

The connection between sustainable tourism and certification systems

Loredana DRAGOMIR^{1,*}, Mirela MAZILU¹, Roxana MARINESCU¹

¹ Faculty of Sciences, Department of Geography, University of Craiova, Romania

* Corresponding author: loredana_iori94@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The subject of certification and standards is vast, complex and at the same time topical, so the best is to begin by clarifying the terms. A "standard" by definition is a set of guidelines that helps organizations to develop, manage and control everything, from processes and products to services and systems. These guidelines meet specific requirements in areas such as efficiency, quality and safety.

On the other hand, the certification is the process that verifies whether an organization, product or tourist service meets the specific standards of providing a written guarantee (the commercial logo), the latter representing a good way to allow customers to identify products that deliver higher quality service levels. At the same time, it participates in increasing the confidence in ecotourism products both nationally and internationally, but also in promoting the concept and principles of ecotourism at local, regional and national level; it contributes to the sustainable achievement of destinations and to the growth of shared knowledge with regard to a certification system, resulting in the benefits brought by it.

In order to certify an organization, product or tourist service that meets certain standards, accredited third-party certification bodies must verify that the requirements are met through an audit process. Only after the successful completion of the audit process, an official certificate of an organization can be issued, and the admitted company agrees to maintain the systems according to the standard requirements of the continuous improvement.

But why do you need to submit to the certification process activity and to all its expenses? What are the benefits of a company or its customers? The third-party certification shows to current and potential customers that an organization is committed to quality and has taken enough time to build and maintain a culture in its processes to give customers the same thing, i.e. the quality of the travel product.

Keywords: *sustainable development, sustainable tourism, certification system, standards, accreditation, certification*

Rezumat. Conexiunea dintre turismul durabil și sistemele de certificare

Subiectul certificării și al standardelor este unul vast, complex și în același timp de actualitate, de aceea, cel mai bine este să se înceapă cu clarificarea termenilor. Un "standard", prin definiție, este un set de linii directoare care ajută organizațiile să dezvolte, să gestioneze și să controleze totul, de la procese și produse la servicii și sisteme. Aceste orientări satisfac cerințe specifice în domenii precum eficiența, calitatea și siguranța.

La rândul său, certificarea este procesul ce verifică dacă o organizație, un produs sau serviciu turistic îndeplinește standardele specifice acordării unei garanții scrise (logo-ul comercial), acesta reprezentând o bună modalitate de a le permite clienților să identifice produsele ce le asigură un nivel de calitate al serviciilor mai ridicat. Totodată aceasta participă la creșterea gradului de încredere în produsele ecoturistice atât pe plan național, cât și pe plan internațional, dar și la promovarea conceptului și a principiilor ecoturismului la nivel local, regional și național; la realizarea durabilă a destinațiilor și creșterea cunoștințelor în ceea ce privește un sistem de certificare, reprezentând beneficiile aduse de acesta.

Pentru a certifica o organizație, un produs sau serviciu turistic ce atinge anumite standarde, organismele terțe acreditate pentru certificare trebuie să verifice dacă cerințele sunt îndeplinite printr-un proces de audit. Numai după finalizarea procesului de audit cu succes se poate emite un certificat oficial al unei organizații, compania admisă fiind de acord să mențină sistemele în conformitate cu cerințele standardului în perfecționare continuă.

Dar de ce este necesar să vă supuneți activității și cheltuielilor procesului de certificare? Care sunt beneficiile unei companii sau al clienților acesteia? Certificarea acreditată de la terți demonstrează clienților actuali și potențiali că o organizație este dedicată calității și și-a acordat timpul necesar să construiască și să mențină o cultură în cadrul proceselor sale pentru a le oferi clienților același lucru, calitatea produsului turistic.

Cuvinte-cheie: *dezvoltare durabilă, turism durabil, sistem de certificare, standarde, acreditare, certificare*

Introduction

This paper aims to present the theoretical aspects of sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification, but also the link between the three functions on which a credible certification system is based.

The interesting topic which is in the spotlight of tourism specialists, the ecotourism certification was also addressed by authors such as Martha Honey (2002) in „Ecotourism and certification. Setting Standards in Practice” or X. Font și R.C. Buckley (2001) in „Tourism Ecolabelling. Certification and

Promotion of Sustainable Management”, which present the subject from different perspectives.

In other words, sustainable tourism is both a resource that meets the needs of tourists and local communities, as well as a way of protecting the environment with the help of actors who continue to actively engage in a responsible attitude towards the environment.

Sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification have been addressed in the scientific literature, either in several ways or from different perspectives, such as the complex approach of the author Mirela Mazilu (2011) in various works such as „Turism și dezvoltare

durabilă", where she defines sustainable tourism as a form of tourism that "allows the development of tourism and leisure activities in a country, region or tourist destination, taking into account the basic principles of sustainable development, showing respect for the environment, for people and for the local economy and culture of the inbound tourist region". By addressing the theme of ecotourism certification from conceptual clarifications, certification criteria, to their application to a particular destination, in works such as „Aspects Regarding The Romanian Certification In Ecotourism Destinations” (2017a) or „Certification standard for tourism in the Danube region” (2017b), Mazilu et al. state that "some systems strongly rely on a so-called third-party assessment, with an independent auditor who verifies the characteristics of the entity to be certified on the spot. Some systems choose an easier approach based on self-evaluation".

The certification is defined as a voluntary procedure that evaluates and provides a written guarantee that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards. It provides a commercial logo to those who meet or exceed basic standards.

Certification is a way to ensure that an activity or product meets certain standards. Within the tourism industry, various organizations have developed certification programs that measure different aspects of tourism: (a) quality, for the entire tourism industry, (b) sustainability also for all sectors and (c) ecotourism, in natural ecosystems, protected or fragile ecosystems, which may include local communities that meet the definition above.

Tourism is a cultural, social and economic phenomenon that involves the movement of persons to countries or cities other than the place of residence to undertake personal or professional activities. These people are called tourists, visitors or excursionists depending on the length of their stay.

Tourism has an impact both on the natural and anthropogenic environment, as well as on the local population, tourists, but also on the economy. Due to these multiple impacts, the wide range and diversity of production factors needed to produce the goods and services acquired by visitors, and the broad spectrum of stakeholders involved or affected by tourism, a holistic approach is required to developing, managing and monitoring tourism (fig. 1).

Taking into account the limits of tourism development, according to the already known formula "too much tourism kills tourism", mass tourism causes the unpleasant negative effects such as:

- ✚ destruction of the environment, historical monuments, the rhythm of local life;
- ✚ damage to the natural, cultural and social environment of the overburdened tourist area,

the ending of the "tourist colonization" of some regions;

- ✚ addiction on political conflicts;
- ✚ seasonal tour operator specializations, unprofitable phenomenon in the practice of tourism, which are changeable from year to year.

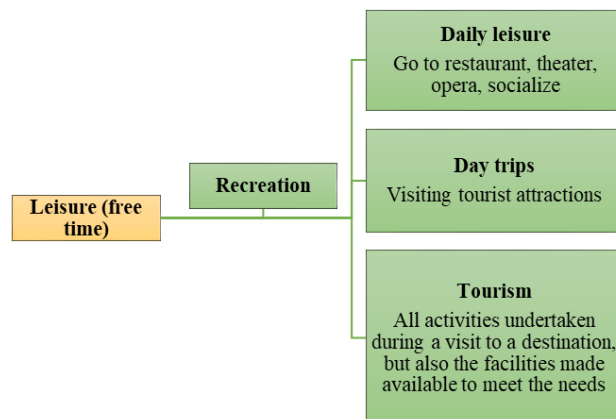


Fig. 1: The conceptual graph of the notion of tourism

Methodology

The study is based on an in-depth documentation of the content of specialized books and, in particular, the consultation of web pages, especially Google Trends. This method is widely used in the analysis of all tourism sectors, as the role of the Internet as a source of information is increasingly important. The number of tourists using it to collect information about possible destinations, their tourist potential, whether or not they have certification from certification systems and many other details is growing, and tourism service providers consider the Internet to be one of the most important marketing means.

The article aims to highlight the link between sustainable tourism and certification systems through conceptual clarification of terms, using comparative methods, inductive analysis, etc. Also the statistical method was combined with the mathematical processing to obtain concrete data related to the perception and image of sustainable tourism.

What do we mean by sustainable development?

The concept of sustainable development was stated by I.U.C.N. (International Union for the Conservation of Nature), as following:

"Sustainable development is a process that runs without producing, exhausting resources, ensuring development. Tourism resources must be capitalized at a rate identical to their renewal and abandonment when the resource is regenerated very slowly to

replace it with another, with greater regenerative power" (Mazilu, 2011, p. 18).

Theobald F. William defined the sustainable development of tourism as the action which implies "directing the management of all resources in such way in order to meet economic, social and aesthetic needs while preserving cultural integrity, ecological, essential processes, biological diversity and life support systems" (Gheorghilaş, 2014, p.62).

When talking about sustainable development, it usually means that we can carry out activities that meet the needs of the present, without compromising future generations, following three main aspects:

- From an **ecological** point of view - the activity minimizes damage to the environment (flora, fauna, water, soils, energy consumption, contamination, etc.) and tries to bring positive benefits to the environment by protecting and preserving it.
- From a **social and cultural** point of view - the activity does not harm and can revitalize the social structure or the culture of the community in which it is located.
- **Economically** speaking - activity does not just start and then quickly dies because of bad business practices; it continues to contribute to the economic well-being of the local community. A sustainable business should benefit its owners, employees and neighbours.

What is sustainable tourism?

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has defined sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of the present and future economic, social and environmental impacts that address the needs of visitors, industry, the environment and host communities."

Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles address the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development as well as an appropriate balance to be established between these three dimensions to ensure long-term sustainability (fig. 2).

So, sustainable tourism should make the best use of environmental resources which is a key element in tourism development, maintain essential ecological processes and contribute to the preservation of natural heritage and biodiversity. It should respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, preserve the built and living cultural and traditional heritage, and contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance. And it should ensure long-term, viable economic transactions that deliver economic benefits to all stakeholders and are

distributed fairly, including stable jobs and social services for residents.

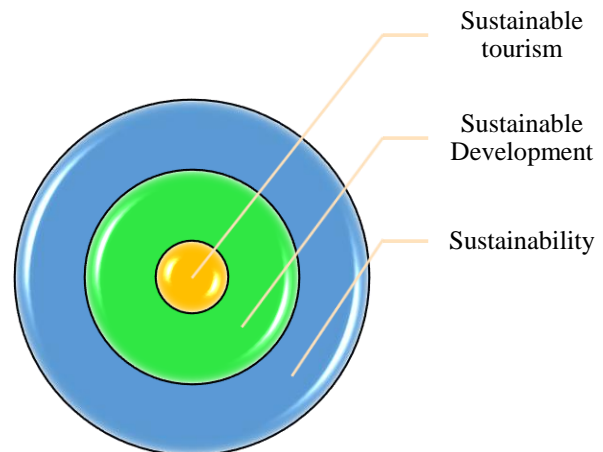


Fig. 2: The conceptual framework of the notion of sustainable tourism

The development of sustainable tourism requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders as well as strong political leadership to ensure broad participation and consensus building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process that requires constant monitoring of the impact, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary.

Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a significant experience for tourists, increasing their awareness of sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism among them.

Sustainable tourism is not a distinct or special form of tourism. All forms of tourism should rather strive to be sustainable, including what is known as "mass tourism".

There are no successful techniques in sustainable tourism, but we can take into account some directions for action, such as:

- ✚ Develop a plan for sustainable tourism development;
- ✚ Promoting sustainable tourism;
- ✚ Better communication within sustainable development;
- ✚ Foster sustainable development as a tourist fructification agent;
- ✚ Initiating tourism in sustainable development for quality tourism.

The guarantee of success for such tourism implies:

- ✚ Stimulate private initiative in tourism and create a framework to support local tourism;
- ✚ To capitalize the touristic potential of the county by developing, diversifying and promoting the tourist supply;
- ✚ Sustainable development of tourism through: rational use of tourism resources and promotion of

- conservation and environmental protection measures in accordance with the provisions of national environmental legislation;
- + Maximizing tourist potential by integrating tourism with other regional industrial areas;
 - + Support for local institutions and operators to develop and modify resources according to community requirements;
 - + Development of the tourism industry through direct investment in the creation and construction of general and tourism infrastructure objectives;
 - + Reviving tourism through effective local initiatives;
 - + Stimulate local initiatives in tourism by creating mutual interests;
 - + Maximizing economic benefits for the population due to the development of tourism in order to achieve economic sustainability;
 - + Developing tourism through the qualitative increase of tourism services in order to attract new visitors;
 - + Developing poorly used tourism potential;
 - + Improving environmental conditions in tourist areas;
 - + Improving the image of tourist areas;
 - + Development and modernization of transport infrastructure;
 - + Showing off the natural, architectural and cultural heritage through specific actions;
 - + Promoting tourism for leisure and sports.

What is a Certification System?

A certification system describes the rules, procedures and management for certification. It sets out specific requirements for a product, process, system or body and uses a third party to ensure that the specified requirements have been demonstrated.

A credible certification system is based on three distinct functions: standards, certification, and accreditation (fig. 3).

A **standard** can be defined as a set of technical guidelines, instructions for designers, manufacturers and users. Standards promote safety, reliability, productivity and efficiency in almost all industries that rely on components or technical equipment. Standards can run from a few paragraphs to hundreds of pages and are written by experts with knowledge and expertise in a particular field that is in several committees.

Standards represent a way of communication for producers and users. They serve as a common language, defining quality and establishing safety criteria. Costs are lower if procedures are standardized; training is also simplified; interchangeability is another reason.

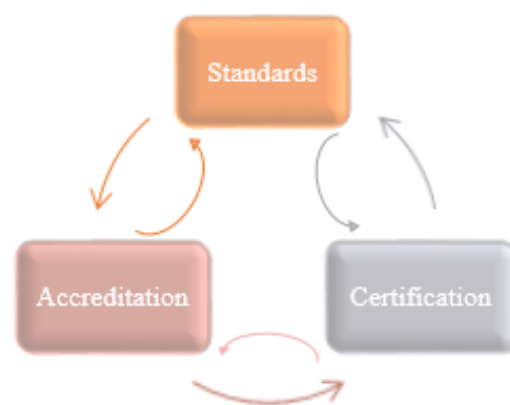


Fig. 3: The three functions on which a credible certification system is based

The standard setting is the process of defining certification requirements in collaboration with stakeholders and is coordinated by a standardization body.

One way to identify businesses that genuinely practice ecotourism or other forms of sustainable tourism is **certification**. This is a very good way to attest the fact that a product or tourist activity meets certain standards.

Certification is defined as a voluntary procedure that evaluates, audits, and provides a written guarantee that a facility, product, process or tourism service meets specific standards. Those who meet or exceed basic standards are offered a commercial logo. Certification is one of the tools that motivates tourism businesses to improve their economic, social and environmental performance while being rewarded, tangible or intangible for these achievements.

The certification highlights three main areas: certification of systems, products and staff. The goal of the certification is to demonstrate that the specified requirements are met. The requirements are usually based on international standards.

Certification can be a useful tool to add credibility by demonstrating that the product or service of these institutions responds to customer expectations. For certain industries, certification is a legal or contractual requirement.

Certification sets standards and contributes to the genuine distinction between ecotourism and sustainable tourism businesses. This helps protecting the integrity of these concepts.

Certification is not a goal itself. It is one of the tools to motivate companies and others to improve their environmental, social and economic performance while rewarding them to do so (fig. 4). These rewards are sometimes tangible and sometimes they are not.

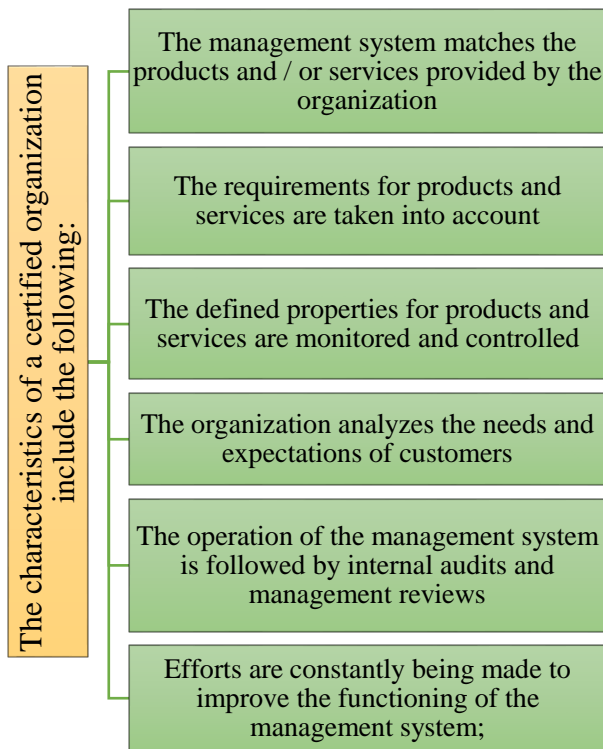


Fig. 4: The characteristics of a certified organization

According to the World Tourism Organization, the world currently has over 200 sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs whose competences include aspects related to the impact of tourism on the economic, socio-cultural and environmental level. Most programs evaluate accommodation, only a few programs certifying sectors and other aspects of the tourism industry.

From the point of view of the geographical distribution of tourism certification systems, we can see that Europe has half of the total number of sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs (fig. 5).

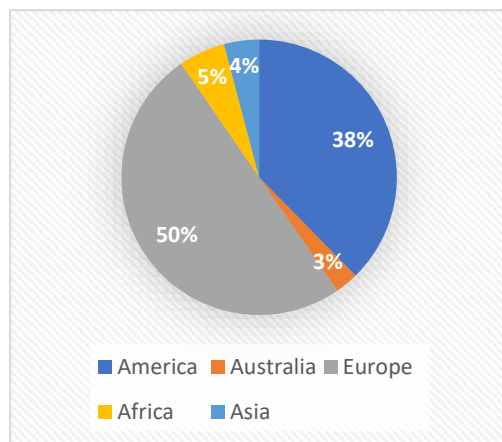


Fig. 5: Geographical distribution of tourism certification systems (2019)

Europe is the continent where the ecological certification of tourism services began for the first time with the Blue Flag Campaign for Beaches in Denmark in 1987 (currently around the world).

Between 1992 and 2002, over 60 ecotourism certification programs were developed, according to an ECOTRANS study requested by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2013).

Most of them were set up in Europe. Initially most of the systems rated only accommodation units, then they began to expand their area by certifying all sectors and aspects of tourism.

Accreditation - official recognition by an independent body, generally known as an accreditation body, that a certification body operates in accordance with international standards.

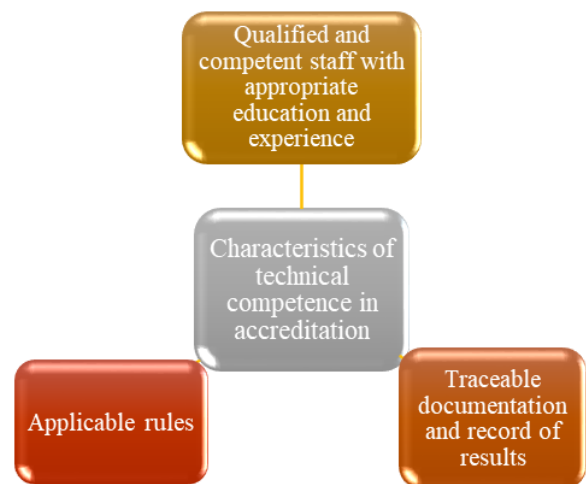


Fig. 6: Characteristics of technical competence in accreditation

Accreditation is the determination and demonstration of competence. The body requesting accreditation defines the area in which its competence is assessed. Accreditation is granted for the domain in which the applicant's competence is demonstrated. The purpose of the accreditation is to demonstrate the reliability of the results and / or the credibility of the certificates issued by the body. There are several requirements for accreditation standards, depending on the nature of the activities (fig. 6).

Accreditation is made to evaluate both the management system and the technical operations, while the purpose of certification is to verify how well the requirements of the management system are met. An organization that carries out certification may also be accredited; this demonstrates the competence of certification. However, certification itself does not demonstrate that an organization is capable of delivering reliable results or products, as certification standards do not include technical competence requirements.

Conclusion

Tourism is a volatile, complex and increasingly accessible industry. The tourism phenomenon is omnipresent all over the world, so its social, economic and environmental impacts are also global. These effects may be positive or negative. Sustainable tourism typically aims to have a minimal negative impact, minimize damage and optimize economic benefits. Ecotourism, a type of sustainable tourism, usually takes place in largely intact natural areas that tend to be environmentally sensitive and often socially sensitive (especially if local groups are involved), so the potential impact may be even greater. Ecotourism aims to expand the positive impact, through special attention to conservation, benefits for the host population and visitor education.

Some businesses and/or destinations really do meet these goals, others claim falsely and others do not care. Some would like to meet those goals, but they don't know exactly how to do it. One way to reward businesses that truly respect these goals is by granting credible recognition outside of them, certification being a tool to do so.

Certification leads to increased industry standards in terms of health, safety, environment, social stability, as well as reducing the cost of environmental protection, by protecting the environment and limiting the negative impact on it, protecting cultural and social values of local human values.

Finally, we can say that the current socio-economic environment requires orientation towards a sustainable, ecological business. Tourism companies are motivated to implement a quality certification system to obtain cost savings and global recognition of the quality of ecotourism services.

In this context, by implementing an ecotourism quality certification system, companies in the area could get a better image and a differentiation from competition, resulting in beneficial effects on the market by reducing costs and improving

performance. Thus, certification systems can become a source of income through the loyalty of ecotourism users.

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