



# **A SIMPLE USER'S GUIDE TO CERTIFICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM**

*A publication of the Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*



*Together with*



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This document expresses the opinion of the author, and not necessarily that of the institutions and persons who supported its publication.

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**Cover photo:** Tammy Guo, Tourists in the Galapagos Islands, 2006.

**Who should use this guide?**

This guide to certification is designed for those who have heard about certifying sustainable tourism and ecotourism and want to understand how it works or how to begin the process. For those who are interested in more technical details about certification, see the references listed at the end of this document.

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## Tourism, sustainability, and certification

Tourism is an enormous and widespread industry. It is found all over the world, so its impacts, social, economic, and environmental, are also worldwide. These impacts can be positive, doing good, or negative, doing harm. Sustainable tourism usually aims to have minimal negative impacts, to minimize harm, and to optimize economic benefits. Ecotourism, a type of sustainable tourism, is usually conducted in largely untouched natural areas, which tend to be both environmentally and often socially sensitive (especially if local indigenous groups are involved), so its potential impacts can be even greater, for good or ill. Ecotourism aims to extend the positive impacts, through a special focus on conservation, benefits for host populations, and the education of visitors.

Some businesses really achieve these aims, others falsely claim to, and some don't care. Some would like to, but don't know how. One way of rewarding the businesses that are truly complying with these goals is by giving them credible outside recognition. Certification is a tool for doing so, and here we describe how it works. The certification process can also teach businesses about better or exemplary practices, even if the business never gets certified.

### What do we mean by sustainability?

When we talk about “sustainable” activities, it usually means that we can do the activity in the same or similar way for the indefinite future (sustainable in time) in three main aspects:

- **Environmentally** – the activity minimizes any damage to the environment (flora, fauna, water, soils, energy use, contamination, etc.) and ideally tries to benefit the environment in a positive way (through protection and conservation).
- **Socially and culturally** – the activity does not harm, and may revitalize the social structure or culture of the community where it is located.
- **Economic** – the activity does not simply begin and then rapidly die because of bad business practices; it continues to contribute to the economic well-being of the local community. A sustainable business should benefit its owners, its employees, and its neighbors.

When we take these three aspects into account in our activities, this is called the “**triple bottom line**”. Sometimes it is referred to as “doing well by doing good.” It means running a business, an organization, or a government in such a way that it doesn't destroy the resources – natural, cultural, or economic – on which it depends. In fact, a business that is run in this way can enhance all three aspects

#### Sustainable Development

The Brundtland Report, “*Our Common Future*”, defines sustainable development as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (UNWCED, 1987)

#### Triple Bottom Line

“Where a company examines the social, environmental and economic effects of its performance on the wider society begins to improve its performance and reports publicly on progress.”  
– John Elkington (1997)

and continue to operate profitably, while benefiting its surrounding natural areas and communities.

## What is sustainable tourism?

**The principles of sustainability can be applied to any type of tourism – mass or specialty; city, beach, or wilderness; large or small. They also can be applied to all sectors of the tourist industry: lodging, tours, agencies, ground operators, guiding, and transport. According to *Agenda 21 for the Travel & Tourism Industry*, “Sustainable tourism products are products which operate in harmony with local environment, community, and cultures, so that these become the permanent beneficiaries.” Many sustainable tourism certification programs consider sustainable tourism to be any kind of “**tourism that seeks to minimize ecological and sociocultural impacts while providing economic benefits to local communities and host countries.**” (Mohonk Agreement, 2000)**

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) declared in 1988 that **sustainable tourism is "envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems."**

A large, conventional city hotel can be environmentally and socially responsible, and so can a small ecolodge near a national park. More to the point, a small lodge can be just as irresponsible and unsustainable as a large hotel, or even more so in some cases. This is one reason why many people see a growing need for internationally recognized, but locally

adapted standards for sustainability.

In tourism, the triple bottom line can be critical, especially for those businesses and tours located outside of large cities. Hotels and tours in rural or natural areas depend on the good will of their local community for their survival. Businesses that do not hire or benefit local inhabitants often lose the support of their neighbors. And towns, villages, and indigenous communities whose social fabric is damaged by tourism often lose their attractiveness for tourists. Businesses based on natural resources cannot survive if the resource is destroyed — this is why the clients are visiting in the first place.

The twelve aims for making tourism sustainable were described in “Making Tourism More Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers” (United Nations Environment Programme – World Tourist Organization, 2005) as:

1. Economic Viability: To ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourism destinations and enterprises, so that they are able to continue to prosper and deliver benefits in the long term.
2. Local Prosperity: To maximize the contribution of tourism to the economic prosperity of the host destination, including the proportion of visitor spending that is retained locally.

3. Employment Quality: To strengthen the number and quality of local jobs created and supported by tourism, including the level of pay, conditions of service and availability to all without discrimination by gender, race, disability or in other ways.
4. Social Equity: To seek a widespread and fair distribution of economic and social benefits from tourism throughout the recipient community, including improving opportunities, income and services available to the poor.
5. Visitor Fulfillment: To provide a safe, satisfying and fulfilling experience for visitors, available to all without discrimination by gender, race, disability, or in other ways.
6. Local Control: To engage and empower local communities in planning and decision making about the management and future development of tourism in their area, in consultation with other stakeholders.
7. Community Wellbeing: To maintain and strengthen the quality of life in local communities, including social structures and access to resources, amenities and life support systems, avoiding any form of social degradation or exploitation.
8. Cultural Richness: To respect and enhance the historic heritage, authentic culture, traditions, and distinctiveness of host communities.
9. Physical Integrity: To maintain and enhance the quality of landscapes, both urban and rural, and avoid the physical and visual degradation of the environment.
10. Biological Diversity: To support the conservation of natural areas, habitats, and wildlife, and minimize damage to them.
11. Resource Efficiency: To minimize the use of scarce and non renewable resources in the development and operation of tourism facilities and services.
12. Environmental Purity: To minimize the pollution of air, water, and land and the generation of waste by tourism enterprises and visitors

The publication explains how these aims are related to the triple bottom line and how each of the aims contributes to all three bottom lines.

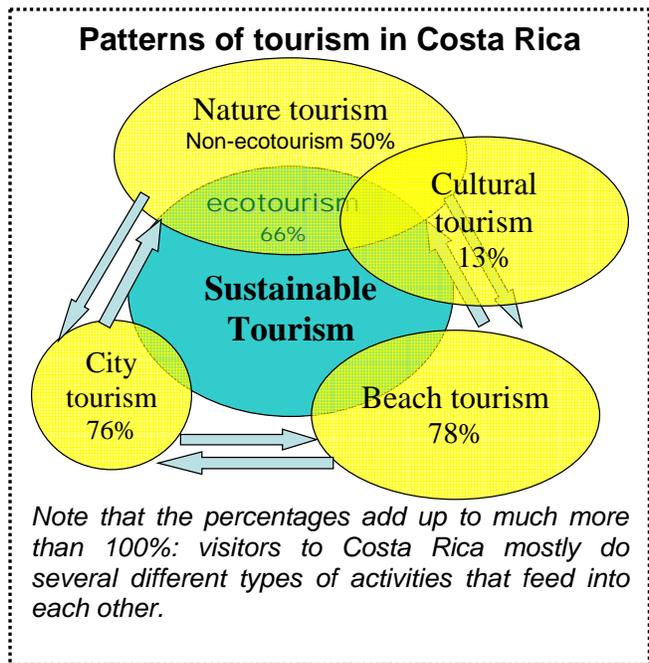
## What do we mean by ecotourism?

Ecotourism is a sector of tourism, based on nature travel and including the principles of sustainability. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as: “**responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people.**” Whatever definition is used, ecotourism should have a *positive impact* on both natural areas and the local community.

**Ecotourism is one kind of sustainable tourism, based on nature, and usually following a distinct set of principles and good practices.** Ecotourism complements other types of tourism, as the diagram at right shows. Most visitors to Costa Rica, for example, participate in both conventional and ecotourism.

A major problem for true ecotourism businesses is a practice called **greenwashing**. This term refers to a business that presents itself as “sustainable”, ‘ecological’, ‘green’, ‘responsible’, ‘ecotourist’, etc., when it doesn’t comply with generally accepted standards, or worse, it is in contradiction with them. For those who are really trying to do their best to comply with all ecotourism standards, the businesses that

falsely use the term ‘ecotourism’ compete unfairly and damage the credibility of the whole industry. **One way of determining which businesses are truly practicing ecotourism (or sustainable tourism in other market segments) is certification.**



## What is certification?

**Certification is a way of ensuring that an activity or a product meets certain standards.** Within the tourist industry, different organizations have developed certification programs measuring different aspects of tourism: (a) quality, for the entire tourist industry, (b) sustainability, also for all sectors, and (c) ecotourism, for sustainable tourism that takes place in natural, protected, or fragile ecosystems, that may include indigenous communities, and that conforms to the definition above.

**Certification** is defined as “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.” – Honey and Rome, 2001

## History of certification

Certification labels have a long history, dating back to the fifteenth century, when the Roquefort cheese label was regulated, and the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when French wines were first certified for origin and purity (“Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée”). The electrical industry has used certification as a way to ensure the safety of appliances and industrial equipment since the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) first established standards in 1904. In clothing, Woolmark was established as a certification in 1964 to assure



Source: Toth, 2002

consumers that the product was made of pure, unsullied wool. Many other industry-specific certification standards were developed during the twentieth century, mostly to assure the reliability of products to wholesalers and industrial users. Most systems are known and recognized only within the industry, but a few have received consumer recognition.

The impetus for environmental certification began with the 1992 “Earth Summit,” held under United Nations sponsorship in Rio de Janeiro. Among the many outcomes of

this event was the “Agenda 21”, with a call for environmental and social responsibility of all sectors of society in the world, including governments, non-governmental organizations, and businesses. Soon afterwards, environmental awards, prizes, and certification systems began to be developed in agriculture and business, including bananas, flowers, fish, timber, and coffee. The ISO 14001 generic standard for environmental management systems was released in 1996 and became popular as a universal environmental certification system, in spite of its serious limitations.

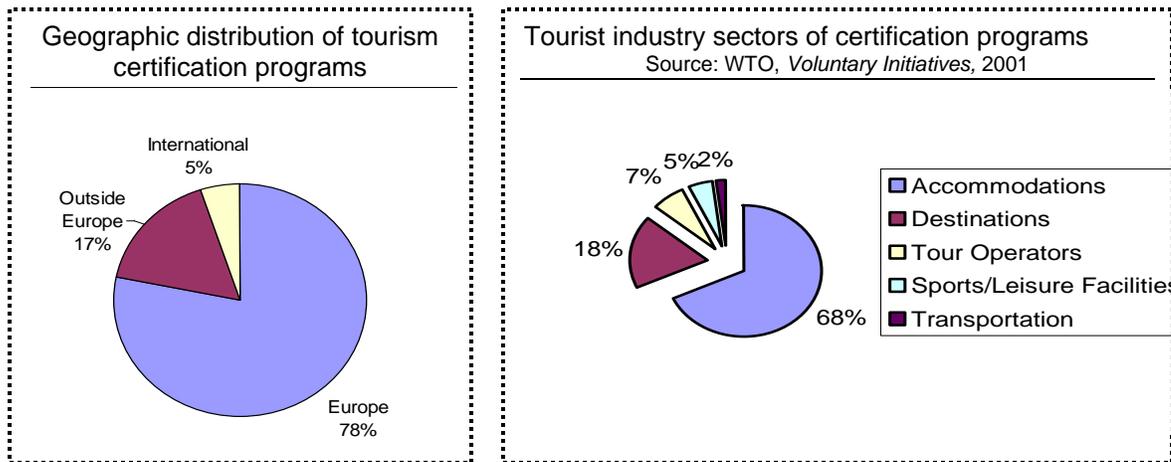
Since 2000, there has been a growing recognition that most environmental certification programs have not seriously considered sociocultural issues, while social and labor certification systems have not considered environmental factors. In some areas, such as organic agriculture, this has led to cooperation between social and environmental certification programs.

A different evolution has occurred in tourism certification: quality certification (for example “star” rating) has existed for decades, whereas environmental certification in tourism is relatively new and only since 1987. Sociocultural aspects have been added since about 1996 in the Americas and 2000 in Europe.

**In tourism, certification has a long history.** The American Automobile Association (AAA), the Mobil five-star system in the United States, the Michelin guides in Europe, and the worldwide five-star system of hotel quality have existed for most of the twentieth century. These systems have traditionally measured the *quality* of the tourist product (usually lodging and restaurants), as well as some aspects of *health, hygiene, and safety*. In recent years, negative environmental and social impacts of tourism have become obvious in many parts of the world, and some of these places have lost market position. As a result, some tourist industry leaders have started promoting the triple bottom line of sustainability as recommended business practice.

For tourism to survive over time, customer satisfaction can be likened to a three-legged stool: it will collapse if any of the legs is too weak. However, traditional tourism certification programs concentrated only on the first leg – quality, while governments have tended to regulate only the second leg – health, hygiene and safety. The third leg represents the triple bottom line. However the first “green” certification programs emphasized only part of the third leg – environmental impacts – without considering sociocultural and economic sustainability.

Environmental certification of tourism services began in Europe with the Blue Flag Campaign for beaches in Denmark, in 1987 (now worldwide). The following year Austria established the "Silberdistel" label for lodgings and restaurants in Kleinwalsertal. In the decade between the Earth Summit in 1992 and the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002, more than 60 environmental tourism certification programs were developed, according to an ECOTRANS study commissioned by the World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO). Most were based in Europe, few took sociocultural factors into account, and all were voluntary. Only three of the programs in the study certified ecotourism. The vast majority of the programs evaluated lodging only, although some programs certified all sectors and aspects of tourism. By 2007, as many as 80 programs exist or are under development, although many smaller programs have ceased to certify new businesses.



Aware of the dangers of uncontrolled proliferation – confusion of the consumer, lack of brand recognition, and widely varying standards – many of the most important sustainable and ecotourism certification programs met in 2000, in Mohonk Mountain House (a 120-year-old sustainable tourism hotel in the mountains of New York) to begin to develop a common language and common minimum standards. This conference produced the Mohonk Agreement ([www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism/documents/mohonk.pdf](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism/documents/mohonk.pdf)), an informal consensus among the programs about the minimum standards for certifying sustainable tourism and ecotourism, as well as establishing a clear distinction between these types of tourism.

Following on this, a formal effort was established, entitled the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) feasibility study (available at <http://www.stscouncil.org>). Consultation workshops were held worldwide, with contributing stakeholders from electronic list-servers, questionnaires, and direct communication with over 1,000 organizations and professionals in 26 countries. The study recommended, among many other things, the establishment of minimum standards for the certification of sustainable tourism, eventually to be guaranteed by an accreditation body that would, in effect, certify the certifiers.

Among the concrete results are the establishment of harmonized standards in Europe (the VISIT standard) and in the Americas (the baseline criteria for the Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas). The member programs follow a set of agreed-upon minimum standards.

The movement towards establishing the STSC as an accreditation body was reinforced in 2005, and, as of 2007, an effort is underway to formally constitute this body.

As a consequence of these activities and studies, new and existing tourism certification programs have begun to take into account all aspects of sustainability: environmental, social, cultural, and economic—the triple bottom line. Many of these programs are designed to work in parallel with quality star ratings and government health and safety regulations. The newer programs often incorporate quality, administrative, health, and safety criteria alongside the sustainability criteria.

## **Why is certification important?**

Certification sets standards and helps distinguish genuine ecotourism and sustainable tourism businesses from others that make empty claims. This helps to protect the integrity of these concepts.

Certification is not an end in itself. It is one of a number of tools for motivating businesses and others to improve their environmental, social, and economic performance, while rewarding them for doing so. These rewards are sometimes tangible and sometimes not.

There are a number of other reasons why certification is important. They include:

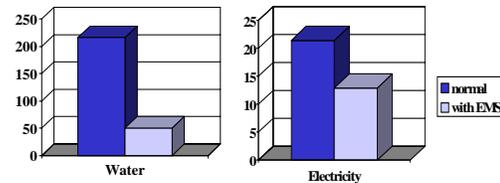
### **Benefits for certified businesses**

- Certification helps businesses to improve themselves: going through a certification process is educational. Many certified businesses have stated that one of the greatest benefits of the certification process was to teach them the elements of sustainability in their operations and focus their attention on the changes they needed to make in their businesses. A better-operating business tends to be more efficient and to attract more clients.

- Certification tends to reduce operating costs. This has been found in almost every type of business certification. In tourism, it has been shown to dramatically reduce the costs of water, electricity, and fossil fuels, without reducing the quality of service, as in the graph at right.
- The process of implementing certification of sustainable tourism is often accompanied by easier access to technical assistance and financing for businesses to implement new technology – the business is educated about these technologies, while donors and financial institutions are more likely to offer low-cost financing.
- Potentially, certification can provide a marketing advantage to certified businesses, as consumers learn to recognize credible certification brands. This has happened in other industries, such as organic foods, wood products, clothing, wine, etc.

### Results of applying an EMS and certification in Jamaica

- Savings of up to 77% of water consumption
- Savings of up to 30% of electric consumption



Source: Hagler Bailly, 1998

#### Benefits for consumers

- Certification provides tourists with environmentally and socially responsible choices – it helps consumers to know which businesses are truly socially and environmentally responsible and to make choices on this basis. As certification programs become better known, this may produce tangible benefits in a business's reputation and popularity.
- Certification in general increases public awareness of responsible business practices.
- Certification can alert tourists to the environmental and social issues in an area, allowing them to act more respectfully or contribute to solutions.
- Certified businesses tend to offer better quality service.

#### Benefits for governments

- Certification helps governments protect their market niches as ecotourism or sustainable tourism destinations, especially when the credibility of the destination is threatened by greenwashing.
- Certification raises industry standards in health, safety, environment, and social stability.
- It lowers the regulatory costs of environmental protection.
- By requiring economic benefits to communities, certification can help reduce poverty, especially in rural areas.

### **Benefits for the environment and local communities**

Finally, certification of sustainable and ecotourism protects both the environment and the social and economic structure of local communities near the certified businesses.

- Certification requires the businesses to protect the environment and do little or no damage to it.
- It requires businesses to respect local culture and provide real economic and social benefits for it.
- When the business is economically sustainable, and offers quality of service to ensure that, it is likely to continue offering benefits for the long term.

### **Different types of certification**

There are many different types of certification systems, as well as related awards and ecolabels, and there is much confusion about how they differ. This section will explain some of the more important similarities and differences for those readers who are interested in understanding the underlying concepts.

### **Common elements to most tourism certification programs**

Although well-designed certification programs can differ considerably, they almost all have some similar components. These are:

- voluntary enrollment by businesses
- well-defined standards and criteria
- assessment and auditing
- recognition and awarding the use of a logo
- periodic follow up audits to renew the certification
- continual improvement
- transparency
- participatory mechanisms to define standards

### **How to ensure fairness and objectivity**

The technical aspects of ensuring the fairness and objectivity of a certification system can be very complicated. There are many definitions and rules that are accepted by most certifiers. A few of the most important are:

- Nondiscrimination: certification should be available to all applicants who meet the standards and whose activities are covered;
- Certification should be free of undue financial considerations and independent of size or membership in groups or organizations;
- The certification standard should consist of clearly defined criteria, specifically related to what is being certified;
- The certifying organization should be able to make impartial evaluations and certification decisions, based on clearly defined criteria;
- The certifying body should allow the participation of all parties significantly concerned with the activity being certified, with respect to the content and function of the certification system;

- The person who evaluates a business or activity should be separate from the entity that decides whether to award the certification; both should be independent of whoever provides consulting service to help the business qualify;
- The certification body should be free from commercial or financial pressures that might influence decisions;
- The certification should award a logo and include a sunset clause that requires re-application after a given time period, to protect against greenwashing;
- There should be established procedures for appeals, for revoking certifications, for revising and changing criteria and standards, and so on.

These and many other generally accepted guidelines and definitions for how to certify, are based on guidelines established by consensus among the members of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), based in Switzerland. Most of the members are officially recognized national standards institutes and accreditation bodies from countries large and small, in all regions of the world. ISO publishes hundreds of guidelines, definitions, and standards.

An important cautionary note is to remember that ISO has issued hundreds of standards for everything from film speed to screw strength. The guidelines for how to *govern* certification programs are among the most widely accepted (e.g. ISO/IEC 17021:2006 and some others). But they should not be confused with the two most famous ISO *certification* standards, ISO 9000 for certifying quality management systems, and ISO 14001, for environmental management systems. These are generic (applicable to any industry, company, or activity), process-based systems that will be discussed below, in the section on process- versus performance-based certification.

### **Types of certifications and ecolabels**

Some of the main distinctions among programs are (a) first, second, and third party certification, (b) process- versus performance-based systems, (c) certification to minimum standards versus ecolabels, and (d) multiple levels versus pass-fail awards. All of these systems usually follow generally accepted rules.

#### **First, second, or third party certification**

*First-party certification* is self-evaluation. For example, when a company declares that its product meets certain standards but no one from outside verifies the claim. This is similar to a high school class where the teacher asks each student to grade his or her own exams.

*Second-party certification* is when a purchaser or industry body assures that the product meets the purchaser's standards. This is similar to the high school

teacher giving exams to see how the students in the class are performing relative to the teacher's expectations.

*Third-party certification* is when a neutral, independent third party evaluates the compliance of the product with clearly defined standards. This is similar to the students taking a standardized test that is graded outside the school. Most credible certification programs require third-party assessment.

### **Process or performance**

A controversial topic in certification is whether *processes* or *results* should be certified.

**The most commonly used process-based systems** are the ISO 9000 series for quality management systems and ISO 14001 for environmental management systems. They certify businesses that have established and documented *systems* for assuring the improvement of quality or environmental performance. They do not, however, determine any specific performance results other than the company's own and those required by law. They must show continuous improvement, but only compared to their own prior performance. Thus, for example, two hotels might both be certified with ISO 14001, while one might have excellent state-of-the-art water conservation systems and the other might have disastrous overuse of water, as long as each could demonstrate improvement from year to year of its own performance. This is the fundamental problem with process-based systems: as long as the business complies with the law and has mechanisms in place to ensure that its management system improves relative to itself, it can be certified. In other words, it receives a certification of its effort, not its actual performance. For this reason, the consumer product of a process-based certification should not, under ISO guidelines, bear the certification logo, because there is no guarantee of the product's compliance with environmental or quality criteria. Only the business or activity is certified, not what it produces, which in the case of tourism, is lodging in a hotel room, a meal, a tour, or transportation.

### **Process-Based Certification Programs**

- Environmental Management Systems (EMS): ISO 14001 and related programs
- Management establishes systems for monitoring certain significant environmental aspects
- Usually requires outside consultants; relatively expensive for small and medium businesses
- Emphasis on internal cost savings & environmental impact mitigation
- No universal standards: cannot compare across businesses
- Logo given for setting up process, not for achieving fixed goals
- Best suited for large businesses, where it is very cost-effective and offers economies of scale

**Performance-based systems** certify whether or not a business or activity complies with objective outside criteria. For example, how many liters of water per guest per night does a hotel consume? This allows a direct comparison between two businesses to show which one has better environmental performance.

In a number of ways, performance systems are better suited to small and medium businesses, which comprise some 80-90% of tourism businesses worldwide. They tend to be cheaper to implement than ISO 14001 or other types of environmental management systems, and they allow comparisons among businesses, since all are rated according to the same criteria.

### Performance-Based Certification Programs

- Tangible criteria that permit comparisons among certified businesses
- Measure achievement and results, not intent
- Can include check list intelligible to both business and consumers
- More transparent; less expensive
- Can include environmental and socio-economic criteria within & without business
- Can involve variety of stakeholders
- Can offer different levels of logos reflecting different levels of performance
- Suited for small, medium & large businesses



From this simple explanation, it might appear that performance-based systems are better than process-based systems of certification. However, the situation in real life is much more complex. Process-based management systems ensure that a company documents its performance, and more importantly, that it has the internal controls in place to continue to maintain good performance. A purely performance-based system might certify on the basis of one or a few measurements of key indicators, whereas a management system can ensure that the indicators are constantly measured and that there is a person and a budget available to do so. Process-based systems tend to be very cost-effective for larger businesses, because they ensure that the mechanisms for improving quality and environmental performance become part of the structure of the business and its organizational culture. Finally, process-based systems can control and measure environmentally important aspects of the business's operations that might not even appear among performance indicators.

Consequently, in tourism there has been a growing international consensus that sustainable tourism certification systems should incorporate elements of both process and performance, but emphasizing performance.

### **Certification or ecolabel**

The terms ‘environmental certification’ and ‘ecolabel’ are often used interchangeably, although they signify different things. **Environmental certification** is awarded to those businesses or activities that comply absolutely with a set of standards. Any number or all of the businesses in a sector can be certified, if they comply. Certification rewards meeting a set of *baseline* or *minimum standards*, which generally require more than what legal regulations do.

An **ecolabel** is an award that is given to a business or activity that has significantly better performance compared to the other businesses in its sector. Only the best performers, who show *exemplary performance*, according to the established criteria, receive the ecolabel. As the industry changes and more and more businesses adopt good practices, the requirements for receiving the ecolabel are raised, so that once again, only the obviously better environmental performance is rewarded. Ecolabels are based on comparison with the best performance (benchmarking), rather than compliance with baseline standards. Many certification systems in sustainable tourism incorporate aspects of both certification to minimum standards and the comparative requirements of an ecolabel.

### **Pass/fail certification or classification to different levels**

When a person graduates from a school, he or she is awarded a diploma that certifies compliance with minimum requirements. This is **certification** of compliance or not. However, to earn that diploma, the person received letter or number grades for each course, which are averaged to give a final grade. This is **classification** on a graded scale of best to worst. Just as a student receives a diploma and a grade, some tourism certification systems not only certify baseline compliance, but also reward better performance. The best known example of this is the five-star system for rating hotel quality.

It is often considered that a ‘graded’ certification scheme is better than ‘pass/fail’ because it acknowledges a range of differences within an acceptable sustainability framework, and it strongly motivates companies to work to improve their ratings in subsequent audits. A number of sustainable tourism certification programs have two to five levels of classification over and above the minimum requirements for certification. Many of the graded certification systems in sustainable tourism have characteristics of both certification (baseline compliance) and ecolabels (rewards for higher level of compliance).

### **Certification versus Accreditation**

Following ISO definitions, certification applies to the awards given to businesses, products, processes, or services, while “accreditation” applies to the process of qualifying, endorsing and licensing entities that perform certification. In other words, accreditation is certifying the certifier.

However there is some confusion in the use of the terms. In the United States, 'registration' and in Australia, Canada, and Fiji, 'accreditation', have also been used as synonyms for certification – the awarding of a logo to a business or a process that complies with certain standards. This is uncommon, however, and the terminology is slowly becoming standardized.

## Sustainable tourism certification worldwide

The World Tourism Organization, in a study published in 2002, identified over 60 sustainable and ecotourism certification programs around the world. A few programs operate worldwide, some are regional, and most are national or local. A number of studies have compared certification programs, in order to determine how they differ and where they can be improved. Some of the more important criteria for evaluating programs are:



- To what degree do they take into account all three aspects of the “triple bottom line” – environmental, sociocultural, and economic sustainability?
- How well do they comply with international technical standards for certification programs – for example, with the well recognized ISO/IEC 17021:2006 (requirements for bodies providing audit and certification of management systems)?
- Do they recognize the basic codes of conduct laid out in various documents for respecting the rights of indigenous and local communities?
- How well do they comply with the Mohonk Agreement, an informal agreement reached in 2000, by the principal certification systems for sustainable tourism and ecotourism about minimum requirements?
- Are they in agreement with the Quebec Declaration and the Convention on Biological Diversity pronouncements on the certification of sustainable tourism?
- Do they follow the “Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations” of the World Tourism Organization?

These technical studies, however, are not of much use to a business that wishes to be certified and doesn't want to become an expert on certification. Also, the sheer number of programs that exist has led to significant confusion about the relative benefits of each. To resolve this problem, a process has begun for accrediting certification programs that comply with baseline standards – the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) initiative. Because of the scope of the project, it will take several years before this system is in operation. In the meantime, many businesses and organizations will want to certify their activities and will have to choose which certification program to use. In addition,

many countries are interested in adopting certification programs and must choose which is best for them. This guide is an attempt to familiarize both business managers and certification program managers with the different options available, and how they might best fit their situation

## **How to choose the most appropriate certification program**

All sustainable tourism certification systems are voluntary. No business is required to be certified, nor can any one certification system be imposed on those businesses that want to be certified. (Obligatory standards are called regulations, and they are imposed by governments.) The first step in certification then, is to determine which programs are available in your area and choose the one that best fits your needs. Or, if you are involved in creating a new program, you need to decide which model or models of existing programs to use.

### **Decide between a certification program for sustainable tourism or ecotourism.**

The first decision is whether to certify sustainable tourism or ecotourism. This depends on the nature of your individual business activities or the type of program you are trying to create. If your business does not involve close and direct contact with nature and some elements of interpretation of nature for visitors, you should choose a more general sustainable tourism certification. Your tourist board and national environmental organizations are probably familiar with the programs in use in your area. There are also websites that give out this information, such as the *DestiNet Portal for Sustainable Tourism Information* which lists more than 60 certification programs worldwide, including 50 in Europe ([http://destinet.ewindows.eu.org/policies\\_resources/fo1954381/fo1703514](http://destinet.ewindows.eu.org/policies_resources/fo1954381/fo1703514)).

Twelve of the principal European programs participated in the VISIT project ([www.ecotrans.org/visit/docs/pdf/visit\\_en.pdf](http://www.ecotrans.org/visit/docs/pdf/visit_en.pdf)) and complied in 2003 with the VISIT standard as a set of 21 key requirements for ecolabels for tourism services. Seven programs belong to the VISIT Association, the umbrella organization for tourism ecolabels in Europe ([www.visit21.net](http://www.visit21.net)).

In the Americas, nearly all of the certification programs belong to the Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas, and have also harmonized their requirements. Information and links to each program are at [www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=network\\_members](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=network_members).

In Australia, the decipher portal serves a similar aim for quality, indigenous, and sustainable tourism certification programs, as well as offering simple examples of good practices ([www.qualitytourism.com.au](http://www.qualitytourism.com.au)).

Links to the websites of programs around the world can be found near the end of this handbook, in the section entitled “Where to find certification programs”.

## How do I get certified?

### 1. Determine how sustainable your business is. What is your “baseline”?

Having selected a program and made contact with it, the next step is to determine how well your business complies with the criteria for sustainability. You should be prepared to determine your usage of water, electricity, and fossil fuels. You may be asked to examine how you process your wastewater (both sewage and gray water) and solid wastes. Do you reduce your consumption of disposable materials, like plastics and bottles? Do you recycle? If you are near a natural area, do you help protect it? Do you avoid using and selling products made from endangered species or having them in captivity in cages or as pets? These and a number of other environmental criteria are found in nearly all certification programs for tourism.

In the sociocultural realm, do you hire local people and pay them fairly? Do you offer training and upward mobility to lower-level employees? Do local people occupy management positions? Are working conditions safe, comfortable, and educational? Does your business respect local cultural norms? Was your property acquired in a just manner? Do you assist when needed in your local community? Do you offer outreach and educational programs to your guests? These criteria too are found in most sustainable tourism certification programs.

### 2. Decide whether or not you need outside help to improve the sustainability of your business

Once you have determined how well you are complying with sustainability standards, you may feel that you need outside help to improve your business. If the certification program you are interested in offers consulting services, be sure that the program does not require that you use its in-house services – this may be an unethical conflict of interest. Most programs can be implemented without the use of outside consultants, by following the manuals and instructions. Many independent sources of information are available from the Internet, non-profit organizations, governments, and service providers.

Often governmental and international agencies can offer assistance and financing in implementing exemplary environmental practices, especially in water and energy conservation. There are also programs available for comparing your consumption of water, energy, and fossil fuels with other similar businesses. These are called “benchmarking” programs, and are incorporated in a few certification programs, but are also available independently of certification. You can locate these programs, almost all of which charge a fee, by searching the Internet for “hotel benchmarking”.

Benchmarks for water, energy, and waste in hotels and camping sites in Europe are available at [www.tourbench.info](http://www.tourbench.info), based on over 450 datasets from 15 European countries. TourBench is online, for free, in 9 languages. EarthCheck ([www.earthcheck.org](http://www.earthcheck.org)) has developed indicators for Asia Pacific,

South America, and the Caribbean, as well as other countries. It is used for the benchmarking component of some certification programs. In addition to water, energy, and waste, EarthCheck considers social commitment and chemical use.

Very large businesses may find it cost-effective to establish an environmental or sustainable management department that works closely with high-level management or assign these functions to existing employees. This is preferable to hiring outside consultants, as an objective of certification is for the company to incorporate the goals of sustainability as its own.

### **3. The certification process**

Once you are ready to be certified, the process usually consists of paying a fee to the certifier, filling in a series of documents and questionnaires, and evaluation by an auditor or some other mechanism of determining compliance. An auditor will usually meet with management or the owners, and then inspect the critical areas of the business that have been determined by the questionnaires. An auditor will also request to see documents, and although these may be confidential, the auditor should be legally bound to respect confidentiality. You should then receive a report that identifies areas that need improvement (called “non-conformities”), and you should be given an opportunity to correct these or to appeal the report. The certification program will then decide whether or not your business can be certified and will award your logo or inform you of the improvements you need to make.

### **4. After certification**

Once you have been certified, the process does not stop. You will be expected to maintain the high standards that allowed you to be certified. The advantages will continue, however, and you should also be able to participate in cooperative advertising programs, receive preferential treatment from your government tourist office, and be listed by the certification program. You are likely to find that your operating costs will go down for water, electricity, fossil fuels, and other consumables. Your relationship with the local community may improve. You should *not*, however, expect to receive quickly an important increase in occupancy, because sustainable tourism certification programs do not yet have wide consumer recognition. After a period of one to three years, you should expect to renew your certification, with new questionnaires and inspections.

## **What are the limitations of certification?**

Certification for quality in tourism has existed for nearly a century and has achieved great market recognition. The five-star rating system took decades to build, but today is accepted worldwide as a standard. Sustainable tourism certification has existed for less than 20 years. Professional market surveys indicate that there is a clear interest in the traveling public in choosing environmentally and socially responsible businesses, but that there is not yet

recognition of credible brands of certification. In other industries, such as coffee, organic foods, and sustainable wood, consumer demand for certification has been built over many years. So it will take time to build demand for certified tourism products.

**Certification cannot substitute good business practice.**

In tourism, whether conventional, sustainable, or ecotourism, the success of the business depends on attracting and pleasing clients. But clients will not visit a place that is unsafe, unhealthy, inaccessible, or too highly priced for the quality offered. It is a grave mistake to think that your business will prosper if you offer environmental and social sustainability without giving your clients what they need in terms of a quality experience. However good management tends to produce quality service, and good environmental and social management are some of the most tangible aspects of your guests' experience.

## Needs of the tourist



Source: Ariane Janer, Eco-Brasil

You should not think about certifying your business unless you are sure that you will meet or exceed the expectations of your clients in terms of safety, access, quality, and price. This does not mean that you should abuse the environment or your community to do so; you should certainly build your business with environmental and social responsibility from the very beginning. But the best certification programs will not certify a business that is not economically sustainable in terms of offering what its clients need.

**Certification will not fill your business with new clients.**

Many businesses seek certification to increase their occupancy. While this may eventually happen, at present, most clients for tourist businesses do not use the sustainability of a business as a reason for choosing their destination. This is unfortunate, and may change in the future, as it has for organic agriculture. For

this to occur, recognized programs must certify many more tourist businesses. In other words, there should be a critical mass of certified businesses with brand recognition of the certifying program. The clients must understand what the certification label means. Right now, there has been a proliferation of certification programs and ecolabels for tourism, but none of them has more than a few hundred businesses certified. The result has been confusion for the few consumers who are aware of certification programs. The Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) initiatives (see above) hopes to accredit the most reliable programs and ensure that they meet minimum standards, as well as promoting the use of these programs. Nevertheless, if you are going to certify your business, you should be prepared to promote the program that certifies you, as well as other businesses certified by that program.

## Where to find certification programs

### Worldwide

- The DestiNet Portal for Sustainable Tourism information describes and offers links to the websites of over 60 ecolabels for sustainable tourism worldwide, as well as awards for excellent sustainability, environmental, or social performance or innovation; and quality schemes including environmental and other sustainability requirements.  
[http://destinet.ewindows.eu.org/policies\\_resources/foI954381/foI703514](http://destinet.ewindows.eu.org/policies_resources/foI954381/foI703514)
- Green Globe 21 (GG21) is an international standard applicable to tourism businesses, activities, and destinations worldwide. Its programs include benchmarking followed by certification. [www.greenglobe.org](http://www.greenglobe.org)
- International Ecotourism Standard (IES) is a Green Globe 21 program for certifying ecotourism activities worldwide.  
[www.greenglobe.org/page.aspx?page\\_id=104](http://www.greenglobe.org/page.aspx?page_id=104)
- Blue Flag “is an exclusive eco-label awarded to over 3200 beaches and marinas in 36 countries across Europe, South Africa, Morocco, New Zealand, Canada and the Caribbean in 2006.” [www.blueflag.org](http://www.blueflag.org)

### In Europe

- The DestiNet Portal (described above) has links to over 50 European certification and award programs.
- The VISIT Association (Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism) consists of seven ecolabels (based in the Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, Latvia, United Kingdom, Switzerland and Luxembourg) that together represent over 2,000 participating tourism enterprises.  
[www.visit21.net/VISIT\\_Ecolabels\\_LinksToEcolabels.html](http://www.visit21.net/VISIT_Ecolabels_LinksToEcolabels.html)
- European Union Eco-label (European Flower) certifies Tourist Accommodation Services and Camping sites throughout the European Union, as well as other countries in Europe. The website has useful information for interested businesses, including a self-check instrument.  
[http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/index_en.htm)

### **In the Americas**

- The Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas describes and offers links to the websites of nearly all the certification programs in existence and under development in the Americas (North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean).

[www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=network\\_members](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=network_members)

**In Asia and the Pacific** (as there is no general source for information on all programs, they are listed individually)

- In Australia the Decipher Portal [www.qualitytourism.com.au](http://www.qualitytourism.com.au) provides access to online registration with Australian quality, business, environmental, and indigenous certification programs.
- EcoCertification (formerly NEAP), Australia, is the pioneer program in the world in ecotourism certification. It also forms the basis for the International Ecotourism Standard (IES) of Green Globe 21.  
[www.ecotourism.org.au/eco\\_certification.asp](http://www.ecotourism.org.au/eco_certification.asp)
- Green Leaf Foundation certifies hotels and tour operators in Thailand.  
[www.greenleafthai.org/home\\_en.asp](http://www.greenleafthai.org/home_en.asp)
- Respecting Our Culture Program (ROC) is an indigenous-run certification program for indigenous tour operators and communities in Australia.  
[www.rocprogram.com](http://www.rocprogram.com)
- Green Globe has offices and information in different languages that can be accessed through [www.greenglobe.org](http://www.greenglobe.org) or directly through: New Zealand [www.greenglobenz.com](http://www.greenglobenz.com); Japan [www.greenglobejapan.com](http://www.greenglobejapan.com); China [www.greenglobe21.cn](http://www.greenglobe21.cn)

**In Africa** (as there is no general source for information on all programs, they are listed individually)

- Ecotourism Society of Kenya (ESOK) EcoRating Scheme: “Ecotourism Kenya manages a certification scheme for tourism accommodation facilities based on environmental and social criteria.”  
[www.ecotourismkenya.org](http://www.ecotourismkenya.org)
- Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FTTSA) “encourages and publicizes fair and responsible business practice by South African tourism establishments... through the FTTSA Trademark, an independent symbol of fairness in the tourism industry. The Trademark is awarded to tourism establishments that meet stringent criteria.” [www.fairtourismsa.org.za](http://www.fairtourismsa.org.za)
- Heritage Environmental Rating Scheme “serves to recognise and identify environmentally responsible companies and products in southern Africa.”  
[www.heritagesa.co.za](http://www.heritagesa.co.za)
- EcoAward Namibia evaluates tourist enterprises into five levels based on: conservation, water, waste & sewage disposal, energy, social responsibility, staff welfare & development, sustainable & appropriate construction & landscaping.  
[www.hannamibia.com/html/Members\\_Page.php?id=403](http://www.hannamibia.com/html/Members_Page.php?id=403)

## Glossary of certification terms<sup>1</sup>

- **Accreditation** is a process of qualifying, endorsing, and "licensing" entities that perform certification of businesses, products, processes, or services. In other words, an accreditation program certifies the certifiers. In Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Fiji and some other places, accreditation has been used synonymously with certification, but in this study, they have distinct meanings.
- **Audit** is a systematic, documented, periodic, and objective evaluation and verification of how well a particular entity (company, product, program, individual, destination, etc.) is complying with a set of standards.
- **Benchmarking** is the systematic comparison of performance in a specific aspect, such as energy consumption, with other comparable businesses and the industry's best practices.
- **Certification** is a voluntary procedure that assesses, monitors, and gives written assurance that a business, product, process, service, or management system conforms to specific requirements. It awards a marketable logo or seal to those that meet or exceed baseline standards, i.e., those that at a minimum comply with national and regional regulations, and, typically, fulfill other declared or negotiated standards prescribed by the program.
- **Criteria** are the individual factors that must be complied with to achieve certification.
- **Ecolabels** award a product or service an ecological label on the basis of its level of environmental impact, which should be better than the industry norm. The acceptable level of environmental impact may be determined by consideration of a single environmental hurdle or after undertaking an assessment of its overall impacts.<sup>2</sup> See Rotherham (1999) for detailed descriptions and definitions. The standard ISO 14024 offers the generally accepted rules governing ecolabels. In tourism, there is much overlap between certification and ecolabeling.
- **Ecotourism** is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people," according to The International Ecotourism Society. A more comprehensive definition is "travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights" (Honey, 1999).
- **Ecotourism certification** programs cover businesses, services, and activities that describe themselves as involved in ecotourism. They focus on individual or site-specific businesses, have standards that are tailored to local conditions, and are often largely or totally performance-based.
- **Environmental management system (EMS)** is part of an overall management system that includes the organizational structure, responsibilities, practices, procedures, processes, and resources for determining and implementing the environmental policy. An environmental management system includes tools such as environmental impact assessment, environmental auditing, and strategic environmental assessment (Synergy, 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these definitions are based on Honey and Rome, 2001

<sup>2</sup> after Synergy, 2000

- **European Environmental Management and Auditing Scheme (EMAS)** is similar to ISO 14001, but it requires publication of policy statement and annual audit report results and allows publishing performance figures and achievements. The SUTOUR project in Europe helps tourism services to prepare for EMAS certification, offering: software, guidance, self-check programs, action plans, recommendation of eco-labels, etc.
- **Exemplary practices (or “best practices”)** is used to designate excellence, the highest quality, or superior practices in a particular field by a tourism operator. It is widely used in many award and certification programs, as well as in academic studies, to designate best in a particular class or a leader in the field. “Best” is a contextual term. There is no set standard of measurement and the term is often loosely or ill-defined (NEAP *in* Honey, 2002; Wight, 1999). The highest-ranking businesses in a benchmarking program, however, can be considered to be the “best” in the aspect being measured.
- **Interpretation** is a means of communicating ideas and feelings that help people enrich their understanding and appreciation of their world and their role within it. Common interpretation techniques used in ecotourism include commentary on guided tours, presentations and discussions, drama performance, musical performance, brochures, signs, displays, and audiovisual presentations (NEAP *in* Honey, 2002).
- **International Organization for Standardization (ISO)** is a world federation based in Switzerland to develop voluntary standards designed to facilitate international manufacturing, trade, and communications. It has issued thousands of standards in nearly all fields, but very few related to tourism services. The voting members are countries, but interested organizations can present their views on new standards.
- **ISO 14001** is the international standard for environmental management systems.
- **ISO 9000** is the international series of standards for quality management systems.
- **Mass or mainstream tourism** are terms commonly but loosely used to refer to popular forms of leisure tourism pioneered in southern Europe, the Caribbean, and North America in the 1960's and 1970's. It involves the movement of a large number of people on nominally standardized packaged tour holidays to resorts and on cruise ships (Synergy, 2000).
- **Monitoring** is an ongoing review, evaluation, and assessment to detect changes in the condition of the natural or cultural integrity of a place, with reference to a baseline condition (NEAP *in* Honey, 2002).
- **Nature tourism** is travel to unspoiled places to experience and enjoy nature.
- **Process-based certification programs** use environmental or quality management systems to measure companies seeking certification.
- **Performance-based certification programs** use a set of externally-determined environmental and usually socio-cultural and economic criteria or benchmarks to measure companies, services, tours, attractions, etc. seeking certification.
- **Small and medium enterprises (SME)** are generally companies that employ less than 250 but more than ten individuals, according to one common criterion. Companies employing less than ten people are generally referred to as micro-

enterprises (Synergy, 2000). This definition varies from country to country.

- **Standard** is a document approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use of a prescribed set of rules, conditions, or requirements (Toth, 2000).
- **Sustainable development** is that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” according to the 1987 Brundtland report. It entails using, conserving, and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological development processes, on which life depends, are maintained and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be sustained (NEAP *in* Honey, 2002).
- **Sustainable tourism** is, according to the World Tourism Organization, “envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled with maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems.” According to *Agenda 21 for the Travel & Tourism Industry*, “Sustainable tourism products are products which operate in harmony with local environment, community, and cultures, so that these become the permanent beneficiaries” (WTO, 2001; WTTC, 1995).
- **Sustainable tourism certification** measures a range of environmental, socio-cultural, and economic equity issues both internally (within the business, service, or product) and externally (on the surrounding community and physical environment).
- **Tourism** is travel undertaken for pleasure or business with at least one overnight stay away from home.
- **Tourism certification programs**, such as AAA (Automobile Association of America), have typically measured and compared quality, service, and price, the areas deemed most important to travelers. Today many programs measure, as well, the environmental, economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism businesses. There are three broad categories: Mass Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, and Ecotourism certification programs. They are based on criteria that are either process- or performance-based or a combination of these two, and they may involve first-, second-, or third-party verification or auditing.
- **Voluntary initiatives** within the tourism industry are not legally required or binding and are usually focused on achieving environmental and social benefits beyond what the law requires (after Synergy, 2000). They may include certification, ecolabels, awards, and self-commitment initiatives.

## Sources of further information

CESD and TIES researched and wrote a number of reports and studies on certification, as part of the Rainforest Alliance's project, "International Accreditation System and Consolidation of National Systems for Sustainable Tourism Certification to Facilitate Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) Competitiveness and Market Access," which was financed by the IDB/MIF. These papers are available on the CESD website: [www.ecotourismcesd.org](http://www.ecotourismcesd.org). Other relevant sources are:

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## About CESD:



Launched in 2003, the Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development (CESD) is a non-profit research organization dedicated to the improvement of ecotourism as an instrument of biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. With offices in both Washington, D.C. and at Stanford University, CESD functions as a bi-coastal institute, conducting research and offering programs, conferences, and courses at both locations, as well as field research opportunities at home and abroad.

CESD's mission is to design, monitor, evaluate, and improve ecotourism and sustainable tourism practices and principles, through collaborative work by academics and industry experts.

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[www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=main](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=main)



[www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)