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Green Travel Today

Given the exponential growth of eco travel in the last two decades, many organizations within the tourism industry have adopted the terms *green*, *sustainable*, *local* and *eco* as powerful marketing slogans to attract consumers.

Problem Statement

The lure of capturing a piece of the billion-dollar a year eco travel market has resulted in

an oversaturation of loosely understood *eco holiday* labeled travel products, leading to consumer confusion and misrepresentation of the eco travel industry as a whole.

Certification Solution

The great informant to consumers who aim to understand the impacts of tourism and make responsible vacation purchasing decisions is eco-certification.

Benefit 1

Eco-certifications take into account the legitimate regional interpretations of what constitutes a natural or wildlife habitat, what amounts to environmental degradation, and what characterizes local prosperity.

Benefit 2

Eco-certification provides much-needed knowledge and transparency because award criteria as well as independent assessment and reauthorization processes not only help educate the consumer about the various socio-economic and environmental of a specific country, but also provide the consumer with a basis of comparison against other travel suppliers.

Benefit 3

Eco-certifications assure consumers that the tourism operator is supporting local communities, emphasizing environmental education, sustaining conservation efforts, efficiently utilizing scarce resources, minimizing tourist waste, and respecting local cultural traditions.

Third Party Certifications

Presently, there are more than 25 major eco and sustainable tourism certifications around the world. While it can be confusing to understand the differences, Greenloons has developed practical summary guides to help consumers.

GSTC Accreditation

A set of 37 standards developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) have come to serve as the foundation for most eco-certification standards and have effectively established the GSTC as an accreditation body.

Advice for Consumers

A reference guide has been developed to serve as a consumer awareness tool alongside practical tips and suggestions for choosing authentic eco travel.

Green Travel Today

Green travel is one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry and over the past ten years has become a \$billion a year market. The segment is estimated to be growing 5% annually worldwide, representing 6% of the world's GDP and reflecting 11.4 % of all consumer vacation spending.

According to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), which is a global initiative representing UN agencies, leading travel companies, hotels, country tourism boards and tour operators that serves as the international body for promoting the increased knowledge, understanding and adoption of sustainable tourism practices, the green travel trend is here to stay.

Sustainable tourism is on the rise: consumer demand is growing, travel industry suppliers are developing new green programs, and governments are creating new policies to encourage sustainable practices in tourism. But what does "sustainable tourism" really mean? How can it be measured and credibly demonstrated, in order to build consumer confidence, promote efficiency, and fight false claims?

Problem Statement

Because there is no global standard definition, the term *eco travel* has been hijacked and incorrectly marketed to the point that many consumers are confused and frustrated by the term that just seems to indicate higher prices rather than for:

- sustainability training for tour operators
- land and wildlife conservation projects
- fair wages for employees
- auditing and verification of *green* or *eco* claims

Certification Solution

Eco-certifications are for authentically *eco* tourism suppliers as USDA Organic stickers are for fruit and vegetable producers.

Besides understanding that the *organic apple*, for instance, was grown without genetic modification, synthetic pesticides, fertilizers or other chemicals, the organic sticker conveys

an assurance that the apple was grown in a more ecologically responsible manner.

Eco-certification acts like a sticker for the eco travel industry. When a consumer chooses an eco-certified tourism supplier, s/he is assured that the company:

- supports local communities,
- emphasizes environmental education,
- supports conservation efforts including equitable access to natural areas,
- minimizes tourist waste including food, water, chemical and energy footprints, and
- respects local cultural traditions.

Eco-certification is awarded to companies that have disclosed their sustainable operations, participated in training on new technologies, and undergone stringent on-site visits by independent auditors. Generally, tourism suppliers are assessed (and re-evaluated on average every two years) on the following criteria:

- sustainable management systems
- customer satisfaction policies
- local design and construction requirements
- quality interpretation of natural surroundings and local culture
- community development and fair trade policies
- local employment practices
- protection of archeological sites and artifacts, and
- conservation and energy use policies

Third Party Certifications

In an effort to make the *eco* tourism industry more transparent and accountable, many regions across the world have developed their own certification standards that reflect their socio-economic and environmental issues. Some examples of regional eco-certifications are:

- Österreichisches Umweltzeichen (Austria)
- Certification for Sustainable Tourism (Costa Rica)
- Advanced EcoCertification (Australia)
- Ecotourism Ireland Label
- Fair Trade in Tourism for South Africa
- Environmentally Sustainable Accommodations Standard (Japan)
- Green Tourism Business Scheme (United Kingdom)
- Smart Voyager (Ecuador)

It can be difficult to understand all the nuances, socio-economic and environmental criteria, award processes and reauthorization processes for the major eco-certifications. However, there are practical summaries that can help consumers:

- Download our exclusive [Reference Guide to Ecotourism Certifications](#)
- Read the detailed *Ecotourism Certification Standards* series within the [Greenloons Blog](#) offering an explanation of the award process and evaluation criteria for each certification.

GSTC Accreditation

The GSTC is an international body that aims to help consumers by providing responsible travel education and offering travel suppliers access to best practices in sustainable tourism.

To this end, over the last 3 years, the council with the help of many corporate and non-profit organizations as well as individual leaders in the travel industry has developed a set of 37 criteria to *represent the minimum that any tourism business should aspire to reach in order to protect and sustain the world's natural and cultural resources while ensuring that ecotourism meets its potential as a tool for poverty alleviation.*

The [criteria](#) not only embody the first and only global framework for defining sustainable travel, it establishes the GSTC as a global accreditation body in a manner like the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) accredits medical schools in the United States and Canada.

In 2011, the GSTC announced a three stage process toward accrediting eco-certifications. The process began with the identification of eco-certifications that were able to verify in writing that its award criteria were compatible with the GSTC criteria. The result is a number of eco-labels that have been awarded the *GSTC-Recognized* label.

The *GSTC-Recognized* evaluation is the cornerstone and first step of a 3-stage GSTC Process.



After written verification, Stage 2 (*GSTC-Approved*) is the physical review of the award process for the individual certification to ensure that it is transparent, impartial and conducted by people with technical competence. The third stage, which is anticipated to begin in late 2014, will result in a full accreditation (*GSTC-Accredited*) of applicable eco-labels.

Advice for Consumers

Supporting certified tourism suppliers does not mean that you will pay more. It means that you are supporting a tourism supplier that meets environmental and social-economic standards for sustainability, responsibility and ethics.

So, how can consumers become advocates for responsible eco travel? Following are questions that consumers can ask either their accommodation provider or tour operator:

1. What is the foreign versus local ownership structure of the company?
2. What percentage of staff is local and how many hold management positions?
3. Are food ingredients/raw materials locally sourced or imported?
4. How is the company contributing to wildlife conservation?
5. How close are guests getting to wildlife or sensitive vegetation?
6. Are tourist activities disturbing animal migration patterns or damaging lands?
7. How is the community specifically benefiting from the tourism operation (i.e. fair wages, access to medical care, community infrastructure, local use of land)?
8. What efforts are made to implement energy or water use mitigation strategies?

In addition, consumers can readily access our [Six Ecotourism Vacation Traps to Avoid](#) guide. By educating consumers about the tools to use and benefits of choosing environmentally and socially responsible vacation packages, we believe that the demand for authentic and certified ecotourism businesses that ultimately affect positive change for local communities will increase too.