

The Benefits and Challenges of Sustainable Tourism Certification: A Case Study of the Green Tourism Business Scheme in the West of England

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Abstract

This paper discusses the perceived benefits and challenges associated with membership of the Green Tourism Business Scheme, a sustainable certification initiative. The literature reveals sustainable business continues to be the focus of considerable academic interest as well as practical importance. Interviews with seven local hospitality and tourism enterprises, in the West of England, provided valuable insights into the benefits of the scheme. These were related to environmental impacts, financial considerations, marketing opportunities, brand recognition and company image, and other issues such as public relations, personal moral responsibility, and political considerations. Challenges included several internal and external factors potentially preventing businesses from joining the GTBS, such as a lack of respondent knowledge of the sustainable tourism concept, the perceived expense of applying for and/or membership, a lack of time to complete the application process, and the amount of work involved in compliance. Recommendations to facilitate and encourage future membership included more information about the scheme and its marketing advantages, the need for regional organisations to spend more money on promoting the GTBS brand, and the necessity of educating consumers on the importance of sustainability.

Introduction

This paper presents research on the perceived benefits and challenges associated with the adoption of a sustainable tourism certification scheme in the West of England, UK, which is situated within the South West of England and is comprised of the four unitary authorities of North Somerset, Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) and South Gloucestershire (formerly known as the county of Avon). It further explores potential marketing and branding opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and provides recommendations regarding how a regional organization such as South West Tourism can encourage local businesses to join a national certification scheme. The first section addresses the concept of sustainable tourism before discussing previous studies into sustainable tourism certification schemes. The second section introduces a case study of the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) in the West of England, and presents the findings of a qualitative study of seven hospitality and tourism SMEs attitudes towards the scheme.

Literature Review

The roots of sustainable tourism can be traced to the wider issue of global sustainable development, which first came to public attention with the World Conservation Strategy in March (1980), and the subsequent creation of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (Weeden, 2002). Out of the WCED came 'Our Common Future, known as the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), which highlighted the importance of sustainability to future world economic development, itself of crucial importance for the future of global tourism (Wheeller, 1992). Since this time, debate has raged, not only over the exact definitions of these somewhat broad terms (Ayuso, 2007) but also about their applicability and utility within tourism (see Sharpley, 2000).

Although definitions of both sustainable development and sustainable tourism vary according to the different perspectives of the stakeholders concerned (Tepelus & Córdoba, 2005), there

is now considered to be general agreement on the key principles of sustainable tourism (Ayuso, 2007). These principles, rooted in social, economic and environmental equity (Dinan & Sargeant, 2000), have recently been further refined. For example, Ayuso (2007:144) suggests,

... strategies for the development of sustainable tourism should be guided by an integrated planning process based on economic, sociocultural and environmental goals, the use of carrying capacity or other techniques for quantifying the limitations of the tourist resources, and a transparent and participative decision-making process.

In addition to the debate surrounding the definition of sustainable tourism (Conlin & Baum, 2003; Mowforth & Munt, 2005) there is some confusion over the difference between sustainable tourism accreditation and certification. These terms are often (erroneously) used interchangeably, but are in fact two distinctly different terms to describe very different activities. Accreditation is the process by which an organization endorses a certification agency to ensure it conforms to a certain set of criteria (Black & Crabtree, 2007; Buckley, 2002; Font & Sallows, 2002). Such accreditation is important because it sets quality standards for both industry and markets, and adds credibility and validity to the different certification schemes (Font et al., 2003). It is considered to be particularly necessary for sustainable tourism products because of the potential for accusations of 'greenwash' (Font & Buckley, 2001) and consumer scepticism that continue to persist (Robbins, 2008).

With regards to certification, this is "the process of providing documented assurance that a product, service or organisation complies with a given standard" (Font et al., 2003:213).

Black and Crabtree (2007:502) suggest a more extensive definition,

[a] voluntary procedure, that sets, assesses, monitors, and gives written assurance that a product, process, service, or management system conforms to specific requirements and norms. A certification/awarding body gives written assurance to the consumer and the industry in general. The outcome of certification is a certificate and usually the use of an ecolabel.

With regard to national certification systems, Vertinsky and Zhou (2000) argue they provide opportunities for industries to coordinate competition, prevent excessive government intervention, and also present a positive destination image. However, market recognition cannot be guaranteed if international and /or domestic tourists are unfamiliar with a national scheme. In the UK, voluntary tourism certification schemes have developed largely within the hospitality sector, mostly due to these organisations being more easily defined and therefore standardised (Bendell & Font, 2004). Indeed, there are now more than 20 sustainable accommodation certification schemes in the UK (Robbins, 2008).

There are many tourism certification schemes around the world and although it is difficult to present a definitive list, some of the larger certification schemes include Green Globe 21, a global benchmarking and certification programme for travel and tourism; Green Key, an international eco-label for leisure that operates in more than sixteen countries; and the Certificate for Sustainable Tourism, a programme to encourage environmental practice in hotels in Costa Rica. Additional schemes include Ecotourism Kenya, Ecotourism Australia and STEP, the Sustainable Tourism Eco-certification Standard.

With more than 100 global sustainable tourism certification schemes already in place by 2002 (Medina, 2005), stakeholders have called for an international accreditation body to regulate such schemes (see Font & Buckley, 2001; Font, 2002), not least because it would eradicate the view that many of them mean little except to local consumers (Font & Buckley, 2001; Font; 2002; Robbins, 2008). Partly in response to such calls, the Rainforest Alliance, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Foundation, and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) jointly developed the Tourism Sustainability Council, intended to oversee implementation of a (voluntary) set of Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC). The Council was originally due to be launched in March 2010. However, concerns remain about the clarity of the criteria, their inflexible

nature to accommodate local conditions, and a lack of agreement on appropriate fees. In addition, concern has been expressed over the implementation of an international scheme, as this may undermine the effectiveness of strong national schemes (Goodwin, 2010).

Notwithstanding the discord already noted, with regard to the efficacy and utility of certification schemes for sustainable tourism, advocates of certification programmes do exist. Indeed, many believe they “represent an increasingly important strategy for encouraging the sustainable production of goods and services,” not least because they are designed specifically to encourage consumers to buy goods and services from companies that adhere to high social and environmental standards in their production (Medina, 2005:281). As an industry, tourism remains largely unregulated, and so the adoption of voluntary schemes is seen to be especially crucial in ensuring the supply of high quality sustainable products, which UNEP considers is essential for ensuring long-term business commitment to quality improvements (Tepelus & Córdoba, 2005).

Of course, developing and implementing tourism certification schemes is not always straightforward. In fact, as has already been indicated, considerable discussions have taken place over the (in)equity inherent in tourism certification schemes. For example, on an international level, there is some disquiet over claims that scheme members may seek to create excessive entry barriers by raising the standards, and therefore cost, of applying for certification. In addition, businesses that can afford to be involved in designing and implementing many of the certification programmes are very likely to be transnational corporations, potentially disadvantaging small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are particularly prevalent in supplying tourism (Medina, 2005; Mycoo, 2006; Rivera & deLeon, 2005; Vertinsky & Zhou, 2000). Certification schemes have also been criticised in the past for focusing too much on hotel or ecotourism providers, and for being weighted too heavily in favour of environmental benefit (Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001), with many of

the early certification schemes ignoring socio-cultural issues (Font & Harris, 2004; Tepelus & Córdoba, 2005).

With regard to SMEs' experiences of certification, the high cost of adhering to strict environmental standards, a lack of time available to owner-directors to pursue the process, limited knowledge and awareness of the scheme, a perceived high level of bureaucracy, and a lack of personal environmental expertise have all been highlighted as key reasons why they often fail to adopt sustainable tourism practices (Carlsen et al., 2001; Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001; Thwaites, 2007; Vernon et al., 2003). Indeed, many businesses feel they lack advice from local authorities regarding sustainable tourism and certification schemes (Carlsen et al., 2001). However, there is evidence of a range of benefits accruing to those who successfully apply for certification. For example, schemes help businesses become more environmentally aware, protect sensitive environment areas, reduce water usage and improve waste management (Russillo et al., 2008).

There are also a variety of additional incentives, and although economic benefits accrue from lower energy, water and waste bills (Bhaskaran et al., 2006; Pizam, 2009; Rivera & deLeon, 2005; Tzschentke et al., 2004; 2007), legal compliance is often the primary reason for UK businesses to undertake environmental improvement (Bhaskaran et al., 2006; Tzschentke et al., 2004). More individual motivations, however, may originate from owner-directors' personal beliefs that it is morally right to be sustainable in business (Tzschentke et al., 2004), and that protecting the environment is a crucial part of the social responsibility of any business activity (Rivera & deLeon, 2005).

However, it is the potential for marketing benefit that is often cited as a key incentive for certification. Such benefits include an improved company image in the market place (D'Souza, 2004; Harris, 2007), an opportunity to claim competitive advantage (Lynes & Andrachuk 2008; Swarbrooke, 1999), and for policy makers, the chance for greater

destination marketing opportunities (Font & Epler Wood, 2007). Comparative advantage can also facilitate the charging of premium prices to environmentally aware tourists, with a potential correlation between higher hotel prices and environmental ratings reported in Costa Rica (Rivera & deLeon, 2005).

With regard to marketing benefit, a 2006 UK survey of GTBS-certified hospitality and tourism businesses, revealed more than 60% thought this was an important consideration for joining (Tourism South East & South West Tourism, 2007). This finding supports an earlier 2004 Green Globe 21 survey (cited in Font & Epler Wood, 2007:153), indicating 18% of members had received increased media exposure since joining the scheme, 22% perceiving they had more 'green' market appeal, with 8% believing they attracted more customers as a direct result of belonging to the scheme. Whether these latter figures are the result of consumer perceptions of the Green Globe brand, or merely a response to increased media attention on environmental issues is unclear (Font & Epler Wood, 2007). Indeed, creating value through an emotional link to establish customer loyalty is argued to be a key strength of any green brand (Hartmann & Ibáñez, 2006). In addition, the more widespread and easy a label is to recognise, the more consumers will utilise it (De Pelsmacker, et al., 2005).

Significantly, not all research supports claims for marketing advantage and evidence is somewhat contradictory. For example, a study of ecotourism operators in New Zealand concluded that whilst belonging to a sustainable tourism certification scheme such as GG21 helped public relations (and therefore market image), the majority of businesses did not believe that GG21 gave them marketing advantage over competitors (Rowe & Higham, 2007). In addition to claims of 'greenwash' and consumer scepticism, certification agencies often have limited or no marketing power, and as noted by Font and Buckley (2001:14), "most eco-labels in tourism, hospitality and destinations are run as public relations exercises for funding bodies to show that they are doing their bit." However, although some decry

certification schemes as being primarily marketing and promotion opportunities, the environment benefits nonetheless, primarily due to the requirements of such schemes (Mycoo, 2006).

The conflicting evidence regarding the marketing benefits of certification mirrors the confusion over whether consumers are sufficiently interested in sustainable tourism and hospitality products to change their purchasing behaviour. For example, barriers to consumer demand have been attributed to the vast number of schemes available, the complexity or lack of information offered about the scheme, lack of consumer awareness, and the price of the product - which is often perceived as higher than other non-certified services (Carlsen et al., 2001; Medina, 2005; Proto et al., 2007; Reiser & Simmons, 2005).

It is not clear whether increased demand is connected to additional media exposure from certification agencies. For example, although they are largely non-governmental and market-based (Medina, 2005), tourism certification schemes rely to a great extent upon government financial support, often disseminated through national and regional tourism boards (Bendell & Font, 2004). The South West Tourism GTBS for example, receives exposure through Visit Britain's accommodation listings, tourism trade fairs and other linked websites. This additional promotion may account for reported increases in consumer demand (Rivera & deLeon, 2005).

Whilst not the focus of this paper, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge research indicating a significant demand for sustainable tourism and hospitality products. For example, a 2002 English Tourism Council study (cited in Font & Epler Wood, 2007), on visitor attitudes towards sustainable tourism certification schemes, revealed 84% would choose an attraction that was part of a 'green' scheme over one that was not, with 58% stating a commitment to the environment was a key factor in choosing accommodation. A more recent study of UK domestic travel revealed most people would be prepared to spend up to an

additional 10% to stay in sustainable accommodation (Visit Britain, 2007). However, such views are negated by Reiser and Simmons' (2005) study of visitors to Christchurch (New Zealand) Visitor Information Centre. This found tourists with a high level of environmental concern were uninterested in a GG21 display, or brochure labelling information. Such conflicting evidence appears to suggest an over-optimistic view of the numbers of people who are interested in buying a sustainable holiday (see Miller et al., 2010). The true influence of certification is hard to ascertain – research into the importance of environmental or ethical issues in consumption behaviour is notoriously subject to social desirability bias, with many consumers believing they have an intention to buy ethically, but in reality do no such thing, focusing more on the comfort, quality and price of the product (Miller et al., 2010; Weeden, 2008).

To summarise, this review of sustainable tourism and accreditation research indicates the need for further exploration, not least because discussion about sustainable tourism certification and eco-labelling can date rapidly in the dynamic tourism and hospitality sectors. In addition, to what extent has the recent economic downturn affected the relevance of sustainable tourism products? According to Carrigan and De Pelsmacker (2009:683),

Despite the global financial crisis, the death knell for the ethical consumer is not yet sounding. Those firms who treat sustainability as an opportunity, rather than a costly add on, are most likely to reap the rewards long-term by exploiting the opportunity it brings to differentiate, make costs savings, build consumer trust and help consumers continue to make more sustainable purchasing decisions.

In line with this point, encouraging sustainable business initiatives continues to be the focus of considerable academic interest and practical importance (see for example, Black & Crabtree, 2007; Font, 2010). Several questions remain, however. For example, what are the perceived benefits and/or challenges faced by SMEs wanting to join certification schemes, to what extent are marketing and branding opportunities important in the decision to join, and how can a regional organization such as South West Tourism encourage more SMEs to join a national certification scheme such as the GTBS? The following section of this paper will

introduce the case study and presents the findings of a recent study of tourism and hospitality SMEs in the West of England (as part of South West Tourism), in order to address these issues.

The Green Tourism Business Scheme in the West of England

Before introducing the case study, it is useful to consider the value and importance of tourism to the whole of the South West of England (which includes the West of England). In 2005, tourism in this region contributed 10% of GDP, with 23.4 million visitors spending £8.8 billion, and supporting approximately 300,000 jobs (South West Tourism, 2007). More recent 2008 figures, however, demonstrate a decline in visitor numbers to 21.2 million, thus contributing £9.4 billion, of which almost £1.7 billion comes from the accommodation sector. This represents 18% of all visitor expenditure, supporting 270,000 jobs (South West Tourism, 2010), demonstrating a decline in the popularity of the region and the number of jobs. In response to such a downturn, sustainable tourism accommodation can be a significant tool for destinations seeking to attract regional investment to upgrade the product and therefore increase visitor numbers. This point is underlined by the South West Regional Development Agency's strategy, 'Towards 2015: Shaping Tomorrow's Tourism', which puts sustainability at the heart of its operations: "a sustainable tourism charter and an accreditation standard for businesses...for example, the GTBS, is a major step towards creating an understanding for tourism businesses, key decision makers and consumers" (South West Tourism, 2005:14).

The GTBS (2010), launched in 1997, is the national sustainable tourism certification scheme for the UK, with 2144 current members. Validated by Visit Britain, it is accredited by the International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT), and introduced to the South West of England in 2005. Since this time, Green Tourism Officers have been employed to specifically focus on promoting and increasing the number of GTBS-certified businesses within the region. The GTBS criteria for certification are set out in Table 1 below:

Insert Table 1 here

An evaluation of the GTBS in the autumn of 2006 (Tourism South East & South West Tourism, 2007), revealed several motivations amongst both member and non-member businesses to joining. These included financial considerations, improved business efficiency, enhanced quality through customer comfort and satisfaction, being able to demonstrate a response to environmental concerns, positive marketing and image enhancement, opportunities to gain specialist advice, and staff satisfaction and motivation. The study also highlighted several challenges to enterprises adopting the GTBS, which centred on the perception of financial and time implementation costs, with nearly 20% of businesses expressing the view that the cost of accreditation cancelled out any financial savings. A similar number believed there existed too many accreditation schemes, although a third of businesses believed they would join the scheme if it were rolled out nationally.

While previous market studies examined certification adoption issues in the UK and in the South West of England, research has never been undertaken specifically in the West of England. In addition, the 2007 study is now dated, with the GTBS since attracting additional new members. Understanding the challenges, as well as clarifying the benefits, of a scheme such as the GTBS is important for those seeking to encourage more enterprises to adopt certification. This will improve the quality of the region's tourism product and therefore support future marketing initiatives aimed at increasing the attraction of the West of England.

Methods

In order to address the key themes and questions from the literature, seven tourism businesses in the West of England were purposely selected to take part in the study so that a diverse set of insights could be generated. Consideration was given to the type, size, public/private/charity status, location of business (urban/rural), and the sample included both members and non-members, in order to ensure variance (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

While the results from a small sample may not fully relate to a wider population of tourism businesses in the West of England, it was deemed that they would provide valuable insight to the issues explored. This study adopted the methods of Tzschentke et al. (2004; 2007), who utilised semi-structured interviews in order to gain an understanding of the motivation factors as to why tourism businesses decided to 'go green'. The interviews were conducted by a West of England Green Tourism Officer, in January 2009, and took place on the premises of each business. The questions addressed the following themes – the benefits and challenges associated with joining the GTBS, perceived marketing and branding opportunities, and potential strategies that might encourage more businesses to adopt the GTBS award. Contact with interview participants had already been established through the work of a Green Tourism Officer, thus enabling ease of access and adding to the credibility of the data (see Saunders et al., 2006). Interviews were undertaken with three Owner-Directors, two Managing Directors and two Marketing Directors, all of whom requested confidentiality. Interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and analysed by theme, using open coding.

Results and Discussion

Initially, respondents were asked for their perceptions regarding the benefits of joining a certification scheme, followed by a series of questions relating to their views on the benefits of membership as identified in the literature. The results and discussion are structured around the key research themes.

Perceived benefits

Table 3 presents a range of quotes from respondents regarding their perception of the benefits of joining in a scheme such as the GTBS.

Insert Table 3 here

These responses seem to indicate a lack of a strong common benefit, with respondents' expressing a variety of opinions regarding their perceptions. There is however, evidence of a deeper understanding from respondents 3 and 6, who are both marketing directors and also scheme members. What is interesting to note here is that the benefits they discuss encompass not only the marketing potential, but also clearly demonstrate their knowledge of environmental imperatives, as well as opportunities for financial savings. In contrast, the other five respondents restrict their perceptions to the marketing benefits.

When prompted by the benefits identified in the literature, respondents considered these to be (in order of importance), reducing environmental impact, financial considerations, competitive advantage, brand recognition, and other advantages such as aiding public relations, personal moral responsibility, and political considerations.

Reducing environmental impact

When initially asked for their personal views on the benefits of joining a scheme such as the GTBS, only respondents 3 and 6 spoke about 'reducing environmental impact.' Indeed, respondent 3 was motivated by "a demonstrable commitment to ecotourism." On being prompted by the benefits cited in the literature, however, all respondents agreed this was a significant benefit. Such a discrepancy could have occurred for several reasons. For example, businesses might not focus solely on 'reducing environmental impact' when considering membership of a sustainable tourism certification scheme, the goal of 'reducing environmental impact' was too obvious to mention, respondents may not be aware of, or did not consider, these benefits before or they felt obliged to highly rank this benefit due to social desirability bias (feeling they ought to put a higher emphasis on environmental issues).

Regardless of this apparent contradiction, however, respondents' perception of importance corresponds with Tourism South East and South West Tourism's (2007) research on GTBS, where 'reduction of environmental impact' was considered among the most important reasons for membership. It also supports previous research, which indicates certification schemes aim to benefit and protect the environment (Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001; Rivera & deLeon, 2005; Russillo et al., 2008).

Financial considerations

Two out of the seven respondents cited financial savings to be important benefits of the scheme, with respondent 3 noting, "there are going to be financial benefits in terms of cost savings of running the facilities." Sometimes it was difficult for respondents to articulate the benefits of joining GTBS, and also to separate those that overlap. For example, respondent 6, originally addressing the issue of 'reducing environmental impact' stated, "personally, I think it's fantastic. As a business, would it be a factor? For PR reasons, of course it would, and for local environmental reasons, but it would be hand in hand with reduced costs." In other words, reducing environmental impact was of equal importance to financial savings.

However, with reference to the perceived higher costs associated with making sustainable changes in business, respondent 7, even though they were not a member of the GTBS, justified spending money on installing a rainwater harvesting system by stating, "I paid a little bit extra but, I know from experience, every year water goes up." The same respondent suggested financial savings would not be an over-riding reason for joining GTBS, saying, "we all have to be prudent, but it wouldn't be the driving factor."

Some of the literature clearly indicates that certification schemes can help businesses make savings by reducing energy, water and waste utility bills (Bhaskaran et al., 2006; Pizam, 2009; Rivera & deLeon, 2005; Tzschentke et al., 2004; 2007). However, Medina (2005), Mycoo, (2006), and Vertinsky and Zhou (2000) suggest the perceived high cost of such

schemes can also act as a deterrent to membership. Significantly, Tourism South East and South West Tourism's (2007) study found that the high costs of membership and compliance cancelled out any financial saving. Such an ambivalent picture of whether certification can lead to financial savings might indeed prevent potential members from joining, especially during the current global economic downturn. However, as noted by Carrigan and de Pelsmacker (2009), those companies who use sustainability as an opportunity, rather than an 'add on,' are likely to benefit from financial savings and sustained sales, even during an economic crisis.

Competitive advantage

Competitive advantage was initially cited by six of the seven respondents as a key benefit to joining a scheme like the GTBS. For example, respondent 6, (member), believed, "[It] increased competitiveness [with] unique marketing potential," while respondent 7 (non-member) suggested, "It creates a benchmark, otherwise you are on your own." These views support the study findings of Tourism South East and South West Tourism (2007).

However, when faced with the benefits identified in the literature (see Lynes & Andrachuk, 2008; Swarbrooke, 1999; Weeden, 2002), there was a lack of consensus from respondents on the extent of this competitive advantage. For example, respondent 4 stated, "probably the main [benefit] is it's a form of differentiation. If it boils down to two different parties, and one of them has an award that somebody else does not, you automatically have that differentiation." Respondent 1 concurred, stating,

There are some organisations that will organise events if the [conference venues] meet their own sustainability criteria, and obviously the choice of venue is affected by that, so it does give you a competitive advantage. It's something else that will set you apart from some of your competitors.

Further support comes from an SME hotel (respondent 5) considering joining the scheme, who stated, "we've got a new marketing director...and I think [they are] very interested in

[GTBS], and I think that the benefit will be much greater than we anticipate.” Respondent 6, a new member, stated, “it gives us that USP, something extra that we can offer our customer ... definitely, from the marketing side of things, it just gives you that edge”.

However, not all respondent members were sure that GTBS gave them an advantage in the market. For example, respondent 2 stated, “we were the first people in [name of place] to do the green business ... trying to gain a niche market, trying to do something that was different from other people ... [but] we’ve had very few people book with us because we’re members of a green tourism business scheme.” Such ambivalence is also reflected in the literature review, which acknowledges that in reality the marketing benefits appeared to be somewhat contested. Rowe and Higham (2007) for example, suggest sustainable tourism certification does not provide marketing benefit, and Font and Buckley (2001) argue certification schemes are simply PR exercises for funding agencies. Further, Font and Epler Wood (2007) suggest increased volumes of visitors at sustainably certified businesses may be unrelated to certification.

It appears businesses that have been members of GTBS for more than 6 months, are less enthusiastic, or perhaps more realistic, about the potential for competitive advantage since joining. For example, “we haven’t found it to be massive so far. It was a factor on application that it was going to be a fantastic marketing advantage” (respondent 4). Likewise, respondent 2 stated, “I’m not convinced it’s done as well as we thought it was going to.” Arguably, there is a significant gap regarding the perception of competitive advantage between non-members and new members, and those that have been members for a longer period.

Brand recognition and company image

Although respondents recognised the importance of GTBS as a brand, “it’s bound to make [the business] more attractive” (respondent 3), the interviews revealed a mix of opinions. For

example, one business (non-member), commented on the strength of the brand and the effectiveness of the logo,

I think [the brand] has become quite strong, actually. I think it's fairly recognisable now. Without even seeing it I can picture the logo, the green, the white with the...something in the middle, what is it, a tree? It says a million things without actually having to write it in words (respondent 1).

However, the majority of comments regarding the GTBS brand were negative. For example,

It's not well known enough, it really isn't. It is not nationally known and it could be better. People are saying 'well, what is GTBS? What does it stand for?' You know...they realise it's green but that's it really (respondent 2).

Respondent 3 elaborated further on this point,

It's a brand that needs to have wider appeal. It needs to be better known. In terms of Google searches it doesn't have a great profile on the web. The only reason we found out about it was through the course that [my partner] did, not through my Internet searches.

From the literature, company image is an important aspect of joining a sustainable tourism certification scheme (D'Souza, 2004; Harris, 2007), and whilst De Pelsmacker et al., (2005) and Hartmann and Ibáñez (2006) assert recognisable and widespread brands lead to improved sales and customer loyalty, these benefits were not wholly endorsed by the respondents. In addition, respondents' views appeared to indicate a mismatch between the marketing benefits of certification as 'sold' to tourism and hospitality businesses, and the reality of the market, where consumers are confused by the proliferation of schemes, sceptical about 'greenwash,' and do not consider certification in their decision-making (Font & Buckley, 2001; Miller et al., 2010; Robbins, 2008). A further problem, indicated by respondent 7 (non-member), was the 'gap' between promoted GTBS standards and actual experience,

The image you're given is not what you actually experience, and I think there's got to be congruity between what you do, and what the guest experiences. I think that sometimes people push the image, and you get a very disappointed experience, and I think that image is very suspect.

There also appeared to be dissatisfaction from both members and non-members with regards to GTBS's own marketing of the scheme. This corresponds to both Font (2002), and Font and Buckley's (2001) opinion, that certification providers often have limited or no marketing

power. To illustrate, respondent 4 was satisfied with the scheme, but disappointed in the lack of PR and marketing undertaken by GTBS,

The only thing I'd like to see from the GTBS is more advertising. There must be so much more GTBS could do, just on editorial write-ups, even about the adverts 'do you know who we are, do you know what we do, do you know who the nationally recognised brand is?' There must be a lot of government funding that the GTBS must could apply for to bring in, to actually push the scheme, to advertise...but if the GTBS were known as a brand, it would be nice to be associated with it...

Other considerations

Some of those interviewed believed certification to be positive in terms of public relations. For example, respondent 1, (conference and event organiser, non-member) commented, "the public perception is that if you combine meetings, and your business, with something that is perceived to be sustainable, that is good PR." The debates concerning PR are discussed at length in much of the literature about certification schemes (see Font & Buckley, 2001; Mycoo, 2006), but Rowe and Higham (2007) highlight good PR does not always translate into financial return. In other words, although PR is often cited as a positive benefit for scheme members, corroborating evidence of increased sales and competitive advantage remains scarce.

One respondent (non-member) mentioned their motivation for being green was their sense of personal moral responsibility, and wanting to "be green without preaching,"

Using GTBS as a benchmark would give credibility to the business's ethical ethos ... having a standard outside of myself. I'm just an individual that the staff have to put up with and 'he rabbits on about these things' but if I can present them with material that is a standard set by an authoritative body it gives me a little more credibility, they have something objective to look at (respondent 7).

Such a view corresponds to the work of Tzschentke et al. (2004) and Rivera and deLeon (2005) who discuss the importance of altruistic motivations for sustainable businesses. In direct contrast to such personal drivers however, some organisations apply for certification

for pragmatic considerations (see Medina, 2005), such as respondent 4 (member), who commented, “ A lot of businesses have now put in their environmental statements that they have to trade with companies with a similar ethos ... a lot of government business [for example] now refuses to book business with you unless you can prove your green credentials.” Such compliance, whilst not legally binding (see Bhaskaran et al., 2006; Tzschentke et al., 2004), serves as an additional imperative to joining a certification scheme like the GTBS.

The final benefit, and one that did not appear within the review of literature, referred to the use of the award as a ‘tool’ for the business to use politically. Respondent 4, for example, suggested the GTBS certification gave them credibility to expand their business into an area of environmental sensitivity,

We’ve just been successful in getting our planning application for another 44 rooms and one of the things we were arguing against anyone that was saying ‘you’re in a green belt’ was, ‘look, we’re not a bad company, we are someone who cares’ and so once again the GTBS award was used again. It’s been quite a pivotal tool in quite a few areas.

To summarise, whilst the evidence discussed here indicates a range of positive benefits to green certification schemes, there are also some significant challenges that mitigate against or even prevent organisations from applying to join such schemes.

Perceived challenges

All of the respondents discussed a range of internal and external challenges potentially preventing businesses from joining the GTBS. Internal challenges included a lack of respondent knowledge of the sustainable tourism concept, the perceived expense of applying and/or membership, a lack of time to complete the application process, and the amount of work involved in compliance.

Several respondents cited perceived expense as a barrier, although respondent 2 claimed cost would not be an issue if value for money were received,

I don't think people would mind paying more [for the scheme] if they see that they're getting value for money ... I don't think we've got value for money in the fact that we've paid for at least two or three years now to join and we've had nothing back at all. What is the point in joining a society when you could use that money somewhere else? There hasn't been anything else except these huge criteria to wade through

The "huge criteria" here refers to their experiences, as members, of the paperwork involved, and which may impact on non-members' perception of the process. This view seems to be pervasive amongst respondents, "GTBS is such a massive amount of work ... the sheer man hours was such a cost," (respondent 4, member), and "if there's a lot of paperwork, that would stop someone, or if there's a lot of fiddly bits ... it does seem like a lot of boxes that you have to tick" (respondent 6, member). A lack of knowledge about sustainable tourism also acts as a challenge, as the following comments suggest, "do not know enough about it" and "confused about the term." Such views can be found in many previous studies (see Black & Crabtree, 2007; Carlsen et al., 2001; Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001; Tzschentke et al., 2007; Vernon et al., 2003).

A further perception that certification is confined to hotel and accommodation providers (Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001) comes from respondent 5 (non-member, hotel owner-director), who notes, "some of the criteria, and I don't know if this is just me, but some of it seems quite focused on hotels." Another challenge can be a lack of willingness to change, with respondent 2 (member) noting "the mindset of business," whilst respondent 7 (non-member) commented, "they think they can't do it, that they think it will be massively expensive, or that they will have the green police after them!" This mirrors tourists who are unwilling to change their behaviour and purchase sustainable tourism products (see Miller et al., 2010).

Indirect barriers, deemed outside of the immediate control of the businesses, included a lack of supportive funding, poor consumer knowledge, poor marketing support, the effects of the recession, and inflexibility of the scheme, all of which correlate to previous studies (Carlsen

et al., 2001; Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001; Proto et al., 2007; Swarbrooke, 1999). The lack of funding relates to the availability of grants or subsidised rates for implementing sustainability into a business, including financial assistance for joining GTBS. Respondent 2, in relation to local funding for businesses to join GTBS, noted, “now, which I think is a big mistake, [the funding] has faded, gone. We haven’t got that money. That money’s just not there. So we as a little group, we *were* pushing green.” Coupled with this point, a perceived lack of local support was also cited as a barrier, and this largely addressed respondents’ lack of confidence as to how to capitalise on potential marketing advantages. For example, respondent 4 noted, “we haven’t found how to use it yet.” Local support, in the form of supporting advice from a local Green Tourism Officer, would give certified businesses a sense of value for money, as well as knowledge as to how to pursue their competitive advantage. With regards to local recycling issues, respondent 2 stated, “[name of council] need to address that because they’re not really supporting the scheme.” It was also suggested that GTBS is inflexible, focusing upon accommodation providers over other businesses, which corresponds to Font (2002) and Font and Buckley’s (2001) point that certification schemes have been criticised for focusing on hotels and ecotourism providers.

Potential strategies to encourage more membership to GTBS

In addition to being questioned about the perceived benefits and challenges of certification, the interviewees were also prompted for recommendations as to how businesses can be encouraged to join the GTBS. Respondents suggested more information about the scheme and its marketing advantages, the need for Tourism South West to spend more money on promoting the GTBS brand, the necessity of educating consumers on the importance of sustainability and how to incorporate such issues into their holiday considerations.

The overriding consideration, however, centred on funding. For example, respondent 2 complained, “We had funding to start off, which does encourage you to do it if you are

prepared to put the work in. At least you don't have to pay the upfront fee to start with." In agreement, respondent 4 commented, "It really does have to be down to funding." Another consideration was the opportunity to benefit from co-operative partnerships between different accreditation schemes, as this would enable SMEs to consolidate the cost of membership between such schemes, and also benefit from cross-marketing opportunities. Respondent 2 commented,

You have to pay for your accreditation, you have to pay for a brochure ... I mean, accreditation's what? £250 now, for the AA? ... Then the brochure is £600-700. Then you have got the 'green' on top of that ... so in a way, it's an annoyance to do. It's an extra.

Another respondent (2) mooted the idea of cross-subsidies, recommending, "Getting the green tourism initiative linked-in would be financially beneficial to businesses, if rates could be funded through partnerships." These comments echo those from previous research completed by Tourism South East and South West Tourism (2007), which suggested businesses are less willing to pay to join the GTBS when additional funding or subsidised rates are not on offer. Such views seem to indicate a lack of personal moral incentive to be sustainable, with businesses only going 'green' if the financial situation is advantageous to them and their product. This recalls the work of Rivera and deLeon (2005) and Tzschentke et al. (2004), who acknowledge the role of personal moral responsibility as a driver of sustainable business. To illustrate this point further, one respondent noted personal moral belief should be more than enough to encourage businesses to join a sustainable tourism certification scheme,

I don't think you should be going into these things unless you actually have a belief that it's doing something for the greater good, for the environment and you value that on its own. That ought to be the main driver (respondent 1, non-member).

What this respondent is suggesting is that those who hold strong ethical beliefs should provide a product that supports these beliefs, regardless of the costs involved. Whether this is

realistic, or even workable, is debateable, but the quote neatly demonstrates one of the major conflicts for those wanting to manage and operate a sustainable tourism business.

Conclusions

Encouraging sustainable business initiatives continues to be the focus of considerable academic interest and practical importance, as evidenced in this paper. The literature reveals a range of issues that are relevant to sustainable certification schemes, with marketing benefit often a key incentive. Additional considerations include opportunities for financial savings and the motivating role of personal moral responsibility in operating a sustainable business. However, the academic and also applied research as discussed in this paper has revealed the contested nature of these issues. For example, some studies suggest certification enhances environmental protection strategies, others argue they are a benchmark for consumers and industry providers, whereas some note the importance of certification for destination marketing purposes. On the other hand, critics contend such schemes are merely public relations exercises, have limited marketing impact, and commercial benefits remain unclear.

Interviews with a range of businesses in the West of England revealed a similar level of contestation, and whilst those interviewed raised the same issues, they placed different emphases on their importance. For example, marketing benefit was initially cited as the most significant issue, but on being prompted by factors from previous studies, they reconsidered these factors. In order, these priorities were firstly, a reduction in environmental impacts, followed by financial issues. These were followed by the marketing benefits (including competitive advantage, brand recognition and company image). Lastly, public relations, personal moral responsibility and political aspects were commented upon.

Membership status also had an impact on respondents' viewpoints. For example, non-members as well as new members were more optimistic about the marketing opportunities of the GTBS, while longer-standing members demonstrated a more negative view of the

importance of certification for consumers, remaining unconvinced that such schemes improved their sales. It is also important to note that respondents who were members, may not have had the skills to accurately measure the impact of the GTBS scheme, with the opinions reported here being based more on ‘gut instinct’ than fact.

The study findings also indicate a level of scepticism, shared by businesses and consumers, about the relevance of sustainable tourism certification schemes. A further consideration is that some stakeholders have to reconcile personal moral obligation with the commercial realities of operating a successful business, all within the context of a dynamic tourism and hospitality sector.

Several recommendations were offered by respondents to encourage uptake of certification, but here they struggled to think beyond the costs associated with application and compliance, the extensive bureaucracy involved, and their desire for increased marketing support, higher advertising budgets and practical business advice from GTBS.

Themes for further study:

- Having explored the perceptions of tourism and hospitality businesses towards the GTBS in the West of England, it is also important to explore and conceptualise tourists’ perception of the scheme, and the extent to which it may or may not impact upon their intention to purchase tourist and hospitality services in the region.
- The research reported in this paper could also be investigated nationally, through a quantitative study of tourism and hospitality businesses’ attitudes and perceptions towards the GTBS.
- This study has revealed significant tensions between an individual’s sense of moral responsibility and the day-to-day practicalities of owning/managing a commercial tourism and hospitality business. Further exploration would provide valuable insights into this complex and largely ignored phenomenon.

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Table 1 Green Tourism Business Scheme criteria for award (GTBS, 2010)

Criteria	Explanation
Compulsory	Compliance with environmental legislation and a commitment to continuous improvement in environmental performance
Management and Marketing	Demonstrating good environmental management, including staff awareness, specialist training, monitoring, and record keeping
Social Involvement and Communication	Of environmental actions to customers through variety of channels and range of actions e.g. green policy
Efficiency	Energy (lighting, heating and appliance, insulation and renewable energy), water,
Purchasing	Environmentally friendly goods and services, e.g. products made from recycled materials, use and promotion of local food and drink, and use of FSC wood products
Waste	Aim to minimise by encouraging the ' <i>eliminate, reduce, reuse, recycle</i> ' principle, e.g. glass, paper, card, plastic and metal recycling; supplier take
Transport	Aim to minimise visitors' car use by promoting local and national public transport service, cycle hire, local walking and cycling option, and use of alternative fuels
Natural and Cultural Heritage	On-site measures aimed at increasing biodiversity, e.g. wildlife gardening, growing native species, nesting boxes, as well as providing information for visitors on the wildlife on and around the site
Innovation	All good and best practice actions to increase a business' sustainability not covered elsewhere

Table 2 Profile of Interview Participants

Interview Respondent and Role	Type of business	Size of Business	Status	Location	Member of GTBS
1 – Managing Director	Events/Conferences	Medium/Large	Public	Urban	No
2 – Owner / Director	Bed and Breakfast	Small	Private	Urban	Yes
3 – Marketing Manager	Visitor Attraction	Medium	Private	Rural	Yes
4 – Managing Director	Hotel/Spa/Events/Conferences	Medium/Large	Private (Ltd. company)	Rural/Urban	Yes
5 – Owner / Director	Hotel	Small/Medium	Private	Rural	No
6 – Marketing Manager	Visitor Attraction	Medium	Charity	Urban	Yes
7 – Owner / Director	Events/Self catering	Small	Private	Rural	No

Table 3 Perceived Benefits of GTBS membership

Int. #	Benefits of GTBS membership (direct quotes)
1	It is a respected and recognised scheme.
2	I suppose it has raised our profile.
3	A demonstrable commitment to eco tourism. Certified by an accredited body. The customer knows what you are about in terms of environmental policy. Financial benefits in terms of costs savings of running the facilities.
4	It is a form of differentiation.
5	Cross-marketing - it helps us access another sort of group somehow.
6	Increased competitiveness, low utility bills, making a healthy and more productive living environment, unique marketing potential, getting rid of more solid waste.
7	It creates a benchmark; otherwise you are on your own.