

Sustainable Tourism Labels: A Suitable Tool for Consumers?

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Abstract

In an attempt to encourage businesses making an effort to reduce the negative impacts of tourism, and to maximise the positive outcomes of this activity an extensive number of sustainable tourism labels were developed worldwide. It has been argued that tourism businesses, as well as consumers themselves, commonly state their willingness to embrace more environmentally friendly policies, placing a strong focus on labelling aspects (Font, 2001). However, despite consumers' increased awareness about these issues over the last two decades, sustainability values still fail to significantly influence tourist behaviour (Sharpley, 2001; Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007).

The impact of consumers' engagement is not only determined directly by their consumption. In turn, Harris (2007) suggests that consumer choices also influence the decisions of businesses to adopt sustainable practices. Thus, this author argues that businesses will support sustainable labelling initiatives if they perceive a financial benefit. Therefore, if consumers demanded sustainable products more actively a more proactive approach to the adoption of sustainable practices could be expected from businesses. According to Font (2001) labelling methods have helped to standardise the promotion of responsible practices through a set of criteria which is then assessed by a third party. Consequently, sustainable tourism labels could play an essential role in enlightening the demand of consumers for more sustainable tourism products. But the question is whether these labels are communicating their message to consumers, and if this communication is taking place effectively.

Questions about consumers' understanding of sustainability can only be answered by asking this group directly. However, an investigation into the labelling organisations can bring an insight into the level of engagement of these labels with consumers. Following this, this paper presents the results from a piece of research aimed to examine the level of engagement that sustainable tourism organisations across Europe have with consumers. The following outlines the main objectives of this project:

- To obtain an insight into the level of understanding that sustainable tourism label certifiers have about the potential consumers of the products that they label.

- To explore the extent of consumer education currently undertaken by organisations offering sustainable tourism labels.
- To examine certifiers' perceived benefits and limitations regarding consumer involvement in the development of their labels.

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