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Standards and Benchmarking

Ecotourism historically has been somewhat hard to define. For a time, anyone operating outdoors could legitimately say they were an “ecotourism” activity, regardless of any thought to the local environment or native cultures they might negatively infringe upon.

After much discussion within this niche of the tourism industry, Ecotourism Australia set the definition for ecotourism as:

“Ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation, and conservation.”

Sustainability in tourism these days is rightfully a hot topic. With such issues as global climate change weighing heavy on the agendas of governments and industry associations alike, ecotourism operators are presented with unique challenges when it comes to monitoring their impacts.

In managing their economic performance along side social/cultural and environmental concerns, sustainable operators take into consideration the triple bottom line of sustainability. Serious ecotourism operators should be concerned about the welfare of the local culture and environment they showcase to travellers. As many successful tourism operators have found, embracing sustainability can be very good for business and a fantastic industry leadership opportunity.

Eliminating wasteful business processes means wins for both the environment and the financial balance sheet. Investing in the area where the business is located by hiring locally and supporting local initiatives can link an ecotourism business as an essential part of the community. Communicating these genuine successes is ultimately a great marketing angle. In proactively managing these priorities, ecotourism operators step ahead of their competition and move actively down a path of sustainable development.

But what is there to guide them along the way? How do ecotourism businesses get help in setting goals and managing the many complex business decisions that arise from being a leader in sustainability? How do businesses communicate their achievements and position to their market? How can you tell an ecotourism operator is genuinely operating in a sustainable fashion, and not “greenwashing?” Standards underpin the credibility of a participant company and provide a backbone for the operations of an ecotourism company.

Naturally, there are marketing benefits involved by being a leader in sustainable ecotourism. Unfortunately, there is often the misconception about standards and their ability to draw new business for an operator. Simply going through the motions, using standards as a base, and expecting a logo to communicate your commitment to sustainable development will not derive much value from a business perspective.

Businesses that are unwilling to make fundamental changes to their operations, innovate, and be leaders in sustainable development will ultimately have nothing worthwhile to communicate to their market—standard or no standard.

Successful operators seek out standards as integral tools to help them inform their business practices. Standards are a way for them to quantify their actions, and prove that they are not “greenwashing.” They are merely one part of an overall marketing strategy, not the be all and end all.

The Eco Certification Program that originated with Ecotourism Australia was combined with elements from the latest Green Globe Benchmarking performance system for delivery to the worldwide travel and tourism market. It became the “Green Globe International Ecotourism Standard”, a robust and well-respected framework that was developed by industry, for industry.

In combining efforts in such a way, a reputable ecotourism standard was given a strong worldwide delivery vehicle. Specifically, the International Ecotourism Standard addresses accommodation, tours, and attractions.

Each one of these sectors has its own indicators that are specific to the business type. For example, an ecotourism accommodation will perform the following actions:

- Enact a sustainability policy for their company’s operations
- Monitor key data for benchmarking in such areas as energy and water consumption, solid waste production, community commitment, customer service staff, contribution to conservation, paper/cleaning/pesticide product usage
- Track optional indicators such as greenhouse gas emissions and carbon offsetting initiatives (Optional indicators can, at the discretion of the operator, include other measures specific to the unique nature of their business.)

This benchmarking data is submitted yearly to Green Globe for benchmarking under the International Ecotourism Standard. The goal of this practice is year-on-year improvement in the areas being monitored.

Participants benchmarking under the International Ecotourism Standard are given assistance in the way of templates and guidelines for writing their sustainability policy, an automated spreadsheet tool to aid in data collection, and online submission software. Once benchmarked, the participant is free to use the logo appropriate to their status (e.g. Benchmarked Ecotourism Attraction).

Beyond merely using a logo, the participant company can also quote many of their achievements and initiatives for use in their marketing material and presentations. For example, this strategy might include reference to:

- achieving best practice in areas indicated in the benchmark report
- giving factual information on local conservation efforts they have sponsored
- local community/cultural training initiatives
- communicating their commitment to greenhouse gas reduction targets and the path they will take to achieve these targets

Together with usage of the logo as a comprehensive effort, such communications will be far more effective in reaching a market of responsible travellers.

By embodying sustainable ethos as an ecotourism operator, a business can demonstrate their actions by participating in a robust framework such as the Green Globe International Ecotourism Standard. Their achievements through their involvement can then be effectively used in their marketing collateral to reach an ideal market of like-minded patrons.

Case study: Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony

Green Globe and the Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony

The Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony has become popular as an ecotourism attraction because visitors have the chance to see blue penguins in their natural environment. In a world of increasing environmental awareness it is becoming very important in the minds' of travellers to view wildlife in such a way. The OBPC is privileged to have the penguins nesting where they do and to have the opportunity to view them. This privilege brings with it a huge responsibility; we are responsible first and foremost for the welfare of the penguins. The responsibility extends to a number of aspects of their welfare. We must ensure that the penguins can live and breed successfully without any impacts from the tourism operation, it is also vitally important that the environment in which they live is taken care of.

The breeding success of the blue penguins at the OBPC is easily monitored through weekly nest checks both at the Quarry colony where we have public visitation and at another colony where there is no public access. This second colony is our control site where we can compare all aspects of the penguin life cycle. After analysing the data gathered at both sites I can guarantee that our activities at the Quarry site are not having a negative impact on the penguins. We can be very proud of this fact and continue to inform our visitors of this. The OBPC wants visitors to take away with them memories of an enjoyable experience but also knowledge of conservation issues relating to the penguins and know that they have viewed the penguins without causing them any disturbance.

Ensuring the penguins' environment is taken care of is where Green Globe standards become important. By collecting benchmarking data under the International Ecotourism Standard we have a way of measuring our environmental performance, which will benefit not only the local environment and community but also has benefits globally. The OBPC recently became benchmarked and achieved best practice results in ten of our indicators. Through benchmarking we are able to clearly define where our strengths and weaknesses are environmentally. It shows where we need to work harder to improve our performance.

As this is our first time submitting data for benchmarking it now gives us our own baseline to work on and improve our operations. Year-to-year going forward the goal will be to continue to improve, particularly in areas where we rated below best practice, examples of which are Customer Service Staff and Contribution to Conservation.

We have begun organising training courses for those staff not already formally trained in customer service. Our target for our Contribution to Conservation is to achieve baseline of 15% or better. This will be achieved through providing monetary

investment or in-kind contributions to local charities, examples of which being the Katiki Point Penguin Charitable Trust and the Yellow-Eyed Penguin Trust. The primary goal of the Katiki Point Trust is to rehabilitate sick and injured penguins, particularly Yellow-Eyed Penguins.