Behind the front desk at Lapas Rios—a 1,000-acre private rainforest reserve in Costa Rica’s Osa Peninsula where guests take bird walks, night hikes, and boat trips to a botanical garden—there hangs a plaque that reads “Sustainable Tourism” in both English and Spanish. Below this the plaque bears four white leaves, indicating that the lodge is one of the top-rated hotels under the Costa Rican government’s Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program. As General Manager Andrea Bonilla explains in her welcome speech, Lapa Rios’ owners Karen and John Lewis built the lodge with the aim of supporting conservation and the local community through, for instance, putting the land they bought under protection, using low impact designs and technologies, hiring and training local people, and helping to build and support a community primary school.¹

On the other side of the globe, a high-speed catamaran operated by Quicksilver in Port Douglas, Australia, carries up to 400 tourists out to a section of the Outer Barrier Reef, where it moors at the company’s large permanent diving platform. On board are some
dozen certified dive instructors and marine biologists who give lessons on the ecology and biology of the reef and recite the do's and don'ts of diving near coral. Some passengers sign up for scenic helicopter rides over the reef, while others choose to stay on board and view the reef from an enclosed semi-submersible tank connected to the catamaran's hull. In the glossy brochure that tourists are handed when they queue to get on board, there is a small logo that reads “ECO Tourism Advance Accreditation.” Quicksilver has been named Australia’s best tour operator and, as the ECO logo indicates, has received the highest rating under Australia’s internationally respected tourism certification scheme, NEAP (Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program). General Manager Max Shepherd tells guests that his company is committed to conservation of the reef—a World Heritage Site—as exemplified by their efforts to educate visitors, generate revenue (each passenger pays an Australian $4 environmental management charge), and provide marine biologists and scientific equipment to help monitor the reef.²

Lapa Rios is a picture postcard of eco-tourism—small scale, low impact, low key—while Quicksilver’s catamaran, with its 72-foot hull, triple decks, and spacious air-conditioned salon, bar, and restaurant, borders on mass tourism. Lapa Rios accommodates a maximum of 32 guests at a time and averages 7,600 visitors per year. Quicksilver's boats carry a million visitors a year to the Great Barrier Reef. But despite their differences, these two businesses share much in common. Their similarities are summed up in the eco-logos they each have earned.

Costa Rica's CST and Australia's NEAP are two of the best-known “green” certification programs, designed to measure sustainability within the tourism industry (see the boxes on page 11 and 12). Certification is defined as a procedure that assesses, audits, and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process, or service meets specific standards.³ It awards a marketable logo to those that meet or exceed baseline standards. Increasingly, companies like Lapa Rios and Quicksilver are seeing voluntary certification programs as a way to help ensure they are following the best practices in the industry, give them market advantage with consumers, and raise standards within the industry.

**Complexities of the Tourism Industry**

Travel and tourism is widely estimated to be the world’s largest industry,⁴ employing directly and indirectly almost 200 million people.⁵ This amounts to 11 percent or one in twelve jobs globally, 10.2 percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product, and 11.2 percent of global exports.⁶ If tourism were a country, it would have the world’s second-largest economy, surpassed only by the United States.⁷

Unlike other green and socially responsible certification programs for a single product—wood, bananas, coffee, cut flowers, aquarium fish—where the chain of custody can be fairly easily established from the point of origin to wholesalers, retailers, and the consumer, tourism is found in virtually every country, is multifaceted and non-linear, and involves a wide variety of both services and products. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), tourism-related businesses include

- travel: travel agents, tour operators, airlines, car rental companies, buses, railways, and taxis;
- accommodation, catering, and retail establishments: hotels, guesthouses, hostels, camping sites, cafés and restaurants, shops (clothing, souvenir, and
handicraft, for example);
- leisure and entertainment: theaters, museums, theme parks, cinemas, and spectator sports; and
- sports and recreation: athletic centers, diving clubs, chartered transport, safaris and other guided visits.\(^8\)

Before the development of green eco-labels, there were other tourism certification programs in the United States, Canada, and Europe designed to measure professional and business quality, service, and safety standards. For instance, by the early 1990s, there were some dozen programs in the United States that certified tourism professions. The oldest, the Certified Travel Counselor (CTC), was introduced in 1965 by the Institute of Certified Travel Agents as a voluntary program to rate and recognize the competence of individual travel agents.

Much older than professional certification programs are those that are linked to the growth of automobile travel and family vacations, which rate quality, price, and service of accommodations along major roadways. Beginning in 1900, the French

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**Certificate for Sustainable Tourism (CST)**

**Geographic scope:** Costa Rica. CST has been officially adopted but not yet implemented in the other Central American countries and is being used as a model for other countries in South America.

**Institution(s):** Created and run by Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT), with INCAE, a business school connected with Harvard University.


**Funding source(s):** Government’s tourism ministry, ICT. There are discussions of how to make it self-supporting.

**Sectors covered:** Accommodations: hotels and lodges. Criteria for tour operators are being test-piloted, and eventually the program will cover restaurants, transportation, and other sectors of the tourism industry. CST also works closely with Blue Flag to certify beaches in Costa Rica.

**Type of industry:** Billed as sustainable tourism, but covers all three types: tourism, sustainable tourism, and eco-tourism. A new set of criteria for eco-tourism businesses is being developed.

**Criteria:** Primarily performance-based but also has ISO-like environmental management system criteria for assessing the physical plant. The criteria consists of a checklist in 152 “yes/no” questions in four general categories:
- biological and physical surroundings (including questions about emissions and waste, policies and programs, green zones, and protection of flora and fauna);
- physical plant (including, for instance, management policies, water and energy consumption, waste management, and staff training);
- customers (including guest facilities and instructions, management of groups, and feedback); and
- social-economic environment (including direct and indirect economic benefits, contributions to cultural development and health, and security).

Each question is weighted on a scale of one to three, with three most important. A formula is used to calculate the final score in each of the four general areas. Then the lowest final score received for any of these four categories becomes the hotel’s overall sustainability category. This unusual and seemingly harsh scoring system is designed to encourage improvement.

**Auditing:** Currently, a team of inspectors (auditors) with various professional specialties work for CST. They do an initial site visit to explain the CST program, give managers a manual containing evaluation guidelines, and go over the questionnaire. Then inspectors return a month or two later for a formal, written assessment, putting “yes” or “no” beside each of criteria. (Inspectors check the hotel and visit the community but do not interview guests.) After the on-site evaluation, hotels are given a list of recommendations and 15 days to fix various problems. Auditors may go back to see if corrections were made. They submit a written evaluation to the National Accreditation Board.

There is also an on-line self-evaluation so hotels can assess where improvements are needed. The inspection team’s survey results are posted on the web. Hotels must show information such as environmental management systems to inspectors, but if a hotel considers this information proprietary, it is not posted on the web. Surveillance audits are supposed to be redone every six months to a year, but there is a large backlog of hotels waiting to be audited.

CST wants to switch to use of independent, third-party auditors. This outsourcing of site visits and auditing to government-authorized private companies and NGOs will eliminate any appearance of conflict of interest: At present CST inspectors consult and train hotel staff and then do the on-site inspections and make recommendations to Accreditation Board.

**Awards:** National Accreditation Board—a voluntary, multidisciplinary committee headed by the Minister of Tourism and composed of representatives from government, NGOs, scientific organizations, tourism industry, and universities—reviews all applicants and determines the level of award on a scale of zero to five. (Those scoring “zero” are not certified.) The board holds the CST copyright and makes final decisions about modifications and additions to the system and accreditation of auditors.

**Levels:** Five levels of certification, designed to encourage improvement.

**Logos:** Plaque with one to five leaves.

**Fees:** First round has been free, financed by the Tourism Ministry in order to attract broad participation. In the future, companies will be charged both a flat fee and an additional amount based on size of the hotel, but exact amounts are not yet determined.

**Certified companies and products:** 63 certified hotels by May 2003. None have yet received level five rating (perfect score), although one hotel is close; only five received level four. About 10 percent of applicants have failed, having received a zero rating. By mid-2000, 171 of the estimated 400 hotels in Costa Rica suitable for certification had signed up to be certified, but bureaucratic difficulties have slowed site visits.

**Marketing and promotion:** The main promotional tool is the CST web site, which is financed by USAID. CST is promoted as part of government’s general international tourism marketing. Most accommodations have their own web sites where they post their CST eco-label. However, CST officials say marketing remains a “huge problem.”

**Web site:** www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr
Like these tourists from Gunn’s Camp, a safari lodge adjacent to the Marenzi Wildlife Preserve in Botswana’s Okavango Delta, a segment of the traveling public has become disillusioned with mass tourism, seeking instead less crowded, pristine natural areas.

**Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP)**

**Geographic scope:** Australia.

**Institution(s):** Owned and run by Ecotourism Australia (EA), which has established the NEAP Management Committee to provide policy and management support.

**Date of initiation:** Planning began in 1993, NEAP I launched a two-tiered system (Ecotourism and Advanced Ecotourism) in 1996, and its first products were certified in 1997. In 2001, NEAP II was launched, including revised criteria and an additional Nature Tourism category; a separate EcoGuide certification program was also launched. In 2002, NEAP and Green Globe launched an international ecotourism standard based largely on NEAP’s criteria. NEAP III will be launched at the Ecotourism Australia National Conference in South Australia, on 10–14 November.

**Funding sources:** Developed with modest government grants (Office of National Tourism (ONT) and Tourism Queensland), plus voluntary services offered by staff and its governing panel and fees charged to businesses applying for certification. Total cost of development is estimated at U.S. $400,000. Currently self-funding through fees. One-off special grants have supplemented EA’s ability to review NEAP and to undertake improved levels of auditing.

**Sectors covered:** NEAP certifies products—accommodations, tours, and attractions—not entire businesses. (It certifies, for instance, individual hotels, not the overall chain, or individual tours, not the tour company.) The EcoGuide certifies nature and ecolour guides. Green Globe/NEAP certifies ecotourism products outside Australia, mainly in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Type of industry:** Originally only ecotourism, Now includes sustainable tourism in its “Nature” level.

**Criteria:** Largely performance-based yes/no and descriptive questions in eight areas:
- natural area focus;
- interpretation;
- environmental sustainability;
- contribution to conservation;
- work with local communities;
- cultural component;
- customer satisfaction; and
- responsible marketing.

To qualify for Nature Tourism and Ecotourism levels, all “core” criteria, specific to whether products are nature-based (only) or are ecotourism-oriented (which focuses on experiencing and interpreting natural areas) must be met. Recognition of additional criteria, in “bonus” and “innovative best practice” categories, are used in awarding the Advanced Ecotourism level.

**Auditing:** A trained assessor is assigned to review and score each written application and contact two independent references and, if necessary, the operator for clarification. Customer feedback may also be solicited. The assessment process usually takes two months to complete. On-site and additional desktop verification of product is undertaken by randomly selecting or in some cases targeting particular categories of nature/ecotourism products. Lack of sufficient funding has prevented systematic on-site inspections.

**Awarding Certification:** The assessor’s report is considered at the monthly meeting of the full assessment panel, which is chaired by someone who is independent of Ecotourism Australia. This committee decides whether certification should be awarded and at what level.

**Levels:** Three categories: Nature Tourism, Ecotourism, and Advanced Ecotourism.

**Logo(s):** Says “Eco Certified” and has a check mark and the level of certification.

**Fees:** Application fee of $85 and $258, depending on the annual business turnover, and an annual fee ranging between $53 and $398.

**Certified companies and products:** More than 350 accommodations, tours, and attractions throughout Australia, with more than 50 percent in Queensland and, in the EcoGuide Program, more than 120 individual guides.

**Marketing and promotion:** Tourism promotion guides, such as the Automobile Association and the Queensland Tourism Board, provide special listings and recognition of NEAP certified products. Australian government has produced an in-flight video on NEAP for Qantas Airlines and has financed several short commercials about NEAP. Ecotourism Australia houses information on NEAP, and there is an on-line listing of all certified products. Significant partnerships have been achieved to co-promote NEAP with the Australian Tourist Commission and state tourism organizations.

**Website:** www.ecotourism.org.au
tire company Michelin published its first guidebook rating hotels and restaurants. Shortly afterward, the American Automobile Association (AAA), made up of U.S. automobile clubs, also began producing motorist handbooks that used a series of stars to rate the quality and cost of accommodations and restaurants located along highways. Gradually the five-star quality and safety-rating system for accommodations spread around the world, although then, as now, the criteria varied from country to country. Today, in Europe, Costa Rica, Australia, and elsewhere, these five-star certification programs often co-exist with newer green certification programs.

As engineer and consultant Robert Toth states, tourist certification programs can be described as a three-legged stool. One leg measures and rates health, hygiene, and safety; a second, quality, service, and price; and a third, sustainability. According to Toth, government generally regulates health and safety standards and most tourists take them for granted (or as with the current SARS virus, government warnings dramatically affect travel and the travel industry). Certification programs either include compliance with government health and safety standards or, in countries where standards are weak or poorly enforced, include standards that go beyond government regulations. The second leg—price and quality standards—have typically been most important to travelers and are those most often set and measured by industry associations, such as AAA or Michelin. While the focus of the mass or conventional tourism industry has historically been on rating these first two legs, the newer green certification programs also measure environmental and socioeconomic impacts and consider the satisfaction of the host community as well as of the traveler.

During the past 15 years, there has been a flowering of green certification programs. According to a World Tourism Organization study, by 2001, there were 59 “very comprehensive state-of-the-art” tourism certification schemes. Of these, the majority are for accommodations (68 percent), but there are a growing number of certification programs covering other sectors of the tourism industry, including sports facilities, destinations, transport, tour operators, and naturalist guides. The largest concentration of programs, 78 percent, is in Europe, while Latin America has the largest number of new programs in development.

The United Nation’s (UN) declaration of 2002 as the International Year of Tourism, which included a series of regional workshops that culminated in the World Ecotourism Summit in May 2002, gave further impetus to the expansion of certification efforts. During the year several new green certification programs were launched, including the Eco-Rating System in Kenya, the first program of its kind in Africa, and the Swedish Ecotourism Society’s Nature’s Best. At the World Ecotourism Summit itself, held in Quebec City, at least nine new programs, including ones in Fiji, Ecuador, and Japan, were announced. In the United States, the Boulder-based organization, Sustainable Tourism International, began to develop what is to be the first green certification program in the country. Currently, the most ambitious and best financed green certification program is in Brazil, where the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB) has put up $1.6 million, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses are raising matching funds to create and launch an environmentally and socially responsible eco-label for hotels.

The origins of this third leg of certification, sustainability, can be traced directly to the rise of the ecotourism movement.

Ecotourism and Certification

The term “ecotourism” first appeared in the 1970s, a decade that saw the rise of a global environmental movement and a convergence of demand for sustainable and socially responsible forms of tourism. It initially grew in scattered experiments and without a name, in response to deepening concerns about the negative effects of conventional tourism. Countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, which viewed tourism as a development tool and foreign exchange earner, were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the economic leakage of tourist dollars and the negative social and environmental impacts of mass tourism. Simultaneously, scientists, parks officials, and environmental organizations in various parts of the world were becoming increasingly alarmed by the loss of rainforest and other habitats and of rhino, elephant, tiger, and other endangered wildlife. They began to argue that protected areas would only survive if the people in and around these fragile ecosystems saw some tangible benefits from tourism.

Mounting criticism of the collateral damage caused by tourism led the World Bank and IDB, which had invested heavily in large tourism projects, to conclude that tourism was not a sound development strategy. In the late 1970s, both institutions closed down their tourism departments and ceased lending for tourism. (They only moved back into providing loans for tourism projects in the 1990s, this time under the rubric of ecotourism.) Parallel with these trends, a portion of the traveling public was becoming increasingly turned off by packaged cruises, overcrowded campsites, and high-rise beach hotels and began seeking less crowded and more unspoiled natural areas. Spurred by relatively affordable and plentiful airline routes, increasing numbers of nature lovers began seeking serenity and pristine beauty overseas.

Gradually these different interests began to coalesce into a new concept that was labeled “ecotourism.” Ecotourism, as most popularly defined by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people.” While nature tourism and adventure tourism focus on what the tourist is seeking or doing, ecotourism focuses on the impact of this travel on the traveler, the environment, and the people in the host country—and posits...
that this impact must be positive. As such, ecotourism is closely linked to the concept of sustainable development. Rather than being simply a niche market within tourism or a subset of nature tourism, properly understood, ecotourism is a set of principles and practices for how the public should travel and for how the travel industry should operate.

During the 1990s, propelled in part by the UN’s 1992 Earth Summit in Rio and a rapidly growing tourism industry, ecotourism exploded. By the mid-1990s, ecotourism (together with nature tourism) was being hailed as the fastest-growing sector of the travel and tourism industry. The International Ecotourism Society estimated that in the year 2000, ecotourism was growing by 20 percent annually, compared with 7 percent for tourism overall. In 1999, Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, the well-known Mexican architect and conservationist, declared, “Ecotourism is no longer a mere concept or subject of wishful thinking. On the contrary, ecotourism has become a global reality ... There seem to be very few countries in the world in which some type of ecotourism development or discussion is not presently taking place.” More than anything else, this “global reality” was signified by the UN’s declaration of 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism.

But parallel to ecotourism’s global reach and recognition have been concerns, most articulately and persistently voiced by those in the global South, that the radical tenets of ecotourism would not continue to take root and grow in this new century. There is ample evidence that, in many places, ecotourism’s principles and core practices are being corrupted and watered down, hijacked and perverted. Indeed, what is currently being served up as ecotourism includes a mixed grill with three rather distinct varieties: ecotourism “lite” businesses, which adopted some few environmental practices (such as not washing sheets and towels each day or using water-saving shower heads); “green washing” scams, which use green rhetoric in their marketing but follow none of the principles and practices; and genuine ecotourism, or those businesses that are striving to implement environmentally and socially responsible practices.

During the last decade it has become increasingly clear that if ecotourism is to fulfill its revolutionary potential, it must move from imprecision to a set of clear tools, standards, and criteria. Ecotourism needs to not just be conceptualized, but codified, and it is here that green certification programs are viewed as having a central role to play. While ecotourism seeks to provide tangible benefits for both conservation and local communities, certification that includes socioeconomic and environmental criteria seeks to set standards and measure the benefits to host countries, local communities, and the environment.

Today tourism, via the concept of ecotourism, is viewed perhaps more than any other global industry as a tool for both conservation and local community development. “[E]cotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism, concerning the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism,” states the Quebec Declaration, the document approved in May 2002 by delegates to the UN’s World Ecotourism Summit. It goes on to affirm that “different forms of tourism, especially ecotourism, if managed in a sustainable manner, can represent a valuable economic opportunity for local and indigenous populations and their cultures and for the conservation and sustainable use of nature for future generations.” The Quebec Declaration endorses the use of certification as a tool for measuring sound ecotourism and sustainable tourism, while recognizing that “certification systems should reflect regional and local criteria.”

Common Components of Certification Programs

In analyzing the current array of green certification programs within the tourism industry, it can be seen that they are all united by some common components. However, these programs are divided by their methodology—process versus performance—and by the sector of the industry they cover—conventional or mass tourism, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism. Examining the common components and broad distinctions helps to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of these programs and to lay out the basic framework and principles that need to be part of any environmentally and socially responsible programs.

While certification programs within the travel and tourism industry vary widely, they do all have several common features.
Voluntary Enrollment

At present, all “green” certification programs in the travel and tourism industry are voluntary, even though governments are involved in financing and in some cases running many of these programs. In contrast, some governments do require hotels to be certified under the five-star rating system to have a license to operate.

Standards and Criteria

Certification requires that businesses be assessed by measuring their level of compliance with prescribed criteria and standards. This can be done by using one of two broad methods: a process that sets up an environmental management system tailored to the business, or a performance that measures every business against a common set of environmental and socioeconomic criteria or benchmarks. Understanding the process-performance distinction is crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of socially and environmentally responsible certification programs. Increasingly, programs are using a combination of these two methodologies.

Assessment and Auditing

Certification involves first-party assessment, by the company itself, which typically involves applicants completing a written questionnaire; a second-party assessment, usually by an industry association like AAA; or a third-party audit, by an authorized, independent auditor who is not connected with either the company seeking certification or the body that grants certification. On-site, third-party auditing is considered the most rigorous and credible because it avoids any conflict of interest.

Logo

All programs award a selective logo, seal, or brand designed to be recognizable to consumers. Most permit the logo to be used only for a specified period of time before another audit is required. Many certification programs give logos for different levels of achievement—one to five suns, stars, or leaves, for instance. This is considered superior to a single logo because it encourages business to improve and helps customers to distinguish among certified products.

Membership and Fees

While many programs are initially financed by governments, aid agencies, or NGOs, the long-run aim is to make them self-supporting through, at least in part, charging an enrollment fee to businesses seeking certification. Many times a sliding scale is used, with larger and more profitable businesses paying more. These fees vary widely and tend to be highest for certification based on environmental management systems that typically require outside consultants. One of the major challenges for green certification programs is how to make certification programs self-supporting over the long haul.

Methodologies: Process versus Performance

While certification programs all share these common components, they are distinguished by whether they use a process or performance methodology and by the sector of the tourism industry they cover.

Process-Based Certification Programs

Process-based certification programs are all variations of environmental management systems (EMS). The EMS method is widely used, particularly for large hotels or hotel chains, to help management conduct baseline studies, train staff, and set up systems for ongoing monitoring and attainment of set environmental targets such as pollution, water, and electricity reduction (see the box below). The best known EMS standard for “green” hotel certification is the ISO 14001 (or one of its variants), developed in the wake of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit as one of industry’s responses to increasing public interest in sustainable development. It contains the specification and framework for creating an EMS for any business, regardless of its size, product, service, or sector. ISO 14001 can be applied corporate-wide, at an individual site, or to one particular part of a firm’s operations, with its exact scope left to the discretion of the company. Certification to ISO standards is based on having an acceptable process for developing and revising an EMS; it is not based on implementation of an EMS or achieving any declared benchmarks.

ISO and other forms of process-based certification fit well with how large hotels and chains are organized. The advantages of ISO 14001 are that it is internationally recognized and has standards tailored to the needs of the individual business. However, the drawbacks are considerable: It is costly (setting up an EMS usually requires hiring commercial consultants and can cost $20,000 to $40,000 for a medium-sized company and as much as

Certification Methodology

- Operate via Environmental Management Systems (EMS): ISO 14000
- Establish systems for monitoring certain criteria through management
- Require outside consultants; are relatively expensive
- Emphasize internal cost savings and environmental impact reforms
- Have no universal standards; cannot compare across businesses
- Give logo for setting up process, not for achieving fixed goals
- Are best suited for large businesses

Performance-Based Programs

- Set criteria that permits comparisons among certified businesses
- Measure achievement, not intent
- Can include checklist intelligible to both businesses and consumers
- Are more transparent and less expensive
- Can include environmental and socioeconomic criteria within and without business
- Can involve variety of stakeholders
- Can offer different levels of logos
- Are suited for small, medium, and large businesses
$400,000 for large hotels). It is also complicated and heavily engineering-oriented; focused on internal operating systems, not a company’s social and economic impact on the surrounding area or on how a business compares with others in the field; and concerned only with how a company operates, not what it does. The ISO certification does not guarantee certain standards have been met and does not allow comparisons among resorts. Therefore ISO and other types of process-based management systems are insufficient, by themselves, to guarantee sustainable tourism practices. There is a growing awareness about the shortcomings of this methodology and growing agreement that, to be credible, certification programs must include performance-based standards. For instance, in 2002, Green Globe, which had been a largely process-based certification program, teamed up with NEAP to create an international ecotourism standard based mainly on performance criteria.

**Performance-Based Certification Programs**

Today, an increasing number of certification programs are performance-based, meaning they include a set of benchmarks, often in the form of yes/no questions, against which a business is measured. These programs focus on what a business does in a variety of environmental, sociocultural, and economic areas. While process-based programs set up a system for monitoring and improving performance, performance-based methodology states the goals or targets that businesses must achieve to receive certification and use of a logo. Programs that are largely performance-based, such as CST and NEAP, tend to be less costly and permit comparisons among businesses.

Performance-based certification programs are typically easier to implement because they do not require setting up complex and costly environmental management systems. They are therefore more attractive to small and medium-size enterprises that comprise as much as 90 percent of tourism enterprises worldwide. In addition, although EMS programs are typically devised by management and outside consultants, the most effective performance-based programs are created and implemented by a range of stakeholders (including representatives from industry, government, NGOs, host communities, and, often, academics) and can solicit and integrate opinions from tourists (see the box on page 15).

Performance-based programs do, however, present some challenges. The yes/no format can be harsh because many questions are better answered with nuances. There is no agreed-upon standard for what should or should not be included. NEAP has come under criticism, for instance, for not censoring Quicksilver for its use of helicopters on the Great Barrier Reef. Even more prevalent, many standards and criteria are qualitative, subjective, imprecise, and undefined and are therefore difficult to measure. For instance, CST does not specify how large a protected area a hotel must have, permitting a hotel that has a small garden to receive the same points as one that has an extensive private reserve. The question, “The hotel’s protected area is appropriately managed” can be open to wide interpretation. Despite these difficulties, there is a growing consensus among tourism certification experts that performance standards better measure sustainability, that is, the environmental and socioeconomic impacts of a business. As a study commissioned by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Britain concludes, “Only where universal performance levels and targets that tackle sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) are specified within and by a standard, and where criteria making their attainment a prerequisite are present, can something akin to sustainability be promised by certification.”

The WWF study also concludes that a combined approach is useful because it “encourages businesses to establish comprehensive environmental management systems that deliver systematic and continuous improvements, include performance targets and also encourage businesses to invest in technologies that deliver the greatest economic, and environmental benefits within a specific region.”

Blue Flag for beaches, one of the oldest and most successful programs, sets concrete performance criteria in three areas—water quality, safety, and environmental education and information—but also requires that beach authorities create environmental management systems. Increasingly, many of the newer or revamped programs such as Green Globe, NEAP in Australia, Green Deal in the Peten region of Guatemala, the Nordic Swan in Scandinavia, and Green Keys in France represent a hybrid of process-based environmental management systems and performance-based standards or benchmarks. This type of hybrid appears certain to become the norm in the future.

**Conventional, Sustainable, and Ecotourism Certification Programs**

While understanding the distinction between process and performance methodologies is important in assessing their rigor, certification programs can also be categorized using a wider lens than methodology. In terms of developing public policy, model programs, and international standards, it is helpful to distinguish among the three fundamental types of certification programs: those covering conventional (sometimes called mass) tourism, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism markets.

**Conventional Tourism Certification**

Conventional tourism certification programs cover companies within the mass tourism market, that is, the large sectors of the tourism industry that were not built on ecotourism principles and practices. They generally include airlines, car rental agencies, hotel chains, cruise ships, golf courses, and other high-volume types of travel and tourism. While certification programs within the conventional tourism sector historically have focused on quality and cost, the newer green programs focus on monitoring and improving environmental efficiency within the business by setting up management systems. They emphasize
Tourists on a camel safari in Egypt clearly affect the local ecosystem and indigenous community. While sustainable tourism certification programs strive to reduce negative impacts, ecotourism certification posits that the effects must be positive.

adoption of environmentally friendly systems that also save money on electricity, water, waste, and laundry. For instance, the Green Hotels Association estimates that encouraging guests to reuse sheets and towels can save the hotel $1.50 per day per occupied room. The Hilton Tokyo Bay, which is certified under the ECO-TEL program, saved $250,000 in 1999 alone by reducing its garbage from 3.5 tons a day to 1.7 tons.

These programs focus on the physical plant or the internal business, not wider conservation and community impacts. For instance, the Costa do Sinhido beach resort in Brazil is harshly criticized by local NGO activists for involvement in unsavory land deals—areas that are not examined by environmental management systems. Often these certification programs are created and run by industry trade associations without wider stakeholder involvement.

In regards to measuring sustainability, these programs are, in a sense, the narrowest and least effective of the certification models. Yet they are also typically the best-funded, best-known, and most heavily marketed because they have strong industry backing. In their favor, they also appeal to the largest portion of the tourism industry, where rigorous and responsible standards for environmental and social equity protection are urgently needed. However, although most of today’s conventional tourism certification programs can lead to some green innovations, they are insufficient to generate sustainable tourism practices. In essence, the current types of certification for the conventional market usually entail taking useful but minimal “eco-lite” measures that fall far short of the sound practices and principles needed to ensure that the business is socially and environmentally sustainable.

Sustainable Tourism Certification

Sustainable tourism certification programs measure a range of environmental and at least some sociocultural and economic equity issues—both internally within the hotel and externally in the surrounding community and physical environment. These are primarily or totally performance- or achievement-based programs, using independent auditors and multi-faceted questionnaires drawn up in consultation with a variety of stakeholders. This type of program may also include creating a management system that establishes more efficient environmental procedures.

Most often, sustainable tourism certification involves individual or site-specific businesses or attractions such as lodges and beaches. The basic aim or motto of this type of program can be characterized as “harm reduction.” A number of the leading programs today—including CST in Costa Rica, Blue Flag for beaches, NEAP’s nature tourism level, and a number of the European programs—fall into the sustainable tourism certification category. There is growing consensus that sustainable tourism certification offers the best option in terms of developing global standards and a model program. Its criteria are broad enough to encompass various sizes of businesses and types of tourism, including niche markets such as nature, historic, and cultural tourism. At the same time, it can contain specific questions tailored to the conditions of a particular country, state, or region, and it is administered locally. Because it focuses on performance both inside and outside the business, it offers a more holistic.
A diver makes contact with a shark in waters off the Tuamotu Islands, French Polynesia’s most remote and unspoiled archipelago.

approach to measuring the effects of a tourism business and allows comparisons among those certified.

Sustainable tourism is, however, a less clear-cut category than either mass tourism or ecotourism, and some worry that it can easily be too broadly drawn. Costa Rica’s CST program, while widely praised as a premier sustainable tourism certification program, also has its detractors and critics who argue it is not suitable for smaller, low-budget, and often locally owned accommodations because it requires an onerous amount of paperwork. Partly for this reason, CST has begun to develop a separate ecotourism standard, aimed mainly at small-scale businesses.31

Ecotourism Certification

This third category of certification programs covers those companies that describe themselves (through marketing tools such as brochures, websites, and guidebooks) as involved in ecotourism. They are invariably located in or near public or private protected areas and/or indigenous communities. Given this, ecotourism certification programs emphasize a business’s impact on the host community and the ecosystem in which it operates. While green innovations for mainstream tourism reduce energy consumption and waste, ecotourism standards go beyond questions of eco-efficiency and are more responsive to national and local stakeholder concerns. While sustainable tourism certification strives to reduce negative impacts, ecotourism certification gauges whether companies contribute positively to conservation of protected areas and what mechanisms are in place to ensure benefits reach local people. In addition to Australia’s NEAP,32 other examples include the PAN (Protected Areas Network) Parks, which cover protected areas larger than 25,000 hectares and their surrounding communities and businesses in Europe,33 and Smart Voyager for tourist vessels (“floating hotels”) in Ecuador’s environmentally fragile Galapagos Islands.34

Even though ecotourism constitutes a small sector of the market, measuring and rating these businesses, services, and products is clearly vital because of its effects on local communities and fragile ecosystems and because sound ecotourism can help to ratchet up performance standards for the broader tourism industry. In terms of developing a global certification model, it seems most appropriate that ecotourism certification programs be incorporated as distinct components to sustainable tourism certification programs that cover a wider spectrum of the market.

Accreditation: Certifying the Certification Schemes

During Christmas week 2002, while Costa Rican families headed for the beaches, Ronald Sanabria was burning the midnight oil as he put the finishing touches on a massive feasibility study that he had vowed to complete before the end of the year. The rather esoteric document—Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council: Raising the Standards and Benefits of Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism Certification—examines the pros
and cons of creating an accreditation body to “certify” the growing number of ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification programs. As the above discussion makes clear, despite the proliferation of green tourism certification programs, the rigor and quality of many of these programs is uneven.

Since 1999, Sanabria had devoted most of his time as the director of sustainable tourism for the Rainforest Alliance to this multi-dimensional study, known by its acronym, STSC. The study involved a team of researchers, a 43-member advisory committee, and a highly democratic consultative process via workshops around the world and surveys of government, industry, and NGO officials involved in tourism. Its completion marked an important milestone on the road toward a global accreditation body for environmentally and socially responsible tourism, and it paved the way for a new project intended to create, within the next two to three years, an accreditation body or “stewardship council” for sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs.

As “green” tourism certification programs have proliferated, there has been a growing international consensus about the need for a sound accreditation program to assess and help standardize these programs and to help with functions such as marketing, training, and development. The process toward rationalizing, harmonizing, and assessing the various certification schemes and building support for an accreditation body for the tourism industry began in November 2000, at the first-ever tourism certification workshop held at Mohonk Mountain House outside New York City. This remarkable gathering of 45 experts from 20 countries revealed a great deal of overlap and commonality among existing sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs. Participants agreed that new programs should not have to reinvent the wheel; rather, they could be given the basic components, or the spokes of the wheel, and use these to build a certification program tailored to their particular needs. To this end, workshop participants drew up and unanimously approved “The Mohonk Agreement,” a four-page document that lays out the framework—the spokes—for credible sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs. The workshop also unanimously endorsed the Rainforest Alliance’s STSC feasibility study.

The Mohonk meeting helped set certification efforts along two broad tracks over the next couple of years. One track leads to a conscious effort by certification practitioners to harmonize new programs. There has been growing consensus that strong certification programs need to be largely performance-based, have on-site, third-party audits, and include social and economic as well as environmental standards and criteria that measure impacts both within the business and within the wider community in which it operates. Since 2001, some dozen countries in Latin America have agreed to develop their national certification programs based on Costa Rica’s CST. In Australia, Green Globe and NEAP have formed an alliance to promote an NEAP-created ecotourism standard among other countries throughout the region. And in Europe there are efforts, supported by the European Commission, to reduce the competition and confusion among existing certification programs by creating a single ecolabel for accommodations.

Simultaneously, since the Mohonk Agreement endorsed Sanabria’s STSC feasibility study, it is gaining wide acceptance among government officials, NGOs, and the tourism industry. The study provided important analysis of current industry and market demand for certification, and it developed a financial model for establishing and maintaining an accreditation organization. Its final report proposes a three-phased process toward setting up a global accreditation body. The first two stages involve building regional networks to share information and technical advice among certification programs, then creating an international association to promote marketing of certified companies, provide technical training, and help harmonize the criteria, standards, and methods among different certification programs. The third and final stage would be the implementation of the stewardship council to assess and accredit the various certification programs against agreed-upon criteria. This is to be preceded by an international meeting—dubbed “Mohonk II”—where key players will agree upon the organization, financing, and duties of the stewardship council.

In January 2003, the Rainforest Alliance, along with UNEP, the World Tourism Organization, TIES, and the Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development (a new research institute jointly run by Stanford University and the Institute for Policy Studies), formed a partnership to implement the blueprint outlined in the STSC feasibility study. In February, the Ford Foundation approved a $1.1 million, multi-year grant to the four organizations, thus bringing the STSC initiative closer to reality. The partners together, with the World Tourism Organization, have devised a complex strategy to build support within key institutions, governments, and regional networks for an accreditation body over the next several years. At the same time, they will further explore and resolve several outstanding issues including how to make an accreditation body for sustainable tourism self-supporting, how to promote consumer and industry buy-in, and how to provide technical and financial assistance to assist smaller-scale and community-based tourism projects to become certified.

While much work remains to be done, there is today considerable grounds for optimism. Propelled by ecotourism as well as the corporate accountability movement, the concept of certification to ensure sustainable environmental and social practices is now one of the hottest topics within the tourism industry. Green certification programs are helping to measure the impacts of tourism and to set concrete standards for environmentally and socially responsible practices for tourism businesses, professionals, and travelers. They are also beginning to provide real choices for consumers who want to make environmentally and socially responsible vacation choices (see the box on page 20.) All indications
point to an increase in the importance of certification programs and to the creation of an accreditation body within the next several years. However, certification programs and a tourism stewardship body should not be viewed as panaceas. Rather they are part of a combination of tools, both voluntary and regulatory, that are needed to promote social equity and a sustainable environment within the tourism industry. As Michael Conroy, an economist and certification expert with the Ford Foundation puts it, “Certification is a type of insurance against social and environmental damage, not totally foolproof, but far better than running unprotected.”39

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NOTES

2. Author’s visit to Great Barrier Reef and interview with Max Shepherd, December 2002.
9. World Tourism Organization, note 5 above.
10. Author’s interview with various people including Brian Maltis, Sustainable Tourism International; Juan Luna, Inter-American Development Bank; Ron Sanabria.

Useful Web Sites on Ecotourism and Certification Programs

Information Assistance for Eco-Travelers

Ecocircle
http://www.ecocircle.com
a cooperative network promoting genuine ecotourism worldwide

Great Outdoor Recreation Pages
http://gorp.com/gorp/activity/ecoint.htm
the world’s most substantive adventure and outdoors tourism resource

National Geographic Tourism Forum
wide range of sustainable tourism-related discussions

Responsible Travel.com
http://www.responsibletravel.com
focuses on “the world’s best and eco-friendly holidays”

The International Ecotourism Society
http://www.ecotourism.org
off-cited resource for ecotravelers and tourism operators alike

Worldsurface.com
http://www.worldsurface.com
sustainable tourism for backpackers and independent travelers

Certification Programs

Blue Flag
http://www.blueflag.org

Certification in Sustainable Tourism Program (CST)
http://www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/EN/home.shtml

Ecotourism Society of Kenya (ESOK)
Eco-Rating Scheme
http://www.esok.org/Ecoring.htm

Green Globe Asia Pacific
www.ggastiapacific.com.au

Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Programme (NEAP)

Nature’s Best
http://www.naturesbasta.com

Smart Voyager
http://www.rainforestalliance.org/programs/sv/stc.html

Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council
http://www.rainforestalliance.org/programs/stsc.html

General Certification Information

Big Volcano Ecotourism Resource Centre: What is Ecotourism?—Accreditation & Certification Programs, and Codes of Practice & Operational Guidelines

Certification Programs, Papers, and Presentations

Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, Institute for Policy Studies
http://www.ips-dc.org/ecotourism/index.htm

Eldis: Tourism and Development Issues
http://www.eldis.org/csr/tourism.htm
one of the world’s leading sustainable development sites, focusing on corporate social responsibility in the field with related certification programs and issues

Global Ecolabelling Network
http://www.gen.gr.jp

Product Category List of Ecolabelling Programs Worldwide

Kiskeya Alternative Destination—Specific References on Accreditation, Certification and Rating
http://kiskeya-alternative.org/certifi/ref-certif-eng.html
a certification program in Haiti and the Dominican Republic that evolved into a Tourism Research Centre

Plactena Ecotourism Certification Workshop
http://www.planeta.com/ecotravel/tour/certsummary.html
a dialogue on the pros and cons of certification programs that analyze the linkages between tourism and the environment

Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada (STAC)
http://www.sustainabletourism.ca/Cert_sources.htm
resources used to develop the Association’s national accreditation programme

Compiled by Fergus Maclaren, Director of International Programs, The International Ecotourism Society
Rainforest Alliance; and Oliver Hillel, UNEP.


19. ISO stands for the International Organization for Standardization, a world federation of standards bodies that develops voluntary standards designed to facilitate international manufacturing, trade, and communications. Another ISO standard, also widely used by the tourism industry, especially hotels, is the 9000 family that sets up management systems for quality and service. Still another cluster—ISO 28, 65, 66, and 67—contains guidance for establishing and managing certifying systems, while ISO 61 contains the requirements for assessment and accreditation of certification bodies. (These are important for creating uniformity in how certification programs are function and are accredited.) See Toth, note 11 above; M. Honey and A. Rome, Protecting Paradise: Certification Programs for Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 2001), 25–30; and R. Krut and H. Gleckman, ISO 14001: A Missed Opportunity for Sustainable Global Industrial Development (London: Earthscan, 1998).


21. For a full discussion see Honey and Rome, note 19 above, pages 23–32.

22. Mastny, note 6 above, page 16.

23. Author’s interview with Dr. Alice Crabtree, one of the founders of NEAP, Port Douglas, Australia, December 2002.


27. Honey, note 3 above, Table 6.1, "Tourism Certification and Ecolabeling Programs in Europe," pages 190–194.

28. P. Szuchman, "Eco-Credibility: Is Your Hotel as Green as it Claims to Be?" Conde Nast Traveler, August, 2000, 46.

29. Author’s conversations with Brazilian officials from environmental organizations, World Ecotourism Summit, Quebec City, May 2002.

30. Minutes of the Mohonk meeting as well as the report it generated, Protecting Paradise (see note 19), are available at www.ips-dc.org/ecotourism/index.htm.

31. Author’s interviews with CST officials, consultants, and hotel owners in Costa Rica, August 2002. The CST website, www.sustainable-tourism.co.ee, includes the completed audit form for every certified accommodation so that it is possible to examine the details of how the audit team rated each business.


34. Ronald Sanabria, "Evolving Ecotourism Alliances Conserve Biodiversity in the Galapagos Islands," UNEP Industry and Environment, note 8 above; and Honey and Rome, see note 19, pages 95–96.


