

Setting a worldwide standard for ecotourism

SHARING EXPERTISE IN ECOTOURISM CERTIFICATION: DEVELOPING AN INTERNATIONAL ECOTOURISM STANDARD

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by

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in partnership with GREEN GLOBE 21



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Sharing expertise in ecotourism certification: developing an International Ecotourism Standard.

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Summary:

A credible, accessible, well-marketed and international certification program has the potential to deliver significant benefits to ecotourism. It is an important tool that can help deliver the potential ecotourism so glibly promises - a win:win:win situation - into actual reality. This document explores the development of a certification program that seeks to provide a suitable international standard. This "International Ecotourism Standard" is being developed through integrating the fundamental principles for sound ecotourism certification assembled in the Mohonk Agreement, with criteria based principally on the highly-regarded Australian Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program and the latest Green Globe 21 benchmarking performance system. A draft of this International Ecotourism Standard and Users Guide is currently available¹ – with feedback on the Standard, the Certification Program and global applicability invited for integration in the final Standard. The completed Standard and supporting systems will be available and launched in October at the Australian IYE2002 conference. The International Ecotourism Standard is jointly owned by the NEAP and the CRC for Sustainable Tourism of Australia, but will be exclusively licensed to Green Globe for its use internationally.

Introduction:

The International Year of Ecotourism has focused world attention on ecotourism and its promises. Although ecotourism is often regarded as a modest, even insignificant, player in the travel and tourism market in terms of actual market size, it is often given extravagant significance and importance in its ability to influence and green mainstream tourism and pave the way for more sustainable tourism practices. Ecotourism's worth lies in its potential to provide a win:win:win situation – a win for the environment, a win for the economy and a win for the local community and existing social and cultural structures. However, to ensure that these glib promises become reality, there is a need for effective tools that encourage genuine ecotourism to develop. One such tool is ecotourism certification – a tool that used wisely and effectively, can provide a blueprint for ecotourism development, a benchmark and incentive to promote best practice and a means of identifying genuine ecotourism.

¹ Go to either <http://www.ecotourism.org.au> or <http://www.ggasiapacific.com.au>.

Background

Certification – a tool

What exactly is certification and how does it provide the means to encourage more responsible and sustainable tourism? Certification involves a process that to be *credible* (a key characteristic for an effective or 'quality' tool) needs to follow conformity assessment principles (Toth 2000). This involves the development of a standard that provides specific criteria or benchmarks to which products are expected to conform, and then assessing adherence to that standard. Certification requires a certifying body to provide assurance that the standard is met – by assessing the product against the standard, being monitored, and awarding a means by which consumers or stakeholders can recognize the certified product.

A tool to help shape the ecotourism industry?

Ecotourism certification can provide significant benefits: help ensure sustainability and conservation, raise industry standards, provide a means of industry self-regulation, and deliver marketing advantages. This is because a sound and effective ecotourism scheme can produce tangible benefits:

- to tourism providers, not only through the competitive advantages of consumer recognition and product differentiation, but also through providing a quality assurance framework, or even preferential access to fragile or sensitive areas;
- to local communities, through providing for better or more appropriate returns, and
- to conservation, through in-kind or cash support.

Ecotourism certification can be used as a tool that provide a means for tourists and other stakeholders such as the local community or protected area managers, to choose wisely. A local community could use this tool to determine the mixture of tourism activity that will help maximize the positive benefits and minimize the negative impacts of tourism. Last, but by no means least, ecotourism certification can be used as a tool that provides best practice benchmarks - a blueprint for existing and developing ecotourism product and a mechanism to ensure continual improvement.

Sound certification

A certification program is only as good as its criteria. Fortunately, there exists a framework for sound sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs and clear direction on what criteria should be included. This was produced by an international workshop that was convened by the Institute of Policy Studies (with support from the Ford foundation) in New York State, November 2000. The resultant "Mohonk Agreement" (see Honey and Rome 2001 for the full text) has the potential to have far reaching effects insofar as it sets "ground rules" that promotes consistency among certification programs from all corners of the globe.

Although good criteria are integral to a good certification program, it is equally important that the certification process also has constituent components that ensure it is credible, affordable, accessible and instantly recognizable, or better still, instantly recognized! It is evident that consumer recognition of ecotourism or sustainable tourism certification is in its early days (Synergy report 2000). This may well reflect the fact that there are around 100 schemes around the world that attempt to identify environmentally and/or socially superior tourism practices with logos, seals of approval or awards - and the number is still growing (Honey and Rome 2001, Font 2002). Lamentably, recognition by other important stakeholders such as the local communities, indigenous people, protected area managers, bastions of our natural and cultural heritage and even within the tourism industry itself, is as bad. The variance in standards between the proliferation of labels and inevitable consumer confusion is of major concern in that it blunts the tool and potential success of certification in increasing sustainability.

Attempts to address this problem are going down two very different, but not necessarily incompatible pathways. One is the formation of accreditation body that “certifies the certifiers” (or if you want to be pedantic, “audits the auditors”!). This has the potential to provide all certified product with a single marketing umbrella and quality standard that would make the myriad of certification labels somewhat comparable. Accreditation has at least two major disadvantages: it may force local or regional programs to comply with criteria and processes that are not particularly relevant to their region or local aims, and it will add to costs. Accreditation is one more layer of verification, one more layer of bureaucracy and inevitably more expensive. The Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council commissioned by the Rainforest Alliance and part funded by the Ford Foundation, is currently conducting a comprehensive feasibility study into this path. The other potential pathway is to develop a truly international standard that can exert a global influence yet address local and regional idiosyncrasies and level of technology. It is this pathway we explore in the rest of this paper.

Principles considered in developing an International Standard

The Ecotourism Association of Australia, building on the success of the Australian Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation [Certification] Program have formed an alliance with Green Globe 21 (Asia Pacific) in order to produce and distribute an International Ecotourism Standard (IES) and Ecotourism Certification Program. It is hoped that this marriage between a successful and highly regarded national ecotourism certification program and the only truly international certification body (which has proficient marketing skills) has a good chance in producing a strong and effective brand. Voluntary certification programs can only achieve their laudable aims if they provide a major benefit to tourism providers – that is, have a genuine effect on influencing consumer’s purchasing decisions. An international program has the best chance of creating a strong brand in today’s global tourism market.

In creating an International Standard and Certification Program there are inevitable tensions. These include the need to ensure that criteria are generic enough to be applicable globally, but have enough flexibility to consider local or regional variations; that a baseline standard is set - but that are still rewards for best practice and encouragement of innovation. It is also important that the program is credible but is still accessible around the world in terms of both cost and the level of technological expertise or infrastructure required. The way in which these "tensions" were addressed are explored below, although the IES has yet to be finalized and the current draft of the Standard may need to be amended to ensure the balance is right.

The broad objectives that provided the frame for the development of the International Ecotourism Standard and the associated Green Globe Ecotourism Certification Program were to:

- provide a means of identification for visitors of genuine ecotourism product;
- give visitors and other stakeholders (such as the local community, protected area managers, tour wholesalers etc.) an assurance that ecotourism product will be delivered with a commitment to best practice ecotourism and provision of quality experiences;
- encourage and reward product that continually improves toward current best practice or develops innovations that increase ecological sustainability; and
- provide a blueprint for new and developing ecotourism product.

The "core" of the International Ecotourism Standard is based on the successful and highly regarded Australian Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation [Certification] Program (NEAP), (see Chester & Crabtree 2002 for details) with revisions that incorporated the fundamentals of the Mohonk Agreement. The Standard was developed by a working party of NEAP and certification experts² with funding of provided from the Australian, Cooperative Research Center (CRC) for Sustainable Tourism. The CRC also provided the BENCHMARKING IP, technical advisors and will administer the BENCHMARKING analysis.

As with NEAP, the International Standard adopts the EAA definition of ecotourism, that is:

Ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.

² This team consisted of Alice Crabtree, Guy Chester, Anthony Lee, Tor Hundloe, Peter O'Reilly, Tony Charters with co-opted expertise from Stuart Toplis and Graeme Worboys.

However, a more definitive “definition” of ecotourism is the expansion of this statement into a core set of eight principles with specific performance indicators (i.e. the suggested Certification Standard). These are that ecotourism should:

1. have a **natural area focus** that ensures visitors have the opportunity to personally and directly experience nature;
2. provide **interpretation** or educational services that give visitors the opportunity to experience nature in ways that lead to greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment;
3. represent best practice in **ecological sustainability practices**;
4. **contribute to conservation** of natural areas and cultural heritage;
5. provide ongoing **contributions to the local community**;
6. **respect and be sensitive to the culture/s** existing in the area;
7. consistently **meet consumer expectations**; and
8. be **marketed and promoted honestly** and accurately so that realistic expectations are formed.

Process or performance?

The original NEAP certification criteria were developed by investigating what were appropriate and assessable components of the eight core principles (listed above). The key objective was to ensure that NEAP had practical, and preferably measurable performance indicators. As such, the program consisted of a mixture of “performance” based (e.g. that sewage treatment meets effluent performance standards) and “process” based (that is, relying on a commitment by the operator to implement a process to meet the desired outcomes – such as an interpretation plan) criteria. The NEAP criteria are thus quite technically prescriptive (i.e. performance based) in some areas and more general in others.

Many existing certification programs (e.g. ISO 14000, Green Tourism Business Scheme, Nordic Ecolabelling of Hotels – see Font 2002) are predominantly process-led. However, process-only systems have come under increasing criticism due to the fact that relying on a system or ‘process’ rather than measuring actual performance may simply reflect that an environmental management system has been set up, NOT that it has, or indeed ever will be implemented.

Performance-based programs that set specific performance indicators (criteria or benchmarks) that product has to meet to attain certification have real value in allowing valid comparisons and judgment to be made between different companies or product against a common set of criteria. There is thus a growing awareness of the need to incorporate significant performance-focused criteria into certification programs, and many of the current and most respected of the certification programs address this i.e. Costa Rica’s Certification for Sustainable Tourism.

Green Globe 21, in combination with the CRC, have recently taken performance-based criteria to a new level (see Green Globe 2001a and b). Green Globe demands quantified performance: with measures taken, actual performance quantified and then analyzed against a baseline standard. The performance indicators (known as Earth Check™) benchmarking criteria are outcome-focused, targeting a quantified improvement in key performance areas. The IES takes advantage of the inherent rigour of this development and has incorporated these strong performance indicators.

More on BENCHMARKING

“BENCHMARKING” thus refers to components of the IES that relate to specific quantifiable indicators. These ‘benchmarks’ require the certification applicant to assess their performance against a baseline and best practice level that have been developed from national environmental performance data.

The BENCHMARKING criteria are mainly modified Green Globe Indicators that have been carefully researched and chosen to grade sustainability performance, but also include some newly developed ecotourism-specific indicators. Like the Green Globe Sustainable Tourism Certification Program for Travel and Tourism Companies, the IES integrates the BENCHMARKING indicators as part of the certification application with additional verification of these measures required by an on-site audit. However, a separate “stage” of “Benchmarked” product does not exist (see Green Globe Path to Sustainable Travel and Tourism....as simple as A, B, C. Green Globe brochure 2001).

Ensuring access

A great deal of effort from the team that has been developing the International Ecotourism Standard went into identifying a generic set of largely performance-based, or at least outcome-orientated criteria that would be generic enough to have global applicability. Specific performance criteria ensure that every product receiving certification has committed to a specified baseline standard. These baselines meet, and often exceed regulatory compliance, in line with the need for ecotourism product to embody best practice environmental, social and economic management.

The obvious concern in setting an international standard is that in dictating baseline performance levels you have to set the level at a relatively low level – or run the risk of producing a standard that is unattainable in developing nations or areas with limited infrastructure and access to technological expertise. However, ecotourism certification wants to differentiate product that has gone well beyond compliance, it does not want to codify ‘just enough’ is good enough.

This difficulty has been dealt with in a number of ways:

- deliberately including some process-based components (i.e. a hybrid performance-process system) such as the environmental management approach (i.e. effectively an environmental management system) that

- allows for the variability in threshold performance levels between countries but demand at least a commitment to improving standards;
- developing a certification program with two levels that recognizes different ways of obtaining best practice;
 - BENCHMARKING indicators are country specific: baseline and best practice levels for these indicators are analyzed according to that countries environmental performance data, or if this is not available, a country with similar technology and infrastructure, and
 - providing specific rules for micro-businesses.³

Two levels: “Ecotourism” and “Advanced Ecotourism”

The IES has two sets of criteria for certifying ecotourism product. Product must complete all criteria and all relevant BENCHMARKING indicators need to at least meet the baseline.

All BENCHMARKING indicators that meet or exceed specified *BEST PRACTICE* will be clearly identified in certification awards and documentation. However, advanced ecotourism certification will only be awarded when the product meets or exceed a specific percentage⁴ of *BEST PRACTICE* criteria from the Standard.

The actual process of certification involves initial self-assessment to ensure product meets all certification criteria, providing the information necessary to ensure BENCHMARKING can occur, BUT is only completed once a compulsory on-site visit by an accredited third-party auditor ensures compliance with and verifies the nominated criteria.

Certifying what?

Product not business entity

The IES further develops the process of certifying product, and not business entity, from NEAP. The reasoning behind this is the fact that ecotourism activities are extremely diverse, and a significant number of tourism businesses and companies (i.e. a single operating entity) have a wide range of products, some of which may not be eligible for ecotourism certification. This may be because some product cannot reach the standard or rigour dictated by the

³Micro-businesses are defined as businesses that consist of at least two of the following:

- 5 or fewer employees;
- have a turn-over of less than US\$20 000 pa;
- are a not-for-profit business that is essentially owned and operated by traditional custodians or the local community for the community's benefit.

The rules for micro-businesses are that wherever they achieve the principles of ecotourism but cannot meet specific criteria, consideration will be given to exemption from those criteria (depending upon the circumstances). Justification can be made at the time of assessment; the vital test is that the principles of ecotourism must be met.

⁴ The percentage is expected to be in the 75% range, has yet to be set. It is currently being investigated through testing the criteria against international product that is piloting the preliminary Standard.

Standard, or may simply be because they have a range of product that is not nature-based. Nonetheless, limiting certification and the logo to the specific product that meets the Standard is essential if the program is to be credible.

Sub-sectors

The IES has been developed to address three distinct sub-sectors of the industry: accommodation, tours and attractions. The principles in the Standard are the same for all three sectors, but the way in which the product may meet the principle may well differ. Explanation and consideration to this fact is provided in more detail in a comprehensive Users Guides that is attached to the Standard. The basic definitions of the three sectors are:

Accommodation is any type of structure of a permanent or semi-permanent nature that is designed to house visitors overnight. Lodges, resorts, standing camps and camping/caravan grounds are included in this category. A major objective of the accommodation is to encourage guests to interact with natural areas adjacent to the accommodation. Tours offered as a separate ticketable item are assessed separately to the accommodation product.

Tours are activities that involve being taken on an excursion with a guide (or guides) for the purpose of viewing and interacting with the natural environment. Tours typically combine activities such as driving, walking or riding with viewing and interacting with the environment.

A tour may offer overnight accommodation (from camping or staying in huts, to hotel and resort-type lodgings) but these are not assessed as part of the *tour* product. However, if they meet ecotourism criteria for accommodation products (see above), they can be certified under the accommodation category.

Attractions are facilities that combine a natural area (or natural area focus) with fixed infrastructure designed to help people explore and learn about nature. Typical examples of an attraction are a Wildlife Park, sanctuary, or interpretive center. Tours or accommodation offered as separate ticketable items are assessed separately.

Further details on the IES and the Users Guide can be obtained by looking at the actual Standard (Draft for Consultation) that is available on the EAA's of Green Globe (Asia Pacific) websites⁵.

Credibility

Although the IES has attempted to resolve some of the tensions inherent in producing an International Standard in developing "good" criteria for both a base line and best practice level, a sound and successful certification program is also critically dependent upon its credibility. The fine details of the Green Globe Ecotourism Certification Program are awaiting the results of consultation on the International Ecotourism Standard (draft for consultation). Although the devil may be in the detail, the Certification Program already has provisions to ensure that the key elements of a sound certification program are included, that is:

⁵ EAA's website is www.ecotourism.org.au and Green Globe is at www.greenglobe21.com

- there are independent third party auditors;
- there is periodic review of criteria (which will embody global best practice environmental, social and economic management);
- there is an incentive to continually improve;
- there will be strong control of the use of logos (including appropriate use and an expiration date), and
- provision to withdraw certification in the event of non-compliance.

Only once certified, will product be eligible to display the IES logo for the specified product. This will consist of both the Green Globe logo and the NEAP ecotourism or advanced ecotourism logos (which have been ‘internationalised’ with the term “accreditation” replaced with the term “certification”).

In Conclusion....

The IES has been designed to provide a mechanism by which the world’s ecotourism industry can continue to work towards the ideal of long-term environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability. It is being developed in consultation with key stakeholder groups (and comment is still invited) and designed to be a voluntary, industry-based initiative. It aims to provide the individuals working at the sector’s coalface, the ecotourism operators, with the means to gain knowledge of best practice principles, to apply techniques within their own operations that contribute towards sustainability, and to embark upon a program of continual improvement. Integral with these aims is the need for this program to become effective program in influencing consumer choice through a strong brand and effective marketing, thereby conferring tangible benefits.

Although considerable effort has been made to ensure that the IES has included good rationale and sound principles behind its development, it remains to be seen if it does set responsible, measurable and practical performance indicators that are sufficiently international in scope but allow for regional differences. The IES has explored critically the questions whether:

- it is really possible to develop a single global certification program that embraces wildly different tourism businesses and takes into account local, national, or indeed, regional variations (and politics);
- compulsory on-site verification by an independent third party auditor is within the financial reach of many ecotourism operations (or if a non self-funding program is a feasible alternative), and
- strong branding is going to result in significant market penetration .

The IES does not, and may never have, answers to these questions. There is hope that this Standard could allow certification to succeed to its fullest potential. However, even if it achieves success beyond the wildest dreams, it must be remembered that certification is only one in a suite of tools that are needed to

effect long term conservation and management of our natural and cultural resources and enhance appreciation of our heritage.

Invitation to comment

The International Ecotourism Standard (draft for consultation) has been developed in consultation with select tourism/ecotourism certification experts and piloted with ecotourism operations internationally. The Ecotourism Association of Australia and Green Globe (Asia Pacific) is now seeking additional feedback on the criteria, format and accessibility of the Ecotourism Standard. This feedback will be reviewed and will help shape, in conjunction with the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council accreditation outcomes, the final Green Globe 21 Ecotourism Certification Program. The final International Ecotourism Standard and additional details of the certification process and support network will be launched at the WTO/UNEP-endorsed IYE2002 International Conference that is taking place on 21-25 October in Cairns, Australia.

Comments and suggestions on the IES or the Green Globe Ecotourism Certification Program should be sent no later than August 1st 2002 to:

Ecotourism Association of Australia
International Ecotourism Standard Working Group
GPO Box 268
BRISBANE
Queensland 4001
Australia.

Copies of the IES are available from either the Ecotourism Association of Australia's website: www.ecotourism.org.au or from Green Globe (Asia Pacific): www.ggasiapacific.com.au. Further details on the IYE2002 conference in Australia can be obtained at: www.ecotourism.org.au/conf2002

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Biographical notes

Dr Alice Crabtree: Alice was one of the founding members of the Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA) and a key player in the development of the accreditation criteria for both the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP), its recently-released nesting sister, the EcoGuide Program. She is currently Chair of both the NEAP Management Group and EcoGuide Program Panel, and the Project Manager for the International Ecotourism Standard. Her involvement in developing international ecotourism standards has been extensive – with a position on the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) Advisory Group and being involved in professional development and training programs on ecotourism in Japan, Borneo and China.

Peter O'Reilly: Peter is the President of the Ecotourism Association of Australia (and has been since 1997) and Director of Marketing, Environment and IT at O'Reilly's Rainforest Guesthouse – a family business that is one of Australia's premier ecotourism products. Peter tempers this practical expertise with a sound academic footing – he has Bachelor degrees in Applied Science, Botany and Hospitality Management and a Masters in IT. His excellent credentials also include positions on the NEAP Management Group and the CRC for Sustainable Tourism Nature, Eco and Adventure Advisory Group. His somewhat eclectic background includes passion and dedication to the Coxens Fig Parrot Recovery Team and Frog week.

Graeme Worboys: Graeme is CEO of Green Globe (Asia Pacific) and a principal consultant to the CRC for Sustainable Tourism. His most recent publication is as principal author of "Protected Area Management: principles and practice" that was published by Oxford University Press in 2001. His extensive expertise has been gleaned from being in positions such as a former Executive Director of NEW South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, but his passion for a more sustainable world is his own.