The Australian EcoCertification Program (NEAP) blazed a trail in developing the world's first ecotourism-specific certification program in 1996, and has been heralded as an example of a successful ecotourism certification program. The program has been credited with improving standards and professionalism in the Australian ecotourism industry, providing encouragement and tangible rewards to operators who demonstrated sustainable environmental and socio-cultural practices and used as a blueprint for the development of other eco certification programs, including Green Globe 21's International Ecotourism Standard. The EcoCertification Program was developed primarily as a tool to identify genuine, and quality ecotourism product. The criteria were developed from the principle components of most ecotourism definitions: nature-focused product that was environmentally sustainable, included interpretation, provided returns to both local communities and environments and was culturally sensitive. This chapter provides an insight into the development of the program and identifies key changes introduced as a result of experience, the in-built demand for continuous improvement, internal politics and external pressure and forces. The realities of establishing and operating an ecotourism certification program and the evolution of the program through to the third version are followed in order to learn from the successes and triumphs as well as the setbacks.
The Australian EcoCertification Program (NEAP): blazing a trail for ecotourism certification, but keeping on track?

Rik Thwaites

School of Environmental and Information Sciences, Charles Sturt University.

Abstract:

The Australian EcoCertification Program (originally known as the National Ecotourism Accreditation Program – or NEAP) blazed a trail in developing the world’s first ecotourism-specific certification program in 1996, and has been heralded as an example of a successful ecotourism certification program. The program has been credited with improving standards and professionalism in the Australian ecotourism industry, providing encouragement and tangible rewards to operators who demonstrated sustainable environmental and socio-cultural practices and used as a blueprint for the development of other eco certification programs, including Green Globe 21’s International Ecotourism Standard.

The EcoCertification Program was developed primarily as a tool to identify genuine, and quality ecotourism product. The criteria were developed from the principle components of most ecotourism definitions – nature-focused product that was environmentally sustainable, included interpretation, provided returns to both local communities and environments and was culturally sensitive. This chapter provides an insight into the development of the program and identifies key changes introduced as a result of experience, the in-built demand for continuous improvement, internal politics and external pressure and forces. The realities of establishing and operating an ecotourism certification program and the evolution of the program through to the third version are followed in order to learn from the successes and triumphs as well as the setbacks.

Chapter Context
Regarded as the world’s first national certification program for ecotourism (Charters 2000), the National Ecotourism Accreditation Program, (NEAP), was launched in Australia in 1996. A second, updated version was launched in 2000 under the slightly altered title of the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program, known as NEAP II, and a third version of the program was launched in 2003, relabelled as EcoCertification. This chapter seeks to build on the discussion of the progress of NEAP presented in Chester and Crabtree (2002) by reflecting further on the experience of the ongoing development and management of this program through versions II and III (EcoCertification).

The author teaches ecotourism at Charles Sturt University, and has been involved in a number of certification projects with tourism operators, including presenting workshops to operators, arranging for students to assist operators through the certification process; and from 2000 to 2003 being a member of the NEAP assessment panel dealing with applications, operators and referees. Since the introduction of EcoCertification, the author has had no direct involvement in the development or implementation of the program. While operator connections have been maintained, specific information regarding EcoCertification has been gained from published sources and from interviews with Ecotourism Australia staff responsible for managing the program.

Introduction: Context of Ecotourism Certification in Australia

Tourism is a major contributor to the Australian economy. In 2001-02 tourism generated over AU$17 billion in export earnings, or 11.2% of total export revenue, and with AU$51 billion of domestic tourism expenditure directly contributed 4.5% of the nation’s GDP (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). The tourism industry directly employs around 550,000 people, or 6% of national employment, and indirectly employs a further 397,000 (2001-02 figures).

Matters of environmental degradation, conservation and sustainable development have seen active public debate and action in Australia in recent decades. The publication of the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) included a chapter on tourism. Two years later, the National Ecotourism Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994) provided a set of guidelines for achieving well-managed ecotourism, and proposed the establishment of high-quality industry standards and a national ecotourism certification system, thus providing a firm conceptual grounding for later activities within the
ecotourism arena in Australia. While the national policy environment has moved on, particularly with the development of the Tourism White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) which provided no focus on ecotourism in discussion of regional tourism and tourism sustainability in protected areas, Fennell (2003, p.109) was of the view that the National Ecotourism Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994) has been ‘instrumental in demonstrating to the rest of the world the advanced state of ecotourism in Australia’.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was considerable debate in Australia, and other parts of the world, over the need for ‘accreditation’ in the tourism industry (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995). This led to the establishment of a Guide Accreditation Scheme by the Inbound Tour Organisation of Australia (ITOA) in 1992, followed by the Victorian Tour Operators Association (VTOA) Accreditation Program in 1993, which became a condition for operators to receive a licence to operate on public lands in Victoria (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995). This program was closely followed by other state and sector-based operator ‘accreditation’ programs. (Since this time, use of the term ‘accreditation’ has changed in line with internationally accepted use, and the term ‘certification’ has been adopted by EA to describe the procedure whereby an independent body provides assurance that tourism products, services or systems conform to specified requirements. The term ‘accreditation’ is still used for this procedure in some quarters in Australia, but in this chapter, will only be used where it is part of a title or program name.)

Early meetings of the Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA) in 1992 and 1993, renamed Ecotourism Australia (EA) in 2003, recognized the importance of protecting the use of the term ‘ecotourism’ and rewarding sound ecological practice (Chester and Crabtree, 2002). The push towards creating an ecotourism certification program reflected the need to create a way of distinguishing quality ecotourism product that would deliver sustainability and benefit to operators, customers and the environment, from more dubious operators. It was considered that there were too many operations misusing the ecotourism term, seeking marketing advantage without attempting to deliver genuine ecotourism product.

So, with a world leading National Ecotourism Strategy, the establishment of a national ecotourism body and development of State policies on nature tourism and ecotourism, and a climate favouring certification the scene was set with exceptional institutional “hardware” for the development of ecotourism certification in Australia.
In 1994, the Australian federal government Department of Tourism hired consultants to investigate the creation of a national ecotourism certification system which would facilitate the application of agreed industry standards by ecotourism operators. The outcome proposed was a large and cumbersome national administrative bureaucracy, but provided little in the way of practical certification criteria (Chester & Crabtree 2002; Charters 2000).

With funding from the Commonwealth Government and together with the Tourism Council of Australia and VTOA, the EAA set out to develop a certification scheme. The government funding provided support only for development of the scheme. The project partners had limited funds for subsidizing promotion and ongoing management, so the scheme had to rapidly become self-funding. Recognizing that the ecotourism industry in Australia consisted largely of small-scale operators, certification would need to be offered at a relatively low cost (Charters, 2000). This in turn meant that the program would have to be ‘lean and mean’ with low operating costs (Chester and Crabtree, 2002). Around 50 tour operators provided an industry perspective on the practicality of the program by reviewing draft criteria, administrative structures and fees. Launched into the market in 1996, the first version of the National Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) was designed with a heavy reliance on volunteers for its management, that is, it was not developed on a full commercial costing basis, but required the substantial input of time and other support from individuals and organisations. It is worth noting that two of the nine characteristics identified by Charters (2000) for the program to be successful related to the economics of the program: ‘affordability’ – that the program be within the financial reach of all operators; and ‘self-funding’ – that the program generate sufficient funds to survive independently in the long term.

A number of descriptions have been written on the development of NEAP, including Chester and Crabtree (2002) and Charters (2000), both drawn on above. It is not the intention of this chapter to repeat all the information contained in these previous works, although it is important to begin by outlining the structure of the program. This chapter will focus on changes to the program, including in the most recent version ‘EcoCertification’, and reflection on the experience of implementing the program.
Program Structure

An important consideration in the development of NEAP was the matter of what should be certified, the business or the product. It was decided that the certification should be provided to individual products, not the operating entities. It was believed that as many operators have diverse businesses and a range of products, some of which may follow ecotourism principles while others may not, that such operations would be excluded from certification if the focus was on the operation as a whole (Chester & Crabtree, 2002). Thus distinct products of a larger operation can be certified independent of the rest of the operation, to ensure a rigorous application of ecotourism principles (Honey and Rome, 2001).

Three different types of products (or sectors of the ecotourism industry) are identified in the program: accommodation where infrastructure and services are supplied to house visitors overnight in nature; tours where guides lead an excursion which combines activities such as walking, driving or riding with viewing and interacting with nature; and attractions that combine a natural area focus with fixed infrastructure designed to help people explore and learn (Ecotourism Australia, 2003).

NEAP was designed to encourage continuous improvement among operators, and the program has been completely updated twice (in 2000 and 2004) to reflect improved industry standards and performance.

The original version of NEAP provided certification at two different levels, Ecotourism and Advanced ecotourism. The lower level would provide for a minimum set of requirements that a tourism product must meet to be certified as ecotourism, while the upper level would reward a higher level of achievement (Chester and Crabtree 2002), thus providing incentive for operators to seek improvement and rewarding those operators who adopt best practices.

As a basis for certification, the program defined ecotourism as:

*Ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation* (EAA, 2000, p.4).
Following from this definition, eight fundamental principles of ecotourism were identified under which detailed criteria could be set to assess operator practice: natural area focus, interpretation, environmental sustainability, contribution to conservation, working with local communities, the cultural component, customer satisfaction and responsible marketing. To qualify for ecotourism certification, products needed to meet ‘minimum requirements’ set out as ‘core’ criteria under each of these eight principles. Advanced ecotourism certification was assessed on the basis of calculation of points for the achievement of ‘bonus criteria’ and ‘innovative best practices’, practices identified by the operator that go beyond the identified requirements of the criteria.

An expanded and updated version of NEAP released in 2000 (NEAP II) incorporated a third level of certification under the new category of nature tourism. This opened up the program to a wider range of operations and products based in natural areas but not meeting the strict definition of ecotourism, and by doing so recognized that all tourism in natural areas should be sustainable and encouraged a wider set of operators to consider the sustainability of their practices. The system of core and bonus criteria was retained, though the criteria were updated and in many cases made more stringent, particularly in relation to the ‘bonus’ criteria for Advanced Ecotourism certification. ‘Nature tourism’ was separately defined, requiring a product to meet core criteria in only four principles, those related to natural area focus, environmental sustainability, customer satisfaction and responsible marketing. Certified nature tourism was thus considered to be a subset of ecotourism, having to meet the same core criteria of some principles, such as environmental sustainability, but excluding criteria under other principles that are considered fundamental for ecotourism certification, such as interpretation (Table 1).

Nature tourism is defined in the program as:

Tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that ensures environmentally sustainable use of natural resources (EAA, 2000, p.4).

Table 1. NEAP II certification principles and eligibility for different levels of certification (EAA, 2000).
**Principles**

The nature tourism or ecotourism product:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature tourism</th>
<th>Ecotourism</th>
<th>Advanced Ecotourism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on directly and personally experiencing nature</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides opportunities to experience nature in ways that lead to greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment (provision of interpretation)</td>
<td>Optional</td>
<td>Mandatory but not necessarily core to experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Represents best practice for environmentally sustainable tourism</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively contributes to the conservation of natural areas</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides constructive ongoing contributions to local communities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is sensitive to and involves different cultures, especially indigenous cultures</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistently meets customer expectations</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is marketed accurately and leads to realistic expectations</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**EcoCertification**

The experience of developing and managing the program allowed NEAP and EAA to contribute internationally to discussions regarding ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification. NEAP representatives participated in the international certification conference held in 2000 in New York. This conference resulted in the Mohonk Agreement which offers a set of principles and elements considered necessary as part of any ‘sound’ ecotourism certification program (Honey, 2002). In 2002, Green Globe 21 and EA jointly launched the International Ecotourism Standard. This was developed by NEAP and EAA, based largely on NEAP II, but also drawing on requirements of the Mohonk Agreement, and the existing Green Globe 21 approach to certification. This exercise contributed greatly to consideration of where to take NEAP in its third version.
The most recent version of NEAP was launched in December 2003 (along with a re-branding of the EAA and change of name to Ecotourism Australia – EA). Recognizing the need for globally consistent use of terminology following Mohonk, reference to ‘accreditation’ was dropped, and the new program was called “EcoCertification”. While many parts of the NEAP II document were re-drafted to reflect new understandings and requirements, EcoCertification also represented something of a departure in that its scope was expanded to include two further principles not considered under earlier NEAP versions: business management and operational planning, and business ethics. As a result, EcoCertification now presents a comprehensive “triple bottom line” approach covering the three elements: economic, social and environmental sustainability (EA, 2003).

The major driving factor behind these additions to the program was the desire to meet the requirements of the ‘Australian Tourism Accreditation Standard’. With the proliferation of certification schemes there was a move in the late 1990s to establish a national tourism accreditation scheme (that is, ‘certifying the certifiers’ in the language of Mohonk) comprising a national framework and standard for certification schemes (TAA 2005). With the creation of a single national system, and its recognition by different levels of government and government agencies, endorsement under this national system would be imperative for any certification scheme to remain credible and relevant to operators.

The Australian Tourism Accreditation Standard is largely focused on elements of business planning and management, components that were not adequately dealt with under NEAP II. The desire to be recognized under the national standard thus provided a strong incentive for EcoCertification to expand the principles covered, and to apply the new set of principles across all three categories of certification (Table 2). EcoCertification achieved national accreditation status in April 2004.

Table 2. EcoCertification program principles applied for eligibility under different categories (EA, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triple Bottom Line</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Nature Tourism</th>
<th>Ecotourism and Advanced Ecotourism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Program Assessment and Administration

The assessment of tourism products throughout all versions of NEAP and EcoCertification has been based around the self-assessment by an operator of the nominated product(s) against relevant criteria and completion of the application document. This document is submitted with product brochures/website details and nomination of two referees. An assessor is responsible for checking all the documentation and ensuring that all relevant criteria have been met, determining the bonus and innovative best practice points, and contacting referees. Once awarded, certification is valid for three years with the operator paying an initial application fee and an annual fee.

With the evolution and growth of NEAP, administration and assessment arrangements have undergone a number of changes. The program has always had a management committee to oversee its development and administration. Initially, this incorporated representatives from EAA, VTOA and an independent chair, and was responsible for management, promotion and ongoing development of the program. Program administration was provided from the EAA office. At this stage, assessment of applications was undertaken in house, by the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic sustainability</th>
<th>1. Business management and operational planning</th>
<th>✓</th>
<th>✓</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Business ethics</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Responsible marketing</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Customer satisfaction</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental sustainability</td>
<td>5. Natural area focus</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Environmental sustainability</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Interpretation and education</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Contribution to conservation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social sustainability</td>
<td>9. Working with local communities</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Cultural respect and sensitivity</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EAA administrative officer on a fee for service basis, with help from members of the NEAP committee. As the number of applications increased, a team of independent assessors was established, who made recommendations to the NEAP committee for the final decision.

In 2001, EAA took over sole ownership of NEAP, and management was changed to reflect this. Independent assessment and audit groups were established with a single independent chair sitting on a NEAP Management Group made otherwise of EAA committee members and Executive Officer (Figure 1). The Assessment and Audit Groups were established to be independent of the EAA, thus separating the tasks of program management from assessing and auditing products and avoiding perceptions of conflict of interest in the awarding of certification (Chester and Crabtree, 2002). The Assessment Group included up to five assessors, sub-contracted to assess applications and advise the Executive Officer of assessment decisions, develop assessment protocols, provide feedback to operators, and pass information on to the Audit Group. The Audit Group was established to develop audit protocols and implement audits, with the authority to revoke or suspend certification. The NEAP Management Group retained the higher level functions of strategic planning and policy setting, managing the business and ongoing review and development of the program (EAA 2001).

Figure 1. NEAP corporate structure (EAA 2001).
**Program credibility**

Given an initial self-assessment process, the credibility of the NEAP program has depended on verification by assessors of information provided, as well as review via auditing. The review of brochures and websites, and contacting referees has proven to be a powerful means of verification of information provided in application documents and identifying areas where further information is required or where further work or modification by the operator is needed.

Additional verification comes from the audit process, including both paper and on-site audits. Achieving a program of on-site audits to ensure credibility of the program has proved to be the real challenge. While the intention was that these be random physical audits, made with a 60 day notice to the operator, these were rarely carried out through the early years of NEAP. The critical point to consider here is that the program was established to be self-funding and affordable to small operators. The first priority of the program was to get a functioning and affordable certification scheme on the market, able to gradually building its membership. However, on-site auditing is an expensive and demanding process, and at least early on, was beyond the budget and the limited organisational capacity of the program.

Pressure for change intensified with the Mohonk Agreement in 2000 identifying that scheme integrity requires audits by suitably trained and independent auditors (Honey 2002). Consultants were engaged to develop a NEAP audit protocol, and a program of on-site audits to test the protocols was rolled out from December 2001 to April 2002 (Chester and Crabtree, 2002). A grant from Tourism Queensland enabled audits to be undertaken across a variety of operations in different States, and included both on-site and desk audits to identify cost effective audit methodologies.

**Assessment under EcoCertification**

The launch of EcoCertification in 2003 saw changes to the assessment and audit process that represent the latest step in the evolution from a ‘lean and mean’ volunteer driven program into a more professional program...
seeking the highest standards. The administrative structure established in 2001 was simplified, with the abolition of the independent NEAP Assessor Group and removal of a position on the Program Management Committee for an Independent Chair of the Assessment and Audit Groups. Trained assessors now work individually on a sub-contract basis, with the responsibility of reviewing documentation and contacting referees, and make their recommendations directly to the CEO of EA.

This change has resulted in some clear efficiency benefits. Under the previous arrangement, assessments regularly took six weeks or more, with assessors having to balance the demands of the assessment process including contacting referees and chasing missing information, and their other (full-time) responsibilities, and final decisions having to wait for a monthly teleconference. Under EcoCertification, a smaller number of professional assessors (two) work independently of each other, responsible to the CEO of EA. With an improved system of chasing missing information and no monthly meetings, turnaround time is now about two weeks for correctly completed applications, making the program more attractive and credible in the marketplace.

While this new system saves considerable time and expense, the replacement of a panel to make decisions by individual assessors making recommendations to the CEO of EA reduces the distance between the assessment decision and the administration, and also removes much of the protection afforded to the assessors from potential accusations of conflict of interest, or from inappropriate pressure to make particular decisions. This is not to suggest that any impropriety has occurred under the new system or that the system is any less rigorous, only to suggest that perhaps the inbuilt protection from abuse has been reduced.

Perhaps a greater enhancement to the rigour of the program, and thus its credibility, has been the commitment to on-site auditing by independent, third party auditors. With the launch of EcoCertification, Ecotourism Australia committed to seek a 100 percent audit of all EcoCertified product/operators over the three year term of the program. The proposal was not for up-front on-site assessment, (perhaps the ideal situation but extremely expensive), but provides for single visits to be made to a region to audit all local operations, recognizing the large size of Australia and the expense of travelling to isolated destinations.

In May 2004 Expressions of Interest were called for from professional auditors, with the intention of establishing a national pool of independent third party auditors. Fees proposed by commercial auditing
organisations were very high, so with an eye to both the credibility and affordability of the program, two specialised independent auditors with the necessary professional qualifications were contracted. More recently the number of auditors has been expanded through a partnership with state tourism organisations providing training to a small number of staff.

By November 2005, a total of 157 product audits had been completed, (Charters, 2005a). Emphasising the effectiveness of the auditing process, Charters (2005a) reported that of these 157 audited products, 4% had been delisted, 41% were required to make minor changes and 55% completed the audit process with no changes required. Many of the non-compliance issues related to operators not displaying the EcoCertification logo appropriately as required by their certification, and thus not putting the brand in the marketplace.

The auditing process requires a pre-arranged on-site visit to an operator’s office with access to facilities and documentation, but does not require auditors to participate in tour products, to receive the full experience including interpretation. This raises the question of how the quality of a product can be assessed without it being experienced. Is ecotourism auditing more than the assessment of technical criteria? For example, is it enough to have an interpretation plan, or should the presentation of interpretation be considered? The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, an important partner and stakeholder in the EcoCertification program, has raised this issue, and the current thinking is that the scope of audits needs to be expanded (Stephen Pahl, pers. comm. 31/1/06), incorporating a comprehensive analysis of the operation, talking to staff and participating in tours.

All these changes to the program could be seen as improvements introduced as a result of the experience of implementing and managing it. The experience of NEAP/EcoCertification may be that the ‘ideal’ is rarely possible as a balance is sought between bureaucracy, complexity, credibility and affordability. For example, the introduction of a regular auditing program, or expanding the scope of auditing, would both add substantially to the cost of the program (financial sustainability is considered later in this chapter). Some of the improved management practices or systems would not have been possible to implement in the early stages of the program, and have only become possible with the increased financial and administrative capacity that comes with the maturing and growth of the program, and acceptance within the market-place.
Partnerships

Another issue of some importance to the EcoCertification program is that of its relationship with other organisations, particularly government agencies. All three levels of government in Australia (federal, state and local) have some responsibility for land and environmental management, and tourism development, planning and promotion. Ecotourism Australia has sought to promote the benefits of certification to agencies, particularly at state and federal level as a complementary program to support their own efforts to achieve objectives in land management and tourism development. A number of partnerships have been formed, such as with Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia and Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in Queensland which both provide access to extended licences for EcoCertified operators. These partnerships have also contributed to strengthening the certification program with support in the review of criteria that are specifically relevant to certain activities, such as marine tourism operators. Ecotourism Australia has made ongoing efforts to establish and expand such partnerships, and is considering the addition of further criteria specific to certain groups of operators, such as in relation to marine safety, or working in particular locations where strict management practices need to be enforced (pers. comm. Stephen Pahl, 31/1/06). Chapter 22 in this book deals with this issue of partnerships, but it is worthwhile recognizing that these partnerships offer benefits to operators, but also wider benefits by providing a strong incentive for operators to become certified and thus to consider the sustainability implications of their practices and potential improvements.

Some Issues Arising from Implementation of NEAP II

A number of observations can be made arising from operator feedback, and the experience of implementing NEAP I and II. Documented sources of operator feedback include: results of a survey of 32 operator members of EAA in 1998, half of whom were certified under NEAP I (Fleming 1998); Tourism Queensland research in 2000, in which 93 of the 99 certified operators at the time were interviewed on their satisfaction with, and expectations of NEAP (Enhance Management 2000a); and in 2002, an Ecotourism Australia market survey which received responses from 54% of the 133 certified operators, and focused on
perspectives of future directions of NEAP, re-branding the program and willingness-to-pay for increased audits and marketing (EA 2002).

The first observation relates to the difficulty faced by operators completing the application form correctly. The application document in all versions of NEAP/EcoCertification to date has been sizeable and complex with a large number of different criteria. Some operators find certain criteria difficult to understand, and the process to be intimidating, presenting a disincentive for them to complete the application. Fleming (1998) notes the most commonly expressed negative aspect of the program was that the documentation was too involved, too time-consuming and too daunting. There may be many sources of confusion and frustration for operators, and these would contribute to the likelihood of documents being incompletely or incorrectly filled in (and thus extra time and frustration for the assessor), or for the application to be put aside. As all operators complete the same document, many criteria will be irrelevant for a particular product or operation, thus contributing to operator confusion or frustration.

One of the greatest challenges is in developing ‘measurable’ criteria that reflect the principles and are unambiguous. However, the criteria do not always cater for all situations and their meaning is not always clear. Under NEAP II, the Assessment Group worked to achieve consistency and transparency in their decisions, but were often faced with having to make policy decisions on interpretation of a particular criterion in relation to underlying principles. This required discussions with the Management Group and was time consuming and frustrating for all parties, including operators awaiting an outcome on their application.

As the program has grown in the marketplace, competitive pressures or agency benefits and incentives (see Chapter 22) may have resulted in some operators with lesser commitment to, or understanding of, the principles of sustainability seeking certification. As some of these operators may not fit the ‘mould’ of operators for which criteria were designed, their applications may reflect a different understanding or interpretation of the criteria, thus adding new challenges to the assessor. Such applications were very often incomplete.

These difficulties are, of course, an expected aspect of the ongoing evolution of a program where criteria may be ambiguous or where new applications challenge existing understanding or criteria. The experience of NEAP II resulted in numerous refinements presented in EcoCertification, which was designed to clarify unclear
or ambiguous criteria (Charters 2003). Despite this, the document remains long and complex, containing many criteria that are not relevant to every product. In late 2005, the EcoCertification Management Committee announced that development of an online application form was under way. Such a form will make the program more accessible, allowing applicants to be presented only with criteria relevant to the type of product and activities nominated.

A further concern relating to the capacity of operators to complete the application correctly relates to the size of operations. Large operators may be able to assign an employee (often with responsibility for environmental management) specifically to deal with the application. But most operators within the nature-based tourism and ecotourism sectors are not large, and do not have employees with this specific portfolio of responsibility. The smallest operators often face the most difficult challenges, as commonly a single person is responsible for all aspects of the operation. If the process becomes too time consuming, confusing or difficult, it may be put aside or left all together.

The issue of affordability is also critical to small operators, as highlighted in the NEAP market survey (EA 2002) which asked questions about increased costs for marketing and for on-site verification. Respondents raised concerns regarding both level of marketing and need for on-site verification, but strong views were also expressed on the issue of raised fees. Examples of comments include:

‘For small operators the costs are becoming uneconomic!’

(Increasing fees are) ‘a real disincentive for many (small operators) to belong to and be accredited by NEAP.’

‘As the goal is to encourage more businesses to meet NEAP standards, we need to be very careful NEAP remains affordable to small businesses.’

‘We don’t want it to be something only affordable to big operators.’

In recent years, with the explosion of compulsory public liability insurance costs for tourism operators in Australia, particularly adventure tourism operators, and increasing regulatory and licensing demands, some operators are finding that the additional time and financial cost of voluntary certification is beyond the capacity of the business.
A final point worth recognizing here is the role of the certification process as an educational tool. The NEAP Industry Survey (Enhance Management 2000a) found that only 10% of operators identified education as an initial motivation to become certified, well below the desire to self-evaluate (26%), seek formal recognition (22%), or access marketing opportunities (22%). However, once engaged in the certification process, 48% of operators identified education (as increased awareness or implementation of environmentally sustainable practices) as the most important impact of NEAP, well ahead of impacts such as competitive advantage (30%), assurance of quality (24%), or marketing opportunities (24%). The process of completing the application document results in an educational outcome for operators; however some operators need assistance to complete the application. One source of assistance is from program personnel, such as administration or assessors. During NEAP II, assessors regularly contacted operators for additional information only to find that the operators would then seek further information or support from them, making the assessment an interactive and hands-on process contributing directly to the operator’s capacity to achieve certification. In developing and promoting a certification scheme, the opportunity for the scheme to provide education, to raise awareness and change practices and to improve products should be recognized and actively promoted.

**Issues Arising from Introduction of EcoCertification**

NEAP has always offered a scaled fee system, based on gross annual turnover, to ensure affordability to small operators, but just how equitable is this system? While affordability will always be an individual judgement of each operation in relation to funds available and perceived benefits, the fees associated with NEAP/EcoCertification increased dramatically in late 2003. A new fee system was introduced under NEAP II from 1 July 2003 which involved substantial increases, but included within the annual fee was membership of Ecotourism Australia. With the launch of EcoCertification, the base level fees were reduced (but remained substantially higher than they had been prior to July 2003). An additional option, ‘EcoCertification Plus’, was also introduced offering EA membership, and its associated benefits in the organisation, including web page listings and promotion and marketing.

**Table 3.** Operator Fee changes from NEAPII to NEAPIII/EcoCertification
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operator annual turnover</th>
<th>Fee type</th>
<th>NEAPII Pre 1/7/03</th>
<th>NEAPII Post 1/7/03</th>
<th>EcoCert Pre 1/7/03 to 1/7/04</th>
<th>Increase % max turnover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $100k</td>
<td>Application</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>*320</td>
<td>220</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EcoCertification Plus</td>
<td>*115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>1158</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years incl. EcoCert Plus</td>
<td>1205</td>
<td></td>
<td>138%</td>
<td>0.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100k to $250k</td>
<td>Application</td>
<td>203.5</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>260</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>*400</td>
<td>280</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EcoCertification Plus</td>
<td>*115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years</td>
<td>698.5</td>
<td>1460</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years incl. EcoCert Plus</td>
<td>1445</td>
<td></td>
<td>107%</td>
<td>0.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$250k to $1 mill</td>
<td>Application</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>330</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>*580</td>
<td>460</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EcoCertification Plus</td>
<td>*165</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years</td>
<td>1276</td>
<td>2070</td>
<td>1710</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years incl. EcoCert Plus</td>
<td>2205</td>
<td></td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 mill to $3 mill (2002)</td>
<td>Application</td>
<td>368.5</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>430</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>*840</td>
<td>680</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EcoCertification Plus</td>
<td>*225</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years</td>
<td>2018.5</td>
<td>2950</td>
<td>2470</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cost 3 years incl. EcoCert Plus</td>
<td>3145</td>
<td></td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 mill to $5 mill (2003 on)</td>
<td>Application</td>
<td>583.5</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>530</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 highlights the level of increase in fees over a period of less than one year (June 2003 to January 2004). Proportionately, the increase in fees is far greater for small operators with a low turnover. Also, annualized total fee rate for each turnover bracket as a proportion of gross turnover decreases considerably with larger operators. That is, an operator in the smallest turnover category, earning $100,000 pays about 0.4% of their total annual turnover. For an operator with gross turnover just under $10 million, annualized total fee would be a little over 0.01% of gross turnover. So, in this sense, certification is almost 40 times more expensive for the smaller operator than the larger. (An across-the-board CPI-based fee increase was introduced in November 2005, with operators advised via their annual renewal notice.)

Recent discussions with the Chief Executive of EA nevertheless indicated that there was no great negative reaction from operators to the increase in fees in 2003 (Stephen Pahl, pers. comm. 31/1/06). On the contrary, to his knowledge, no operator withdrew from the program because of the fee increases, and the continued growth of the program is testament to its acceptance in the marketplace. In fact, Stephen Pahl indicated that fees prior to 2003 were not realistic in relation to running a viable program, and fees are considered by operators to be very affordable. A few points are worth making here. The first would be that willingness to pay fees would clearly relate to the relative value that operators consider they are getting from the program. Stephen Pahl is of the view that with the growth in the program, the efforts to improve program credibility through changed assessment and auditing processes, the considerable efforts to increase market awareness...
with the re-branded EcoCertification program, and expanded commitment from state agencies to the program, operators perceive considerably better value in the program now than prior to the introduction of EcoCertification. The other point would be that the EA office is likely to be getting feedback from operators who are involved in the program. That is the information is not coming from a truly representative sample of operators since those who choose not to be a part of the program, whether through genuine unwillingness/ inability to pay for the services offered or for other reasons, are less likely to be communicating with EA office, so their views are less likely to be understood or considered.

Approximately half the certified operators have chosen to take up the EcoCertification Plus option, including membership (Stephen Pahl, pers. comm. 31/1/06). This more expensive option has tended to be taken up by larger operators, smaller operators preferring to remain on the base certification rate. EcoCertification Plus thus creates a two-tier system of operators, those paying for extra services including promotion and those not paying, and thus the potential to create an inequity between the presentation and promotion of large versus small operators.

Certification as a competitive advantage

Research undertaken on behalf of Tourism Queensland (Enhance Management 2000a) identified strong concern amongst operators regarding low public awareness of NEAP. This was generally attributed to a lack of marketing or the inefficiency of marketing initiatives and was frequently identified by operators as the reason for NEAP’s failure to provide a competitive advantage to their business. While some operators described a competitive advantage and increase in business, many did not see this outcome. Some operators appear to describe their NEAP experience in largely economic terms, that is, balancing the costs incurred in fees against the benefits experienced (or not) in increased business. Many operators recognize (and seek) a wider range of benefits, but may still feel frustration with the lack of direct benefit through increased business.

‘The economic cost of involvement must relate closely to the benefits of participation. To date we have been unable to attribute very much in terms of market advantage.’
'NEAP must provide more business to members than if it didn’t exist. .... why would we spend more money on certification if it doesn’t attract more business?'

(Unpublished operator comments in responses to NEAP market survey, EA 2002).

Competitive advantage has often been identified as a potential benefit of certification programs. The EcoCertification application document lists competitive advantage in marketing as the first of six benefits to operators. Identified benefits to consumers include that the program provides a recognized means of identifying genuine nature tourism and ecotourism products (EA, 2003). There is an implicit assumption here that tourists are interested in whether a product adopts genuine sustainability practices in nature and ecotourism, and thus that tourists are likely to respond to altruistic consideration of environmental issues and make decisions based on environmental performance indicated by certification status. This assumption is supported by a consumer survey of visitors to NEAP certified operations (Enhance Management 2000b) which found that after being given a description of NEAP, the majority of visitors would be more likely to select a certified operator in the future and would be willing to pay more for a certified product.

It is not the intention of this chapter to explore the issue of consumer response and behaviour in detail. It should, however, be noted that while consumers often report a willingness to make an altruistic decision based on environmental factors, even to pay more for doing so, there is also ample evidence to indicate that consumer behaviour does not always follow declared preference or intention. Sharpley (2000), for instance, challenges the assumption that environmental awareness converts into consumer choice, particularly in the context of tourism where motivations are focused very much on personal needs and ‘outward looking environmental concern is likely to have a low priority’ (p.51). In fact, he considers that the claimed environmental values of consumers and their actual behaviour are often contradictory.

**Competitive advantage**

![Diagram of competitive advantage](image)
If there is a question over the link between consumer awareness and consumer choice, then this must challenge the logic of competitive advantage. Given that many operators have also questioned the approach to marketing NEAP/EcoCertification, and have suggested that not enough effort has gone into promoting the brand direct to tourists as consumers, it is perhaps not surprising that some operators are not experiencing the competitive advantage that they might have expected.

Taylor et al. (2000) investigated operator responses to three tourism business certification programs in Australia (not including NEAP), finding that though operators had a high expectation of benefit derived from consumer awareness of certification, concern was expressed about low levels of consumer awareness. Taylor et al. (2000, p.18) concluded that ‘where businesses have been proactive in promoting their accredited status, some benefit has been derived.’

There is a clear message from this for EcoCertification. Promoting a competitive advantage from certification is risky. If this is the primary reason that operators choose to be certified, then they may well be dissatisfied with the program if they do not see a direct increase in customers related to their certification status. To avoid dissatisfaction with EcoCertification and alienation of the operator base, it is important that the program should stimulate in operators a realistic expectation of consumer behaviour and economic benefit. On the other hand, encouraging operators to be more proactive themselves by promoting their certification status and what this means, may well provide a positive impact for their businesses as well as assisting in the broader promotion of the certification program and raising of consumer awareness. In all its versions, NEAP/EcoCertification has provided information to support operators in promoting the certification program and product certification status. In fact, under the ‘Responsible Marketing’ principle, for any product to achieve certification, core criteria require:

- At least one of the marketing methods in continual circulation will define nature and/or ecotourism; and

- At least one of the most widely used marketing methods will include the EcoCertification logo alongside certified products. (EA, 2003)
Though the competitive advantage of certification remains the first listed benefit in the application document, it seems that Ecotourism Australia recognizes the difficulty in this. The Chief Executive indicated that at operator certification workshops around Australia, increased profit is not sold as the primary benefit.

‘We want people to be committed to sustainable operations, to make a commitment to continuous improvement. The program provides a framework for best practice sustainable operations and stimulates continuous improvement. If operators are not prepared to come into the program within that framework (but just seeking profit), then it is just a waste of time’

(Stephen Pahl, pers. comm. 31/1/06).

So, the ‘internal’ benefits of the program to an operation (including the ‘educational’ aspect of the program mentioned previously) should be considered as the primary benefit to operations. At the same time, according to Stephen Pahl, (pers. Comm.. 31/1/06) the ‘external’ benefits of the program, the awareness and perception within the marketplace are important, and the EA has made major efforts to raise the profile and awareness of the EcoCertification brand.

**Current Status and Success of EcoCertification.**

Over the years, many questions have been asked of the sustainability of the NEAP/EcoCertification program, particularly in relation to the dependence on volunteer input, the level of fees and consumer buy-in (‘consumers’ as operators choosing to become certified, but also as tourists choosing to buy certified products). Changes to the program have generally been evolutionary, building on the experience of implementation through modification, rather than revolutionary, though each of the re-launched programs (NEAP II and EcoCertification) have introduced substantial changes. Each year, a report on progress has been presented at the Ecotourism Australia Annual General Meeting, which provides an opportunity for those outside the management committee to hear of the achievements of the program over the past year. The annual program report presented in November 2005 outlined a number of positive achievements (Charters, 2005a). These include:

**Growth**
Currently there are 225 EcoCertified operators with over 520 products and the program is growing consistently at 20% per annum (Figure 1)

Distribution

The program is a truly seamless national certification program and has strong growing representation across all States of Australia (Figure 2). (We will have to accept that there is growth across all states, Figure 2 actually highlights the challenge for EcoCertification of becoming more relevant and accepted outside Queensland.)

Impact

While ecotourism and nature based tourism make up about 25% of the tourism industry, and only about 6% of ecotourism operators hold EcoCertification, EcoCertified operators are having an extraordinary impact on the industry as indicated by their representation in the Australian Tourism Awards. For example, 75% of award winners in the ecotourism category and over 60% of award winners in the adventure tourism category are EcoCertified.

Acceptance

Acceptance of EcoCertification under the national Tourism Accreditation Australia program, allowing EcoCertified operators to also be certified under the national program and display the national green tick logo.

Inclusion of EcoCertification in the Australian Government’s ‘Accreditation Portal’ initiative, allowing applications to go online saving time and reducing costs for both administration of the program and operators, and providing an opportunity for regular alterations and updates to the program rather than having to wait for the three year review.

Partnerships with agencies such as that with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in Queensland and Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia which both allow EcoCertified operators to qualify for extended operating permits.

Verification
Assessment processes have improved becoming more efficient and the audit program has continued with 72 operators and 157 products being audited across Australia.

Engagement

Throughout the year 19 workshops have been held in different parts of Australia to assist operators with the application process. The exposure of EcoCertified products has also been increased by EA attending tourism trade events in Australia, Germany and Japan. (Charters, 2005a)

Figure 2. Growth of EcoCertification program and number of certified products and operators by state (from Charters, 2005a)

These listed achievements indicate an admirable performance by the program, particularly given its volunteer driven roots and need to be self-supporting from the beginning. The outcomes are perhaps particularly important for sustainability of the program with the ongoing expansion of numbers of operators and products despite the substantial increase in fees from late 2003.

Other possible measures of success of the program not discussed by Charters (2005a) include assessment of operator satisfaction or attrition numbers, monitoring of consumer recognition and of course financial performance of the program.

The operator experience and attrition

The three reports presenting operator views mentioned above (Fleming 1998; Enhance Management 2000a; EA 2002) raised enough issues of concern to suggest that some ongoing process of monitoring the
operator experience is needed. In NEAP II, a feedback form dealing with the application criteria and structure was included as part of the application document. As an additional component of the already long and complex application form, this was often not completed, though responses were considered in the program review process. Under EcoCertification the application document contains no survey, but an annual survey of operator members is conducted through the EA office. This survey has a wider focus than the NEAP II feedback, covering not only the program itself, but also its administration, efficiency, and delivery of service. While no outcomes are published, the responses have been collated, and will contribute to the upcoming review of the program in 2006.

Without publication of operator responses to these recent surveys, it is impossible for those outside the program to understand what information is being used in development or review of the program. Experience over many years of dealing directly with operators, and considering previous surveys does raise the question of operator satisfaction. Operator members regularly express dissatisfaction with the outcomes from the program, particularly in relation to direct economic benefit from membership. Some operators have questioned whether they will continue with NEAP/EcoCertification.

‘At this stage we receive no measurable benefit from being EAA Advanced Eco accredited. If the fees increase, it is doubtful we will continue. We support the concept and ethics but in the long run it must generate a financial return.’

‘We are considering pulling out of NEAP/EAA as we see little value while believing it a good idea.’

(Unpublished operator comments in responses to NEAP market survey, EA 2002).

Recognizing that many changes have been made to the program since these comments were made, and that other more positive views were expressed, the comments do raise an issue that has not been covered in any annual report for NEAP/EcoCertification – the rate of attrition. A searchable database of EcoCertified operators is available on the EA website (www.ecotourism.org.au). Searches of all operators were conducted in April 2004, and again in December 2005. While there may be problems with the database, (accuracy and currency) these two searches allow for a quick comparison of both growth and attrition of operators/products.
Table 4 indicates a considerable growth in the aggregate number of certified operators (39%) and products (48%) over little more than a year and a half. On 25 April 2004, the database contained records of 164 operators offering 338 products over the three product types. On 31 December 2005, this had increased to 226 operators and 501 products. By cross-checking the data-base records, these figures can be broken down into actual new operators and operators lost to the system. This shows an increase of 82 new operators (or exactly 50% increase on the number in April 2004), but a corresponding attrition of 20 operators (or 12% of the original number). While the growth rate is extraordinary, the attrition rate should be of some concern, and may reinforce the need for systematic monitoring of the operator experience including some kind of exit survey to understand the factors influencing attrition. Such an exit survey may also aid in developing a wider understanding of the industry response to the program, avoiding the bias inherent in gathering information from a sample that is not representative (as mentioned in the discussion of fees, above).

Table 4. Aggregate numbers of certified products and operators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product type</th>
<th>25/5/04 Operator</th>
<th>25/5/04 Product</th>
<th>31/12/05 Operator</th>
<th>31/12/05 Product</th>
<th>Net Increase Operator</th>
<th>Net Increase Product</th>
<th>New</th>
<th>Attrit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tour</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>41 (39%)</td>
<td>136 (50%)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomm.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6 (14%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attraction</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16 (107%)</td>
<td>23 (128%)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>62 (38%)</td>
<td>163 (48%)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Financial viability**

One of the great challenges for a certification program is to be affordable, yet viable. NEAP began by minimizing its operating costs, depending heavily on volunteer commitment to get a program functioning. The
maturing of the program has seen a move away from what was an unsustainable dependence on volunteers and low cost options, to a more professional and credible program, but clearly, this comes at a cost.

While the great achievements in growth of the program outlined above indicate a positive future, what of the financial sustainability of the program? The introduction of auditing under EcoCertification has clearly added considerably to the cost of managing the program, and expanding the scope of audits will further increase the cost. A direct budget allocation is made by EA to the auditing process each year, but the cost of auditing has been supplemented by contributions from Tourism Queensland and the South Australian Tourism Commission (Stephen Pahl, pers. comm. 31/1/06). EcoCertification is wholly owned by Ecotourism Australia, and separate budget details are not published. Annual financial details for the EA include income and expenditure items against EcoCertification, and on this basis, the program would seem to be functioning at a considerable profit, with income approximately double expenditure. But many costs, including some auditing costs, office management, communications and administration are not included in these items, but are integrated into other budget items. Despite this, the Chief Executive believes that the program is ‘most definitely paying for itself’.

Despite the constraint of a self-funding model, the program has gradually expanded and built a reputation amongst operators and government agencies in under a decade to get to the stage where it can provide certification of products including a professional auditing component anywhere in Australia. On this basis, the program would have to be considered a financial success. However, every decision made, every change introduced, offers new opportunity for improvement, but also potentially the seeds of failure if the stakeholders – operators, state agencies and ultimately tourists – disagree with the directions taken or the previously mentioned balance of characteristics such as bureaucracy, complexity, credibility and affordability tips in the wrong direction.

Some Questions and Challenges for EcoCertification
A question of market differentiation

The idea of market differentiation, which is so often promoted as a benefit of certification, is based on the expectation that only the best operators, those adopting the best practices, will achieve certification. Part of the attraction to these operators is that certification can assist them to differentiate themselves as genuine ‘eco’ operators from the ‘eco-cowboys’, the ‘greenwashing’ and the ‘ecotourism-lite’ (Honey and Stewart, 2002).

At the same time, Honey and Stewart (2002) argue that certification will help ecotourism to achieve its potential by providing a set of tools, standards and criteria to move from conceptualisation to codification (p.3), and that by charting a new direction, the principles and practices of ecotourism can infuse and ultimately transform the entire tourism industry (p.8). The reach and influence of EcoCertification across the industry via such aspects as expansion of the program membership and representation of certified operators in tourism awards has been previously referred to as a great achievement for the program. Partnerships with protected area agencies are resulting in larger numbers of operators seeking certification, and benefits to those protected area managers are maximized if all operators gain EcoCertification.

The notion of influencing sustainable practices across an entire industry is admirable, desirable. Yet the idea of transforming the social and environmental practices across the industry through the tool of certification introduces a fundamental contradiction. How can an operator gain a marketing benefit if all (or even a large proportion of) operators are certified?

One answer might be that we cannot have it both ways, that marketing benefits from product differentiation and selling certification as a preferred approach for licensing in protected areas are mutually exclusive. One implies that a relatively small number of operators are certified, the best operators, self-motivated to achieve excellence in sustainability performance. The other implies a move away from certification being a ‘voluntary’ system to some form of ‘regulation’ encouraging all operators to adopt improved practices.

The answer, of course, is that NEAP/EcoCertification does seek to have it both ways, with three different levels of certification with progressively more stringent requirements placed on each. However, for
competitive advantage to be maintained for higher levels of certification, it is crucial that the highest level of certification is rewarding the very highest level of performance and practice (recognizing the elite products), that the certification levels are recognizably different to consumers, and that progressively higher levels of certification are differentiated in the benefits available to them, such as gaining better access to certain promotional opportunities. On the first point, the question must be asked whether the highest level has become too easy with 58% of certified products achieving ‘Advanced EcoCertification’ level, 28% achieving ‘Ecotourism’ level and 14% certified at ‘Nature Tourism’ level (Charters, 2005b). (Should this be seen as a positive, that so many products have achieved the highest level of practice, or a negative, that the highest certification level available does not adequately differentiate the elite products? Could it be that the program is still largely attracting the elite products, the operators who are the ‘true believers’ of sustainability?)

On the second point, there must be adequate differentiation in the marketplace to promote the excellence achieved by operators certified at Advanced Ecotourism level above the minimum level achieved by some other operators. Based on promotional programs, consumer awareness of EcoCertification and the existing logos for the three levels of certification (Figure 2), questions have been raised regarding the recognisable differentiation benefit for operators with higher levels of certification. Seeing any one of these logos in isolation may tell the consumer that the product is certified, but not the level of achievement relative to other products/certification levels.

**Figure 2.** EcoCertification logos

On the third point regarding promotional benefits, EcoCertification Plus offers greater benefit to those who are willing to pay for it, rather than on a merit based system of certification level. The promotion of operators and products via the EcoCertification website lists all operators and products in the same way. The
only differentiation of certification level on the EcoCertification website is on the basis of the logo assigned to
the operator, which of course depends on viewers recognizing the difference between the logos, and the
implication of those differences.

The certification landscape

Within Australia, there is increasing coordination of the various state-based tourism business certification
schemes, with Tourism Accreditation Australia (TAA) licensing programs in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania,
Northern Territory and Western Australia under the National Tourism Accreditation Program label. A large
number of operators are certified in some states under these schemes, and enjoying the benefits of their
membership, such as discounted access to state marketing campaigns. EcoCertification has now also been
endorsed by TAA with its expansion to cover business management and ethics principles, suggesting that
rather than being a complementary program, EcoCertification is a direct competitor in the territory of existing
business certification schemes. At the same time, some mainstream tourism certification programs have
moved towards the addition of ‘green’ components to their packages. In late 2003, a Green Star rating
scheme for accommodation was launched by AAA Tourism, the national tourism body of Australian motoring
organisations. There is a danger that rather than seeing a rationalisation of certification, there will be a
proliferation of competing schemes, leading to a dilution of the market and confusion of customers (Honey
and Stewart 2002; Toth, 2002). Operators too must make a choice between schemes. Some may choose to
join more than one scheme, but many will consider the relative costs and benefits of different schemes and
select only one.

EcoCertification was initially viewed by some state based tourism business certification schemes as a
competitor. More recently the various organisations have worked with Ecotourism Australia to seek synergies
and beneficial outcomes. As the required content of the National Tourism Accreditation Program is contained
within Chapters 1 and 2 of the EcoCertification document, EcoCertified operators are deemed to have met the
requirements of state-based tourism business certification schemes, so can display the state-based
certification logo as well as the EcoCertification logo. In some states, Ecotourism Australia has negotiated for
EcoCertified operators to receive all the benefits of state-based tourism certification including discounts on
state marketing campaigns. This means that EcoCertified operators do not have to be members of the state-based scheme as well to gain these benefits. The cooperation has gone further to include the training of a small number of state tourism organisation employees in Environmental Management System auditing and their registration as professional auditors for the EcoCertification program, allowing for cost efficiencies in delivery of auditing EcoCertified products. Rather than functioning in competition, this cooperation between organisations and certification schemes has helped in the move towards a cohesive certification landscape across Australia that is efficient for operators and recognisable to consumers.

**Equity and accessibility**

Honey and Stewart (2002, p.22) identify two contradictory crosscurrents within the tourism industry: one towards the consolidation of big players into fewer, larger corporations, based mainly in the global North catering largely to the mass tourism market; and the other towards a proliferation and decentralization of businesses, many in host countries in the global South and based on the principles of ecotourism. Honey and Stewart (2002) go on to consider the debate over the ‘North-South’ divide, ‘whether tourism certification is simply another technique for strengthening the hand of powerful and largely foreign owned corporations at the expense of businesses, communities, and countries in the South or whether certification can be shaped into a tool for setting standards and criteria that promote and protect the interests and welfare of those in the South’ (p.23).

This debate has relevance to the situation of ecotourism certification in Australia. If we replace ‘North’ with large corporations, and ‘South’ with the small operations and local communities, then we can see the potential for the same issues to arise. In Australia, the ecotourism industry includes many small operators, but also a number of large corporations provide products that meet the requirements of NEAP/EcoCertification. Given the complex and demanding nature of the NEAP application process, consideration must be given to whether small operators are discriminated against by the process, and whether, as a result, larger companies are being strengthened by their capacity to achieve high level certification. This is not to say that small operators cannot, or do not, achieve Advanced Ecotourism certification. However, with the capacity of operators in mind, NEAP was originally designed to be affordable for all operators, practical for operators in
remote areas without access to higher education institutions and consultants, simple to complete with straightforward documentation and non-technical and inclusive (Charters, 2000). Given these realities and intentions, the difficulties faced by small operators need to be considered to ensure that those operators are not being excluded by the very nature of the certification process, but that their interests and welfare are being promoted and protected.

Questions have also been asked in this chapter about the equity of fee scales for EcoCertification and capacity of smaller operators to fund certification, as well as the potential inequities in benefits introduced by ‘EcoCertification Plus’. The move to an online application form will undoubtedly simplify and streamline the process which should make achieving certification simpler for those operators with access. It is also possible that some operators may not have the skill, the technology or the access to enable them to use this online environment, so hard copy applications will still need to be provided (again, leaving the process more difficult for those less able or in more isolated environments). With all these factors in mind, EcoCertification will need to remain vigilant to ensure that it does not become the preserve of the bigger, more affluent (more powerful?) operators, but that the profile of certified operators is a reasonable reflection of the broader ecotourism and nature tourism industry.

**Conclusion**

NEAP/EcoCertification is clearly a success story. It was the first national ecotourism certification program, and is often heralded as a successful model to build on and learn from. NEAP began as a low cost program, designed to be practical but achievable, affordable and accessible, and from the beginning was driven by volunteers. Ensuring credibility of the certification brand presents a range of problems and has required ongoing change to the program assessment and auditing. The administration and assessment of a program is always going to be a challenge to get right, as exemplified by the apparent contradiction between the ‘independence’ of the assessment process and efficiency in implementing criteria. Challenges must also be faced in moving from a small volunteer-driven program to a more ‘professional’ one. NEAP has always managed to remain essentially self-funded, quite an achievement in the world of certification. While external funds have been needed for special projects, including supporting development of the auditing program, the
basic operations of the program have been covered by operator registrations. As the program has expanded, the expense of its operation has increased, but so has the capacity to meet costs of program improvements such as the introduction of paid professional assessors and independent third-party auditors.

EcoCertification will continue to build partnerships to achieve better coverage in the market, and produce greater benefits to operators. Partnerships with state protected area management agencies are a good example, where the agencies, operators and the EcoCertification program can all benefit from a constructive relationship. But expansion of such partnerships will continue to attract operators with little previous knowledge of, or interest in, sustainability to seek EcoCertification. While exposing these operators to new ideas and providing incentives to improve practices, this will also create new challenges for the program.

NEAP/EcoCertification has continued to grow and expand. But it is relatively easy to count the numbers and think everything is going well. It is always more difficult to consider what we should really be measuring to monitor success: - who is missing out, or whether the program is really identifying and rewarding genuine quality in ecotourism and nature tourism.

The evolution of the program will continue. The online application form is due to be launched some time in 2006. The ongoing process of review continues, with the next version being developed through 2006. Further changes will be made in the move to continue to improve the program, to encourage continuous improvement in operator practices, to make the program more efficient, effective and accessible. Not all changes will work or be positive for all stakeholders, so it is important the program undertakes regular reviews, monitors various criteria of success including the operator experience, and is engaged with external stakeholders and opinion. Critical to this is the consideration of ‘negative’ criteria, such as attrition rates or exit surveys. The transparency of the program is also an issue to consider. Across of the community EcoCertification has many stakeholders with an interest in the directions that the program takes and how decisions are made. External questioning should be considered as a healthy aspect of ongoing development of the program, but for these questions to be relevant, they must be informed. Perhaps there is not only a need for EA to investigate the ‘negative’ aspects of the program, but also to be transparent and publish the outcomes of those investigations. Asking questions and facing challenges openly will be an important means
for EcoCertification to further its success, and to continue to provide a model from which other programs can learn.

The fundamental objective of promoting sustainable practice and quality in nature based and ecotourism must not be lost in the ongoing drive for accessibility, professionalism, credibility and efficiency in the program. Perhaps the Mt Everest of challenges for EcoCertification remains the building of consumer awareness, the recognition of the logo, and creating real market advantage to certified members.

References


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Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to my understanding of the NEAP/EcoCertification program, including many past and present staff and board members of Ecotourism Australia. For support, stimulating discussions and commitment to the goals of a successful and credible certification program, I am indebted to members of the NEAP Assessment Panel, particularly Stuart Toplis, Matt Whitting, Jenny Nichol and Sandra Taylor. My thanks go to Alice Crabtree for her comments on an earlier version of this paper drawn from years of experience in working with the NEAP and IES, and to the anonymous reviewers who provided valuable comments. I would also like to thank the CEO of Ecotourism Australia, Stephen Pahl, for his generosity with time and information in helping me understand some of the policy directions and the experience of implementing EcoCertification.