ECOCLUB.com E-Paper Series, Nr. 11, Jan 2005

An Investigation into Consumer Attitudes to Ecocertification. The Case Study of Lake Plastira in Karditsa, Greece.

by

Fiona Bakas

Ecotourism MSc thesis (summary), presented on 30th September, 2004 to the Faculty of the Environment, The University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK
fioba@yahoo.com

An Investigation into Consumer Attitudes to Ecocertification. The Case Study of Lake Plastira in Karditsa, Greece.

Fiona Bakas. Ecotourism MSc thesis (summary), presented on 30th September, 2004 to the Faculty of the Environment, The University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK.

Abstract

Ecotourism is a sub-section of tourism which has the intent of being environmentally, economically and socio-culturally sustainable. Ecocertification, which is the process of defining tourism businesses that fulfil ecotourism criteria, is believed by many to be an effective tool in promoting ecotourism. However, a plethora of ecolabels and lack of a credible accreditation body have given rise to consumer confusion, to the extent that they ignore these labels. Adding to this consumer confusion, are the numerous tourism organisations that use the prefix "eco" solely as a veneer of ecotourism, with the purpose of increasing business, effectively result in "green-washing" of the public. Through extensive review of existing literature and by using questionnaire analysis of a case study of tourism consumers in the Lake Plastira area in Karditsa, Greece, an evaluation of consumer attitudes to ecocertification was carried out. Respondents' attitudes regarding environmental awareness and methods of increasing consumer demand for ecocertification were thus extrapolated. Backed by interview analysis of experts in the field, recommendations were made for the formation of an effective eco-certification scheme on a local and international scale. Finally, suggestions for further studies that could enhance the representativeness of the results and recommendations towards the future of ecolabels' certification are made.

Key Words: Ecocertification, consumer attitudes, Greece, ecotourism, ecolabels, tourism

Introduction

The concept of ecotourism emerged in the late 1970's as a response to a global movement towards sustainable and socially responsible forms of tourism (Honey, 2002). Defining ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people" (TIES, 2002) it's potential use as a rural development tool, is enormous. The definition of ecotourism is a subject of debate, making it easier for some tourism businesses to make false claims regarding their "eco-ness", which can lead to "green-washing" of the public with regards to the socio-economic benefits a particular business incurs on the host population. With around 260 voluntary initiatives to certify ecotourism (Font and Buckley, 2001), consumer confusion is exacerbated and as consumer-driven demand for eco-certified practices has not as yet been proven, opposers of certification schemes (Inamdar, 2003) strengthen their view-point that well-needed funds are better spent on other issues (e.g. developing infrastructure), rather than on certification programmes.

The focus of this paper is based on the fact that as government's authority is diminishing and being taken over by international trade and investment institutions (who rely on consumer demand for their strength), it is essential to know what consumers want. Most studies have focused on evaluating the level of environmental awareness, assuming that this implies the emergence of green tourists. These surveys are hard to fully analyse as the extent to which environmental concern is translated into green behaviour, is dependant on a whole host of variables related to the egocentric needs of individuals, which tourism fulfils. This gap in knowledge is aimed to be filled via the current study which investigates consumer attitudes specifically to ecotourism and ecocertification.

Lake Plastira in Karditsa, Greece, (Figure 1) which is a Natura 2000 area of Outstanding Beauty, relatively under-developed touristically, with an existing eco-labelling scheme (AN.KA, 2002a), was used as a case study area in which consumer attitudes to ecocertification could be evaluated. The hypotheses that *eco-certification is on demand by consumers* and that *greater environmental awareness increases consumer demand for ecocertification,* were tested for their validity based on the case study area analysis. A combination of the literature review data and the case study analysis was utilised to fulfil the main aims of this project which were:

- o To define ecotourism and eco-certification

- o To evaluate the extent of case study tourists' knowledge of the definition of "ecotourism" and "eco-certification"

- o To analyse consumer opinions of eco-certification schemes represented by the case study analysis.

- o To evaluate certification schemes in similar countries and suggest a model scheme for Plastira Lake.

- o To identify current and future plans of Greek government bodies and other stakeholders with regards to eco-certification.

Initially however, a background to ecocertification will be given together with a more detailed description of the case study area in order to "set the scene" for the reader.

Figure 1 Pictures of Lake Plastira Exhibiting its Natural Beauty [Taken July, 2004]

Background Information

One of the world's largest industries, tourism is also the world's largest employer, generating directly and indirectly nearly 200 million jobs or approximately 10% of jobs globally (TIES, 2000). Growth of the tourism industry is estimated at approximately 4% per annum and projected growth for 2020 is represented in Figure 2.
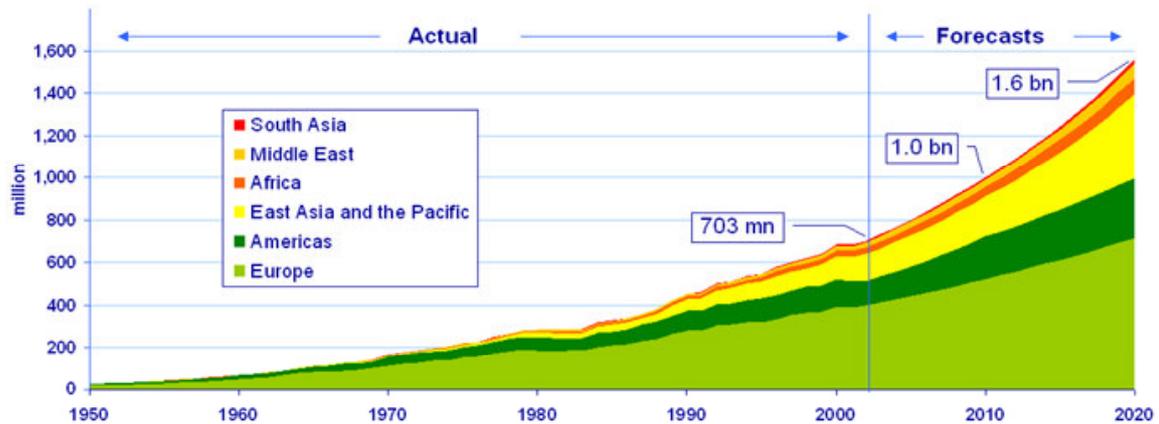
Figure 2. Projected growth of the tourism industry to 2020. [Source: WTO]

Mass tourism which currently accounts for the majority of tourism worldwide, has historically focused on customer satisfaction as defined by cost, quality and health & safety standards (Honey, 2002). Owing to its non-local orientation it has been criticised for the fact that it dominates tourism within a region and very little of the money spent at the destination actually stays and generates income (limited multiplier effect). The financial beneficiaries of mass tourism are mainly large, international co-operations, which focus on attracting the highest possible volume of tourists often over seasonal periods of time, using non-local products, displacing locals and commercialising natural and cultural resources (Fennell, 1999).

Eco-tourism is fundamentally a philosophy, underpinned by deontological concerns with regards to both the physical and cultural environment. Once indoctrinated, even mass tourism stakeholders could potentially operate in a more sustainable fashion, thus helping to conserve tourism's base: the environment.

A succinct way in which to help control non-sustainable tourism development, is to use eco-certification to highlight the effort on an environmental, socio-cultural and economic basis, that true ecotourism businesses invest, in order to attract customers who believe in the cause. By using certification[1], a greater awareness among consumers with regards to the nature of ecotourism is generated as one might intrigued as to *why* these products are being certified. A greater degree of credibility is inhered to certified businesses or destinations, especially when the accrediting[2] body is also credible and stable.

Ecocertification has been heralded by many experts in the field of ecotourism, as an important tool in regulating tourism development, by ensuring that environmental, social, cultural and economic criteria are satisfied by certified organisations. It is also an important method of avoiding consumer confusion as to what standards purported "ecotourism" businesses adhere to, by presenting the information in an easily recognisable symbol – an ecolabel. One of the best-known ecolabel examples, the Blue Flag, certifies clean beaches around the world. The potential for the use of ecolabels in other sectors of the multi-faceted tourism industry, such as accommodation and tour operators, is great. However, with over 104 ecolabelling schemes

---

[1] Defined as "the procedure by which a third party gives written assurance that a product, process, service or management system conforms to specified requirements" (Maclaren, 2004)
[2] An accreditation body basically "certifies the certifiers" (Maclaren, 2004)

BAKAS, Fiona, An Investigation into Consumer Attitudes to Ecocertification. The Case Study of Lake Plastira in Karditsa, Greece, ECOCLUB.com E-Paper Series, Nr. 11, Jan. 2005

p6

currently in existence, of which none are globally recognised (apart from perhaps (to some extent) the Green Globe initiative), consumers have not been able to rely on any particular scheme for accurate information to help them decide when choosing a holiday. This has seen the rise of "green-washing" by companies who use the "eco" prefect to define their business (without actually adhering to ecotourism principles), for the purpose of enhanced marketing. It is believed that using certification as a tool to reduce the number of these "free-riders", will lead to enhanced consumer confidence in accredited ecolabels.

One of the arguments against investing in ecocertification is that it is not on demand by consumers, thus having a limited effect in promoting ecotourism concepts and therefore much-needed funds could be earmarked for other tourism development strategies like improving infrastructure in under-developed areas. As there has been little research on evaluating consumer demand of ecocertification, and ultimately ecotourism, the current study aims to fill this gap in tourism research knowledge.

Thus, the main aim of the current study was to evaluate consumer attitudes to ecocertification. This was achieved through fulfilling the specified objectives of defining ecotourism and ecocertification and evaluating the case study's sample knowledge of these terms and their attitudes towards a proposed certification scheme (by way of questionnaire survey). In order to be able to obtain a representative sample of consumers, Lake Plastira in Karditsa was chosen as a case study area in which to administer the questionnaires. Being a Natura 2000 area with a wide variety of leisure activities available, the Lake provided a suitable place in which to gain a representative consumer sample, the absolute size of which amounted to 100 completed questionnaires.

Methodology

By using a triangulation of methods, including the literature review, questionnaire survey and interviews with experts in the field of ecocertification, the potential for representative data arising from this study was maximised. In order for the author to retain a holistic view upon the meanings of real-life events, a case study area was chosen where the questionnaire survey could be completed.

100 on-site questionnaires were randomly administered to the sample in July, by standing at each tourism business's entrance and asking a person to partake in the survey approximately every 10 minutes. In order to ensure high participation rates, the purpose of the study was stated as well as it's affiliation with AN.KA[3]. Personal questions (e.g. age) were designed to be on the second page of the questionnaire, so as not to intimidate potential respondents with wanting to gain lots of personal information first, as in general, people are not very keen to disclose this kind of information. Presentation of only one sheet of paper to potential participants also helped gain high response rates.

Eight interviews with people believed to be experts in ecotourism (in Greece) were conducted in April and in July, which aided to pilot the questionnaire (Delphi Technique) and also to gain more insight into the current state of ecocertification in Greece. Short hand was used to avoid intimidation of interviewees, whilst questions were left open to discussion and interviewees encouraged to express their opinions freely.

---

[3] AN.KA is the Local Development Agency in Karditsa which has been instrumental in implementing many of the tourism policies that are present in the Lake Plastira area.

Thus, using the aforementioned methodology (e.g. maximising response rates and clarity of questions asked), the frequency of invalid and unrepresentative results emerging from this study was minimised.

Analysis of Data

When analysing the questionnaire data using SPSS (vs. 11), it was found that the majority of tourists were domestic (a fact backed by AN.KA statistics) (AN.KA, 2002b), young (25-45), well-educated and of an annual income under €10,000. Defining about 36% of the sample as ecotourists, a relationship between education levels and ecotourism knowledge was found, indicating that the more educated the respondents, the more likely they are to have a greater environmental knowledge. A significant relationship (99%) was also found to exist (Table 1) between consumer awareness of ecotourism and definition of ecocertification, strengthening the initial hypothesis that a greater environmental awareness will result in higher demand for ecocertification. As the majority of respondents were willing to pay more for eco-certification, this finding also points towards consumer demand for ecocertification.

Significance = 0.01

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	**12.432**	**1**	**.000**		
Continuity Correction	9.591	1	.002		
Likelihood Ratio	9.871	1	.002		
Fisher's Exact Test				.002	.002
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.308	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	100				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 1 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.89.
Table 1. Chi-Square Tests (Ecocertification* Ecotourism Q1 Crosstabulation)

Surprisingly, an inversely proportional relationship was found between the amount (as a percentage increase in price) respondents were willing to pay for eco-certified accommodation and their income, with lower income respondents being prepared to pay more for certification, a fact that may be attributed to the environmental awareness of respondents or the relatively low representation (in the sample) of high income respondents.

Tourism employees in general, had a high knowledge of ecotourism although occupation and environmental knowledge were not found to have a relationship. Confusion is also evident (perhaps due to low levels of eco-awareness) concerning the benefits of certification, with the majority of tourism employees viewing these schemes primarily as a marketing tool.

The aforementioned experts interviewed, showed a richer level of knowledge of ecotourism to consumers, emphasising different components of ecotourism, according to their specific field interests. The majority however, concurred on the notion that the environment was the ultimate beneficiary of ecotourism. Regarding ecocertification specifically, a lack of detailed knowledge on the subject was observed among interviewees, indicated by the inability of some experts to place their organisation in relation to eco-certification policies.

The accommodation sector was believed to be the sector with the highest take up rates of an eco-certification scheme, participation in which would result as a combination of a voluntary and enforced enrolment system.

When looking at the characteristics of a potentially ideal eco-certification scheme, disagreement between consumers and experts was found, the former believing a national scheme audited by state inspectors to be the most effective whilst the later predicting that an international scheme with EU inspectors to be the most effective. One of the reasons behind this opposition in opinions may be attributed to the lack of general knowledge (of consumers) regarding certification.

Conclusion

Ecotourism, defined by TIES as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people", is rapidly gaining support, especially from experts within the tourism industry, and is predicted to grow by 10-20% in the next decade (WTO, 2001). Whilst this is an encouraging level of predicted consumer participation in more sustainable forms of tourism, there is a need for more complete and relevant research in this field as there is currently no global incentive for gathering ecotourism data (TIES, 2000).

Some interesting observations arising from the questionnaire analysis, regarding the case study sample, was that a high level of consumer awareness of ecotourism and eco-certification was evident. However, this was at a superficial level, indicating the need for further environmental education of the public. A relationship between levels of knowledge of ecotourism and ecocertification was found at a significant level (99%), which indicates that to achieve higher levels of consumer demand for ecocertification, enhanced environmental education is essential. Backed by the findings for the experts' interviews, an environmental awareness campaign was proposed as an effective method in promoting eco-certification schemes. It is however recommended that further research be undertaken into defining the extent of consumers' knowledge of ecotourism and ecocertification by administering questionnaires that focus on analysing consumer motivations and eco-knowledge in greater detail.

Consumer demand, represented by willingness to pay more for eco-certified accommodation, was seen to be high, with 64% of the questionnaire sample responding positively to this notion. Demand levels were seen to be related to the environmental knowledge base of the respondent, which again highlighted the connection between environmental awareness and consumer demand for ecocertification. In order to further analyse consumer demand it is recommended that similar studies are conducted focusing to a greater extent of defining willingness to pay (for which issue many studies and models exist) more for environmentally-sensitive products, i.e. by analysing respondents' preference levels for widely available consumables such as Fair Trade products.

Based on the interview and questionnaire analysis, an ecocertification scheme was proposed to be third-party regulated based on a combination of performance and process-based criteria. However, further research into evaluating consumer preference of the nature of an accreditation body is recommended, in order for relevant bodies to be able to make an informed choice as to which type of accreditation the public would trust and hence demand. It is also recommended that to increase the transparency of the proposed eco-certification scheme, common indicators be introduced .

Regarding the scale of the ecocertification programme, this was proposed to be on an international level with locally adapted standards focusing on tour operators and accommodation providers as the former would have low set up costs and the latter are a) already acquainted with certification schemes (start ratings) which could effect higher take-up rates and b) have easily measurable indicators (e.g. amount of energy consumed). However, further research should be undertaken into analysing the attitudes of tourism employees in order to gain a better indication of how effective the proposed ecocertification scheme will be.

BAKAS, Fiona, An Investigation into Consumer Attitudes to Ecocertification. The Case Study of Lake Plastira in Karditsa, Greece, ECOCLUB.com E-Paper Series, Nr. 11, Jan. 2005

p9

It is recommended that consumer attitudes to existing eco-certification schemes are evaluated by administering questionnaires focusing on the perceived benefits of these schemes and actual preference rates for certified versus to non-certified businesses. A good start point would be to analyse consumer attitudes to TPS-certified businesses found in the case study, a subject that currently remains unexplored.

Concluding, in order to gain more insight into what constitutes an effective ecocertification programme, consumer demand must be measured, as consumers are the best evaluators of any certification programme (Inamdar, 2003). A global initiative for collection of information of consumer-related attitudes and motivations to ecotourism is thus recommended as being an essential future step in determining the type of development tool to used in order to promote sustainable tourism and halt the progressive destruction of tourisms' natural base.

Bibliography

AN.KA (2002a) Thessalian Symbol of Quality. *AN.KA study*.

AN.KA (2002b). Development of Tourism and Protection of the Environment in the Karditsa Prefecture**.** *CD obtained from AN.KA*, 15th April, 2004. (in Greek)

Fennell, D.A. (1999). Ecotourism: An introduction. *Routledge, London*.

Font, X. and Buckley, R.C. (2001). Tourism Ecolabelling: Certification and Promotion of Sustainable Management. *CABI Publishing, Oxon, UK*.

Honey, M. (2002). Ecotourism & Certification: Setting Standards in Practice. *Island Press, Washington DC, USA*.

Inamdar, N., (2003). Ecotourism Certification Workshop Summary, *Planeta, retrieved 27/01/04 from* http://www.planeta.com

TIES (2000). Ecotourism Statistical Fact Sheet. *Retrieved 26th June, 2004 from:* www.ecotourism.org/research/stats/files/stats.pdf

World Tourism Organisation (n.d). Recommendations to Governments for Supporting and/or Establishing National Certification Systems for Sustainable Tourism. *Retrieved 22/01/04 from* http://www.wto.org

WTO (2001). Sustainable Development of Ecotourism : A compilation of good practices. *WTO Publishing.*