

THE ANALYSIS OF THE ECO-TOURISTIC ACCOMMODATION LABELLING IN HUNGARY AND CROATIA

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Abstract

The types of tourism which are destined for reducing the negative effects of mass tourism, like ecotourism, mild tourism and green tourism appeared at the end of the 20th century. The approach has changed, visiting natural and cultural values has become one of the main motivations of the tourists who are responsible for their environment. This change of approach has become necessary for the touristic service providers, who are the important pillars of the touristic superstructure. The eco-touristic labelling system was introduced some years ago in South Transdanubia, Hungary. The highest obtainable rank is the three “hellebores”. One can label the ecotouristic service providers in three categories, for instance the accommodation, the catering and the services/events. We had done some labels therefore we were able to analyse whether the criteria system was living or not, in which section the touristic service providers performed the best and what were their most common difficulties. During the research it turned out that the criteria system must be changed at some points. Because of the differences between the capacity of accommodation it is essential to reconsider or change some terms, regarding their necessity.

Key words: *responsibility, tourism, service providers, eco-label, Hungary*

Introduction

The negative impacts of tourism development can destroy the environmental resources on which it depends, resulting in a continuing pressure on the environment and the cultural heritage of destinations. Destinations under the pressure of overtourism are not new phenomena, though, we are increasingly faced with that: the local inhabitants suffer from mass tourism and it is also a negative experience for visitors.

The number of international tourist arrivals grew by 7.0% in 2017. By region, Africa and Europe grew above average, but we can see the increase in every region. Europe is only second in the list with growth of 8.4%, but it is still the most popular destination (WTO 2018).

The types of tourism which are destined for reducing the negative effects of mass-tourism, like ecotourism, mild tourism and green tourism appeared at the end of the 20th century. The approach has changed, visiting natural and cultural values has become one of the main motivations of the tourists who are responsible for their environment. This change of approach has become necessary for the touristic service providers, who are the important pillars of the touristic superstructure. The goal of tourism sustainability is twofold. On the one hand, it is “morally” responsible for not causing irreversible damage to the natural, social and economic environment of the world. On the other hand, the sustainability of the environment is important from a business point of view, as the inadequate development of tourism can damage or destroy the natural and cultural environment on which it is based (PUCZKÓ – RÁTZ 2001).

Responsible tourism refers to tourism which creates better places for people to live in and to visit (responsibletourism.com). If we think about it responsibly: could eco-accommodations be the solution? The idea of application of green technologies in accommodation industry is not new. Eco-accommodation is a type of accommodation in ecotourism where the philosophy and principles of ecotourism meet. Key incentives for the tourism sector to use certification schemes include the benefits (financial savings, marketing benefit, brand recognition, etc.) accruing to those successfully applying for the certification. Energy efficient construction and environmentally friendly materials is the beginning of ecologically oriented business philosophy (HOOK 2009 in BRADIĆ et al. 2017). Within positive economic effects it could be mentioned that accommodation facilities that received the eco-label are better positioned in the market.

The reduced number and interest of eco-certified accommodation units in the countries surveyed is an element which is indicated by the research.

1. Theoretical background

The decisions of tourists are more and more frequently influenced by environment consciousness: there is a visible growth in the number of those tourists in whose choice of destination the state of the environment of the destination is also taken into consideration (GONDA 2017).

“Certification can and should play a role in sustainability initiatives where the criteria are clear and public, and where the certificate carries a clear guarantee” (GOODWIN 2016). It is worth mentioning international eco-labels like Green Label, Green Globe 21, Energy Star, Viabono, Ecotel and EU Eco-label as the most frequent and globally recognisable eco-labels in tourism and hospitality. We also know numerous eco-certifications at national level. They were created mostly in the late 90’s.

Several international programmes related to environmental responsibility and sustainability have been launched (e.g. Planet21 Programme, EcoLabel), but their significance in Hungary is negligible. There is only one tourism service provider with EcoLabel qualification in Hungary: this is Eco-Park Pension, Camping Site and Adventure Park in Eger-Szarvaskő, the North of Hungary. It is positive, on the other hand, that the Hungarian Hotel and Restaurant Association announced the tender called “Green Hotel” already in 1994 for the first time, more than twenty years ago.

In one of the visions of the Hungarian National Tourism Development Concept (MTÜ 2017), the Hungarian tourism sector in 2030 is characterised, among other things, by its being “a pull sector in sustainable economic development”. In order to achieve this, sustainability appears, on the one hand, among the pillars of the Strategy (KISFALUDY TURISZTIKAI FEJLESZTÉSI PROGRAM), and also among the horizontal fields of intervention of the strategic goals of the Strategy: H1 – “Tourism living with us” (MTÜ 2017).

In Hungarian tourism the South Transdanubian Region is peripheral, even if it is well perceived that the interest of visitors travelling to the region is more focusing on the natural beauties and landscape endowments which well fit to the international trends of ecotourism as well (CSAPÓ et al. 2015).

The eco-touristic labelling system was introduced some years ago in South Transdanubia (GONDA et al. 2016), Hungary and the situation is similar in Istria and Dalmatia County, Croatia. Comparing labelling systems located in such diverse areas could be problematic, but in every research case the touristic supply side faces the consumer preferences mentioned above, eco-conscious tourists. Nevertheless, the examined areas have different effects of tourism. According to regional data from Eurostat (ec.europa.eu) for example Dalmatia is affected by (high) seasonality, overtourism, in some summer period the region is on the end of its carrying capacity, while Istria Peninsula shows a dichotomy: high coastal demand – beach tourism, resulting in more developed tourism and economic activity (ZADEL et al. 2018), in contrast there is less interest in the inland of Peninsula, Central Istria.

2. Research methods

Eco-labelling in tourism sector is mostly regional (except some programmes for the big chained-brand hotels) and they focus on small accommodations. Based on this I chose four eco-accommodation qualifications: the South Transdanubian Eco-lodge system, Eco-accommodation qualification of the Ecotourism Cluster (South Transdanubia, both from Hungary), Eco domus (Istria county) and Dalmatia Green (Split-Dalmatia County) from Croatia.

I did desk research to collect possible useful information from websites and applications forms. For the collection of primary data in this study I used an e-mail survey from coordinators and interview. I examined some labels; therefore, it is possible to analyse whether the criteria system was functional or not, in which section the touristic service providers performed the best and what were their most common difficulties.

3. Results

3.1. Eco-accommodation qualification (South Transdanubia, Hungary)

South Transdanubia the one and only region that has an operating Ecotourism Cluster, they worked out the qualification system for eco-accommodations. The handbook written by the Ecotourism Cluster gives advice and information related to the application of the principles and practice of sustainability in all sorts of tourism-related enterprises. The qualification system has separate chapters designed for accommodation owners and operators, gastronomy service providers, programme organisers, festival and event managers and also for other tourism service providers like tour operators etc. The highest obtainable rank is the three “hellebores”, which depends on the acquired points.

3.2. The South Transdanubian Eco-lodge system

In 2010 for the pilot area of South Transdanubia, the Baranya County Rural Tourism Association worked out the qualification and criteria system of the network of “environment friendly hosts” or “eco-accommodations”. Only a village accommodation operating in rural areas and in the quality category of 3 or 4 sunflowers can apply, and the accommodation can have maximum 16 beds. The first level contains the basic criteria, the second level contains the necessary criteria, the third level is extra achievements that are acknowledged by the system (special attraction). Recently there are 27 qualified accommodations in this system.

3.3. EcoDomus (Istria county, Croatia)

EcoDomus is a marking programme carried out by the Istrian Region Administrative Department for Tourism with the aim of increasing both social and environmental awareness in tourism. (In 2017 the ECOMode Accommodation label for Istria was transformed into the new Istrian County owned EcoDomus label.)

It is created for small tourist accommodations with maximum 30 beds. Facilities bearing the EcoDomus mark have complied with at least 50 basic criteria within the 12 categories (maximum 75). Facilities EcoDomus Premium must meet all basic criteria and minimum 20 points from 53 from the additional criteria.

3.4. Dalmatia Green (Croatia)

Dalmatia Green is an initiative of the non-for-profit Association for Nature, Environment and Sustainable Development Sunce, with a mission to promote authentic eco-friendly tourism offer in Dalmatia. It is a regional certification programme for small tourist accommodations, recognised by the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia. It has only 22 members, but as the manager told me, more and more service providers are interested in the programme. It is in early phase because it started only in 2017. In this programme the specialty is the cooperation with private sector and to increase the visibility of member accommodations, they are in connection with Ecobnb, which is a web platform that allows travellers to find and book every kind of green accommodation. Dalmatia Green programmes offer for participants that they will teach and guide them through all 10 “Eco Steps” to Sustainable Accommodation, but they choose the right pace for themselves. Certificate Dalmatia Green for 5 “eco steps” is the beginning; with 7 or 8 “eco steps” they will receive the Dalmatia Green PLUS certificate and by filling in 9 or 10 “eco steps” they will become Dalmatia Green PRO-fessional.

3.5. Comparison of the qualification systems

While there is a state institution behind EcoDomus Istria, in the other three cases non-for-profit organisations, cluster or association, which might have relevance in resource allocation. In Table 1 I compare four eco qualification systems. At the qualification the questions are asked with different details, so I looked at the criteria to be met by groups of topics. It is clearly visible that three of them have stricter

conditions. I could highlight that just in two Hungarian cases or systems the location is a basic criteria, which means the facility should be located in the vicinity of protected values. The green building is a requirement is in two cases, the “Hellebore” Eco-accommodation qualification and Green Dalmatia. It is clear that the criteria of Green Dalmatia are the most permissive. When I got here I started looking for the reasons and try to find explanation.

Table 1: Comparison of four eco-labelling systems by category

CERTIFICATION/ CRITERIA	ECODOMUS (ISTRIA)	GREEN DALMATIA	“Hellebore” Eco- accommodation qualification	Eco- lodge system
MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION	X		X	X
WATER	X	X	X	X
WASTE	X	X	X	X
RECOVERY & REUSE OF RAINWATER		X	X	
ENERGY, RENEWABLE ENERGY	X	X	X	X
HYGIENE (environmental friendly product)	X		X	
INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR	X		X	X
LOCATED IN THE VICINITY OF PROTECTED VALUES			X	X
GREEN BUILDING		X	X	
MAINTENANCE, CLEANING AND DISINFECTION	X	X	X	
NOISE AND LIGHT POLLUTION	X		X	
LOCAL VALUES	X		X	X
FOOD AND DRINK	X	X	X	X
MOBILITY, CAR-FREE ACCESSIBILITY	X		X	
SOCIAL COMMITMENT	X		X	

Source: edited by the author

At present, the public system does not allow for the separation of 80% of waste, and citizens are not able to compost, as biological waste bins do not exist at all. In region Dalmatia (Croatia) green mobility is very limited, accommodation facilities are not accessible by public transport, especially those in the hinterland of Dalmatia, bicycle paths are not well decorated and marked, in the city almost none exist, and those are mostly parked by cars. These are all obstacles that can have a negative impact on the willingness to qualify even in cases when tourism service providers are dedicated towards responsible tourism.

Organic food supply is limited due to a lack of organic producers and it is also problem in all cases investigated. The food safety regulations for hospitality industry are rigorous and small accommodation service providers also face the same. Providing a declaration of compliance or appropriate supporting documentation causes a problem. On the supply side it is difficult to provide a wide range of locally sourced products – i.e. a product which has been caught or grown within 100 km of the tourist accommodation – because a common platform, channel or network that connects the stakeholders is weak or missing.

Another surprising result is connected to the criterion “management and communication”. If a tourist accommodation actively takes measures, for example, to use renewable energy sources, save energy and water, to reduce waste, to improve the local environment, it should give information to guests on environmental policy, objectives and actions. It is not a realistic expectation of smaller service providers - which are often family businesses - to have paper-based detailed action plans concerning their future measures for environment consciousness, although it is a criterion in the case of the Eco-accommodation qualification called “Hellebore”.

Local values and social commitment are in close contact. One or both are missing criteria at Dalmatia Green and Eco-lodge system. It should not be forgotten, on the other hand, that in the latter case only those accommodation providers can apply who are qualified village hosts, in which a great emphasis is placed on the organisation and promotion of programmes based on local values, and so the criteria mentioned above are met without having to demonstrate them again.

All those actors who participate in the promotion of a destination must take into consideration the technological development of our time and the trend that the primary source of information for tourists is the Internet (ZÁVODI – SZABÓ 2018). (According to TOMAS LJETO (2017) Tourism Institute, in 2017 in Croatia the proportion of tourists using the Internet as the primary source of information was 44%.) This makes it reasonable to look at the four qualification systems also from the aspect of the provision of information via this channel. Unfortunately, only one of them (Dalmatia Green) has a separate website with relevant and upgraded information content. It is also available by social media where information is shared not only about its programmes and best practices but also the accommodations that it qualified. As regards the South Transdanubian systems, more accurate information about the qualification systems is available through the website of the patrons, i.e. the association and the alliance. Information about the EcoDomus qualification and the qualified private accommodations can be read on the website of Istria Tourist Board. It is important on the demand side that in three cases (South Transdanubian Eco-lodge system, EcoDomus, Dalmatia Green) the contact details of the qualified accommodation providers can be found on the websites mentioned above, i.e. they use online marketing tools, thereby alleviating communication for tourists focusing on environmental responsibility, and creating a bridge between the service providers and the potential demand.

Conclusion

As regards the Eco-accommodation qualification (South Transdanubia, Hungary), the accommodations in our examination possess an eco-qualification, furthermore they are after the repeated qualification as well, so the selected tourism service providers can share very useful experiences concerning the system of criteria that is an essential element in the responsibility of the tourism sector. During the interviews several obstacles were detected that makes it more difficult for accommodation providers to be dedicated to responsible tourism, also, criticisms were stated concerning the qualification system, the deficiencies of the systems and the problematic contradiction in them.

It is a voluntary certification scheme. The cost of applying for certifications is relatively low, while tourism certification bodies sometimes create excessive entry barriers by raising the standards.

Tourism service providers' limited knowledge about the certification is considered a major factor inhibiting the adoption of certifications. The negligible marketing about labelling is a hindering factor in many ways. Standards like Framework for Responsible Environmental Marketing Communication can offer basic guidance for changes also in the area of tourism (ICC 2010). The transparency of the verification process and simplified, intelligible criteria would be more advantageous for the applicants. Guests should be provided with appropriate information about the service provider, the natural and cultural environment and about the adequate behaviour.

During the research it turned out that in Hungarian cases the criteria system must be changed at some points. Because of the differences between the capacities of accommodations it is essential to reconsider or change some terms regarding their necessity. Revision of the scope and definitions of the current criteria is desirable.

The use of certification schemes in the tourism industry has to be transparent, as well as providing detailed information to the public. Satisfying this – environmental friendly, eco-conscious – demand is increasingly seen by the tourism industry as a key to success. The long-term value of labelling systems is the approach of both the demand and supply side of tourism sector to responsible tourism.

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