

Certification as a tool for sustainable development in winter sport destinations – challenges for “old” and “new” European skiing areas

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Introduction

Certification systems are used as a tool to enhance the sustainable development of tourism enterprises. As such these certifications play a key role in sustainable tourism management (Honey 2002, Bien 2007, Font 2002). Certification has also been recognized as a valuable method to influence markets (Buckley 2002, Font 2001). Honey and Rome (2001) define certification as a voluntary procedure which assesses audits and provides a written assurance that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards and it awards a marketable logo to those enterprises which meet or exceed baseline standards. Ideally the certification differentiates clearly sustainable from unsustainable organizations (Font 2004). It is therefore perceived as an important tool of competitiveness and differentiation, which establishes consumer confidence. The trend toward environmental or sustainable certification has increased in the last two decades.

All these certifications have three crucial functions: environmental standard setting, third party certification of these standards and value-added marketing or environmental communication. In addition to various voluntary approaches the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has developed more generic environmental certifications that do not apply to one industry in particular (e.g. ISO 14001 and ISO14004). Also, in Europe the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) serves as an environmental benchmark and plays an important role in various branches (Pröbstl et al. 2004, Pröbstl, Jiricka 2009).

Methodological approach

In this study I compare the environmental problems in the alpine area, the so called “old” world of ski resorts, such as winter sport destinations in Schladming or Lech am Arlberg in Austria, and the “new” world of upcoming ski resorts in Eastern Europe, such as Bansko in Bulgaria. In order to compare the main tasks of the auditing process in these two types of ski resorts we focus on the following aspects and challenges:

- Motivation to participate in an Auditing Scheme
- Relevance and objects of environmental improvement
- Information, marketing purposes and target groups
- Relevance for internal management and the motivation of the employees
- Relevance of additional subjects such as climate change.

Against this background the reasons and options for upgrading the environmental situation based on an auditing system are discussed.

Main findings

The motivation to participate in an auditing scheme differed at the beginning significantly. In the Eastern countries the auditing was the result of ongoing complains by environmental NGOs. Furthermore the administration underlined the necessity to implement a management system to improve the environmental situation. In the alpine resorts the start was motivated by marketing aspects and the expectation to distinguish oneself from other resorts with a “green image”.

The comparison of the objectives of environmental improvement showed that the different analyses of possible improvements of soil and erosion, regeneration of the vegetation or water management are more important in the eastern European resorts than in the alpine ones. In contrast, in the Alpine resorts the main focus concerning the environmental issues was to improve the summer management and adapt it to the changing situation in the agricultural sector in the mountains as well as to mitigate impacts emanating from an overlapping use e.g. by summer tourism.

Also, the expectation concerning information and marketing effects differed significantly. In the Eastern European resorts the primary purpose of the relevant reports was to be sent to the respective Ministry of the Environment. In the Alpine area the accessibility to the internet and the distribution of brochures for journalists is much more of interest.

The role of the certification on employees is one of the intensively discussed topics in the literature. Many authors highlight that the social aspects of sustainability are often underrepresented. Concerning the relevance for internal management and the motivation of the employees, we also found significant differences. In the Eastern European resort the participatory process was difficult to initiate. Beside the language barrier, basic mistrust or missing experience in participatory planning processes influences the possible effect. It took more time and effort to integrate their knowledge and experience into the auditing process. In the alpine area these problems did not exist. Here the auditing scheme was a relevant tool to discover problems in the interrelationship between various company sections and to enhance the motivation and identification with the enterprise.

Additional topics such as climate change are very important in the alpine resorts only. Since many of the alpine resorts are low lying resorts and this argument is heavily discussed within the local market the interest in this additional tool is much higher.

Overall applying certification in several ski resorts underlines the important effect on the employees and the relevance for the future management in Central and Eastern European countries.

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