

Certification and promotion of sustainable tourism: consumers attitude towards EU Ecolabel

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Abstract

The potential of ecotourism certification system has a promising development, considering increasing demands for environmentally friendly accommodation facilities for tourists on their vacations. The importance of the certification system and its impact or influence on the economic, social environment but also on the natural environment is a very big one. The opportunities offered by the certification activity are very wide, offering a number of advantages to the local communities, but also to the tour operators in the areas where such a system is implemented. That is why the standards regarding the ecological labeling have been developed and have been introduced in the national and regional systems of life cycle analysis of the products.

The goal of the paper is to highlight the current situation, possibilities and approaches to ecological certification in tourism in Romania and to bring to the fore some fundamental elements regarding the ecological label. To determine the current attitude of the Romanian consumers towards the ecological labeling of the products, a questionnaire was carried out. It focused on identifying the perception of Romanian consumers towards the ecological label and how it influences their buying behavior.

Based on the results of this research, we could observe the high level of notoriety of eco-labels among Romanian consumers, but also a nebulosity regarding the notion of eco-label, the uncertainty making its presence among our respondents.

Keywords: *eco-label, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, certification, consumers*

Rezumat. Certificarea și promovarea turismului durabil: atitudinea consumatorilor față de eticheta ecologică a UE

Potențialul sistemului de certificare ecoturistică are o dezvoltare promițătoare, având în vedere cererile crescânde de facilități de cazare ecologice pentru turiști în vacanța lor. Importanța sistemului de certificare și impactul sau influența acestuia asupra mediului economic, social, dar și asupra mediului natural este foarte mare. Oportunitățile oferite de activitatea de certificare sunt foarte largi, oferind o serie de avantaje comunităților locale, dar și operatorilor de turism din zonele în care este implementat un astfel de sistem. De aceea au fost elaborate standardele referitoare la etichetarea ecologică și au fost introduse în sistemele naționale și regionale de analiză a ciclului de viață al produselor. Scopul lucrării este de a evidenția situația actuală, posibilitățile și abordările certificării ecologice în turismul din România și aducerea în prim plan a unor elemente fundamentale privind eticheta ecologică. Pentru a determina atitudinea actuală a consumatorilor români față de etichetarea ecologică a produselor, a fost aplicat un chestionar. Acesta s-a concentrat pe identificarea percepției consumatorilor români față de eticheta ecologică și a modului cum aceasta influențează comportamentul de cumpărare al acestora.

Pe baza rezultatelor acestei cercetări, am putut observa nivelul ridicat de notorietate al etichetelor ecologice în rândul consumatorilor români, dar și o nebulozitate în ceea ce privește noțiunea de etichetă ecologică, incertitudinea făcându-și prezența în rândul respondenților noștri.

Cuvinte-cheie: *eticheta ecologică, turism durabil, ecoturism, certificare, consumatori*

Introduction

Tourism, being the world largest industry with a 6% growth to 1,4 billion international tourist arrivals worldwide in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019) is highly connected to everyday and business practices and territories. Tourism has also become the most dynamically developing industry, being also one of the key factors in the development of regions. As such, moral concerns have been raised over the impact of tourism, as well as the hospitality industry, in terms of sustaining social life and the natural environment for the generations to come (Lovelock and Lovelock, 2013).

In terms of the tourism industry, it is considered to be better for the environment than other industries, but its size and large-scale presence in recent years have had negative effects on the

environment, both physically and socially, so that in some destinations it has led to increased demands for a sustainable approach to tourism. Tourism has also a growing importance in the world economic, this is why in connection with it, the topic of environmental sustainability of tourism is discussed ever more often (Fulekaret. al, 2014, Rogers et.al., 2008, Mazilu 2011, Lóránt & Tünde, 2010, Jugmohan et.al. 2020).

Tourism is an activity dependent on the environment. The environment is a fundamental element of the tourist experience, as tourists are looking for attractive, different or distinct environments, which can support specific tourist activities. At the same time, tourism is an avid resource; its development and practice consume resources, create waste and require significant infrastructure development, all of which can frequently, but not always or inevitably, contribute to

reducing, degrading or destroying tourism potential. Therefore, maintaining a healthy and attractive environment is essential for the long-term success of tourism, both in itself and, more importantly, as a potential vehicle for social and economic development. In short, environmental sustainability is a prerequisite for optimizing the tourism development potential.

Sustainable tourism is considered to be an overall concept relevant to tourism, because it emphasizes achieving a special combination of numbers and types of visitors, the cumulative effect of their activities at a given destination, together with actions of the hospitality businesses, can continue into the foreseeable future without damaging the quality of the environment on which the activities are based.

The connection between the environment and tourism is directly proportional, so it reflects an immediate consequence on the tourist activity, and the quality of the environment. They are very sensitive to the influence of human behaviour and management decisions as well as to natural processes of ecology and the emerging science and technology of measuring environmental impacts and responding to them.

In an idealistic way, it was believed that through proper planning and management, not only could tourism be developed in harmony with the environment, but it could also be a process of mutual support. Therefore, the focus has been on the development of sustainable tourism as a means of maintaining a balanced relationship between tourism and the environment on which it depends, and also on implementing an ecotourism certification system, especially for tourist accommodation facilities and services, camping sites or destinations.

Literature review

Ecotourism certification systems

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 can be used as projects stimulating tourism subjects to increase their economic, social, and environmental performance while being rewarded, tangible or intangible for these achievements. The topic of certification has been addressed by many authors in their paperworks (Dinu et.al., 2012, Nicolae et.al., 2013, Dragomir et al., 2018; Mazilu et.al. 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Mazilu, Dumitrescu, 2012, Ryglóvá, 2007).

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. Those standards were developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) as a basis for the international recognition of certification standards and programs. The GSTC criteria serve as global benchmarks for sustainability in tourism.

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

EU Ecolabel or EU Flower

The EU Ecolabel is the voluntary environment scheme of the European Union. This label of ecological excellence is granted to products and services that meet high environmental standards throughout their life cycle: from the extraction of raw materials, to production, distribution and disposal.

The products and services that have received the ecolabel bear the well-known logo of the European flower that allows consumers - including public and private purchasers - to easily identify organic products (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The logo of EU Ecolabel

Source:

<https://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/images/ecolabel.png>

Even if the logo is simple, the environmental criteria for obtaining it are harsh and only the best products, which are more environmentally friendly, have the right to carry the EU Ecolabel.

An eco-friendly accommodation unit of the EU has: reduced production of energy, water and waste, favors the use of renewable resources and less dangerous substances and promotes environmental education and communication.

An individual product / service must comply with all the criteria for the award of the European Ecolabel. Regardless of the product / service group, environmental requirements refer to air quality, water quality, soil protection, reducing the amount of waste generated, saving energy, managing natural resources, preventing global warming, protecting the

ozone layer, environmental safety, noise and biodiversity.

The criteria underlying the award of the European Ecolabel encourage the application of best practices in order to protect the environment and population health and to recycle the products.

Since 1992, since the start of eco-labeling, the number of companies that have applied for and received the ecolabel has grown every year, reaching 1,575 in March 2019, showing an increase since 2016 by 88%. A high frequency of eco-label use is found in France (307) and Germany (287) as we can see in figure no. 2, while, at the opposite pole we can find Romania and Finland with a number of 16 licenses (fig. 2).

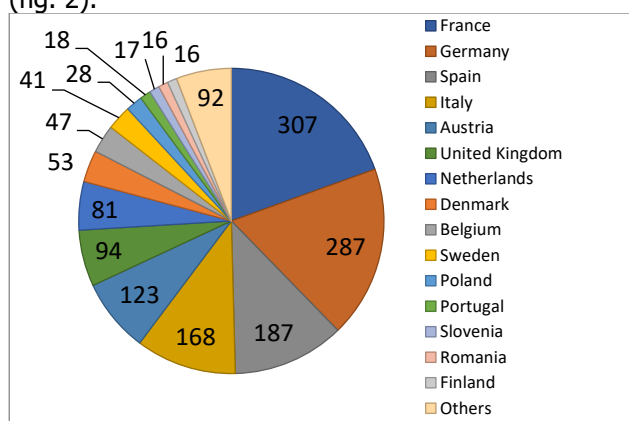


Fig. 2: EU Ecolabel Licenses Per Country

Source: authors, based on European Commission, 2019

Regarding the distribution of ecological labels according to the product/services group it is observed that tourist and accommodation services hold the first place with a percentage of 18% (282 eco-labeled products), followed by hard surface cleaning products with a percentage of 17,5% and and tissue paper with 11% (Fig. 3).

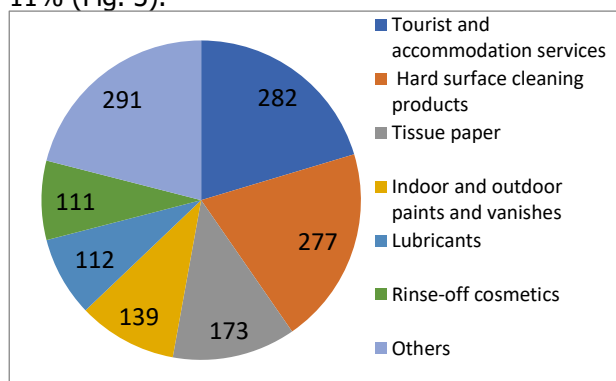


Fig. 3: The EU Flower by product/service group

Source: authors, based on European Commission, 2019

The use of the eco-label confers a number of advantages:

- it aims at a sustainable society, as it contributes to reducing pollution, protecting and conserving the environment;
- guarantees a high degree of reliability and credibility;
- contributes to improving the image of the manufacturer;
- Ecolabel is a good marketing tool, allows the development of these products at European level.

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. The article aims to highlight the importance of ecotourism certification systems in the process of protecting the environment with respect to the impacts of tourism on the natural and socio-cultural environment, especially from the view of tourist services providers, through conceptual clarification of terms, using comparative methods, inductive analysis, etc.

The research was carried out through a structured questionnaire, based on questions with pre-defined forms and orders. In this case, we can talk about a classic research, after the way of communicating with the respondents the questionnaires being administered personally. The questionnaire was applied through online sources, being emailed to participants. They belong to two different categories: people with studies in the field of tourism, most of them being students or graduates of the Geography department from Craiova, and the second category being people who do not have studies in the field of tourism, but whose likes to travel.

A total of 100 people answered this questionnaire, 30% of the participants being male and 70% female. The age of the participants varied, the category with the highest percentage (50%) being those aged between 18 and 34 years, followed by those aged between 35-44 years (30%) and those between 45-64 years (20 %), the category over 65 years old having no respondent.

Results and discussion

The product groups for which criteria for awarding the Romanian eco-label are established are similar to the European ones. Also, the criteria for awarding the eco-label, promote above all: reducing energy consumption; reducing water consumption; reducing the amount of waste; favoring the use of renewable resources and substances less harmful to the environment; promoting communication and education in the field of environmental protection.

It is necessary to emphasize the lack of an "ecological culture" of the Romanians, as well as the lack of familiarity of the Romanian consumer with this type of products, but also their interest in the ecological label. This aspect is reflected by the attitude of the Romanian consumers towards the ecological labeling of the products.

We present below a series of aspects regarding: the importance given to the factors of choosing the accommodation unit; the level of recognition of the eco-label; the importance of the eco-label in the purchase decision; the most important attributes specified by the ecological label; awareness of the symbol of the EU eco-label.

Regarding the importance given to the factors of choosing the accommodation unit the main reasons for choosing an accommodation unit are the quality of the services (64%), followed by the price (22%), and with 7% of the answers, two attributes were situated on a level playing field (recommendations and the classification category) meanwhile, no one has chosen certification as an factor of choice of accommodation unit. Romanian customers are willing to pay more for comfort, image, prestige, as determining factors in choosing the accommodation unit (Fig.4).

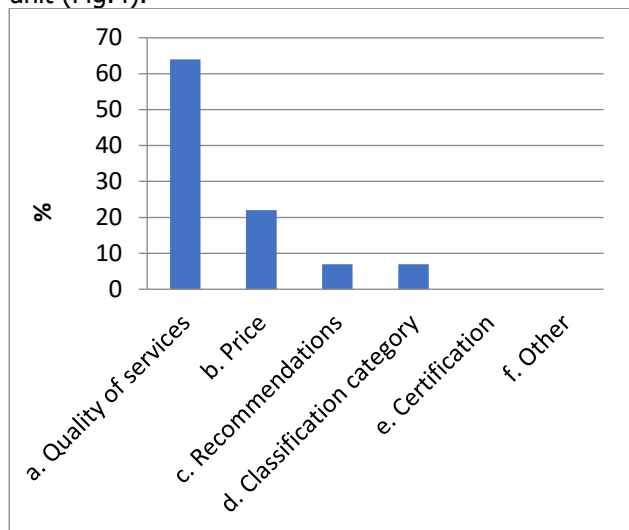


Fig. 4: The importance given to the factors of choosing the accommodation unit

Source: authors, based on research

Regarding the level of recognition of the eco-label, most of the respondents heard about the eco-label (79%), while 21% did not hear about the eco-label (Fig. 5). The same goes with the awareness of the symbol of the EU eco-label, the share of those who have seen and heard about the eco-label symbol is equal to those who have heard of the eco-label (79%), and only 21% have not seen and heard about the eco-label symbol (Fig. 6).

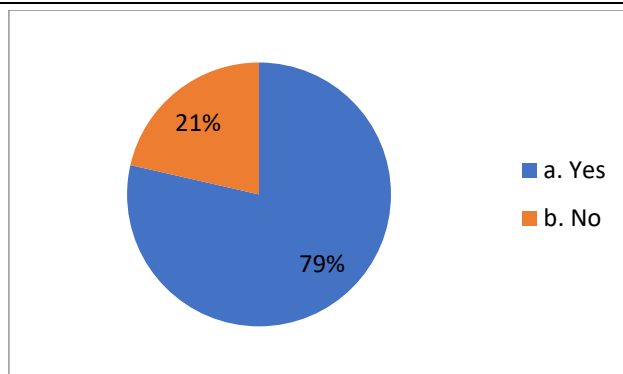


Fig. 5: The level of recognition of the eco-label

Source: authors, based on research

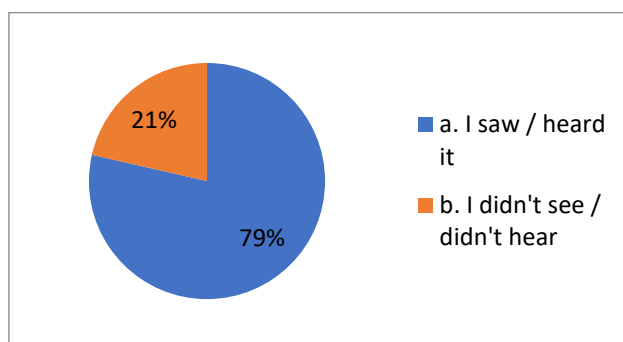


Fig. 6: The level of awareness of the eco-label symbol

Source: authors, based on research

When asked: Some products have an eco-label that certifies their ecological character. Which statement best characterizes this aspect? among the responses of the Romanian consumers, there is a relatively high share of those who consider that ecological labeling plays an important role in purchasing decisions (50%). It is also relevant that the share of Romanian consumers who consider that eco-labeling does not play an important role in purchasing decisions is of high concern (21%), while the share of those who declare that they do not know or do not answer this question is of 29%. This makes us realize that the Romanian consumers understand very little the impact that the ecological label has on the environment (Fig.7).

Subsequent to giving minimal explanations regarding the eco-label and the related measures, the subjects had to indicate the attributes of the impact of the eco-label. With 43% of the answers, the attribute "increases the degree of trust in the accommodation unit" is the first place, followed by "improves the image of the accommodation unit" with a weight of 36% and "is a guarantee of the services offered" by 14%. While, there were also respondents who felt that it had no noticeable impact (7%) (Fig. 8).

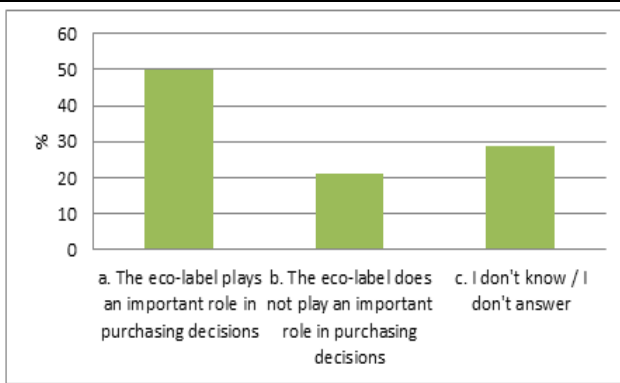


Fig. 7: The importance of the eco-label in the purchase decision

Source: authors, based on research

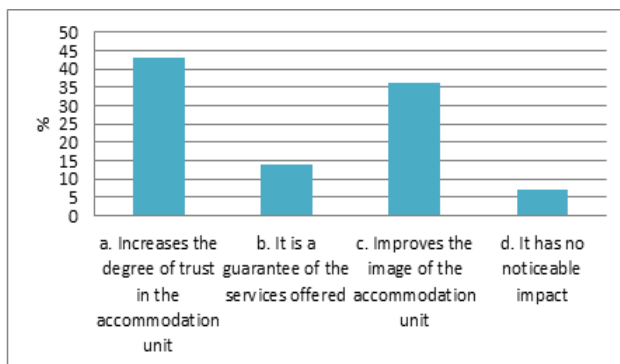


Fig. 8: The attributes of the impact of the eco-label

Source: authors, based on research

Analyzing all the results it is observed that the ecological label is insufficiently popularized among the Romanian customers. This was reflected in the fact that although some respondents claim that the eco-label plays an important role in purchasing decisions, they would not be willing to pay more for such services (14%). However, 86% of those who would be willing to pay more for such services is encouraging, because that means they associate the eco-label with the quality of the benefits (Fig.9).

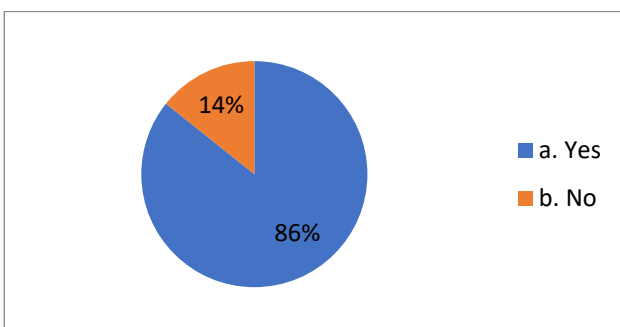


Fig. 9: The answer to the increase of the tariff of the tourist services with ecological label

Source: authors, based on research

From the ones presented above, there is a low degree of information regarding the ecological label of customers. Although many have heard of the eco-label, no one has chosen certification as a factor in choosing an accommodation unit. As a result, awareness campaigns of Romanian consumers are needed through information campaigns.

Promoting and publicizing the European eco-label among consumers must be achieved either through the development of a "green education" strategy in order to change consumer behavior in the purchasing process, or through the development of "marketing and advertising tools" to address to the specific needs of consumers.

Conclusion

The research results show the existing situation in Romania as regards the level of notoriety of eco-labels among people with or without studies in the field of tourism. As we saw the level of notoriety of eco-labels among the participants of our study is relatively high. But even if they recognize and are aware of what an eco-label is, this study made us realize that the Romanian consumers, in fact, understands very little of what impact an ecological label has on the tourism industry. A big part of them they associate the eco-label only with the quality of the benefits, without knowing what other benefits an eco-label can bring to a destination.

The ecological label can be an extra image and an element of differentiation between the competing units, but it also represents a passport that authorizes the free movement of the organic products on the territory of Romania, increasing the number of consumers.

That is why, for the general public to know and accept green products and services, it is essential for non-governmental organizations specialized in environmental protection and consumer organizations to be actively involved in informing and raising public awareness about eco-labeling. This can only be achieved through promotional actions and information and education campaigns at local, national level.

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