Recognising Sustainability in Tourism

By Satvinderjit Kaur Singh

Introduction

An increasing number of tourists are concerned about the environmental impacts of their travels and would like to opt for more sustainable alternatives. Correspondingly, a growing number of companies claim to provide "green" goods and services to meet this demand. While some of these claims are genuine and verifiable, many others are not. At best, some of the latter companies might be unable to provide reliable evidence of their environmentally sound practices. At worst, some of these firms might be engaging in "greenwashing": the act of making exaggerated claims about the sustainability of one's business. This practice of "greenwashing" could have negative impacts on the sustainable tourism industry by reducing consumer trust on business claims and preventing legitimate green businesses from attaining a greater market share.

Recognising the need to address sustainability of the tourism sector, APEC Leaders in 2017 committed to explore measures to drive sustainable and inclusive growth of the sector[1]. APEC Tourism Ministers also encouraged economies to pursue sustainable development of the tourism sector[2,3]. One of the early discussions on greenwashing that surfaced at APEC meetings was during the High Level Policy Dialogue on Sustainable Tourism in Ha Long in June 2017 [4] . The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) presented the importance of standards and certification to tackle greenwashing in the tourism industry. The APEC Virtual Center for Korea Environmental Technology Exchange[5] likewise recognised the need to develop greenwashing guidelines and revise relevant laws to improve consumer access to information, provide practical guidance on environmental standards to

businesses and promote environmentally friendly products. Further discussions of challenges faced by the sustainable tourism industry at a recent *Brainstorming Workshop towards APEC Green Road: Promoting Responsible and Sustainable Tourism in MSMEs* [6] in Chiang Mai brought out concerns about the confusion caused by the plethora of environmental certificates used to signal sustainability. On an economy level, several economies have acknowledged greenwashing (for example, with respect to customs[7], procurement[8], and marketing[9]) and aim to educate their citizens to be wary. This policy brief intends to contribute to this discussion by examining the use of environmental certifications to address greenwashing and of accreditation in regulating these certifications.

For the purpose of this policy brief, sustainable tourism is defined as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, [while] addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities"[10].

Growing demand for sustainable tourism

The vast improvements in connectivity and globalisation as well as greater prosperity have led to tremendous growth in the tourism industry during the last two decades. Between 1995 and 2018, direct contributions of tourism to GDP increased by 214 percent from USD 482.2 billion to USD 1,516 billion (see Figure 1). Moreover, the tourism sector created 18.8 million new jobs in the region during the same period, which is an increase of 50 percent. (see Figure 2).

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[1] https://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Leaders-Declarations/2017/2017_aelm

[2] https://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Sectoral-Ministerial-Meetings/Tourism/2017_tourism

[3] https://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Sectoral-Ministerial-Meetings/Tourism/2018_tourism

[4] http://mddb.apec.org/Documents/2017/MM/HLPD-ST/17_hlpd-st_008.pdf

[5] http://www.apec-vc.or.kr/include/EUN_download.asp?str=INDUSTRYSPOTLIGHT&str2=6

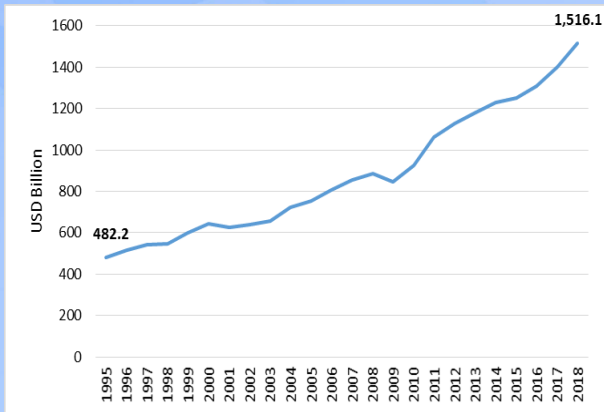[6] http://mddb.apec.org/Documents/2018/SMEWG/SMEWG47/18_smewg47_003a.pdf

[7] https://www.customs.gov.sg/~/media/cus/files/media-releases/2008/131_ecofriendlycigarettes.pdf

[8] https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/7b8df2bd-3bb9-49cc-b417-5f2eb6e0ce37/files/sustainable-procurement-guide.pdf

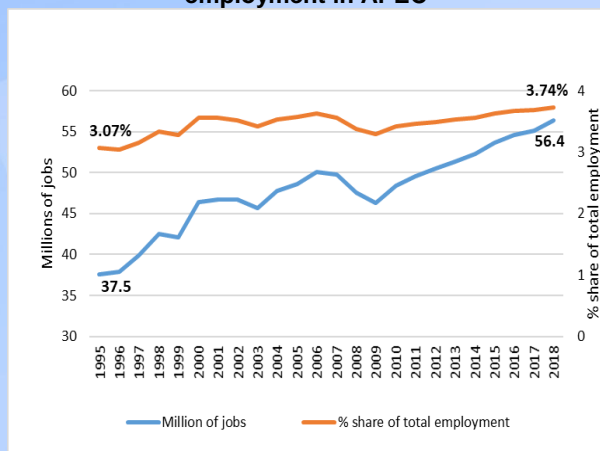[9] https://www.epa.gov/greenerproducts/introduction-ecolabels-and-standards-greener-products

[10] http://sdt.unwto.org/content/about-us-5

Figure 1: Tourism's direct contribution to GDP in APEC

Figure 2: Tourism's direct contribution to employment in APEC

Sustainable tourism in particular has gained popularity in recent years. According to a survey done by Mandala Research (2016), 60 percent of travellers have taken at least one sustainable holiday between 2013 and 2015. Moreover, a 2016 GlobalData consumer survey found that 35 percent of travellers were likely to book sustainable holidays (GlobalData, 2017). This demand could in part be explained by the observation that younger consumers are more open to paying extra for sustainable goods and services. A global survey conducted by Nielsen found that about 73 percent of Millennials (21-34 years old) and Generation Z (under 20 years old) were willing to pay a sustainability surcharge while only 51 percent of Baby Boomers (50-64 years old) were willing to do so (Nielsen, 2015).

The rising demand for sustainability is not specific to the tourism industry but part of a larger movement towards a greener economy. The percentage of consumers willing to pay more for sustainable options had increased by 11 percentage points between 2014 and 2015 and stood at 66 percent in 2015 (Nielsen, 2015). In addition, a survey by Accenture found that 83 percent of senior executives regarded spending on green goods and services as an investment and not a cost, despite acknowledging the expensive nature of such goods (Business Green, 2012). These trends suggest that the high demand for sustainable options in the tourism industry may continue.

The increase in interest and consequently investment in sustainable tourism are partly a result of growing access to information on the negative impacts of tourism. For example, the recent closure of Boracay Island in the Philippines to allow for rehabilitation of coral reefs (GOV PH, 2018) caught global attention. Subsequently, Maya Bay in Thailand announced its indefinite closure to assist recovery of its coral and marine life (Pearlman, 2018).

To further increase awareness, universities and research organisations publish studies on the impacts of tourism, showing evidence of the worsening impacts on the environment. According to the University of Sydney (2018), tourism's carbon footprint rose from 3.9 gigatonnes of equivalent carbon dioxide (Gt CO2-e) to 4.5 Gt CO2-e during the five years ending 2013, representing eight percent of the global greenhouse emissions. On an international policy level, the importance of sustainable tourism has been well communicated through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): tourism appears in three of the 17 goals, namely inclusive and sustainable economic growth, sustainable production and consumption, and sustainable use of marine resources (UNWTO; UN Global Compact Network Spain, 2016). To spread awareness, the UN recommends that economies use communication tools like the radio and television to publicise the SDGs across various groups and disseminate information on the impacts caused by tourism and the measures that can be taken to restore the environment.

High demand for sustainable tourism has led to the creation of various categories of responsible tourism promising varied unique experiences. CREST (2016) lists six types of niche sustainable tourism markets that have been gaining popularity: adventure tourism, agritourism, culinary tourism, cultural tourism, sharing economy and wellness tourism. Adventure tourism, valued at USD 263 billion in 2013, is the fastest growing form of tourism with an estimated 65 percent yearly growth between 2009 and 2012 (Adventure Travel Trade Association and The George Washington University, 2013).

The demand for sustainable tourism is, however, not met with corresponding supply. Businesses are struggling to meet the demand for green goods and services, and inadequate supply is notably pronounced in emerging economies, of which 44

percent experience supply shortages (Business Green, 2012). This shortage of green goods and services is likely to become worse as public awareness as well as the purchasing power of Millennials and Generation Z increase (Nielsen, 2015; Govender & Govender, 2016; Juwaheer, Pudaruth, & Noyaux, 2012).

Misleading environmental claims: the problem of greenwashing

The increased demand for sustainable goods and services has been met with the rise of greenwashing, that is, unjustified or exaggerated claims of sustainability by businesses to gain greater market share. According to Dahl (2010), greenwashing has existed since the late 1980s but has recently worsened due to increasing demand for sustainable alternatives. In 2009, TerraChoice, an environmental marketing firm, noted that more than 90 percent of sustainability claims in product advertisements were false. The tourism industry similarly suffers from misleading advertisement. Pile (2017) noted that at least 50 percent of all British accommodation providers were engaged in some form of greenwashing.

TerraChoice (2007) had initially listed six broad 'sins' of greenwashing before revising to include another in 2009 (TerraChoice, 2009; Dahl, 2010; Delmas and Burbano 2011). The seven 'sins' of greenwashing are listed below:

• Hidden trade-offs: drawing focus towards one aspect of a product that is green without paying attention to other more important aspects of environment-friendliness. For example, hotels frequently advertise the use of tissue made out of recycled material but refrain from giving further details on the manufacturing process and the related environmental impacts.

• No proof: lack of easily accessible supporting information or third party confirmation of the environmental claim. For example, claiming an environmentally friendly tour without providing any certificate.

• Vagueness: making unclear sustainability claims that are likely to be misinterpreted by the consumer. For instance, labelling a shampoo bottle as "all natural" without further explaining what is meant by the term.

• Irrelevance: drawing attention towards a green aspect of a product that is unhelpful in enabling the consumer to make an environment-friendly decision. A common example of this is claiming a product to be "free of CFCs" when measures to phase out the use CFCs have been implemented under the Montreal Protocol 30 years ago.

• Lesser of two evils: using environmental qualifiers like "green" or "natural" for product categories that are unquestionably harmful to the environment to distract consumers. Labelling pesticides as "green" would be a fitting example.

• Fibbing: making completely false environmental claims about a product. For instance, claiming a soap bar is packaged in 100% recycled paper when it has a plastic wrapping.

• Worshipping false labels: giving a false impression of third-party endorsement either through words or images. An example would be bearing an in-house environmental programme stamp without explanation.

The growing prevalence of greenwashing has three distinct negative ramifications on the budding market for sustainable goods and services (TerraChoice, 2007):

• Firstly, fake green claims prevent environmentally positive consumers from achieving the desired environmental benefits.

• Secondly, businesses making false sustainability claims take away market shares from legitimately sustainable businesses, hence hindering the spread of environmental innovation.

• Finally, greenwashing reduces the trust consumers have on similar claims, frustrating their environment-friendly intentions. Consequently, reduced demand will negatively impact the market-driven incentive for green innovation.

Considerable fines have been imposed on businesses that engage in false green advertising. Walmart paid USD 1 million in order to settle allegations that it sold plastic products labelled as "biodegradable" or "compostable" when they were not (Hardcastle, 2017). The Volkswagen Group was charged a fine of USD 4.3 billion for conspiring to cheat on its diesel emission tests for over 10 years, which was largely categorised as fraudulent greenwashing (The Straits Times, 2017; Majláth, 2016).

The threat of such fines have led to the rise of "greenhushing", which is the deliberate underplay of sustainability efforts to prevent being accused of wrongful green claims. Greenhushing leads to more uninformed spending and prevents green businesses from receiving the recognition and encouragement they deserve (Horiuchi et al., 2009). An analysis of 31 small rural businesses in the UK found that 70 percent of them practiced greenhushing because they either perceived that consumers would not care or, that they would come

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across as being hypocritical or providing poorer quality (Font, Elgammal, & Lamond, 2017).

Much of the confusion regarding sustainable practices revolves around the lack of understanding of the overall environmental impact of goods and services (Pearce, 2010). For instance, electric cars are not environmentally friendly until and unless the electricity that powers them is generated in a green way. Frequently, one or two green aspects of a business are widely marketed while other, less sustainable business practices are swept under the carpet.

The problem of greenwashing also arises to some extent out of the difficulty of regulating the green and tourism industries. According to Font (2002), there are three reasons for this. The first is that there is little agreement on what constitutes sustainable tourism, which hinders policy formation. Secondly, the tourism industry's cross-border nature obstructs effective regulation since rules cannot be applied beyond government boundaries and, as a result, environmental advertising regulations vary across economies. Thirdly, most of the environmental regulations tend to be inadequate or casually enforced.

For example, according to Delmas and Burbano (2011), environmental advertising regulations by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and the European Commission have been generally lax and inadequate in protecting consumers from greenwashing which leaves a regulatory gap that needs to be filled. Hence, the role of monitoring and disseminating information has largely been passed on to the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Meanwhile, the International Chamber of Commerce has responded by developing a global 'framework for responsible environmental marketing communications'[11] to assist marketers in meeting standards and avoid misleading consumers.

Font (2002) further noted that the lack of methods to enforce and regulate sustainable operations has resulted in the growth of voluntary environmental initiatives in the form of environmental certificates and awards, among others. Environmental certificates can play an important role in fighting the 'sins' of greenwashing and protecting consumer interests as they provide an easy means for consumers to verify sustainability claims.

How to solve greenwashing?

Environmental certificates or ecolabels can be used to assess, monitor and provide written assurance of the business, its products, processes and

management systems once specific requirements have been met (Honey, 2008). According to Buckley (2002), criteria for creating a substantive environmental certificate must include the relevant environmental parameters, how to measure them and the thresholds that need to be met to attain the environmental certificate. Proper usage of the certificates requires public access to their criteria, coverage, and the application process. Furthermore, to ensure adequate enforcement, regular assessment, audit and setting of appropriate penalties for non-compliance are required. These certificates can then be confidently used as marketable logos. Therefore, while businesses might find it worthwhile to look into clearer forms of green signalling, consumers could look out for environmental certificates and for possible evidence of the seven 'sins' of greenwashing to make informed decisions (TerraChoice, 2009).

However, the environmental certificates that have been used as a measure to promote sustainable production and consumption by policymakers have grown to an unmanageable number. According to Yeo and Piper (2011), of the 340 international environmental certificates recognised by the World Resources Institute in 2010, 40 were specific to the travel industry. This number has now increased to over 150 (Naturefriends International et al., 2016). These certifications vary in terms of quality, contents, criteria and scope, thus causing great confusion among consumers and businesses (Font, 2002). Certifications like the Rainforest Alliance and Travelife are of commendable quality as both have global recognition from the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), publish their standards online, and conduct verifications through periodic third-party onsite visits (Naturefriends International et al., 2016). However, many other certifications do not live up to the same standard.

Accreditation plays a crucial role in sorting this confusion by ensuring competency of certification schemes and credibility of standards by certifying the certifiers (Font, Sanabria, & Skinner, 2010) (Figure 3). It is a process carried out by an authoritative body to certify that a business can conduct its tasks competently. In this case, accrediting a certification provider will allow consumers to trust the quality of the certificate and make an informed and confident purchase decision. To ensure compliance and quality management among the accredited certification programmes, regular monitoring visits and audits are required. An overarching accreditation system will also allow local certificates to be placed in a relatively competitive position against international ones (Font, 2002). Businesses can hence improve their

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[11] https://iccwbo.org/global-issues-trends/responsible-business/marketing-advertising/environment-claims/

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green signalling by attaining certifications from accredited providers. This also allows consumers to compare certifications held by different businesses and to identify the credible ones. As a result, consumers can be more confident and better able to recognise legitimate green businesses.

Figure 3: Relationship between accreditation and certification bodies

Source: Adapted from Durband, Randy. Keynote Presentation: "Promoting Responsible & Sustainable Tourism in MSMEs in the APEC Region". Brainstorming Workshop towards an APEC Green Road. Chiang Mai, Thailand. 4 September 2018.

Green Globe was one of the first international organisations to develop sustainability certification for tourism in 1993 in efforts to attain greater harmonisation [12]. The Green Globe Accreditation was then established in 2002 to ensure consistency in the assessment services of certification bodies[13].

Building on the original developments of Green Globe, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) was founded in 2007 by the UN World Tourism Organization, UN Environment Programme, Rainforest Alliance and UN Foundation. As an independent NGO, the GSTC plays the role of a global accreditation body for sustainable tourism certification programmes based on the GSTC Criteria [14] and is recognised as a

global authority in managing standards for sustainable tourism (Modica, 2016). Moreover, the GSTC Destination Criteria have a strong relationship with the UN SDGs with at least one criterion listed under 16 of the 17 SDGs [15]. In addition to providing guidance for international tourism standards through the GSTC Criteria and serving as an accreditation body, the GSTC also aims to promote market access and increase knowledge through its sustainable tourism training programme. As of 31 December 2018, the GSTC had accredited two certification bodies for destinations, six for tour operations and five for accommodations[16].

While an accreditation body like the GSTC can create a basis for international standards and provide clarity and comparability in the sea of environmental certificates, there are some drawbacks to getting drawn into this process. According to Font (2002), there are three drawbacks of overarching accreditation systems. The first is that such accreditation systems may force regional or sub-industry specific certificates to comply with relatively stringent external criteria which may disregard their specific nature. Secondly, governments may withdraw funding from their sponsored certificates upon realising loss of control to international accreditation systems. Lastly, accreditation adds a new layer of bureaucracy to environmental certification which creates an added expense. Despite the challenges of strained finance and increased bureaucracy, the accreditation of environmental certification programmes can go a long way in sorting out the confusion created by hundreds of environmental certifications. It can also play a significant role in educating travellers on environment-friendly tourism and in turn making the tourism industry greener.

The role for APEC

Given the significant contribution of tourism to APEC's GDP and employment, there are considerable benefits to be gained from investing in a more sustainable industry. The APEC Tourism Working Group (TWG) has been conducting substantial work to support the transformation of the industry into a more inclusive and sustainable one. In 2013, TWG released a report on the Sustainable Development of Tourism Destinations [17] which presented a framework for tourism sustainability and addressed relevant definitions, and a Tourism Sustainability Assessment Tool [18] to act as a

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[12] https://greenglobe.com/latest-news/green-globe-20-years-of-sustainability-certification-for-travel-tourism/

[13] https://greenglobe.com/about/

[14] https://www.gstcouncil.org/about/about-us/

[15] https://www.gstcouncil.org/sdgs-gstc-destination-criteria/

[16] https://www.gstcouncil.org/certification/become-certified-hotel/; https://www.gstcouncil.org/certification/become-

certified-destination/; https://www.gstcouncil.org/certification/become-certified-tour-operator/

[17] https://www.apec.org/Publications/2014/03/Sustainable-Development-of-Tourism-Destinations

[18] https://www.apec.org/Press/Misc/tourismtool

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baseline for managing sustainable tourism development. In the implementation of its APEC Tourism Strategic Plan (2015-2019)[19], the working group focused on four priorities, one of which promotes sustainable growth of the industry by encouraging socially responsible tourism. In addition, the APEC Guidelines for Tourism Stakeholders [20], welcomed at the 2018 Tourism Ministerial Meeting in Port Moresby, put forth a set of guidelines to enhance sustainable and responsible tourism, among others. As part of the initiative, tourists and businesses are encouraged to engage in sustainable practices and to incorporate "reduce, reuse and refuse" in operations.

In APEC, the Sub-Committee on Standards and Conformance (SCSC) has administered work on product standards since 1994 and has been active in educating consumers about the importance of standards. A five-year Standards and Conformance Education Initiative was implemented between 2007 and 2011 to encourage development and implementation of standards through educational workshops and development of a standards education information portal. More recently, in 2017, a second phase was held to consolidate best practices from the region to inspire a new generation of standards professionals.

However, APEC has not done much work on sustainability standards specific to the tourism industry and more could be done towards filling this gap. APEC could look at the undertakings of other international and regional organisations. For instance, ASEAN has developed seven tourism-based standards as of 2018, which include the ASEAN Green Hotel Standard, ASEAN Clean Tourist City Standard and ASEAN Homestay Standard (ASEAN, 2018). To encourage compliance to these standards, ASEAN also introduced the Tourism Standard Awards to recognise outstanding tourism destinations and businesses.

APEC Leaders have repeatedly called for the pursuit of sustainable economic growth in the region. In 2015, they endorsed the APEC Strategy for Strengthening Quality Growth[21] which identifies three Key Accountability Areas (KAA) as priority areas for regional cooperation and future growth. Developing environmental standards and certifications for tourism can contribute to two of these KAAs: institution building and environmental impact. This can also help to enhance tourism's role in promoting sustainable economic growth.

As a starting point, knowledge sharing and cross-fora collaboration between TWG and SCSC can be facilitated to gather information on the practices of different economies in the region in formulating and managing standards in the tourism industry. Having these standards can facilitate the development of appropriate solutions to greenwashing and promote sustainable tourism in the region.

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[19] https://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Sectoral-Ministerial-Meetings/Tourism/2018_tourism
[20] https://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Sectoral-Ministerial-Meetings/Tourism/2018_tourism/APEC-Guidelines-for-Tourism-Stakeholders

[21] https://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Leaders-Declarations/2015/2015_aelm/2015_Annex-A

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