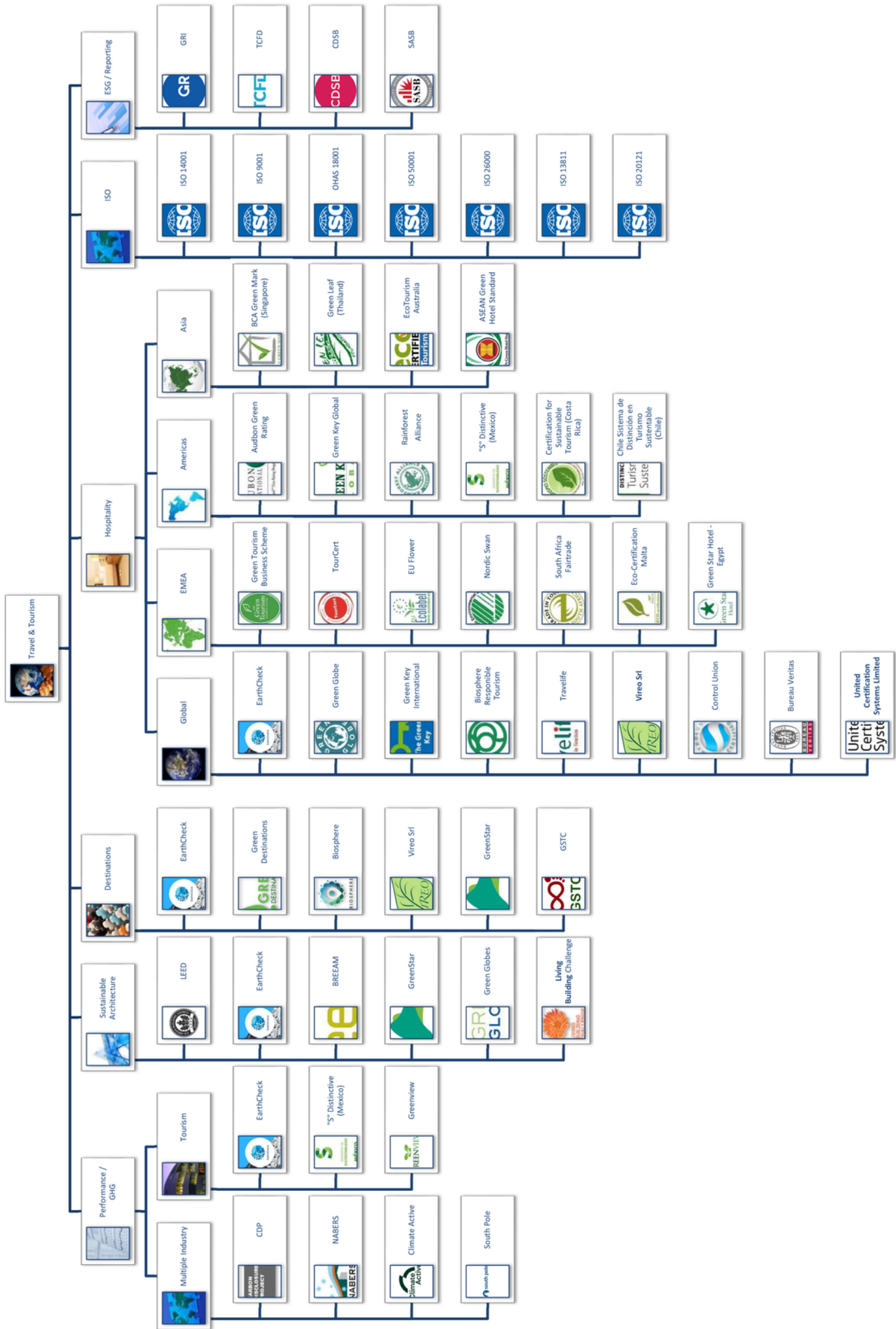
90%

of tourism and events industry professionals consider sustainability "important" or "extremely" important.

*According to the www.gds.earth

Performance-based and process-based certification schemes simultaneously strive for sustainability, but achieve it through different means.

They can, and often are, implemented alongside each other; process-based schemes aim to achieve greater sustainability through the implementation of an environmental management system, whereas performance-based schemes relate to specific actions needed to achieve specific sustainability objectives outlined by criteria.



CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES - REQUIREMENTS OF PROGRAMMES

Principles:

- Competence
- Impartiality
- Accessibility
- Transparency
- Confidentiality
- Independence of assessment
- Stability

Documentation and office procedures

Considerable emphasis should be placed on the need to produce evidence to back up claims. This should be acceptable to well managed operations.

Programmes should **DOCUMENT EVERYTHING** – especially rules, procedures, decisions

Scheme integrity and independence

The certification body should be independent of the parties being certified and of technical assistance and assessment bodies (i.e. administrative structures for technical assistance, assessment and auditing should avoid conflicts of interest).

Quality Management System (QMS)

The programme should have a specific management system in place, that is documented in a manual (e.g. ISO 9001). The manual should be used internally to guide the organisations employees through what must be met and maintained in order to ensure customer satisfaction, continuous improvement and provide the necessary instructions that create an empowered work force.

The manual should be used to show the integrity of the QMS and to highlight that the organisation will maintain and focus on customer interaction, leadership, engagement of people, process approach, improvement, evidence-based decision making, relationship management.

It should be noted that requirements of the management system manual are quite specific and some schemes may not be meeting all of this.

Competence of auditors

The programme must be able to demonstrate that auditors have sufficient skills specifically relating to the product concerned (sustainable tourism). Records of experience, qualifications, training received must be provided. Auditors should not take final decisions and make awards.

CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES – REQUIREMENTS OF PROGRAMMES

Transparency

Information about certification procedures, evaluation process and the standards used must be publicly available (could be purchasable at a reasonable price).

Auditing process

- Documentary evidence
- Site visit
- Report of audit
- Opportunity to rectify non-conformity
- Decision making committee (not auditor)
- Post-certification surveillance
- Re-evaluation is required within a declared period

Independence from advice and consultancy

The certification body shall not “give advice or provide consultancy services to the applicant as to methods of dealing with matters which are barriers to the certification requested” and shall not “provide any other products or services which could compromise the confidentiality, objectivity or impartiality of its process and decisions”. Activities of related bodies should not “affect the confidentiality, objectivity or impartiality of its certifications”.

Appeals

Must have a documented procedure for the handling of appeals, complaints and disputes. Appropriate action taken. Full records kept – including action and result.

Adequate cover for any liabilities.

Control of certificate / label

Documented policy on use and clear guidance given to certificated enterprises. Actions taken against inappropriate use. Documented policy and procedure on withdrawal of certificate and evidence of implementation.

GLOSSARY

Accreditation – The certification of the certifier, whereby competence, authority or credibility is presented.

Certification – A procedure that independently audits and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards. It awards a logo seal to those that meet or exceed baseline criteria or standards that are prescribed by the program.

Ecolabel – A labelling system for consumer products and services that are made in a certain fashion to avoid detrimental effects on the environment. The labelling entity is most often the independent certification entity.

Eco tourism – Responsible travel to fragile, pristine and unusually protected areas that strive to be low impact and small scale. Aims to educate the traveller, benefit the local economy and conserve the environment. Generally speaking, it focuses on volunteering, personal growth and environmental responsibility.

Environmental auditing – Independent third party assessment of the current status of an organisations compliance with the various certifications, laws and regulations in circulation.

Performance-based certification – Uses externally determined criteria and benchmarks allowing for easy comparison among certification programs. These are applied uniformly across the sector and measure achievement, not intent.

Process-based certification – Focused on setting up environmental management systems and using these internal systems for monitoring and improving procedures and practices. The certifiers do not set performance standards but award eco-labels for the accomplishment of internal goals.

Procurement – Green certified products and services purchased by organisations.

Rating – The evaluation and assessment of a hotels sustainability practices, in terms of quality. Allows for ratings to be compared between companies or annually within companies.

Sustainable Tourism – Committed to having a low impact on the environment and local, regional and global (ie includes travel (and aviation)) culture. The aim of sustainable tourism is to ensure that development is a positive experience for local people, tourism companies and tourists themselves. The key pillars are environmental integrity, social justice and economic development.

Triple bottom line – Spectrum of values and criteria for measuring organisational success in economic, social and environmental areas. In the private sector a commitment to corporate social responsibility implies a commitment to some form of triple bottom line reporting. Increasingly a quadrupole bottom line also includes cultural responsibilities

Verification – A quality control process used for checking that a product, service, or system meets specifications and that it fulfils its intended purpose. Sometimes involves an independent third party review to ensure the validation is unbiased and professional.



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