

Environmentally Sustainable Practices of Victorian Tourism Enterprises

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Abstract

Environmental sustainability has been a growing concern in our society for the past twenty years, and is a primary issue of many leaders of the tourism industry. In spite of the many efforts to encourage and/or enforce environmentally sound practices, they have expressed concern as to the actual level of adoption of such practices by the industry at large.

This study considers current attitudes towards and adoption of environmentally sustainable practices of Victorian tourism enterprises. Using a purposive sample of businesses in the Geelong Otway region, in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews provided a wealth of information relating to perceived benefits and barriers to adopting environmentally sustainable practices.

The findings demonstrate that, while many operators are aware of environmentally sustainable practice and have a positive personal philosophy towards implementing them, they remain constrained by business needs such as customer demands and limited acceptance of certification and accreditation programs.

The study concludes with a number of recommendations to assist the industry bodies supporting operators in the take up of environmentally focused practices. The final recommendation is to continue to develop knowledge in this field and extend the research to a broader base via a questionnaire based on the findings.

Objectives of Study

Due to the wide field of environmental practices, this exploratory study aims to gain insight into:

- The environmental attitudes and behaviour/practices (both positive and negative) of Victorian tourism enterprises, as well as to
- Identify barriers to environmental compliance and
- Identify best practice using real life examples and case studies to highlight how to operate a business taking into practices that take into account environmental sustainability.

Methodology

It was agreed with Tourism Victoria to focus on one region where in-depth information could be obtained from a range of operators. The Geelong Otway Tourism (GOT) region was suggested for a number of reasons:

- GOT is itself Green Globe certified, demonstrating a willingness to adopt strong environmental practices;
- They have a good range of members that would provide us with a varied range of environmental activities, from those who are embracing certification through to those who have not.

Twelve operators were identified by Tourism Victoria and GOT, with in-depth interviews undertaken covering a broad range of environmental questions.

Key Findings

While not specifically considered from an environmental perspective, the key issue facing tourism businesses was the cost of petrol, which at the time was affecting visitor numbers. In addition, while the importance of conserving water was acknowledged, operators noted that a certain amount of water is required to keep the customers satisfied such as in the provision of spas, laundry requirements and normal water-flow showerheads. It should be noted that the drought and related water shortage in Australia is a major concern for a number of businesses, therefore, this finding is not surprising.

There were a range of motivating factors that encouraged the implementation of environmentally sustainable practices, with those most often mentioned being personal values, healthy living values and market pressure.

A number of barriers to implementing environmentally sustainable practices were identified by the operators. Some were specific to the nature of the business, for example, operating in a building with a heritage classification imposed restrictions. The main barriers identified included implementation costs, lack of customer demand, the labour-intensive nature of becoming certified, lack of government and industry support and the technicality of information forums. While the lack of customer demand for change is a barrier the increased environmental awareness of customers is beginning to force operators to become more environmentally focused. Customer pressure, however, varies across the different tourism sectors.

In direct contrast to those who considered the cost of implementation to be a barrier, half of the twelve operators believed that the key benefits of employing environmentally sustainable practices were the cost savings. Just under half of the operators also believed that they gained a competitive edge from promoting their environmental commitment, as it differentiated their business from others. Interestingly, the enterprises with Green Globe certification, more so than the others, recognised the value of certification and were able to measure the benefits and to use this knowledge for marketing.

Overall, there was a low awareness of existing programs, with only three programs achieving more than 50 percent awareness. Some programs had no level of awareness, which for the Green Living Builder program is of concern as many places were renovating, building or extending their current buildings.

In terms of useful resources, 'how to' sheets, case studies, web sites and demonstration projects all ranked highly with an average score over 4 out of a scale of 5 in terms of their importance.

Conclusion

The richness of the information provided through the in-depth interview yielded a number of recommendations, with the most significant outlined below in terms of the provision of information, motivating businesses, barriers and marketing.

The lack of awareness of existing environmental programs is evident. The importance of and need for businesses to be able to quantify the financial benefits of ESP came out strongly in the interviews, as did the need for simple, relevant information.

While many of those interviewed did not initially believe they were doing much in relation to ES practices, when pressed, many 'simple' practices came to light. However, it is acknowledged that some types of practices have more of an impact in reducing negative affects on the environment. Whilst many of the motivations for implementing ES practices were random and varied, there was agreement that the operators generally obtained personal gratification from doing 'the right thing'. Although for the smaller businesses the types of practices implemented were similar to those implemented in households the financial benefits for the business were recognised. The issue of quantification of cost savings was apparent and needs further investigation in the future. However, promoting the 'bottom-line' benefits is more likely to encourage businesses to take up ES practices than a mandatory approach.

Although the benefits of Green Globe certification were acknowledged particularly from the marketing advantages it could provide, barriers were also evident. Impediments of cost and

relevance to small businesses were apparent and are key considerations for small firm operators. Evident in this research is the lack of Green Globe's focus on the small business perspective. This finding suggests that Green Globe needs to build its credibility with small businesses and to empathise with the issues confronted by operators.

To date, most of the promotion of certification has focused on encouraging businesses to take up the program, however most acknowledged that they were looking for consumer demand in order to justify the cost and effort of certification. The message that the operators expect the certification programs themselves to undertake the marketing and promotion of these programs to the consumer to create customer demand was a common theme. However, there was evidence that some operators are taking the lead and educating their customers about environmental issues and in particular about the need to save water. One way to assist small businesses is to learn from these operators, who in some cases are market leaders and to share their good practices. Enforcing certification may, therefore, not be essential in all cases.

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