

## Nature tourists' response to ecolabels in Oulanka PAN Park, Finland

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As the awareness of environmental problems caused by tourism has grown, various international initiatives, ecolabels and certification programs have been introduced to promote sustainable tourism. Ecolabels are meant to indicate the degree to which tourism companies or destinations are operating sustainably. Ecolabels are both an environmental management and a marketing tool as they help to reduce negative impacts and gain a competitive advantage (e.g. Buckley 2001, Fairweather et al. 2005, Font 2002). The present study examines nature tourists' environmental values and perceptions of ecolabels: how familiar are tourists with tourism ecolabels and certifications and how do they respond to them, how these relationships are influenced by various background variables, and how tourists' environmental attitudes are related to their beliefs on ecolabels in tourism and travelling behavior? The research material, 271 surveys, was collected with an onsite-survey for visitors to Oulanka National Park located in northeastern Finland. Oulanka NP was one of the first parks certified in 2002 by PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks Foundation, which was established in 1997 by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Dutch leisure company, Molecaten (Font & Clark 2007).

Tourism ecolabels were not very well-known among the respondents: only 11% of them were familiar with some ecolabels used in tourism. Nationality (domestic vs international) was the only variable predicting the probability that a respondent was familiar with ecolabels. Among domestic respondents 14% were familiar with some ecolabel whereas only 2% of international ones knew some ecolabel used in tourism ( $\chi^2=6.44$ ,  $p=0.011$ ). PAN Parks certification program was known by 28% of respondents, and according to logistic regression analysis it was predicted only by the educational level of respondents: ones with higher education were more likely to be aware of the PAN Parks certification. Only one respondent answered that PAN Parks certification of Oulanka NP influenced her/his choice of trip destination. Visitors found ecolabel's current visibility low and that it should be improved. Moreover, 70% of respondents indicated that they would like to know more about tourism ecolabels. Almost all respondents that were members of some environmental organisation, and overall, 78 % of respondents were ready to pay more for products and services with an ecolabel.

Our results are consistent with the previous ones which show that tourists are not very familiar with tourism ecolabels and certifications (Lübbert 2001, Fairweather et al. 2005). Probably, however, the awareness of ecolabels, such as PAN Parks, was somewhat higher in Oulanka PAN Park than in some other non-certified destinations. Despite the low awareness, the respondents of this study expressed a positive attitude towards ecolabels and certifications as they considered them necessary in Finland, wanted to have more information about them and to increase their visibility (see Lübbert 2001, Fairweather et al. 2005). Currently it seems that ecolabelling has a quite low effect on the consumption process and decision-making of tourists. Real market benefits may thus not be created in the short run (see Font & Epler Wood 2007), which may undermine industry support for certification programs and tourists' indirect role in developing sustainable tourism. Nevertheless, tourists' interest in ecolabels suggests that the increased visibility, promotion and marketing of ecolabels could increase their demand. Tourists' positive response to ecolabels and

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favorable attitudes towards the environment in which they travel should encourage businesses to adopt environmentally friendly practices.

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