

**DEMAND FOR AND PERCEPTIONS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CERTIFICATION
IN IRELAND**

**Aíne Conaghan
Dr. James Hanrahan
I.T. Sligo
Sligo**

aineconaghan@gmail.com

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Abstract

Global tourism is set to hit 1.6 billion arrivals by 2020 (UNWTO, 2009). To reach this growth in a sustainable manner, all tourism businesses and destinations need to be managed sustainably. Certification has been highlighted as a key tool in sustainable tourism management (Honey, 2002; Bien, 2007; Conaghan and Hanrahan, 2009). Sustainable tourism seeks to minimise ecological and socio-cultural impacts while providing economic benefits to the local communities. This is achieved by an integrated approach to tourism planning, management and certification. Sustainable tourism and sustainable tourism destinations have emerged from five main drivers. Firstly the increasing regulatory pressure. The growing awareness of cost savings from sensible resource consumption. The awareness by governments and operators that the growth of tourism can have a negative impact on the environment. Furthermore tourism professionals and operators recognise that environmental quality is essential for a competitive product. Finally, the growing awareness of communities about their potential to influence tourism policy. This paper specifically identifies the demand for and perceptions of sustainable tourism eco-certification amongst those working in the industry.

The study determines the stakeholders of the tourism industry understanding of sustainable tourism determined from preliminary results. It assesses the awareness and perceptions of sustainable tourism eco-certification programs and who should implement them. The paper discusses whose interests are served relating to the need for certification programs in the tourism industry. The research makes a unique contribution to a very significant gap in the study of tourism certification in Ireland.

Keywords: Certification, Sustainable Tourism, Sustainable Tourism Management, Sustainable Tourism Destination.

Introduction

The environment is the main resource for many tourism destinations. The past decade has shown a significant amount of research globally, devoted to sustainable tourism management and development which have advanced the concept (Schianetz, Kavanagh, and Lockington, 2007). As a result, Farrell and Twining (2005) indicate sustainability must be conceived as a transition and learning process. A 'moving' rather than a static goal (Lee, 2001). Consequently, tourism industry stakeholders are under increased pressure to implement sustainable practices due to the expected growth in tourists (Dolnicara and Leisch, 2008). Certification has been highlighted as a key tool in sustainable tourism management (Honey, 2002; Bien, 2007; Conaghan and Hanrahan, 2009).

This preliminary study provides initial data amongst stakeholders of the tourism industry in Ireland. The study determines the stakeholders understanding of sustainable tourism. It assesses the awareness and perceptions of sustainable tourism eco-certification programs and who should implement them. The paper discusses whose interests are served relating to the need for certification programs in the tourism industry. The results contribution to a very significant gap in the study of tourism certification in Ireland.

Tourism and Sustainability

The term "sustainability" has become a central topic in the tourism industry (Byrd and Cardenas 2007). Development of a definition for sustainable tourism has been attempted by many scholars and organisations (Gunn, 1994; Ioannides, 1995; Robson and Robson, 1996; WTO, 1998; Hardy and Beeton, 2001; Byrd and Cardenas, 2007). Moreover, the definition applied frequently by tourism planners and in tourism research literature was developed by the World Tourism Organization (WTO).

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecology processes, biological diversity, and life support systems (WTO, 1998: 21).

The widely recognised definition of sustainability, invoked by the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), considers sustainable development

to be 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987). Furthermore, in 2004, the WTO expanded their definition (Byrd, Cardenas and Dregalla, 2009). The description extended to further describe and explain sustainable tourism, this addresses six main principles:

- (1) High level of tourist satisfaction
- (2) Make optimal use of environmental resources
- (3) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities
- (4) Provide socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders
- (5) Constant monitoring of impacts
- (6) Informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership (WTO, 2004: 193)

The common theme evident in many of these definitions is the triple bottom line as they seek to minimise ecological and socio cultural impacts while providing economic benefits. Sustainable tourism is tourism that seeks to minimise ecological and socio-cultural impacts while providing economic benefits to local communities and host countries (Mohonk Agreement, 2000).

However a question regularly asked is how sustainable is sustainable tourism? For example Collins (1999), asserts that if an explicit natural capital perspective is adopted, current sustainable tourism development can not be considered as genuinely sustainable. It can be argued that the potential spillover affects from sustainable development, such as what started as a designated sustainable destination, may end up not being one. While managing excess capacity, a certain destination might also deflect demand to another tourist area and thus actually "export unsustainable tourism to neighbouring destinations" (Velikova, 2001:499). All these, and other arguments, lead logically to Collins's (1999:99) assertion that sustainable tourism might not be as sustainable as is currently believed. Furthermore, the level of natural capital deemed adequate for sustainability by current generations may eventually prove insufficient in the future.

As a tourism destination develops, the ability of the environment to resist change may diminish and thus the carrying capacity level needs to be adjusted accordingly. One way to overcome these problems is to plan for some reserve capacity in advance. In Collins' (1999: 99) interpretation of the WCED definition he acknowledges its broadness, obscurity, and the uncertainty it brings in regard to the needs and values of future generations. Tjolle (2008:1) indicates that it is, 'No longer an activity, sustainable tourism is set to become a feature.' Collins

does give the industry consideration and at the same time is warning against extreme reliance on it (Velikova 2001: 499). This is of importance if sustainable tourism is to be realised. Accepted global indicators for certifying global tourism is the logical step which needs to be implemented to ensure tourism is authentically and professionally sustainably managed (WTO, 2002). The demand and perceptions for certification within the tourism sector is explored through this research. This paper will initially identify the stakeholders understanding of sustainable tourism and whether or not they recognise a tourist demand for it.

Stakeholders and Tourism

The concept of stakeholder inclusion and participation is key to sustainable tourism development as identified in the WTO's expanded description (Byrd, Cardenas and Dregalla, 2009). A stakeholder can be defined as,

Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisations objectives (Freeman, 1984: 46).

The development of tourism in a sustainable manner is unattainable without stakeholder participation (Ap, 1992; Gunn, 1994; Andereck and Vogt, 2000; Gursoy, Jurowski and Uysal, 2002; Andriotis, 2005; Byrd, Cardenas and Dregalla 2009). For tourism, stakeholders include government officials, the local business owners, residents and visitors (Long, Perdue and Allen, 1990; Martin 1995; Byrd 1997; Andereck and Vogt, 2000; Pizam, Uriely and Reichel, 2000; Hardy and Beeton, 2001; Byrd, 2007; Byrd, Cardenas and Dregalla, 2009). Furthermore, the environment should be viewed as a major stakeholder in any development (Driscoll and Starik, 2004). In addition to this, Byrd, Cardenas and Dragella (2009) indicate, for the environment to be included as a stakeholder, the other groups must acknowledge and understand its value and interests. They also indicate similar understanding is necessary of the attitudes of the other stakeholders to the environment and its relationship to tourism development. There has been extensive research to investigate the attitudes and perceptions toward tourism and tourism development, however the majority focused on one specific stakeholder group such as residents (Allen, Long, Perdue and Kieselbach, 1988; Perdue, Long and Allen, 1990; Martin, 1995; Akis, Peristianis and Warner, 1996; Brunt and Courtney, 1999; Andereck and Vogt, 2000; Besculides, Lee, and McCormick, 2002; Andereck, Valentine, Knopf and Vogt, 2005; Byrd, Cardenas and Dregalla, 2009), business owners (Clarksen, Getz and Ali-Kinght, 2001), or local government

officials (McGhee, 1991; McGhee, Meng, and Tepanon, 2006). These studies found that differences exist in the attitudes and perceptions of different stakeholder groups toward tourism and tourism development. The purpose of this baseline study is to identify tourism organisations understanding of sustainable tourism as well as the demand for and perceptions of sustainable tourism certification in Ireland. The overall study will aim to investigate if differences exist between stakeholder groups in the area of sustainable tourism certification.

Sustainable Tourism Certification

Authentic certification is one way of ensuring sustainability. Certification is sometimes referred to as a management tool. The tool gives credible recognition to reward the businesses that comply with such criteria. Furthermore, it is used for setting standards that can help promote true sustainable tourism. Honey and Rome (2001: 5) define certification as:

A voluntary procedure that assesses audits and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards. It awards a marketable logo to those that meet or exceed baseline standards.

Theory on certification, propose the instrument will differentiate sustainable from unsustainable tourism organisations (Font, 2009). There had been an explosion in the range of voluntary standards in the past ten years and the number of companies adopting them (Bendell, 2000; Hauffler, 2001; Webb, 2002). As well as the range of programs certifying to sustainability standards (Font, 2002; Honey, 2002; WTO, 2002; Conaghan and Hanrahan, 2009). Furthermore, certification has been recognised as a valuable method to improve industry performance (UNEP, 1998; WTO, 2002) and influencing markets (Buckley, 2002; Font, 2001).

Certification is important as it provides benefits to the stakeholders of the tourism industry (Bien, 2007; Conaghan and Hanrahan, 2009). It has its advantages as a sustainable development tool, it showcases good practice and encourages voluntary improvements (UNEP, 1998; Honey, 2002; Font and Harris, 2004). Subsequent to these perceived advantages, opinions changed through time. This has been argued by, Font (2005) and other academics that many papers based on certification have been descriptive, self-promotional or politicised, and almost always atheoretical (Buckley, 2002; Griffin and De Lacy, 2002; most chapters in Honey, 2002; Parsons and Grant, 2007). Furthermore, (Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter, 2002 and Font, 2005)

certification has its drawbacks, for example not being equitable and efficient. Logically this would have been expected due to the growing number of standards at that time.

There are over one hundred labels for tourism, hospitality and ecotourism, with many of them overlapping in sector and geographical scope (Font and Buckley, 2001; Ecotrans, 2001; Font, 2001). Despite the growing number in certification programs, the coverage is not even ([Font and Buckley, 2001](#); [Bendell and Font, 2004](#) and [WTO, 2002](#)). The abundance of certification programs in existence are predominantly based in Europe, 78% according to ([WTO, 2002](#)). This is a large distribution located in Europe. Furthermore in 2010, five sustainable tourism certification programs exist in Ireland. These are the Green Hospitality Award (GHA), the Green Tourism Business Scheme, The EU Eco-flower, The Greenbox Ecotourism label and Sustainable Travel Internationals, Sustainable Tourism Eco-certification Program (STEP).

Despite the quantity of certification, Bien (2007) indicated few had taken socio-cultural factors into account. Analysts, experts, practitioners, and policymakers are demanding a change in emphasis of certification to embrace social issues (Synergy, 2000; Chester and Crabtree, 2002; Griffin and De lacy, 2002; Honey, 2002; Koeman, Worboys, De Lacy, Scott and Lipman, 2002 and WTO, 2002). However in 2004, Font and Harris brought to light that this was 'putting the cart before the horse.' This was due to low numbers of certified organisations under eco-efficiency standards. They believed moving to 'eco-justice' would require greater commitment and would reduce the appeal of certification as a market-led tool for sustainable development. Having indicated that the number of labels did increase rapidly, they cannot be explained by their effectiveness or efficiency as these are not often measured (UNEP, 2005; Mason, 2007; Toplis, 2007; Font, 2009). In addition, this causes confusion for the organisations to decide which certification to choose. Tjolle (2008) recommends choosing the toughest, and then you know you have the best.

According to Tjolle (2008) there has been a longing for global standards, to distinguish the certification programs that conform to these. In addition, stated by Conroy (2007: 290),

If businesses and consumers are satisfied with any claim to certification, the concept may become diluted to the point of uselessness.

There is a chance of the concept diluting due to the sheer numbers in existence, the consumers and the travel industry are facing confusion (Honey, 2002). However, the new initiative of the Tourism Sustainability Council (TSC) due to launch this year, should help as a tool to monitor and diminish such non-authentic programs that exist. The TSC was merged in 2009 from Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria and the [Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council](#) (Rainforest Alliance, TSC, 2009). The organisation is dedicated to combat the range of labels and minimise the effects of green washing. Furthermore, to mainstream sustainability through the accreditation of certification and to provide minimum standards these programs should aspire to reach (TSC, 2009). The study will assess who should implement certification also the awareness and perceptions.

Methodological Approach

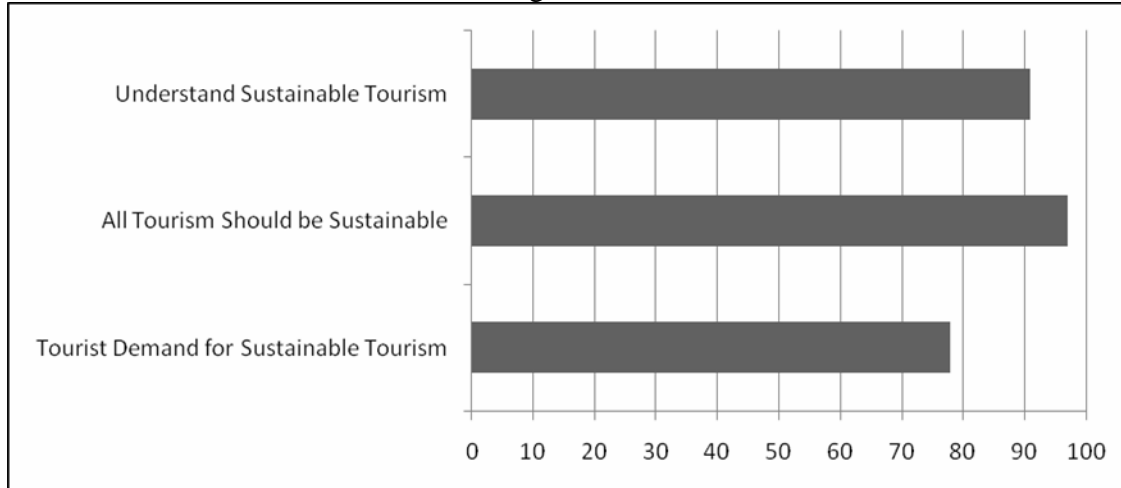
This paper is derived from work in progress on a MA funded through the Fáilte Ireland research scholarship scheme. A comprehensive literature review was conducted on sustainable tourism certification. Suitable questions were designed which were embedded in the literature. The surveys were completed by stakeholders via interview and telephone, utilising a random valid sample. The tourism organisations were represented by the accommodation, transport, attractions, and activities and followed by the tour operator sector. As a result of the research, the initial findings were determined and discussed in context of current literature. The respondents are anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

Understanding and Demand for Sustainable Tourism

One common theme of sustainable tourism is having stakeholder support for tourism. However before tourism organisations support sustainable tourism, they need to have an understanding of what they support. Therefore, it is necessary to assess tourism organisations knowledge of sustainable tourism, (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, and Van Es, 2001; Byrd and Cardenas, 2007). The stakeholders within the tourism organisations surveyed showed a high level (91%) understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism. Furthermore, 97% of these stakeholders thought that ‘all tourism should be sustainable’. In addition, consumers are undeniably one of the major driving forces behind sustainable tourism. Supporting this, Tjolle (2008: 23), ‘Sustainable tourism is a market choice, without the consumer there can be no sustainable tourism business’.

These results indicate 78% of the tourism organisations expressed there is a tourist demand for sustainable tourism.

Table 1.1 Stakeholder Understanding and Demand

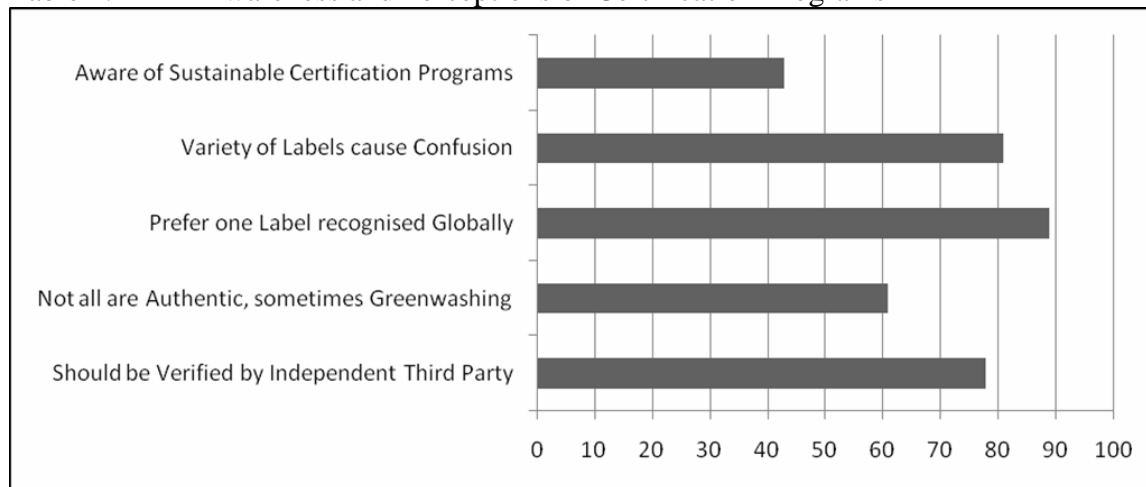


This in progress baseline study has provided data about the tourism organisations perceptions and understanding of sustainable tourism. This research indicates these tourism organisations have a clear understanding of sustainable tourism. This should allow the stakeholders to make sound decisions in relation to the tourism development and management in their organisations. Furthermore the tourism organisations believe not only that all tourism should be sustainable but that tourists actually demand sustainable tourism.

Awareness and Perceptions of Certification Programs

Sustainable tourism certification is increasingly used by the tourism industry in an effort to enhance the credibility of the sector and raise awareness. Factors that hinder the success of certification are little awareness, the stakeholder's confusion due to multiple labels, and questionable credibility (Hansen, 2007). This research indicates that the tourism organisations have a moderate level (43%) awareness of sustainable tourism certification programs. The Irish tourism organisations strongly agree (81%) the variety of labels cause confusion. In addition, 89% of these stakeholders would prefer if there was one label recognised globally. The credibility of certification programs is questionable with 61% perceiving that not all labeled are authentic and perhaps they are green washing. Furthermore the majority (78%) of tourism organisations express the importance of these certification schemes to be verified by an independent third party.

Table 1.2 Awareness and Perceptions of Certification Programs

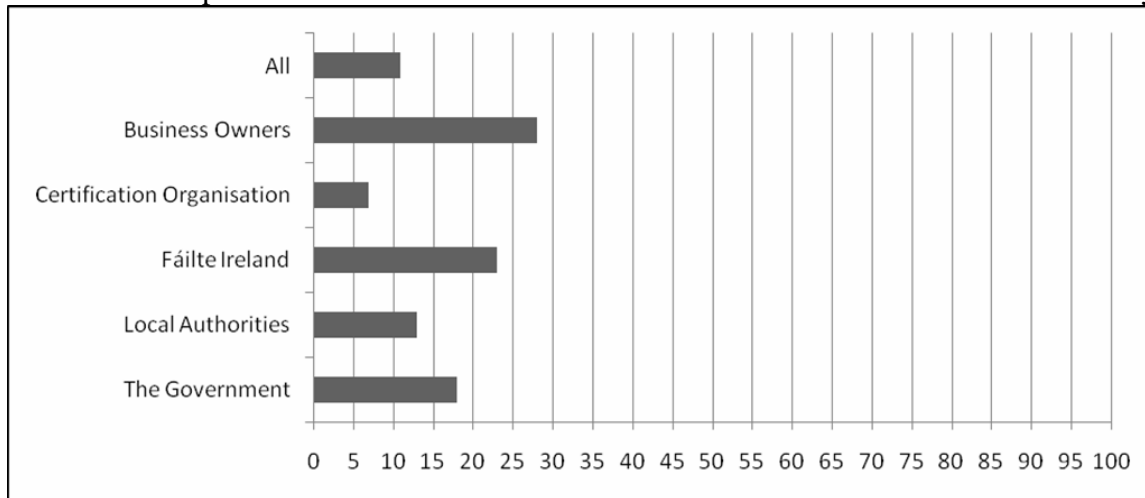


These stakeholders in Ireland have shown a moderate level of awareness and some confusion due to the variety of labels. Font (2010) argues that the current world efforts should be towards reducing the number of labels and consolidating standards, the results clearly show the stakeholders in Ireland want this also. It has become apparent that an international accreditation body may be a key component to ensuring the credibility of certification programs and restoring confidence in the system.

Implementation of Sustainable Tourism Certification

Stakeholders within the tourism industry have an interest in assuring that tourism operations implement high standards and achieve certification (Russillo, Honey and Rome, 2006). The Irish tourism stakeholders show a great deal of disparity in suggesting who should implement sustainable tourism certification programs. The only significant find is tourism organisations are 93% sure that the certification organisations should not be responsible for implementing certification.

Table 1.3 Implementation of Sustainable Tourism Certification in the Tourism Industry

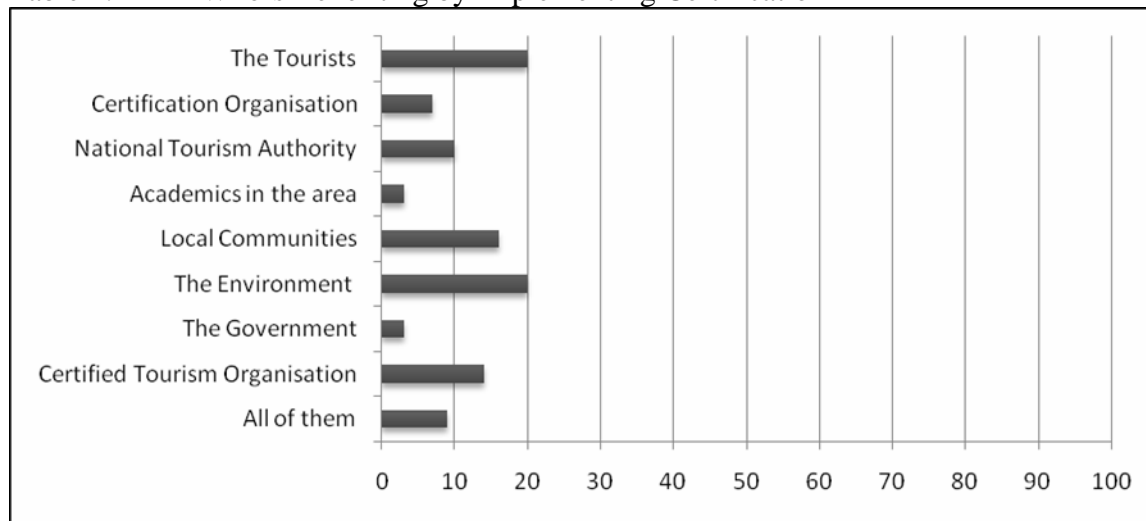


Clearly, Irish tourism organisations are confused on whose role it is to implement certification and should not have to face challenges in certification alone. Partnerships with other sustainable tourism stakeholders using a combination of funding mechanisms will spread the costs and risks of funding sustainable tourism certification for small businesses (Russillo, Honey and Rome, 2006). Nevertheless, it provides advantages to all stakeholders, economic, social and environmental benefits. Fáilte Ireland (2009) identify labeling will become more and more important as the demand for ecotourism products grow.

Who's Benefitting by Implementing Certification

Certification provides benefits to the certified business, to the consumers, governments, the local communities and the local environment. It has its advantages as a sustainable development tool, it showcases good practice and encourages voluntary improvements (UNEP, 1998; Honey, 2002; Font and Harris, 2004). Table 1.4 depicts the tourism organisations opinion on who is benefitting by applying certification. With several stakeholders to choose from, those more prominent to be benefitting were the tourists (20%), the environment (19%), followed by the local communities (15%). This table indicates all the stakeholders benefit as recognised by the tourism organisations in Ireland.

Table 1.4 Who's Benefiting by Implementing Certification



This research has assessed the data regarding the tourism organisations perceptions on whose interests are served from implementing certification. These findings indicate that Irish tourism organisations have good understanding, through acknowledgement that all stakeholders benefit which is clearly reflected in the theory.

Conclusion

This study contributes to sustainable tourism research in Ireland. The awareness of sustainable tourism and certification programs is investigated amongst the stakeholders. The understanding of sustainable tourism was relatively high within the tourism organisations. In addition, they agree all tourism should be sustainable and felt there is a tourist demand.

Certification can be used as a tool for sustainable tourism management. These certification programs which certify sustainable tourism standards are rapidly growing worldwide and in Ireland. It is possible that certification may change in function and effect from awarding excellence to becoming *de facto* requirements to trade (Bendell and Font, 2004: 139). Certification can be effective depending on the awareness, clarity and credibility (Hansen, 2007). This study highlighted moderate awareness of certification as well as high level of confusion amongst the stakeholders due to the variety of labels. The results had shown the need for certification to be verified by an independent third party. An international accreditation body would be a key component to ensure the credibility of certification programs and restoring

confidence in the system. The findings indicated stakeholder's preference to have one label recognised globally. From this perspective, the application of the TSC may be a promising tool to address the high fragmentation and proliferation of labels. Furthermore, such a global accreditation body could represent as a useful tool for stakeholders and their decision making in choosing which certification for their organisation. In addition, addressing the perceived lack of authenticity.

Confusion exists as to whose role it is to implement certification within the industry. However, it is least expected that the certification organisations should be responsible for the implementation. Nevertheless, this sustainable development tool has advantages for all stakeholders of the industry and are clearly reflected in the theory. The Irish tourism organisations recognise who benefits from the implementation of certification. Perhaps through ongoing research and awareness of sustainable tourism certification amongst stakeholders of the industry, Ireland could become a sustainable tourism destination.

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