

***Attitudes and Perception of Destination Certification
Towards Sustainable Tourism Development***

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism has been a topic of discussion for decades, but it is more relevant now than ever. Prior to COVID-19, many tourist destinations were grappling with the negative impacts of mass tourism. The global pandemic has caused international travel to pause temporarily, allowing certain tourism hotspots a much-needed break. However, without addressing the issue with appropriate measures, the crowds will return as will the consequences. Many destinations have taken the opportunity to reassess their sustainability practices by introducing improved destination management frameworks with sustainability strategies as the overarching theme of their recovery plan. Policy makers, destination managers, and tourism experts in the public and private sector are constantly seeking effective tools to better manage tourism and destination development in a sustainable manner. Certification is one of many tools available. Although not a new concept, it is well-known yet widely debated.

Destination certification and assessment is an emerging trend, with more tourism destinations striving to become certified. There is also an increase in the number of ecolabels to choose from. However, tourism destinations are complex in nature, with multiple stakeholders and interest groups involved. Previous research has addressed challenges and opportunities affiliated with destination certification, but rarely from the perspective of tourism stakeholders in certified destinations. This study aims to address the impact of destination certification on tourism and sustainable development through the perspective of local tourism stakeholders in destination's that have achieved certification.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, destination certification, ecolabels, certification scheme, attitudes of destination stakeholders

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Abbreviations

AER – Association of Ecotourism in Romania
DMO – Destination Management Organization
ETIS – European Tourism Indicator System
GSTC – Global Sustainable Tourism Council
IPA – Importance-Performance Analysis
NGO – Non-Government Organization
SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals
SI – Sustainability Indicator
SIS – Systematic Indicators System
STI – Sustainable Tourism Index
UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme
UNWTO – United Nations World Trade Organization
WTO – World Tourism Organization

Glossary

Accreditation – formal declaration by a neutral third party that the certification program is administered in a way that meets the relevant norms or standards of certification program.

Certification – voluntary, third party assessment, through an audit, of a tourism enterprise for conformity to a standard.

Certified destination – a destination that has achieved certification and complies with the sustainability standards on the certification scheme

Certification scheme – certification system related to specified products, to which the same specified requirements, specific rules and procedures apply.

Criteria – baseline standards for sustainability in travel and tourism.

Destination – the main destination of a tourism trip is defined as the place visited that is central to the decision to take the trip. See also purpose of a tourism trip

Ecolabel – a label given to a product that certifies that it has been produced in accordance with certain environmental standards.

Overtourism – tourist destination that has reached its limits on the amount of visitors causing deterioration of the quality of life and experience to locals and visitors.

Standards – a set of standards or other types of sustainability systems

Sustainability Indicator – individual credit scoring variables that provides specific measurements related to sustainability.

Sustainable development – development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable tourism – tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future.

Tourism stakeholder – individuals or groups in tourism who depend on the organisation to fulfil their own goals and on whom, in turn, the organisation depends.

1. Introduction

While the entire tourism industry is headed for a restart due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainability and resiliency is at the forefront of recovery plans. To avoid mass tourism post-pandemic, there is increasing pressure on destinations to follow sustainability guidelines and practices. More than ever, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), policy makers and tourism stakeholders are seeking the best tools and practices for tourism and sustainable development. While there is no simple answer to how the entire industry can become more sustainable, there are several solutions that have been adopted to combat the negative consequences associated with tourism, including certification schemes.

Sustainable tourism certification is not an unfamiliar concept, yet it continues to be a topic of debate. Certification is known as the process of assuring that an organization or product has met a set a voluntary set of standards (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). It was developed by the private sector in response to external pressure, providing guidelines on corporate social responsibility standards and practices (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). Certification schemes have the potential to reduce the negative impacts of tourism by holding those in the industry accountable, while also providing additional benefits to the organizations that meet the recognized standards (Font, Sanabria, & Skinner, 2003). However, there are different factors associated with each certification body, such as: varying goals, criteria, services, benefits, scope, partners, and level of transparency (NatureFriends International, 2016). While some certifications schemes are available internationally, others are regional. Not all ecolabels are accredited either, which can result in “greenwashing”.

While there are a growing number of certification programs available, there is dispute on whether certification schemes are as effective as advertised. Destination certification has been criticized for its many downfalls, such as the oversimplification of indicators without addressing critical mass at a local level (Gkoumas, 2019). With the plethora of ecolabels and programmes available, not to mention the cost and time commitment required, it poses the question whether destination certifications are an effective tool for sustainable tourism. The research aims to address that exact question. Are destination certification schemes an effective tool for tourism and sustainable development? Rather than measure and study the quantitative data before and after certification, we chose to analyze the impact of destination certification based on the attitudes and perception of tourism stakeholders within various certified destinations. A holistic approach to

sustainable management of tourism requires the involvement of tourism stakeholders throughout the supply chain, from decision-makers to local experts. Thus, the objectives of the study were to:

- Study the relationship between destination certifications and sustainable tourism development from the perspective of tourism stakeholders
- Determine the attitudes that tourism stakeholders have regarding sustainable destination certification
- Identify what motivates a destination to become certified
- Address the challenges and opportunities associated with destination certification and assessment

Although this is a complex topic that will require further research, the aim of the study is to provide a preliminary study and insight to the impacts of destination certification on sustainable tourism development from the perspective of tourism stakeholders in 7 certified destinations: Rottneest Island, Australia; Snaefellsnes Peninsula, Iceland; Thompson Okanagan, Canada; Thredbo, Australia; Vail, USA; Teton County/Jackson Hole, USA; Kaikoura; New Zealand. These destinations are certified through one of three certification bodies, namely EarthCheck, Biosphere Responsible Tourism, and Green Destinations.

The next chapter of this dissertation is a literature review based on previous studies to provide an overview of certification schemes and sustainable tourism, the perception of destination certification, as well as the hypotheses of our research. The third chapter will discuss the methodology of the research, including the type of study and design, the sampling method, and the data analysis. This type of study and design was chosen based on literature review on previous studies, particularly the study "Perception of residents about the impact of sports tourism on the community" conducted by González García, Añó Sanz, Parra Camacho and Calabuig Moreno (2018). Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the results and discussion, such as the demographic of respondents, the results of the research with in-depth analyzation of the data we obtained and testing of the hypotheses, as well as a discussion that shows our interpretation of the data in relations to the objectives of our study. Lastly, chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by reiterating of the importance of this research in the field of sustainable tourism, along with opportunities for further research and limitations to our study. Key stakeholder engagement is important, but many destinations have a top-down approach that may not involve destination stakeholders from various levels of

employment in the decision making and implementation process. This work is an opportunity to explore the perceived impact of certification schemes from those who interact with tourism daily, from policy makers to general staff. The conclusion addresses the gaps and challenges, as well as the motivations of destination certification. The innovation of this work will allow for ecolabels, DMOs, and decision makers to further assess the certification process, along with practical insight on how certification can be an optimal tool for sustainable tourism development when approached holistically.

2. Literature Review

The literature review addresses the complex characteristics of destinations, the components involved in eco-certification, as well as gaps and challenges identified by previous research. The overall perception of ecolabels and destination certification is also discussed. Included in this chapter is an outline of the 8 hypotheses of the study, which analyzes the relationship between destination certification and the perceived impacts, specifically motivation, attitudes, challenges, and benefits.

2.1 Destination Certification and Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability is at the forefront of dialogue amongst tourism professionals and academics and will continue to be relevant as the travel sector continues to grow. Despite the debate on the definition of sustainable tourism, there is consensus on the importance of reducing negative impact on people and the planet, while utilizing tourism as a catalyst for economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefit. According to Farrell and Twining-Ward (2004), the concept of sustainability is an idealized state, which results in the need of reconceptualizing the scope, tools and goals of sustainable tourism. Currently, practitioners worldwide seek practical tools and adoptable best practices. Oftentimes, sustainable development in tourism is argued to be the prerequisite of each destination in terms of long-term viability and distinction (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). As such, the surge of ecolabels creates evidence that there is demand for tools to provide guidance in meeting such sustainability goals. Ecolabels are known as a mark, seal, or written identification attached to products that provides specific ecological information that allows consumers to make comparisons with other similar products (UNEP, n.d.). Black and Crabtree (2007) describes eco-certification as a voluntary process that assesses, monitors, and provides assurance that an organization, product, or service

has met the minimal requirements. There are three main purposes of certification schemes in tourism, such as promoting the voluntary adoption of sustainability practices, increasing economic gains, and informing prospective tourists on the sustainability performance of the organization (Grapentin and Ayikoru, 2019). Thus, sustainability certification is recognized as a practical tool to enhance the overall quality of the tourism sector by reducing the negative impacts of tourism development while also providing competitive advantage (Font & Harris, 2004).

In the case of ecolabels in tourism, certification schemes are predominately used for certifying hotels and accommodation, tour operators, and tourism businesses. More frequently, the overwhelming negative impact from tourism, especially overtourism, has prompted interest in destination assessment and certification. According to Grapentin and Ayikoru (2019), destinations are complex structures that involve many stakeholders and interest groups, causing them to be more complicated to certify. The lack of simplicity is evident from the various definitions of a destination that currently exist. A tourism destination is defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as “the place visited that is central to the decision to take the trip” (UNWTO, n.d.). Murphy, Pritchard and Smith (2000) defines destinations as “the most central component of the tourism system”, where as Holloway (2016) describes tourism destinations as being either natural or constructed, but many are managed to some extent. Given the complex nature of destinations, it can be challenging when applying tourism sustainability to entire destinations. It is particularly difficult when the tourism system is constantly transforming, including the socio-cultural complexities of the local community, the instability of the global economic market, the dynamics of a destination’s lifecycle, as well as the changing trends of the tourism market (Faulkner & Russell, 1997).

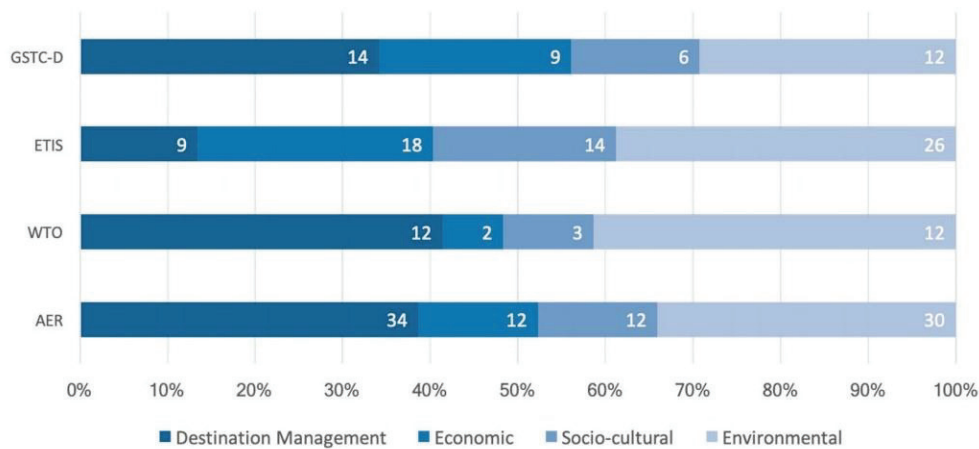
Despite the lack of consensus, a plethora of ecolabels for tourism have emerged. The Blue Flag Program (BFP) was introduced in 1985 as the first tourism ecolabel (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). Since then, 260 international ecolabels have been established with over 50 of them based in Europe, making it the continent with the most certification schemes (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). Several regional certification schemes also exist, along with fewer globally recognized certification bodies that have been accredited. As a result, numerous different systems have been developed to measure and monitor sustainability. A few examples include the Sustainable Tourism Index (STI), Global Sustainable Tourism Council Criteria (GSTC Criteria), Systematic Indicators System (SIS), the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), and SERVQUAL framework (Schianetz & Kavanagh, 2008). The Global Sustainable Tourism Council

indicators and criteria form the foundation of a certification scheme, which are then evaluated during an auditing process. Sustainability indicators (SIs) are known as quantitative tools that analyze and evaluate information to provide specific measurements related to sustainability (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). According to Crabtree and Bayfield (1998), indicators act as a tool for “quantifying change, identifying processes, and providing a framework for setting targets and monitoring performance”. SIs are mainly classified in three ways, depending on the context in which they are used, including assessing sustainability progress based on historical and present context, predicting future occurrences through the evaluation of resources, or to create positive impact through changes in sustainability policy or strategies (Torres-Delgado and Saarinen, 2013). Majority of the tourism certification schemes have adopted one or more of these concepts. Thus, indicators are a core element of the practice of measuring and monitoring sustainability practices against baseline standards.

However, based on research by Torres-Delgado and Palomeque (2014), there is often a lack of agreement on the number of performance indicators used within an indicator system. As a result, the indicators associated with each certification scheme vary, including the criteria, standards, and number of indicators. As an example, figure 2 shows a summary of four different assessment and certification schemes, including the GSTC Destination Criteria, also known as “GSTC-D”, the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS), World Tourism Organization (WTO)’s Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations, and a certification program from the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER) (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019).

Figure 2

Distribution of criteria between core objectives in selected schemes



Note: From “Destination Assessment and Certification: Challenges and Opportunities” by Grapentin, S. and Ayikoru, M., 2019, *Sustainability*, 11(13), 3691-3715 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/su11133691>).

Moreover, the effectiveness of SIs is heavily dependent on the quality and application of the indicators (Sirakaya, Jamal, & Choi, 2001). For effective tracking, indicators must be based on relevant policy, analytical soundness, and measurability (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). According to Akama, Maingi, and Camargo (2011), a multitude of indicators is considered and recognized in the development and implementation of certification schemes on a global scale. Previous research suggests that indicators act as a pathway for tourism businesses and organizations to implement sustainability principles into practice (Agyeiwaah, McKercher & Suntikul, 2017), but it should not be the only sustainability management tool. Due to the complexity and dynamic nature of tourism, sustainability indicator systems should be applied with an adaptive management approach (Schianetz and Kavanagh, 2008). As such, tourism destinations need to be viewed and studied as a complex adaptive system with complementing linear sustainability assessment tools (Schianetz and Kavanagh, 2008). However, it is argued that without measures or indicators in place for tourism development, the use of the term “sustainable” becomes jargon and meaningless (Butler, 1999).

Consequently, the process of applying sustainability practices in tourism remains a difficult task to accomplish. Previous studies indicate that the theoretical vagueness and inappropriate use of methodology is problematic when implementing certification schemes and programs (Torres-Delgado & López Palomeque, 2014). A study conducted

by Gkoumas (2019) to investigate the failure of the Mediterranean Standard for Sustainable Tourism (MSST) found that the criteria in the certification schemes was not balanced between the elements of sustainability, particularly in relations to destination management, economic sustainability, socio-cultural sustainability, and environmental sustainability, which is also evident in figure 2. This type of imbalance can impact the perception that locals, tourists, tourism operators and businesses have in relation to the benefits associated with each element. There are also limitations to analyzing destinations of different sizes and characteristics with the same inflexible set of indicators, particularly while including all relevant stakeholders from various sectors with different opinions involved in the process of certification (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019).

Overall, tourism destinations are unique and consist of various actors, stakeholders, and social groups that come from diverse backgrounds with different interests and issues involving governance and civic representation (Ryan, 2002). It is important to involve all those engaged in tourism, but that is not always the case. Previous academic studies have determined that applying sustainability to destinations proves to be challenging due to local governance and the conflict of interest and priorities of all stakeholders (Bramwell, 2011). Moreover, the implementation of such a certification system and evaluation of indicators often requires a level of expertise and substantial resources, which local authorities, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) often lack the necessary skills, particularly in remote or emerging destinations (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). As each destination is unique, it is important to consider socio-cultural context and ensure that the standards of an ecolabel, the certification process, implementation of knowledge, and regulation is aligned with the local practices of each destination (Duffy and Moore, 2011). Thus, using one common universal approach for destination certification while applying sustainable tourism standards with a top-down approach can be problematic, especially when excluding local tourism professionals and stakeholders from the process of implementation, development, and evaluation of SIs (Sasidharan, Sirakaya, & Kerstetter, 2002). As a result, following a more performative approach would allow the involvement of civic society, along with the public and private sector, in the decision making of tourism destinations (Jamal & Watt, 2011).

2.2 Perception of Destination Certification

Destination certification programs and application of sustainability standards, although not new, are an emerging trend in all parts of the world. There is no doubt that voluntary standards and ecolabels have introduced baseline standards and indicators that foster responsible tourism in terms of social, cultural, and environmental sustainability (Honey, 2002). However, despite the positive impact that ecolabels can have on economic advantage, environmental preservation, and protection of cultural heritage, the perceived benefits of destination certification schemes continue to be widely debated. Moreover, research has shown that uncertainty lies in the viability of sustainability standards offering optimal benefits for public authorities, local government, policy makers, and tourism businesses in developed and mature destinations (Goukmas, 2019). Sustainability certifications have also been criticized for the oversimplification of indicators to examine local tourism development (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). Since there isn't an agreed upon universal method, in many cases, it continues to be difficult for local destinations to measure sustainability related to tourism and to meet such sustainability criteria (Fernandez & Rivero, 2009). Although certification is recognized as an important tool in reducing the negative impacts of tourism, the achievement of destination certification and ecolabels as a method of applying sustainability continues to be controversial (Font and Harris, 2004).

Furthermore, the plethora of ecolabels that exist are often unfamiliar to tourists and many tourism stakeholders, causing confusion and unawareness (Naturefriends International, 2016). The implementation of sustainable tourism strategies and policies, along with tools such as certification schemes, are often decisions made by policymakers, destination managers and high-level stakeholders. According to Grapentin & Ayikoru (2019), given that assessments and certification are often conducted internally with decision-makers and managers, there is lack of awareness with those who are not involved in the process and the benefits are insufficiently communicated to the public. Without involving tourism stakeholders throughout the supply chain, local tourism professionals and businesses may not be as knowledgeable or aware of the benefits affiliated with destination certification. Local tourism professionals also often disregard the benefits affiliated with adopting a certification scheme and sustainability standards if there are impending issues at the forefront, such as seasonality, competition, high taxes, and increased land prices (Gkoumas, 2019). Although tourism professionals and researchers ensure that destination assessment and certification have the potential to enhance the role of sustainability in tourism (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019), it can be an even more powerful tool with all tourism stakeholders engaged and putting these benefits

into practice. Previous research conducted by Margaryan and Stensland (2017) suggest that motivations and beliefs about eco-certification, as well as economic and demographic characteristics, are factors that are associated with the adoption of eco-certification. Thus, raising awareness of certification schemes and their potential benefits to local tourism professionals, prospective tourists, and other destinations is a practical step that DMOs and certification bodies can take to utilize the benefits of destination certification (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019).

While many studies have examined the perception and attitude that locals and tourists have towards tourism and sustainability, fewer have focused particularly on the perception and attitude towards destination certification. Consequently, the focus of this study is to analyze the perception and attitudes of destination certification from various tourism stakeholders in certified destinations, particularly from those who are actively engaged in tourism daily. Although it is important to also understand how such certification schemes can better inform tourists and their perceived impact, due to the limitations of our research, it is not an objective of our research. Thus, another study should be conducted in the future to analyze the perceived impact and attitudes of destination certification from the lens of tourists. Understanding the perceived impact of destination certification on sustainable tourism can help DMOs and certification bodies create more awareness among tourism stakeholders and maximize certification as a tool for sustainable tourism development. Receiving feedback from currently certified destinations can also help encourage other destinations to participate in destination assessment and certification. According to (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019), the availability of hand-on support and experience from certified destinations can help attract inexperienced destinations, while also raising awareness of certification schemes to the public. As a result, analyzing the perception and attitudes that tourism stakeholders have towards destination certification can provide information on the effectiveness of such schemes, while also allowing DMOs and certification bodies to better assess their processes and the utilization of ecolabels for sustainable tourism development. Thus, the research will test the following hypotheses:

- H1:** There is a **positive** correlation between **positive attitude** towards destination certifications and the perceived **motivations** of becoming certified.
- H2:** There is a **positive** correlation between **positive attitude** towards destination certifications and **perceived benefits** of becoming certified.
- H3:** There is a **positive** correlation between **perceived benefits** and **motivations** of becoming certified.

- H4:** There is a **negative** correlation between **positive attitude** towards destination certifications and perceived **challenges** associated with destination certification.
- H5:** There is a **positive** correlation between **negative attitude** towards destination certifications and perceived **challenges** associated with destination certification.
- H6:** There is a **negative** correlation between **negative attitude** towards destination certifications and the perceived **motivations** of becoming certified.
- H7:** There is a **negative** correlation between **negative attitude** towards destination certifications and the perceived **benefits** of becoming certified.
- H8:** There is a **negative** correlation between perceived **challenges** associated with destination certification and the perceived **motivations** of becoming certified

The null hypothesis in this study states that there is no relationship between destination certification and the perceived impacts, including motivation, attitudes, challenges, and benefits.

3. Methodology

This method of research was chosen based on review of previous studies, such as the research conducted by Gonzalez-Garcia, Ano-Sanz, Parra-Camacho & Calabuig-Moreno (2018) on the “Perception of residents about the impact of sports tourism on the community.” The objective of our study is to analyze the relationship between destination certifications and sustainable tourism development from the perspective of tourism stakeholders, determine the attitudes that tourism stakeholders have regarding sustainable destination certification, identify what motivates a destination to become certified, and address the challenges and opportunities associated with destination certification and assessment.

3.1 Type of Study and Design

In this study, we chose to use a cross-sectional research method since we will not be manipulating variables and can determine prevalent characteristics in each population while studying the perceived impact of destination certification on sustainable tourism. A cross-sectional study, collecting data from a population over a single period, is the most optimal method as we will be studying the perception of a group of tourism stakeholders, as opposed to a longitudinal study that observes the same variables over

a period. Survey research, a quantitative approach, is the design of our study since it is the most effective method to obtain data from a sample of tourism stakeholders in various parts of the world. A self-administered questionnaire allowed us to collect information on the perspective of tourism stakeholders with relative ease in an efficient and confidential manner (see Appendix I). The surveys were administered digitally through Google Form to increase confidentiality and decrease response bias. This online survey allowed tourism stakeholders to answer the questions confidently knowing the survey won't be seen by their employers or colleagues, which would cause bias in their answers. Each survey was completed individually as opposed to a group setting so there is less pressure to answer questions according to their peers.

The questions were chosen based on literature review of destination certification on sustainable tourism. The entire survey consists of 13 questions, with sub-questions for number four, five, six, and seven, and takes approximately five minutes to complete. The first three questions pertain to awareness of four ecolabels that certify destinations, namely EarthCheck, Biosphere Responsible Tourism, Green Destinations, and TourCert, as well as the certification awarded to the respondent's destination. The questionnaire also has seven sub-questions evaluating the motives that may lead a destination to join a sustainable certification scheme, four sub-questions evaluating the challenges associated with joining a certification scheme, and 10 sub-questions evaluating the benefits associated with becoming a certified destination. These sub-questions were measured with a Five-point Likert Scale from "Completely Irrelevant" to "Extremely Relevant". The Likert scale was chosen because it is a research tool that has greater convergent and discriminatory efficiency (Maddox, 1985). Another 23 sub-questions were asked pertaining to participant's attitudes towards achieving sustainability certification as a destination, which were also measured with a Five-point Likert Scale, from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". The last six questions asked for personal information of the respondent, including age, level of education, gender, the destination they represent, as well as their current role and sector.

As a result, this quantitative research strategy allows us to generate data that can be used to quantify the tourism stakeholder's attitude towards destination certification and the impact it has on sustainable tourism, as well as their familiarity on ecolabels, while generalizing results to understand the perspective of a wide range of respondents from various destinations and tourism sectors.

3.2 Sampling Method

A sample of tourism stakeholders from various destinations with different levels of involvement in tourism was selected to provide insight on the perception of destination certification. To begin the sampling method, we first examined internationally recognized ecolabels that certify destinations globally, as opposed to ecolabel that are region specific (see Appendix II). Thus, we focused on destinations certified by EarthCheck, Biosphere Responsible Tourism and Green Destinations since all three ecolabels have certified destinations around the globe and are accredited. Another internationally recognized ecolabel we considered was TourCert, but we chose not to focus on it because all their certified destinations are concentrated in Germany as opposed to globally. Once the certification bodies were determined, we identified destinations that had achieved full certification, omitting those where certification is still in progress.

Afterwards, we analyzed the characteristics of each destination with the intention to choose those with comparable traits, including spoken language, level of development, population, geographical size, as well as the years and level of certification. Although the ideal situation should be to compare destinations that are identical except in the variable we want to use for comparison, it was difficult given the low number of certified destinations. Since it is impossible to compare identical destinations, we chose mature destinations that are similar in the level of development and culture (see Appendix II). In this case, English speaking destinations that are of a higher level of development. The number of years of certification was also considered, which was difficult since destination certification is not as common and is more complex than certifying hotels or tour operators. Majority of the destinations chosen have been certified for less than 10 years, with the expectation of one with 17 years of certification. This process narrowed down to 7 chosen destinations, Thompson Okanagan, Canada; Teton County/Jackson Hole, USA; Rottneest Island, Australia; Thredbo Village, Australia; Kaikoura, New Zealand; Vail, USA; and Snaefellsnes, Iceland.

Since the objective is to compare the perception of destination certification without bias, we chose to sample a wide range of tourism stakeholders with various levels of involvement in different sectors of tourism in both public and private sectors, including but not limited to Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), academia, tourism operator, accommodation and hospitality, parks and recreation, food and beverage, municipality, and government. We aimed to reach a wide network with varying roles of employment as well, including tourism business owners, directors and

managers, professors, members of government, as well as general staff. The digital survey was sent to 254 tourism stakeholders from all six certified destinations through email and asked to share with their staff and others involved in tourism. The survey was open for 30 days and a total of 40 participants replied through the Google Form.

3.3 Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics software was chosen to analyze the survey data due to its accessibility and technology in computing and analyzing data. First, we input all our data in the SPSS software to analyze the number of responses per question, the percentage, valid percentage (the percentage when missing data is excluded from the calculations), as well as the cumulative percentage. To better understand our dataset, we used descriptive statistics to calculate the standard measures for each variable. This gave us a summary of the statistics to determine the mean, median, standard deviation, and range of each variable, summarizing every question asked in the survey.

Given the number of items per each of the five variables: motivation (7), challenges (4), benefits (10), positive attitudes (19), negative attitudes (4), we chose to run a reliability analysis in SPSS to see whether all items are a reliable measure of the same variable. Thus, reliability analysis was used in SPSS to compute Cronbach's alpha (α) as a measure of reliability for each of the five variables. The Cronbach's Alpha are as follows: motivation (0.72), challenges (0.75), benefits (0.87), positive attitudes (0.95) and negative attitudes (0.82). Given the general rule that an α coefficient higher than 0.7 indicates a moderate, yet acceptable level of reliability, all five variables have good internal validity and reliability since each α coefficient is over 0.7. Measuring the internal consistency allows us to collapse each set of variables into one variable because the values that make up the scale can measure the same attribute, as opposed to analyzing each item individually. As a result, we could then analyze 10 correlations between of 5 dimensions (motivation, challenges, benefits, positive attitudes, and negative attitudes) as opposed to 946 correlations between 43 variables (that is, 7 motivation items, 4 challenge items, 19 benefits items, and 23 attitude items).

Afterwards, we ran a bivariate Pearson Correlation, a parametric measure, in SPSS to measure the strength and direction of linear relationships between the five variables. This statistical procedure allowed us to test the proposed hypotheses. We chose this method as it can best determine whether a statistically significant linear

relationship exists between two continuous variables and the strength of that linear relationship, given that the cases have non-missing values on both variables, the values for all variables across cases are unrelated, the cases are independent, and we have two or more continuous variables (LibGuides, n.d.). To test the significance, we used a two-tailed test because we are interested in testing the possibility of the relationship in both directions.

Next, an independent sample t-test was used to determine if there was a statistically significant mean difference between male and female, two independent and unrelated groups, and the perception of destination certification on sustainable tourism. We first computed the mean, standard deviation, and number of responses per gender (female and male). Then we used the five dependent variables (motivation, challenges, benefits, positive attitudes, negative attitudes) as test variables and gender as grouping variables, group 1-F for female and group 2-M for male. Statistics for each analysis are based on cases with no missing or out-of-range data for any variable in the analysis.

To compare the level of education against perception of destination certification on sustainable tourism, we used a one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA). We chose this statistical technique because we wanted to compare three or more groups with each mean population, believing that our population means are close to equal. Do respondents with different levels of education have an equal mean when it comes to their perceived motivation, challenges, benefits, positive attitudes, and negative attitudes towards destination certification? To test if the five education level means are equal with each of the five perceptions, we first ran a simple descriptive table to determine the mean and variance for these samples. Then we ran a one-way ANOVA in SPSS to determine the p-value (that is, the statistical significance). This method of statistical analysis was optimal in this scenario because each observation was distinct and independent.

Lastly, we wanted to determine the correlation between the familiarity of each ecolabel, as well as familiarity with ecolabels in general, with the five variables pertaining to the perception of destination certification on sustainable tourism. We chose Pearson Correlation with a two-tailed test to determine the statistical significance. To measure the overall familiarity with ecolabels to the five variables, we created a new variable (familiarity with ecolabels) with a scale range from 1 to 4, each person scoring between 4 to 16. Descriptive statistics was used to determine the mean and standard deviation.

4. Results and Discussion

This section analyzes and discusses the data collected from the digital survey that was distributed during this research. As mentioned, tourism destinations are unique and consists of the various actors and stakeholders with different issues and interests (Ryan, 2002). Previous studies suggest that a top-down approach, which excludes local tourism professionals, is not the most optimal approach when implementing destination assessment and certification. To understand the perceived impact of destination certification on sustainable tourism in certified destinations, our research aims to involve various tourism stakeholders and local tourism professionals in the public and private sector.

4.1 Demographic of respondents

Responses were received from various tourism stakeholders in 7 different certified destinations. Of the 40 surveys, 29 respondents were female (72.5%) and 11 were male (27.5%). Majority of the respondents were over 30 years of age, with the highest age bracket (32.5%) belonging to the 31-45 age range, followed by 46-60 and above 61 years old, both representing 27.5% of the respondents.

Table 1

Age and Gender of the Respondents

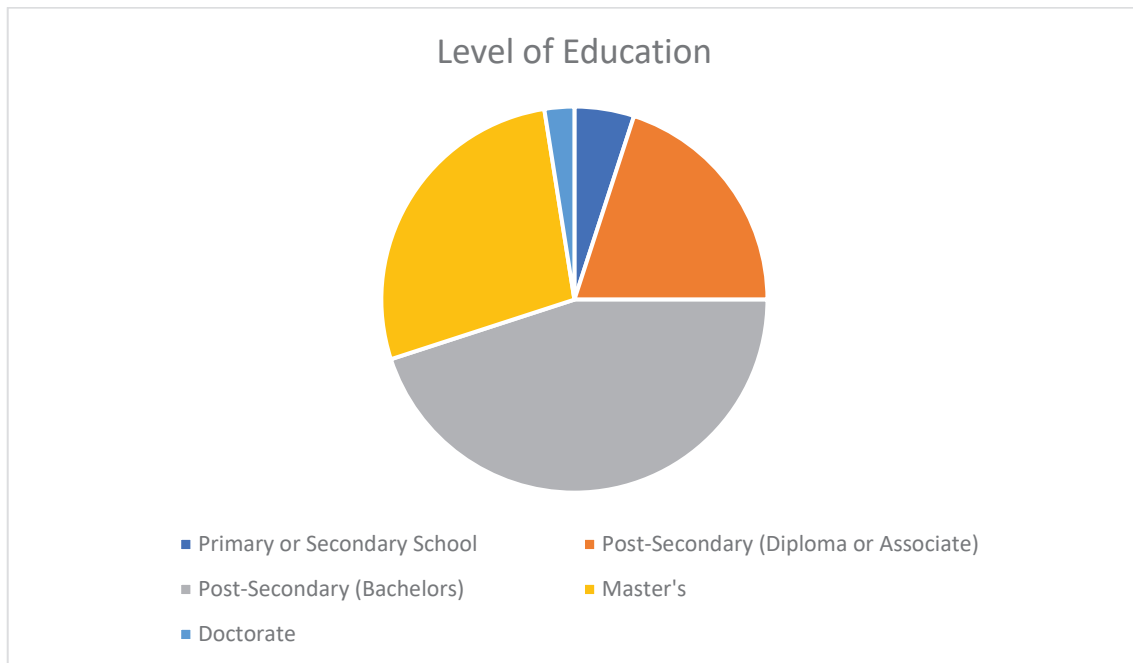
Age	Frequency		Percentage		Age %
	Male	Female	Male %	Female %	
18-30	0	5	0	12.5	12.5
31-45	2	11	5	27.5	32.5
46-60	4	7	10	17.5	27.5
Above 61	5	6	12.5	15	27.5
Total	11	29	27.5	72.5	100

The survey also asked the respondent for their role of employment. 32.5% of respondents are Directors or Managers, 22.5% are owners or CEOs, 22.5% are

considered general staff, 10% are board members, 5% are members of local government and 7.5% responded other. When asked the highest level of education, most respondents have received higher-level education, with majority (45%) having completed post-secondary with a bachelor's degree, followed by 27.5% of tourism stakeholders having achieved a master's degree. 20% have attended post-secondary, receiving a diploma or associates degree, and 2.5% have a PhD (doctorate degree). Out of those who answered the survey, only 5% did not attend post-secondary school, with primary or secondary school as their highest level of education.

Figure 3

Highest level of education achieved by respondents



Note: Source: Original illustration.

4.2 Results

Table 4.2 shows the level of relevance assigned to each of seven motives to adopt a given certification ecolabel, presenting the percent distribution, the means, and the standard deviation. An increase in environmental awareness (mean score = 4.45) and achievement of sustainability goals (mean score = 4.33) were the highest motivators for destinations to achieve destination certification. On the other hand, increasing the destination's profitability (mean score = 3.25), followed by competitive advantage in a

global market (mean score = 3.78), were least motivating according to tourism stakeholders, but still relevant factors. The data also shows that 57.5% of respondents find that lowering environmental impact of tourism is extremely relevant and can motivate a destination to achieve destination certification.

Despite all the referred differences, we can conclude that the sample assessed all the seven motives for the certification ecolabel adoption as relevant, since even the one less scored (increasing the destination's profitability) achieved a lower mean score (3.25), that is higher than “neutral”. Moreover, based on the data, one can state that the environmental issues were assessed as the main important motives for a destination to adopt an ecolabel certification (4.45 and 4.33, respectively for “More environmental awareness” and “Achievement of sustainability goals”), as opposed to economics (3.78 and 3.23, respectively for “Competitive advantage in a global market” and “Increasing the destination's profitability”).

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of perceived motives that may lead a destination to join a sustainable certification scheme

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
More environmental awareness	0.0	2.5	7.5	32.5	57.5	4.45	0.75
Achievement of sustainability goals	0.0	2.5	15.0	30.0	52.5	4.33	0.83
Enhancing the destination's image	0.0	5.0	15.0	30.0	50.0	4.25	0.90
Better destination management and tourism strategy	0.0	5.0	17.5	27.5	50.0	4.23	0.92
Lower environmental impact of tourism	0.0	12.5	10.0	20.0	57.5	4.23	1.07
Competitive advantage in a global market	2.5	10.0	32.5	17.5	37.5	3.78	1.14
Increasing the destination's profitability	5.0	20.0	42.5	10.0	22.5	3.25	1.17

Note: 1 = Completely irrelevant; 2= Somewhat irrelevant; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Somewhat relevant; 5 = Extremely relevant

The data suggest that there are perceived challenges with joining a destination certification scheme (Table 4.3). Difficulty in measuring, monitoring, and collecting the required data (3.85), followed by difficulty in ensuring compliance with the criteria (3.70), difficulty in covering the associated costs (3.70) and difficulty in gaining support from the community and other tourism stakeholders (3.40). However, for all these four concerns, most respondents assigned moderate evaluations, between the 3 and 4 in the 5-points Likert scales, that is between the scale marks of “neutral” and “somewhat relevant”. As

a result, respondents are aware of the difficulties inherent to achieving certification, but they are not of huge concern.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of perceived challenges with joining a destination certification scheme

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
Difficulty in measuring, monitoring and collecting the required data	2.5	2.5	30.0	37.5	27.5	3.85	0.95
Difficulty in ensuring compliance with the criteria	0.0	10.0	40.0	20.0	30.0	3.70	1.02
Difficulty in covering the associated costs	0.0	7.5	42.5	22.5	27.5	3.70	0.97
Difficulty in gaining support from the community and other tourism businesses	2.5	17.5	30.0	37.5	12.5	3.40	1.01

Note: 1 = Completely irrelevant; 2= Somewhat irrelevant; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Somewhat relevant; 5 = Extremely relevant

After analyzing what motivates a destination to become certified, along with associated challenges, the research shows that tourism stakeholders agree that there are perceived benefits with becoming a certified destination. The most relevant benefits are raising awareness of the destination’s cultural, political, social and environmental climate (mean = 4.33), better understanding of global sustainable tourism standards and better management of tourism policies and resources (mean = 4.00). The benefits rated least relevant is gained support from public authorities (mean = 3.63) and financial benefits to the local community (mean = 3.28).

Table 4*Descriptive statistics of perceived benefits with becoming a certified destination*

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
Raise awareness of the destination's cultural, political, social and environmental climate	0.0	0.0	22.5	22.5	55.0	4.33	0.83
Better understanding of global sustainable tourism standards	0.0	5.0	22.5	30.0	42.5	4.10	0.93
Better management of tourism policies and resources	0.0	2.5	30.0	32.5	35.0	4.00	0.88
Tools and resources for tourism businesses	0.0	5.0	27.5	35.0	32.5	3.95	0.91
Enhanced quality of visitor experience	5.0	5.0	37.5	20.0	37.5	3.90	0.98
Energy efficiency gains and savings	0.0	7.5	37.5	20.0	35.0	3.83	1.01
Recognition of ecolabel for marketing purposes	5.0	7.5	22.5	30.0	35.0	3.83	1.15
Access to a global network of like-minded destinations	2.5	12.5	27.5	20.0	37.5	3.78	1.17
More support from public authorities	5.0	10.0	27.5	32.5	25.0	3.63	1.13
Financial benefits to the local community	2.5	22.5	40.0	15.0	20.0	3.28	1.11

Note: 1 = Completely irrelevant; 2= Somewhat irrelevant; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Somewhat relevant; 5 = Extremely relevant

Moreover, the data supports the theory that there is a positive relationship between perceived positive attitudes towards achieving destination certification with an ecolabel. Tourism stakeholders felt that achieving destination certification strengthens their destination's management strategy towards sustainable tourism (4.35), it strengthens their image as a tourist destination (4.28), it enhances the guidelines that protect cultural resources (4.13). It also helps strengthen the knowledge of global sustainable tourism standards (4.10) and the environmental awareness of tourists (4.10). On the lower end, not as many tourism stakeholders felt that achieving destination certification increases the overall profitability of the destination (3.33), strengthens equal opportunity for employment in tourism (3.35) or significantly reduces the environmental impact of local residents (3.38). Thus, we can highlight that the way respondents evaluate the attitude statements seem very congruent with their own evaluation of motives for a destination to adopting an ecolabel, since the issues related to sustainability and environment are scored in the top of ranking, and those more related with economic concerns appear in the lower positions of the ranking.

Table 5

Descriptive statistics of positive attitudes towards achieving destination certification with an ecolabel

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
"Strengthens our destination's management strategy towards sustainable tourism."	0.0	0.0	12.5	40.0	47.5	4.35	0.70
"Strengthens our image as a tourist destination"	0.0	0.0	10.0	52.5	37.5	4.28	0.64
"Enhances the guidelines and policies that protect cultural resources"	0.0	2.5	17.5	45.0	35.0	4.13	0.79
"Strengthens knowledge of global sustainable tourism standards"	0.0	0.0	22.5	45.0	32.5	4.10	0.74
"Strengthens the environmental awareness of tourists"	0.0	2.5	15.0	52.5	30.0	4.10	0.74
"Strengthens the environmental awareness of local residents"	2.5	2.5	25.0	40.0	30.0	3.93	0.94
"Increases available tools and resources for tourism stakeholders & operators"	0.0	0.0	30.0	52.5	17.5	3.88	0.69
"Allows us to attract more international travelers"	0.0	5.0	30.0	37.5	27.5	3.88	0.88
"Strengthens the resiliency of our destination, in the case of a crisis"	0.0	5.0	37.5	27.5	30.0	3.83	0.93
"Strengthens the positive relationship that local residents have with tourism"	0.0	7.5	27.5	42.5	22.5	3.80	0.88
"Significantly strengthens the guidelines & policies addressing climate action"	2.5	2.5	35.0	37.5	22.5	3.75	0.93
"Strengthens the celebration of intangible cultural heritage"	2.5	7.5	37.5	27.5	25.0	3.65	1.03
"Increases economic benefit for tourism and hospitality businesses"	0.0	7.5	45.0	30.0	17.5	3.58	0.87
"Allows us to attract more domestic travelers"	0.0	10.0	42.5	30.0	17.5	3.55	0.90
"Significantly reduces the environmental impact of tourists"	2.5	17.5	25.0	32.5	22.5	3.55	1.11
"Increases the promotion and development of small and SMEs"	0.0	7.5	47.5	35.0	10.0	3.48	0.78
"Significantly reduces the environmental impact of local residents"	2.5	22.5	30.0	25.0	20.0	3.38	1.13
"Strengthens equal opportunity for employment in tourism"	5.0	12.5	35.0	37.5	10.0	3.35	1.00
"Increases the overall profitability of the destination"	2.5	17.5	37.5	30.0	12.5	3.33	1.00

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

In regards to perceived negative attitudes towards achieving destination certification with an ecolabel, the analysis identifies that very few respondents felt that it was not worth the effort, with a mean of 1.98. However, respondents also agreed that it

is a complicated process with a mean of 3.70. As a result, although many felt that it is a complicated process, it is still worth the effort to achieve destination certification through an ecolabel.

Table 6

Descriptive statistics of negative attitudes towards achieving destination certification with an ecolabel

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
"Is a complicated process"	0.0	10.0	32.5	35.0	22.5	3.70	0.94
"Requires too much time and resources"	15.0	22.5	32.5	20.0	10.0	2.88	1.20
"Is too costly to maintain"	12.5	22.5	45.0	12.5	7.5	2.80	1.07
"Is not worth the effort"	42.5	25.0	27.5	2.5	2.5	1.98	1.03

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

4.2.1 Mean differences by gender and levels of education

When comparing the perceived motivation, challenges, benefits, and attitudes between genders, the mean differences between male and female groups are not statically significant. That is, according to the data, the gender does not influence any of the five variables.

Table 7

Mean comparison of perceived motivation, challenges, perceived benefits, and attitudes between different genders

	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Female		Male		t	Sig.
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Motivation for adopting ecolabels	0.72	4.10	0.60	3.99	0.62	0.55	0.589
Challenges associated to adoption of ecolabels	0.75	3.67	0.72	3.64	0.84	0.14	0.893
Perceived benefits	0.87	3.90	0.68	3.76	0.74	0.54	0.595
Positive attitudes	0.95	3.81	0.62	3.71	0.74	0.41	0.684
Negative attitudes	0.82	2.77	0.74	3.02	1.14	0.84	0.407

When comparing the mean of perceived motivation, challenges, benefits, and attitudes between different levels of education, the significant of the test Z was 5% or lower for perceived challenges, as well as positive attitudes. As a result, the higher the level of education, the more perceived challenges are associated with obtaining destination certification with an ecolabel. This could be due to being more aware of challenges that are associated with certification. Furthermore, positive attitudes towards destination certification for sustainable tourism are also dependent on education level with a significant level of 2%. Those with post-secondary diplomas as their highest level of education perceive destination certification with more positive attitudes, a mean of 4.39, compared to respondents who have achieved a higher level of post-secondary education, such as a Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctorate degree. This may be because those with a lower level of education don't anticipate as many difficulties or may not be as involved with the process of obtaining certification. However, we are aware that one of limitations of this research is the very small sample size, which should be taken into consideration when analyzing the findings.

Table 8

Mean comparison of perceived motivation, challenges, benefits, and attitudes between different levels of education

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Z	Sig.
Motives for adopting ecolabels	3.79	4.48	4.02	3.92	4.00	1.31	0.285
Challenges associated to adoption of ecolabels	2.63	3.22	3.86	3.80	4.25	2.65	0.050
Benefits	3.65	4.35	3.79	3.95	4.60	1.97	0.121
Positive attitudes	3.63	4.39	3.74	3.42	3.89	3.38	0.019
Negative attitudes	2.38	2.44	2.89	3.09	3.25	0.88	0.484

Note: Level 1 = Primary or Secondary; Level 2 = Post-Secondary Diploma; Level 3 = Bachelors; Level 4 = Master's; Level 5 = Doctorate

4.2.2 Testing hypotheses

With the present study, we intend to test a set of hypotheses concerning the relationship between five core concepts that can explain perceived impact that destination certification has on sustainable tourism development, namely: motivation of

being certified, perceived benefits, perceived challenges (or difficulties) of being certified, and attitudes (positive and negative) towards achieving certification as a destination. As it is shown in the Table 4.9, the positive attitude towards destination certification has a positive correlation with the perceived motivations of becoming certified, as it is suggested in the Hypothesis 1 (Pearson $r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$), as well as with the perceived benefits of being certified, which is in line with the Hypothesis 2 (Pearson $r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$). That is, the higher the positive attitude towards destination certification the higher the perceived benefits and the higher the motivation of becoming certified. However, despite Hypothesis 4 posing a negative correlation between the positive attitude towards destination certification and perceived challenges (that is perceived difficulties), the data does not confirm this idea (Pearson $r = 0.00$).

Regarding the negative attitudes towards destination certification (measured as the agreement with the following beliefs: "it is a complicated process", "it requires too much time and resources", "it is too costly to maintain" and "it is not worth the effort"), Table 4.9 presents a positive correlation with the perceived challenges: the higher the negative attitude regarding the certification the relevant the challenges (difficulties) are considered. This finding is in line with the Hypothesis 5 (Pearson $r = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$). In contrast, negative attitudes towards destination certification does not have significant correlation with the motivation and perceived benefits, which does not confirm Hypotheses 6 (Pearson $r = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$) and 7 (Pearson $r = 0.07$, $p > 0.05$). Moreover, the motivation of becoming certified (that we already mentioned as being positive correlated with the positive attitude but not correlated with the negative attitude), has a strong positive correlation with the perceived benefits (Pearson $r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$), which is in line with that was predicted in Hypothesis 3.

Lastly, contrary to Hypothesis 8, to which it should be expected a negative correlation between perceived challenges associated with destination certification and the perceived motivations of becoming certified, there is a significant but positive correlation (Pearson $r = 0.39$, $p < 0.05$). According to the data, the more aware respondents are about the challenges of achieving certification as a destination, the more they perceive the motivation of becoming certified.

As a result, the null hypothesis stating that there is no relationship between destination certification and the perceived impacts, including motivation, attitudes, challenges, and benefits, is rejected.

Table 9

Correlation between motivation, challenges, benefits, and attitudes towards destination certification

	Motivation	Challenges	Benefits	Positive attitude	Negative attitude
Motivation	1				
Challenges	0.39*	1			
Perceived Benefits	0.78**	0.30	1		
Positive attitude	0.61**	0.00	0.72**	1	
Negative attitude	0.06	0.32*	0.07	-0.15	1

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A possible explanation for the unexpected positive correlation between motivation of becoming certified and perceived challenges of certification can eventually be related with the level of knowledge or familiarity with the certification schemes and their criteria. However, when analyzing the familiarity respondents have with Biosphere Responsible Tourism, Green Destinations, TourCert or EarthCheck, there is no correlation between familiarity with the ecolabels and any of the variables (higher than 5%).

Table 10

Familiarity with ecolabels VS positive attitude, negative attitude, motivation, challenges

	Motivation	Challenges	Benefits	Positive attitude	Negative attitude
Biosphere	0.26	0.18	0.19	0.24	-0.35
Green Destinations	0.27	0.18	0.24	0.25	-0.11
TourCert	-0.21	-0.11	-0.27	-0.22	-0.26
EarthCheck	0.15	0.10	0.05	0.09	-0.25

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.3 Discussion

The objective of this research was to study the relationship between destination certification and sustainable tourism development from the lens of tourism stakeholders. By doing so, we can determine whether a destination certification scheme is an effective tool for sustainable tourism development based on the attitudes and perceptions of local key players in certified destinations, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter. As previously mentioned, certification schemes have three main purposes in tourism. In accordance with past research, the main objectives of certification are to promote voluntary adoption of sustainability practices by the industry, contribute to potential economic advantage, and inform prospective tourists on the sustainability performance (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019).

Furthermore, another objective of the study was to determine the attitudes that tourism stakeholders have regarding sustainable destination certification. Based on the findings, the data accepts hypotheses 1, 2, 3 and 5. This supports the theory that there is a positive correlation between positive attitudes towards destination certification and the perceived motivations and benefits of becoming certified. The higher the positive attitude that one has towards destination certification, the more motivated they are to achieve certification and the higher they perceive the benefits to be. Thus, we can highlight that the way respondents evaluate the attitude statements seem very congruent with their own evaluation of motives for a destination to adopting an ecolabel. In contrast, there is no significant correlation with negative attitudes and perceived benefits or motives. Overall, tourism stakeholders believe that achieving destination certification can impact environmental sustainability, creating more awareness with locals and tourists alike, as well as better protecting cultural resources. It can help strengthen the relationship locals have with tourism, which is especially important in destinations that have encountered mass tourism that has negatively impacted the local community. Achieving destination certification allows tourism stakeholders to have better access to tools and resources, better knowledge of global sustainable standards, and most importantly, it strengthens the destination's management strategy towards sustainable tourism. As a result, tourism stakeholders of certified destinations do have positive attitudes towards certification, along with perceived benefits and motivation. This reflects the importance of involving tourism stakeholders in the process of destination certification, which allows them to gain the knowledge required to adopt best practices. This would also optimize the benefits of a certification scheme within the community by

raising awareness and creating positive impacts, such as more tourism businesses becoming certified and working towards a common goal of sustainable tourism and destination development.

Moreover, the research conducted also allows us to identify what motivates a destination to become certified, which was another objective. Based on the responses from participants, all motivations listed in the survey were relevant. Issues related to sustainability and environment are scored higher at the top of the ranking, and those more related with economic concerns appeared in the lower positions of the ranking. The findings conclude that respondents were mostly motivated by environmental awareness and achieving sustainability goals, followed by enhancing the destination's image, and better destination management and tourism strategy. This data is in line with previous studies and is not surprising as more destinations are becoming increasingly focused on implementing sustainability strategies related to environmental factors and sustainable management. However, it also shows that destinations may not be as driven by economic advantage as previous research suggests. Consequently, it is important to understand the perceived motivations behind certification, not only to better serve destinations that have already achieved certification, but for ecolabels to better understand how to promote certification as a tool for sustainable tourism to other potential destinations that are interested in the certification process.

Additionally, the last objective of this research was to address the challenges and opportunities associated with destination certification. When analyzing the negative attitudes that respondents have towards destination certification, the higher the negative attitude that one has towards certification, the more that the challenges and difficulties are considered. However, a higher positive attitude does not equate to lower perceived challenges. The study also suggests that the more aware respondents are about the challenges of achieving certification as a destination, the more they perceive the motivation of becoming certified. As a result, respondents are aware of the challenges and difficulties inherent to achieving certification, but it is not of huge concern. According to the study, respondents found that there is difficulty in measuring, monitoring, and collecting the data for certification, as well as compliance with the criteria. Destination certification is also perceived as costly. Each ecolabel and certification scheme has a different breakdown of pricing. There are other associated fees, such as an introductory fee, auditing cost and annual fee, which will differ with each certification scheme and label. Thus, we must consider that the destinations in our study were certified by different ecolabels (EarthCheck, Biosphere Responsible Tourism, and Green Destinations) that

have different pricing schemes. Furthermore, the research only shows data from certified destinations, who were able to pay the fees and overcome challenges to achieve certification. However, if such certified destinations are met with challenges, we must also consider that these difficulties could be deterring potentially interested destinations from beginning the process of assessment and certification. This is a limitation in our study and should be considered for future research. As a result, there is opportunity for ecolabels to better support tourism stakeholders with the certification process, whether that be more education and involvement in the process, different pricing options, more in-depth workshops with various levels for different tourism professionals depending on their involvement or developing better resources and practical tools that are easily accessible. However, we must also take into consideration that the respondents may not have been involved in the decision-making of the certification process and may lack in-depth knowledge of the logistics, which we will cover in the limitations section.

Ultimately, the perceived impacts do indicate that destination certification is an effective tool in sustainable tourism. As more destinations become aware of certification as an option, ecolabels should continue to develop tools and resources in support of destinations. Destinations should consider following a more performative approach, which would include the involvement of civic society, along with the public and private sector, in the decision making of tourism destinations (Jamal and Watt, 2011). This would be beneficial for the overall destination, ensuring that tourism businesses are aware, involved, and motivated to partake in sustainable practices. The data in our research also shows that majority of respondents are well-educated. Involving more local tourism stakeholders in the certification process allows for the opportunity of different ideas and approaches that may not have been previously considered. In addition, although not a focus of our study, the survey showed that many respondents were unsure if their destination was certified or not. Since this research only included certified destinations, there is a gap between local tourism professionals and decision-makers. To involve all those in the tourism supply chain, more businesses should be aware of such sustainability strategies as it would be a more effective use of destination certification. It could also encourage local tourism operators and businesses to become a certified tourism business. This is an opportunity that could mitigate the difficulty in gaining support from the community and other tourism businesses.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the conducted study shows that tourism stakeholders of certified destinations perceive certification as an impactful tool for sustainable tourism development. The data suggests that tourism stakeholders have a positive attitude towards destination certification and identify benefits affiliated with certification schemes, although there are still challenges and difficulties involved. The motivations of achieving destination certification are more correlated with environmental sustainability than economic advantage, though all motivations were relevant to the respondents. Given the perceived attitudes in this study, we can conclude that certification is an effective sustainability tool for destinations that have already achieved certification. However, it is still debated whether or not certification schemes are the most optimal tool for all destinations.

Certification schemes are one of many tools available to ensure that a destination is managing tourism in a sustainable manner. The differing characteristics, including size, geography and politics, must also be considered. Not all destinations are equal, which explains the complexity of certifying destinations, nor do they all have the financial means. As mentioned, the increase in tourism certification programmes has led to market confusion and higher start-up costs (Font et al., 2003). For some destinations, it may not be financially feasible to pay the cost of an initial fee, in addition to auditing fees and the annual cost. Not all ecolabels have the same pricing scheme either. However, that does not necessarily mean that the destination does not have effective practices in place. In this case, a combination of different tools and strategies may yield better results when it comes to tourism management and sustainable development. A combination of tools also allows for a more comprehensive and holistic approach, especially given that tourism destinations consists of many different stakeholders and social groups. Destination certification can be even more impactful and effective when all tourism stakeholders are aware, engaged, and committed to putting these benefits into practice. Thus, it is important to involve stakeholders in the certification process, as opposed to a top-down approach that only involves DMOs, policy makers, and high-level decision makers. As a result, destination certification is an impactful tool based on the perception of tourism stakeholders in certified destinations, but more research is required to determine whether it is effective and optimal tool for all types of destinations.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

The objective of the study is to understand the perception and attitude of destination certification on sustainable tourism from a wide range of tourism stakeholders. The questionnaire was sent digitally to various emails from different organizations found online, which included local government, DMOs, tourism councils, tourism operators, hotels and accommodation, volunteer organizations that pertain to tourism, and academics. In the email, we asked for the survey to be shared with other staff members. There are limitations to this method, given that only certain staff members would have access to a company's email, particularly tourism operators, food and beverage, or accommodation. Moreover, the benefits destination assessment or certification are often insufficiently communicated to the public due to decision-makers conducting assessments internally, which results in low visibility of certification schemes to those who are not involved in the process (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). If the respondents were not involved in the assessment and certification process, they may not know as much about ecolabels and destination certifications in general but answered the survey regardless.

Another limitation is the lack of certified destinations we had to work with. It was difficult to find destinations that were homogenous. If more destinations become certified, it is recommended that further research is conducted to analyze destinations with similar characteristics. Based on the limitations of our study, we can only determine the attitude and perception of destination certification through the lens of tourism stakeholders. A future study could analyze quantitative data before and after certification to study the impact certification schemes have on tourism and sustainable development overtime.

The research method in previous studies also involved interviews with respondents, which we did not have sufficient time to accomplish. A future study also include a short follow-up interview with tourism stakeholders from each destination to collect qualitative data and gain a better understanding of the impact ecolabels has had on their particular destination. Overall, the research conducted is a preliminary study that gives insight into the perception of destination certification. Further research should take place to continue evaluating the effectiveness of ecolabels as a tool for sustainable tourism.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Questionnaire

Destination Certification for Sustainable Tourism

This questionnaire is part of a Master's thesis research at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, Portugal.

We intend to collect information to explore the perceived impact of destination certifications on sustainable tourism development. Your collaboration will add value to our research and conclusions. Please read the questions carefully and choose the answer that best applies as it pertains to your particular destination.

All replies will be held securely and confidentially while remaining anonymous. No one will be able to identify who responded. The entire questionnaire only takes 5 minutes to complete.

Thank you in advance for your contribution.

* Required

1. Please indicate the level of familiarity with the following eco-labels



EARTHCHECK



BIOSPHERE



1. 1. Please indicate the level of familiarity with the following eco-labels *

Mark only one oval per row.

	I don't know anything at all	I know it exists, but I'm not familiar with it	I am relatively familiar with it	I know it quite well
EarthCheck	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Biosphere Responsible Tourism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Green Destination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TourCert	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. 2. Your destination is certified with an eco-label *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, it is certified
- It is in the certification process
- No, it is not certified
- Unsure

3. 3. If you answered "yes" or "in the certification process", please indicate the eco-label

4. 4. Evaluate the MOTIVES that may lead a destination to join a sustainable certification scheme *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 = Completely irrelevant	2	3	4	5 = Extremely Relevant
Enhancing the destination's image	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Better destination management and tourism strategy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Increasing the destination's profitability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More environmental awareness from residents, businesses, and tourists	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lower environmental impact of tourism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competitive advantage in a global market	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Achievement of sustainability goals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Evaluate the CHALLENGES associated with joining a destination certification scheme *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 = Completely irrelevant	2	3	4	5 = Extremely Relevant
Difficulty in ensuring compliance with the criteria	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty in covering the associated costs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty in measuring, monitoring and collecting the required data	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty in gaining support from the community and other tourism businesses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. Evaluate the BENEFITS associated with becoming a certified destination *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 = Completely irrelevant	2	3	4	5 = Extremely Relevant
More support from public authorities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tools and resources for tourism businesses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Recognition of eco-label for marketing purposes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Better management of tourism policies and resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Energy efficiency gains and savings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial benefits to the local community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Raising awareness of the destination's cultural, political, social, and environmental climate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Access to a global network of like-minded destinations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Better understanding of global sustainable tourism standards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Enhanced quality of visitor experience	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. 7. Achieving sustainability certification as a destination: *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
"Allows us to attract more domestic travellers"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Allows us to attract more international travellers"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens our image as a tourist destination"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens our destination's management strategy towards sustainable tourism"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens the resiliency of our destination, in the case of a crisis or emergency"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Increases economic benefit for tourism and hospitality businesses"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Increases the promotion and development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Increases the overall profitability of the destination"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens knowledge of global sustainable tourism standards"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens equal opportunity for employment in tourism, including women, youth, minorities, and other vulnerable populations"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens the positive relationship that local residents have with tourism"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Enhances the guidelines and policies that protect cultural resources"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens the celebration of intangible cultural heritage (ie. song, dance, crafts)"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens the environmental awareness of local residents"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Strengthens the environmental awareness of tourists"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Significantly reduces the environmental impact of local residents"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Significantly reduces the environmental impact of tourists"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

"Significantly reduces the environmental impact of local residents"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Significantly reduces the environmental impact of tourists"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Significantly strengthens the guidelines and policies addressing climate action"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Increases available tools and resources for tourism stakeholders and operators"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Is a complicated process"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Is too costly to maintain"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Requires too much time and resources"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Is not worth the effort"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. 8. Which sector of tourism do you represent? *

Mark only one oval.

- Destination Marketing/Management Organization (DMO)
- Tourism operator
- Accommodation
- Food & beverage
- Parks & recreation
- Municipality and/or government
- Other: _____

9. 9. What is your role of employment? *

Mark only one oval.

- Owner/CEO
- Director/Manager
- Member of local government
- General staff
- Other: _____

10. 10. Which destination do you represent? *

11. 11. Age *

12. 12. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

Female

Male

Other: _____

13. 13. Highest level of education *

Mark only one oval.

Primary or Secondary School

Post-Secondary (Diploma or Associate)

Post-Secondary (Bachelors)

Master's

Doctorate

Appendix II – Certified Destinations Charts

Figure 4

Global certified destinations based on ecolabels

	TourCert (20)	Green Destinations (2)	EarthCheck (13)	GSTC (10)	Biosphere
Europe	Alteyer Laine, Germany (check)	Schouwen-Duiveland, Netherlands	Soeflenska Þónausa, Iceland	Fjord, Norway	La Palma, Canary Islands, Spain
	Bad Dürrenberg, Germany		Azores, Portugal (2019)	Lanzarote, Spain	Tenerife, Spain (in process)
	Bad Nenndorf, Germany			Orist, Montserrat	Azusa, Ierona, Spain
	Bad Norderhorn, Germany			Southern Sardinia, Italy	Gala de Iona, Iona, Spain
	Bad Urach, Germany (check)				Lanzarote, Spain
	Bad Wildbad, Germany (check)				Reserva da Biosfera Transilvanica Meseia, Portugal
	Badenbrunn, Germany				Madeira, Portugal
	Colbe, Germany				Castelo Rodrigo, Portugal
	Hochschwarzwald, Germany				Trancoso, Portugal
	Jüdis, Germany				Alameda, Portugal
	Mittelchor Schwarzwald, (Germany) (check)				Castelo Mondo, Portugal
	Oberpfand-Schlo, Germany				Linhare de Ines, Portugal
	Raarland, Germany				Vouzela (in process), Portugal
	St. Wendel, Germany (check)				Aldeas Históricas de Portugal, Portugal
	Uckermark, Germany				Barcelos, Portugal
	Wiesentberg, Germany				Sardha, Portugal
					Pórtico, Portugal
					Castelo Novo, Portugal
					Monsanto, Portugal
					Idanha-a-Velha, Portugal
				Matta (in process), Portugal	
				Alentejo (in process), Portugal	
				Gijón/Gaon, Spain	
				Vizna-Gaizte, Spain	
				Rica Alavesa, Spain	
				Val de Arán, Spain	
				Camu De Sest Juki (in process), Spain	
				Pirineus Barcelona, Spain	
				El Pinar y las Torres de Urdia, Spain	
				Paratyque Marcolino, Spain	
				Tosa de Mar, Spain	
				Costa Rarcelona, Spain	
				Rarcelona, Spain	
				Catalunya, Spain	
				ViaTonica del Penedès, Spain	
				Silves, Spain	
				Escora, Mallorca, Spain	
				Xàbia, Alicante (in process), Spain	
North America	Las Galeras, Dominican Republic (check)	Val, CO, USA	Teton County/Jackson Hole, WY, USA	Sedona, AZ, USA	Koolhaas Rockies Tourism Region
			Huasteca, Mexico	Isim County, NY, USA	1 Temples Oaxaca
			Isos, Mexico (2019)	Sanumil, Mexico	Vasconcelos Island Tourism Region
			Loreto, Mexico	Riviera Maya, Mexico	Northern British Columbia Tourism Region
			Nuevo Villaria, Mexico	Sima Guadalupe, Mexico	Cariboo Chilcotin Coast British Columbia
			Playa del Carmen, Mexico (Biosphere)	Southern Sinaloa, Mexico	Guarajato, Mexico (in process)
Central America	Sanpedro, Costa Rica		Zhuatlanejo de Azuela, Mexico	Cayman Islands	
	Santh, Costa Rica			St. Croix, US Virgin Islands	
South America	Cuenca, Ecuador			St. Kitts and Nevis	
				Belm City, Belize	
Asia				Roratan, Honduras	
				Lago Llanquihue, Chile	Megar, Colombia (in process)
				San Pedro de Atacama, Chile	Ramónnagay: Masala-Puzos, Bolivia
				Sacred Valley and Cuzco, Peru	Tao Tom, Chaco, Bolivia
Africa					Mersey, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
				Musik Hangshen, China (2017)	
					Mount Hangshen, China
					Haseong Park, Korea
					Lombok, Indonesia
					Pangandaran, Indonesia
Middle East					Sleman, Indonesia
					Wakabo, Indonesia
Oceania					Pattaya, Thailand
					Sukhothai, Thailand
					Davango Delta, Botswana
					Mara Hoboisho Conservancy, Kenya
					Raz Ar Khaimal, UAE
					Saonea
					Ruthest Island, Australia
					Threcho Village, Australia
					Kakoura, New Zealand (2019)

Note: Source: Original illustration.

Figure 5

Short-list of certified destinations with similar characteristics

Destination	Geography	Country	Language	Label	Date Certified	Level	Annual Visitor Arrival	Population	Area (sq km)
Thompson Okanagan	Region	Canada	English	Biosphere	2017	Gold	11.4 million (2019)	545,000	20,829
La Palma, Canary Island	Island	Spain	Spanish	Biosphere	2018	Gold	133,395 (2017)	82,671	708
Teton County/Jackson Hole	Mountain	USA	English	EarthCheck	2020	Silver	1.84 million (2018)	11,000	1869
Rottenest Island	Island	Australia	English	EarthCheck	2015	Gold	78,5000 (2018)	300	19
Threcho Village	Mountain	Australia	English	EarthCheck	2012	Gold	1 million	389	2.8
Kalkoura	Peninsula	New Zealand	English	EarthCheck	2004	Platinum	100,000 (2016)	3912	5.64
Snaefellsnes	Peninsula	Iceland	Icelandic	EarthCheck	2008	Platinum	165,617 (2016)	3900	1479
Schouwen-Duiveland	Peninsula	Netherlands	Dutch	Green Destination	2019	Platinum	5.4 million (2018)	33,735	488
Vail	Mountain	USA	English	Green Destination	2018	Mountain IDEAL	1.6 million	5,469	21.4

Note: Source: Original illustration.