

SIGNIFICANCE AND EFFECTS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CERTIFICATIONS: A PRELIMINARY QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF THE FIRST GSTC-D CERTIFIED DESTINATIONS IN ITALY AND AUSTRIA

Abstract. COVID-induced lockdowns and ensuing restrictions have exacerbated existing socioeconomic challenges, above all in the tourism sector. Conversely, growing sensitivity to the climate crisis, and greater demand for sustainability and resilience to global threats, is putting high pressure on tourism destinations to avoid a return to “business as usual”. These trends represent a clear opportunity to rethink tourism and focus on emerging demands in line with a just transition in Sustainable Tourism Destination Management. This paper draws on qualitative data to provide an overview of the significance and opportunities of the voluntary sustainability certification scheme for destinations based on the GSTC criteria (GSTC-D). Authors have accompanied three destinations in Italy and Austria in the GSTC certification process for over two years and have collected initial scientific findings which are presented and discussed in this article. The paper highlights how destination managers have started to place more emphasis on destination management, with greater attention to the views of residents and tourism operators, innovative sustainable tourism products, as well as new and unprecedented partnerships and communication campaigns in line with sustainable pathways.

Keywords: Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), Third-party Voluntary Certification, Destination Management, Sustainability, Resilience

1 INTRODUCTION

The climate crisis, digitalization, globalization, and demographic trends are completely changing our societies, environment and economies. The COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 has exacerbated existing socioeconomic challenges and accelerated changes especially in tourism. The growing demand for sustainability and resilience to global threats is putting high pressure on tourism destinations to avoid a return to “*business as usual*” [1]. Booking.com (2021) shows how the year of the pandemic accelerated visitors’ perceived desire to travel more sustainably: “83% of global travellers think sustainable travel are vital, with 61% saying the pandemic has pushed them to travel more sustainably in the future” [2]. These trends represent a clear opportunity to rethink tourism in line with a just transition in Sustainable Tourism Destination Management (DMO).

The concept of sustainability is defined in tourism 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*” [3]. If sustainability has so far

been a seal of quality for a destination in the future, it is set to become a “*must*” for destinations that wish to remain competitive in the global arena.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) define certification as: “*A mechanism for ensuring that an activity or product meets certain standards that may be set by government or agreed within an industry sector*” [4]. Sustainability standards and certification schemes relying on them are a way to cope with the evolution of market demand because they may provide instruments and tools that are authoritative and can be recognised internationally by the market, while at the same time providing operators and DMOs with clear guidance and direction to reducing the negative impacts of tourism [5]. Nowadays, Ecolabel has indexed 463 ecolabelling systems in different sectors [6] while in tourism, there are over fifty sustainable certification schemes for hospitality businesses, tour operators, and destinations in addition to a high number of available quality standards. However, challenges have so far limited broad international adoption and market recognition [7]. For example, few of these standards are international. They are often open to organisations from different sectors that have different structural characteristics than those of tourism. They often have a restricted thematic scope of application for example referring only to environmental aspects as with the Ecolabel, or only to protected areas. In many instances, they are self-referential, with little or no third-party verification of the requirements. To create a common language and define the concept of sustainable tourism in all its aspects, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) defined and manages an international standard based on sustainability criteria applicable to all operators in the tourism sector [8]. The criteria apply to accommodation facilities (GSTC-H), tour operators (GSTC-TO) and destinations (GSTC-D). The GSTC criteria have a worldwide recognition and are directly connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the paper is to move forward the discussion on voluntary sustainable tourism certification as generating process innovation, whereby destinations formally commit to continually improving their sustainability and resilience. While the hypothesis is that GSTC certification leads to qualitative improvements in the destination, the paper specifically addresses the following questions:

- I. Is certification a viable option for increasing sustainability processes in destinations?
- II. What are the value and benefits of third-party GSTC-accredited certification? What are the challenges of this process and how can they be addressed?

It is expected that certified destinations will increase in the future. The paper provides a first analysis of preliminary findings in this direction.

2 METHODS

Authors have accompanied the certification process in three destinations in northern Italy and southern Austria (Table 1). They are the APT Valsugana-Lagorai, the Tourism Promotion Consortium of Tarvisiano, Sella Nevea and Passo Pramollo in Italy and the Nassfeld-Lesachtal-Weißensee Tourismus Marketing GmbH (NLW), in Carinthia. While the APT Valsugana-Lagorai was the first destination to be awarded the GSTC certification in 2019, the Consortium of the Tarvisiano and the NLW Tourismus Marketing represent the first cross-border destinations to be awarded the GSTC certification in 2021. These tourism organisations began to act concretely on how to regenerate their destinations in a sustainable way. The paper relies on qualitative data in supporting and monitoring the certification process.

Table 1. The three destinations (DMOs) in Italy and Austria which have been certified according to GSTC criteria.

Destinations	Resident population (2019)	Overnight stays (2019/2020)	Municipalities	Year certified
Valsugana-Lagorai (first GSTC-certified)	(2019) 62,787	(2020) 1,503,155 (2019) 2,200,137	29	2019
Tarvisiano-Sella Nevea-Passo Pramollo (first GSTC cross-border certification with NLW)	(2019) 7,033	(2019) 259,554	4	2021
Nassfeld-Lesachtal-Weißensee (NLW) (first GSTC-certification in Austria)	(2019) 21,210	(2020) 1,862,993 (2019) 2,200,952	10	2021

3 INITIAL FINDINGS

The initial findings of the comparative analysis show how the three DMOs saw the GSTC certification as a way to differentiate their destination among other mountain destinations in the Alps, but more importantly, as a way to engage operators, residents and visitors more actively in a common vision, and to bring innovation into the destination. The President of the APT Valsugana-Lagorai stated: *“We realised that the certification was not just about communicating the territory but that it meant making sure that above all, we believed in the value of living in a beautiful territory worth our respect, and that of the guests who visited our area”*. The sustainability manager of the Tarvisiano tourism consortium highlighted how: *“The GSTC certification process made it clear where some of our gaps were, such as the lack a clear strategy shared with the territory, and collaboration among tourism operators”*. This point

was shared with the APT Valsugana-Lagorai, whose director of the DMO remarked that: “After this milestone, we are talking about APT as the Agency for the Territory and not simply the Agency for Tourism. The focus today is very much aimed at an internal path where we put all the operators at the centre [...] and our residents can become real ambassadors of our territory”. The director of the NLW Tourismus Marketing GmbH commented: “Anyone who is allowed to put seals of quality like this on their own banners has recognised one thing: Sustainability should not be a green badge. Our goal is to raise the quality of life and leisure, from which locals and visitors alike benefit”. Table 2 shows the analysis of the perspectives and key elements on the value of the standard, the process of certification, some of its outcomes and challenges as well as the expectations for the future.

Table 2. Summary of perspectives from the destinations as well as statements of the persons concerned (newspaper article and website of the company) on the value and impacts of the GSTC certification

Perspectives	APT Valsugana-Lagorai	Consorzio del Tarvisiano	NLW Tourismus Marketing
Value of the GSTC standard	Focus on whole community Coherent policies for sustainability International tourism network	Authoritative standard Differentiate the destination Value added	Improvements in the local mindset Process to continuously implement and improve the GSTC criteria
Value of the certification process	Connection between tourism and quality of life Constant process to improve	Critical eye on internal problems: collaboration, common vision	A new tourism concept developed together with different stakeholders and civil society
Outcomes	New approach to engage residents, youth and operators through community “Ambassadors” New partnerships & Co-marketing Projects with a positive impact on the local community	Stimulus to work together (also cross-border) Engage operators on sustainability issues and support them to get certified	Possible to improve the quality of life and leisure in the region Improved communication with guest and locals Expansion of cooperation with research institutions
Challenges	Communicate sustainability to visitors and residents Engage residents and local enterprises	Collaboration with operators Organise internally to address the requirements of the standard	Make GSTC better known among residents and guests Higher benefit from improvements of the GSTC certification process Stronger integration of the SDG’s
Expectations for the future	Creation of new sustainable tourism products Network with certified destinations for knowledge exchange Develop new ideas thanks to a commitment to sustainability	Engage operators towards a sustainability pathway New communication models Strengthening cross-border cooperation	Establishment a professional tourism monitoring system More connection to GSTC network Strengthening cross-border cooperation

4 CONCLUSION

In the past, destinations aimed at attracting increasing numbers of visitors and the benefits of a few shareholders. In the future, tourism is poised to become once again a key driver and employer for many rural areas while it addresses the impacts it has on the local economic, ecological, cultural and social life. The challenge for destinations will be to nurture more sustainable and regenerative pathways, proactively designing quality tourism and making a

significant contribution to improving benefits at the local level. This requires professionally designed certification processes which are actively guided by all stakeholders and may lead to long-term learning opportunities and changes in the mind-set of a tourism destination and its operators. However, certifications processes are also complex projects and need support from scientific research to properly assess the effects at the destination level and across destinations. Research and studies on certification impacts are often scattered and sometimes poor even for more mature certification systems. As a more recent certification scheme, the GSTC's efforts at developing impact monitoring and reporting from the very beginning, in cooperation with certificate holders and other bodies involved in the system, could lead to practical cooperation among GSTC/GSTC-related bodies and independent researchers. Currently, concrete medium- to long-term data are not yet available and will have to be collected over the next few years as a necessary scientific goal. Preliminary findings to date show that certification processes, such as those connected to the GSTC standard, already have many positive effects in the short term, presented in the paper.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research leading to these results was carried out as part of the support provided to achieving the certification in the three destinations. The Tourism Promotion Consortium of Tarvisiano, Sella Nevea and Passo Pramollo and the NLW Tourism Marketing GmbH were co-financed by the Interreg Italy-Austria "World of Mountains (WOM365)" project.

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