Ecolabelling at lodges in South Africa

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Abstract

The development of ecolabels has been unbalanced and in large parts of the developing world there are no operating ecolabels although studies have shown that it is likely that ecolabelling can be implemented successfully in these areas. In Pieterse [1], research focused on lodges in South Africa and it was concluded that it would be useful and relevant to develop an ecolabel based on the experience offered and not based on the form of accommodation as is traditional. There are a number of issues and trends that have an influence on the development and operations of ecolabels. This paper considers how an ecolabel based on the lodge experience would impact on these trends and developments.

Keywords: ecolabel, lodge, lodge experience, ecolabel trends and developments, ecological certification, South Africa tourism, sustainable tourism.

1 Introduction

Tourism ecolabelling has been in existence since the 1980’s and there are a large number of schemes operating in various parts of the world [2]. Ecolabels have developed in a very haphazard fashion and in large parts of the developing world there is no ecolabelling scheme in operation. In 2002 South Africa was the fastest-growing tourism destination in the world [3]. Lodges form an integral part of the country’s wildlife ecotourism product. In 1997 it was estimated that 34% of visitors wanted to stay in a lodge/guest house during their vacation in South Africa. Despite this, there are however no established ecolabelling schemes operating at lodges in South Africa.

For the purpose of this paper, Dooley and Kirkpatrick’s definition of an ecolabel in Synergy [4] will be used: “a term used to describe an officially sanctioned scheme in which a product may be awarded an ecological label on the basis of its ‘acceptable’ level of environmental impact. The acceptable level of environmental impact may be determined by consideration of a single
environmental hurdle, which is deemed to be particularly important, or after undertaking an assessment of its overall impacts.” (p. vii).

Research done in Pieterse [1] found that there is significant potential for ecolabelling at lodges in South Africa. It also specifically pointed out that such potential would best be served when an ecolabel is developed based on overall experience offered at lodges, not just based on its accommodation classification. This paper draws directly from that research. The South African lodge experience is examined as well as current trends and developments in the ecolabelling industry and the objective of this paper is to assess what impact the development of an ecolabel, based on the ‘lodge experience’, would have on issues and trends that currently influence new and established developments.

2 South African lodge environment

2.1 South African tourism

From 1994 to 2002, since the start of the new South Africa, overseas arrivals grew by an incredible 89%! In 2002 South Africa was the world’s fastest growing tourism region [3] and overseas arrivals grew by a staggering 23% [5]. Although official figures have not been released, despite war in Iraq, SARS and weaker economies in most main source markets, and compared to a decline in global tourism of –1.2%, South Africa’s preliminary overseas arrivals figures seem to have grown by 3% in 2003 [5]. Studies have repeatedly shown that South Africa’s scenic beauty, sunny climate, abundant wildlife and varied cultures are its main attractions, basically all of which are offered at lodges in one form or another [6].
2.2 Lodges

The Tourism Grading Council of South Africa defines a lodge as “an accommodation facility located in natural surroundings. The rates charged are usually inclusive of an experience offered at the lodges, viz. game drives, battlefield tours etc. In general, food and beverage services are provided for all meals” [7, Lodge section 1]. It is estimated at present that there are about 300 lodges operating throughout the country [8]. There is however no official number. The majority of lodges are found in the Lowveld region in the northeastern part of South Africa. Average prices for up market lodges range from R2500 – R4500 p.p.p.n. It is a very intense market and competitive advantage stems mainly from two aspects: the quality of game viewing, especially the Big Five, and standards of service [9].

A typical visit to a lodge would involve a stay in surroundings as close to nature as possible to experience nature to the full, and all activities are focused on learning and feeling nature first-hand, with game rangers and trackers as personal tutors. A traditional day spent at a lodge will offer an early morning game drive, a late morning brunch, a guided walk in the bush or game-watching from the patio, a late afternoon game drive, sundowners along the way and then a meal served in a boma under the stars [10].

2.3 Sustainable actions at lodges

Lodges’ operations and existence are so closely linked to their direct environment that often they have no option but to act sustainable. For many lodges acting in a sustainable way, i.e. recycling, being involved in the community, caring for their land, just “makes business sense” [1].

Although differing in scale and extent, there is a great deal of overlapping in terms of the type of actions taking place. For example, all of the lodges recycle tins, glass and bottles, but only at one lodge has this been turned into a further initiative where an employee takes responsibility for collection and transportation and can therefore collect on revenue gained from the effort. It is also important to note that in many instances the parameters of their surroundings compel lodges to go beyond what would normally be considered as sustainable actions. Many lodges are forced to build waste cages in order to keep trash away from hyenas and other scavengers, a problem not likely to be encountered by a hotel in the Johannesburg city center! [1].

2.4 Lodges as an experience

It was a conclusion in Pieterse [1] that rather than establishing and considering ecotabelling schemes and criteria in terms of the type of accommodation offered, there should be a classification of accommodations in terms of the experience offered. Across the world, it seems that ecolabels have attempted to rate establishments according to the same classification used by service grading schemes, that is, different segments within accommodation or facilities or locations. Although Blue Flag’s official classification is in terms of facilities, the
success of their label could be attributed to the fact that their label conveys information relevant to an experience, that of going to the beach. Different from hotels in cities, which are focused on providing only accommodation, lodges are not just “hotels in the bush”, they offer a total experience (see section 2.2). Different lodges offer different nature-based scenery and activities (dessert landscapes in Namibia or Big Five safaris in Mpmulanga, etc.) but these all boil down to the experience of guests feeling and learning from nature. Therefore, although lodges can offer and operate as five star hotels in the bush, they should not be regarded and judged in the same way as a five star hotel in the city centre because their approach, operations and focus, in order to bring about a desired five star experience, differ radically.

3 Current trends and developments

3.1 Background to ecolabelling

Ecolabelling has been used for about three decades. The first official ecolabel was the German “Blue Angel” in 1978, which labelled everyday household products [11]. Since then a number of industries worldwide have joined the effort to promote sustainable business through ecolabelling [12]. Ecolabelling was introduced to the tourism industry around 1985 when the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe (FEEE) awarded its first Blue Flag label for beaches and marinas [13]. Currently, there are over 100 tourism ecolabels functioning throughout the world [13, 14]. Because of this significant growth and resultant confusion, there has been increasing interest in, as well as concern over, the future development of ecolabelling, and a number of issues and trends are currently receiving attention on the tourism ecolabel scene.

3.2 Demand

Discussions by Synergy [4], Honey and Rome [14] and, Font and Buckley [15] identify a lack of clear, and often contradictory demand, as one of the major issues in terms of ecolabelling.

Both Honey and Rome [14] and Font and Buckley [15] argue that although interest and support for “green” actions is increasing and becoming stronger, there is no clear indication that this translates into actual green behaviour in the tourism industry. As maintained by Honey and Rome [14], whenever demand is verified, surveys indicate that as soon as consumers need to give something up to obtain an environmentally friendly product, for example having to pay additional costs, they tend not to choose that product. Key factors influencing the choice of a destination still seem to be price, accommodation and the activities offered [4, 13]. The only exception to this appears to be when the environmental state of the product or service is fundamental to the enjoyment of the whole experience [4, 14, 15]. The relative success of the Blue Flag label and its focus on sanitation and safety facilities can be traced back to this principle.
There seems to be agreement among stakeholders that the overabundance of ecolabels has also created confusion among tourists. In Costa Rica, Green Globe, New Key, CST and ECOTEL have all certified different accommodations within the same region, leaving consumers confused and sceptical over the meaning of a logo and the credibility of a certified hotel [14]. Consequently, Font [13] and Sasidharan et al. [16] concluded that tourists then tend to ignore labels, further diminishing demand.

3.3 Mass tourism, sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification

The decision regarding the type, focus and scope of an ecolabel is a complex and important consideration in its establishment. Honey and Rome [14] identified and discussed three umbrella-like types of certification programmes, namely mass tourism, sustainable tourism and ecotourism.

Mass tourism certification focuses on accommodation in the mass tourism segment, for example hotels and resorts. They cater for a diverse global mass market and consequently their criteria and frameworks are more vague. These schemes tend, however, to be the most well known, marketed and funded [14].

Sustainable Tourism Certification is focused on aspects of the “triple baseline”. These schemes invariably have much more detailed criteria [14].

Ecotourism certification programmes are a more specialised form of a sustainable tourism programme. They look beyond the business to its impact on its surroundings and how it fulfils the characteristics of an ecotourism establishment [14].

According to Amos Bien in Honey and Rome [14], the major problem with this kind of distinction among programmes is that a lodge might be environmentally green according to “mass tourism” criteria while, due to the more stringent criteria of “ecotourism” standards it might not be considered “green”, again influencing the credibility of both the ecolabel and establishment [14].

3.4 Focus of ecolabels

Once the type of certification programme, mass tourism, sustainable tourism or ecotourism, has been established, the actual scope and focus of an ecolabel should be considered.

In the UNEP study conducted in 1998 [2], four different scopes of ecolabels were identified. These were international, regional, national and sub-national schemes. Although most of the established schemes still operate on only a regional or national level, a lot of attention is currently paid to the feasibility and development of international schemes (section 3.6). Regional schemes operate across the borders of several countries and their focus is based on defined features, for example, Blue Flag that operates at beaches [2].

The focus area of a scheme normally deals with one particular segment in the industry. According to UNEP [2], focus areas include accommodation, such as hotels or campsites; services, such as tour operators; and locations, such as golf courses. Based on the segment it focuses on, a scheme will then formulate its
criteria and methods of assessment. The mainstream accommodation segment is the most popular.

3.5 The big business vs. small and medium enterprises (SME’s) divide

In a comparison of papers written by Synergy [4], Honey and Rome [14], and Sasidharan et al. [16], it becomes clear that developing countries and SMEs often share common problems when compared with developed countries and bigger businesses, respectively. Developing countries and SMEs form the basis of the ecotourism sector and stand to gain the most from ecolabelling schemes, but are often not able to stand their ground against bigger players due to a lack of resources. Eco-protectionism is increasingly identified as a major obstacle curbing the development of ecolabels. (Sasidharan et al. [16] explain eco-protectionism as something that happens when larger companies, often originating in developed countries and because of their resources, are able to be eco-certified, and they then use this certification to attract foreign “green” tourists at the cost of many smaller, locally-owned enterprises not able to join such schemes.)

According to Honey and Rome [14], SMEs comprise some 97% of the tourism industry and according to Sasidharan et al. [16] it is likely that bigger corporations who have more time, funding and human resources will have a larger influence on the formulation of criteria and the ability to enforce their viewpoints. Both Sasidharan et al. [16] and Font and Buckley [15] consequently warn against criteria unintentionally established at levels, which would make it impossible for SMEs to comply.

3.6 Towards a global overseeing structure

International tourism is increasing throughout the world and tourists want to know what ecolabels at their destinations mean [16]. In an attempt to curb this problem the tourism industry has engaged in a number of discussions. Two possible solutions have been proposed. The Rainforest Alliance has undertaken to determine the feasibility of a Global Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC), which will act as an international accreditation body that will verify the credibility of all operating ecolabels through affiliation with such a scheme [17]. At the World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec in 2002, representatives from the Ecotourism Association of Australia and Green Globe 21 (Asia Pacific) tabled a second option, that of an International Ecotourism Standard [18]. This solution instead proposes the establishment of generic standards for tourism businesses within a specific segment, in each case adapted to take into account site-specific issues.

4 The lodge experience and ecolabelling issues and trends

In South Africa, it seems most lodges support a compulsory scheme and they support the fundamentals of such an effort. In addition, the government is very
much for, and involved in, actions towards responsible tourism. It is, therefore, possible that a scheme can be made compulsory or at least be regulated through some official body within the South African context, and this would greatly increase its potential. However, across the world, schemes are voluntary and there is no guarantee that a scheme could be made compulsory. It is for this reason that Pieterse [1] found formulating criteria in terms of the experiences offered at lodges a more plausible solution. In this way, only one scheme’s criteria would be applicable to lodges and credibility can be maintained and confusion avoided. Assuming this as a possible scenario and based on the discussion above, the following inferences can be drawn regarding the impact of the ‘lodge experience’, as a basis for an ecolabel, on current trends and developments in the ecolabelling industry.

When it comes to actual demand from tourists for an ecolabel, it seems lodges’ sustainable actions, as in the rest of the world, more often than not are not a determining factor when guests choose a destination. Actual interest of lodge guests in environmental aspects at their destination seem to stretch only as far as it concerns their own safety and the quality of their experience. In the case of lodges such questions relate for example to whether malaria is a threat at the lodge or whether it offers the Big Five (lion, leopard, elephant, rhino, buffalo) or not. However, because lodges are so small and remote there is much more interaction of guests with the milieu of the lodges. Guests interact with ground level personnel as well as with all levels of management, while the nature of their visit allows them to intimately experience the natural environment through the interpretations of a ranger. Lodges can therefore play a huge role in sensitising guests to responsible environmental behaviour. Also, of the total foreign leisure tourists to South Africa in the first quarter of 2002 only 30% were first-time visitors while some 26% have been to the country ten or more times [19]. As such, the lodge experience itself can play a significant role in “creating” demand among guests for environmentally responsible establishments.

Lodges are a rather small, but distinct and significant segment of the South African tourism industry. By their very existence, situated in nature and offering wildlife, lodges have to act more “green” than other normal accommodation establishments. A mass tourism scheme would therefore not help or enable them to act more sustainable but as Sasidharan et al [16] argue, chances are lodges will join such an ecolabel simply for the “green” marketing tool it would provide. If criteria were however developed based on the experience offered at the establishment, only one scheme’s would be applicable and relevant, avoiding erroneous certifications by other irrelevant schemes.

The same also applies for the focus of ecolabels. If criteria and procedures are based on the experience offered at lodges, categorization of businesses as per the traditional alternatives becomes obsolete and there would be no confusion as to which category would best apply to the lodge.

As for the scope of ecolabels, lodges, as defined in this study, are a unique experience of the African continent, specifically Southern and Eastern Africa. They share common site-specific issues and if an ecolabel were to focus on the
experience offered at an establishment it would be quite possible to operate it across borders without any major adjustments necessary. This would allow a label to gain broader market acceptance as well as exposure and this would be beneficial to the credibility of that ecolabel. Because this ‘lodge experience’ is so unique to the African continent, and because an ecolabel based on such experience would only be suitable for Africa, the possible problem of eco-protectionism by developing countries could not become one. All of southern Africa, where the label will operate, is considered developing countries. This is also the case with eco-protectionism by bigger companies. Although no official study has been done, the majority of lodges are SME’s and an ecolabel based on the ‘lodge experience’ would therefore effectively avoid this problem.

As pointed out earlier, an ecolabel would have no impact if its meaning is not known to its patrons. As the majority of visitors to lodges come from outside the country’s borders, up to 90% at some, participation in or accreditation by an international scheme would increase the credibility and recognition of such an ecolabel. As per the argument in this paper, lodges in South Africa work under unique circumstances in comparison with for example, hotels in Johannesburg or eco-lodges in Costa Rica, and although there will always be generic standards applicable in any scheme (such as recycling), there are many issues that can only be understood and explained in a South African or African lodge context. In light of this it would seem that the Rainforest Alliance’s STSC holds more promise for an ecolabelling scheme at lodges than an international ecotourism standard. Under the auspices of such a body, a scheme will be able to operate autonomously, allowing it to determine its own ‘lodge experience’-based criteria and operating procedures while maintaining credibility through accreditation.

5 Conclusion

The classification that forms the basis for any ecolabel will always result in specific issues and trends relating to that specific basis. This then also has an influence on the further development and existence of new ecolabels. As discussed above, currently all ecolabels are classified on the traditional segmentation of the tourism sector. It is to be expected that any new classifications for ecolabels would deliver their own issues and trends. However, the aim of this paper was not to identify possible new issues when an experience-based ecolabel were to be developed. Rather, it was to assess in what way a ‘lodge experience’-based ecolabel would impact current issues and trends. Although demand might not increase only because a different classification is used, the ‘lodge experience’ as such seems able to actually create demand for its ecolabel. Focusing only on lodges, such an ecolabel would be able to avoid potential problems that may arise regarding the question of an applicable type and focus of an ecolabel scheme for the particular establishment. As the industry market for this specific market is much more homogenic, the problem of ecoprotectionism can be avoided, both in terms of the fact that lodges basically only operate in developing countries and that most lodges are SME’s. This homogeneity will also allow lodges to operate on a regional level which will add
exposure and credibility to their label. Also on a global level, basing an ecolabel on the ‘lodge experience’ will duly fit in with the suggestion for an international accreditation body, allowing it to operate within the global scene. It is the conclusion of this paper that a ‘lodge experience’-based ecolabel would positively impact on current issues and trends and that it would add value and credibility to ecolabelling.

References

