

**SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATION IN THE TOURISM SYSTEM – the time is now?**  
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It is renowned that the percentage of tourists that “prefer” eco-friendly experiences and structures is growing. What is also sure, according to several recent surveys (OECD, Rebuilding tourism for the future: COVID-19 policy responses and recovery, Updated 14 December 2020; Booking.com), is that this drastically increased with the covid-related emergency and that after-covid tourism will be more eco-sensitive. Tourists are more motivated to go deep and are no longer satisfied with greenwashing. As in many spheres of life, there is a chance that the emergency opened eyes and made us realise what really matters. How this translates into practices is an open question though.

It is a very crucial phase for innovation toward sustainability. On the one hand we feel the urgency, we set objectives and deadlines, on the other hand there is a risk of not getting to the point, not obtaining the real impact we aim at.

Google is starting to label hotels based on their sustainability credentials (Benjamin Lephilbert, Food Waste Hacker. Entrepreneur. Tech designer. Counselor at Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce FTCC; Bloomberg; Google). It also introduced a feature in their flight search indicating the CO2 emissions for flights at compared to the average.

To diversify the European tourism offer, the European Commission provides co-funding through the COSME programme (now the Single Market programme) to sustainable transnational tourism products. The six projects (**CEnTOUR** - Circular Economy in Tourism, **EU ECO-TANDEM** programme, **SUSTOUR** – Promoting sustainability among the European tour operator sector through a business led approach, **Tourban** - Accelerating SME capacity and inn Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Services and Navigation (BCC), **TourISME** - Improving sustainability of tourism SMEs through knowledge transfer, international cooperation and multi-stakeholder engagement, **ETGG2030** - European Tourism Going Green 2030) co-financed under the 2019 call for proposals ‘Boosting sustainable tourism development and capacity of tourism SMEs through transnational cooperation and knowledge transfer’ (COS TOURCOOP-2019-3-01) will share research, tools and good practices as well as support capacity building and innovation for tourism SMEs to move to more sustainable and circular models , including the adoption of internationally recognised sustainability certifications and labels. To this end, they provide funding to tourism SMEs by means of a various support schemes announced through calls for proposals directed at tourism SMEs.

At present, two TOURCOOP project Calls just recently closed and have selected businesses to be supported in building capacity and innovation paths towards circularity: TOURISME for France, Italy, Spain, Cyprus (closed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2021, info at <https://tourisme-project.eu/call-for-smes/>); CEnTOUR Circular Economy in Tourism for Italy, Spain, Greece, Moldova, North Macedonia (closed 31st October 2021, info at <https://circulartourism.eu/>), while TOURBAN's call, focusing on Sustainable Urban Tourism in Croatia (Dubrovnik), Hungary (Budapest), Denmark (Copenhagen), the Netherlands (Amsterdam), Estonia (Tallinn), Spain (Barcelona) and Germany (Kiel) will close 19<sup>th</sup> January 2022 info at <https://www.tourban.eu/2021/08/13/the-sustainable-urban-tourism-acceleration-programme/>).

What could be the right tools, especially in the tourism sector, to embrace paths of innovation toward sustainability? We decided to focus on an apparently small aspect that has nevertheless huge consequences as it could be a key (and currently often missing) link between innovation and return on investment and touch one of the most sensitive points of today's social systems: how do we find reliable information to orient our consumption choices? This aspect is that of Sustainability

Certifications.

Straightforward and rationale, Sustainability Certifications have not always been seen as favourable to companies. They have been considered time consuming, bureaucratic, and often viewed a favour to large companies and a further obstacle to SMEs.

There are nevertheless strong arguments to pay growing attention to certifications in this particular phase. Things could just be right as we need to make sustainable solutions scale up and mainstream. We need to identify new ways to engage in common objectives and to be rewarded for it and this could be the right moment it can be done at a larger scale, through shared tools like certifications.

Therefore we have asked a few experts in sustainability and tourism as well as a project officer, involved in TOURCOOP projects, to highlight what are the added values of Sustainability Certifications today and how this is going to change in the next two years. Read below their views.

### **1- The impact is indeed positive**

Professor Silvio Cardinali and Barbara Kulaga, Research Fellow, at the Economic Department of Marche Polytechnic University can confirm this *“Eco-labels are a controversial topic in tourism as the degree to which they influence tourist planning processes and corporate environmental performance is largely unknown. In recent years, several studies have investigated the main positive effects reported by the implementation of the EU Ecolabel by tourist facilities and among these are: image improvement, environmental performance improvement and consequently a lower impact. Other benefits recognized by the interviewees are an improvement of the internal organization, a more eco-efficient operational management, and the standardization of environmental data. Furthermore, the attitude of guests towards green practices positively influences the evaluation of green practices and as the segment of attentive consumers is growing rapidly this effect cannot be overlooked”*

### **2 - You aim at a label, but you also gain new tools for your company development. And you do it in a way that is structured and with clear guidance, so you do not waste time.**

**Erwan Mouazan** (Phd) is a circular economy and sustainability expert with 17 years' experience in coaching and training on sustainability topics at EU level with a focus on sustainable business model innovation and environmental certifications: *“One set of advantages often overlooked in setting up a sustainability certification is actually related to the internal social positive effects of such schemes. Setting up an environmental certification is a good way to engage your employees on a shared mission (...) This in turn creates a positive working atmosphere and leads to an improved performance. One other important point: the ability to attract and retain talent is key in today's world and this is more than relevant in the tourism sector. Experience has shown that organisations which distinguish themselves from their competitors in terms of environmental commitment find it easier to attract new talents.*

**Leonie Hehn** is a Project Manager at the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce and worked as a Research Assistant at the Department of Tourism at the University of Technology, Business and Design Konstanz (Germany): *“Obtaining a sustainability certification as a tourism business does not only mean to get a nice sticker to be displayed at the hotel entrance or the company's website for marketing purposes. Getting certified enriches a business through the learning and adaptation process it needs to undergo to fulfill the sustainability requirements of the respective scheme”*

### **2 – There are obviously economic gains, and of several types: from cost and resources savings to better positioning on the market**

HEHN: On the one hand there are “*business-related advantages like cost savings in energy, water or waste management through an optimised management or the use of more efficient devices*”, on the other “*a better positioning on the market and the inclusion into marketing streams at destination level, but also in booking systems (filter)*”.

**Herbert Hamele** **Herbert Hamele** holds a master in economies and tourism and started working in 1983 in the field of environmentally sustainable tourism development in Europe. In 1993 he founded ECOTRANS - European Network for Sustainable Tourism Development and following developed Tourism 2030 – DestiNet Services - Your Knowledge Networking Portal for Sustainable & Responsible Tourism: “*Sustainable Tourism certification programs are able to increase market access through:*

1. *Being known and trusted by the travellers who consider the existence of a certain label in their decision making for a destination. A good example is the international “Blue Flag” for beaches and marinas*
2. *Being recognised as credible certificate at those market players who market the offer and inform the demand: tour operators, booking services, Regional and National Tourist Boards, media for consumers, sustainable tourism sites, etc. The Tourism2030.eu platform – managed by ECOTRANS – provides transparency on all 200+ certificates worldwide: on the “Certification Quickfinder” you can filter the global list by country, tourism category, standard and credibility level.*
3. *Providing their listings of certified tourism businesses to booking services and other intermediaries. Large certification programmes as e.g. the Green Key with 1000’s of certified hotels are meanwhile of interest to big players like booking.com and big tour operators to identify and mark their bookable products as “green”*
4. *Feeding their listings into the common all in one “Green Travel Maps”. This is seen as the way out to bring the green offer closer to the consumer: about 50 leading certification programs publish and update meanwhile their listings on the global and public Green Travel Maps on the independent Tourism2030.eu platform with currently more than 16,000 certified accommodation providers and camping sites, attractions, tour operators and destinations.*

#### **4 – You care about the environment and also about your community - these might not be the first driver, but surely are rewarding.**

HEHN: “*There is obviously much added value related to the protection of the environment through the reduction of CO2 emissions by a decrease in energy consumption or the use of renewable energy sources or local supply chains with less emissions from transport. At the same time, usually food waste, the use of plastic and the consumption of water are reduced, while the use of products that harm the environment like chemicals and pesticides are avoided. Depending on the certification scheme selected, there are also factors and improvements to be expected that play into the social dimension of sustainability like improvements in accessibility, worker’s well-being, social inclusion, and gender equality.*”

#### **5 – You also improve your networking and collaboration with like-minded/certified businesses and destinations improving the quality of your own work**

Certifications are multiplying factors, especially when done at destination level, in a two-folded way.

HAMELE: “*Destinations can get access to other certified destinations: exchange, mutual support, synergies in joint marketing actions, e.g. “Sustainable destinations: Initiative of Excellence” (s.a.)*” They can also make their certified businesses marketing partners. “*Link to each other and raise awareness to each other – and link the sustainability messages to your certificate*” (Peter Zimmer/FUTOUR)”

#### **6 – You work towards quality and excellence of services – following a clear path**

HAMELE: “*While in the past destination marketing was mainly focusing on attracting more visitors and meeting their expectations, since some years more and more destinations follow a more holistic approach with the ambition to achieve both: a high quality of life for the host population across all their activities and*

*a high level of visitors fulfillment. If a destination wants to market their offer as sustainable tourism, then the DMO in close collaboration with their tourism businesses and service providers need to focus on two main goals: the destination as better place to live in AND a better place to visit (Xavier Font & Scott McCabe (2017) Sustainability and marketing in tourism: its contexts, paradoxes, approaches, challenges and potential, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 25:7, 869-883, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2017.1301721)*

HEHN: *“The advantage of opting for a certification scheme is however that it offers a structured process and clear directives on what to do and how to do it. This helps most business who are compromised in advancing in their sustainability but do not know where to start and how to approach this complex subject”.*

Greenwashing is no longer a viable option, as it is more and more liable of sanction as it collide with Consumers Protection legislation, so businesses investing in sustainability should be sure to be going in the right direction and this is not just a matter of gaining trust from the market, but also of not breaching laws. The Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs of the European Commission is currently carrying out a consultation on 'Principles and recommendations for Good Practice in online consumer reviews and ratings' within a Study of possible initiatives at EU level and establishment of a multi-stakeholder platform on quality of tourism accommodation.

HAMELE: *“the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has now published a “Draft Guidance on Environmental Claims on Goods and Services. Helping businesses to comply with their consumer protection law obligations” for all businesses making claims about their green credentials.”* Whilst the draft guidance itself is not legally binding, the consumer protection legislation (the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 (the CPRs)) that lies behind it is (Walker Morris <https://www.walkermorris.co.uk/publications/greenwashing-and-consumer-protection-what-businesses-need-to-know/>)

HEHN: *“it is most advisable for businesses to adapt today on their own terms and initiative rather than later by force of the market or governmental regulations. Because sustainability in the tourism industry will be a mainstream at some point and **who wants to be mainstream if you can also be avantgarde.**”*



Erwan Mouazan (Phd) is a circular economy and sustainability expert, dividing his time between consultancy at Ecores, a brussels based consultancy focusing on sustainability transition, and research, at the University of Vaasa, Finland. Erwan has 17 years' experience in coaching and training on sustainability topics at EU level with a focus on sustainable business model innovation and environmental certifications. He's currently active in several EU projects focusing on circular economy transition, including CenTour, focusing on circular transition of SMEs in the tourism sector.



Leonie Hehn is a Project Manager at the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce and in charge of planning and managing several EU-funded projects (among them Tourban) under different funding programmes. Before her position at the Chamber, she worked as a Research Assistant at the Department of Tourism at the University of Technology, Business and Design Konstanz (Germany) responsible for planning and executing tourism projects related to e-mobility, tourist tracking and shopping tourism. She holds a B.A. in Political Science and Public Administration from the University of Konstanz, a M.A. in International Relations and a M.Res in Political Science from the University of Konstanz and Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona, Spain) respectively.



**Herbert Hamele** holds a master in economies and tourism and started working in 1983 in the field of environmentally sustainable tourism development in Europe. In the 80ies he worked with the Studienkreis für Tourismus (Tourism Research Institute) in Germany, set up the department for tourism, environment and regional development, and did some research on travellers interest in environmental issues as well as on the potential to develop “soft tourism” in various German regions. Together with more than 20 NGOs from different parts of the world he engaged in the “Tourism with Insight” group for raising the awareness for good and bad practices in tourism at ITB until 1992. Since that time he has looked at the growing list of certification programmes for environmentally friendly and sustainable tourism in Europe and internationally. In 1993 he founded and since then chairs the European network for sustainable tourism development ECOTRANS, registered as a not-for-profit association. After the Rio + 10 conference in Johannesburg together with a group of experts and in partnership with the European Environment Agency he developed the DestiNet platform on the Internet for sharing knowledge and for facilitating networking on sustainable and responsible tourism. Herbert Hamele co-founded and served the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) as a board member and is sitting on advisory boards of various other initiatives and networks.



Silvio Cardinali is Associate Professor at the Economic Faculty of Marche Polytechnic University. He works in the field of marketing and communication, has developed several studies and research in sales management and is the author of various national and international publications in the field.



Barbara Kulaga, Research Fellow at the Economic Faculty of Marche Polytechnic University after a PhD in Management and Law; she is in the research staff of several European projects.