
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CERTIFICATION MARKETING

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LABELSCAPE
Integration of sustainability labels into Mediterranean tourism policies

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Content:

1. Who creates marketing strategy of tourism destination? What is marketing strategy?	2
2. Sustainable tourism marketing.....	2
3. Does sustainable tourism certification increase market competitiveness of tourist destination? If yes, how?.....	2
4. Once destination or tourism businesses have obtained a certification - how can they effectively market it, market themselves and tourism products?	3
5. Who is responsible for increasing the visibility of a certification? Certifying body, certified destination and businesses?.....	5
6. What advantage can destinations expect from certification/labelling - what is realistic and what not realistic to expect?	5
7. When should marketing plan/strategy of destination be developed? How is it developed - steps? Who are target groups, actors involved? How can marketing plan encompass such fragmented sector as tourism?	6
The “European Tourism Indicators System for sustainable destination management (ETIS) gives is very helpful to implement this process. Some of the Certification programs for destinations have meanwhile integrated (part of) the ETIS indicators into their own standards. They e.g., start with the forming of a round table of stakeholders, help to assess the sustainability level of the tourism offer (e.g., mobility, accommodation, activities, infrastructure, culture, nature) with strengths and weaknesses and to elaborate an action plan for achieving the certificate’s sustainability standards. During that process also the topic “marketing” will be discussed, ideas for a marketing plan can be collected and further elaborated.	6
8. Is this a role of public authorities, DMOs, private actors, certifying body?	7
9. What is the difference between green marketing and greenwashing?.....	7
10. Why should tourism destinations and businesses avoid greenwashing?	8
11. The problem of marketing of "unstructured" destinations - do you have any advice for them?	8
Sources for more information	8



1. Who creates marketing strategy of tourism destination? What is marketing strategy?

Each destination – whether a town or region or country – should have a Destination Management and Marketing Organisation (DMO) which is responsible for the coordination of the stakeholders with their products and services, their interests and opportunities. It is essential that the DMO and stakeholders in the destination have a clear picture of what tourism destination marketing is and not is (see: Sotiriadis, 2021; Sergey Lomanenko, 2018), to know i.e. the four Ps of marketing of destinations (see: Rodney Payne, 2016), to have a common idea why they shall do and contribute to marketing of their destination and how to elaborate a marketing and promotion strategy (see: Sergey Lomanenko, 2018).

2. Sustainable tourism marketing

While in the past destination marketing was mainly focusing on attracting more visitors and meeting their expectations, since some years more and more destinations follow a more holistic approach with the ambition to achieve both: a high quality of life for the host population across all their activities and a high level of visitors' fulfilment. If a destination wants to market their offer as sustainable tourism, then the DMO in close collaboration with their tourism businesses and service providers need to focus on two main goals: the destination as better place to live in AND a better place to visit (Xavier Font & Scott McCabe, 2017)

It is a DMO's key role to work closely together with many stakeholders in the destination "in search of common goals for a prosperous, and environmentally responsible industry and marketplace, one that respects the needs of all stakeholders to achieve positive, successful and long-term outcomes, including tourists, residents, the tourism industry and related destination services." (Xavier Font & Scott McCabe, 2017)

A practical and holistic method how to involve many stakeholders for developing and implementing a sustainable destination plan and marketing concept is the "Lebensraumkonzept" (habitat concept), developed by the consultancy Kohl & Partner and applied in destinations in Austria, Switzerland, Germany and other countries: a holistic conception for the future development of the destination is based on the wide participation and different interests of a many stakeholders and sectors – including tourism.

3. Does sustainable tourism certification increase market competitiveness of tourist destination? If yes, how?

Independent sustainable tourism certification gives credibility to the destination and facilitates "sustainable empowerment" to the staff working in the DMO and in the participating businesses and service providers. "They never fall back to what they already had learned and achieved in making their tourism more sustainable." (Peter Zimmer/FUTOUR, Interview with the author, 10 Oct 2021).

Thus, the main benefit for a destination is not only the certificate. It is rather the participation and implementation process and the joint commitment for continuous improvement.

1. Sustainable Tourism certification programs are able to increase market access e.g., through marinas or - if it comes to the decision making for a destination in a specific country - the national "Austrian Ecolabel" which is granted to many different products, including tourism businesses.

2. **Being recognised as credible certificate at those market players** who market the offer and inform the demand: tour operators, booking services, Regional and National Tourist Boards, media for consumers, sustainable tourism sites, etc
 - Since 2010 the Global Sustainable Tourism Council recognises the standards of certification programmes worldwide which comply with the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for industry (GSTC-I), above all hotels and tour operators, and with the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for destinations (GSTC-D). Today about 50 standards are GSTC recognised worldwide. Beside specific standards also a Certification body itself using such a standard can become “GSTC accredited” for the high quality of operation, including independent on-site auditing of applicants.
 - The Tourism2030.eu platform – managed by ECOTRANS – provides transparency on all 200+ certificates worldwide: on the “Certification Quickfinder” you can filter the global list by country, tourism category, standard and credibility level.
3. **Supporting the visibility of certified businesses and destinations through own marketing activities**, e.g. promoting destinations with their sustainability strengths on their websites. This is done on the business level by many certificates for tourism businesses. The Green Destinations organisation is awarding and certifying destinations worldwide and could achieve a high level of awareness and recognition in the past decade through their annual global TOP 100 Green Destinations promotion campaign.
4. **Supporting the exchange and networking between their certified members**. An excellent example is the German “Sustainable Destinations Initiative of Excellence”: about 15 destinations have achieved the TourCert certification for destinations, exchange their experiences and solutions through a common knowledge platform, webinars and meetings.
5. **Providing their listings of certified tourism businesses to booking services and other intermediaries**. Large certification programmes as e.g., the Green Key with 1000’s of certified hotels is meanwhile of interest to big players like booking.com and big tour operators to identify and mark their bookable products as “green”. But the demand so far is limited due to the effort needed to identify credible certificates with certified businesses in “their” destinations.
6. **Feeding their listings into the common all in one “Green Travel Maps”**. This is seen as the way out to bring the green offer closer to the consumer: about 50 leading certification programmes publish and update meanwhile their listings on the global and public Green Travel Maps on the independent Tourism2030.eu platform with currently more than 16,000 certified accommodation providers and camping sites, attractions, tour operators and destinations. To support the market access of certified tourism *ECOTRANS* – in agreement with the certification programmes – forwards Green Travel Maps listings to booking sites, tour operators or national tourist boards who want to promote their credibly certified green offer. Thus, they react on the growing interest and demand of more than 50 % of consumers for more environmentally friendly and socially compatible travel experiences (RA 2020, booking.com survey 2020). E.g., *German National Tourist Board* (Feel Good site and campaign), *TravelPort Austria* (PowerSearch booking system in 1,500 travel agencies), *FairWeg* sustainable travel promotion and booking portal (Start up in Germany).

4. Once destination or tourism businesses have obtained a certification - how can they effectively market it, market themselves and tourism products?

Destinations in Europe can choose among various certification programs with different approaches and services. Some are also certifying tourism businesses in the destinations, are operating highly credible systems, facilitate the exchange and networking between their certified businesses and destinations

and support the promotion to the public. Examples are the Biosphere Responsible Tourism certification program, EarthCheck, TourCert and Green Destinations.

Certified destinations can support the promotion of their certificate and market themselves with their sustainable tourism products and services. Here some recommendations:

1. **Highlight your certificate:** give it prominent and easy to find visibility on your website with short explanatory information
2. **Show your sustainability commitment, strengths and initiatives:** communicate what you are doing and provide facts in an own –easy to find – website section, in blogs, online and print media, e.g., “responsible travel experiences for our guests”, add the certificate logo as “green proof”
3. **Promote certification to your businesses:** implement a “Sustainable tourism certification” process and encourage your tourism businesses to go for sustainability certification. Promote appropriate certification programmes for your accommodation providers and other businesses along the tourism supply chain.
4. **Market your certified offer:** start to highlight and promote those businesses which are certified – on your website and on external marketing channels which are reaching your source markets, including domestic tourism.
5. **Make your certified businesses marketing partners:** a DMO cannot successfully market the destinations alone. All participating businesses and stakeholders involved need to play their role in promoting themselves as part of the green offer in their destinations. This should also involve those businesses which are interested in going green and doing first steps. “Link to each other and raise awareness to each other – and link the sustainability messages to your certificate” (Peter Zimmer/FUTURE)
6. **Recommend responsible travel experiences to your (potential) visitors:** give concrete tips to your guests how they should behave during their stay to avoid damages and achieve benefits for the nature, culture and host population in the destination.

To facilitate these steps the European TOURCOOP program is supporting the “**European Tourism Going Green 2030 project (ETGG2030)**” to provide a set of tools “boosting sustainable tourism through certification”. The tools will support destinations and businesses in realising the above recommendations (available in 2022/2023):

Ad 1 and 2: On the Tourism2030- Green Travel Maps you can filter 100s of awarded and certified destinations and see how they are promoting their certificate and their sustainability strengths and initiatives

Ad 3: The “Tourism2030 – Certification Quickfinder” helps businesses and service providers to see which certificates are available to them in their country with different sustainability and credibility levels and services. The section “Recommended certificates for your tourism businesses” include national and international certification programmes for hotels, camping sites and tour operators which certify a basic (environment) to high level of **sustainability** management and performance, which provide a high level of **credibility** (third party audit) and **transparency** (profile description, standard published, sharing their certified businesses on the Green Travel Maps)

Ad 4: Destinations can get from 2022 onwards an own “Destination Green Travel Map” with the certified businesses and achieved certificates in your territory. The map can be used on Tourism2030 and embedded in the own website.

Ad 5: Destinations can get also own “Going Green” maps for destinations which allow to network the certified businesses with those interested in going green. In addition, a European “R U Ready for Certification” online tool will help tourism businesses to self-assess their sustainability level and see their options to do more and to go for certification.

Ad 6: The international “Travel Green Europe” App will promote certified destinations with links to their websites.

5. Who is responsible for increasing the visibility of a certification? Certifying body, certified destination and businesses?

The visibility of a certification is key: to raise the awareness for the opportunity of “green proofs” and to reduce the (threat of) greenwashing. Beside the certification bodies themselves and the certified destinations and businesses also the regional and national tourism marketing organisations, incoming and international operators, travel agencies and online booking systems should show the certificates’ labels. And: the regional and national tourism and consumers associations play an important role when promoting and informing their members about sustainably certified tourism.

Some examples: In Europe several countries started in the past years to promote certificates and support the visibility of their logos in their marketing activities, e.g., Germany Travel with its Feel Good campaign, Slovenia with its Slovenia Green programme, Swiss Tourism with their “Swisstainable” initiative, Visit Finland and Visit Norway with similar initiatives. A milestone has been set by TravelPort Austria with their PowerSearch tool used in 1,500 Travel agencies. The system uses the Tourism2030 – Green Travel Maps listing to identify the certified businesses and beaches in their travel packages, show the underlying certificates in the reservation and booking system and links each certificate with the description the Tourism2030 – and thus providing full transparency. Same level of transparency is provided by the start-up online booking site “FairWeg” in Germany.

6. What advantage can destinations expect from certification/labelling - what is realistic and what not realistic to expect?

Recent national and international studies from e.g., the annual German Travel Analysis (since the 90ies) or Booking.com (2021), show that sustainable and responsible travelling is of high interest for travellers: more than 50% want to get reliable information, want to stay in environmentally friendly hotels, want to reduce their climate impact and footprint. Certifications are the easiest way to give credibility to such information.

The resources and opportunities at certification programmes to bring the certified offer to the consumer are limited. Marketing is not their main role, but there are exceptions, e.g., the “Green Destinations” programme.

But there are some other benefits provided by the one or the other certificate, e.g. monitoring the progress and performance of certified destinations and providing benchmarking information (e.g. Earthcheck), networking the destinations for exchanging experiences and good practices (e.g. TourCert

with their “Initiative of Excellence”), providing standards and complementary certificates to businesses (e.g. Green Destinations with their “Good Travel Seal”). Similar services are provided by more specific certification programmes, e.g., the Alpine Pearls for destinations in the Alps or the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas in Europe.

On the Tourism2030 – Certification Quickfinder the descriptions of the certificates include listings of such benefits with links to more information on the certificates’ websites.

7. When should marketing plan/strategy of destination be developed? How is it developed - steps? Who are target groups, actors involved? How can marketing plan encompass such fragmented sector as tourism?

Before planning the marketing of a destination, the destination needs to know what they want to offer to whom. Many destinations develop first a tourism master plan, involving all relevant stakeholders (holistic approach) to define the tourism development objectives and to specify the roles of the actors. At least one person should be responsible for “sustainability”.

The “European Tourism Indicators System for sustainable destination management (ETIS) gives is very helpful to implement this process. Some of the Certification programs for destinations have meanwhile integrated (part of) the ETIS indicators into their own standards. They e.g., start with the forming of a round table of stakeholders, help to assess the sustainability level of the tourism offer (e.g., mobility, accommodation, activities, infrastructure, culture, nature) with strengths and weaknesses and to elaborate an action plan for achieving the certificate’s sustainability standards. During that process also the topic “marketing” will be discussed, ideas for a marketing plan can be collected and further elaborated.

The development of the marketing plan and the strategy for implementation should involve all relevant actors along the tourism supply chain in the destination, who are offering transport and mobility services, infrastructure for activities, accommodation and camping sites, restaurants, shopping of local products, events, cultural and natural attractions, guided tours, tourist information, and more.

Following questions should be answered:

- How far do they already form part of a “sustainable” tourism offer?
- What are their sustainability strengths?
- How do the promote their services?
- How far does their promotion support the (desired) sustainability image of the destination?
- How successful are their marketing activities?
- Which target groups do the reach?
- Is there enough substance and interest to develop a destination brand?

The assessment of the marketing activities above shall help to understand the benefits of the tourism offer in the destination and allow to set realistic goals for promotion and advertising campaigns.

- Which target groups shall be reached in which countries?
- Which messages shall be sent to these target groups?
- Which media do reach (best) the target groups?

Any marketing campaign should strive to achieve the following A.I.D.A. goals:

A – to raise the attention of the target groups: “What’s that? Catching holiday pictures and messages.

I – to get their interest: I like what that destination is promising, I want to get more information

D – decision: I want to go there

A – Action: I organise my travel and start booking

The marketing strategy of a destination should include vertical & horizontal marketing synergies:

- Vertical synergies a) with marketing activities of their tourism businesses and services (lower level) and b) with the marketing activities of their regional and national tourist marketing organisations (upper level).
- Horizontal synergies with other sectors in the destination and their sustainability strengths, e.g., organic farming, traditional and innovative handcraft and trade of local products

Such a strategy can create multiplying effects: raising the awareness of target groups for both the destination with their sustainability strengths AND the businesses with their individual contributions to sustainable development in their destination – ideally communicated together with environmental and sustainability certificates as green proofs - to prevent the suspicion of Greenwashing.

8. Is this a role of public authorities, DMOs, private actors, certifying body?

The development and operation of a successful marketing campaign ideally involves public authorities, DMOs, private actors, NGOs and certifying bodies should be involved in the planning, marketing and monitoring. In most cases the DMO is the coordination body, but in little destinations this can also be done by another public or private organisation which is trusted by the other stakeholders.

A good example is the destination Saarland in Germany: the DMO of this little region started few years ago to implement the TourCert certification process with a wide multi-stakeholder engagement, has updated their tourism development and marketing plan and has started to promote their travel offer and sustainable tourism engagement (<https://www.visitsaarland.co.uk/Nachhaltiges-Reisen>). Meanwhile the Saarland with their sustainability certificate as green proof is one of the top destinations promoted internationally through the 2021 “Feel Good” marketing campaign of the National German Tourist Board.

9. What is the difference between green marketing and greenwashing?

In a nutshell green marketing is based on a marketing strategy to create and strengthen in the public an environmentally friendly, sustainable image of the destination. Greenwashing uses sustainability arguments in marketing of a destination without providing the green proofs: as a response to the growing interest of consumers in green, less harming travel experiences and as a factor of competitiveness. This makes it even more important to certified tourism businesses and destinations to make their green proof visible!

The European Commission is permanently looking at potential greenwashing and misleading information to consumer, e.g., at booking sites, and improving the European Consumer Rights Directive accordingly.



10. Why should tourism destinations and businesses avoid greenwashing?

The reason to avoid greenwashing nowadays is very clear: visitors have clear expectations on “green”, especially if they are already aware of the existence of certificates for sustainable tourism. Most travelers know that they harm the environment and are looking for less harmful options. And they know that it can make a difference to travel by train, to stay in an environmentally friendly hotel, to leave a little rather than a big environmental footprint in the destination. They easily can identify high energy and water consumption in hotels and miss soft mobility options for their visits and excursions. If this is seen as a contradiction to the destination’s marketing sites and brochures, then they will perceive this as a negative travel experience or even take pictures and make negative comments on rating and booking sites.

11. The problem of marketing of "unstructured" destinations - do you have any advice for them?

Unstructured marketing simply is waste of money: not only because of the lack of planned synergies but also because of the threat of contradicting messages to the target groups. The first step in destinations without a DMO is simple: the (leading) tourism businesses should agree to establish a destination website as a sub-site of the larger destination or region, a person should be responsible to organise and collect requests from potential visitors, share the information with the individually acting businesses, recognise potential benefits of the establishment of a DMO, etc. Independent consultants and trainers can play a key role to bring together many different individualists and to steer the necessary processes away from ego-centric thinking and acting from the visitors’ perspective. The stakeholders can bring in their special experiences and interests in thematic working groups, define their own plans for improving the quality and sustainability of their services – to become a green stone in the mosaic of their green destination, region and country, and to be part of the future of tourism.

Sources for more information

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