Kristina Bučar / Derek Van Rheenen / Zvjezdana Hendija

Ecolabelling in tourism:
The disconnect between theory and practice

Abstract

Each year the global tourism market records increasing numbers of international tourist arrivals, drawing attention to the negative impacts on environmental sustainability. As such, the concept of sustainability has become of paramount concern in the tourism sector over the last few decades with an emphasis on "going green" and reducing the environmental footprint associated with this growth of tourism. At the same time, tourists have become increasingly concerned about environmental issues while traveling, forcing tourism providers to carefully plan in a sustainable way. The tourism industry has accepted this trend and has applied new approaches and strategies towards environmental sustainability in their management practices. The greening of tourism began when the first ecolabel, Blue Flag, launched in France in 1985. After two years, the company expanded its activities to other European countries; it became an international ecolabel in 2001. The idea behind ecolabelling is to help tourists make informed decision about their prospective destinations. The purpose of this paper is to explore and compare the widespread ecolabelling process in the tourism industry today. Since the first ecolabel in tourism was launched, the number of ecolabels in the tourism sector has rapidly increased in number; today there are more than two hundred distinct ecolabels within the tourism industry. Unfortunately, there is no standardized set of criteria for certification relative to environmental sustainability practices. Given this practical issue within the global tourism industry, this research seeks to review whether the existing scholarship on sustainability and ecolabelling in tourism has informed the actual practice of ecolabel certification.

Key words: international tourism; green orientation in tourism; Blue Flag; ecolabelling

Introduction

The tourism market is a dynamic and ever-changing industry. Since the 1990's, there has been increased attention paid to understanding the positive and negative impacts of tourism on the environment (Moscardo & Murphy, 2014). And to be viable and successful over the long term, tourism must respect the basic notion of sustainable development (Bučar, 2017). In order to achieve sustainable growth and limit the negative impacts generated by tourism development, the tourism industry has adopted environmentally friendly and green practices (Carić, 2018). These practices can be defined as actions taken by service providers to protect and sustain the health and well-being of the environment (Yusof, Rahman & Iranmanesh, 2015). United Nations Environment Programme defines a green economy as one that results in improved well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological degradation (UNEP, 2011). The greening of tourism involves improvements in energy, water and waste system efficiencies while reinforcing the employment potential of the tourism sector with increased local hiring (UNEP & UNWTO, 2012). A successful green strategy in tourism balances the unique needs and priorities of all stakeholders, including tourists, the local community, the tourism industry and government agencies (Mazilu, 2013).

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The demand for environmentally friendly products and services has strongly increased in the last two decades (Škrinjarić, 2018). Tourists have come to demand the greening of tourism; more than one third of travellers today are found to favour environmental friendly tourism (UNEP & UNWTO, 2012). Green brands appeal to customers who acknowledge global ecological and climate problems and seek to travel responsibly (Van Rheenen, 2017). Customers do not expect green brands to be perfect but authentic (Hays & Ozretić-Došen, 2014). As a result, ecolabelling and green certification have become more popular within the international tourism market. When utilized effectively, ecolabel certification can be used as a powerful tool in the quest to attain sustainability (Rattan, 2015). For example, ecolabel standards are now incorporated into innovative hotel management practices (Dziuba, 2016). Ecolabelling systems and benchmarking have a common focus on identifying best practices in promoting sustainability while recognizing that continuous improvement can be achieved (Kozak & Nield, 2004). Ecolabels help to construct an image of responsibility and therefore attract tourists with a higher level of ecological motivation (Chen, 2011). These trends suggest that ecolabelling will improve the attractiveness and competitiveness of products in the tourist market (Batić & Gojčić, 2011).

The primary objective of ecolabels in tourism is to help tourists make informed decisions about their prospective destinations and services/products, focusing on a genuine ethic of care for the environment. In theory, green producers provide reliable environmental information to the consumer and thereby seek to influence his/her preferences and choices when acquiring goods and services (Bohdanowicz, Simanic & Martinac, 2004). Ideally, ecolabels provide tourists with the assurance that a tourism business has been certified as environmentally friendly and committed to local sustainability. Often, however, tourists do not know what ecolabelling actually means and how reliable such certificates are, as there are many different standards with varying levels of quality control.

This paper examines the increased number of ecolabels and corresponding process of certification within the tourism industry over last 30 years. During this period, the hyper production of new ecolabels has created a market akin to a jungle, bound by few rules and regulations. While the metaphor of a jungle describes the current situation in ecolabelling in the tourism industry, an evolving body of scholarship has provided a number of valuable insights that might be utilized to unify an inconsistent practice within the sustainable tourism market. For example, Navratil, Picha and White Baravalle Gilliam (2016) found that the primary motivation for establishing ecolabels in hotels is for promotional purposes. And yet, as Van Rheenen, Cernaianu, Sobry and Wille (2017) have argued, there may well be a difference between how to study tourism and how to do tourism. While we have the potential to gain knowledge from both of these intellectual and practical exercises, there may be limited communication between scholars and practitioners in the field of ecolabelling in tourism industry.

This research has shown that within the tourism industry today, there are numerous types of ecolabels and green certificates and the future research might explore how significantly ecolabels stimulate or influence tourist demand.

The paper begins with a theoretical background, defining the concept of an ecolabelling in tourism and its relationship with green orientation and sustainable tourism development. The second section provides a literature review examining green strategies focused on the ecolabelling process within the tourism industry, examining the existing ecolabels in practice discovered through an extensive website analysis. The article then presents the results from our bibliometric analysis of published scientific articles focused on the ecolabelling in tourism. We then conduct a comparative analysis of these two sets of collected data (published scientific articles and the evolution of new eco-labels), spanning the last three decades to the present. Finally, this study concludes with a call for future research examining

the potential symbiotic relationship between the theory and practice of ecolabelling within the broader tourism industry.

Ecolabels in practice

The following section provides a literature review examining green strategies and the process of ecolabelling certification within the tourism industry. Thereafter, an analysis of web sites related to eco-labels in tourism was carried out as a basis of comparison with the frequency and timing of these scientific journals.

Certification is a voluntary procedure which sets, assesses, monitors and gives written assurance that a product, process, service or management system conforms to specific requirements and the certification process aims to help consumers distinguish genuine sustainable tourism from other forms of tourism that have not made such a commitment (Totem Tourism, 2013). A label is a word or a phrase that is used to describe the characteristics or qualities of activities of a given product; an eco-label is an official symbol signifying that a product has been designed to do less harm to the environment than similar products without this designation (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). According to Buckley (2002), a label is simply a description associated with a product in some way, whereby potential purchasers may obtain information additional to the product itself; an ecolabel is simply one whose content refers principally to the environment and its sustainability. Ecolabells usually encourage businesses to raise their standards of environmental protection while demonstrating their environmental credentials to consumers (WTO, 2002). Ecolabels are granted by third parties and based on specified criteria for green or environmentally friendlier tourism products, destinations, hotels, tour operators, travel agents, marinas, beaches etc. (Mihalič, 2000).

The tourism market is a dynamic and ever-changing industry; these changes force the tourism industry to adapt to an evolving tourist demand. The demand for environmentally friendly products and services has increased in the last decade. Perceived service quality and image are important factors in increasing customer satisfaction, which may in turn result in customer loyalty (Pianroj, 2012). A destination image represents the set of beliefs and impressions that tourists have about a particular place or destination (Kotler & Gartner, 2002). Tourists who are motivated by environmental sustainability tend to demonstrate loyalty to those destinations that implement sustainability practices and use green branding. For example, green hotels are more likely to convince environmentally friendly guests to revisit, pay extra and provide positive recommendations to their relatives and friends (Yusof, Rahman & Iranmanesh, 2015). Thus, there is increasing pressure for the tourism industry to become more sustainable (Weston et al., 2018); as a result, the tourism sector has seen the rise and proliferation of ecolabels, especially since the turn of the 21st Century. With the assumption that there is sufficient interest among tourists for sustainable products and practices, suppliers or providers feel persuaded that an ecolabel is worth acquiring (Buckley, 2002).

Ecolabelling entered mainstream environmental policy-making in 1977, when the German government established the Blue Angel programme (UNEP, 1998). The first ecolabel to emerge within the tourism industry in Europe was Blue Flag, established in France in 1985. It was developed by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), a non-profit organization, to encourage local authorities to provide clean and safe beaches (and marinas) for local populations and tourists (UNEP, WTO & FEE, 1996) and to promote sustainable tourism development in marine and freshwater areas (FEE, 2017). The Blue Flag programme has been operating in Europe since 1987, and in areas outside of Europe since 2001. The programme now covers more than 50 countries in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa and Oceania (FEE, 2017).

TOURISM
Original scientific paper
Kristina Bučar / Derek Van Rheenen / Zvjezdana Hendija
Vol. 67/ No. 4/ 2019/ 365 - 374

367

Since its inception in the late 20th century, the number of ecolabels within the tourism industry has rapidly increased. Ecotrans has reported that a growing number of tourism products are equipped with labels but for that period there is no precise information on the number of ecological labels in the tourism market due to unequal criteria for their evaluation (Ecotrans, 2016). United Nations Environmental Programme in 1998 quotes 28 different tourism environmental and awards and ecolabels while Mihalič (2000) references 30 different environmental awards and ecolabels in tourism practice, the European Commission (2019) noted that there were approximately 60 eco-certificates and labels in the tourism industry in 2000. In 2005, there were approximately 70 environmental certificates that covered nearly all segments of tourism in Europe, with 125 different standards. More than half of them were associated with hospitality sector, ranging from hotels and restaurants, campsites, youth hostels, farm houses, and alpine huts to holiday houses, guest houses, and bed and breakfast lodgings (Kis-Orloczki, 2012). In 2013, Totem found 138 ecocertificates in the tourism market. Four years later, the European Commission (2019) reported a total of 186 environmental and sustainability certificates and labels in operation at either the continental, national or sub-national levels.

This study utilized a desktop analysis to identify websites that provide information about existing ecolabels and the certification process. We have collected the following data in our analysis: year of establishment, country and founder (international or national organization) and the particular areas within the tourism industry for which each certificate is focused.

Findings from our study's website research revealed a total of 203 ecolabels currently in use through July 2019 (Table 1)[1]. These labels include those that are *mono-focused* within the tourism market (n= 30 or 15%), which means that they are focused on a singular area within the tourism market. For example, one ecolabel is focused solely on the accommodation or tour operators. The other ecolabels found within the tourism market are *poli-focused*, whereby one ecolabel applies to more than one area. For example, one certificate is applied to accommodation, transportation, attractions, activities, destinations and conferences.

Table 1
National and international ecolabels according focus

Focus area of ecolabels	Ecolabels according focus			Share in total number (%)		
	Na- tional	Interna- tional	TOTAL	Na- tional	Interna- tional	TOTAL
Accommodation (hotels, camps etc.)	42	33	75	43.3	31.1	36.9
Tourist agency/ Touroperator	15	15	30	15.5	14.2	14.8
Restaurant	13	15	28	13.4	14.2	13.9
Destination (rural, eco dest., coastal etc.)	10	14	24	10.3	13.2	11.8
Attractions	4	10	14	4.1	9.4	6.9
Activities	7	4	11	7.2	3.8	5.4
Protected areas/ Environment protection/ Conserved areas	3	5	8	3.1	4.7	3.9
Transport		5	5	0.0	4.7	2.5
Beach and marinas/ Sea	0	2	2	0.0	1.9	1.0
Ecotourism/ Sustainable tourism/ Sustainable tourism development	1	1	2	1.0	0.9	1.0
Conferences		1	1	0.0	0.9	0.5
Other (tourist information, tourist services, cruises etc.)	2	1	3	2.1	0.9	1.5
Total	97	106	203	100.0	100.0	100.0

Of this total; international ecolabels dominate the tourism industry, with 106 or 52% or of the 203 ecolabels (Table 1). There are 97 national ecolabels currently in use, 48% of the total number of ecolabels in the global tourism market. They are found in 37 countries worldwide (9 countries from

TOURISM
Original scientific paper
Kristina Bučar / Derek Van Rheenen / Zvjezdana Hendija
Vol. 67/ No. 4/ 2019/ 365 - 374

368

Europe, 9 from Asia, 5 from the Americas and 4 from Africa). In some countries, there are more than one ecolabel connected to tourism (e.g. in Germany, France, Ireland, Norway etc.). The sheer number of national ecolabels in the tourism industry has caused confusion among tourists who are unclear how to evaluate one certificate from another, especially as criteria for certification are not the same from one country to the next.

As the data depicted in Table 1 illustrates, there are numerous focus areas for which ecolabels have been applied. Of the 203 ecolabels found, 75 certificates or 37% of the total are associated with accommodations (hotels, campsites, etc), and 30 certificates or almost 15% of the total are associated with tourist agencies or tour operators. These two focus areas cover more than a half of the ecolabels within the tourism market (almost 52%). The third most common type of ecolabels is for restaurants (28 of them), followed by ecolabels focused on destinations (24 of them). These four focus areas cover 77% or 157 of 203 of all ecolabels in the tourism industry today. The other focus areas are less common and less significant in ecolabelling (attractions, activities, protected areas/environment protection/ conserved areas, transport, beach and marinas/ sea and other etc.).

Ecolabel certification adopts different standards with varying levels of quality control around the world. As such, it is not always easy to differentiate between what is reliable and what is dubious (Ecotrans, 2016). Some ecolabels are confusing by focus area because they are defined too broadly (for ecotourism, sustainable tourism or sustainable tourism management etc.). Additionally, many of these environmental awards and labels are not transparent, such that there are no objective criteria provided as evidence to warrant certification. It is therefore difficult for visitors to determine which tourism products are more or less damaging to the environment (Mihalič, 2000). As a result of this lack of clarity, travellers are often neutral or not sure about certification and its relationship to safety, benefits and future travel (Pennington-Gray, Schroeder, Wu, Donohoe & Chyanto, 2014).

While numerous ecolabels have been established or proposed, many remain specialized and little known (Buckley, 2002). Those on holiday, for example, report little to no awareness of sustainable tourism certification (Conahan, Hanrahan & McLoughklin, 2015). Thus, due to the poor visibility of these ecolabels within their target groups, the degree of recognition among consumers is less than 10% on average (Weston, et. al., 2018).

To make the process more credible and effective, it is necessary to develop a consistent and rigorous methodological framework to guide the appropriate certification of ecolabels into distinct categories (UNEP, 2011) Ecolabels in tourism need a transparent set of criteria and procedures for valid certification, with detailed information readily available to the public (Buckley, 2002). The leading organization for ecolabelling within the tourism market is Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), established in 2008. The primary activity of the GSTC is to undertake accreditation of certification and labelling licenses (Weston, et. al., 2018). In the European Union (EU), the European Eco-Tourism Labelling Standard (EETLS) has been developed. It was established in 1992 and since 2003 the certification process evaluates tourism accommodations and combines the GST-Criteria with a detailed set of practical indicators for certification of EU Ecolabels (Weston et. al., 2018).

The tourism industry that applies ecolabels is considered to be environmentally friendly and this could make a difference in the process of choosing where and how tourists are going to spend their holidays. However, it is particularly striking given the vast number of certified ecolabels that have entered the market over the past several decades. There are so many different standards with varying levels of quality control around the world in the tourism market that this kind of jungle among them produces problems for tourists when they need to make decision about their travel.

TOURISM
Original scientific paper
Kristina Bučar / Derek Van Rheenen / Zvjezdana Hendija
Vol. 67/ No. 4/ 2019/ 365 - 374

369

Ecolabels in theory

To provide a snapshot of scientific knowledge about ecolabelling in the tourism industry, a bibliometric and content analysis has been conducted in this section of paper. In the second phase of analysis, the frequency of scientific paper publication and the number of new ecolabels in tourism practice were collected. Both sets of data were analysed by date, comparing the time when a new ecolabel was introduced to the market and when an article on the subject area was published.
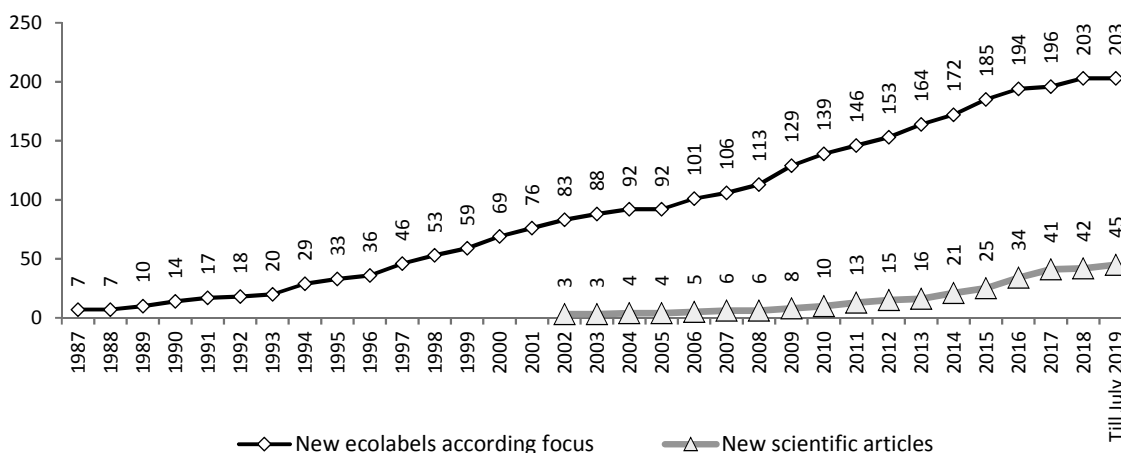
As a first step, a bibliometric analysis was performed to provide temporal data regarding publications covering the specific research area (Dabić, Mikulić & Novak, 2017). Specifically, a related key word search of all articles indexed in the database Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection was conducted, focused on the combined terms "ecolabel* AND tourism." The asterisk following the keyword ecolabel allowed for truncation, so that all words with this root would be identified, such as "ecolabels" or "ecolabelling." WoS was selected because it is the world's largest publisher-neutral citation index and research intelligence platform for the social sciences. The WoS Core Collection includes journal articless, books, and conference proceedings and symposia content (WoS, 2017). The publication extraction was performed on July 11th 2019 and refers to the period from the mid-1950s since the electronic version of the WoS is available up to the present. Forty-five (n=45) results matched the search criteria.

Although the first Ecolabel was established in 1987 (Blue Flag), the first journal article on this topic indexed in the WoS Core online database was published in 2002 in the journal Annals of Tourism (Buckley, 2002), a gap of fifteen years.

In fact, from the time the first ecolabel were launched in the tourism industry until 2000, 69 distinct ecolabels was introduced. Not a single scientific paper on the topic of ecolabels was published during this time.

Our literature review, utilizing the WoS Core Collection database, found 45 articles related to ecolabels in tourism published in the period from 2002 to July 2019. The evolution of articles on this topic is characterised by annual oscillations from zero to 10 articles per year.

Figure 1
Total number of new ecolabels and published scientific articles in WoS Core Collection (1987- July 2019)

Source: Web of Science Core Collection (2019) Search for topic: ecolabel* AND tourism.

TOURISM
Original scientific paper
Kristina Bučar / Derek Van Rheenen / Zvjezdana Hendija
Vol. 67/ No. 4/ 2019/ 365 - 374

370

In the first decade of the 21st century, 70 new ecolabels were launched within the tourism market, more than one-third of all ecolabels that have been established in the tourism industry to date. This was the first decade (2001-2010) in which scientific papers appeared 10 articles were published in total, from which three articles were published in the journal Annals of Tourism Research (Buckley, 2002; Font & Harris, 2004; Eichhorn, Miller, Michopoulou & Buhalis, 2008); two in the journal Tourism Management (Font, 2002; Sasidharan, Sirakaya & Kerstetter, 2002) and two in the Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Park & Boo, 2010; Buultjens, Gale & White, 2010). These three periodicals were the most popular journals for authors to publish scholarly work on this research topic during that period.

In the most recent decade (2011-July 2019), 64 new ecolabels were launched within the tourism market. During the same decade, there was a marked increase in the number of scientific papers published in the field. As illustrated in Figure 1, the frequency of publication increased to 9 per year (in 2016), for a total of 35 articles. This number represents more than three quarters of all published scientific papers in the field to date. Among scientific sources in that decade for publication in the field, the most popular journal was the Journal of Sustainable Tourism. This journal published four articles about ecolabelling in tourism (Eijgelaar, Nawijn, Barten, Okuhn & Dijkstra, 2016; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Fraguell, Marti, Pinto & Coenders, 2016; Cerqua, 2017). Three articles were also published in the journal Sustainability (Duglio, Beltramo, 2016; Gligor-Cimpoieru, Munteanu, Nitu-Antonie, Schneider & Preda, 2017; Barbulescu, Moraru & Duhnea, 2019). In Tourism Management was published only one article in this phase (Buckley, 2013). As such, these four scientific journals (Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Management, Annals of Tourism Research and Sustainability) are the most popular journals among authors to publish their research about ecolabelling certification in tourism, with every third article (33% of 45 articles) published in one of these journals.

Researchers have explored different areas related to ecolabels and certification in tourism, including the influence of ecological labels on tourist motivation, the importance of ecolabels in the promotion of destinations, the impact of ecolabels on sustainable development of destinations ecological labels focused on specific markets or destinations, such as the hotel industry, transportation, as well as beaches and marinas. The most researched area remains the hospitality industry, discussed in nine articles. The ecolabel most commonly discussed in these publications was Blue Flag, mentioned in seven separate articles.

In general, this study demonstrates that the practical application of ecolabels within the global tourism industry has been poorly researched since appearing in the late 1980's, despite a significant increase in the frequency and range of scholarship over the last decade.

Conclusion

Ecolabelling is a growing trend within the tourism sector, particularly in the last few decades. In theory at least, consumer decisions regarding destination and product selection may become increasingly patterned on supplier's demonstrated commitment to, and genuine care for, the environment. There is also tremendous variation in the process of certification, the administration and scope of these ecolabels, as well as variation in the target groups of this growing trend. We have described the emergence and hyper production of ecolabels in the global tourism market, with few rules and regulations, as a kind of jungle difficult for tourists to navigate. While the trend towards ecolabelling may bode well for global efforts at increasing local sustainable development, without a standardized process of certification, these ecolabels may simply serve as a convenient and relatively superficial marketing strategy.

TOURISM
Original scientific paper
Kristina Bučar / Derek Van Rheenen / Zvjezdana Hendija
Vol. 67/ No. 4/ 2019/ 365 - 374

371

As we have noted within this study, however, a limited but evolving body of scholarship, particularly within the last decade, offers a number of valuable insights that might help to unify an inconsistent practice within the tourism industry. For example, how has the tourism industry been informed by the development of case and/or impact studies focusing on economic, environmental and social sustainability, leveraging positive outcomes while mitigating against negative consequences? How has theory informed practice and how, in turn, has practice informed theory?

Note:

[1] Sources of websites: https://destinet.eu; http://www.ecolabelindex.com; https://www.gstcouncil.org; https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org; https://earthcheck.org; http://www.eceat.org/; http://www.ecotourismireland.ie; https://ecotourismkenya.org; http://www.thelongrun.org; http://www.greenflagaward.org.uk; http://www.greenleafthai.org; https://www.baatbg.org; http://www.svanen.se; http://partner.nationale-naturlandschaften.de; http://www.turismozarautz.eus; http://www.sstl.sc; http://www.cotococha.com; https://www.tourcert.org/; https://www.entreprises.gouv.fr; http://www.travelife.org; https://www.tripadvisor.com; https://www.whiteflagint.com; www.dinnegreen.com; https://ecotourism.org/certification-and-standards/; https://www.slovenia.info; https://www.clubturtas.com.tr/green-star/; https://www.walkingmountains.org; https://www.greentable.de/; https://eco-lighthouse.org; https://www.gites-de-france.com; https://nezeh.com/asean-green-hotels/; https://cuperu.com/downloads/green-choice; http://www.botswanatourism.co.bw/eco-tourism-certification-application-process

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TOURISM
Original scientific paper
Kristina Bučar / Derek Van Rheenen / Zvjezdana Hendija
Vol. 67/ No. 4/ 2019/ 365 - 374

373

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