



Impact of Tourism Related Development on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica

*Certification of Sustainable Tourism and Climate Change: overviews within the
frame of the current economic crisis.*

FINAL REPORT

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For:

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Pacific Coast”*

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i. Acronyms

AYA	Acueductos y Alcantarillados
MINAET	Minister of Environment, Energy and Telecommunications
ICT	Costa Rican Tourism Board
CANATUR	National Chamber of Tourism
INBIO	National Institute of Biodiversity
ICE	Costa Rican Institute of Electricity
RACSA	National Supplier of Internet and Telecommunications Services (from Grupo ICE)
CNFL	Compañía Nacional de Fuerza y Luz (from ICE group)
EBF	Ecological Blue Flag
CST	Certification of Sustainable Tourism
NAC	National Accreditation Commission.
PROARCA	Regional environmental Program for Central America
INCAE	Central America Business Administration Institute
UICN	International Union for conservation of Nature

1. General Aspects

This consultancy is part of the study of *“The Impact of development associated to tourism along the Pacific coast of Costa Rica”*. Will obtain information about what CST -certified lodging enterprises located along the Pacific coast think in terms of CST criteria, benefits, improvement opportunities, application of CST to achieve their sustainability and marketing goals, motivations, driving forces, and the possibility to apply CST for coastal residential and vacation home developments.

Their approaches to implement actions to mitigate the CO2 emissions caused by their operation will also be considered as well as the impacts of the current economic depression.

2. Objectives

1. Obtain information from CST-certified lodging enterprises located along the Pacific coast in terms of the CST criteria, motivations, driving forces, and recommendations for the CST program.
2. Identify their initiatives to mitigate the CO2 emissions caused by their operation.
3. Inform the impacts of the current economic crisis in their businesses.
4. Identify management differences between CST, the 5 stars and Blue Flag Certification.
5. Inform what do ICT/CST officials think about different aspects of the Certification of Sustainable Tourism, 5 Stars Rating and the Blue Flag Beach Category

3. Methodology

From the form perspective this research will systematize information in four topics:

Certification of Sustainable Tourism, CST

Climate change

Other certification programs (Star rating, Blue Flag)

Current economic crisis

3.1. Sources

1. Phone, e-mail and personal interviews with 10 CST-certified lodging enterprises located along Pacific coast.
2. Interviews with ICT officials.

3.2. Interview Subjects

Table 1

Hotel/Instit	Location	CST Level	Stars	Interviewed	Position
Esquinas Lodge	South Pacific	3	3	Catalina Torres	General Manager
Lapa Rios	South Pacific	5	4	Millay Kogan	Sustainability Coordinator
Sugar Beach	North Pacific	2	3	Sarah Pfeiffer	Resident Manager
Villa Caletas	Mid Pacific	2	5	Mauricio Gutierrez	Resident Manager
Punta Islita	South GU	4	5	Eduardo Villafranca	CEO Grupo Islita
Si Como No	Mid Pacific	5	4	Jim Damalas	General Manager
Ocotal	North Pacific	3	4	Claudia Acevedo	Sales Manager
Villas Sol	North Pacific	3	4	Alvaro Lachner	Vice President

Hotel/Insttit	Location	CST Level	Stars	Interviewed	Position
Parador	Mid Pacific	4	4	Marco Soto	Sales & Marketing Director
BW Jaco Beach	Mid Pacific	4	4	Mario Barrantes	Public Relations Manager
ICT				Gina Guillen	Minister of Tourism Advisor - Direction of Sustainability ICT Macro process
CAN				Glenn Jampol	CNA Commission
AYA				Jesus Vega	Blue Flag Program

4. Executive Summary

Background

CST is a program that seeks to categorize and certify tourism companies according to the degree to which its operations comply with specific indicators of sustainability. CST was launched in 1997 and it currently provides certification services to hotels and tour operators. Four fundamental aspects are evaluated for hotels: physical-biological environment, infrastructure and services, external clients and socio-economical environment.¹ This study interviewed 10 CST Hoteliers from the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica and intended to measure performance of CST in terms of motivations and driving forces, but also as an effective tool to achieve hotel's social and environmental sustainability goals. The study links CST for hotels with the possibility to apply it to coastal residential or vacation home developments and takes the opportunity to also measure impacts of the current economic crises on hotel's occupation.

Motivations, Benefits and Drawbacks

Decision to apply CST was made due to commitment, conviction and consciousness reasons regarding the environment conservation, but also to obtain recognition of what they have been doing before CST and even since the beginning of their operations. Also visualized a marketing opportunity due to the growing travel consumer's demand on sustainable tourism certified services and products.

For the majority of hotels (60%), main market is United States and for half of this percentage (30%) Costa Rica is their second main market and an emerging market for other hotels.

More than a half (60%) of CST hotels said that the CST is very important to their marketing campaign and some of the main benefits are preferential treatment on ICT marketing efforts and international tourism trade shows, discounts up to 30% to participate in special events, growing demand on certified products and save energy in their operations due the best management practices for sustainable tourism implemented.

Some of the main drawbacks are high costs in terms of time but also investments in physical features, guests might not be willing to pay more to stay at a certified hotel. Costa Rican government does not offer assistance in tax reductions; this makes the CST certification process financially unattractive.

CST for coastal residential and vacation home developments

A majority of hotels (90%) said that CST or similar tool should be applied for coastal and vacation home developments.

70% thinks that CST should be mandatory for hotels, residential and vacation home developments. The remain 30% instead said that is better to provide tax credits, low interest loans and import exonerations that would help encouraging many more companies to participate. 100% of hotels also confirmed that CST should be adapted for new tourism projects beginning since their construction phase. However CST officials have not contemplated to make CST mandatory at least in the near future.

Climate Change

Hotels have made efforts such as support local reforestation projects, have submitted reports to become certified as C-Neutral, have made changes in their operation policies, all of them have waste collection centers, and ensure an appropriate waste management.

Economic Crisis

Collapsing credit has plunged the world economy into the deepest recession in more than Seventy Yearsⁱ and tourism is not the exception. Estimated average occupancy for 2009 will be of 54%, 10% less than 2008 and 14% less than 2007.

Hotels are trying to pick up their occupation through different special offers along the year and are making their best effort to maintain their operation. Small Hotels seems to have higher occupations, especially during 2009 high season.

Conclusions

CST or similar tool should be applied for coastal and vacation home developments as well as its phases of design and construction.ⁱⁱ Rainforest Alliance Best Managements Practices for Sustainable Tourism and a building certification such as LEED might be helpful for with these developments.ⁱⁱⁱ Will be a great support if the CST can regulate those projects with strict environmental and social criteria.^{iv}

All the same efforts hotels made to achieve CST, are efforts that contribute to the reduction of climate change negative impacts. It is recommended to inform hotels about climate change reduction mechanisms and guide them about contributions they have already done through their best management practices of their operations. Reductions in energy, waste and water consumption are concrete actions that contributes to the reduction of carbon footprint of the tourism operations; implementation of Ecological Blue Flag Program for

beaches, communities and mitigation are also efforts that help to reduce carbon footprint.

Creation of incentive plans might increase demand of hoteliers that want to apply to the CST. A CST hotel needs to be more appreciated by international tour operators and their retailers and should be number one priority in marketing and sales efforts.^v

Improve international marketing through international press releases, TV coverage's and support publicity campaigns, might address differentiation CST hotels are expecting.

Hoteliers believe that attitudes towards sustainability are strategic issues that will shape the future of their businesses and even though their guests do not appreciate their efforts, as they would expect to, this is something that seems to be changing in a meaningful way.

5. Part 1: Certification of Sustainable Tourism

5.1. Hotel's Characteristics

- ❖ Hotels surveyed are located along the Pacific Coast, from Papagayo Gulf to Mid Pacific Area (Jaco Beach and Manuel Antonio National Park), continuing to the South Pacific (Puerto Jimenez, Piedras Blanca's National Park)
- ❖ Hotels have been in the market between 13 and 39 years, none of the hotels surveyed have more than 130 rooms or less than 16 and the average length of stay is 3.26 nights.
- ❖ For more than a half (60%) of hotels surveyed, their main market is United States but for half of this percentage (30%) Costa Rica is their second main market.
- ❖ Costa Rica is an emerging market for 10% of hotels surveyed and 20% mentioned France, Russia and Israel as emerging markets.

5.2. Motivations

- ❖ Half of hotels surveyed applied CST due to their commitment, conviction and consciousness regarding the environment conservation. The other half said that their decision had been taken to complement and enhance what they have been practicing before CST and even since the beginning of their operations. Expectations to receive support from the Costa Rican

government were also present, especially recognition for their efforts and benefits in terms of promotion and publicity.

- ❖ 20% of hotels surveyed mentioned that besides their commitment with sustainability, also visualized a marketing opportunity due to the growing travel consumer's demand on sustainable tourism certified products but also because it was already a key issue to their main market's travel decision.

5.3. Changes in equipment, supplies, management practices in their operations and investment

- ❖ More than a half of CST Hotels (70%) invested in a number of changes in structure and equipment that met CST criteria. 30% made a number of changes over the years, but because since its design and construction, the owners worked diligently to incorporate the concept of sustainability into its operation. The most meaningful changes are solar panels, non-chlorine pool cleaning systems, waste collection centers, grey water treatment plants, wildlife refuges, and energy saving technologies in different areas, including investments in highly energy-efficient air conditioning systems and kitchen equipments. Economic investments vary from US\$120,000 up to US\$2,000,000
- ❖ 20% of surveyed hotels had to invest in minor changes such as energy saving devices for freezers and florescent light bulbs. Economic investments vary from US\$200 to US\$700
- ❖ All CST hotels invested huge amount of time and effort adjusting their standard operating procedures, compiling the right documentation, records, registers and all back up needed to meet CST criteria. Most of them had to design their supply's manual required by the CST. None of them could estimate their economic investment in this training effort.
- ❖ All of them (100%) said that made a great deal of effort to train staff of all areas to ensure the understanding of the CST process and its implementation.
- ❖ 40% mentioned that made changes in garden, housekeeping, laundry cleaners, maintenance, and fumigation products.

5.4. Criteria

- ❖ It is very important that the ICT revise and update CST criteria: lack of social and environmental balance, adapt criteria for those hotels located in places where existence of potable water is very low and recognize huge efforts hoteliers located in difficult areas make. Do not punish hotels located in areas where humidity is high and receives 6000mm of rain per year,

therefore do not need to collect water to irrigate the gardens. It is very important to revise and update CST criteria according to 60% of hotels surveyed.

- ❖ 40% said that the CST contain the right criteria to help ensure the environmental and social sustainability for coastal accommodations but can be improved and make standards stricter and more rigorous.

5.5. Benefits and drawbacks

- ❖ Main benefits ICT provides to the CST certified hotels, according to the surveys are:

- Preferential treatment on ICT promotions and trade shows along with invitations to activities with other members.
- Due to the ICT marketing actions, demand for certified hotels will grow.
- CST has been very good developing interest in sustainable development within tourism sector, specifically hoteliers sector.
- Energy saving in their operations.
- Support standardization and document processes.
- More presence of the CST brand at Expotur.
- Discounts in seminars and congresses organized by Acoprot, Canatur, CCH. For CST hotels discounts are up to 30%.

- ❖ Main drawbacks CST hotels found are:

- One of the main drawbacks to the CST certification process is the cost in terms of time but also investments in physical features.
- The fact that, unfortunately, many guests will not be willing to pay more to stay at a certified hotel
- The fact that the Costa Rican government does not offer assistance in tax reductions, this makes the CST certification process financially unattractive.
- Not enough personnel, including inspectors and new manager for CST.
- “Bureaucracy is an obstacle as it has hindered all of us in the past but improving gradually...I hope”

- Suppliers of green products are more expensive and tourism sector is living difficult times.

5.6. Recommendations

- ❖ Work on incentive plans, package of benefits and be able to honor them, otherwise it would be very disappointing for hotels sector.
- ❖ Work together with other Ministers such as education, health and environment in order to revise the CST program and make improvements with the inputs of other institutions that are totally linked with sustainable development.
- ❖ Encourage creation of local development committees and promote the creation of micro-enterprises supply chains, generating entrepreneurship at local communities.
- ❖ That they run the operations on a more professional level when it comes to responding to member requests and that the public needs even more access to knowledge of CST.
- ❖ That the ICT make CST hotels their number one priority in sales, even if it means a smaller commission. A CST hotel is not “cheap to be green” and that needs to be more appreciated by international tour operators and their retailers plus the general public in choosing properties or operators for that matter.
- ❖ To improve social criteria
- ❖ To regulate residential tourism projects under construction in Guanacaste area. It will be a great support if the CST can regulate them with strict environmental and social criteria.
- ❖ Improve audits on site and avoid waiting long periods of time for inspections. Enlarge their technical team.
- ❖ Improve CST web page and actualize information of hotels.
- ❖ Improve International presence and promote national publicity campaigns that differentiate CST Hotels from others.
- ❖ International Exposure for CST Hotels, International Press Releases, International TV coverage.
- ❖ Hotels should achieve a minimum of 3 levels to obtain CST. Hotels that achieve less than three levels should not receive a CST, this way hotels and Tour Operators will commit to achieve at least a 3rd level to obtain the CST.

- ❖ Reports about specific reductions in energy, waste and water consumption. Other certifications, such as LEED Certification for Existing Buildings and Operation for example, award their participants for demonstrating reductions ranging from 10-75%. Implementing such a strategy would assure that tour operators or hotels are not only measuring their usage and planning for reductions, but actually working to achieve tangible results as well.
- ❖ The use of sustainable linens and fabrics. Awarding hotel operators for purchasing products made from organically grown cotton, or alternative sources such as bamboo, would certainly contribute to minimizing the negative environmental impacts associated with these products.
- ❖ Promotion of sustainable transportation options for both guests and hotel operations. The carbon emissions caused by tourism operators and their guests, contributes significantly to global warming. Flights in and out of the country, as well as the transportation of employees, guests and goods both on and off property, are just a few examples in which a hotel or tourism operators' transportation policies can negatively affect their surrounding environment and community. Encouraging carpooling among employees, using biodiesel in hotel vehicles and offering carbon-offset opportunities to guests, for example, are just a few options for how a hotel or tourism operator could work to incorporate these standards into its operation.
- ❖ Specifying and defining locality. While the CST does ask its participants to hire workers and purchase goods (including furniture, materials and agriculture produce) from the local community, nowhere in its questionnaire does it define "local community" (how local the products, goods or services need to be), nor does it specify a particular percentage of the products, goods or services that the hotel needs to own in order to achieve this criteria. The specificity of locality, as well as the number of goods and services that meet this criteria, can have a significant environmental and socio-economic impact, affecting the amount of emissions caused by transportation of goods or services, support to local communities and changes in the surrounding biodiversity.
- ❖ Inclusion of more certified products. Currently, the CST only awards hotels for the use of "certified organic produce". However, a number of internationally recognized certification programs, including Fair Trade certification (which assures that producers are paid a fair, livable wage for their work), Marine Stewardship Council certification (which works to certify sustainable fishing practices), Forest Stewardship Council (which works to certify sustainable lumber and paper products), Green Seal certification (which works to certify biodegradable and environmentally safe cleaning supplies) and Energy Star certification (which works to certify machinery and

appliances for reductions in energy usage) are all options that should be included in future CST evaluation.

- ❖ CST should coordinate more activities in Guanacaste, meetings & support workshops are always in San Jose. It is difficult for a hotel with a small staff to attend.

5.7. Marketing

- ❖ More than a half (60%) of CST hotels said that the CST is very important to their marketing campaigns.
- ❖ 20% said that the CST is a great tool to achieve their sustainability goals but is not important in their marketing Campaigns. They are well known for its vision and mission within the sustainable tourism development frame. The other 20% said that CST is not relevant in their marketing campaigns. They are beach resorts that commercialize its products through big chains in the US market and Canada. Their main markets are Costa Rica and United States and their customers are not interested in CST as a valuable program, they do not pay attention that there is a CST.

5.8. Few Coastal Hotels Certified with CST

- ❖ Surveys show that 30% of hotels said that it might be because they do not see any financial benefit, lack of incentives.
- ❖ 40% thinks that it is because of a huge amount of work and investment and do not see it an added value to their businesses.
- ❖ 30% said that it is lack of cautiousness, conviction and vision.

5.9. CST or a similar tool for coastal residential and vacation home developments

- ❖ A majority of hotels (90%) said that CST or similar tool should be applied for coastal and vacation home developments. Rainforest Alliance Best Managements Practices for Sustainable Tourism and a building certification such as LEED would be extremely helpful with this market.

5.10. CST: Mandatory?

- ❖ 70% thinks that CST should be mandatory for hotels, residential and vacation home developments. 30% do not agree and instead said that is better to provide tax credits, low interest loans and import exonerations that would help encouraging many more companies to participate. 100% of

hotels also confirmed that CST should be adapted for new tourism projects beginning since their construction phase.

6. Part 2: Climate Change

Hotels have made efforts such as support local reforestation projects, have submitted reports to become certified as C-Neutral, have made changes in their transportation policies, all of them have a waste collection center, that as all said, ensure the right waste management.

- ❖ All the same efforts hotels made to achieve CST, are efforts that contribute to the reduction of climate change negative impacts.
- ❖ Hotels make some suggestions to the CST criteria such as to include measures to be taken to protect facilities against increasingly severe storms.
- ❖ Another suggestion is that the CST allows the negotiation of carbon credits in the market.
- ❖ More emphasis on reforestation programs and proper selection of indigenous landscaping to proper building insulation.

7. Part 3: Other Certification Programs

1. 50% of hotels said that there are overlaps between the two programs that should be revised. 20% mentioned that the program needs an update. 10% mentioned that the stars program has international recognition, CST is not internationally recognized, and therefore the quantity of leaves loses relevance.
2. 40% of the hotels have the Blue Flag Program in the Beach Category and 2 of them are Blue Flag but in different categories: Communities and Mitigation.
3. The ones that are involved said that Blue Flag is a very valuable program.

8. Part 4: Current Economic Crisis (based on 9 CST hotels)

- ❖ January 2007
 - Five hotels show occupancy percentages above 80%. (Figure 1)
 - Lowest occupancy: 54%
 - Highest occupancy: 98%
- ❖ January 2008
 - Four hotels show occupancy percentages above 80%. (Figure 2)
 - Lowest Occupancy: 44%
 - Highest Occupancy: 99%
- ❖ January 2009
 - Two hotels exceeded 80% of occupancy. (Figure 3)
 - Lowest Occupancy: 64%
 - Highest Occupancy: 97%
- ❖ March 2007
 - Five hotels show occupancy percentages above 80%. (Figure 1)
 - Lowest occupancy: 53%
 - Highest occupancy: 94%
- ❖ March 2008
 - Five hotels show occupancy percentages above 80%. (Figure 2)
 - Lowest Occupancy: 49%
 - Highest Occupancy: 99%
- ❖ March 2009
 - One hotel exceeded 80% of occupancy. (Figure 3)
 - Lowest Occupancy: 50%
 - Highest Occupancy: 92%
- ❖ October 2007

- Seasonality of tourism in Costa Rica has shown that October is probably the lowest month of the year in terms of arrivals. (Figure 1)
- Lowest occupancy: 34%
- Highest occupancy: 48%
- ❖ October 2008 (Figure 2)
 - Lowest Occupancy: 26%
 - Highest Occupancy: 40%
- ❖ October 2009 (Figure 3)
 - Lowest Occupancy: 4%
 - Highest Occupancy: 45%
- ❖ December 2007
 - Two hotels show occupancies above 80%
 - Lowest occupancy: 55%
 - Highest occupancy: 85%
- ❖ December 2008
 - None of the hotels had a occupation above 80%
 - Lowest Occupancy: 55%
 - Highest Occupancy: 78%
- ❖ December 2009
 - Lowest Occupancy: 28%
 - Highest Occupancy: 75%
- ❖ Figures 1, 2 and 3 show occupancy per hotel. Hotel number 4 does not have information available for the months of January, March and December. Hotels 2 and 3 will be closed during October 2009.

Figure 1: Occupancy per month, 2007.

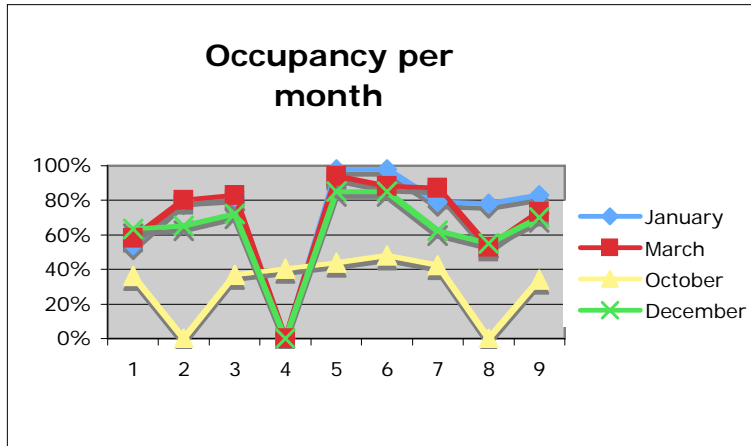


Figure 2: Occupancy per month, 2008

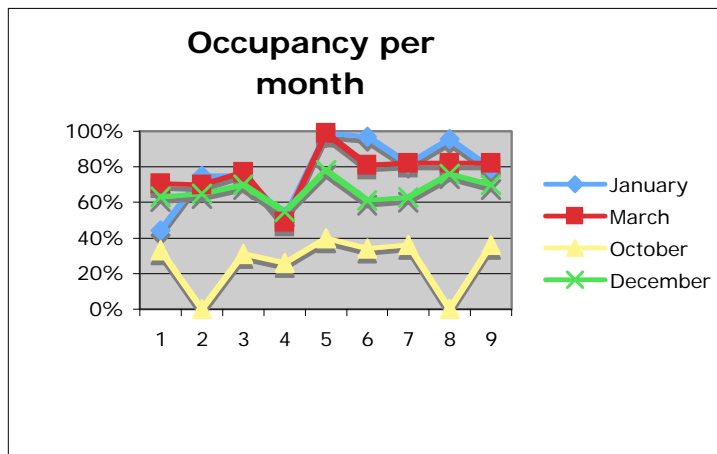
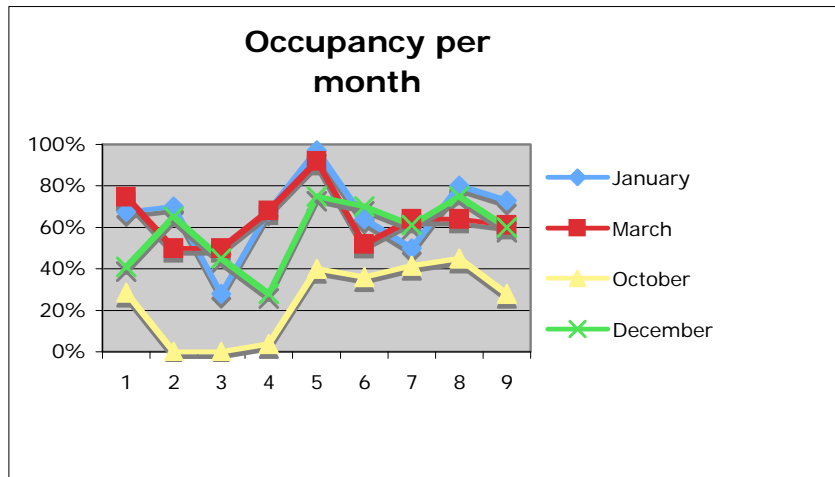


Figure 3: Occupancy per month, 2009



❖ The following chart shows the average occupancy for the months of January, March, October and December since 2007 until December 2009. In January 2009, occupancy had a decrease of 16% compared to 2007, March had a decrease of 13%, October estimations show that will be a decrease of 8% and December shows an estimation decrease of %14 compared to 2007.

Table 2

Hotels average occupancy based on 9 CST hotels
2007,2008,2009

<i>Year</i>	<i>January</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>October</i>	<i>December</i>	<i>Ann Avg</i>
2007	82%	77%	40%	70%	68%
2008	78%	77%	30%	67%	64%
2009	66%	64%	32% (estimated)	58% (estimated)	54% (estimated)

❖ Small Hotels seems to have higher occupations, especially during 2009 high season, however 80% of hotels surveyed answered that there are no differences in occupancy between small-scale boutique hotels and large coastal resorts.

9. Part 5: Additional research elements: CST, 5 Star Rating and Blue Flag certification programs management

9.1. Certification of Sustainable Tourism Program for Hotels (CST)

CST is a program that seeks to categorize and certify tourism companies according to the degree to which its operations comply with specific indicators of sustainability. CST was launched in 1997 and it currently provides certification services to hotels and tour operators. Four fundamental aspects are evaluated for hotels: physical-biological environment, infrastructure and services, external clients and socio-economical environment.^{vi}

The lowest score in any of the above-mentioned categories is the final score achieved. It is expected that this policy will encourage hotels and tour operators to advance towards the model of sustainability by giving the same degree of consideration and importance to each of the four areas evaluated. This is a program developed by the ICT and governed by the ICT and supported by the National Commission of Accreditation (CNA) composed by professionals from the following institutions: MINAET, University of Costa Rica, National Chamber of Tourism (CANATUR) National Institute of Biodiversity (INBIO), Central America Business Administration Institute (INCAE), International Union for conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Regional environmental Program for Central America (PROARCA).

According to a representative from the CNA, making CST mandatory will not happen in the near future due to the intricacies and bureaucracy. There are new limits for coastal constructions, one that will be going into effect in 2010, but its extent is still unknown.

It is expected that most hotels will participate but those that do not, might feel obligated to due to the changing demand profiles in their travel decision regarding certificated products and services. This means that they might prefer a CST certified tour operator and hotel rather than others. (Jampol, 2009)

Gina Guillen, Costa Rica Minister of Tourism Advisor, also mentioned “...*the biggest CST weight resides in its voluntarism, make it mandatory could damage its most basic essence...*”

According to the Costa Rica Tourism Board, CST should not apply to coastal residential and vacation home developments since this is not a part of the CST main goals. For now it will only apply for hotels and Tour Operators.

Inspections

ICT has a technical team of 5 CST evaluators, regular employees of the ICT. There are 20 external evaluators that the CST trained but have not received yet their CST certification that allows them to function as official evaluators.

CST Guidelines during design and construction phases

If there is an Environmental Impact Study done (EIA) it will require that the developer hire an Environmental Regent to oversee all the areas of coverage during the construction are complied with.

Apply CST guidelines during construction and design phase “might require some new rules, but I doubt seriously that the CST will enter into that realm anytime soon based on the same reasons mentioned above” (Jampol, 2009)

The other pertinent infrastructure to allow for a high CST ranking, should be added voluntarily by the developer if they plan on participating in the CST later, this makes more financial sense.

To create a certification program for residential housing complexes is something has not been discussed in the CNA and it does not appear to be something that will be contemplated soon, as the next step for the CST will be with Transportation: airplanes, car rentals, buses and other tourism transportation systems.

9.2. The five star rating

The five star rating is a global system used to determine the quality of the hotel: its use of quality furniture and adornments, curtains instead of blinds, room service, turn down service, parking facilities, concierge etc. In Costa Rica, it has less impact or importance than in most other countries, as Costa Rica's attraction is enmeshed in adventure, nature and biodiversity. Thus is highly probable that the CST could ultimately have more importance for a tourism company than the traditional star system.

The five star rating is not mandatory, and it is not required to get a license to operate, however, if hotels want to apply to the CST program, can only do it if they have the “touristy declaratory”. This is the act by which the Costa Rica Tourist Board Management declares a company or activity as tourism related company, after complying with technical, economic and legal requirements as per the Manual of regulations for tourism companies and activities^{vii} Tourist declaratory is given by the ICT. To obtain the Touristy Declaratory, hotels must present a letter to the Costa Rica Tourism Board asking the evaluation according the hotel's inspection guide of the ICT (5 Stars Rating) and a minimum of one star category is required.

Inspections

ICT has a technical team of 5 evaluators; Javier Cordero is the Project Analyst.

9.3. Ecological Blue Flag Program

The Ecological Blue Flag program is an annual recognition awarded to coastal and non-coastal communities or educational institutions that voluntarily make an effort achieve environmental excellence by adopting practices to meet strict health and sanitation standards. This program is an adaptation of a European program began in France and Spain in 1985 and is managed here by the Water and Sewer Institute (Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados, AYA) since 1995.

Main goal of the program is to seek and promote local communities organization in order to promote a balance between the protections of the natural resources, seek of better hygienic- sanitary conditions and the improvement of the Costa Ricans public health.

In Costa Rica there are six Ecological Blue Flag Categories: Beaches^{viii}, Communities^{ix}, Educational Centers^x, Protected Natural Spaces^{xi}, Hydrological Micro Watersheds^{xii}, Actions to face Climate Change^{xiii}

The Blue Flag program rates beaches with the following criteria:^{xiv}

- ❖ Quality of the seawater (35%)
- ❖ Quality of the water for human consumption (15%)
- ❖ The cleanliness of the beach. (30%)
 - Inorganic waste (10%)
 - Domestic grey waters (15%)
 - Industrial grey waters (5%)
- ❖ Environmental education. (10%)
- ❖ Administration and security. (10%)

One to five stars are awarded depending on the level of fulfillment but the minimum score to obtain the award is 90%. Requirements are as follows:

Those beaches whose score is from 90% to 100%, obtain 1 star.

The beach whose score is 100% but besides has strong waves signage, dangerous animals warning signs, monitoring & lifeguards during weekends and high season, obtain 2 stars.

Two stars plus showers and restrooms and maps to identify special areas and tourism services, obtain 3 stars.

Three stars besides permanent monitoring & life guards, an emergency local committee and a Regulation Plan approved and published at La Gaceta newspaper, obtain 4 stars.

4 Stars, special spaces for handicap vehicles, special ramps or synthetic carpets for beach access, tourism cops and human consumption water supply with an AyA Sanitary Quality Program, obtain 5 stars.

Inspections

AYA has a technical team of 4 evaluators; but the ICT supports beach category evaluations on site with 4 members of the Sustainability Department. The Inter-institutional Commission comprised of AYA, MINAET, ICT, CANATUR, Health Minister, ICE Group (Racsa, ICE, Fuerza y Luz), Public Education Minister and Red Costarricense de Reservas Naturales (Natural Reserves Association) makes final decisions.

10. References

Official Documents

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11. Endnotes

ⁱ Economist Intelligence Unit: Manning the Barricades, 2009

ⁱⁱ Interview Subjects

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview Subjects

^{iv} Interview Subjects

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^{vi} Certification of Sustainable Tourism. Costa Rica Tourist Board, 2009

^{vii} Regulations for Tourism Companies and Activities. Executive Decree No. 25226-MEIC-TUR, 1996

^{viii} Executive Decree No 31610-S-MINAE-TUR, 2004.

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^{xi} Executive Decree No 33604-MINAE, 2007.

^{xii} Executive Decree No 34777-MINAE-S-MEP, 2008.

^{xiii} Executive Decree No 34548-MINAE, 2008.

^{xiv} Ecological Blue Flag Program. Instituto de Acueductos y Alcantarillados, 2008