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Guiding practices for implementing an eco-certification program: A case study of Ecotourism Australia

Certification has been one way in which tourism organizations demonstrate their responsibility toward the environment and local communities where their businesses are located. The purpose of this paper is to highlight guiding practices that can lead to successful implementation of a certification program. This research gleaned insight from leaders who have been intimately involved in one of the more well-known certification organizations, Ecotourism Australia Limited (EA). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 'Green Industry Leaders' (GILs), professionals that have been involved with the development, refinement, and implementation of the eco-certification programs overseen by EA. Findings are organized as guiding practices aimed towards organizations seeking to develop a certification program. Guiding practices include demonstrating the benefits of certification, creative incentivizing, simplifying the implementation process, have stakeholders support maintaining a common voice for the industry, and seek a consistent approach by government when considering tourism development funding and investment is encouraged.

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Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private businesses have developed a myriad of eco-, sustainable, and green certifications (henceforth, eco-certification) for tourism organizations and businesses that are intended to provide "documented assurance that a product, service, or organization complies with a given standard" (Font, Sanabria & Skinner, 2003, p. 213), that hold organizations to a certain environmental and/or socio-cultural standard. On an international level, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), Green Globe International, the Certification for Sustainable Tourism of Costa Rica (CST), International Organization of Standardization (ISO), Sustainable Tourism Eco-Certification Program (STEP), Audubon International, and Earth Check, are known widely. Each of these certification programs has created a set of standards that may include aspects such as climate mitigation, carbon offsetting, use of eco-friendly products and chemicals, as well as a variety of requirements that may demand the improvement or maintenance of environmental, social, and economic outcomes. This paper focuses on Ecotourism Australia (EA), an eco-certification agency based in Brisbane, Australia, that provides certification to nearly 500 tourism-related operations around the country and has been supporting these organizations and businesses through national and international partnerships for over 20 years.

Organizations like EA have been able to fill the gap of government leadership in the area of sustainability by providing a mechanism for voluntary involvement through certification programs for those organizations wanting to set higher standards for positive environmental behavior for themselves. However, the success of certification programs has been limited; for example, certification programs, which typically include some type of 'eco-logo/label', or environmental brand image, have flooded the tourism markets, making consumer recognition and comprehension of the logo meaning difficult to interpret (Graci & Dodds, 2015; Haaland & Aas, 2010; Harris, 2007). Relatedly, certification programs vary in

the categories, types, and levels of criteria included in the certification process, leading to confusion in the interpretation of the meaningfulness of certifications. Similarly, issues of 'greenwashing,' which is the exaggeration of positive environmental behavior or outright false claims about conservation efforts on the part of the business as a marketing strategy, have occurred (Bowen & Clarke, 2009; LePree, 2008; Dodds & Joppe, 2005; Font et al., 2003; Buckley, 2002).

Moreover, the voluntary nature of the programs may lead to issues of effectiveness, and overall issues of trust and credibility among the proliferation of certification programs to choose from (Graci & Dodds, 2015; Rattan, 2015; UNWTO, 2005). Hence, challenges remain for organizations choosing to adopt an eco-certification program, and further, evidence suggests that these certifications may also be costly and without substantial financial benefits and environmental improvements (Blackman, Naranjo, Robalino, Alpízar, & Rivera, 2014; Blanco, Rey-Maquieria & Lozano, 2009), or may have a limited effect on tourist demand (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016). Conversely, a wealth of research has suggested that eco-certifications can reduce environmental and social constraints on businesses by helping them improve their practices, reduce operating costs, create a competitive advantage, meet legislative goals and compliance, and increase the environmental awareness of guests (Graci & Dodds, 2015; Font et al., 2003). Likewise, they can serve to improve the image of a tourism business or organization through marketing a branded eco-certification (Klein & Dodds, 2018; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Harris, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight guiding practices for successful development and implementation of an eco-certification program in tourism through the perspective of EA's *Green Industry Leaders* (GILs)—formally known as *Green Travel Leaders*. GILs provide respected insight to EA, as they are tourism operators and/or protected area managers that hold more than 10 years of eco-certification experience. Paired with literature, their

perspective provides practical insight from tourism leaders who have been involved in the development, refinement, and implementation of eco-certification programs. Thus, this paper fills a research gap by highlighting both relevance and utility of practices, policies, and philosophical approaches that may guide certification programs. Though the context from which this data emerges is specific to Australia, the guiding practices that are subsequently offered can be applied more widely to various contexts.

Literature Review

In 2003, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) stated that certifications systems in tourism, "can bring benefits to society, the environment, governments, private companies and consumers as well" (p. 2-4). Principally, tourism literature on eco-certification has focused on these benefits of eco-certification that can be organized by beneficiaries including operators/ businesses, consumer, and to society and the environment at large (Table 1).

Table 1.		
Benefits of Certification		
Benefits to Operator/Businesses		
	Improves marketability, reputation	Esparon, Gyuris & Stoeckl, 2014; LePree, 2008; Harris, 2007; Dodds & Joppe 2005
	Improves sustainability across tourism sector	Buckley, 2012; Dodds & Joppe, 2005
	Cost savings	Bien, 2007; Sasidharan, Sirakaya, & Kerstetter, 2002
	Improves operational efficiency of the business	Graci & Dodds, 2015; Bien, 2007
	Peer recognition among operators or competitive advantage	Dodds & Joppe, 2005
	Service price premiums	Blackman et al., 2014; Rivera & deLeon, 2005

	Organizational voting rights within certifying body	Font et al., 2003
	Promotional highlights in business brochures, websites, etc.	Dodds & Joppe 2005; Sasidharan et al., 2002
Consumer focus		
	Educates travellers about personal destination impacts	Graci & Dodds, 2015
	Influences consumer purchasing decisions	Jarvis et al., 2010; Goodwin & Francis, 2003
Social/ Environmental focus		
	Minimizes/reduces negative environmental impacts or resource use (water/energy)/ improves environmental performance (waste management)	Blackman et al., 2014; Russillo et al., 2008; Bien, 2007; Font et al., 2003
	Reduces negative social impacts	Jarvis et al., 2010; Font et al., 2003
	Meets/surpasses environmental policy legislation	Dodds & Joppe, 2005
	Promotes local/community employment	LePree, 2008; UNWTO, 2003

Of interest to this research are the number of scholars who have discussed certification development guidelines and effective implementation of these programs (e.g., Graci & Dodds, 2015; Bien, 2007; World Bank 2005). Graci and Dodds (2015) highlight a number of recommendations for organizations to enlist in order to maintain the success and expansion of certification ranging from preferential treatment by government to establishing agreement on standards internationally.

Specifically, EA which created one of the first ecotourism certification programs (i.e., Australian EcoCertification Program, formally known as the National Ecotourism Accreditation Program or NEAP), has continuously demonstrated its prominence as a guiding

model for other certification programs through its successes (see Thwaites, 2007; Chester & Crabtree, 2002).

Ecotourism Australia

EA was established in 1991, one year before 182 heads of state endorsed Agenda 21 at the United Nations Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. Originally named the *Ecotourism Association of the Indo Pacific Region*, and after changing names for the third time, it became NEAP in 1996. From conception, a diverse group of stakeholders (e.g. protected area managers (PAMs), NGOs, government affiliates, conservation organizations) supported the organization, in which the government provided AU$10 million for the initiation of NEAP as part of the Department of Tourism's strategy to encourage ecologically sustainable tourism development (Chester & Crabtree, 2002). During the 2002 International Year of Ecotourism, the organization reached its current name as Ecotourism Australia Ltd. ("A Brief history of Ecotourism Australia," 2015, para. 1).

EA was established to act in several capacities, relative to the Australian tourism industry and its surrounding geographical region. EA was also developed to promote the "creation of partnerships, developing and encouraging quality ecotourism experiences and providing the industry with a clear voice," ("A Brief history of Ecotourism Australia" 2015, para. 2) which has now been the goal for over 20 years. It established the Global Eco Conference, which is the longest-running ecotourism conference in the world, celebrating 25 years in 2017. Additionally, EA also developed a program to recognize the longevity of its successful tour operators that have made long-term commitments (i.e., 10+ years) to sustainable tourism through their Green Travel Leader program. However, most notably is EA's creation of three operator certification programs: ECO, ROC (Respecting Our Culture); and CA (Climate Action) and one person-level certification, ECO Guide.

EA Certifications

Two of EA's three operator certifications offer different levels of achievement. Distinct from the others, *EcoGuide* solely certifies an individual, endorsing their communication skills, industry-related knowledge, ability to access and manage safety and risks, and develop and provide tours. The first of the operator focused programs established was ECO Certification, replacing NEAP in 2003. This certification is for businesses and tour operators where a minimum of 50% of the tourism product is nature-based (ECO and Respecting Our Culture Certification Essentials, 2016). The three levels of achievement, in order of increasing standards, include Nature Tourism, Ecotourism, and Advanced Ecotourism.

ROC was established in 2008, as the second program, focusing on tourism products that respectfully highlight Indigenous culture and heritage of Indigenous communities (ECO and Respecting Our Culture Certification Essentials, 2016). This certification was originally designed by Aboriginal Tourism Australia and is administered by EA. Additionally, Climate Action (CA) certification is offered to any type of tourism operator including restaurants, transport, hotels, attractions, etc. and is achievable at three levels—Climate Action Business (adopted emission reduction strategies, but not measuring carbon footprint), Climate Action Innovator (adopted emission reduction strategies and measuring carbon footprint), and Climate Action Leader (advanced level of measuring and reducing footprint using a credible system).

While both ECO and ROC Certifications require a business, marketing, operations, and environmental plan, the Advanced Ecotourism level requires an additional interpretation and climate change action plan. All areas of CA certification criterion include specifications on business details, business relationships/communications, business operations, climate

change risk assessment and adaptation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and innovative

best practice.

Methods

This qualitative study was completed during spring 2015. Data were collected through

semi-structured interviews with GILs who were identified by EA management and through

field observations. Unlike other operators certified by EA, these individuals have been

certified as an operator for at least 10 years and had additional industry experience prior to

joining EA. These potential participants were identified due to their extensive field

knowledge based on personal time working in the industry and for their experience on both

sides of the issue – as businesses seeking eco-certification and involvement with the

organization which developed and implements the eco-certification program. Respondents'

industry experience spanned five Australian territories and collectively over 130 years of

tourism-related expertise (Table 2).

Table 2.

Ecotourism Australia Industry Leader Descriptors

Green Industry Leader	Position	Gender	Years in industry	Major Region(s) of influence in AUS
GIL A	Tourism Operator Director	Male	22	QLD
GIL B	Tourism Operator Director	Female	22	QLD
GIL C	Protected Area Manager/ EA BM	Male	30	WA
GIL D	EA Board Member	Male	30	NSW, NT, QLD
GIL E	EA Board Member	Male	30	ACT, QLD, WA

Potential participants were emailed to request participation and schedule

interviews for the study. Due to time and geographical limitations, two respondents

provided written responses via email, two were completed over video call, while the

remaining respondent completed the interview in-person. In-person and phone

interviews were audio recorded, lasting 20-30 minutes. The interviews included seven

core questions with additional probing questions to clarify and expand responses, regardless of response format. Questions included asking, how policy affects green tourism development initiatives in Australia, political challenges for green tourism development broadly, organizational barriers to adopting an eco-certification program, recommendations for overcoming these challenges, and other considerations for the development of certification programs in other contexts. Responses not fully resolved during the interview process were clarified through member checking after all interviews were complete; all respondents were emailed a transcript of their interview.

Following transcription of the video call and in-person interviews, data were thematically analyzed by hand by the research team. An initial round of inductive open coding was conducted independently, then jointly discussed to identify agreement and consensus, to establish the reliability of the emergent themes. After initial open codes were discussed with emerging themes in mind, the research team conducted a second round of analysis to confirm fit of the themes. Thus, this coding process segmented data into simpler, general categories (i.e., themes; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002). These were then used to inform the subsequent list of guiding practices.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, field observations were also collected over a four-month period where a member of the research team spent time working with EA in daily operations as part of an internship program. Working directly with EA's Certification Manager, the researcher had many informal discussions about the benefits of certification programs, challenges the certifying body faced, and ways to improve the program. This experience and field observations stimulated ideas around this research and informed the

questions that were included in the semi-structured interviews and also helped to triangulate the data.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the data and have been organized around guiding practices for organizations to consider when developing certification programs for eco/sustainable tourism development. These guiding practices will help overcome challenges and recommend employable strategies for developing a successful eco-certification program.

1. **Demonstrate Value and Benefits**

Demonstrating the economic value of implementing a certification to a tourism operator/business is one of the greatest challenges, and opportunities, for certifying organizations. Many operators question whether certification provides a return on investment and financial constraints are often cited as one of the largest barriers to participation (Blackman et al., 2014). GILs impress that the benefits strongly outweigh the expenditures when considering the long-term economic gains. GIL C commented on how to make an operator eco-friendlier by stating,

> "… being sustainable or ecofriendly is actually a good business practice
> because it could demonstrate where you can reduce your costs… People
> usually associate being ecofriendly or being sustainable as costing more when
> actually it doesn't. It can actually cost you less if you do it properly" (GIL C).

Hence, certification can be a useful business development tool. Businesses can learn more about improving their operation by implementing a certification; for example, both of EA's ECO and ROC certifications require detailed business, marketing, operations, environmental, and interpretation plans to achieve approval. In addition to the research that has noted the benefits to operators/ businesses, consumers, and the public at large (e.g., social and

environmental gains) by participating in eco-certification (see Table 1), several studies also offer insight on consumer preferences for companies with ethical environmental and social commitments (Font, Walmsley, Cogotti, & Haeusler, 2012; Lacher, Oh & Norman, 2012; Chafe, 2007; Goodwin & Francis, 2003). Using similar evidence to motivate a business' adoption of an eco-certification is imperative. Build marketing and promotional literature around this information to encourage businesses' evidence-based decision-making.

2. Incentivize Participation

GILs encouraged certification agencies to use incentives as a means for increasing and maintaining participation in the program. Some incentives identified included discounts (e.g., tourism association fees, conference registration), preferential listings, and marketing advantages with logo use/ recognition. GIL E stated "… governments respect these types of programs… operators who are certified get treated better… Some tourism organizations provide higher rankings on their website listings…," which could potentially have financial impacts on their business.

Much of Australia's tourism is conducted in natural protected areas, requiring licenses to operate. Although licensure lengths vary by Australian territories (e.g., Queensland, Tasmania, etc.), providing extended licenses for certified operators and businesses has been successful, as they are mandatory for operation within the government's National Park systems and protected areas. Essentially, certification with EA extends the intervals between licensure renewals and minimizes costs with fewer licenses needed over time. While this incentive was created in partnership with PAM agencies and federal government, similar enticements can be created in other contexts. Numerous studies have emphasized the role of incentives in certification participation including price premiums (Blackman et al., 2014) and also marketability of products or services (Rivera & deLeon, 2005).

3. Work with Small Businesses

For small businesses, the economic risk may seem high when committing to a certification program. GIL C noted that, "… there are lots of benefits [to certification] but sometimes they're not so apparent to a small, family-oriented business who's struggling [daily] to run their business." Opportunistically, certifying bodies can find ways to better assist businesses through the process. GIL C also added, "small businesses are too busy doing business to worry about the future of their business… but actually [certification] helped them with their business planning." Indeed, limited resources and maintaining 'business-as-usual' make innovation difficult. Agencies must be creative in helping businesses overcome this challenge; for example, having representatives visit businesses to talk more in-depth about the program, or provide online webinars are ways to save time. Likewise, certification affordability for smaller firms can be achieved through tiered pricing or scaled fee systems (Haaland & Aas, 2010).

4. Make the program affordable, but economically viable

Not only is it important to be as affordable as possible, there must be enough buy-in of businesses to keep the operation financially sustainable. GIL E stated that "… trying to work out a system that's financially stable and sustainable that has the requirements of GSTC and UNWTO is extraordinarily difficult." To that end, finding the balance between affordability and economic viability means finding the threshold between price setting (i.e., fee structure) and size of the customer base (i.e., economies of scale). For example, EA is a "self-funded program where administration, assessment, and auditing costs are funded by the application and annual fees," and those fees are differentially set based on each business' gross annual income (Haaland & Aas, 2010, p.379). Simply, the cost of auditing and evaluating a business that joins is an important operational cost to consider so not to lose credibility of the certification program (Thwaites, 2007; Font, 2002). GIL A stressed this

point noting that, "greater participation is not necessarily better if it comes at the expense of the accreditation scheme's integrity".

5. Keep it Simple

With pre-existing daily operation challenges, the goals of certification are not to inundate businesses with unnecessary tasks, but to instead help them focus on the outcomes of sustainable and environmental practices. GIL D encouraged the idea of "KIS," or, "Keep it Simple," with regard to certification implementation. Complicating the system is easy… however, the easier the process is to understand, the likelier you are to have buy-in from potential businesses. GIL B added that "[auditing] questionnaires are becoming more onerous and the criteria seem to be shallow and to some extent irrelevant." They recommend reviewing the assessment guidelines continuously to ensure it still serves the purpose of promoting ecotourism and is not superficial in scope. Moreover, those guidelines should be clear and easily understood (UNWTO, 2003).

6. Play up the Awards

In 2015, a third of all 2014 Quantas Australian Tourism Award winners held an ECO Certification with EA (www.ecotourism.org.au/news/a-third-of-all-2014-qantas-australian-tourism-award-winners-are-eco-certified/), displaying its ability to improve operators' noticeability as sustainable and eco-friendly businesses. These awards build trustworthiness and credibility of the purpose and effectiveness of your program. Certification agencies should seek out and apply for awards from other sustainable, eco-/ green certifying organizations in order to increase their credibility and visibility (e.g., TripAdvisor's Green Leaders). Likewise, consider implementing awards for your participating organizations to recognize internal success stories. Recognizing success is excellent for public relations opportunities. GIL E reiterated this by saying, "at the Tourism Awards on Friday, all the

finalists in ecotourism category have our certification… so, if you want to position yourself [or] develop your product, it's a really good thing."

7. The Advantages of Non-Governmental Status

Operating as a transparent NGO, adds value to certification, increasing trust in the certifying body. Even consumers recognize this as GIL E added, "visitors are becoming much more discerning now and they don't trust governments, they don't trust big companies…" Although relationships with the government may improve political climate awareness impacting the industry, a distinct separation between the certifying body and government can encourage increased levels of trust. Rim, Yang and Lee (2016) report that surveys reflect a developing consumer interest in socially related issues and nonprofits where 78% of Americans find relationships between businesses and nonprofits more reliable. To support merit and growth, certification agencies should attempt to create trusting relationships with its stakeholders.

8. A Unified Voice for Sustainability

In consensus, GILs suggested that one of tourism's greatest challenges in Australia has been creating unified cooperation and a singular voice for the industry. GIL E stated, "[w]e get caught down in just the crap at the bottom instead of getting this big picture and presenting ourselves as a single industry". GIL D noted Australia's tourism being fragmented and made up of small niche tourism businesses. With a limited overarching body setting standards, challenging the broader movement towards sustainability, it is easy for the industry to be pulled in 'paths of least resistance' (traditionally leading to unplanned, uncontrolled development). Certification agencies should position themselves to play an important role in defining these standards for their territory, state or country, and setting the precedent for helping businesses achieve them.

9. Marketing and Information Dissemination

Disseminating information is salient for a certification program's success. GIL C recommended that beyond marketing, providing supportive resources like case studies from seasoned operators that have undergone the process of implementing certification is one way to help increase participation in (and understanding of) the process. Operators who can attest their achievements with and challenges related to the certification process are an agency's best resource. Their testimonies can be shared through formal or informal approaches. Formal operator testimonies can be highlighted on the agency's website or social media outlets.

Building relationships and networking with stakeholders is instrumental in the success of certification programs. Continuous marketing and promotion of the program, particularly through word of mouth among participating and potential businesses, is one of the most important responsibilities of the agency. Participating businesses are counting on the program to stay informed so their investment in the certification remains relevant. Black and Crabtree (2007) emphasize that failure to market a certification efficiently is a major downfall. As such, market to potential businesses that certification and their involvement with your program is an opportunity to network with other businesses which share relative passions for greening their organization. Consider cultivating online and in-person forums, socials, and/or avenues to facilitate networking across participating businesses (another possible incentive to market for participation). Encourage relationships with stakeholder groups that may benefit the participating businesses (PAMs, government officials, etc.). Additionally, disseminating the results of program evaluations, and more broadly, overall newsworthy eco- and sustainable tourism achievements may become another responsibility.

10. Evaluation and Feedback

Certification agencies should offer mechanisms for current and previous certified operators to provide honest feedback and evaluation of the process. Making changes based on

these recommendations, and communicating them to current and potential businesses will reflect the transparency of a certifier's business operation. To promote operators' sharing of information about their experiences, GILs suggested that agencies should encourage honest feedback about their ability to guide operators through the process of certification and the relationship between operators and certifiers. Evaluations can be achieved through anonymous surveys on an annual basis as well as post-certification follow-up assessments of the certifier. Evaluation may also be enforced as a form of accreditation, as Font and Harris (2004) state that "the certification body could also be subject to a procedure of accreditation, guaranteeing the process" (p.987). Maintain similar avenues to promote rapport and honest feedback for the agency.

11. Consistent Messaging from all faces of the Organization

Frontline personnel are the leading advocates to the importance of eco-certification. All members of the certification agency must be familiar with the program's intricacies, and be able to articulate the benefits of joining. One efficient way this can be achieved is by recruiting quality staff that are properly trained and instilled with the mindset of taking ownership of themselves and the business they represent. Likewise, creating continuing educational opportunities for staff can be a way to keep them informed on the certificate program; for instance, hosting training lunches or bi-monthly email newsletters that highlight program successes or changes to the process. GIL D recommended that this may reduce staff turnover while increasing retention rates.

12. Work through the Supply Chain and other Influencers

Supply chains can greatly influence business decisions and purchasing power. Businesses seeking certification should approach the influencers, supply chain members, or other persons that impact business management practices, to gain their support in environmental efforts which could lead to discounts or other cost-savings. A certification

program may help establish connections between companies and businesses that have opted into an eco-certification program. Importantly, a sustainable supply chain in tourism can be one of the most effective ways to create considerable environmental (and social) benefits with the ripple effect of businesses choosing to support pro-environmental behaviors (Font, Tapper, Schwartz, & Kornilaki, 2008). It is also helpful "to get the people with influence seeing sustainability as an important thing," GIL E stated, as it is a significant part of the business. Power and influence can occur both ways including a bottom-up approach that is locally driven. GIL E reiterated this by summarizing that Australia isn't viewed as a leader in ecotourism because of the government, it's the operators that make it happen.

13. Work with, not against, your Government

Knowledge of the current political climate is necessary when attempting to implement a certification program. For example, Australia's Commonwealth government may see regulations shift drastically with changes in dominant political parties. Consequently, over the course of an election, federal and local level policies may impact sustainable tourism development, that directly affects the ability to implement and sustain a certification program. As a supporting tourism organization, agencies must deal with a continuum of perspectives from preservationists to developers:

> "You've got the entire political spectrum to deal with… the people that think
> that tourism development should just not happen, especially in protected areas,
> and at the other end of the spectrum are the people who will develop at all
> costs…." (GIL D).

'Playing politics' is necessary to further an agenda of sustainable development and earn the support of important stakeholder groups (e.g., tourism businesses, PAMs, government officials). Make the government a partner in your mission to increase participation; "I think it's having a really good conversation with government… if government gets out of the way

of business, business would be a lot better… it's always a balance" (GIL C). When various organizations play a supporting role in setting standards for their industry, it allows the government to conserve resources while also appearing not to overreach (a win-win for them). In addition, inter-and intra-cooperation amongst private sector businesses, NGOs, Indigenous communities, environmental organizations, and other municipal structures aids to combat climate-change challenges (Haque & Islam, 2015; Andrade & Oliveira, 2015) which also impacts the tourism industry. While legislation is not always within your control, ensure that policymakers know your agenda and how supporting your program is mutually beneficial.

14. Reinforcing Nature and Nurture

Maintaining operators' support over time requires remaining steadfast to the goals of the certification agency and seeking improvement of standards. Certification helps protect nature—a key resource to the success of tourism in many places. For example, Australia has popular national attractions such as the Great Barrier Reef, Ayers Rock, Fraser Island, the Blue Mountains and Daintree National Forest, where each holds some level of certification with EA. Likewise, GIL A reminds us of the need to include the "well-being of local people," in the conceptualization of ecotourism and cites that *The International Ecotourism Society* and the 2001 Chutes Montmorency Declaration from the World Ecotourism Summit, both include this notion in their definitions. While it may not be the expectation that certified businesses 'keep up with the literature,' connecting theory to praxis should be a goal of a certification agency. That is, as the conceptualization of ecotourism is refined, or sustainable/ environmental practices are examined through research, agencies should help bridge this information to businesses on the ground. With improved understanding of 'the why' (i.e., why is environmental, sustainable practice important), then the easier it is to create supportive buy-in for certification standards. Moreover, it helps agencies progress towards

their mission, while helping avoid greenwashing or "pseudo-environmentalism," as GIL B suggests. Additionally, some operators are still challenged in recognizing this relationship, demonstrating a need for environmental education (informed by research). GIL C said,

> "…a lot of Western Australia's tourism product is based on nature-based tourism… So, operators and the tourism industry are beginning to understand that climate change is a real issue for them and could be a threat to them in the future."

Sasidharan et al. (2002) highlight that tourism industry professionals are recognizing the environment's role as a 'vital resource' which is increasing the use of environmental measurements to reduce negative impacts caused by tourism development. GILs agree that educating tourists on the differences between what is or isn't ecotourism and green tourism development is necessary and may minimize greenwashing.

Educating operators and tourists can create a cycle of accountability where tourists know what to expect from certified operators and the operators hold neighboring operators to the same standards they are responsible for adhering. GIL C implied that eco-/tourists who are aware of environmental concerns want to retain the services of operators that are 'doing the right thing' and are certified. In a study by Esparon et al., (2014) researchers found that "customers of ECO certified operators tend to be more satisfied than their non-ECO certified counterparts," which contributes positively to customer satisfaction for certified operators (p.163). Environmental education should also facilitate a shift from 'red-tape' to 'green-tape' so businesses recognize that protecting the environment actually protects the business of nature and sustainability-based operators.

Implications and Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to highlight guiding practices that could lead to the successful development and implementation of a certification program. Although the process of implementing an eco-certification is not without its challenges, it is achievable with the

right set of tools and resources. These findings reflect a need for certification programs and their developers to be more flexible, aware, and innovative. While guidelines to creating an eco-certification may be beneficial, developers must be flexible and willing to offer a product that can cater to diverse markets, not only those who can afford certification (a concern raised by Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016). Literature has highlighted numerous benefits to eco-certification (e.g., Graci & Dodds, 2015), but developers must be innovative in the way they operationalize and market those benefits to operators, helping them capture the marketing value of such a certification.

Likewise, if small businesses, those that make up the majority of tourism operators, cannot afford to be certified, then the potential for pro-environmental, socio-cultural and economic outcomes rests heavily on larger businesses that are often more constrained by organizational standards. An eco-certification's success will also be dependent upon its developers to establish and maintain relationships and partnerships with stakeholders that are both relevant and like-minded, as they may help to further progress the goals of the certifying body. To this end, the findings outlined in these guiding practices highlight the importance of working with one's government and other influencers in the tourism supply chain. Building relationships and networking capacity are key to the success of certification programs.

Future research should consider assessing guiding practices for certification development and implementation in lesser economically developed countries, as existing challenges may differ drastically than those in a more economically developed country. In addition to facilitating research on eco-certification in diverse contexts (e.g., lesser economically developed countries), studies should consider mixed methods designs that encourage elaboration and clarification from the results of one method to other methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In this case, further study with the inclusion of varying stakeholder perspectives such as government officials and consumers, as well as new and

seasoned operators may further corroborate this list of guiding practices. Finally, research on social media marketing may reflect possibilities for improving certification implementation processes and to determine if it is a feasible channel for disseminating information to consumers and other certified operators. Research focusing on information channels could provide clarity on effectiveness of educational messaging to target audiences.

This was a small study, contextually situated within Australia, and generalizations are limited as such. It should be noted that a limitation to this study is the small number of participants interviewed due to the nature of tourism in Australia where it is dominated by small businesses, particularly those in nature-based tourism (McKercher, 1998). Likewise, restricted access to the use of EAs email account for the distribution of the study participation requests may have reduced the number of emails that successfully arrived in potential participants' electronic mailbox (e.g. were placed in the spam folder or were disregarded as spam/junk mail). Nevertheless, the guiding practices identified in this study may be useful for practitioners, industry professionals, and organizations considering developing their own eco-certification tourism program.

Research on certification and conceptualizing sustainability must remain relevant in the pursuit of achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as it is an important mechanism for bringing sustainability to practices. Goal 17, *Partnerships for the Goals*, has been highlighted as an indicative theme and should incorporate participation from various stakeholders including certification and accreditation organizations (Boluk, Cavaliere & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2017). With no overarching governmental or intergovernmental advancement of obligatory environmental standards within tourism suggest that the voluntary certification programs will remain important in the future. Guiding practices offered by GILs in this study highlight eco-certification as a multi-use practical tool which may counter

several sustainable tourism development challenges and improve the success of these

certification programs in the future.

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