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**Article**

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## **ECOROM – INDICATORS SYSTEM PROPOSAL OF QUALITY CERTIFICATION IN ECOTOURISM**

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### **Abstract**

Open to trends in tourism development on European and world level, Romanian tourism improves under its impact, developing specific recognition criteria at global level, regarding the quality of services and cultural and natural attractions it owns. Developing a set of indicators based on performance which can be integrated into the ecotourism certification, provides an objective and scientific assessment of implementation and development of programs in tourism, taking into consideration their efficiency and, on this basis, embracing appropriate strategic decisions. Starting from the international experience in the field of certification, it was synthesized, in this paper, a set of core indicators that can be implemented in every local community, as a first step in the process of certification of the services offered to tourists. There were analyzed over 30 international certification systems, aiming both common points but also differentiation elements. Combining the international experience in this field with national specificities, a set of indicators is proposed, this paper, that may lead to a national certification system of ecotouristic services within a local community. The deployment of such a system in the tourism branch represents a first step for quality services, for the modernization of the Romanian tourism in accordance to some of the newest trends existing in the world: the requirements of sustainable tourism.

**Keywords:** certification, indicator system, ecotourism, sustainable development, sustainable tourism.

**JEL Classification:** L15, L83, Q20, Q50,

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### **Introduction**

In the tourism sector, both natural and anthropogenic element plays an important role in the progress of the activity. They form the essential element which differentiates tourist services from any other type of services, without which this sector could not exist. Any sort of tourism is based either on natural resources (eg seaside tourism, spa etc.) or on the anthropogenic ones (eg cultural or religious tourism, etc.). Under these circumstances, in ecotourism field, the natural environment plays an important role, for several reasons. First of all, it is an attraction point that seduces tourists to that particular destination due to its unaltered landscape. Secondly, eco-tourism implies a bilateral relationship between nature and tourism services. In ecotourism field, the touristic services (accommodation, food,

recreation), gain another value and constitute attraction elements for the tourists, especially for the foreign ones. In Romania, the tourism that runs in natural areas, suffers from several points of view. The reduced quality of services offered to tourists is a first negative aspect to be mentioned. Secondly, the national legislation fails in the area of protecting the natural and anthropogenic environment. A third negative aspect is the practice called "Greenwashing". This refers to the companies that call themselves "sustainable," "ecological", green ", " responsible ", " ecoturistic "but they actually do not meet the generally accepted standards, or are in contradiction with these concepts. (P. Nistoreanu. Ecotourism and Rural Tourism, 2006).

The issue of certification of ecotourism and sustainable tourism in the quality of tourism services have been addressed by the following authors: Martha Honey (Ecotourism & Certification: Setting standards in practice, Island Press, Washington D.C., 2002), Font X. (Environmental certification in tourism and hospitality: progress, process and prospects, *Tourism Management* 23 (2002) 197-205, Elsevier Ltd.), Blumer A. (Ecotourism certification in Romania – a tool for nature conservation and responsible marketing – scientific paper Global tourism Conference 2007, Oslo, Norway), Sanabria R. (Quebec+5: Enhancing benefits and addressing challenges of sustainable tourism certification, scientific paper Global tourism Conference 2007, Oslo, Norway), Eriksen J. (Blue Flag and Green key Eco-labels, scientific paper Global tourism Conference 2007, Oslo, Norway).

Most certification programs in ecotourism presented by them are created to assess environmental performance, economic and socio-cultural tourism products, but in most cases they do not quantify these features; as it will be shown in this paper some of them are limited to an assertion of principles or conditions to be met and / or a degree of achievement. Fundamental success of certification in ecotourism lies in the ability to demonstrate tangible results and continuously improving the sustainability criteria in line with tourism development and sustainability issues. Achieving these objectives involves developing a set of indicators based on results or performance, to provide tangible information in order to increase credibility and value of certification.

### **1. Certification - conceptual clarifications**

For those who do their utmost to meet the ecoturistic standards, the companies that misemploy the ecotourism term are a disloyal competition, that jeopardizes the credibility of the entire industry. A good solution to identify the business that truly practices ecotourism or any other form of sustainable tourism, is certification. This is a way of certifying that an activity or a product meets certain standards.

Certification is defined as a voluntary process that evaluates, audits and provides written assurances that a facility, a product, process or service achieves specific standards. A commercial logo is being offered for those who meet or exceed basic standards (Honey, 2002). Certification is one of the tools that motivates tourism businesses to improve their economic, social and environmental performances, while being rewarded, in tangible or intangible way, for these achievements.

Certification in tourism services and especially in the ecoturistic field must achieve some very important issues including:

- It has to play an educational role;

- It is an important mean of reducing operating costs by saving resources or promoting new technologies, more efficient ones, without diminishing the quality of services;
- On economic level, ecoturistic certification is acting, through its implementation process, towards easy access to the financial and technical assistance for the businesses that promote new technologies;
- Certification is an effective marketing tool, because consumers are trained to recognize credible brands with a certain notoriety. Thus, eco-certification is a sine-qua-non condition in the selection, promotion and conservation of eco-destination (Hornoiu and Zamfir 2008).
- certification leads both to the increase of the industry standards concerning health, safety, environmental, social stability and also the reduce of the environmental protection costs, by potecting the environment and limiting the negative impact on it, by protecting the culture and the local socio-human values ( Tuclea and others, 2008);

From what was mentioned above, one can notice the importance of touristic services certification and the impact / influence it has on the economic and social environment, but also on the natural framework. The chances offered by the certification are very broad, offering a series of benefits for the local communities and for the tour operators in areas that implement such a system.

## **2. Global certification systems**

Among the first tourism certification systems, located in the XX th century, that measured the quality of the touristic product (usually food and accommodation) but also some aspects like health, hygiene and safety, there are included: The American Motoring Association System (AAA) , The Mobile Five Stars in the United States, the Michelin Guide in Europe and The Five Stars certifying quality hotels.

During the past years, the negative impact of tourism on the environment manifested globally, a good part of destinations losing their position on the market. Consequently, most of the stakeholders involved in tourism, started promoting the three dimensions of sustainable development, indicating them as best practices. According to these objectives, by focusing the touristic certifications systems on quality, health, hygiene, safety and on the three dimensions of sustainable development (environmental, socio-cultural and economic) the growth of the satisfaction of tourists has being seeked after. According to the World Tourism Organization assessments, there are now over 80 certification programs and sustainable tourism certification worldwide, that includes aspects regarding the impact of tourism on economic and socio-cultural environment. Most of the programs assess accommodation, and only a few certify divisions and other aspects of the tourism industry.

Among the most important systems of certification of quality tourist services are the following systems:

- Blue Flag is an exclusive ecolabel awarded to beaches and ports that meet certain requirements in areas like : education and environmental information - warning in cases of pollution, information on sensitive natural areas, at least five environmental education activities on the beach etc.; Water quality - compliance with EU Directive on bathing water, there must be no discharge of wastewater into the beach area, emergency plans in case of accidental pollution, etc.; environmental management -

the existence of a territorial facility plan, daily cleaning of beaches, safe access to beach, etc., security and services - to warn people about the quality of services, lifeguard and rescue teams in sufficient number, source of drinking water etc. Currently, over 3,000 beaches and ports in 36 countries in Europe, Africa, America, New Zealand received this certificate in 2007.

- European Union Ecolabel (European Flower) certified tourist accommodation services and spaces for camping in the European Union and other European countries. Website contains useful information for the interested companies, including a self-control tool.

Besides all these, there are a number of certification systems for Africa, America, Asia and the Pacific area. They put a multitude of forms of organization. To summarize them, the situation worldwide is as it follows. There are 8 certification systems internationally accepted (EMAS - Eco-management and audit scheme, Green Globe, ISO 14001, Eco-friendly hotels worldwide, Ecotel, Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System, Audubon Signature Cooperative Program, the Blue Flag. Besides these certification systems, there are 50 other certification programs with a regional or national impact. In an analysis of forms of organization and leadership, the graphs below are eloquent to see the importance of certification programs among the tourist profile organizations.

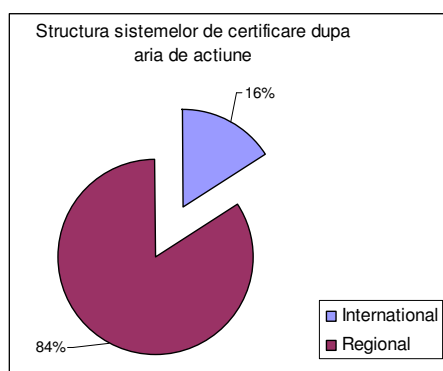


Fig. 1 System certification structure after area of action

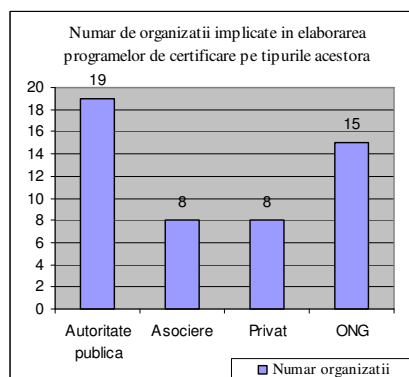


Fig. 2 System of certification number by type of organisation

Source: based on information collected by the authors, 2006-2008

From the above graphs one can notice the more regional nature of these certification programs. This signifies a very fragmented activity, difficult to unify into a coherent program, applicable to a particular touristic sector or to a certain component of the touristic activity. From Fig. no. 2 note the involvement of various types of organizations in developing certification programs, with an almost equal share of those developed by NGOs and public authorities. This means a certain level of interest from governments for the touristic activity and a permanent concern to improve it. Programs conducted in association are lower because the number of problems arising in any association between two entities, often with different interests - the public and private environment. A small number of certification programs were conducted in private because of the reduced possibilities of

implementing them in real economic environment. Schemes run by public authorities may present a mandatory character for the operators in that area, and those carried out by NGOs have the advantage of support by both private and public environment, and a higher acceptance rate.

### 3. The typology of certification programs

The complexity of tourism is reflected in the existence of certification systems and in their different ways. However, most of them have some similar components, such as: voluntary implementation, the existence of clearly defined standards and criteria, evaluation, recognition and granting the use of a logo, a regular audit for the renewal of certification, continuous improvement, transparency and the existence of participatory mechanisms to define standards.

The technical aspects of ensuring fairness and objectivity of the certification system can be very complicated. There are a variety of definitions and rules that are accepted by most certifying authority, among which:

- Non-Discrimination - the certification must be accessible to all applicants who meet standards;
- The certifying authority must make decisions and make fair assessments based on clearly defined criteria;
- the Certifying organization should allow participation of all parties involved in the work to be assessed, in accordance with the content and the operation of the certification system;
- The person who assesses a business or activity for certification must be different from the entity that decided to grant certification and both should be independent of that which gives advice to business qualification for certification;
- The certifying authority should not be influenced in its decisions by various trade and financial pressures;
- The certifying authority should mention, as an important contractual clause, re-applying for certification after a certain period of time, as a measure of protection against the practice of "greenwashing"
- Developing procedures to revoke certification for review and change of the criteria.

The important differences between the certification programs covers: the parties involved in the verification process, the certification system based on process versus performance, minimum standards certification versus ecolabel; multiple levels against accepted / rejected.

Certification presents itself in other forms of manifestation; among them, we should mention the process certification in a company and the performance certification of such a firm. Thus, the most significant process certification systems within a company are ISO 9000 and ISO 14001. These systems must show continuous improvement processes from one year to another by comparing their performance. Thus, two hotels can be certified ISO 14001, even if one has an excellent system of water conservation and the other may have a bad use of it, as long as they show their performance improvement from one year to another. This is a fundamental problem of the system based on the certification process: a company may be certified if it has a mechanism to ensure that the management system is improving constantly in relation with itself. In other words, the company receives a certification of the efforts and not of its actual performance. Consequence of these effects,

the product certification based on process should not be given a logo, because there is no guarantee of product conformity with quality and the environment criteria. Only the company or business is being certified, and not what is - for tourism - accommodation in a hotel room, food or transport.

The performance based system certify whether a company or activity is consistent with some objective criteria of a particular standard. In this way, it allows direct comparison between two companies, specifying which one has a better environmental performance. In most cases, certification schemes based on the results match small and medium enterprises, which amount to 80-90% of business travel worldwide. These systems requires much lower implementation costs than ISO14001 standard; they include environmental, economic and socio-cultural criteria, involving a diversity of stakeholders; they may grant logos that reflect different levels of performance.

#### **4. ECOROM Indicators System**

This system of indicators (ECOROM), proposed by the authors, was conducted in several stages, based on a detailed research - carried out between 2006-2008, and the global existing certification. Its importance derives from the usefulness of these indicators for traders who are interested in monitoring economic and performance activity, profits growth and general level of satisfaction of clients. Also, this system of indicators can be used by local authorities to measure and act accordingly in order to minimize socio-cultural damage and maximize economic benefits of the local communities.

At the general level of national tourist destinations, the implementation of this system of indicators, in the first place, and the necessary measures to bring results at a optimum level, secondly, help to increase the quality of the services and the level of customer satisfaction. This way they ensure the premises of sustainable development of tourist destinations in accordance with the principles of ecotourism.

In the first stage the authors have defined 60 potential indicators, most of them common in the 38 systems of certification programs in tourism that were analysed. They were classified into primary and secondary, based on six key issues (environmental, economic, socio-cultural, quality, staff training, information for visitors and safety, health and security).

In the second stage, the list was reduced to 30 indicators, using SMART methodology selection. Thus, a certain amount of potential indicators have not met one or more SMART test criteria (Specific, Mesurable, Achievable, Reliable, Time-bound), which means that the indicator should be: specific - it is connected to a single objective, and stakeholders should consider it representative; measurable - data on this are available and can be used to measure changes; achievable - measurements and deadlines, turned into costs, are set realistically; sure - the same conclusions will result if the measurements are made by different people in similar circumstances; measurable in time.

In the last stage was developed the final set of indicators based on performance. This selection was consistent with the conceptual framework of tourism and criteria such as: selection of indicators which measure results at the expense of the ones based on the process; choosing, wherever possible, quantitative indicators, quantifiable; identifying indicators that facilitate comparisons between certification systems and can be integrated both national and regional level. In view of the current, there was developed a set of 21

indicators (11 primary and 10 secondary) whose determination provide the guarantee of ecotouristic services in accordance with the requirements of sustainable development and quality standards, in terms of quality demanded by consumers (Hornoiu 2008) .

The set of indicators developed plays in a synthetic speech, statistico-mathematics, information on various aspects of certification in ecotourism field, useful information to measure the phenomenon and its effects, to anticipate evolution trends on this field. In conjunction with these elements, but also with the side of business that it reflects, the proposed indicators are presented in a wide range:

- Primary indicators - measuring environmental, social and economic key aspects;
- Secondary indicators - measuring what matters and strengthen the primary ones;

The performance indicators proposed are first of all quantitative because they are easier to compare between different certification programs for ecotourism. Most indicators have been proposed based on results, with few exceptions - issues that require complicated measuring use of expensive foreign experts - They have preferred indicators based on processes.

**Final list of result-based indicators**

Table 1

Objective	Criteria	Type	Indicator
<b>A. MINIMIZING ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE</b>			
1. Reducing the quantity of solid waste			
A1	P1	Kilograms of waste/tourist day or tourist	
A1	S1	Percent of total waste which is reused and/or recycled	
2. Minimizing contamination through waste elimination			
A2	P2	Kilograms of chemical products used/tourist day or tourist	
A2	S2	Percent of biodegradable products used in total chemical products	
A2	S3	Elimination of solid waste	
3. Energy saving			
A3	P3	Total energy consumed/tourist day or tourist	
A3	S4	Percent of renewable energy in total energy	
A3	S5	Total CO <sub>2</sub> offset from total CO <sub>2</sub> output.	
4. Water saving			
A4	P4	Total volume of drinking water consumed/tourist day or tourist	
A4	S6	Residual water is treated accordingly	
<b>B. MINIMIZING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DAMAGE</b>			
5. Behavior code			
B5	P5	The behavior code is integrated in management operations	
6. Contributing to the development of local community			
B6	P6	Percent of income from yearly contributions of total yearly income	
B6	S7	Newly established businesses and/or promoted personnel	
7. Stakeholder Consultation			
B7	P7	Dialogue and consultation with local community and other stakeholders	



C: MAXIMIZING ECONOMIC BENEFITS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES		
8. Hiring personnel from the local community		
C8	P8	Percent of personnel from the local community hired from total personnel
C8	S8	Percent of total wages paid to personnel from the local community
9. Purchase of local goods and services		
C9	P9	Percent of purchase of local goods and services in total purchases
D: OPERATIONAL AND QUALITY MANAGEMENT		
10. Integrating ecotourism in management operations		
D10	P10	Company ecotourism policy
D10	S9	Management systems regarding ecotourism principles
D10	S10	Good ecotourism practices implemented by the personnel
11. Maximizing ecotourist satisfaction		
D11	P11	Ecotourist satisfaction

Source: drafted by the authors, 2008

The development of the indicators, their diversity are subject to availability of primary sources of data collection, the methods and suitable working techniques. The proposed indicators are calculated using an integrated group of statistical information, which provide comparable, reliable and consistent data. Thus, there were especially used simple indicators or base indicators, that have been obtained starting directly from the statistical series which are formulated as average, percentage structure, frequency, etc.. and also synthetic or processed indicators - they relate to global aspects and include elements integrated on the factors that generate the phenomenon followed - starting from a series of data on which we can apply more complex methods of processing.

### Conclusions

As shown, more and more countries are concerned with the development and implementation of certification programs, the establishment of criteria and indicators to ensure an assessment of performances and results in this field, in order to establish minimum levels of requirements for recognition as a various touristic and ecotouristic activities. The results of this research are distinguished in comparison with previous theories and research, highlighting their importance for knowledge and practical applicability in the future through a proposed standard framework for the collection and use of data necessary to compile the indicators ECOROM which will harmonize the systems of certification in ecotourism, thereby providing opportunities for comparison between them. The examination of the achievements in the field, showed that, although remarkable progress has been made, there is still room for assuring the comparability of assessment systems and for the preparation of a representative set of indicators, simple, easy to use, which can allow the determination and improvement of performance, contributing to final analysis, defining the objectives of ecotourism and its constant conformation to changing environmental conditions.

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