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Sustainable tourism certification in the African hotel sector

Anna Spenceley

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to review the current status of certification and certified hotels on the African continent, and to discuss the implications for mainstreaming sustainable tourism on the continent.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The research design focused on a literature review and an online survey. The survey was used to consult stakeholders on options for incentives, and future interventions, which was distributed to 80 stakeholders from the government, certification bodies, intergovernmental agencies and NGOs. The survey resulted in 41 complete responses from 18 countries.*

Findings – *The study identified nine African certification programs, and nine international certification programs operating in Africa. Collectively, the African and international certification programs have certified at least 715 accommodation facilities in 19 African countries, against their environmental, social and economic criteria. So only a very small proportion of all hotels in Africa have been certified (certainly less than 3.4 per cent) and that these are patchily distributed across the continent. A number of incentives have been used in Africa, including marketing and promotion; interest free loans for new technologies; preferential inclusion in tour itineraries; free or discounted application processes; and technical support. Consultees suggested that hotels were generally motivated to seek certification to: promote their achievements to environmentally conscious clients and avoid negative criticism, and save money by conserving resources. However, hotels do not understand the financial benefits of sustainable practices.*

Research limitations/implications – *Research limitations include the modest sample size. For the purposes of this research, there was a greater emphasis in targeting a modest number of key respondents who could provide expert opinions on the topic, rather than a more extensive sample size of lower quality.*

Practical implications – *Practical implications include recommendations of incentives and approaches to mainstream tourism certification in Africa. These include promoting programmes and their returns on investment more broadly, promoting market advantage for certified accommodation (i.e. preferential marketing or concession terms) and the value of integrating sustainability criteria into national and regional quality-rating standards.*

Originality/value – *This is the first study of its kind to analyse certification on the African continent, which was presented at the Climate Change Summit (COP22) in Morocco in 2016 and the BEST EN Think Tank XVII in June 2017.*

Keywords Africa, Certification, Hotel, Sustainable tourism, Incentive

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Sustainable tourism has virtuous objectives, and is defined as *Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities* [United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), 2005]. However, poorly planned and operated tourism can have a range of negative environmental consequences, including pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and impacts on local environments and cultures that are visited (Buckley, 2011). For tourists seeking a

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sustainable travel experience, there is a challenge in distinguishing between hotels and tours that are, or are not, sustainable. To meet this challenge, tools such as indicators, certification programmes and accreditation systems, have been gradually developed over the course of the past century. Tourism certification is defined as *a voluntary procedure that assesses audits and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards. It awards a marketable logo to those that meet or exceed baseline standards* (Honey and Rome, 2001). In general, certification signifies that an independent third-party has verified the conformity of an activity or product to a written standard. For it to address sustainable tourism, the standard needs to include socioeconomic, cultural and environmental criteria (Spenceley and Bien, 2013).

Certification aims to foster responsible environmental, social and cultural behaviour and provide a quality product to tourists. It provides a mechanism through which enterprises can achieve voluntary standards of performance that meet or exceeds baseline standards or legislation (Dodds and Joppe, 2005), and critically, it verifies claims made by enterprises to counter green-washing attempts. Certification also assists consumers and trade buyers who are looking for sustainable products and provides a basis for sustainable businesses to promote and network with each other with mutual confidence (Denman, 2010). Furthermore, the process of becoming certified, or associated training, can help enterprises understand what they need to do to be considered sustainable and improve their performance (Ponnareddy *et al.*, 2017). For example, it can help them identify weaknesses and gaps in their performance and seek to fill them within a programme of continuous improvement (Denman, 2010).

In the accommodation sector, certification may help hotels to: improve efficiency and reduce operating costs, particularly by installing new technologies and adapting operational practices; gain credible independent recognition of commitment to sustainable tourism; identify ways to improve internal management processes and independently assess a hotel's environmental, social and economic impact; demonstrate compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements on environmental issues; increase sales by appealing to environmentally conscious customers (i.e. tourists and tour operators); and help them to comply with tour operator minimum standards and requirements [e.g. many major outbound tour operators in the UK, including Cosmos, Kuoni, The Cooperative Travel, Thomas Cook, TUI UK & Ireland and Virgin Holidays, have selected Travelife as their preferred scheme; adapted from International Tourism Partnership (ITP), 2016; Ayuso, 2007]; obtain free or subsidised participation in trade shows or tax benefits (Rome, 2005). There are also tools and booking platforms available, which help travellers to find and book trips with enterprises that are independently recognised as sustainable, such as "The Responsible Tourist" (Spenceley and Rylance, 2016).

Despite the idealistic aims of certification, there are a number of limitations and constraints too, which include the following (Spenceley and Bien, 2013):

- the number of applicants to certification programmes globally within the private sector is only growing slowly (Weaver, 2009; Font, 2009; WTO, 2002);
- there is a lack of robust and regular sources of income to effectively operate and market relevant, appropriate and credible programmes. Most sustainable tourism certification programmes cannot cover the complete cost of running their programme from user fees alone (Rome *et al.*, 2006);
- sophisticated tourism operations working across geographical regions and pushing the boundaries of sustainability feel that certification programmes available are not adequately sophisticated to fully capture their work;
- once initial savings have been made from resource saving programmes (e.g. energy and water), it is difficult for companies to justify retaining membership of certification

programmes and recurring membership and evaluation fees (Rome *et al.*, 2006), and it is unclear whether the costs of becoming certified are recouped (El Eief and Font, 2010; Rowe and Higham, 2007);

- the market advantage envisaged from certification has not been fully realised. For example, a vast majority of tourists are largely unaware of tourism certification labels (or indeed of sustainable tourism) offerings (TUI Travel Plc, 2010). There are indications that the hotel sector has little understanding of sustainable tourism, or that it is too expensive to operationalise (Frey, 2017; Sasidharan *et al.*, 2002). Evidence does exist, however, that travel intermediaries do favour certified businesses (e.g. Travelife) and that the process of certification induces businesses to become more efficient and offer higher quality services. Research suggests that a certification label will not induce higher occupancies (Karlsson and Dolnicar, 2016), but some travellers may be willing to pay more for certified products (Oom do Valle *et al.*, 2012; Puhakka and Siikamaki, 2012; Fairweather *et al.*, 2005), and a higher quality of service does do so (Karlsson and Dolnicar, 2016; Bien, 2005). Ironically, for some certification is considered more of a tourism promotional tool than an environmental management tool [e.g. beach managers in Ontario, regarding the Blue Flag certification (Klein and Dodds, 2017)]; and
- a plethora of tourism certification programmes globally makes it difficult for tourists and tourism operators to discriminate between them or understand what each really means in terms of ecotourism and sustainability. For example, tour operators in the Caribbean feel that the number and variety of different schemes makes it very difficult to educate their customers or their staff (Dodds and Joppe, 2005).

There have been at least 100 tourism certification programmes developed since 1990, which address various forms of sustainable tourism (Karlsson and Dolnicar, 2016). Each has its own certification programme and variable adherence to generally accepted principles for standardisation and conformity assessment (Bien, 2009). An effort to bring coherence and good practice to these programmes began with the Mohonk Agreement (2000), the publication of indicators for sustainable tourism destinations by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2004). This process culminated with the establishment of the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC Criteria) in 2008, and Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) in 2009 (Spenceley and Bien, 2013). The GSTC is an international body for establishing and managing standards for sustainable tourism. Through extensive consultation processes, the GSTC established globally recognised criteria for sustainable tourism at the hotel and tour operator level, and for tourism destinations (Spenceley, 2016). The GSTC can also recognise or approve sustainable tourism certification standards and processes that meet or surpass the relevant GSTC Criteria (GSTC, 2016a, b). In an effort to promote sustainable operators, the GSTC lists hotels that have been certified under GSTC approved or recognised standards, to help travellers and tour operators find sustainable accommodation (Spenceley and Rylance, 2016).

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, and would contribute to the objectives of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Tourism.

Adopted in 2015 by the UN General Assembly, the 17 SDGs aim to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all and address key issues of poverty, hunger, health, education, climate change, gender equality, water, sanitation, energy, environment and social justice. Tourism has the potential to contribute across all the 17 UN SDGs (UNWTO, 2015). Notably, tourism certification can contribute directly towards the implementation of SDG 12, which is to “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns”. The SDG’s Target 12.b is to “Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts

for sustainable tourism which creates jobs, promotes local culture and products” (UNWTO, 2015).

The aim of this research, commissioned by the African Development Bank (AfDB)’s African Natural Resources Centre (ANRC), included to identify international and regional certification bodies specifically relating to the accommodation sector in Africa, establish what type of actions or incentives would increase the level of uptake. The report’s findings and recommendations were launched by ANRC at the 22nd Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP 22) in Morocco on 8 November 2016 (Spenceley, 2016). In addition to certification results, the findings included research on water and waste management standards in African hotels, which are reported elsewhere (Spenceley, 2016).

Methodology

The study was conducted using a mixed measures approach, incorporating a desk review and consultation process, which is summarised below.

Desk review

A desk review (Neuman, 2006) was undertaken to:

- identify certification schemes; and
- identify candidate case studies in Africa and trans-nationally.

Information on certification schemes was obtained from the Sustainable Tourism Certification Alliance for Africa (the Alliance), by communicating with certification programmes directly and with regional and international experts on sustainable tourism. An internet-based search was also made of research articles, consultancy reports, guidelines and toolkits and media articles relating to certification and incentives. During the desk-review process, information was collected on destinations with documented best practices and lessons learned (Spenceley, 2016).

Consultation

Surveys are widely accepted data gathering techniques used in social sciences (Neuman, 2006). A structured survey was devised using an online survey tool, SurveyMonkey, to further consult on sustainable tourism certification and, in particular, to explore options for incentives and future interventions. Two members of the Alliance reviewed a draft of the questionnaire: the Secretariat (Fair Trade Tourism: FTT) and the Chair of the Alliance’s Impact and Standards working group (Levelle Perspectives).

An initial list of targeted stakeholders was drafted by the researcher, with nominated individuals drawn from African governmental institutions, tourism certification programmes (both African and international), regional and international tourism specialists working on certification and United Nations and intergovernmental agencies. The draft was reviewed by FTT and then supplemented with their comments and suggestions from [i.e. snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961)].

The survey tool asked a range of structured and semi-structured questions regarding sustainable tourism certification. The semi-structured questions asked the sample about existing types of incentives for sustainable tourism (identified from the literature review), and how effective they perceived them to be. Respondents were then asked to rate on a Likert scale (Likert, 1970) how effective they thought a series of proposed new incentives might be in encouraging greater uptake of certification in the accommodation sector in Africa. They were also given opportunity to present additional options if they wished.

The survey link was then distributed by email directly to 80 stakeholders on 12 September 2016, and was open for 2 weeks. A notice was also circulated using online media, to which additional responses (including from stakeholders that had not been targeted, such as from the tourism private sector). There were 41 complete responses received from 20 countries, including 10 African countries (i.e. Botswana, Egypt, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Seychelles, Tanzania and Zimbabwe) and 10 non-African countries (i.e. Australia, Chile, Denmark, France, Germany, India, and Spain and the Netherlands, UK and USA). The sample of consultees and respondents in each category are summarised in the table below (Spenceley, 2016). For the purposes of this research, there was a greater emphasis in targeting modest numbers key respondents who could provide expert opinions on the topic, rather than a more extensive sample size of lower quality (Table I).

Analysis

Information from the literature review on existing tourism certification programmes operating in Africa and the number of accommodations that they had certified, and existing incentives for tourism certification were collated to establish statistics for the continent. In terms of ratings of the likely effectiveness of new incentives in encouraging greater use of certification in the accommodation sector, tallies of those where more than 50 per cent of respondents “strongly agreed” that the incentive would be effective were recorded. Short case studies to illustrate certification application in Africa were compiled from the literature review, coupled with information provided by representatives of institutions involved in the case (i.e. the certification programme, certified accommodation and associated NGOs).

Limitations

Although the survey response rate was acceptable (i.e. over 50 per cent), there were relatively few responses from among the government representatives contacted (i.e. a 20 per cent response rate). Owing to the challenges in contacting individual hotels across Africa, tourism ministries, authorities and private sector associations were requested to circulate the online questionnaire invitation to their hotel databases, and other institutions circulated to their networks and using social media. However, there were only a few responses from this stakeholder group, when considering the number of hotels on the continent. Future research may need to identify an alternative approach to gaining their feedback.

The number of certified enterprises reported directly by certification programmes often differed from the number indicated on their websites. Therefore, there may be a margin of error in the numbers reported here. Furthermore, some hotels have more than one certification logo awarded. The figures presented represent the number of certifications

Table I Stakeholders consulted

Type of stakeholder	Requests sent	Responses
Government representatives (e.g. National tourism boards, ministries of tourism, embassies and research institute)	34 (in 22 African countries)	7
Certification programmes – African and international	24	14
Regional and international tourism specialists on certification and standards	13	11
Private sector: tourism associations and non-governmental organisations*	5	7*
United Nations and intergovernmental agencies	4	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>41</i>

Note: *Announcements on social media resulted in additional responses from these stakeholders (including non-targeted hotels and tour operators)

Source: Spenceley (2016)

awarded, but this will, therefore, be somewhat higher than the actual number of hotels at least one certification award.

Status of tourism certification in Africa

The literature review revealed that there are currently nine African certification programmes and nine international certification programmes operating in Africa. The African schemes comprise government-initiated programmes (e.g. Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label and Botswana Ecotourism Certification System), schemes run for profit (e.g. Heritage Environmental Management Company) and those run by non-governmental/not-for profit organisations (e.g. Fair Trade Tourism, EcoAwards Namibia, Responsible Tourism Tanzania and Ecotourism Kenya). Furthermore, the GSTC has recognised and approved some of the certification standards used in Africa, in line with the GSTC criteria (Spenceley, 2016).

Collectively, the African and international certification programmes have certified at least 715 accommodation facilities in 19 African countries against their environmental, social and economic criteria (see Tables II and III below; Spenceley, 2016).

Furthermore, there are a series of certification schemes in progress in Mauritius (i.e. an eco-label under standard MS165:2014-Sustainable Tourism, but which is postponed while a compulsory hotel quality rating programme is implemented), Morocco (i.e. an EVEA Tourism initiative that has started environmental labelling with ten hotels in Marrakech) and Cabo Verde (i.e. a proposed GSTC linked programme is to be established under the Ministry of Tourism, Investments and Business). However, others have lapsed, including the Moroccan Rural Accommodation Quality Assurance and EcoCertification, which ceased because the support institution (Zakoura Microcredit Foundation) went bankrupt in 2012, and although Credit Agricole, which purchased it, maintained the rights to the programme, they did not proceed with the operations (Spenceley, 2016).

Incentives for tourism certification

A number of incentives have been used in Africa, and internationally, to encourage the uptake of sustainable tourism certification. Conditions under which incentives are more likely to succeed include sufficient returns to motivate a change in behaviour. The OECD suggests that *Subsidies and tax incentives only work if they close the price gap for more sustainable products or create significant tax rebates for their use. These instruments influence consumer behaviour by making sustainable choices less expensive. Incremental tax reductions or small subsidies do not by themselves create demand for more sustainable products. Also, subsidies or tax rebates which are complicated to apply for, or which have a long payoff time, may not be effective* (OECD, 2008: p. 17).

Types of incentives for tourism certification include the following (Spenceley, 2016):

- *Marketing and promotion:* Most certification bodies award their certified hotels with permission to use a logo, and also advertise them on their websites. This promotion allows tourists and tour operators to recognise hotels that have, and have not, had an independent third-party evaluation of their sustainability claims (including relating to waste and water). Furthermore, a number of online booking platforms focus specifically on promoting sustainable and certified hotels (e.g. WorldHotelLink; Bookdifferent; GoBarefoot; and Responsibletravel). The European Union has supported marketing of certified businesses in Europe through the Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism programme (CBD, UNWTO, UNEP, 2009). Also, the Tourism for Tomorrow Award has a specific environmental award category (WTTC, 2016).
- *Interest-free loans to introduce new technologies:* The Green Star Certification programme in Egypt proposes to offer interest-free loans for hotels in the future to green

Table II Certification programmes operating in Africa, by programme (2016)

Certification programme	Countries of operation and No. certified		GSTC
<i>African programmes</i>			
Botswana Ecotourism Certification System	Botswana: 23		
EcoAwards Namibia	Namibia: 65		
Ecotourism Kenya	Kenya: 110		
Fair Trade Tourism (FTT)*	South Africa: 61		Recognised
	Mozambique: 5		
	Madagascar: 8		
Green Star Hotel programme, Egypt	Egypt: 58		Recognised
Greenleaf Environmental/EcoStandard	South Africa: 33	Ethiopia: 1	
	Mozambique: 1	Senegal: 1	
Heritage Environmental Management Company	South Africa: 27	Nigeria: 1	
	Namibia: 2		
Responsible Tourism Tanzania (RTT)	Tanzania: 24		
Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label (SSTL)	Seychelles: 11		
<i>International programmes</i>			
Earthcheck company standard	Morocco: no data	Zanzibar: no data	Recognised and approved
	Egypt: no data	South Africa: no data	
Ecotourism Africa**	South Africa: 3		Recognised and approved
Global Ecosphere Retreats Standard (The Long Run)	Kenya: 2	South Africa: 1	Recognised
Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)	Tanzania: 1	Namibia: 1	
	South Africa: 7	Mauritius: 1	
	Botswana: 1		
Green Globe	Egypt: 10	Mauritius: 1	Recognised
	Tunisia: 2	Seychelles: 1	
	Ghana: 1	Morocco: 1	
Green Key	Morocco: 72	Egypt: 2	Recognised
	Tunisia: 11	Kenya: 1	
Green Tourism	Zimbabwe: 13		
Green Tourism Active	South Africa: 20	Kenya: 1	Recognised
	Egypt: 2	Seychelles: 1	
Travelife – large/small accommodation	Egypt: 57	Kenya: 4	Recognised
	Tunisia: 31	Tanzania: 2	
	Morocco: 16	Gambia: 1	
	Mauritius: 9	South Africa: 1	
	Cabo Verde: 7		

Notes: Information obtained from certification bodies or their websites, September 2016; *Fair Trade Tourism also has mutual recognition with Responsible Tourism Tanzania, Seychelles (SSTL), Botswana Ecotourism Certification, Ecotourism Kenya and EcoAwards Namibia; **based on Ecotourism Australia

Source: [Spenceley \(2016\)](#)

their operations and pay back in a pattern that matches their occupancy ([The Alliance, 2016](#)).

- *Preferential inclusion in tour itineraries:* Certified accommodation facilities in the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA) are eligible for inclusion in Futouris tour operator catalogues (whose members include TUI, Gebeco, Thomas Cook and DER Tour). Those certified by FTT, EcoAwards Namibia (5 flowers) and Botswana Ecotourism (Ecotourism level) may be branded “Fair Trade Holiday” (50 per cent bed nights on itinerary). So far, the programme has encouraged 25 additional lodges in the area to become certified in Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe ([Strasdas, 2016](#)). (See examples’ section for more information.)
- *Free or discounted application processes:* The Botswana Ecotourism Certification System’s audit costs are all met by Botswana Tourism (Board), and 23 accommodations

Table III Tourism certification in Africa by country (2016)

Country	No. of hotel certifications
South Africa	153
Egypt	129
Kenya	118
Morocco	89
Namibia	68
Tunisia	44
Tanzania	27
Botswana	24
Seychelles	13
Zimbabwe	13
Mauritius	11
Madagascar	8
Cabo Verde	7
Mozambique	6
Senegal	1
Ethiopia	1
Nigeria	1
Ghana	1
The Gambia	1

Source: Adapted from [Spenceley \(2016\)](#)

have been certified in this manner. Similarly, the Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label offered the first 50 assessment applications for free, paid for by the Government; the incentive attracted 25 applications, of which 11 have been awarded the logo so far. Mauritius has plans to offer grant funding equivalent to 50 per cent certification costs, up to a value of Rs44,000 (approx. USD1,293), to meet the MS165:2014 standard [[Ministry of Tourism and Leisure \(MTL\), 2018](#)] once the scheme is operational. The Heritage Environmental Management Company used to offer to refund audit payments if the hotel did not make equivalent cost savings during the year. Heritage was able to prove the cost savings through their audits, and no hotels ever claimed a refund. However, the incentive was removed after five years because it was no longer attracting new business.

- *Technical support:* The Long Run offers their certified members personal and tailored technical support through their network of experts as part of their relationship, to help improved their sustainability performance.

Qualitative responses from the online survey suggested that the perception that hotels were generally motivated to seek certification to;

- promote their achievements to environmentally conscious clients and avoid negative criticism; and
- save money by conserving resources.

However, one respondent commented that the lack of government direction or policy could undermine effective implementation of certification because tourism enterprises have no official requirement to operate in a sustainable manner. Other respondents suggested that hotels request whether a particular certification programme is recognised or approved by the government, before proceeding with it (though in some African countries, such recognition is not available at all). In some instances, there are challenges in mainstreaming sustainable tourism certification systems in combination with quality grading programmes, which are more likely to be government-endorsed ([Spenceley, 2016](#)). Notable respondent comments received on certification included the following:

Certification is a grudge activity in spite of the benefits that it can bring in the sustainable operation of businesses.

Most businesses don't relate their expenses with the cost of certification – hence, they are unable to see the return on investment (ROI) ratio that the certification does produce.

Biggest barriers to certification were: cost, time to get organized and no guarantee of ROI. Only a few really idealistic products owners went through the very rigid process because they really believed in the principles.

We had offered free certification for ten properties a few years ago as incentive. Most of these declined reassessments and terminated membership as soon as they had to pay annual fees [...].

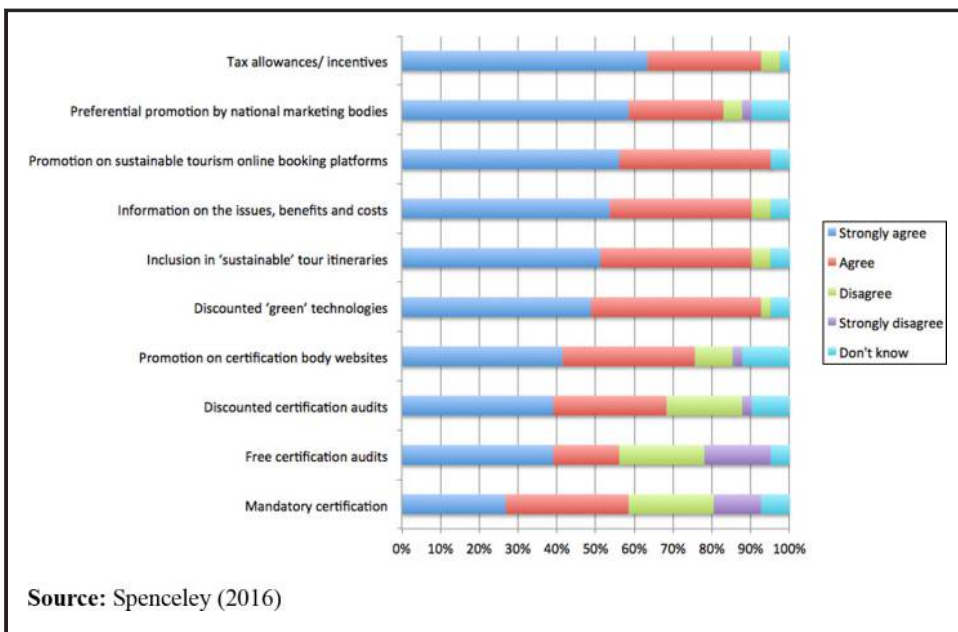
The Government needs to promote energy, water and waste audits among tourism businesses so that they start understanding the benefits of sustainable tourism and then get certification ready.

In terms of future incentives that might encourage greater uptake of certification in the accommodation sector, more than half the consultees “strongly agreed” to the following:

- tax allowances and incentives (63 per cent);
- preferential promotion by national marketing bodies (59 per cent);
- promotion on sustainable tourism online booking platforms (56 per cent);
- information on the issues benefits and costs (54 per cent); and
- inclusion in “sustainable” tour itineraries would be effective (51 per cent; see [Figure 1](#) below).

The least popular incentives rated were mandatory certification (27 per cent) and free or discounted certification audits (39 per cent; [Spenceley, 2016](#)).

Figure 1 What new incentives or approaches do you think would encourage a greater use of certification in the accommodation sector? (*n* = 41)



Examples of certification in Africa

This section of the paper provides three short case study examples of tourism certification in Africa to illustrate different applications and implications of the tool:

- a certification body developed by a national Government;
- application of certification to drive sustainable tourism in a destination; and
- application by a hotel group.

Certification body

The Green Star Hotel (GSH) is a national certification and capacity-building programme developed to distinguish hotels and tourism resorts operating in Egypt with interest in sustainable tourism. It was created as a result of successful local and international cooperation between the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism in cooperation with the local chamber of hotels (Egyptian Hotel Association), two Egyptian private tourism investors, a German tour operator and the GIZ organisation. The programme's main objective is to encourage and support hotels to improve their environmental performance and social standards through compliance with a carefully designed set of standards that are customised for the local context. GSH-certified hotels receive their award after passing on-site audits administered by a team of local and international certified auditors, granting them a star rating based on their level of compliance with the standards (3, 4 or 5 green stars). A public-private board provides guidance to the programme helping to streamline its operation, ensuring sustainability and supporting its international recognition. The programme offers benefits to certified hotels through training and coaching as well as inclusion on the GSH Web page and its newsletter. The GSH Programme standards are internationally recognised by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC; [Spenceley, 2016](#)).

Tourism destination

The Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA) is a vast multiple land-use area extending over 519,912 km² in the river basins of the Okavango, Chobe and Zambezi rivers. KAZA was established through a by treaty between Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe in 2011. The TFCA aimed to boost social and economic opportunities for local people, to expand wildlife habitat and promote tourism. Futouris is a non-profit initiative of the German tourism industry aimed at sustainable development. Their members include leading outbound tour operators such as TUI, Gebeco, Thomas Cook and DER Tour as well as cruise companies and travel agencies ([Spenceley, 2016](#)).

The KAZA Sustainable Lodges project rewards lodges for their commitment to sustainability by incorporating them into Futouris members' product portfolios: this allows international tour operators to "green" their own supply chains. The incentive is that being demonstrably sustainable creates a market advantage. To demonstrate their commitment, the sustainability claims of lodges must be independently verified on-site and certified by a credible partner organisation. Once certified, the accommodation is eligible for inclusion in Futouris tour operator catalogues. In addition, where operators have a mutual recognition agreement with Fair Trade Tourism and lodges have achieved the highest certification level (i.e. EcoAwards Namibia: 5 flowers and Botswana Ecotourism Certification System: Ecotourism level), lodges can be included in a branded "Fair Trade Holiday" (where 50 per cent bed nights on itinerary are certified). The project catalysed new certification applications and awards of 25 additional lodges through certification partners: EcoAwards Namibia (8 certified in Namibia), the Botswana Ecotourism Certification System (42 certified in Botswana) and Green Tourism (12 certified in Zimbabwe). This has increased the number of certified lodges in the KAZA TFCA from 37 in 2015 to 62 in 2016 (a 40 per cent increase; [Spenceley, 2016](#)).

Hotel group

The Constance Ephelia Seychelles is a 313-room resort based on the island of Mahé, in the Seychelles. It is one of seven hotels operated by the Constance Group in the Indian Ocean. In line with the Constance Group's slogan, *to be committed to the environment*, Ephelia has been certified by two independent certification bodies: Green Globe, an international certification programme since 2014; and the Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label (SSTL), a locally developed initiative since 2012. The resort has found that certification not only helps them to protect the environment, but also reduces their operational costs (offsetting certification audit fees), and supports promotion to guests interested in the environment. Markus Ultsch-Unrath of the Constance Ephelia Resort remarks: *if you are not green, you will waste a lot of money. If you speak to people about the environment, people are not always serious. But if you talk to them about financial savings, then they will listen. So monitoring, and recording savings, provides a useful tool to persuade management of the benefits of good environmental practices. In other words, being sustainable will keep our environment healthy, will make our local communities happy and will result in financial savings plenty* (Spenceley, 2016).

Discussion and conclusions

This research has provided an assessment of the current status of tourism certification in Africa with the following key findings (Spenceley, 2016):

- *No additional tourism certification programmes in Africa are needed.* There are 18 sustainable tourism certification programmes operating in Africa. These include nine African certification programmes and nine international certification programmes operating on the continent. Nine of the programmes have standards recognised by the GSTC, and two of these are also approved by the GSTC. There is a gap in the market within African countries with no certified accommodation or low numbers of certified products. If the existing African and international programmes were to promote their services within the accommodation sectors in those countries, and raise awareness of the benefits of certification, uptake would likely increase. This would lead to a more sustainable accommodation sector (with associated environmental, socio-cultural and economic benefits) and more choice for travellers seeking sustainable travel options (Oom do Valle *et al.*, 2012; Puhakka and Siikamaki, 2012; Fairweather *et al.*, 2005).
- *Most certified hotels are present in North, East and Southern Africa.* There are certified hotels present in 19 of 52 African countries. The 5 countries with the most certifications to hotels are South Africa (153 certifications awarded), Egypt (129 certifications) and Kenya (118 certifications). Across Africa, 33 countries have no certified hotels, and four countries just have one each (i.e. Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana and Nigeria). Therefore, the level of uptake on the continent is patchy. Countries with higher levels of uptake tend to have certification programmes that have been developed and promoted by institutions based within those countries. For example, South Africa has three local programmes (FTT, Greenleaf and Heritage); Egypt has the Green Star Hotel programme; and Kenya has Ecotourism Kenya. Countries without any certified accommodation have no locally established certification scheme, and the lack of international certification uptake may relate to a lack of awareness of options, a lack of outreach by the certification programmes themselves and the cost of bringing independent assessors to new destinations. This implies that having locally established, locally relevant, certification programmes is related to increased levels of uptake in Africa.
- *Only a very small proportion of all hotels in Africa have been certified – less than 3.4 per cent.* Collectively, the African and international certification programmes have certified at least 715 accommodation facilities Africa (and some hotels have more than one). Although the total actual number of hotels in Africa is not known (e.g. Booking.com lists

20,844 hotels in 51 of Africa's 52 countries, and this is certainly an underestimate), the number of hotels that are definitely monitoring their waste and water consumption, and taking efforts to improve their practices, are a tiny proportion of the number of accommodation facilities on the continent: certainly less than 3.4 per cent. This demonstrates that very little progress has been made over the past 30 years in mainstreaming sustainable tourism practices in Africa. This supports findings elsewhere in the world, indicating low levels of uptake (Weaver, 2009; Font, 2009; WTO, 2002). Of greater concern, and unreported elsewhere in the world, is that Frey (2017) suggests that in 2009, there were 500 accommodation establishments that had been collectively certified by FTT, Heritage and the Green Leaf Environmental Standard, but this analysis only identified 153, indicating a massive 60 per cent drop over a 7-year period.

- *Tax allowances and more information would encourage more certification:* Stakeholders suggested that tax allowances and incentives would be effective in encouraging certification. In Africa, governments and sustainable development projects are well placed to establish financial incentives to mainstream sustainable tourism providing information on the issues, benefits and costs would be useful. This could be established through focused research programmes with effective communication to the accommodation sector of the findings. Market-based incentives – such as preferential inclusion on tour operator itineraries (as per the KAZA case study example) – can clearly encourage rapid increases in certification uptake. Comparably, on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, there are preferential concession terms and promotional opportunities provided to certified tour operators by the protected area authority (Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, 2018).
- *Hotels do not understand the financial benefits, and more research is needed on the ROI and payback periods.* More research in Africa is needed on ROI, and this needs to be shared with hotels so that they understand how good environmental practices can improve their profitability. This finding supports work from elsewhere in the world, indicating that the market advantage and cost-savings associated with certification are poorly understood (El Eief and Font, 2010; Rowe and Higham, 2007).
- *More government support is needed to promote certification programmes that promote them in the hotel sector:* Although three certification programmes operating have been developed by the Government (in Egypt, Botswana and the Seychelles), and owing to their subsidies do not need to be operationally profitable, as they do not face the same financial challenges as commercial programmes (Rome *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, commercial and NGO certification programmes face challenges persuading hotels to be assessed if they are not formally endorsed by the Government. Notably, few countries integrate sustainability criteria into their quality rating systems, and so sustainable tourism certification is an optional “nice to have” rather than a core element of most hotels’ business strategy. The RETOSA initiative to harmonise southern African and Indian Ocean star-rating standards, and integrate sustainability criteria, needs to be supported and could be up-scaled to the continent. This initiative could transform the uptake of sustainability practices in the accommodation sector and help to address the sector’s confusion with multiple available schemes (Dodds and Joppe, 2005).

Recommendations for interventions

The purpose of this section is to highlight areas of support needed in Africa to promote the uptake of sustainable tourism certification. The African Development Bank is currently accepting comment and feedback from its member states to identify the demand for particular types of intervention on the basis of the following findings. Key points to be recognised include that sustainable tourism certification needs to be expanded and

mainstreamed in Africa, in its policies and strategic frameworks. Expanding the geographical scope of existing certification programmes (particularly those that are GSTC-recognised or -approved), rather than “re-inventing the wheel” by developing new ones. This is recommended as the most cost-effective and efficient way for member states to expand coverage across Africa. However, it is important to recognise that a “copy and paste” approach may not always be effective, and in some destinations, a “bottom up” approach to certification and sustainability standards has been more effective (e.g. in Vanuatu, Pers. Com. J. Spooner, Nov 2017). Certification needs to be repositioned as standard and mainstream business practice to have impact at scale. Options for interventions include the following:

- raising awareness of the benefits of sustainable tourism certification among African countries (particularly those with currently low levels of certification – see [Figure 1](#));
- improving linkages between established certification programmes and member states, where there the programme is aligned with the country’s objectives;
- providing guidance on the design and implementation of incentives to encourage certification [e.g. increasing market advantage that certified products have, including through online booking platforms ([Gössling, 2017](#))]; and
- encouraging and supporting more African countries to integrate sustainability criteria into their hotel quality-rating programmes.

These interventions would support Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production [[UN World Tourism Organisation \(UNWTO\), 2015](#)].

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