

WHAT DO ECOLABELS BRING TO TOURISM?



Sustainability is a trend even for holidaymakers and sustainable tourism is growing in popularity. More than 150 international ecolabels have established themselves as a part of the eco-friendly businesses offering environmentally friendly services even for the travelers. What is the difference of these ecolabels?

Tourism is largely a natural experience, but the holidaymakers often damage the environment with their activities.

“An awareness of sustainability in tourism has only emerged when more people started travelling and first signs of damage were reported,” says Petra Thomas, Managing Director of Anders Reisen, an association of sustainable travel companies.

The first ecolabels were created in 1987 - the Blue Flag for coastal zones in Europe. In 1998 the Blue Swallow for environmentally and socially friendly accommodations in Germany. In recent years the number has risen sharply. “There are around 150 to 180 labels worldwide for sustainable tourism,” says Martin Balàs from the University of Sustainable Development in Eberswalde.

Criteria for the Assessment of Ecolabels

It is not always easy to say how to assess the company requiring an ecolabel. But there are important criteria: Is there a sustainability strategy? Are visitors counted and the cultural heritage protected? What about environmental factors such as water consumption, recycling, light and noise protection?

There are great differences in the review of these criteria. Some labels are checked from the desk, others send external reviewers to the companies. “The criteria should be presented transparently - that is, publicly,” Balàs says. However, some ecolabels do not publish their evaluation catalogues.

An important point of orientation for holidaymakers is the question: Was the label recognized by the GSTC? Today, the Council is the largest international interest group for sustainable tourism. It is financially supported by TUI among others, but it works independently according to its own statement.

The organization checks who is behind a label, what the criteria list requires, how reliable the test procedure is, the sustainability focus of a label and which companies and offers are certified. So far, 26 ecolabels have been recognized by the GSTC.

“The question of the best ecolabel cannot be answered on a flat-rate basis. The variety of ecolabels has developed from the diversity of tourism,” explains Herbert Hamele, founding member of the GSTC. There are regional, national and international certificates as well as labels, which distinguish either hotels, camping sites, travel agencies and even car wash systems - or all of this.

Different Sustainability Points

The labels also differ in the sustainability focal points. Some focus on ecological criteria, such as the Green Key of the Foundation of Environmental Education, which was already awarded to more than

2,500 companies.

Other labels cover all three pillars of sustainability, including social and economic components. This includes TourCert, which has been developed by Tourism Watch and the HNE Eberswalde for travel agencies and accommodation. They therefore advertise their travel offerings prominently.

Green Globe also features hotels, resorts, travel agencies, car rentals and congress centers in a similar fashion. More than 540 events have been held under the ecolabel.

Attempts for a Single Certificate Failed

In order to create more transparency, six years ago efforts were made to obtain a uniform certificate. The seal of the Tourism Sustainability Council should include sustainability criteria for all tourism offerings in the world.

The project however failed. A campsite in Austria, for example, has completely different basic requirements than eco-lodge in the jungle of Borneo.

Are there any black sheep among the ecolabels? Herbert Hamele has been working on sustainable tourism since 1987. "Greenwashing has not occurred to me during this time." So far, sustainable tourism has been developed on a voluntary basis beyond legal requirements. Greenwashing only occurs when a hotel or region deliberately makes false statements.

The question remains: Does the vacationer look at the labels at all? "For the traveler, this is only decisive in the second or third stage when the destination and price are the same," says Petra Thomas.

The assumption is that sustainable travel is generally more expensive. Thomas considers this as prejudice owed to the oversupply to travel deals. **Their argument is that through sustainable travel, many savings are passed on to the traveler.**

The market for ecolabels is likely to develop strongly in the future. Martin Balàs refers, for example, to the climate agreement in Paris and the consumer center for responsible and sustainable products. "These developments generate positive dynamics towards sustainable tourism," the researcher believes.

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