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Abstract: This chapter introduces the spectrum of quality assurance tools that have been developed and applied in the ecotourism industry to address and improve quality. Specifically the chapter looks at awards of excellence, codes of conduct, certification and accreditation, and monitoring and evaluation. The latter part of the chapter provides a more detailed overview of certification programs. This emphasis on certification reflects the benefits of this approach over other voluntary initiatives such as awards and codes, and the increasing number of programs throughout the world. Each of the chapters in Part One provides a detailed analysis of a particular quality assurance tool.

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Chapter 2

Achieving quality in ecotourism: Tools in the toolbox

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Introduction

This chapter sets the context for Part One of the book by introducing the spectrum of quality assurance tools that have been developed and applied in the ecotourism industry to address and improve quality. Specifically the chapter looks at awards of excellence, codes of conduct, certification and accreditation, and monitoring and evaluation. The latter part of the chapter provides a more detailed overview of certification programs. This emphasis on certification reflects the benefits of this approach over other voluntary initiatives such as awards and codes, and the increasing number of programs throughout the world. Each of the chapters in Part One provides a detailed analysis of a particular quality assurance tool.

What is commonly known, labeled and marketed as ecotourism is often not, and unfortunately there are no restrictions that govern the use of the term. Misuse of the term ecotourism may arise out of ignorance - a lack of awareness of the weight of the principles and ideology that the term carries with it, but deliberate misrepresentation and abuse of the term also appears common.

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Ignorance may hopefully be rectified by better education and raising awareness among the broader tourism industry. However, of more concern is the trend to ecotourism 'lite' (Honey, 2002). This trend involves minimal, cosmetic and usually cost-saving actions that are proclaimed as 'helping to save the world' to appeal to the green market. Few, if any of the necessary and fundamental reforms in environmental or social practices are embraced or implemented. An example is the request by some hotels to reuse towels that are now common in accommodation facilities from Britain to Barbados, where the greatest savings are to the operator's laundry bills. Another trend of concern is 'green-washing' (Weaver 2001, Wight, 1993; Honey, 2002) where operations or projects claim ecotourism credentials, but are just using green terminology to cover up poor or mediocre practices and policies, and convey an image of being environmentally friendly. All this presumes that 'green sells' and the abuse of the term ecotourism becomes a mere marketing ploy. Whatever the cause, abuse of the term tarnishes the reputation of ecotourism.

The misuse and abuse of the term ecotourism has resulted in confusion, misunderstanding and disenchantment with the whole concept, not just the name by many ecotourism stakeholders (Burns 1997). This situation impedes the ability for genuine, quality ecotourism to deliver on its promises – delivering quality experiences for the clients, but also positive returns for the host community, host environment, and host enterprises. The promotion and delivery of products that are not ecotourism needs addressing to create and establish legitimacy and credibility for the term and the practice of ecotourism. One way to ensure this occurs is for products and services to meet the key principles of ecotourism, as outlined in Chapter 1. To achieve this situation it is necessary to have a clear and unambiguous understanding of the key principles of ecotourism, as well as the quality assurance tools and initiatives designed to help deliver more consistent, quality ecotourism products that better meet ecotourism principles.

Quality assurance initiatives in ecotourism: Tools in the tool-box

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In the last ten to fifteen years there has been a proliferation in policy, instruments, quality assurance tools and other mechanisms to ensure better sustainable and ecotourism (Font & Buckley, 2001; Honey, 2002; WTO, 2002; Fennel & Dowling, 2003, UNEP & WTO 2006). This growth in quality assurance tools has mirrored, with a slight lag, the growth of ecotourism itself.

Most people will be familiar with regulatory tools - mandatory requirements that are enshrined in law that have to be complied with. Legislation, regulation, licensing and permits are inter-related and set out requirements that are both compulsory and enforceable, and often lead to sanctions and penalties if they are not met. Legislation provides the authority to enforce requirements, which are defined and elaborated by regulations. Licensing is the process of checking compliance with legislation and regulations, and conveys a permission to operate (UNEP and WTO, 2006). Explicitly, the purpose of licensure is to protect the public from incompetent practitioners. For example the process may require an individual or tourism business to have a licence, or a permit to operate or conduct an activity and/or enter/practice in a particular location such as a national park. It is necessary to ensure mandatory and/or legislative requirements do not act as barriers to business, and act to mainly restrict operations to those which meet a minimum acceptable standard and thus mainly serves to protect the public from incompetent practice. However, minimal standards, whilst necessary and important, do not demonstrate a quest or aim for best practice or quality.

The focus of this book is on quality ecotourism, and despite the necessary and important role that regulation, policy and other government initiatives play in complementing and supporting ecotourism planning and delivery, these initiatives will not be discussed in any detail. The focus instead is on the spectrum of voluntary initiatives that may be used to promote and support quality ecotourism. Voluntary initiatives are not compulsory, which means that the initiator is not obliged to by law to propose or run the initiative, and the target groups are not obliged to conform/apply and therefore do not restrict trade or operation. Thus, these tools can demand best practice rather than accept a minimum standard. Voluntary initiatives, must as a minimum meet, but preferably exceed regulatory compliance and often indicate practices for which there is no legislation or regulatory control.

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Voluntary tools include initiatives such as prizes and awards of excellence, codes of conduct or practice, environmental management systems, best practice guidelines, self-commitments and self-declarations, professional certification programs for individuals such as tour guides, certification and accreditation programs, as well as less well known initiatives such as sustainable tourism charters in New Zealand (Enterprise Northland, 2005, http://www.enterprisenorthland.co.nz/projects/activate/sustainable_tourism_project.htm). The tools and their operating characteristics are often depicted on a quality continuum (Manidis Roberts Consultants, 1994; Issaverdis, 1998, 2001; Black, 2002) that ranges from relatively weak measures that serve mainly to raise awareness, to stronger and more credible measures that demand formal quality system components such as benchmarking, performance indicators and auditing.

The spectrum of quality assurance tools that will be examined in Part Two of this book follows this continuum from awards through codes of conduct to certification and accreditation programs. Sustainability indicators have also been discussed in two chapters because they are a useful tool for monitoring and evaluating quality initiatives for ecotourism.

The following discussion briefly introduces some of the quality assurance tools used in the ecotourism industry that are illustrated in more detail using case studies in the subsequent chapters. Moving from the relatively weak tools to the stronger and more credible tools we introduce awards, codes of conduct, certification and accreditation and finally monitoring and evaluation.

Awards of excellence

At the least formal and rigorous end of the quality continuum spectrum are awards – a reward that is generally solicited or applied for. Even within this category there is considerable variation in credibility relating to the rigor of the selection process and whether or not there are performance indicators (see Chapter 3 in this book), however it is rare for on-site assessment or verification to take place. The award

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winner usually gains a seal of approval – in effect a logo that is often used for marketing purposes. Awards fulfill an important purpose by providing an incentive for good performance and service and celebrating excellence. How successfully the awardees use the award depends upon how well known and respected the award is. The credibility of the award depends on the integrity of the application and selection procedure, with some awards almost evolving into a type of ecolabel remarkably similar to certification, with stringent application criteria and attempts to verify claims - a type of conformity assessment (e.g. David Bellamy Awards for Conservation). As discussed in Chapter 3 of this book, there are some concerns that awards depend in part, not on how good the business or product is, but on how good an application is submitted.

Codes of conduct

Codes of conduct or codes of practice were one of the earliest voluntary initiatives developed to address quality issues in tourism. They provide information that aims to influence behaviour of tourists or tourism enterprise operators by providing guidelines or rules of appropriate behavior. The voluntary nature of codes of conduct means there are rarely any checks on compliance. Codes have certainly been criticized because they are often vague, have been proclaimed as a type of self-regulation yet have no penalties for non-compliance and so are often considered the weakest form of quality control (Weaver, 2001). Codes are explored in more detail in Chapter 4 of this book, and as with awards there is great diversity. However, evidence suggests that codes can influence tourists' and tourism enterprise operators' behaviour and practices (see Stonehouse, 2001; Chapter 3 in this book). Certainly codes addressing tourism and child prostitution have resulted in raising global awareness of serious social problems, and stimulated national and international legislation (WTO, 2002).

Codes often declare a self-commitment to ecological sustainability or ethical tourism, and even without enforcement place a strong moral commitment to comply. As with awards there may be tendencies to mutate into more formal and enforceable standards, with the development of some form of conformity assessment. Many codes try to boost credibility and commitment by integrating a requirement to sign a

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declaration that commits the individual or enterprise to compliance (e.g. Tourism Council of Australia Code of Conduct). The implication of this requirement is that non-compliance may lead to public exposure. The associated reputational risk provides additional pressure to ensure the compliance of codes. Unfortunately, codes, as well as industry-led certification are perceived by some (Mason and Mowforth, 1996; Chapter 4 in this book) with a degree of concern, as simply a pragmatic way that government regulation can be staved off, despite only having voluntary and unenforceable rules for which there are no formal consequences for non-compliance.

Certification and Accreditation

The terms certification and accreditation are sometimes used interchangeably, particularly in Australia, Asia and New Zealand (Honey, 2002) yet they represent two quite different and separate quality mechanisms with different processes and implications. Certification is a voluntary procedure that sets, assesses, monitors and gives written assurance that a business, product, process, service or management system conforms to a specific requirement. A marketable logo (sometimes called an ecolabel) is given to those that conform or meet the criteria, with the standard at least meeting, but generally being above any regulatory requirements. Most importantly, certification measures compliance through both initial assessment and subsequent audits (i.e. it monitors and polices). Certification endorses skilled expertise or best practice rather than regulates for a minimum acceptable standard.

Accreditation, in contrast, is defined here as the procedure by which an authoritative body formally recognizes that a certifier or certification program is competent to carry out specific tasks (i.e. it certifies the certifiers or demonstrates they are doing their job correctly). The development of a global accreditation body for sustainable and eco-tourism certification programs has been under consideration since the Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Certification Workshop held at Mohonk, USA in 2000. Certification experts from twenty countries that had created, run or evaluated tourism certification programs including most of the leading global, regional, national, and sub-national programs formulated a set of basic principles and components that should be part of any sound sustainable and ecotourism certification

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program (this is known as the Mohonk Agreement – see Honey, 2002) and workshop participants approved a proposal by Rainforest Alliance to investigate the feasibility of a Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (Rainforest Alliance, 2001; see Chapter 23 in this book).

Monitoring and evaluation

To assess whether quality ecotourism is being achieved either through the quality assurance tools examined in this book or through other initiatives such as sustainable tourism charters, government policy and legislation, there needs to be some meaningful method of evaluating whether the underlying principles of ecotourism are being achieved and performance monitored. Monitoring instruments and related procedures such as benchmarking, reporting, indicators, assessment or auditing are vital components of any quality system. The credibility of any quality tool often hinges on these components as the lack of monitoring or enforcing of standards may result in fraud. Some of these monitoring instruments are used as stand-alone tools, although many are also standard components of certification programs.

Benchmarking is the process of comparing performances and processes within an industry to assess relative position against either a set industry standard or against those that are ‘best in class’. Best practice should be drawn from benchmarking processes and identifies leaders in the field or leading practices. One of the most well known of the sustainable tourism certification programs, Green Globe (see Chapter 6 in this book) uses benchmarking indicators on a set number of criteria to provide an assessment of comparative performance.

All credible certification programs use conformity assessment to check compliance, with the most reliable programs insisting on regular on-site verification by trained third party assessors. Details of this process and some of the challenges these processes present are evident from a number of chapters in this book (see Chapters 6, 14, 22 in this book) that cover various different types of certification programs.

Indicators are information sets or measurements that are selected to be used on a regular basis to measure changes that are of importance, for example changes in the ecosystem. Well selected indicators provide early warning of changes that may need addressing, and as such are of importance to planning and management processes. Indicators are discussed in more depth in Chapters 7 and 8 in this book.

Summary

The long-term viability, competitiveness, and economic and environmental sustainability of the ecotourism industry are reliant on two important factors. The first is maintaining and enhancing unique natural and cultural environments on which the industry depends (Issaverdis 1998; Toplis 2000). The second is increasing the professionalism of the industry. Ecotourism appears to have emerged from its infant stage into an increasingly mature, but perhaps still adolescent industry. A number of trends indicate the coming-of-age and increasing sophistication of the ecotourism industry. First, a growing consensus on ecotourism's core principles (see Chapter 1 in this book), second, an increasing number of recognized best practices for the ecotourism industry (see chapters in Part One of this book), and third, genuine attempts to set appropriate and relevant guidelines and benchmarks. Finally, the ecotourism industry is showing evidence of increasing professionalism as well as the development of a spectrum of specific quality assurance tools and instruments to ensure ecotourism standards are clearly defined, set, measured and met.

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