**World Tourism Organization**

**RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENTS FOR SUPPORTING AND/OR ESTABLISHING NATIONAL CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

## Introduction

Certification systems for sustainable tourism play an increasing role in regulating tourism operations as voluntary instruments above legal frameworks. They usually address three main aspects, namely: 1) environmental performance of companies, operations and destinations; 2) product quality; and 3) corporate social responsibility of operations. They normally target tourism suppliers, such as accommodation, restaurants, sport and leisure facilities, tourist attractions, destinations, tour operators, (tourist) transport companies, tourist associations, etc.

Considering the growing number and importance of certification systems and other voluntary initiatives in tourism, and based on a recommendation made by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, WTO undertook a comprehensive worldwide study on this topic. The results of this study were published in 2002, under the title "Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainable Tourism: Worldwide Inventory and Comparative Analysis of 104 Eco-labels, Awards And Self-commitments".

The WTO Committee on Sustainable Development of Tourism, at its 3rd Session held in Costa Rica, 25-26 September 2002 recommended the preparation of a set of guidelines for Governments on certification systems for sustainable tourism. Acting on this decision of the Committee, the present document aims at enhancing awareness among governments about the opportunities certification systems may provide as part of their sustainable development policy goals, and provides basic recommendations for supporting and/or establishing such systems at the national level. It is primarily based on the WTO study mentioned above. It also draws on the survey conducted among WTO Member States in November 2001 – January 2002, considering the feasibility of a Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, on the experience gained in the area of certification through the International Year of Ecotourism 2002, on comments received from the Committee members, and on other relevant documents.

## The role of governments in present certification systems

The WTO study on voluntary initiatives for sustainable tourism revealed that governments have an important role in many of the certification systems presently operating. Twenty of the 59 certification schemes investigated are lead by government agencies. A further 18 have government involvement, either through direct financial support, marketing support, expert know-how in criteria setting, verification procedures, or surveillance of procedures followed by the certification body. Government financial support is crucial to half the schemes for which data is available. Government agencies

involved generally include either environment ministries, national tourism authorities and tourist boards, and in fewer cases, standards institutes.

**Certification systems can bring benefits to society, the environment, governments, private companies and consumers as well.**

**Potential benefits for society:**

- Generally speaking, societies will benefit from certification systems that cover the three aspects of sustainability: social, environmental and economic. Certified companies are supposed to generate benefits in these three areas, while reducing their negative impacts. Therefore, the contribution of tourism activities to the sustainable development of host societies will be more evident, more measurable and more accountable.
- Furthermore, the level of awareness on sustainability issues will be stronger in the host society if the large majority of tourism companies and/or destinations are certified.

**Potential benefits for the environment:**

- It is evident that certification systems and ecolabels that include strict environmental criteria result in benefits for the local environment and, to the extent that some mass tourism activities can impact biodiversity and climate change, also the global environment.
- Furthermore, the widespread use of ecolabels and certification systems in the tourism industry helps to generate increased environmental awareness among both, tourists and host societies and should result in more caring attitudes with respect to the natural and built environments.

**Potential benefits for governments:**

- Providing an effective alternative to direct regulation, which could prove more difficult and time-consuming to implement;
- Enabling governments to adopt a flexible approach to monitoring the tourism industry, permitting organisations to proceed at the pace they feel most comfortable with, while encouraging them to develop innovative approaches to environmental and socio-cultural improvements;
- Giving tourism companies greater scope for making environmental and social improvements by exploiting opportunities specific to their individual circumstances, rather than governments having to control and inspect companies in order to check that they comply with general, industry-wide regulations;
- Allowing part of the costs of implementing and monitoring environmental protection measures to be transferred to the industry itself, thereby reducing the financial burden of regulation on the taxpayer;
- National programs of tourism certification can enhance tourism's recognition in the country, national competitiveness and image in international markets.

**Potential benefits for companies:**
- Adherence to voluntary environmental initiatives can enable the company to market its products more effectively, and to improve their public image among consumers, business partners and with the host communities;
- Engaging in voluntary certification can help companies to signal their specific commitment to environmental, social and even economic improvements, which may in turn help to defer the need for further direct regulation by governments;
- Pursuing sound environmental management strategies can generate substantial cost savings for the company;
- Participation in a certification programme can provide better access to modern techniques, technology and know-how;
- Applying effective environmental management can help to protect the environmental and cultural assets upon which the tourism industry depends for its continued prosperity.

Finally, certification and ecolabels can of course **benefit consumers** by providing them with more information and guidance for their decisions on travel choices, as well as assurances for product and service quality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Certification systems for sustainable tourism need to be developed and operated to fit geographical, political, socio-economic and sectoral characteristics of each country. For this reason, the following recommendations serve as general orientation and they need to be adapted to the economic, institutional, social and environmental conditions prevailing in each country.

## 1. Development of the certification system

Governments can play a key role in the initiation and development of certification systems for sustainable tourism by creating the supportive legal and institutional structures. The following general recommendations can be made:

1. Consider a national certification system as an integral part of sustainable tourism development policies, strategies and objectives, and an effective tool to implement them.

2. Identify key stakeholders and potential target groups relevant to and interested in certification programmes.

3. Develop the certification system through multi-stakeholder consultation processes, involving all relevant interest groups, such us different government authorities (tourism, environment, transportation, finance, education, etc); tourism trade associations and other private groups; academic, education and research institutions; NGOs; consumer associations; etc. The development and the operation of a successful certification program in many cases lays in the multi-stakeholder representation of the team awarding certificates and supporting the program.

4. Coordinate an in-depth research on the conditions and feasibility of a certification system, including aspects such as:
   - Existing legal and voluntary instruments affecting the tourism sector (e.g. laws, regulations, taxes, subsidies, local certification systems, codes of conduct, environmental awards, etc.);
   - Experience of certification systems applied in other sectors in the country, like agriculture, forestry, and draw lessons from them for the tourism sector
   - Certification criteria *(see section 2 below)*;
   - Operational mechanisms: application, verification, awarding, revision and inspection procedures; consulting and technical assistance for participants, marketing and communication; funding *(see section 3 below)*.

5. Provide finance and/or seek partners for co-financing and providing technical contributions for the research, development and operational costs of certification programmes (e.g. different government departments, NGOs, academic institutions, international finance and development agencies, private foundations, etc).

6. Ensure transparency throughout all the stages of the development and operation of the certification system and establish an appeals process.

7. Make clear to the private sector the benefits, costs and other implications of certification systems.
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8. Develop incentives to motivate and encourage tourism companies to become certified, e.g. marketing incentives by giving priority in trade shows and nationally sponsored publicity, or ensuring access to environmental technologies, etc.

9. Consider issues affecting the sustainability of destinations as a whole, involving all tourism product and service providers.

10. Pay special attention to equitable access to certification, especially by small and medium size firms, as they can have more difficulties in meeting the costs and technical requirements than bigger companies.

11. Conduct pilot projects for testing and demonstration of the certification system.

12. Prepare the market for certification, in order to reach a good demand level from tourism companies, and a critical mass at the initial phase to get the system running.


## 2. Certification criteria

Developing certification criteria is a critical part of the certification system development process. The following general recommendations need to be considered:

1. Base criteria on existing legal standards and instruments and set them well above legal compliance.

2.  Include the precondition of compliance by the applicant with these legislations.

3.  Address the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, socio-cultural and economic issues.

4.  Define core criteria and supplementary criteria specific for different tourism product and service groups (e.g. hotels and other accommodations, transportation services, restaurants, tour operators and travel agents, attractions, etc.). By this way consider the implications to destinations as a whole, and not just certain tourism product and service groups.

5.  In bigger countries, criteria can be adjusted to specific regional and local environmental and socio-economic conditions.

6.  For each criterion, define indicators that are measurable and easy to understand by the different type of stakeholders involved in the certification process.

7.  Base criteria and indicators on scientific research that evaluates the key environmental and socio-economic impacts of the sector.

8.  Criteria should refer to attainable and realistic goals for private sector participants.

9.  Criteria can be set in different levels of requirements: from more easily achievable to very demanding criteria. Thus, the certification system sets a framework for continuous improvement whereby applicants can achieve higher performance levels step by step.

10. Compliance with criteria can be measured through process and performance-based assessments. Indicators are essential tools for measuring environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism operations:

    Environmental indicators can relate to the following factors, among others:
    - Environmental impact assessment conducted for setting up the operation or construction of establishments;
    - Environmental management practices, company policies and technical measures (e.g. energy, water saving and waste treatment devices, environmental friendly transportation, etc.) in place;
    - Land use and property issues in destinations;
    - Health and safety;
    - Use of natural resources:
        - ❑ Energy (consumption, reduction, efficiency)
        - ❑ Water (consumption, reduction, quality)
        - ❑ Solid and liquid waste (reduction, reuse, recycling, treatment, disposal)
        - ❑ Appropriate building materials
        - ❑ Hazardous substances (reduction, handling, use of nature friendly cleaning products)
        - ❑ Noise (reduction)
        - ❑ Air quality (quality, improvement)
        - ❑ Habitat/eco-system/wildlife maintenance and enhancement;

- Environmental information/interpretation/education for customers;
- Transportation services (public transport, environmental friendly alternatives;
- Indicators and standards on the impacts at specific tourist use areas (e.g. beaches) and on the impacts caused by specific tourism activities and facilities (e.g. diving, golf, marinas etc.);
- Visual impacts of establishments and infrastructure; etc.

Social indicators can relate to the following factors, among others:
- Social impact assessment conducted for setting up the operation and the establishments;
- Staff policies and management (information, education, training, incentives, health, safety, etc.);
- Relationships with local communities (local employees, outreach and education programmes);
- Emphasis on, and conservation of local/regional culture, heritage and authenticity;
- Maintaining aesthetics of physical development/architecture;
- Community feedback systems, satisfaction of local population;
- Contribution to community development purposes (infrastructure improvement; social services, etc.);
- Information provided to guests on sustainability aspects;
- Guest feedback systems in place, customer satisfaction, etc.

Economic indicators can relate to the following factors, among others:
- Creation of local employment (number of employees from local communities and their level of skills);
- Supply chain management through green and sustainable purchasing policies;
- Creation of networks of environmentally friendly businesses within a given destination;
- Responsible marketing;
- Use of locally sourced and produced materials and food, etc.

In addition, certification criteria for ecotourism should specifically address the elements below, besides the general sustainability criteria:

- Financial and in-kind contributions to conservation of ecotourism sites by companies;
- Level of involvement of local communities and benefits accruing to them;
- Use of specialized guides and other interpretation techniques, information provided to tourists through ecotourism operations;
- Environmental education activities provided for tourists and local populations;
- Locally appropriate scale and design for lodging, infrastructure and tours;
- Minimal impact on and the appropriate presentation of local and indigenous culture.

11. Indicators to measure the success of certification systems can address:
- The number of applications and certified companies (i.e. increase over time of the number of companies registered in a certain certification system);

- The percentage of certified companies in the different tourism product and service groups;
- Improvement in environmental and social performance in certified companies (e.g. changes in water and energy consumption, resource savings, etc.);
- Environmental and social performance of certified companies as compared to non-certified ones (e.g. a current estimate is that environmental performance per certified accommodation enterprises can be taken as about 20 % better than the average performance at accommodation facilities in Europe).

12. Consider the whole product life cycle when setting product environmental criteria (from the manufacturing, transporting, through purchasing, consumption, to recycling, disposal, etc.).

13. Undertake periodic revision and update of criteria (e.g. every 2-3 years).


## 3. Operation of certification systems

The procedure is normally composed of the application, verification and certification processes. The funding mechanism for the above services and procedures is a crucial and critical element for the success of certification systems. Normally there is a funding, verification and certification body interacting in these processes. In many cases the funding and certification bodies coincide. Fundamental components of any certification system are the facilitation of consulting, advisory and technical assistance and marketing services. The following general recommendations can be made in relation to the operational processes:


### 3.1 Application:

1. The system should be open to all potential applicants.

2. Provide clear and easily accessible information on the criteria, costs and benefits and other conditions of certification (e.g. through Internet, email, telephone, information kit).

3. Offer immediate sources for consultation services.

4. Show tangible benefits for applicants (e.g costs savings, marketing advantage, access to technical assistance and modern technology and financial possibilities, etc.) and explain clearly the commitments and costs.

5. Application documents should be clear, easy to understand and fill in.

6. Conduct a pre-evaluation/assessment of the applicant in order to identify technical and technological aspects that need to be improved to meet the criteria. Provide assistance and financial incentives for these improvements.

## 3.2 Verification

7.  Verification of compliance with criteria should be done by an independent or third-party organization. In other words by a body which is independent from the parties being certified and of technical assessment or funding.

8.  Verification is normally done through a combination of different activities: review of application documents and references, self-assessment by the operation through questionnaire, on-site visit, fees to be paid by the applicant.

9.  Verification audits should be conducted by suitably trained auditors.

10. The verification process can be also used to give recommendations to the applicants on how to improve their performance and achieve further progress.

## 3.3 Certification (awarding of certification)

The certification is basically the awarding of the certification to the applicant, granting a permit for using the logo, marketing and other services of the system.

11. Certification bodies can be composed of representatives of the mayor stakeholder groups participating in the development and operation of the system. Governments have a key role in certification bodies, by giving credibility and recognition of the system.

12. As it was also mentioned among the recommendations for criteria development, awarding of certification can be done at single-level or at multi-level. The latter one occurs if criteria are set on different scales with a view to ensure a framework of continuous improvement.

13. The certification, the use of a logo and related benefits should be granted for a pre-determined period, after which re-assessment and verification should be conducted to ensure continuous compliance with the same or higher criteria.

14. Follow up control can be conducted after certification. For example, the WTO study on voluntary initiatives demonstrated that more than 50% of the certification systems currently operating undertake some control visits after certification: 38% are announced, and 17% are surprise visits. Some eco-labels either do phone checks, stimulating guests' feedback or sending "mystery guests" to the certified tourism service.

15. Procedures have to be in place for the cancellation and withdrawal of certification and the use of the corresponding logo in case of non-compliance.

16. The certification system can also include consumer and local community feedback mechanisms.

**3.4 Consulting, advisory and technical assistance services**

The facilitation of the following services represents important added value for tourism companies and can be decisive factors for joining the certification system.

17. Provide technical consultancy options from the initial expression of interest and through the application phases onward, and give guidance to the applicant at every stage of the process.

18. Facilitate technical assistance for applicants so that they can introduce advanced management techniques and technology to meet the certification criteria. Provide access to environmental technologies, equipments and techniques by creating alliances with other organizations that can provide assistance for this purpose.

19. Develop training and capacity building programmes in form of courses, workshops, distance learning, etc.

20. Organize regular meetings for certified companies to promote the exchange of experiences and the sense of group.

21. Constant assistance and advisory is especially important in certification systems where the criteria and awarding are set on different scales.

**3.5 Marketing and communication**

Marketing is another fundamental element of certification programmes, representing perhaps the biggest attraction and the most tangible benefits for private companies. The following general recommendations can be made:

22. Develop a precise marketing strategy for the certification system targeting three groups in principle:
    22.1 Potential candidates: aiming at attracting companies to join the programme
    22.2 Applicants and certified companies: providing marketing and promotional support and market advantages for them
    22.3 Consumers: reaching recognition of the certification programmes, fostering responsible travel choices, and make effective the marketing advantage for certified companies.

23. Develop a well-distinguished and unequivocal logo design for the system. The logo can be accompanied by a motto, or slogan. Ensure legal protection of the logo.

24. The presentation of the system in media and communication should reflect a well recognized corporate image in the market for businesses and consumers as well. The system can represent a sort of brand.

25. Use all available forms and channels to publicize and provide information on the certification programme for companies and consumers (e.g. brochures, flyers, guide books, printed and electronic media, Internet, conferences, seminars, tourism and trade fairs, etc.)

26. Give good media coverage to the awarding ceremonies.

27. Provide marketing support and promotion for certified companies through national tourist boards or national tourism marketing organizations, e.g. presentation of these companies in national brochures, catalogues, listings, websites, support for presence at national stands at tourism fairs and exhibition, etc.

28. Give recommendations and examples to applicants and certified companies on how to include the certificate in their own marketing activities.

29. Demonstrate the distinction on environmental performance, economic and socio-cultural effects between certified and non-certified products/companies.

30. Communicate on a regular basis with certified members (e.g. through periodic meetings and events, newsletters, emails, exclusive access to information on Internet, etc.)

31. Provide clear and easily understandable information to consumers on the characteristics and added value that certification represents.

32. Develop consumer awareness raising and education campaigns on the certification system and certified products.

33. Involve consumer associations in these efforts

**3.6 Fees and funding**

Governments have a key role in providing funding themselves, and/or in conceiving and developing alternative funding mechanisms with other partners for the operation of the certification system.

34. Establish the right balance between financial contributions of the public and private sectors.

35. Ensure that the sources of funding do not create a conflict of interest, since undue influence by funding organizations should be avoided in the certification procedure.

36. Establish fees for participants to cover (at least part of) application and verification costs. Fees should be kept as low as possible in order to encourage participation.

37. Fees should be calculated proportionally to size of businesses (e.g. by number of beds or visitors, turnover, etc.).

38. Provide incentive measures and support the application of companies, especially of small and medium size enterprises that would otherwise be left out (e.g. by soft loans and subsidies to make the necessary improvements to meet the criteria).

39. Consider in-kind contributions by governments for the operation, e.g. providing facilities, office space and equipment.

FINAL NOTE: Governments are encouraged to convey to the World Tourism Organization their experience in connection with certification systems related to sustainability in tourism. This will allow WTO to periodically revise these guidelines, introduce any additional guidelines or modify those recommended above.

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