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An Analysis of sustainable tourism certification programs in the United States

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Executive Summary

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, was to evaluate the effectiveness of state sustainable tourism programs, utilizing the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) as a measure of baseline sustainable tourism effectiveness.

Methods

The GSTC initiated a process to form criteria that are the minimum requirements that any tourism business should aspire to reach in order to protect and sustain the world's natural and cultural resources while ensuring tourism meets its potential as a tool for conservation and poverty alleviation. The outcome was the development of 37 sustainable tourism criteria, which set a baseline set of guidelines for sustainable tourism.

The criteria are organized around the four pillars of sustainable tourism:
- Effective sustainability planning;
- Maximizing social and economic benefits to the local community;
- Reduction of negative impacts to cultural heritage; and,
- Reduction of negative impacts to environmental heritage.

The survey effort began with semi-structured telephone interviews with statewide certification program directors/managers. To understand state sustainable tourism certification programs with respect to their baseline criteria as it relates to the GSTC, researchers utilized state certification websites to secure a list of certification program participants. Twenty-three statewide certification programs were identified in the United States. Of these programs, 17 were contacted for inclusion as state operated programs. Fifteen programs are represented in the interviews with directors and managers and 13 programs were represented by certified program participants in the survey. The on-line certification survey began in February 2010.

Results

Insights from Certification Program Directors

Statewide certification programs have a range of institutional structures, stemming from industry associations to more complex partnerships through departments of environment (or similar) and tourism industry associations and departments. Certainly a strength and recommendation identified for successful programs were partnerships with other agencies and associations. With the focus of the study on stated adopted programs, or those that operated within state agencies and/or industry associations and departments, researchers also explored initiation, successes, challenges, training and education components, and weaknesses of programs. Statewide programs were initiated for several reasons, including:
- Cost savings for the tourism industry;
- To uphold state's traditions, image, and commitment to the natural environment;
- Carry forth a particular political agenda and/or program;
- Reduce environmental impacts from a substantial industry;
- Bring recognition to the tourism industry, through marketing support;

- To be competitive with other states.

Findings suggest that strengths of certification programs include training and education, quality of technical assistance, organically developed program with buy-in from stakeholders, number of participants, and diversity of sectors represented within their program. Auditing of program participants occurs at various levels, and appears to be somewhat constrained through the availability of human and financial resources. Renewal times varied, from 1 to 3 years, with a range of renewal requirements. Training and education aspects of each program was noted as a strength, benefit, and free of charge, or offered for a low fee, making it accessible to a range of programs. Benefits also varied for participants, from little to no marketing benefit, to substantial marketing support for certified products. Cost savings for tourism operations was another notable benefit for participants. Some of the notable weaknesses program directors/managers acknowledged included identifying ways to measure the economic benefits of a sustainability program, annual review program, the criteria may be too easy now, lack of measuring mechanism, and a need to provide easy consumer feedback on certified products. Challenges identified were focused on keeping up with changing technology and information, and access to greater support and resources (human and financial).

State certification program directors also had recommendations for those wishing to initiate a program in their state. These included: involve as many stakeholders as possible; incorporate on-site verification process; help participants measure their progress; share resources, don't reinvent the wheel; ramp up certification requirements as more programs meet various criteria; develop and maintain partnerships to strengthen programs.

Certification Participants Survey

The on-line participant certification survey included 157 participants from 13 states. Survey respondents represented a range of sectors in the tourism industry, including lodging, food and beverage, state parks, campgrounds, tour operations, guide/outfitters, and visitor centers. Most of the lodging participants had a capacity of less than 50 rooms. The majority had received awards in the past three years, which included local, national, and international recognition for a range of topics, from particular service such as cooking awards, to community service awards, to green or sustainability awards. Many lodging participants held ratings of excellence as well, from AAA to of course, certification program recognitions. Approximately one-third of the operations were located in or near a park or public lands.

Participants were asked to evaluate their business or operation using the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria. The criteria included sustainable management, social and economic benefits or impacts to local communities, and environmental benefits and impacts. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or to the extent certain criteria were included in their operation. With respect to sustainable management, most certified participants had some kind of sustainable management system, which were primarily environmentally focused. The majority of respondents identified with environmental aspects of sustainable management, with slightly less identifying with social-cultural aspects. With respect to sustainable design, a majority of respondents agreed with criteria focused on environmental elements of design, with slightly less on social-cultural aspects, which also has slightly more non-applicable responses overall.

Respondents generally considered local legal requirements, such as health, safety, and labor aspects, as well as local guidelines and voluntary codes of practice. Participants also supported training for personnel in environmental and health and safety practices. Nearly all participants monitored customer satisfaction, and agreed with ethical marketing practices. With respect to interpretation and education, the vast majority of participants provided information to customers on natural surroundings, culture. However, these were not as participatory when it came to explanations of appropriate behaviors for visiting living cultures and cultural heritage. Barriers or constraints to these aspects were primarily related to their responsibility, lack of relevance, and budgetary ideas.

Based on the results of the Sustainable Management criteria, it appears that some of these criteria require further explanation; that some natural and cultural ideas did not apply to businesses in various locales or certain size businesses; the construction section may not be applicable for established or rental properties; and that other regulatory guidelines which they followed were not compatible with these criteria.

With respect to social and economic benefits or impacts to local communities, a majority of participants agreed with criteria relative to linkages to local communities, local hiring and training, and local goods and services. Just over half of the respondents considered criteria that addressed the extent to which the business supported local businesses. Constraints or barriers to this criteria included location and access to vendors and limited resources. With respect to the level of extent to which the business developed a code of conduct regarding activities with indigenous and/or local communities, the majority of respondents felt the criteria did not apply to their business; the majority supported anti-exploitation concepts, discrimination, and treatment of workers criteria. With respect to criteria focused on infrastructure and local communities, the vast majority agreed with statements that supported these criteria. Approximately half of respondents agreed with criteria addressing established guidelines or codes of behavior for visitors to culturally or historically sensitive sites, with a substantial number considering this criteria not applicable to their operation. However, the majority of respondents did agree on protection of artifacts, contributing to the protection of cultural heritage and important properties and sites, and supporting access to culturally important sites. The vast majority of respondents also agreed in respectful use of culture and property rights of local community members.

With respect to environmental management of businesses and operations, the vast majority of participants agree to strongly agree with the criteria for conserving resources. There were somewhat mixed levels of agreement with respect to reducing pollution criteria, which included greenhouse gas emissions considerations (less than 50 percent), offsets, and reused wastewater strategies. Some of the barrier or constraints included laws with respect to gray water use, budgetary constraints, and issues with alternatives to certain issues such as pest control.

Other areas that participants were less agreeable or felt the criteria were not applicable, concerned criteria involving wildlife harvesting and captive living specimens—whereby the majority felt these ideas were not applicable overall.

In summary, participants of statewide certification programs are generally in agreement with a majority of the GSTC. In areas of the criteria where a majority was not reached, the criteria

generally addressed social or cultural issues, related to advising guests of behavior or particular information sharing ideas, and captive or harvested wildlife concepts. These areas were largely considered to be not applicable or operations felt there were constraints or barriers to addressing these criteria. The majority of barriers to achieving the GSTC were relative to ample resources in time and/or money; the direction of other guidelines or regulatory direction; lack of perceived relevance to their operation; and the size, scale, or location of the business and access to other types of resources such as materials and products.

Amidst the increasing number of certification programs, this study explored statewide tourism certification programs within the United States, which are operated or housed within state agencies, industry organizations, non-profits, and partnerships. It also explored their program participant's perceptions of the GSTC. The results of this study provide important insights into program manager's perceptions of certification program successes, benefits to participants, strengths, weaknesses, audit structures, and challenges. The results of the certification program participant study provide some insights into alignment with the GSTC. There are however limitations that should be considered in reviewing these results. First, the results of the certification program participant's survey may not be generalizable to the population of tourism certification program participants, because of a low sample size and uneven representation of various statewide programs. Secondly, the study was focused on statewide programs that are operated from within the state specifically; therefore, findings are limited to these types of programs and not generalizable to all tourism certification programs.

Managerial Implications
Finally, certification programs are complex undertakings for the both the implementers and the participants. There are several recommendations prompted by both certification program managers and directors and their participants. These include:
1) The benefits program participants receive are much more than marketing for their tourism operation. These include, but are not limited to costs savings, training and education, increased awareness and access to resources, and continuous improvement and operational efficiency, and awards, recognition, and attitudinal changes towards environmental and socio-cultural initiatives, environmental and social health, which increases the attractiveness of the state. These concepts and ideas should be marketed more comprehensively in campaigns to build participants.
2) Involving a wide-range of stakeholders and partners in the development process and continuing in an advisory capacity, increases the strength, applicability, and buy-in, ensuring some level of sustainability within the program. This includes not only a range of sectors within the tourism industry, but organizations and associations, government leaders, and community members indirectly affiliated with tourism development.
3) Include tools for measuring energy, waste, water, customer satisfaction—as those programs with these tools appeared highly successful and progressive with their participants. There are several resources available and it is important for the industry overall to share these tools and resources, and not continuously reinvent the wheel.
4) Include on-site verification in the evaluation mix, third-party is best. This offers increased credibility and strength to certification programs.

5) Certification programs must be accessible, yet must have a process whereby there is continuous improvement.
6) The sustainable tourism is in motion, new technologies and strategies for sustainable operations are becoming more accessible, stay on top of it.
7) Create sites where information for participants and potential participants is easily accessible, link to resource sites.
8) Provide a venue for consumer feedback on certified products.
9) Provide education and training that links the industry to a greater understanding of sustainability from economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects.
10) Lobby for ordinances, laws, and regulation that support sustainability concepts, as some are antiquated from the participant's perspective and hinder growth in sustainability with respect to building and design, recycling, and other waste management aspects of their operations.
11) Supporting a credible statewide certification program can be the impetus for further media attention and marketing for the state; well-run tourism certification programs can also have a spin-off effect into to other businesses, with entire communities supporting sustainable growth and management.

With respect to the GSTC, it is important to note that some of the criteria were perceived as not applicable or respondents identified barriers for their implementation. As part of the process for standards setting, the criteria will be reviewed every two to three years. The language utilized in setting the criteria as well as education processes for communicating the intent of the criteria should be explored within these review processes.

This study provides a baseline understanding of statewide certification programs in the United States and their program participant's alignment with the GSTC. Further studies should explore the barriers and constraints to implementation of the criteria, as well as how the criteria are communicated and understood by participants. As interest in sustainable operations continues to grow, further research should also explore various funding mechanisms and models to support statewide certification programs, as most of the program directors and managers noted they were grossly under resourced, both financially and with respect to staffing.