

ERSA congress “Disparities in a Digitalising (Post-Covid) world - Networks, Entrepreneurship and Regional Development”

Special Session: Assessing tourism sustainability and resilience: new data, methods and tools

Title: Assessing existing eco-certifications schemes for the tourism accommodation sector in the EU27

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Extended Abstract:

1. Introduction

Promoting sustainable consumption and production are important aspects of sustainable development, which depends on achieving long-term economic growth that is consistent with environmental and social needs (OECD, 2008). With the aim of supporting this sustainable consumption, many Eco-certifications or Eco-labels schemes have been promoted worldwide over the past decades. These schemes are increasingly used to guarantee that goods and services are generated using high environmental standards, while communicating such guarantees to consumers, who, in turn, can make purchases that are more informed. For this reason, eco-certifications can be a potentially interesting market instrument to lower environmental impacts and, more generally, to push towards the green transition.

Eco-certifications for the Tourism Sector are as well increasingly demanded, since tourism is one of the world's fastest developing sectors globally, having a growing global environmental impact. Tourism is, directly and indirectly, consuming an increasing amount of global resources, including fossil fuel consumption with the associated CO₂ emissions, freshwater, land, and food use (Gössling & Peeters, 2015).

In this context of high proliferation of eco-certifications or eco-labels programs issued by a myriad of organisations, and after years of implementation in some cases, many questions arise: Are these programs really making an impact? Are they significantly spread? Are these labels having an influence on travelers' choices? Are they really promoting sustainability or just a green marketing?

Some recent studies performed an exploration of the growing list of eco-labels, such as the study conducted by Hamele & Núñez (2016) which estimated the existence of more than 150 quality labels worldwide, a “Eco-label jungle” that creates confusion on many travelers. This confusion could have negative effects, and other studies have found that although sustainability efforts and actions matter to travelers, some eco-labels by themselves are not eventually affecting their buying decisions (Kusiák, 2020).

Answering the previous questions requires to perform a constant monitorization and analysis of Eco-certifications schemes. Over the past decades, different organizations have promoted studies on Eco-certifications schemes. For instance, The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published its first report on environmental labelling in 1976, and extensive reviews of existing and

planned schemes were carried out since then, such as the recent reports on Environmental labelling and information schemes (ELIS) (OECD, 2016). In addition, with the aim of shedding some light on this complex Eco-certification landscape, other institutions have promoted reviews of Eco-certifications programs. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides reports and recommendations on Ecolabels and Standards for Greener Products (EPA, 2022) and when it comes to Europe, there are also different initiatives to highlight. The European Commission (EC) not only has promoted regular reports focused on the analysis of Environmental Labelling schemes and the design of labelling strategies since long time ago (Allison & Carter, 2000). The EC also established the EU Ecolabel of environmental excellence in 1992, and The EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), a premium management instrument for companies and other organisations to evaluate, report, and improve their environmental performance.

Another consequence of the growing proliferation of environmental labelling schemes is the need of internationally agreed and harmonized criteria and methods of labelling to provide credibility (ISO, 2019). This is the reason why many schemes, such as the mentioned EMAS, are adopting the standards of The International Standards Organisation (ISO).

2. Objectives

Within the Tourism Sector, Tourism Accommodation Services are responsible for an important sustainable impact regarding aspects such as energy efficiency, water consumption, waste management and recycling, etc. For this reason, Tourism Accommodation Services are the focus of general and specific eco-certifications or eco-labels programs.

To the best of our knowledge, we lack a recent and systematic assessment of the existing eco-certification schemes focused on Tourism Accommodation Services. The main objective of this research is to create an inventory of existing eco-certifications schemes for the tourism accommodation sector in the European Union. The inventory includes a geographical database with the number of listings per eco-certification scheme at the highest possible spatial resolution. The purpose of this inventory is to build the bases for a comparative and systematic assessment of existing eco-certification schemes relevant for tourist accommodation services in the EU27, and a preliminary assessment is provided. Eventually, the inventory and the assessment aim to contribute to the development of a new Tourism Dashboard for the European Union.

3. Methodology

The methodology followed comprises the following stages:

First, a review of previous eco-certifications assessments has been conducted, with an especial focus on those centered on Tourism Accommodation Services. The review cover not only assessments in the context of the European Union but also beyond, so that the scenario regarding the EU can also be contextualized in the global scene.

Second, we define the different aspects and characteristics to be analyzed regarding the different eco-certification schemes: (1) Issuer entity name and address, (2) Date of establishment, (3) Product/service coverage (considering Accommodation, Accommodation and other tourism sectors or Accommodation and other sectors), (4) Geographical coverage (considering Regional, National, European and International beyond EU), (5) Specific EU member states where the scheme is present, (6) Scope/focus, (7) Criteria considered (single-attribute or Multi-attribute), (8) Number of tourism establishments listed, (9)

Reliability of scheme (unknown, Internal audit, Issuer Entity audit or Third Party audit), (10) compliance with ISO standards 14001 and 14025, (11) Transparency (published, partially published, not published) and other potential relevant information, specific for particular schemes.

Third, the database structure and format are defined and designed, including the previously defined aspects. The database itself is a product to be delivered to the European Commission as a tool to continue the monitorization of the eco-certification landscape. The database includes a form to easily introduce data and the automatic production of inventory reports with summary/record card or files for every eco-certification scheme.

Fourth, the data collection methods are defined, based on general internet searches on the eco-certification scheme websites and complementary inquiries directed to issuer entities, when relevant information is not publicly available or previously found.

Fifth, the geographical database with the number of listings per eco-certification scheme at the highest possible spatial resolution is cleaned, standardized and visualized through cartographies produced with Geographic Information Systems.

And sixth, a preliminary systematic and comparative analysis is performed, based on the inventory and the geographical database.

4. Results

This study is producing three different outcomes. First, the inventory itself, which is in progress now, is allowing the systematic exploration of the eco-certification schemes regarding the different aspects previously mentioned. The purpose of this inventory is to build the bases for a comparative and systematic assessment of existing eco-certification schemes relevant for tourist accommodation services in the EU27, but also constitute a tool to continue the monitorization of the eco-certification landscape. A first version of this inventory is expected by April 2022.

Second, the geographical databased, which will be visually presented through several maps and also online maps, allows the spatial exploration of the listings per eco-certification scheme at the highest possible spatial resolution.

Third, the preliminary systematic and comparative analysis will performed, based on the inventory and the geographical database, introducing the main conclusions

As previously mentioned, this study eventually aims to contribute to the development of a new Tourism Dashboard for the European Union. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the development of the EU Tourism Dashboard offers a strong motivation and opportunity to start assessing existing eco-certification schemes and their role in promoting the green transition of the tourism sector

5. References

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