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Snežana Šerbula

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ECOTOURISM CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS: MANAGING FINANCING

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Abstract

Ecotourism is a subcomponent of sustainable tourism and sustainable version of the primary tourism based on the nature, including various different elements of rural and cultural tourism in all its forms. The main intention is to achieve results and effects in terms of sustainable development. The paper gives a glance on financing ecotourism certification programs. In this line, it underlines the necessity of developing certified programs that measure different aspects of ecotourism. Moreover, the paper poses the general and specific objectives stated in the specific ecotourism accreditation program. The summarized findings present that small ecotourism enterprises lack financing along with missing appropriate information, technical capacity and capabilities to search for funding. More precisely, they are not sufficiently informed about the sources of financing ecotourism programs, and are not ready to take the debt without clear cost-benefit analysis. In this regard, one may assist them by creation of a public-private partnership in the field of ecotourism. Finally, the paper concludes that tourism businesses, which have identified the necessity of certifying ecotourism programs, needs unconditionally to follow standardized ecotourism principles.

Keywords: Managing financing, Ecotourism, Certification, Tourism development

INTRODUCTION

Being identified as a subcomponent of sustainable tourism, ecotourism includes persons or groups with very clear ecological mind, who participate in all activities and other possibilities settled in the environment. Yet, their increased number arise the issue of increasing infrastructural activities often being not sufficient. Some basic characteristics, which are mentioned at the concept of ecotourism and accommodation for which these tourists are interested in, are: (i) Well preserved areas; (ii) Using simple types of accommodation; and (iii) Strict adherence to the environmental protection, including limited number of visitors. Hence, the main intention of ecotourism is to decrease negative effects made by mass tourism.

In past decades, these efforts to validate the effects and success of ecotourism are still at an early stage. Given the fact that ecotourism is further defined by its participants and markets, many questions remain unanswered about how the success story of ecotourism can be verified. On the other hand, ecotourism business cannot be successfully run without investing in ecotourism certification program, which assists in surviving in the competitive tourism market, as well as in improving performance, and raising image and confidence of the company.

This research gives a glance on the importance of applying ecotourism certification programs. Moreover, it recalls some basic types and mechanisms for funding, by concluding that tourism, particularly ecotourism unconditionally needs to follow general and specific objectives and principles noted in the certification programs. In order to meet the research aims, the paper is structured in several parts. After the introductory part, the following section

gives a brief overview on theoretical aspects of the certification programs in ecotourism. A snapshot on stylized facts on why certification is a need to tourism businesses is followed by a section briefly describing the phases how to certify the programs. The accent is put on the section presenting the main issues on managing finance on ecotourism certification programs. The article's final section offers the conclusion about the investigated issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large pool of approaches towards the ecotourism certification programs. Yet, one is certain that all address specified criteria applicable to the working style of the entities involved in ecotourism development. On the other side, these programs are designed specifically for ecotourism or sustainable tourism in general, and have an urgent need to build international guidelines to address the task how to develop and manage certification programs. Bien [1] notes that certification is a way of ensuring that an activity or a product meets certain standards. Moreover, it is "a voluntary procedure that assesses audits and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards. It awards a marketable logo to those that meet or exceed baseline standards" [2]. According to de Vicente [3], certification has a much larger impact on supply side of the ecotourism market, than on the demand side.

Certification programs have dual role of increasing industry, firstly, performance by providing guidelines on how to be more sustainable, and at the same time by providing marketing benefits [4]. In this line, Klintman and Boström [5] mention internationally harmonized eco standards known as ecological standardization schemes. Some programs are even more legitimate for the so called "green political consumers" [6], or give the priority to certain criteria [7-10].

WHY CERTIFICATION?

Table 1 gives a glance on the importance of the certification process.

Table 1 Certification benefits [1]

Body	Benefits
Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helps businesses to improve themselves; - Tends to reduce operating costs; - Enables easier access to the technical assistance and financing for businesses to implement new technology; - Ensures marketing advantage to certified businesses, as consumers learn to recognize credible certification brands.
Consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides tourists with environmentally and socially responsible choices; - Increases public awareness of responsible business practices; - Alerts tourists to the environmental and social issues in an area, allowing them to act more respectfully or contribute to solutions; - Offers better quality service.
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helps governments to protect their market niches as ecotourism or sustainable tourism destinations; - Raises industry standards in health, safety, environment, and social stability; - Lowers the regulatory costs of environmental protection; - By requiring economic benefits to communities, it can help reduce poverty, especially in rural areas.
Local community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires businesses to protect the environment and do little damage to it; - It requires businesses to respect local culture and provide real economic and social benefits for it; - It is likely to continue offering benefits for the long term.

Along, several additional reasons are noted for justifying the necessity of certifying tourism businesses, like: Improving quality and performance of their business and staff; “Doing the right things” to protect the environment and local community; Cutting costs; Gaining marketing advantage; and Avoiding being lumped with “green-washed” businesses that are not sustainable, yet try to claim to be [11].

HOW TO CERTIFY?

Getting certification program is not an easy process due to many open issues. One of the biggest limitations is its poor recognition by the consumers. Having in mind that this program type is applicable only to ecotourism products and not to general tourism businesses, it creates additional dilemmas in certification process.

Table 2 presents the key phases in certification program development, which are essential for establishing, developing and maintaining reliable certification program.

Table 2 Certification programs phases [12]

Phase	Steps
I Start Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involve a multi-stakeholder body, consisting of representatives from government, tourism industry, academia, and non-profit organizations; - Conduct a feasibility study assessing market needs and readiness, funding sources, models of program structure and finance, etc.; - Develop a business plan; - Develop draft standards and procedures; - Finalize standards and procedures; - Establish audit and assessment protocol process; - Develop marketing materials; - Develop a monitoring and evaluation protocol; - Secure buy-in (and funding) from key interest groups.
II Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Begin the process of assessing, auditing, and awarding businesses with certification label or logo; - Implement training and education programs; - Market program and certified businesses to tourism intermediaries; - Begin monitoring and evaluation.
III Consolidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires businesses to protect the environment and do little damage to it; - It requires businesses to respect local culture and provide real economic and social benefits for it; - It is likely to continue offering benefits for the long term.

FINANCING ECOTOURISM CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

Obtaining ecotourism certification arise certain costs, which are not limited to short-term or nominated as direct costs, and they can be presented as in Figure 1.

The entire set costs include costs for certain changes and financial needs in terms of equipment and infrastructure, necessary to meet the requirements of certification program. Especially in times of major activities, one have to consider major investing, like installation of solar panels. Many times these costs are related to introduction of very sophisticated technology. However, the improvements within the company during the period of certification, leads to conclusion that these costs is expected to bring benefits in much bigger internal efficiency.

On the other hand, small ecotourism enterprises need to have smaller investments since they act in the limited environment and apply small range of technologies. But tight budgets, as well as the long-term financing costs represent big charges for the most of small ecotourism enterprises. They are at “pole position” not only in access to finance, but also in the implementation of any new system and technology that have or are required to be introduced.

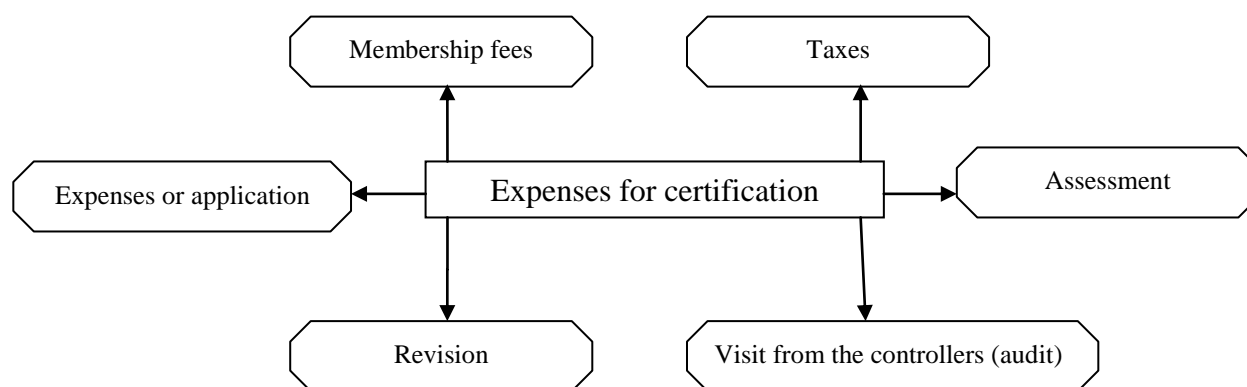


Figure 1 Ecotourism certification costs [10]

Therefore, small ecotourism enterprises do not have just lack of funds, but mostly lack sufficient information and technical capacity and capabilities to clearly understand the benefits and effects of ecotourism. Moreover, they:

- (a) Do not know where to look for funding for their projects;
- (b) Are not ready to take the debt without clear cost-benefit analyses; or
- (c) Do not know how and where to seek for technical assistance for funding sources.

One approach to assist ecotourism entities is forming private-public partnership with other stakeholders active in ecotourism. These stakeholders (Government, NGOs, industry, donors, etc.), generally have some common interests in providing the highest standards. Hence, most of them are eager to meet the requirements of the certification program. Furthermore, they can play an important role in the overall means of providing technical and financial resources. The Government, for example, through subsidizing social and economic conditions necessary for meeting the certification program criteria for sustainable environmental development, may assist in great manner in sustainability of ecotourism.

Based upon Table 3, it is noticeable that costs for ecotourism certification are divided into two groups:

I Direct costs, which are directly related to the certification process (known as temporary or short-term costs). Generally, this group of costs includes: (i) Application of taxes; (ii) Acquisition of technical documentation; and (iii) Visiting from some agencies or consultants to implement the certification;

II Indirect costs, which are long-term, fixed and variable costs, and generally address: (i) Using the best available techniques; (ii) Education and training; (iii) Technical assistance; and (iv) Investments in infrastructural projects.

In terms of financing certification programs, tourism businesses may have in mind the following funding mechanisms:

- Financial instruments, such as: financial aid, subventions, grants, loans and payments for services which are performed in the environment, and so forth;
- Financial support i.e. direct or indirect subsidies such as cost reduction or other forms of financial support, like: (i) Informal taxes (membership, application, review, training, income, etc.); (ii) Reduced costs or loans from the government for small businesses to implement specific sustainable practices; and (iii) All types of support, including technical assistance to offset the investment needs and direct payment of subsidies from NGOs, donors and governments.
- Grants, usually used to cover the program costs for providing technical assistance and training programs;
- Loans and Loans guarantee;
- Other types of support, like: non-cash asset, technical assistance, marketing assistance or through business administration;
- Finance for conservation;
- Payments for the eco-environmental services;
- Other considerations.

Table 3 Sample costs for certification programs [13]

Type	Cost item
I Direct costs	Fees such as application and manual.
	Audit/Assessment costs:
	- Travel, food and lodging for auditors;
	- Daily rates for specialists or internationally accredited auditors;
II Indirect costs	- Multiple visits: pre-assessment, diagnostics, audit, and verification inspections.
	Logo and licensing fees.
	Costs of meeting certification requirements:
	- New management systems and technologies;
	- Investment in infrastructure;
	- Creating and maintaining management systems;
	- Staff training on implementing certification criteria;
	- Creating and maintaining social programs;
	- Creating and maintaining environmental programs;
	- Meeting and maintaining quality and service standards.

CONCLUSION

The paper gives a glance on the possibility to manage financing of ecotourism certification programs. It underlines the necessity of developing certified programs that measure different aspects of ecotourism. In this line, the paper found certified programs to ensure that ecotourism:

- (i) Empowers local communities around the world to fight against poverty and to achieve sustainable development;
- (ii) Provides effective economic incentives for conserving and enhancing bio-cultural diversity and helps protect the natural and cultural heritage; and
- (iii) Promotes greater understanding and appreciation for nature, local society, and culture.

With regards to general and specific objectives stated in the ecotourism accreditation program, the paper found that around 80% of specific criteria must be fulfilled in order to get the certification. That means that more than 2/3 of each category (nature; interpretation; environmental sustainability; protection; working with local community; cultural component; customer satisfaction; and responsible marketing) must be met.

Finally, the research underlined the basic financial obstacles for tourism enterprises in the process of certification. Although the first impression is that small ecotourism enterprises have lack of funds, the practice showed that they are often faced with lack of appropriate information, technical capacity and capabilities to search for funding. More precisely, they are not sufficiently informed about the sources of financing ecotourism programs, and are not ready to take the debt without clear cost-benefit analysis. In this regard, the paper argues the possibility of creating a public-private partnership in the field of ecotourism. Referring the types and mechanisms for funding, the paper recalled numerous financial instruments for providing funds for certification of ecotourism businesses. So, subsidies, grants, guarantees, credit loans, non-cash assets and other funding sources are elaborated.

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