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The development of a sustainability certification system for tourist accommodation services in Flanders.

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that tourism causes positive and negative impacts on the social, natural and cultural environment.

The concept of sustainable development must therefore be fully applied to tourism and the principles must be adopted by the whole tourism sector.

The Tourism Board of Flanders is convinced that the need for greater sustainability in tourism services and activities is already widely recognised in Flanders at all levels.

Certification systems are a widely used voluntary instrument to incorporate sustainability criteria in tourist accommodation services.

The tourism sector in Flanders is ready to implement a **certification system**; the tourism sector sees the benefits of reducing costs and benchmarking, environmental organisations feel international pressure of existing international certification schemes and the integration of sustainable principles is a prior pillar in the policy of the tourism government.

The main challenge for Flanders was to develop a certification system that:

- could garner support from all the main stakeholders
- could be based on the guidelines set out by the World Tourism Organisation
- could be adopted by small and medium-sized enterprises
- could fit in with existed international norms and guidelines
- will not cause confusion among consumers

This paper reflects upon a **two-year process of a public private partnership** that dealt with all these challenges.

The result is a certification system that will be implemented in 2006.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, certification system and accommodation services

For further information : see main text in annexe 1.

**Pilotproject: Digital course of sustainable tourism for tour operators.
A co-operation between Tourism Board of Flanders and ABTO (Belgian association of tour operators)**

Description of the best practice

Responsible department of the government

Tourism Flanders is an Internally Privatised Agency of the Flemish Community with a separate legal personality, in other words part of the Flemish government.

Tourism Flanders is responsible for promoting leisure and business tourism to and in Flanders.

Its principal task is to promote and market Flanders as a tourist destination.

Its second main task is to support and develop creative, high-quality tourism products.

Since 2000, another item on Tourism Flanders' agenda has been sustainable tourism. At

www.toerismevlaanderen.be/duurzaam, you can find our mission and vision with regard to sustainable tourism. Tourism Flanders wants to convert the thinking behind sustainable tourism into concrete measures for the tourism sector.

One of the steps needed in order to achieve this is the integration of sustainability in the travel industry's quality assurance approach via the professional federations.

Partners involved

Tourism Board of Flanders (see above)

ABTO Belgian association of tour operators

Characteristics that make the initiative a best practice

- Public private partnership
- Content of the course makes clear what the impact of tourism can be on the environment, social and cultural life and the local economy of the destination + give examples of what a tour operator can do to minimize the negative impact.
- The combination of theory and practice becomes relevant in the test: make a plan of action for your company.
- To monitor the effectiveness of the course, an inventory of best practices of the tour operators is made each two years.
- Long term guarantee: course will be open for all tour operators every year for 4 months

Mainstreaming sustainability of the best practice

Positive results brought about by the initiative

- 21 participants received a certificate in 2005
- The results of the evaluation by the participants was good
- Some tour operators took sustainable initiatives (TUI Belgium, Antipodes)

Linkages with national developmental policies

This initiative is implemented in the documents of the Flemish tourism policy

Financial viability

The cost for the development of the course is a non-recurring expense. (digital course)

Course is implemented as a permanent fixture in the training department of Tourism Flanders.

Tourism Board of Flanders provides infrastructure, manage the voluntary instrument (course) and make promotion for it (stimulates enterprises to take part)

Lessons learned

Participation of the sector in the planning and development process is essential to make a voluntary initiative a success. Especially the engagement of the major players (in this case TUI and Thomas Cook)

Replication

This initiative fits in a European initiative, Tourlink, which is still in process.

The development of a sustainability certification system for tourist accommodation services in Flanders.

MAIN TEXT

Context

Tourism is one of the biggest and fastest growing industries. The World Tourism Organisation recently announced that international tourism had reached a new record in 2004. This entails an increase in turnover of 10.3 percent, to 512 billion euros and a rise in the number of international tourists worldwide by 10.7 %, to 760 million. Europe is the main international travel destination. Approximately 58% of all international arrivals are registered in Europe.

Belgium is a federal state made up of three communities: the Flemish (Flanders and the Dutch-speaking population of Brussels), French (Wallonia and the French-speaking population of Brussels) and German-speaking communities. In addition there are three regions: Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital region.

In Belgium, policy matters regarding tourism are handled by the Communities. The complete tourism policy for the Flemish Community is implemented by the Tourism Board of Flanders. Belgium is probably not one of the countries immediately associated with thoughts of holiday and summertime leisure. Yet it is visited extensively by foreign holidaymakers.

In 2003 the National Institute for Statistics in Belgium recorded 36.2 million overnight stays. The Flemish Community accounts for 80% of all overnight stays. The Flemish coast represents the most overnight stays, followed by the cities of Brussels and Antwerp. The domestic market is the largest market in Belgium, with 53% of all overnight stays.

The figures indicate that tourism has an enormous impact on the economy, culture and environment and that this impact is still growing. The fact that not all consequences of tourism are positive has long been known. After all, uncontrolled growth can lead to a disruption of the ecological, social and economic balance. The sustainable development of tourism aims to restore this balance of benefits and costs. Sustainability is therefore no longer an option for a tourism policy but a necessary component in long-term competition.

This paper outlines the process of developing an ecolabel for Flanders. It deals with a certification scheme for campsites and tourist accommodation, as an instrument for sustainable tourism. The emphasis is on the process itself and the difficulties and challenges in this process. At the time of writing this paper, this process was not yet finished; it is still in progress.

The Tourism Board of Flanders is a partner in this process.

Sustainable tourism development in Flanders

The Tourism Board of Flanders aims to develop a quality, sustainable tourism policy where Flanders can profile itself as a sustainable tourist destination. This is the main long-term goal. To do this, the Tourism Board of Flanders wishes to convert the thinking process in sustainable tourism into practical measures for the tourism sector with the goal of:

- improving the tourist's holiday experience;
- increasing the quality of life in destination regions;
- retaining natural and cultural sources by reducing negative impacts;
- guaranteeing the future of the tourism sector.

Quality means sustainability. Quality tourism therefore implies sustainable tourism.

The mission of the Tourist Board of Flanders 'sustainable tourism' project is to make sustainable tourism a guiding thread in all policy measures and allowing it to become an integral part of all policy lines. Integration is the keyword. Two major actions are on the agenda:

1. integrating sustainability within the Tourism Board of Flanders
2. interpreting the concept of sustainability for each sub-sector

On the one hand, the Tourism Board of Flanders has an exemplary function to fulfil by integrating the sustainability concept fully within all departments in its own organisation and ensuring that the Tourism Board of Flanders as a whole also does business sustainably.

On the other, the Tourism Board of Flanders has a role as a stimulator. It must encourage the various sub-sectors to adopt sustainable initiatives to achieve a sustainable tourism chain.

Certification systems and tourism

Certification systems form an important tool for sustainable development and marketing. They form a suitable policy option for creating sustainability in the tourism industry and for stimulating demand for sustainable products. (WTO, 2002).

A tourism **ecolabel** is a certification obtained by a tourism company that shows that efforts have been made to limit the impact of tourism on the environment or that a proposed basic standard has been reached.

Ecolabels are an example of the many voluntary initiatives that are characteristic of sustainable tourism. The voluntary development and implementation of a project or a tool stimulates entrepreneurs to undertake actions beyond legally imposed obligations that benefit the natural, social and economic environment.

The diversity in certification systems and ecolabels is confusing both for the entrepreneur and for the customer. Europe has by far the most certification programmes globally. In 2004 there were more than 50 different environmental certificates or approvals. More than 40 of these apply to the accommodation sector: hotels, camping sites, youth hostels, B&B's, etc.

The Tourism Board of Flanders sees a range of advantages in developing an ecolabel. It could:

- provide an effective alternative or complement to direct regulation, which may prove more difficult and time-consuming to implement
- facilitate the adoption of a flexible approach to monitoring the tourism industry, permitting organisations to proceed at the pace they feel most comfortable with, while encouraging them to develop innovative approaches
- enhance recognition of tourism in the country, national competitiveness and improve the country's image in international markets
- provide consumers and tourists with a sustainable product
- offer an instrument that supplements existing classification of the accommodation sector to increase quality even further

To obtain the advantages associated with an ecolabel, the main challenge for Flanders is to develop a certification system that:

- ***can garner the support of all the main stakeholders***
- ***is based on the guidelines set out by the World Tourism Organisation***
- ***could be adopted by small and medium-sized enterprises***
- ***can fit in with existed international norms and guidelines***
- ***will not cause confusion among consumers***

Pilot project The 'Groene Sleutel: towards an ecolabel for sustainable tourism in Flanders'

Background

The first steps in developing an ecolabel for the leisure sector (tourist accommodation and recreational areas) date from 2000.

The initiative came from the private sector and more specifically the camping and recreational sector.

The camping sector in Flanders is ready for an ecolabel, but is the tourist or holidaymaker also ready?

The survey: 'The European ecological label: what is its impact on consumption choices?' undertaken by OIVO, the Consumers' Organisation Survey and Information Centre, reveals that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the environmental impact made by the production, use and disposal of goods that they buy. They express a readiness to take account of environmental and other ethical criteria in their consumption choices. In this respect, ecological labels are tools that can help the consumer to make decisions.

Moreover, the survey shows that good quality information about goods and services plays an important role in the development of sustainable consumption behaviour. A good explanation encourages consumers to seek out better performing products and with other measures can help the market to move to higher social and environmental standards.

Other studies have demonstrated that consumers in Europe (e.g. from Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands) are aware of the environmental impact that can be caused by tourism. They expect high environmental quality in their destination, prefer ecolabelled accommodation services, and would like to see certified products in travel catalogues and have access to all 'green' tourism products in Europe.

In 2004, the following question was included in a survey on Belgians' holiday behaviour commissioned by the Tourism Board of Flanders: 'would the introduction of an ecolabel that offers guarantees for the environmental friendliness of hotels, holiday homes, camping sites, etc. influence your choice of accommodation?' 42.2% of surveyed holidaymakers would opt for environmentally friendly accommodation if an ecolabel for such accommodation were introduced. The extent to which the choice of accommodation is influenced by the introduction of an approval label rises with age and is higher among the higher social classes. For the Tourism Board of Flanders this result produces an additional argument for seeing an ecolabel as a factor in improving quality in the accommodation sector.

At present Flanders only has one ecolabel, i.e. the European Ecolabel. This is a unique situation in the European tourism landscape. This European quality label applies to non-food products and services, which are less environmentally harmful. It was developed as a reaction to the vast sprawl of national environmental quality labels. The European Ecolabel is managed by the European Commission. It is implemented in each Member State by an authorised organisation, the so-called 'Competent Body'. The federal environmental authorities are the contact point in Belgium along with the secretariat of the Belgian Committee, which grants the label. At present there are 21 product groups with a European Ecolabel.

The ecolabel for tourism accommodation has been operational since April 2003. The criteria for camping sites were approved by the European Commission in April 2005.

The process of developing an ecolabel only began to take shape with the launch of the 'Groene Sleutel' pilot project in July 2004.

The pilot project is titled 'Groene Sleutel', a reference to Green Key, La Clef Vert, etc. Green Key is an internationally recognised label for tourism products. It was developed for hotels in Denmark in 1994 and later also applied to camping sites in France (1998). At present the Green Key operates in 6 countries. Green Key is co-ordinated internationally by FEE (Foundation for environmental education in Europe), which also co-ordinates the Blue Flag. In Flanders the FEE is represented by the NGO Bond Beter Leefmilieu (BBL), the umbrella organisation for Flemish nature and environmental associations.

Both the Green Key and the European Ecolabel are internationally recognised labels for tourist accommodation and camping sites. The debate about which ecolabel fulfils the expectations of the various stakeholders and consequently is suitable for the Flemish recreational sector is part of the pilot project.

Just like the tourism sector in Flanders, the European tourism industry is an SME dominated sector, with over 99% of firms counting less than 250 employees, and about 94% employing fewer than 10 people. On average, tourism SMEs in Europe provide jobs for 6 employees (micro-enterprises). The pilot project will deal primarily with this target group.

Goal of the pilot project

The goal of the project is a quality label for Flemish camping sites and recreational areas which is recognised by the sector, the environmental movement and the government. This quality label must be a motivating tool for Flemish camping sites and recreational areas to bring the quality of the tourism product to the same level as in neighbouring regions.

Initiators

The initiators of this pilot project are: Kempen Campings (a group of 36 camping sites and accommodation centres in Kempen), Vlaanderen Is Recreatie (a group of leisure centres in Flanders) and Bond Beter Leefmilieu.

The Tourism Board of Flanders, The Tourism Board of the Province of Antwerp and OVAM (the Flemish Region Public Waste Company) are supporting the project.

The pilot project was originally limited geographically to the region of Kempen.

However, since the Camping federation, CKVB (the largest professional federation for camping sites in Flanders), also have adopted a range of initiatives to create awareness in companies of waste & emission prevention and environmental care. This professional federation became a partner in the pilot project.

Stakeholders

The various stakeholders come from the private sector (professional federations and individual operators), the public sector (the Flemish Department of Tourism and the Environment), a research centre and an NGO.

Length of the project

The pilot project runs for 15 months from July 2004 to November 2005.

It is financed through the OVAM PRESTI-5 programme. In this instance PRESTI stands for PREvention STimulation. The programme is aimed at the Flemish businesses, but more specifically at small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The pilot project has 3 phases

1. Start of the planning phase

In the initial phase, the various partners were contacted and a steering committee was formed with representatives from the stakeholders. The steering committee meets on a regular basis. Debates are held within this committee and it faces the challenge of developing a certification system that is supported by all members of the committee.

One important suggestion dealt with opting for an ecolabel with various levels. The most important factor for the Tourism Board of Flanders is that as many companies as possible (including SMEs) should undertake sustainable initiatives. Working with various levels and an accompanying support programme ought to foster this.

The steering committee drew up an action plan for the next 15 months.

The various partners then announced the start of the project to the entire tourism sector.

2. Development and implementation phase

A list with test criteria was drawn up after a thorough study of existing criteria for various internationally recognised ecolabels (Green Key, Milieubarometer, EU ecolabel). The criteria for international ecolabels almost exclusively cover ecological criteria. Flanders wishes to promote sustainability and therefore wants to include social criteria such as accessibility.

Camping sites and recreation centres were approached to act as pilot companies for 12 months. Fifteen camping sites and recreation centres, spread regionally across Flanders and differing in size and involvement in the environment and quality, entered the project.

The pilot companies are informed about the progress of the pilot project and knowledge and practical experience about good preventive techniques are exchanged during three interactive working sessions. It is important to intersperse theory with adequate practical examples and visits to encourage the many SMEs to participate in the initiative.

A number of working tools were developed to support operators adopting sustainable initiatives, such as a checklist, a website with the legislation and subsidy facilities, worksheets to register energy, waste and water consumption and a guide with the criteria.

The checklist has a triple role:

- it offers the entrepreneur a picture of how the company is performing in terms of sustainability
- it indicates which actions still have to be undertaken to achieve the basic or higher levels
- it gives ideas for possible actions

The registration forms implement the principle of measuring is knowing. The figures are not only interesting for the operators (to find out changes in their costs and for benchmarking) but also for the government. Flanders currently has little or no quantitative material that sets out the ecological impact of accommodation. The results of impact analyses are needed to pursue an efficient policy (monitoring) and are an important tool in creating awareness.

The list of criteria is tested during two on-site visits.

After the final company visit a report is compiled for each firm with an inventory of the environmental performance per step and advice on preventive action so that the next step can be reached.

The criteria are specifically checked for their applicability (are they clear and feasible and attainability).

3. Management phase

The pilot project is currently in this crucial phase. At this point decisions are made about the structure of the ecolabel, the choice of ecolabel, interpretation of the support programme, implementation opportunities, financing and distribution of tasks.

The negotiations are conducted within the steering committee, with each representative defending the viewpoint of his organisation after consensus is reached in it. Members agree on the main goal of 'stimulating tourism companies to take environmentally friendly initiatives', which means that this has become the reference point during the discussions.

In this phase the biggest challenge is to reconcile the various interests of the stakeholders with each other.

The steering committee agrees on the **structure of the ecolabel**. It has opted for an ongoing growth system where the sector is encouraged to strive towards an ecolabel via a support programme (level system). The programme contains three levels. Level one and two are aimed at the entrepreneur. How can the entrepreneur save costs and also spare the environment? The last and third level is the acquisition of an ecolabel, the communication tool for the customer and recognition for the entrepreneur.

A survey of the directors of the 15 pilot companies fathomed the advantages that a director expects after acknowledgement of level one and two and the acquisition of an ecolabel. For 11 of the 15 pilot companies promotional recognition for both the label and the growth levels is desirable to necessary. Only two companies selected a financial advantage.

What does promotional recognition involve? Does the sector expect a logo or, for example, is a statement about environmental performance in brochures sufficient?

The choice of an ecolabel, the pinnacle of the programme, appears to be quite difficult to agree on. Does the European Ecolabel meet the needs of the Flemish accommodation sector, which means that no other ecolabel needs to be introduced to Flanders? If not, is a Flemish version of the Green Key adequate? If so, how will this new label stand in relation to the European label?

The Green Key has been proposed by Bond Beter Leefmilieu, the recreational sector and the camping sector as the most suitable sustainability label for interpretation of the top (third) level. They are aiming for good co-operation here with the European ecolabel.

To be able to make an objective assessment of the choice of ecolabel the Tourism Board of Flanders commissioned a comparative investigation of the two ecolabels. The investigation compared: the criteria and their attainability, possibilities for application in the accommodation sector, procedures and the operating structure, costs for the operator, costs borne by the stakeholders, dissemination and reputation of the ecolabel among customers, agreement with WTO guidelines, and co-operation with competent authorities.

The results reveal the bottlenecks. The competent authorities are being asked to make proposals as a response to these. For example, the Belgian committee for the European Ecolabel will make suggestions that lead to simpler administration of the application procedures and will have to guarantee the feasibility of some criteria for Flanders. For example, FEE international will have to approve the added supplementary Flemish criteria.

In the meantime, negotiations have started in a number of European countries with the aim of limiting the confusion caused by the plethora of ecolabels and of promoting co-operation with the European Ecolabel. The Tourism Board of Flanders has regular contact with VISIT, Voluntary Initiative for Sustainability in Tourism, an initiative which among other things aims to reduce the workload of various authorities recognising an ecolabel. Flanders, which has been safeguarded against uncontrolled growth in ecolabels, can learn a lot from experiences in other European countries and must also exploit this knowledge.

The intended certification system for Flanders must also be applicable to all tourism accommodation. During a pilot project there is a risk that uninvolved sub-sectors will be left aside during the crucial phase. This is why opinions were also sought from HoReCa Vlaanderen, the professional federation representing the interests of the hotel-restaurant-bar businesses, about the choice of an ecolabel. Their recommendations and reflections will be crucially important during the final decision.

The Flemish ministry of Tourism will decide on which label is wanted in Flanders based on the above-mentioned results in consultation with the steering committee.

The steering committee is also making proposals on **interpretation of the support programme**. These proposals are included in the survey of the operators of pilot companies. Support is understood as:

- an information service where the company where the company can ask questions by telephone or mail about subsidy opportunities, possible actions, cost calculations, etc. (according to the survey 11 of the 15 pilot companies consider this important to very important)
- a guide with background information about criteria, examples of good practice, a list of suppliers of green products, etc.
- individual support, tailored advice
- content-related working sessions
- the checklist ...

The implementation of the support programme and the associated awarding of an ecolabel are best arranged within an established and recognised authority.

The Tourism Board of Flanders has made the strategic choice of integrating the support chain within its quality assurance department. This department issues permits to various forms of accommodation and also performs the associated inspections. An additional employee with technical environmental expertise can not only co-ordinate the support programme but can also involve the entire department in the process. The Tourism Board of Flanders gives a clear signal to the sector: sustainability is important and forms an integral part of quality.

The service for candidate operators and persons who want information about sustainable initiatives therefore also has just one point of contact.

Depending on the choice of ecolabel, it will be issued by Bond Beter Leefmilieu (the Groene Sleutel) and/or the Federal Department of the Environment (the European Ecolabel).

The Tourism Board of Flanders is going a step even further to stimulate sustainable initiatives in the camping sector. An overview of existing subsidy possibilities shows which investments are still not covered by subsidies. The Tourism Board of Flanders can fill in these gaps by linking premiums set out in the Camping premium decree for the Flemish Community with sustainable criteria. This means that most criteria for both the Groene Sleutel and the European Ecolabel that require an investment can be linked to a subsidy.

These strategic choices together with the choice of the ecolabel influence the **financial burdens in the certification system**.

Governments have a key role in providing funding themselves, and/or in designing and developing alternative funding mechanisms with other partners for the operation of the certification system (WTO, 2004)

The Tourism Board of Flanders is aware of this. The strategic choice of integrating the support programme within its organisation proves this.

Promotion of the certification system among operators (sustainable production) and the promotion of accommodation with an ecolabel (sustainable consumption) form the basis for the ecolabel's success. This is an important task for the Tourism Board of Flanders for which budgets also have to be released.

The costs for the application procedure, verification tasks and promoting the label depend on the choice of the label. The costs for the European Ecolabel are borne by the Federal Department of the Environment in Belgium. An appeal is being made to the government for the costs of the Groene Sleutel.

Ovam, the Flemish Region Public Waste Company, supported the pilot project financially, as was previously stated.

How much is the private sector ready to pay to acquire the ecolabel?

Companies incur costs by investing in sustainable new buildings or renovation and by using the ecolabel, if attainable and desired. The investment costs can be reduced significantly through the wide range of subsidies available.

The costs for using the ecolabel as a marketing tool must cover a part of the working costs for the application and processing of the procedure.

But the costs cannot be so high that they frighten away potential ecolabel candidates. The result of the survey among directors of the pilot companies indicate that an average cost of EUR 250-300 is not a barrier for 11 of the 15 pilot companies.

Conclusion

The biggest challenge for the tourism sector in Europe is to maintain and bolster competition by making the tourism product ever more attractive. The ecological and socio-cultural problems caused by tourism must be prevented and reduced by a sustainable tourism policy. The government and private sector must jointly seek tools which on the one hand lower energy costs and on the other increase the quality of the tourism product. Voluntary instruments, such as ecolabels, are described as the best way of guaranteeing long-term progress and commitment. This applies particularly to the tourism sector, where small and medium-sized enterprises dominate and where the attractiveness of the destination forms the basis of the tourism offering. (UNEP, 1988) This document makes it clear that despite the existence of a sustainable climate within tourism policy, the willingness of the public and private sector, the existing guidelines such as those defined by the WTO and the expertise and experience in various European countries, the development of a label for Flanders is a very complex and enriching process.

The challenges for the development of an ecolabel in Flanders, as stated above, are becoming ever larger. Which interests will ultimately determine the choice of an ecolabel? Will the ecolabel address the various sub-sectors and thus increase the sustainable supply? Will this automatically entail an

increase in demand? How will the European Ecolabel evolve in Belgium and in the rest of Europe?
Will national and other international ecolabels disappear from the market?

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