Prospects and Challenges for Tourism Certification in Botswana

JOSEPH E. MBAIWA, LEFATSHE I. MAGOLE and DONALD L. KGATHI

Abstract: This paper traces the development of tourism certification in Botswana and examines prospects and challenges of successful implementation. A precertification study was conducted that led to the resulting Botswana Ecotourism Certification System (BECS), the main document guiding the implementation of tourism certification in the country. The BECS comprises of seven principles and over 240 performance standards; a Best Practices Manual provided detailed criteria to assist in developing the standards. The system uses a three-tiered structure designed to incorporate various tourism operations and levels of sustainability practices. The extensive groundwork done prior to implementation indicated that tourism certification in Botswana has the potential to facilitate sustainable tourism and ecotourism practices, especially in nature-based tourism areas like the Okavango and Chobe regions. The current implementation emphasis is on the accommodations sector, to be expanded in future—26 tourism companies in the precertification programme went on to register for certification since the BECS programme was launched in January 2010. However, early learnings indicate that limited policies and infrastructure inhibit the provision of necessary sustainability oriented services from other supporting sectors. For instance, municipal waste recycling centers and national policies that promote the use of energy saving devices in destination areas are lacking, but are important to certification outcomes. Despite these challenges, the BECS is comprehensive in vision and scope (it addresses both quality and sustainability), and has the hallmarks of a globally outstanding certification system.

Keywords: tourism certification; sustainable tourism; best practice manual; ecocertification; Botswana Ecotourism Certification System.

Introduction

Tourism is a primary source of foreign exchange earnings for 46 out of 50 of the world’s least developed countries (DeLacy 2009; Jiang et al. 2009), and plays a vital role in addressing the dual, sometime, conflicting goals of economic development and environmental conservation in biodiversity rich regions and developing countries like Botswana. Tourism was an insignificant economic sector when Botswana gained independence in 1966 (Mbaiwa 2011). Arrivals increased steadily between 1989 and 2000, rising to over 2.1 million in this period. By 2007, it had grown to be the second most important economic sector (after diamond mining), contributing 5.0% to gross domestic product (WTTC 2007). Much of Botswana’s tourism industry relies on visitors to nature-based destinations like the Okavango Delta (an inland wetland area located in Ngamiland District) and the rich wildlife habitat in northern Botswana (see Figure 1). Most visitors are photographic tourists from Europe, North America and South Africa. As of 2003, there were 64 lodges (privately owned) and camps in the Okavango with capacity ranging from 8 to 16 beds, plus 31 bush landing strips.

Botswana has adopted a tourism policy oriented toward high-paying low-volume visitors to its biodiversity rich natural areas and has implemented a number of initiatives to address conservation and sustainability in these ecotourism rich regions. Among these is its recently developed ecotourism certification programme. Tourism certification has become a widely recognized market mechanism to address environmental (and more recently social) impacts and industry practices related to destination sustainability (Honey 1999; Synergy 2000). Well-known tourism certification programmes cited include the: 1) Australian Nature and Ecotourism Certification Programme (NEAP), 2) Costa Rican Sustainable Tourism Certification (STC), and 3) Canadian Saskatchewan Ecotourism Accreditation System (SEAS) (Mbaiwa and Stronza 2009).
The Botswana Ecotourism Certification System (BECS) was recently adopted to facilitate conservation and sustainability within its rapidly growing tourism industry.

This paper examines the development of the BECS and examines prospects and challenges for successful implementation in Botswana. Following a brief review of certification schemes, the process of developing the BECS programme is described, including the precertification study, the stakeholders involved, the dual goals of sustainability and service quality, and the challenges being experienced at this early stage of implementation. The discussion offers a preliminary understanding of the merits and challenges of tourism certification in this African context. The paper closes with conclusions and implications for successful implementation of certification programmes like the BECS.

Certification Review and Challenges

Global interest in tourism certification has increased since the 1992 Rio Summit and Agenda 21, which emphasized the need for business to comply with environmental regulations and policies to mitigate global sustainability problems (Goodwin 2005; Honey 2002). Agenda 21 for Travel and Tourism urges governments and the tourism industry to adopt policies and code of conducts to promote best environmental practices to ensure responsible and ethical management of products and processes and to increase self-regulation (Mowforth and Munt 2003). An early milestone at the local and destination level was achieved in 1985 with the Blue Flags programme, whose ecolabel has so far been awarded to over 3300 beaches and marinas in 36 countries across Europe, South Africa, Morocco, New Zealand, Canada and the Caribbean (Blue Flag, www.blueflag.org). Green Globe 21, a destination certification body established in 1994 by the World Travel & Tourism Council, established it’s benchmarking, certification and performance improvement programme based on Agenda 21 principles (Green Globe, www.ec3global.com). Joint collaboration at the regional level has also resulted in a range of certification products and ecolabels. The ecolabel Green Key, for example, is the result of joint cooperation between Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) France and the Danish Green Key Organization, which developed criteria for hotels, camping sites, hostels, summer houses, restaurants, leisure facilities and conference facilities. Green Key has been made available to 37 countries in the FEE network (Green Key, www.green-key.org).

Since the 1990s, over 250 voluntary initiatives and schemes in tourism have been documented (Dreike 2007), including codes of conduct, awards, benchmarking, best practices, ecolabeling and certification programmes for environmental, tourism, travel and hospitality providers (Font and Buckley 2001; Honey 2002; Leader-Williams 2002; Rainforest Alliance 2003). Process-based approaches focus on sustainability practices, using tools such as Environmental Management Systems (EMS), while performance-based ones use benchmarks and standards that generally target service and product quality. Tourism certification to date is primarily viewed as a market-driven mechanism, usually voluntary, aimed to influence visitor behaviour and demand for sustainable products (hence providing a source of competitive advantage), as well as shaping supply of services and industry practices (Buckley 2002; Font and Harris, 2004; Honey 1999, 2002). It represents the procedure by which an accrediting body gives written assurance and awards a logo to the consumer or industry to signify that a product, process, service, or management system is in conformity with the specified requirements or standard (Epler et al. 2001; Synergy 2000; UNEP 2006).

Proponents of tourism-related certification and ecolabels argue that certification can provide potential marketing benefits to those firms that meet the standards; furthermore, credible awards promote sustainable consumption patterns by providing concise and accurate information to consumers to help them identify products and services which incorporate a good level of environmental and social performance (Diamantis and Westlake 2001; Rainforest Alliance 2003). While certification is seen to play an important role in facilitating sustainability practices through action planning and performance improvement.

Figure 1. Map of Botswana, Southern Africa
Tourism certification schemes currently tend to be concentrated in Europe (Dreike 2007). The most widely published programmes outside Europe include the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Programme (NEAP) in Australia and, in the developing world context, the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) in Costa Rica. Outside the developed countries, certification faces challenges, for example, small-scale tourism enterprises of developing countries tend to be ill-equipped to conform to the environmental standards and criteria circumscribed by international schemes originating in developed nations (Sasidharan and Font 2001; Sasidharan et al. 2002). Jamal et al. (2006) point to the need for collaborative and participatory processes to better address cultural and social sustainability in sustainable tourism certification. Using the example of Belize, Medina’s (2005) ethnographic study of ecotourism and certification reveals disagreements among ecotourism stakeholders within Belize and with international experts about who should count as local, what should count as local participation, and even what constitutes a local benefit to the Belizian communities. Divergent perspectives on such issues must be taken into consideration in certification for ecotourism, she says.

Tourism certification programmes have slowly been emerging in African countries to manage their growing tourism industry and international nature-based assets. Such as the Ecotourism Society of Kenya EcoRating Scheme, Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa [FTTSA], Heritage Environmental Rating Scheme, EcoAward Namibia and Green Globe 21), a donor agency (GTZ Transform) and two NGOs (IUCN-South Africa and the ComMark Trust) (see Spenceley 2006). The Botswana Ecotourism Certification System (BECS) is a newly adopted initiative launched in 2010. The next section examines the development of this certification, and the opportunities and challenges for sustainable tourism development in Botswana.

**Sustainable Tourism and Certification: Botswana**

Botswana’s tourism industry is largely wildlife-based and is carried out in national parks, game reserves and other protected areas. The Wildlife Conservation Policy of 1986 proposed the division of all of Botswana’s nine districts into Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), including Ngamiland District where the Okavango Delta is located. WMAs outside national parks and game reserves were further subdivided into Controlled Hunting Areas (CHAs). Over 17% of the country’s surface is designated as national parks and game reserves; an additional 22% is designated as Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). The primary form of land use in the WMAs is wildlife conservation and tourism, but other forms not allowed in national parks and game reserve such as human settlements and agricultural development are permitted (Government of Botswana 2003). Overall, about 39% of Botswana’s land surface area is set aside as protected areas in which wildlife conservation and tourism development are the main activities. About 125,000 of Botswana’s 1.7 million people live in the Okavango region, and the delta’s wetland areas are a major source of livelihood for the rural communities that have traditionally inhabited this area (Mfundisi 2008). Its rich wildlife diversity, permanent water resources, rich grasslands and forests, has led the Okavango to become one of the main tourist destination areas in Botswana over the past decade; the WMAs and CHAs are visited by 50,000 to 100,000 tourists annually (see Figure 2).

Botswana’s Tourism Policy of 1990 strongly influenced subsequent tourism planning towards conservation and sustainable use, particularly the Botswana Tourism Master Plan of 2000, the Ecotourism Strategy of 2002 and the seven year National Development Plans. These policy documents laid an important foundation for the subsequent development of sustainable tourism and ecotourism practices and certifications.

One key recommendation to be implemented from these policy documents (especially the National Ecotourism
Strategy) was to ensure Botswana’s success as an ecotourism destination where the tourism industry was planned and managed in accordance with the highest ecotourism standards, and where those standards had credibility with international tourists. To achieve this, a Best Practice Guidelines Manual was to be developed for existing and prospective tourism operators, and a national ecotourism accreditation scheme was to be developed based on the five guiding principles of ecotourism listed above. The Best Practice Guidelines Manual was developed in 2008, along with the Ecotourism Best Practices Guidelines User Manual and the Eco-certification Feasibility Analysis (to determine the potential for success of implementing an Ecotourism Certification Programme in Botswana as well as responding to the goal of the National Ecotourism Strategy). The Best Practice Guidelines Manual outlined the criteria agreed upon by the Botswana tourism industry in 2008, which were felt to reflect the range of environmental management practices that can be assessed and used to help develop specific standards to grade facilities under the ecotourism certification programme (BECS Preliminary Standards Report 2009).

Funded by the University of Botswana and the Botswana Tourism Organization, the BECS (http://www.botswanatourism.co.bw/gradingProcess-eco.php) was structured holistically to encourage and support responsible environmental, social and cultural behaviour by tourism businesses and to ensure that they provide a quality ecofriendly product to consumers (BTB 2009). Its performance standards were designed to meet or exceed basic environmentally responsible standards or legislation. Further guidance was drawn from the baseline criteria of the Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas, Agenda 21 principles for Sustainable Development endorsed at the Earth Summit in 1992, the Mohonk Agreement and the ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 standards (see Synergy 2000). The Ecotourism Certification System Secretariat and associated Project Steering Committee who oversaw the BECS project, also sought to integrate it with internationally recognized schemes such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria and Green Key.

Botswana’s tourism certification development was a complex process ambitiously oriented towards providing a quality product based on a sustainability paradigm and a collaborative approach. A precertification study was deemed prudent to undertake, which would draw directly upon sustainability principles to gauge the process and procedures by which a national level sustainable tourism certification programme could be established. A participatory methodology was employed involving diverse stakeholders, including government, private sector and NGO organizations.

The Precertification Study: Methodology

The main goal of the precertification study was to ascertain the tourism industry’s ability to participate in tourism certification and to gather baseline information to establish and propose preliminary ecotourism standards. The precertification study took place between June and August 2009 and was conducted by experts from the University of Botswana with co-financing from the Botswana Tourism Organization (which replaced the BTB in 2010). One of this paper’s co-authors was directly involved in this precertification study. Data gathering involved administering semi-structured questionnaires containing...
open and closed-ended questions in face-to-face meetings. These were conducted in both English and Setswana (Botswana’s two official languages).

As shown in Table 1, tourism stakeholders interviewed included government officials from the North West District Council; Departments of Tourism, Wildlife and National Parks; Environmental Affairs; Waste Management and Sanitation; North West District Council and Tawana Land Board. Parastatal bodies and NGOs included the Botswana Tourism Organization, Hotel and Tourism Association of Botswana, Botswana Guide Association and various individual tourism operators. Tourism operators were classified into four strata; namely Hotel\(^1\), Urban Lodge\(^2\),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourism Stakeholder Groups</th>
<th>Number of Stakeholders Interviewed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Lodges</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Lodges</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Safaris</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Departments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wild Lodge\(^3\) and Mobile Safari\(^4\) operators. Most (over 80%) of the tourism operators and companies in Botswana are foreign owned and also operate in other Southern and Eastern African countries (Mbaiwa 2005). Some of these companies are large-scale, operating several facilities in Botswana. The Okavango Wilderness Safaris, for instance, owns 19 five-star wild or bush lodges in the Okavango Delta. In total, 42 respondents participated in this part of the precertification study. Data collected focused on a range of topics gathered around four major thematic areas: 1) Current environmental management systems; 2) Energy management; 3) Waste management; and 4) Staff training on environmental policies and guest/client awareness. These areas were selected as they were believed to be specific and pertinent to sustainability and quality tourism issues in Botswana.

The precertification study also involved consultation workshops with tourism stakeholders in seven districts considered to be key tourism destinations (refer to Figure 1). The proposed certification system and proposed standards identified from this extensive process were shared with stakeholders in fall 2009, and feedback was sought; the proposed system was also pilot tested on 12 tourism establishments countrywide between September and October 2009, in an ecotourism certification exercise. Follow-up communication shortly after the BECS certificate programme was launched in January 2010 generated a range of stakeholder opinions on the certification programme; a few are illustrated further below.

Secondary data sources on tourism certification were used to gather additional information for the study. The main secondary sources used were published and unpublished literature on tourism certification and sustainability in Botswana and included: Tourism Policy of 1990; Botswana Tourism Master Plan of 2000 and the National Ecotourism Strategy (NES) of 2002. Some of the documents used include the Botswana Ecotourism Certification System (BECS); the Ecotourism Best Practice Manual and the Ecotourism Feasibility Analysis report.

Data Analysis

Frequency tables were produced on the closed-ended questions and thematic analyses on the open-ended questions were used to analyze the questionnaire data. Thematic analysis involves data reduction into themes and patterns to be reported. Leininger (1985: 60) states that in thematic analysis, themes are identified by “bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone.” In thematic analysis, themes that emerge from the informants stories are pieced together to form a compressive picture of their collective experience” (Aronson 1994). In this study, qualitative data from stakeholder interviews and secondary sources were examined for themes and patterns.

Results

Results from stakeholder interviews on the precertification case study are presented below on the four key thematic areas around which data was gathered.

Environmental Management Systems before Certification

Results of the precertification survey indicated that respondents in the various strata said the ecocertification programme was overdue in Botswana and believed good environmental management was important for the tourism industry. Operators of Wild Lodges were further asked to state their views on whether ecocertification would increase or decrease their business. Results in Table 2 indicate that 84.0% of the operators believed ecocertification would influence guests planning to visit Botswana (note: literature evidence shows little support for this claim; moreover, self-selection bias has to be considered here). Only 4 (16%) of the operators believed that ecocertification might affect their tourism business adversely. These operators felt that environmental management practices should first be adopted in some facilities before adoption.
Tourism Certification in Botswana: Mbaiwa et al.

Table 2: Will Ecocertification Affect Tourism Business?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certification will increase business</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification will affect business</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the question of whether tourism operators had developed environmental management plans for their facilities, results indicate that only 12% and 33% of Wild lodges respectively had developed Environmental Management Plans. The lack of Environmental Management Plans and lack of systematic adherence to environmental management practices indicated there was room to develop standards to guide and evaluate tourism facilities.

Even though the majority of the tourism facilities did not have environmental management plans, 80%, 20% and 33% of Wild Lodges, Urban Lodges and Hotels, respectively, stated that they had environmental targets and strategies to achieve them in their facilities. A closer look at Wild Lodges (80%) shows they largely have environmental targets or practices they wanted to achieve in their facilities. Urban Lodges and Hotels appear to pay less attention to environmental management issues.

On the question of whether companies conducted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before construction of their facilities or during the development of their tourism business, results showed that EIAs were carried out prior to the construction of 72% of Wild Lodges and 33% of Hotels. Government departments followed the 2005 EIA Act in the construction of their offices and other projects. These results indicate strong awareness overall of the existence and use of EIA tools.

Energy Management

In relation to energy management, operators were asked to state the major power supply they have in their facilities. Results showed that 24% of the Wild (bush) Lodges especially in the Okavango Delta used diesel generators as their primary source of power. All Wild lodges operated off one generator (average size 73 KVA with average consumption 6.6 L/hr for an average of 10.9 hours per day), with one additional generator as a backup. Average generator consumption for Wild Lodges was 8.3 L/bed night. No respondents listed solar as their major power supply. All urban lodges were connected to the main power supply and used generators only as a backup during load shedding. Their generators were on average 250 KVA (20 L/hr consumption) in order to cope with the power demands. Only one mobile operator took along a generator on trips (4 KVA for 3 hours per day), other mobile operators relied solely on firewood for cooking and a battery/inverter system for electric lighting. The government departments and associations connected to the main power supply and only one department that had field offices used diesel generators and solar water heaters in them.

Waste Management

A couple of the indicators used to examine waste management related to sewage and gray water disposal practices. Results indicated that of all the Wild Lodges surveyed, 76% used septic tank sewerage systems while 24% used activated sludge treatment plants. Of the hotels surveyed, 33% used septic tank sewerage systems and 66% used sealed units. 100% of the hotel’s gray water went to soakaways and effluent was not reused. A total of 20% of urban lodges used municipal sewerage systems, 20% used sealed unit sewerage systems and 60% used septic tank sewerage systems. 20% of urban lodges recycled their gray water while 80% used soakaways to dispose of gray water. The mobile operators used long drops which are dug at each site where tourists happen to stay for a night (i.e., camping in the wilderness). Only one hotel used rain storage to water their garden when possible. The offices of all government departments and associations were either connected to the municipal sewer lines or used septic tank and soakaway systems.

Solid waste management was another indicator used to examine the state of environmental management in tourism operations. Results showed that only 4% of Wild Lodges and 40% of Urban Lodges had no solid waste management systems in place; i.e., solid waste was not separated and everything is sent to the municipal dump site. Most (80%) Wild Lodges, 40% of urban Lodges, 100% of Mobiles and 33% of Hotels separated their solid waste. Of the respondents who separated their solid waste, 52% of Wild Lodges and 40% of Urban lodges burnt paper and wet waste in camp. The remaining solid waste went to the municipal dump. 24% of Wild Lodges reused plastic or glass water bottles and one Wild Lodge used recycled oil in Maun (the main gateway tourism town located at the edge of the Okavango Delta — refer to Figure 1) to make biodiesel. None of the government departments and associations separated solid waste and mentioned they did not generate much waste. The extent of waste separation at the Maun municipal landfill is limited. Domestic waste is not separated and plastic, tins and kitchen waste is lumped as one. There was limited recycling undertaken by tourism companies. Results also indicate limited (5,000 L) use of oil collection tanks that cater for the entire District. This tank is the only one with a capacity of 5,000 L. Recycling and waste management clearly continue to need attention through certification.
Companies Involved in Tourism Certification

Since the BECS and its standards were adopted in January 2010, 26 tourism companies have registered for tourism certification and interest has been high (Stephen Ramalepa, Manager, Tourism Quality and Standards, BTO, March 2011, personal communication). In Botswana’s context (a sparse 2.03 million inhabitants), 26 companies represents a high figure. Twenty-four of these companies operate lodges in the Okavango Delta and only two operate hotels in Botswana’s capital city of Gaborone (i.e., Grand Palm Hotel and Gaborone Sun Hotel). Most tourism companies operating in Botswana are largely foreign owned (Mbaiwa 2005). In 2005, a total of 81.5% of the lodges and camps in the Okavango Delta were found to have foreign control and ownership—they were either wholly owned or jointly owned by citizen and foreign companies. The potential benefit of tourism certification in Botswana was acknowledged by both citizen and foreign companies (Ramalepa 2011, personal communication).

The BTB (2009) noted that tourism certification standards in Botswana were developed in close cooperation with the Botswana tourism industry and received high levels of support throughout the process from its stakeholders (government, private tourism sector and NGOs). The development of tourism certification standards in Botswana was a collaborative approach that involved key tourism stakeholders, including both foreign and local companies.

The Botswana Ecotourism Certification System

The BECS (refer to http://www.botswanatourism.co.bw/gradingProcess-eco.php) uses a three-tiered structure (levels) designed to incorporate the broadest cross-section of tourism operators, while still distinguishing an urban facility from an ecotourism product in a pristine natural environment. A certified facility/operation is entitled to use the BECS logo on all its promotional materials and is expected to display the Green, Green+ or Ecotourism certificate prominently in a public space (BTO 2009).

Certification is administered by the Quality Assurance Division of the Botswana Tourism Organization (BTO), formerly referred to Botswana Tourism Board (BTB). The Division has trained Ecotourism officers to conduct audits and assess facilities for certification. Certification involves two steps; first the facility conducts a self-assessment and forwards the self-assessment report to BTO. Auditors from BTO then conduct a field assessment and forwards completed audits reports to the Quality Assurance Committee (a subcommittee of the Botswana Tourism Organization, comprising individuals from outside BTO) to award certification. In addition to awarding the logo, the BTO manages the certification costs, which includes evaluation, monitoring, all administrative costs for various committee meetings, administration to operate the system and the marketing budget (BTB 2009). The multiple roles played by BTO (a government-funded parastatal organization) corroborate claims that most certification schemes in the world are supported by governments in terms of funding, assessment and recognition; Font and Bendell (2002) indicate that two-thirds of tourism certification schemes would not manage to survive without government support.
The BECS covers more than 240 standards encompassing the following: environmental management, cultural resources protection and community development, socio-economic responsibilities and fundamental ecotourism criteria (BTB 2009). Based on feedback received in the precertification process, Botswana opted for two sets of standards in its ecotourism certification: Accommodations standards and Ecotour standards. The accommodations standards apply only to all fixed tourism sites (accommodations facilities). The three-tiered certification structure of the accommodations standards represents incrementally higher levels of achievement and criteria met: Green, Green* and Ecotourism (BTB 2010a: 4). Seven principles with 241 criteria (represented by points below) distributed across them guide these standards.

- **Principle – 1**: Implementation of sustainable management policies (32 points)
- **Principle – 2**: Green and Responsible Marketing (7 points)
- **Principle – 3**: Minimization of negative impacts on the environment by physical design and operations (127 points)
- **Principle – 4**: Visitor experience, impact and interpretation (17 points)
- **Principle – 5**: Maximization of local (District) community benefits (15 points)
- **Principle – 6**: Contribution to conservation (7 points)
- **Principle – 7**: Tour Execution/Nature Interpretation (Ecotours) (36 points)

The Ecotour Standards only apply to non-fixed tourism operations (e.g., mobile safari services) that provide guided tours or use the services of another company to provide guided tours in wilderness areas. 140 criteria distributed differently across the seven principles above guide the Ecotour Standards’ three-tiered certification level system (defined as Ecotourism), which also represent incrementally higher levels of achievement and criteria met: Green, Green* and Ecotourism (BTB 2010: 4).

The Botswana Tourism Organization officials noted that during the consultation workshops in the precertification stage with tourism stakeholders, representatives of companies operating lodges in environmental sensitive areas argued that standards should be made compulsory instead of voluntary as is the case at present (Stephen Ramalepa, BTO 2011; personal communication), or at least the first level of Green should be. However, tourism stakeholders have since agreed that a two year voluntary period should be observed before the Green level is made compulsory for operators (Stephen Ramalepa, March 2011, BTO, personal communication, Gaborone, Botswana).

During follow-up email discussion in March–April, 2011 with stakeholders from Table 1 in Maun and Gaborone, opinions were solicited on the recently implemented certification programme. The following represent some of the responses received from various stakeholders including public relations and marketing managers, environmental managers, government/association and private safari stakeholders. They illustrate an overall positive, upbeat tone and register a few implementation concerns:

- “...ecotourism certification is a great idea, that’s where the world is going especially now when the world is very sensitive to the environment as well as concerned with the issue of climate change. I don’t think it is a dream, I think it is achievable and already the uptake on certification is positive; again if you are recertified it alleviates legal requirements like EIA which the ecotourism surpasses so that’s a benefit. Travellers these days are very informed and concerned about the environment.”

  **[Hospitality and tourism association stakeholder]**

- “...the idea of certification is good; the question is whether we will implement it effectively. It does add value to the environment and tourism product especially in Botswana’s context where we sell wildlife and the wilderness...”

  **[Government representative, tourism]**

- “Good concept—and a nice certificate to have for “marketing” purposes.

  To be effective in reducing impact and carbon footprint it needs a lot more thoughts and input from all sectors—HOORC (now Okavango Research Institute-ORI), DEA (Department of Environmental Affairs) and private sector—to create a system with achievable goals without compromising service and product offering. [At the] end of the day, exploiting any resource is all about money—jobs, tax revenue for development—social and infrastructure—and profit to keep investment stimulated, and ensuring sustainability to keep all the above rolling in ad infinitum.

  Not sure if BTO is the right agency to monitor and manage, but have concerns about DEA (regulators justify their existence by creating more regulations) and HOORC (academics by definition are not concerned with money!)

  **[Director, safari tour company]**

- “I personally think that recertification can work if it does not become too onerous. By this I mean, that our standards are not informed by international consultants who come here and place standards that are from the northern hemisphere. Certification, if voluntary (NB), can be a very useful when marketing a product, in this case ecotourism camps in a...”
Discussion

The Botswana Ecotourism Certification System (BECS) was designed with the goals of facilitating sustainable tourism in Botswana. The system is described as unique and may have a higher chance to succeed because a collaborative, bottom-up approach was followed in its development, during the precertification study. As observed by the Botswana Tourism Board (BTB):

> The development of the system involved and was informed by stakeholder meetings in seven regions of the country and benefited from the unanimous support of all industry operators and suppliers. Following the presentation to more than 350 stakeholders the system was tested at 12 different facilities where the self-assessment forms and the standards were reviewed and critiqued against actual situations. The recommendations from this field testing were incorporated into the final set of standards (BTB 2009: 9).

The resulting standards can, however, be critiqued for appearing to put more emphasis on environmental sustainability than social equity and economic efficiency. As the BTB (2010b: i) noted, “the production of the standards demonstrates a strong commitment to environmentally responsible tourism.” Sustainable tourism calls for the tourism industry to take into account the considerable socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects in destination areas (Wall 1997); but incorporating socio-cultural dimensions has yet to be taken up effectively in the BECS programme.

The 26 tourism companies\(^7\) that have registered for certification have gone to great lengths to promise that they will ensure that their operations adhere to good environmental standards (BTB 2009). A number of lodges in the Okavango Delta, for instance, operate without normal utility services and instead generate their own power and manage their sewage and solid waste outside the municipal support system. This collaborative effort should yield sustained continuity of the BECS scheme. Location, however, plays an important role — some of the lodges are situated in extremely difficult terrain where access is by air (e.g., small plane), and face serious logistical challenges for proper environmental management. Previous studies (Aqualogic 2009; Mbaïwa 2003; McCarthy et al. 1994) have shown that the majority of tourism establishments in the Okavango Delta fail to dispose their waste properly. These scholars contend that tourism establishments in the Okavango Delta have the potential to cause severe environmental damage. Tourism certification in fragile environmental areas like the Okavango Delta and monitoring of the tourism operations to conform to environmental standards are vital to achieve sustainability. Yet, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that own and run ecologodes under the Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programmes are slow to get tourism certification. Small-scale tourism operations like such ecologodes may not be able to afford the required finances and time to complete the extensive paperwork needed to meet certification standards.

The credibility of the Botswana Ecotourism Certification System is dependent upon the entire country rallying behind the standards with an enabling environment that includes support infrastructure, supporting policies as well as a mindset within the government workforce that is also supportive of the certification programme. The Ministry of Environment, Wildlife and Tourism under which most of the departments and affiliated institutions of environmental management fall, must take the lead role to ensure that BECS, though voluntary, is adhered to by government organizations; as they say, “charity begins at home.” A potential challenge to successful implementation of the BECS is the potential conflict of interest that the BTO may get caught up in. The BTO plays two conflicting roles with respect to the BECS: it is an assessor but also awards certification — it is vulnerable to criticism of favouritism or lack of impartiality. Perhaps, in order to better manage possible conflicts of interest, the Botswana Bureau of Standards (BBS) should be considered to play the role that the BTB currently plays in tourism certification; its credentials for this task are indeed appropriate, as it is a national organization responsible for the assessment of quality standards of products in Botswana.

The commitment of both the larger and smaller establishments within the tourism industry to the principles of sustainable tourism has also yet to be tested. The BECS was developed with performance standards designed to meet or exceed basic environmental expectations as set by various policies mentioned earlier. However, while the tourism industry in Botswana appears to have embraced BECS, some tourism companies may be lured by the benefits of market advantage and reduced operational costs and avoid implementing the ecotourism certification standards. It should be noted also that although some local communities in rich wildlife areas such as the Okavango Delta and Chobe possess ecologodes, none of them have registered for tourism certification; certification appears to be embraced by only big tourism companies in Botswana so far. Critics caution furthermore that developed countries and transnational corporations based in these countries are likely to dominate the process of creating and implementing certification...
programmes, leading to programmes that privilege the interests of the global North over the needs of the developing South and concerns of the profit-oriented private sector over those of environmental conservation (Mowforth and Munt 2003). Much greater focus is clearly needed in the BECS to social (and economic) sustainability, particularly with respect to the participation and well-being of local Botswana residents and communities in the Wildlife Management Areas.

The currently strong interest and support by foreign tourism companies for tourism certification in the Okavango Delta and Botswana therefore merits careful future research. The role of the tourist, too, is unclear and deserving of closer study. No research has been conducted to assess whether tourists visiting Botswana intentionally select certified operators and destinations as essential to their visitation choices. Generally, the percentage of tourists who visit nature-based destinations with environmental sustainability concerns is very low. Dodds and Joppe (2005: 18) argue that the percentage of consumers (tourists) who consciously look for sustainable travel packages or ecotourism is estimated to be a very low 5% of the overall market for travel. Moreover, while the tourism industry is advancing with ecocertification reforms, the rest of the country is still lagging behind with limited policies and inadequate infrastructure to support the BECS reforms. For instance, there are no municipal waste recycling centers, and national policies that promote the use of energy saving devices are lacking. Some key supporting sectors are especially lacking in the environmentally sensitive areas, for example, there is currently inadequate waste management and municipal waste collection in wilderness areas like the Okavango Delta by local government authorities (known as councils in Botswana).

**Conclusion**

Certification programmes represent an increasingly important strategy for encouraging the sustainable production of goods and services. In Botswana, the BECS provides details on the standards of tourism certification in the country and guides the implementation of tourism certification. It appears to be well supported and adopted by tourism stakeholders in January 2010, influenced by extensive stakeholder participation in the precertification process. Such collaboratively developed tourism certification has the potential to facilitate sustainable tourism in the country (BTB 2009). This is particularly important in environmental sensitive and nature-based tourism destinations like the Okavango Delta and Chobe regions in the country (which also has a high number of foreign operators). Certification has the potential to reduce tourism’s negative environmental and social impacts, not only through the setting of performance standards but also by ensuring that the tourism industry is held accountable to stakeholders (including community residents) and provide marketing benefits to those firms that meet the certification standards. In the case of the BECS, much greater attention is needed to the social dimensions of certification, the role of local communities and residents, and the provision of necessary infrastructure and support services (e.g., waste management, recycling facilities). The local setting, however, remains miles behind and could possibly impede successful implementation of BECS over the long term.

While much further research is needed to examine the challenges and impediments to successful implementation of tourism certification in Botswana, we conclude that the new BECS is a comprehensive achievement that has the hallmarks of being a globally outstanding certification system. Its potential to facilitate sustainable tourism development in Botswana has yet to be realized, but joint action and close cooperation between local knowledge and expert knowledge could help craft new avenues towards this goal.

**Endnotes**

1. Hotel operators run tourism facilities which offer accommodation, restaurant and conference services only.
2. Urban lodge operators run tourism facilities in an urban area that offers accommodation and food services only. They have an option of providing tours into wilderness areas.
3. Wild lodge operators run tourism facilities in a wilderness area offering game drives, accommodation, food and other safari services.
4. Mobile operators run tours in wilderness areas. Their clients do not necessarily stay in a permanent accommodation facility but stay in campfires during the safari.
5. A soakaway is a hole dug in the ground and filled with bricks, stone, rubble or similar material for the disposal of grey water.
6. A long drop is a bush or casual toilet with a large hole dug in the ground with a board over the top acting as the toilet seat. When a human being uses the toilet, there is long drop of human waste to the bottom of the hole hence the term long drop.
7. Some tourism companies own and manage more than one accommodation business, e.g., Okavango...
Wilderness Safaris owns/manages 19 lodges/hotels in Okavango Delta only, &Beyond owns about 6 lodges/hotels, Desert & Delta owns and manages about 5 lodges/hotels. Therefore, the number of accommodation businesses adhering to certification is not necessarily at par with the 26 tourism companies registered for certification in terms of numbers, its far more.

References


Tourism Certification in Botswana: Mbaiwa et al.


Website References


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