

## **A Tool for Improving the Sustainability of Tourism Industries**

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### **Introduction**

The tourism industry's interest in sustainable management has increased in exponential proportions over the past year. Substantial amounts of space in industry journals are devoted to issues such as sustainability, energy management, green building design, waste reduction, water saving practices and other topics related to social responsibility (International Tourism Partnership, 2007). CEO's of major corporations have identified sustainable management practices as critical to the success of their business (examiner.com, 2008). Top management focus on sustainability may be partially driven by consumer demand. A recent survey of the members of Travelocity revealed that 80% of the respondents were willing to spend more on eco-friendly destinations or businesses (Reuters, 2008).

Managers anxious to meet consumer expectations are actively seeking knowledge on how to *green* their business (The term *green* is being used here to incorporate all aspects of sustainability and corporate social responsibility). They want to know what actions they can take. There is a plethora of information available. However, most non corporate properties do not have the resources to research and identify actions they can take. Managers lack a tool they can use to help them readily assess their position and select strategies to improve their performance. The purpose of this research is to synthesize the many resources available for tourism related businesses and develop a list of practical actions businesses can take to manage more sustainably.

### **Method**

A list of web sites that contain recommended actions for *greening* tourism operations was compiled from an Internet search of sustainable hospitality management. Sources were located both individually and from compiled lists. For example, many resources came from a list published by the College of Engineering at Purdue University titled "Environmentally Sound Hotel Management, Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism." The list contains links to international and domestic organizations, institutions, universities and journals that focus on 'green' issues related to hospitality and tourism that were used as sources for this research (College of Engineering, n.d.). Each source was analyzed for categories and content. A set of categories was developed and a

list of *green* actions was created for each category based on the content of the sources. Each item mentioned was recorded on an EXCEL worksheet. When an item was repeated, a tally was kept of the number of times that item was mentioned. After a comprehensive list was generated, similar action items were combined to simplify the list. For example, three methods of recycling food waste were combined into one action item. Combined items included the ideas in the formerly separate items so that content would not be lost. The total number of times an item was mentioned by all resources was calculated to determine which action items were most commonly mentioned.

## **Findings**

Data was collected from web sites published by federal, state and local governments, industry organizations, non-governmental organizations, certifying organizations and consultant reports for a variety of grant projects. Other sources were found in the course of long term research related to sustainable tourism development. Some sources are specific to one industry segment while others are more general. For example the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance publishes a fact sheet for waste reduction for restaurants while the focus of Audubon International's sustainable management program spans industry segments and resource management areas. Fact sheets are published in 8 categories: wildlife, water, eco-efficiency, environmental management, golf and the environment, community/sustainability, outreach and education. Within a factsheet performance indicators are divided into four categories: wildlife and habitat management, energy efficiency, waste management, outreach and education (Audubon International, 2007; Bronski, 2007; NCDENR, 1999).

Also significantly different are the formats used. For example, CERES' Best Practice Survey is designed as a survey with six categories and a summary score sheet where points are scored for each positive answer. It asks respondents to evaluate their operation with questions like:

Are there individuals with authority and resources taking responsibility for environmental management? Circle all that apply: active Green Team; regular eco-meetings with reporting; eco-initiatives budget; employee eco-suggestion opportunities.

Similarly, the Good Earthkeeping program of the American Hotel and Lodging Association (2008) makes a checklist for improved energy performance available. Other checklists have a broader focus. The lodging chapter in *Greening Your Ski Area* provides a checklist with the following

categories – institutional, guest rooms (energy efficiency, resource efficiency and water efficiency), housekeeping (energy efficiency, hazardous chemical use, and resource efficiency), laundry (energy, water and resource efficiency) and maintenance (Sustainable Slopes, 2008).

The checklist format was used by a small portion of the sustainable management. Narratives of a variety of length were more common. They ranged from fact sheets and lists aimed at industry professionals seeking a quick reference tool to complete manuals with a comprehensive focus. For example, the *Green Plan for the Food Service Industry* offers fact sheets that list actions related to oil and grease, food waste and solid waste (NCDENR, 1999). In contrast Green Seal's *Greening Your Property* is a 91 page document with 14 chapters and numerous checklists (Ton, Lin, Radin & Gray, 1996). Sustainable Slopes published a similarly comprehensive document related to ski resorts and destinations (Dorsey, 2002). On the other hand, the Green Hotels Association (2008) uses case studies to inform readers of possible actions. Examples include: replace mowed landscape by ground cover; use reusable chips for car parking and coat checking instead of paper tickets; and recycle stained tablecloths by making them into napkins, chef's aprons and neckties.

## **Results**

Action items were placed in one of 11 categories: Policy & Framework, Waste Reduction, Energy Efficiency, Water Conservation, Purchasing, Employee Involvement, Community Service, Destination Protection, Air Quality, Landscaping and Hazardous Waste Management. Of the ten most frequently mentioned actions, 50% were in the waste reduction category. More than three – fourths (76%) of the publications reviewed encouraged the use of refillable containers such as refillable condiment bottles and amenity dispensers. Recycling of food waste, glass, plastic, cardboard, paper and the purchase of recycled products was mentioned by more than half of the resources examined (former 53%, latter 63%). Four of the top ten action items were in the purchasing category. The purchase of energy efficient lighting ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the number of times mentioned. Included in the recommendations was the purchase of compact fluorescents (CFL), self-luminous, electroluminescent, tungsten light strips, LEDs, and halogen lamps. Almost equally frequently mentioned were three other purchasing actions: working with or selecting vendors who offer products with less packaging, products made with recycled materials and/or refillable packaging. The choice of recycled products was also mentioned by more than half (53%) of the sources. In 10<sup>th</sup> position was the use of low flow faucets.

## **Implications**

The goal of this research is to provide hospitality and tourism managers with a comprehensive list of actions that can be taken to become more sustainable. The number of times an action item is mentioned is not as important as the number of actions from which a property can choose to become more sustainable. Becoming *green* is a process. Few properties have the financial resources to engage fully in resource saving and socially conscious management. The *Green Check* developed in this research will give managers a quick reference list from which to choose actions that are most feasible and most beneficial to their property.

*Green Check* is also useful for certifying organizations. A version of the checklist will be used by the Institute of Ecotourism to identify *green* businesses for their Green Concierge program. This version has a separate list for each of the following: lodging managers, tour operators, managers of activities and attractions, food service managers, transport managers and event managers. The Green Concierge program is a kiosk that visitors can use to find local sustainable tourism activities in the aforementioned categories.

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