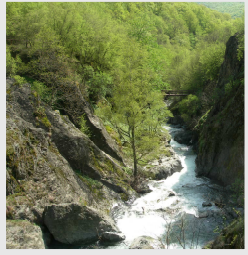
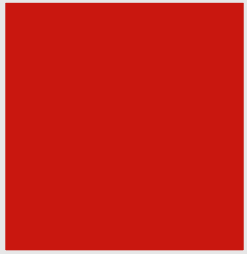
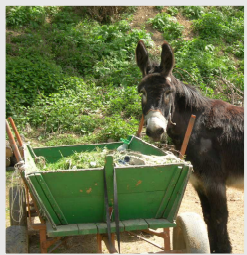


PAN Parks[®]

founded by



A study of PAN Parks' certification process of local business partners (LBP)



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A study of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners (LBP)

A study of PAN Parks' cooperation with and certification of its local business partners,
including field-research in the Central Balkan National Park

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Breda, May 2008

I hereby declare that the dissertation submitted is wholly the work of Christine Koblun. Any other contributors or sources have either been referenced in the prescribed manner or are listed in the acknowledgements together with the nature and scope of their contribution.

Author's signature

Date and place

Preface

I put my heart and soul into this thesis report. What started as a final assignment of my studies, progressed as a piece of work I am proud of and was very enthusiastic to work on. During the process of writing, I was blessed to meet many skilful professionals giving me their opinion on the subject, so that I eventually found my own voice.

Even though the subject might not seem appealing and exciting to someone at first sight and merely consists of regulations, principles and policies, the subject became more and more exciting and lively by every day I worked on it. Even on precious Saturdays and Sundays mornings, just before the sun raised, the excitement and curiosity about this amazing subject of certification let me jump out of bed and work on my thesis.

I hope that any reader will enjoy this thesis as much as I enjoyed studying, exploring and writing about the subject.

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Writing this thesis has been an enriching experience. The interest and support from many people being dear to me have made writing this thesis an exceptional journey.

In particular my thanks go to three persons who have helped me in an exception way: Niek Beunders, Mylène van der Donk and Ivo Simon.

I already had the pleasure to learn from Niek's expertise during various courses in the fourth year of ITMC and was very pleased to hear that my preference for him as a supervisor was granted. Niek has been an exceptional supervisor, whose expertise I highly value and admire. I thank Niek for giving me inspiration, for fascinating discussion, for excellent advice and for always finding time to meet me, when I needed his guidance. I thank Niek for giving constructive feedback all the way throughout the process of writing my thesis and for never ending a meeting before a solution has been found to a particular issue. I wish Niek all the best for his future and I thank him for making the last months a true pleasure.

Mylène van der Donk has been my company supervisor at the PAN Parks Foundation. Mylène has dedicated countless hours to my thesis and ensured that I would be supplied with relevant information and be connected to the right stakeholders. Mylène has exceeded any expectations one could have of a company supervisor. I thank Mylène for her exceptional dedication to my project, her good advice, many hours of productive discussion, her positivism and friendship. I wish Mylène all the best for her professional career at the NHTV and that many students may profit from her expertise.

My special thanks go to Ivo Simon, my beloved boyfriend. I thank him for support reaching beyond expectations. I thank him for five months of support during my thesis, for many hours and some sleepless nights sitting behind the computer with me, discussing and improving my final report. I thank him for always being there, for supporting me and most importantly loving me.

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Finally, but not less importantly, I would like to thank my parents and family for supporting my at all times. I have to most wonderful parents in the whole world and I would like to express my deepest love to them and appreciation for their support. I further would like to express special thanks to my friends who have been of extreme support to me during the last five months and for their understanding. My special thanks go to my dear friends Dorina, Katharina, Dieke, Tessa, Saskia and Aimee.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother Dina, who will always stay in my heart.

Executive summary

Throughout the ITMC study program I developed a special interest in sustainable tourism. I see sustainable tourism as a feasible future perspective in the tourism sector, however it is contested by many false claims. How can it be proven that a product indeed conforms to sustainable practices? To me the answer is presented in tourism certification programs. During my internship at Ecotourism Australia, a third-party certification program, I could further broaden my special interest and gained valuable insight into the industry of sustainable and ecotourism certification programs. For my final thesis I had the ambition to further investigate the field of sustainable and ecotourism certification. Through Niek Beunders I got acquainted with the PAN Parks Foundation.

The Protected Area Network of Parks, known as PAN Parks, was founded in 1997 as a common initiative from the Dutch World Wide Fund for Nature and the Dutch leisure company Molecaten. PAN Parks was initiated to serve as a third-party certification program for European protected areas (certified PAN Parks) and adjoining sustainable tourism enterprises (PAN Parks local business partners, shortened LBP).

For the certification of protected areas a central and uniform certification process has been developed and implemented. The certification of PAN Parks local business partners has been addressed to 'Local PAN Parks Groups' (LPPG) consisting of stakeholders from the protected area's management, local authorities, entrepreneurs and inhabitants, which have to be formed in each PAN Park. This multi stakeholder group is responsible for the development, implementation and monitoring of a certification program for PAN Parks local business partners. As a result PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners differs between the various PAN Parks.

PAN Parks' management team detected that the level of quality delivered by PAN Parks' local business partners varies, not only between the various PAN Parks, but also within one park. Local business partners of high quality are extremely important to the foundation, but it is estimated that only 50% of PAN Parks' local business partners meet the foundation's desired level of quality. Unsure where weaknesses are located, the PAN Parks Foundation decided an improvement of the situation has to take place and that action has to be taken immediately.

It is the aim of this thesis to identify **what** precisely the weaknesses of PAN Parks' certification program are, **where** in the process of certification these weaknesses are located, **why** they exist and **who** is responsible for these weaknesses. By finding answers to these key questions, the ultimate goal of this thesis, **to give recommendations for an improved certification program of PAN Parks' local business partners**, can be realised. In order to be able to draw final recommendation on how PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners can be improved and deliver the desired level of quality research questions were formulated. The three main research questions are:

1. What is tourism certification?

2. How does PAN Parks certify its local business partners and what are the programs' weaknesses and strengths?

3. How can insufficient aspects of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners to be improved?

These three main research questions are extended by relevant sub-questions (which can be found in section 1.3).

This is an applied research project, where existing theoretical knowledge about tourism certification programs has been applied to PAN Parks' particular problem in the certification program of local business partners, in order to find a feasible solution to the problem. The research project has been divided into four steps:

In **step a** theoretical research has been undertaken, in order to gain knowledge of relevant theories about certification and related issues. It was explored that certification programs in the sustainable tourism industry consist of several elements. Not only the certification process itself influences the success of a program, but also quality of the product, its sustainable and ecotourism measurements, its communication with and acceptance of the market and its communication with its partners. A model has been developed which outlines general steps in the development of a certification program. After the arise of a specific aim or need by a group of individuals, an organisation, an association or a special interest group, objectives have to be set and the target group of the certification program defined. The definition of objectives and the target group found the basis of the development of a certification program. The core body of the development of a certification program consists of two separate but interrelated subjects; the structure of the certification program and the content of the certification program. Items included in the structural development of a certification program were derived from the model of conformity assessment developed by Martha Honey. Where guidelines are given for the methods of setting standards, assessment, certification and accreditation. The second part of the core body is dedicated to the definition of content related issues and is derived from the Mohonk Agreement. The certification program's content of criteria, benefits for stakeholders, social/cultural impacts, ecological impacts and economical impacts have to be defined. After structural methods and content have been defined the core of a certification program has been designed.

In **step b** PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners has been studied. Two different approaches have been used, firstly secondary-data has been collected and analysed supplied by the PAN Parks Foundation and secondly through field research in the PAN Park Central Balkan National Park a more practice oriented view has been gained. During the field research in-depth interviews were held with certified PAN Parks' business partners to get an insight into their perception on PAN Parks' certification. Further, focus group interviews were held with the National Park directorate and members of the LPPG. While analysing the structure of PAN Parks certification program of local business partners the model 'key stakeholders in ecotourism certification' developed by X. Font and R.C. Buckley could be adopted to visualise PAN Parks' certification process of local business partners and weaknesses in the certification program have been identified:

- Limited control of the PAN Parks Foundation on certification processes of LBPs
- Lack of transparency, cause by language barriers and limited information transfer
- Lack of independent third-part assessment
- Different standards upon which PAN Parks local business partners are being certified between certified PAN Parks

In **step c** research findings from step a and step b were merged. On hand of the 'certification development model' which was introduced in step a, it has been analysed if PAN Parks certification program of local business partners meets requirements which have been identified through the analysis of theory. For the case that requirements were not met, first recommendations were given. Investigation showed that it is recommendable to the PAN Parks Foundation to create a uniform certification program for all local business partners. Until present PAN Parks' local business partners are being certified upon different standards. As a result PAN Parks' local business partners do not deliver a homogeneous level of quality. The PAN Parks Foundation is recommended to develop a uniform foundation for certification program for every PAN Parks' local business partner with baseline standards as a tool. These baseline standards should guarantee that basic tourist needs are fulfilled (such as safety and health, accessibility and quality). In addition to these baseline standards, LPPGs would formulate specific standards directed at local requirements. Further it is recommended that standards should be performance based, where functional and operational characteristics to be achieved are described. It was further investigated that third party assessment should be made use of, so that an unbiased and independent body assesses whether applicants conform to standards.

In **step d** final conclusions have been drawn and recommendations given. A model has been developed which outlines a more efficient and effective way of certification of PAN Parks local business partners. The most central issue in the management of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners is a lack of transparency. In PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners the LPPGs play a central role. In many cases it was expressed that the driving force behind LPPG meetings would be the management of the certified PAN Park itself and that LPPG members find it difficult to make time available for LPPG meetings. In PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners most responsibilities are directed to a group of stakeholders (LPPG) which has limited time, limited resources and a limited level of knowledge about certification programs. A body is missing which can coordinate the whole certification program. Therefore it is recommendable to create a body which has sufficient time and means available to manage the coordination of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners. This coordinating body should be an elected person from the LPPG dedicated to the enhancement of sustainable tourism in the region.

List of figures

FIGURE 1: PAN PARKS' CERTIFICATION PROCEDURE	2
FIGURE 2: ISSUES INVOLVED IN PAN PARKS CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS	5
FIGURE 3: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK	7
FIGURE 4: RAINFOREST ALLIANCE CERTIFICATION SEAL	12
FIGURE 5: USDA ORGANIC CERTIFICATION SEAL.....	12
FIGURE 6: FAIR TRADE CERTIFICATION SEAL.....	12
FIGURE 7: PLANTATIONS ARRIBA CHOCOLATE, RAINFOREST ALLIANCE CERTIFIED.....	12
FIGURE 8: SIMPLIFIED MODEL OF THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION (WASZINK, 1991).....	14
FIGURE 9: ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS (HONEY, 2002)	16
FIGURE 10: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM	20
FIGURE 11: LOCATION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM (WEAVER, 2001).....	21
FIGURE 12: DIMENSIONS OF ECOTOURISM (WEAVER, 2001)	23
FIGURE 13: HIERARCHY OF TOURIST NEEDS (JANER, 2003)	24
FIGURE 14: MASLOW'S SEVEN NEED CATEGORIES AND THEIR RELATED SERVICE QUALITY CONTENTS (HUNG-CHANG CHIU, 2006) ...	25
FIGURE 15: KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN ECOTOURISM CERTIFICATION (BUCKLEY, 2001)	28
FIGURE 16: CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY	31
FIGURE 17: POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS OF COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS IN TOURISM PLANNING (BRAMWELL, ET AL., 2000)	36
FIGURE 18: MATRIX: RELATION OF CERTIFICATION METHOD AND ASSESSMENT METHOD	37
FIGURE 19: CERTIFICATION PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT MODEL	38
FIGURE 20: PAN PARKS MANAGEMENT TEAM (JANUARY 2008)	43
FIGURE 21 CERTIFIED PAN PARKS JANUARY 2008	48
FIGURE 22: MAP OF ALL PAN PARKS, DECEMBER 2007.....	49
FIGURE 23: KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN PAN PARKS' CERTIFICATION OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS	50
FIGURE 24 PROCESS OF PAN PARKS CERTIFICATION	58
FIGURE 25: PROCESS OF PAN PARKS CERTIFICATION UPDATED BY VLADIVOJ VANCURA	59
FIGURE 26: FRAMEWORK FOR THE DESIGN OF CHAPTER FOUR AND FIVE	62
FIGURE 27: PAN PARKS' GUIDELINES FOR SETTING STANDARDS OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNER CERTIFICATION	70
FIGURE 28: EXPECTED AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF PAN PARKS' CERTIFICATION OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS IN CENTRAL BALKAN NATIONAL PARK	72
FIGURE 29: KEY STAKEHOLDERS' RELATIONS IN PAN PARKS IMPROVED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS	75
FIGURE 30: KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN PAN PARKS' IMPROVED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS	78
FIGURE 31: DEVELOPMENT OF PAN PARKS' CERTIFICATION PROGRAM EXTRACT FROM 'KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN PAN PARKS' IMPROVED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS'	80
FIGURE 32: THE CERTIFICATION EXTRACT FROM 'KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN PAN PARKS' IMPROVED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS'	82
FIGURE 33: COMMUNICATION WITH THE MARKET EXTRACT FROM 'KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN PAN PARKS' IMPROVED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS'	84
FIGURE 34: COMMUNICATION MODEL OF CONSUMERS AND LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS.....	85
FIGURE 35: IMPROVED COMMUNICATION MODEL OF CONSUMERS AND LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS	86
FIGURE 36: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ALTERNATIVE IMPROVEMENT SCENARIOS	89

List of abbreviations

ISO = International Organization for Standardization

ISO 9000 = The international series of standards for quality management systems

ISO 14000 = The international series of standards for environmental management systems

LBP = Local business partner

LPPG = Local PAN Park Group

NGO = Non-governmental organisation

NP = National Park

P&C = PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators

PPF = PAN Parks Foundation

STDS = Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy

TIES = The International Ecotourism Society

WTO = World Tour

Contents

PREFACE	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	II
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	III
LIST OF FIGURES	VI
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	VII
CONTENTS	VIII
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT	1
1.2 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM DEFINITION	3
1.3 THESIS OBJECTIVE AND CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	5
1.4 THESIS METHODOLOGY	7
1.5 LIMITATION OF THE SUBJECT	9
1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.....	10
CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL REVIEW ON SUSTAINABILITY AND CERTIFICATION	11
2.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER TWO	11
2.2 CERTIFICATION.....	13
2.2.1 <i>Definition of certification</i>	13
2.2.2 <i>Setting standards - Conformity assessment systems</i>	15
2.3 TOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY.....	19
2.3.1 <i>Sustainable tourism</i>	19
2.3.2 <i>Ecotourism</i>	21
2.3.3 <i>Consumer demand for quality assurance in sustainable tourism and ecotourism</i>	24
2.4 CERTIFICATION IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY	26
2.4.1 <i>Definition of tourism certification</i>	26
2.4.2 <i>Key stakeholders in ecotourism certification programs</i>	28
2.4.3 <i>'Certifying the Certifier' - Accreditation in sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification</i>	31
2.4.4 <i>Critical success factors of any sustainable and ecotourism certification program</i>	33
2.5 COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS	35
2.6 CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER TWO	37
CHAPTER THREE: THE PAN PARKS FOUNDATION AND ITS CERTIFICATION PROCESS	40
3.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER THREE	40
3.2 THE PAN PARKS FOUNDATION	40
3.2.1 <i>Introduction to PAN Parks</i>	40
3.2.2 <i>PAN Parks organisational structure and PAN Parks partners</i>	43
3.3 PAN PARKS CERTIFICATION PROCESS.....	45
3.3.1 <i>PAN Parks five dimensions of certification</i>	45
3.3.2 <i>Certified PAN Parks</i>	48
3.4 PAN PARKS CERTIFICATION PROCESS OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS (LBP)	50
3.4.1 <i>Model of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners (LBP)</i>	50
3.4.2 <i>Analysis of the certification process of LBPs per National Park</i>	54
3.4.3 <i>Transparency issues in the certification of PAN Parks local business partners</i>	58
3.5 CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER THREE	61

CHAPTER FOUR: APPLYING THE ‘CERTIFICATION DEVELOPMENT MODEL’	62
4.1. INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER FOUR	62
4.2 ARISE OF SPECIFIC AIM OR NEED	64
4.3 OBJECTIVE.....	64
4.4 TARGET GROUP	65
4.5 STRUCTURE	66
4.5.1 <i>Setting standards</i>	66
4.5.2 <i>Assessment</i>	67
4.5.3 <i>Certification</i>	68
4.5.4 <i>Accreditation</i>	68
4.6 CONTENT	69
4.6.1 <i>Standards</i>	69
4.6.2 <i>Benefits for stakeholders</i>	70
4.7 CONCLUSION CHAPTER FOUR	73
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	74
5.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER FIVE.....	74
5.2 IDENTIFICATION OF STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR RELATIONS IN THE IMPROVED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF PAN PARKS’ LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS.....	74
5.3 A MODEL FOR PAN PARKS IMPROVED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS.....	78
5.3.1 <i>The development of PAN Parks certification program</i>	80
5.3.2 <i>The certification</i>	82
5.3.4 <i>Communication with the market</i>	84
5.4 FEASIBILITY OF RECOMMENDATIONS.....	88
5.5 FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS	90
APPENDIX	91
APPENDIX I: VERIFICATION PROCESS OF LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS IN OULANKA NATIONAL PARK	91
APPENDIX II: FULUFJÄLLET NATIONAL PARK’S APPLIED CRITERIA UPON LOCAL PARTNERS ÉCOLABEL	93
APPENDIX III: MOHONK AGREEMENT.....	94
APPENDIX IV: PAN PARKS PRINCIPLES AND CRITERIA (PRINCIPLE 5).....	97
APPENDIX V: PAN PARKS’ LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS	102
APPENDIX VI: OUTLINE OF INTERVIEWS WITH PAN PARK’S LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNERS (CENTRAL BALKAN NATIONAL PARK) ...	104
SOURCES.....	108
BOOKS	108
REPORTS	110
ONLINE SOURCES	112

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the subject

The Protected Area Network of Parks, known as PAN Parks, was founded in 1997 as a common initiative from the Dutch World Wide Fund for Nature and the Dutch leisure company Molecaten. PAN Parks was initiated to serve as a third-party certification program for European protected areas and adjoining sustainable tourism enterprises. In general, PAN Parks has four main aims:

- to create an European network of wilderness protected areas;
- to improve nature protection by sustainable tourism development
- to provide a reliable trademark that guarantees nature protection and is recognised by all Europeans
- to involve local business in the development of a sustainable tourism strategy that forms part of the certification process itself. (Black, et al., 2007)

The PAN Parks foundation aims at certifying National Parks, which are characterised by outstanding European natural and cultural heritage, as well as sustainable tourism businesses located in proximity of the certified National Parks. By awarding parks with PAN Parks' certification, the foundation wants to communicate to the public, that these parks are of natural and cultural importance and are well managed in terms of conservation. Together with the certification of sustainable local enterprises PAN Parks aims at creating a high quality experience for domestic as well as international visitors.

Until present, the PAN Parks Foundation certified ten National Parks located all within European boundaries, as well as over 50 local business partners, which operate in proximity to or within the certified PAN Park.

The PAN Parks Foundation was initially set up to improve conservational work in National Parks all over Europe. Therefore, the PAN Parks Foundation firstly developed a set of standards that National Parks have to conform to regarding natural values, habitat management and visitor management. At a later stage, standards regarding sustainable tourism development in the surrounding region of the National Park were developed and added to the certification procedure. At present there are five different elements of standards, which are called 'PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators', or abbreviated P&Cs which National Parks have to conform to. Nowadays PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C) cover two interrelated areas: the management of the National Park, covering the issues of natural values, habitat management and visitor management, and a set of criteria aiming at tourism development in the National Parks' region, covering a sustainable tourism development strategy and the management of local tourism business partners.

Because of the division between the assessment of the National Park and issues related to tourism development PAN parks divided its certification process into three steps (figure 1).



Figure 1: PAN Parks' certification procedure

In the first step of certification, the PAN Parks Foundation is assessing whether a National Park is meeting standards concerning natural values, habitat management and visitor management. In most cases alterations and improvements have to be made and it can take up to several years before the National Park conforms to standards set specifically aiming at the management of the protected area. After a successful assessment of these criteria, the second phase of certification starts. In the second step of certification the National Park has to form a Local PAN Park Group (LPPG), consisting of stakeholders from the park management, local authorities, entrepreneurs and inhabitants. The LPPG is responsible for formulating a 'Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy' (STDS) for the region. In the STDS the Local PAN Park Group has to present a tourism strategy for the National Park and its environs, which is safeguarding sustainable development, so that conservational as well as social and economical aspects are positively stimulated. If the STDS of a prospect PAN Park is assessed as conforming to PAN Parks' standards the third and final step of certification is undertaken. The Local PAN Park Group is addressed to formulate a management plan on local business partners, which is in line with the formulated STDS. It is the LPPG's responsibility to design a certification program for local business partners and also execute this program.

1.2 Background and problem definition

The PAN Parks Foundation certifies and therewith gives a certification-logo to two different groups: Protected areas located within Europe and tourism enterprises located in proximity to the certified PAN Parks.

National Parks seeking certification apply directly with the PAN Parks Foundation. After the National Park submitted his application documents the PAN Parks Foundation makes a first assessment of the fulfilment of criteria. At this stage advice of corrective actions are given by the Foundation to the applicant and both parties undergo a contract of certification. The PAN Parks Foundation then outsources the assessment of PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators one to three to an independent third-party and according to this judgement certification upon the P&Cs one to three is granted. Every five years certified PAN Parks have to undergo recertification.

The certification of PAN Parks' local business partners differs from the method used for the certification of the protected areas. As it has been shown in figure 1, the certification procedure of local business partners is the final step of PAN Parks' certification process. PAN Parks' local business partners are being certified according to locally set standards. Every PAN Park has to form a Local PAN Park Group consisting of relevant local stakeholders, this group designs and formulates the certification process of local business partners. The LPPG has to formulate the standards to which local business partners have to conform, which methods will be used for the assessment and has to determine how the performance of local business partners will be monitored. The PAN Parks Foundation gives a general outline of standards which should be included. However the LPPGs are free to design standards of which they think are relevant for the region and will deliver high quality tourism partners operating according to sustainable practices. In the line of a PAN Parks' certification upon principle four and five, the PAN Parks Foundation commissions independent verifiers to assess if the designed scheme of certification of local business partners is meeting PAN Parks requirements. As a consequence of this applied method of certification every PAN Park has a unique set of standards upon which local business partners are being certified. Further, methods of assessment also vary between certified PAN Parks. In some cases independent local verifiers are commissioned to undertake the assessment of applicants, in other cases one or more members of the LPPG assess whether an applicant conforms to set standards.

Internal research carried out by the management team of PAN Parks, detected weaknesses in the level of quality delivered by their local business partners. As the 'PAN Parks experience' consists of the consumer's experience delivered from the certified PAN Park and from PAN Parks local business partners, it is vital for the organisation to secure a consistent quality level of both parties.

The management team of PAN Parks noticed that the level of quality delivered by local business partners varies, not only from PAN Park to PAN Park, but also within one park. A survey carried out amongst the management team of the PAN Parks Foundation, revealed that all respondents stated that local business partners of high quality are extremely important to the foundation. At the same time, the majority of the

respondents felt that only 50% of PAN Parks' local business partners met the foundation's desired level of quality. In addition, all respondents stated that an improvement of quality amongst PAN Parks' local business partners should be reached within the next year.

A satisfactory level of quality amongst PAN Parks' local business partners is of vital importance to the foundation, since PAN Parks stands with its brand name for quality (certified) tourism products. After an enterprise has been assessed as meeting the locally set standards, the PAN Parks Foundation awards the business with the PAN Parks logo, which can be used for marketing purposes. Further PAN Parks is listing, and therewith recommending, local business partners on their webpage. PAN Parks guarantees with its name that these businesses are meeting sustainable standards and are of excellent quality.

“The PAN Parks quality standard is your assurance that you are visiting some of the best managed wilderness areas in Europe and the tourism providers you use are working together with the Parks to ensure they are protected for future generations.” (PAN Parks)

If consumers experience a lack of quality with one of PAN Parks' local business partners, it also influences the consumer's perception of the PAN Parks Foundation's image negatively. The consumer's trust in the brand would most likely be negatively affected and it would be unlikely that this consumer will choose for the PAN Parks experience again. Other PAN Parks could be negatively affected by a consumer's negative experience in another PAN Park. In addition, that consumer could be discouraged other potential consumers to put trust in the PAN Parks brand.

At this point it is unclear to the PAN Parks Foundation why there are such tremendous differences existing in the delivered quality of local business partners. In order to reach a constant level of quality amongst local business partners, it is essential to identify the reason behind the issue.

Therefore it is important for the PAN Park Foundation to investigate the questions:

- **What** are the weaknesses in the certification program of local business partners?
- **Where** in the certification process of local business partners do weaknesses exist?
- **Why** do these weaknesses exist?
- **Who** is responsible for these weaknesses and who could help to improve these?

1.3 Thesis Objective and central research questions

It is the aim of this thesis to identify **what** precisely the weaknesses of PAN Parks' certification program are, **where** in the process of certification these weaknesses are located, **why** they exist and **who** is responsible for these weaknesses. By finding answers to these key questions, the ultimate goal of this thesis, **to give recommendations for an improved certification program of PAN Parks' local business partners**, can be realised.

Ultimately recommendations will be given on how to overcome identified weaknesses of the certification program and a model will be designed which visualises a more effective and efficient program.

Subjects which are involved in PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners are not solely related to certification in general, but also encompasses issues such as quality assurance, sustainable tourism and ecotourism, nature conservation and protection as well as partnerships (visualised in figure 2).

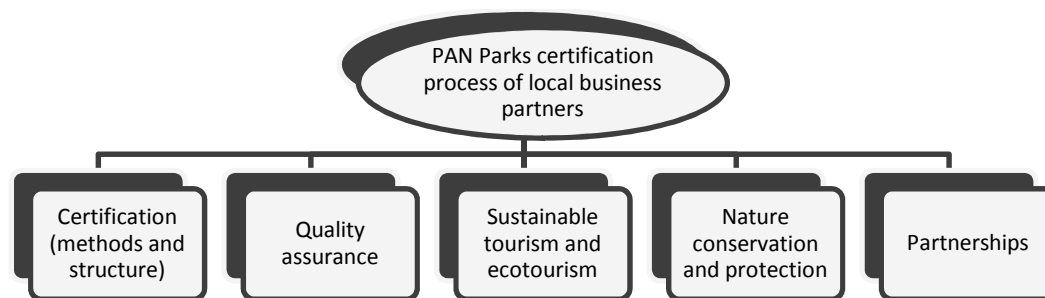


Figure 2: Issues involved in PAN Parks certification program of local business partners

Answering the following **research questions** will identify and analyse weaknesses in PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners and to formulate recommendations:

1. What is tourism certification?

1.1 What is certification?

1.1.1 What elements does certifications consist of?

1.1.2 What types of certification do exist?

1.1.3 Which management approaches do certification programs make use of?

1.2 What is sustainable tourism and ecotourism?

1.2.1 What is sustainable development?

1.2.2 What is sustainable tourism?

1.3 What is tourism certification?

1.3.1 Which elements does ecotourism certification consist of?

1.3.2 Which stakeholders are important in tourism certification?

1.3.3 Which principles and critical success factors do exist for tourism certification?

1.3.4 What do consumers demand from a certification program?

1.4 What are partnerships?

2. How does PAN Parks certify its local business partners and what are the programs' weaknesses and strengths?

2.1 How does the certification process of PAN Parks' local business partners look like?

2.1.1 Which stakeholders are involved in the certification process? And how are responsibilities divided?

2.1.2 Into which of the theoretical framework fits PAN Parks' certification program?

2.3 What are problematic or critical areas in PAN Parks' certification process of local business partners?

2.3.1 Is the program meeting all principles and critical success factors outlined in theory?

2.3.2 What are stakeholder's opinions about the program?

2.3.3 Which elements of the certification process are weakly managed?

3. How can insufficient aspects of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners to be improved?

3.1 Which aspects in the content and structure of the certification program are insufficient and how can these be improved?

3.2 Which management aspects of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners are insufficient and how could these be improved?

3.3 How does the most feasible approach of certification look like?

1.4 Thesis methodology

In this section the methodology underlying this thesis will be outlined. Generally the thesis falls into the category of applied research.

Applied research “seeks not necessarily to create wholly new knowledge about the world but to apply existing theoretical knowledge to particular problems or issues. (...)Applied research (...) is research designed to find solutions to problems which arise in particular policy, planning or management situations” (Veal, 1997).

Existing theoretical knowledge about certification and related subjects will be studied and applied on PAN Parks' specific problems in the certification program of local business partners, in order to find solutions.

This diagnostic practice-oriented research project has been divided into five different phases (as visualised in figure 3).

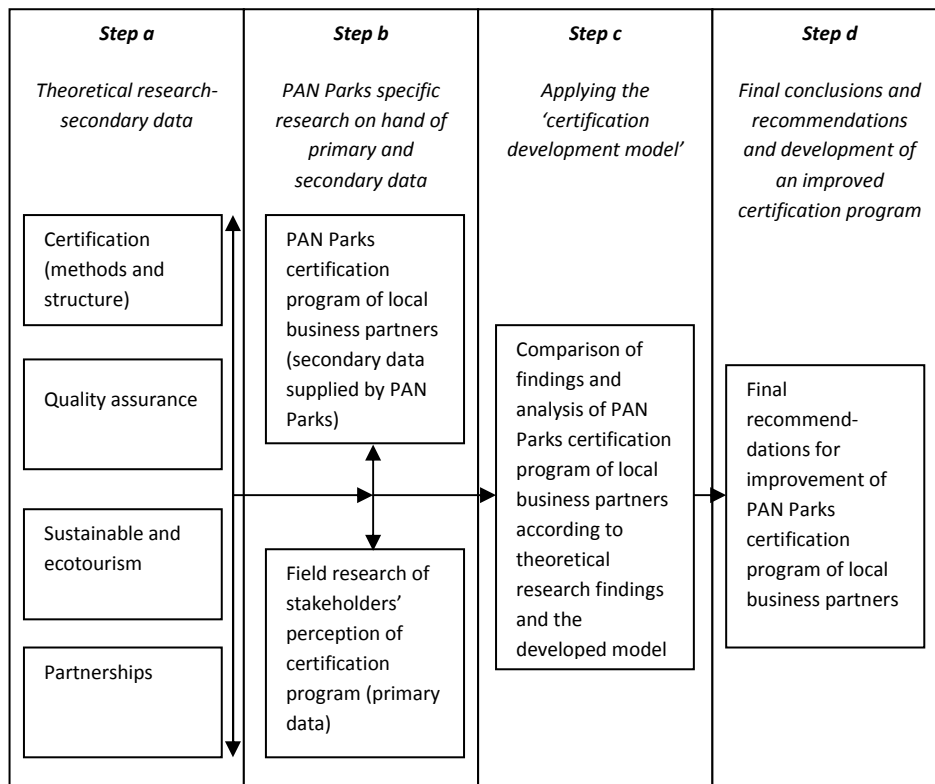


Figure 3: Research framework

In **step a** theoretical research will be undertaken, in order to gain knowledge of relevant theories about certification and related issues. The research will be conducted via desk research, gathering data from literature, newspaper articles, reports, and publications. In **step b** PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners will be studied. This will be made upon two different approaches, firstly secondary-data will be collected and analysed supplied by the PAN Parks Foundation, and secondly through field research in the PAN Park Central Balkan National Park a more practice oriented view will be gained. During the field research

in-depth interviews will be held with certified PAN Parks' business partners to get an insight into their perception on PAN Parks' certification. Further focus group interview will be held with the National Park directorate and members of the LPPG. In **step c** research findings from step a and step b will be merged. It will be analysed if PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners is meeting critical success factors and guidelines identified by the theoretical research. In **step d** final recommendations will be made on an improved method of PAN Parks' local business partners. A model will be developed which outlines a more efficient and effective way of certification of PAN Parks local business partners.

1.5 Limitation of the subject

The PAN Parks Foundation now exists for over ten years. Many professional in the field of tourism and nature protection have worked hard on formulating and designing a certification scheme which provides sustainable benefits for the areas of nature protection and tourism. Firstly the Pan Park Foundation was initiated to support and enhance nature protection in Europe focussing on lesser-known destinations with rural characteristics. Only at a later stage tourism has been identified as an important factor to the overall success of the program and thus has been included in the certification program. PAN Parks is the only certification program worldwide which certifies protected areas and at the same time tourism enterprises. In fact, PAN Parks delivers a certification program which normally is managed by two different parties; one certifying protected areas such as Natura 2000 and one certifying sustainable or ecotourism enterprises such as Ecotourism Australia. PAN Park is therefore a very ambitious project wanting to combine two separate certification programs, where most organisations already face difficulties 'only' managing one of the two.

From the beginning on, PAN Parks' principle four and five (Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy and certification of local business partners) have caused heated debates about the approaches to be used and about the division of responsibilities. Especially principle five has been a problem child from the start of its introduction. Many professionals in the field of tourism tried to analyse and improve the program's effectiveness, however with many stakeholders involved, limited financial and human capital the PAN Park Foundation has until now failed to reach their desired level of quality and benefits delivered from the program.

This research has been commissioned by the PAN Parks Foundation to get an outsider's view on the performance of the certification program of local business partners. Research findings in this thesis are based upon theoretical knowledge gained and data provided by the PAN Parks Foundation, as well as a field-trip to one of PAN Parks certified parks. Recommendations are made upon research findings, however financial and human resource aspects are only included to a limited extent.

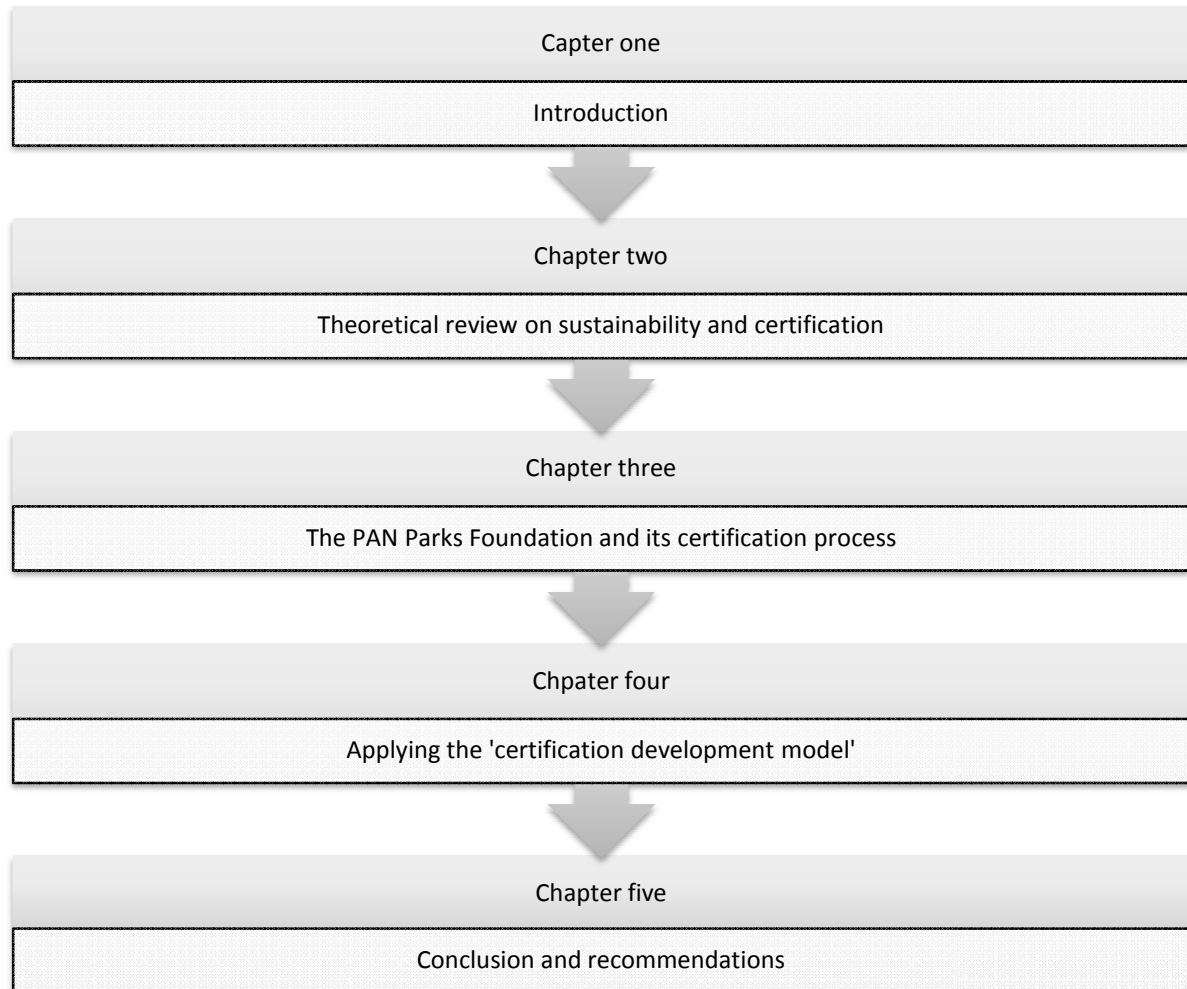
Recommendations are based on what would deliver best results concerning the quality of certified partners and what would deliver most benefits to all stakeholders involved. However, it is in the foundation's control how to implement recommendations and to which extend they believe these are financially feasible.

Throughout the research it has been proven that the certification program is of a very complex nature and to a great extent lacks transparency. Not all documents could be made available, such as certification criteria for principle five, due to language barriers and communication issues. However, where and when possible translations were made, so that a more reliable study could be made.

NOTE: Due to its recent certification (2007) and the lack of data provided the marine national park "Archipelago National Park" (Finland) has been excluded from the study.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

Below an outline of the general structure of this report can be found.



CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL REVIEW ON SUSTAINABILITY AND CERIFICATION

2.1 Introduction to chapter two

In this chapter an introduction will be given to the main concepts underlying this report: sustainable tourism and ecotourism, certification, tourism certification programmes and issues underlying collaborations and partnerships.

A general understanding of the concepts and principles of sustainable tourism and ecotourism as well as certification in the tourism industry is of essential importance for the analysis of PAN Parks' certification process of its local business partners.

Nowadays, the word 'sustainability' is used in many ways. And it is more than likely that one might encounter the term "sustainability" while doing daily shopping. In our modern supermarkets whole shelves have been dedicated to selling sustainable products. Simple actions like buying chocolate, can become a terribly confusing and frustration act, if one would want to buy chocolate which tastes good, is of high quality, its production had a low impact on the environment and on top of that generates profit to local cacao farmers.

Suddenly the consumer is surrounded by choices. Chocolate bars are not only different in price and taste, but also distinctive in ways of production. The consumer can find terms like 'biological', 'fair trade', 'organic' and 'bio-organic' on his chocolate bars. Assuming that the prospect-chocolate-buyer is inexperienced in the field of terminology of sustainable food labelling, he will not know which product to choose. He will ask himself questions like: *"Does 'fair trade' labelled chocolate also implement that organic ingredients have been used?" or "Are local farmers profiting in the same way, when I choose for biological chocolate instead of fair trade?" or simply "Which chocolate tastes the best?"* Despite the huge amount of information given, the consumer will still be unsure which product to choose. In the jumble of definitions, descriptions, labelling and naming of sustainable products the consumer often gets irritated, confused and eventually lost.

The industry is well aware of this problem. In order to give more credibility to the sustainability of products and services, certification labels have been created. The goal of certification is to give assurance to the consumer that the product or service "conforms to specified requirements and norms" (Black, et al., 2007). In theory this practice sounds feasible. The awarded label or certificate gives the consumer insurance that the product or service is meeting the set standards. In practice, however, it still proofs to be difficult for the consumer to make a judgement over the level of sustainability and quality of the product or service.

Going back to our example, the issue will become clearer. Now that our consumer is well aware that a certification scheme can help him in finding a 'sustainable produced' chocolate bar, he reassesses the supermarket's shelf. In desperate hope to find the one certified product, which is fulfilling all his demands, he

actually finds many types of chocolate bars, different brands and tastes, all of them showing other certification labels. In total he can detect three different certification labels:



Figure 6: Fair trade certification seal



Figure 4: Rainforest Alliance certification seal



Figure 5: USDA Organic certification seal

Not knowing for what these certification labels stand and upon which criteria the products have been certified, the consumer is still not able to make a judgement. Despite all the information he got on the production process of the various chocolates, the nature of ingredients and despite the ‘supposed’ help of various certification logos, our consumer decided to take a chocolate bar wrapped in brown soft paper, with a beautiful picture of a tree losing leaves on its front cover. He likes brown earthy-colours and autumn, when the coloured leaves dance from their branches down to earth. For all of these reasons he chose for this chocolate bar.

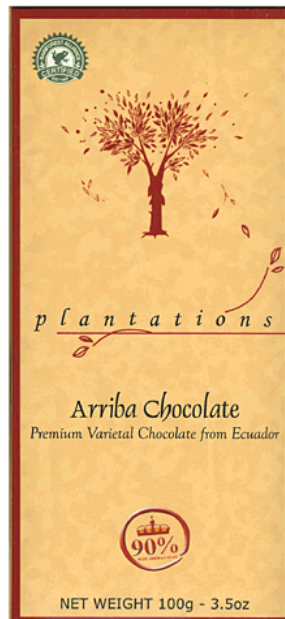


Figure 7: Plantations Arriba chocolate, Rainforest Alliance certified

Even though this is a fictional story, similar stories often happen, when consumers are faced with certification logos. Measuring, determining or proving sustainability in the tourism industry is an even more challenging subject. Unlike chocolate or any other groceries, tourism consists of intangible products with many stakeholders involved. As in the food industry, certification programs also have been developed in the tourism industry aiming at ensuring the consumer of the product’s quality or any other requirements.

Since the report centres on the subjects of sustainability and certification in the tourism industry, this section will give an introduction to the issues and an analysis of the most important characteristics.

2.2 Certification

2.2.1 Definition of certification

Certification finds its roots in quality assurance. A certification program serves the ultimate goal of ensuring a consumer about the level of quality of the product he or she wants to purchase or make use of. Below two widely quoted definitions of certification can be found:

Certification

“A voluntary procedure that sets, assesses, monitors and gives written assurance that a product, process, service or management system conforms to specified requirements and norms. A certification/ awarding body gives written assurance to the consumer and the industry in general. The outcome of certification is a certificate.” (Black, et al., 2007)

“Certification is a voluntary procedure that assesses, monitors, and gives written assurance that a business, product, process, service, or management system conforms to specified requirements. It awards a marketable logo or seal to those that meet or exceed baseline standards, i.e., those that at a minimum comply with national and regional regulations and, typically, fulfil other declared or negotiated standards prescribed by the program.” (Honey, 2002)

In general certification consists of the following elements:

- it is a voluntary procedure
- has no limitation to one industry sector: products, processes, services and management system can be subject to certification, regardless of their sector
- a certification program sets, assesses and monitors specified requirements
- and a certification program gives written assurance to the consumer.

In its simplest form, third party certification encompasses three parties (figure 8):

- the supplier (first party)
- the consumer (second party)
- and the certification body (third party) (Waszink, 1991)

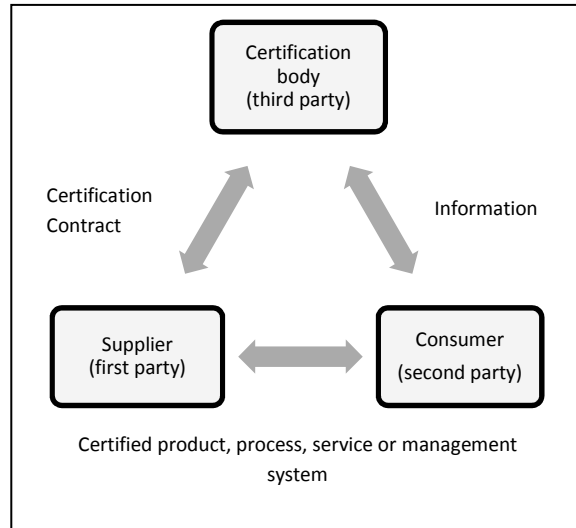


Figure 8: Simplified model of third-party certification (Waszink, 1991)

In the process of certification, all three parties are related to each other. The supplier, who can be seen as a first party, is undergoing a certification contract with the certification body. In practice this means, that either the supplier or his products, processes, services or management systems are assessed and monitored according to specific requirements or norms set by the certification body. When these meet the specific requirements the supplier is awarded with certification. The certification body is then enabled to give the consumer information about the first party's performance. The consumer is hence provided with unbiased information about the company, product, process, service or management system by a third party, which has no commercial interest in selling the item to the consumer. It thus gives the consumer an assurance of quality.

The following section will show that in the process of certification the consumer plays a key role. Suppliers undertaking certification and certification bodies heavily rely on the interest, trust and awareness of the consumer in the certification process.

2.2.2 Setting standards - Conformity assessment systems

Certification, together with further interconnected activities, forms part of conformity assessment. Conformity assessment determines whether a company, product, process, service, or system conforms to specified requirements. According to the author Dimitrios Diamantis “the processes and terminology of conformity assessment are important to set the scene of ecotourism certification standards. Importantly, it must be recognised that the terminology extends beyond just the tourism industry.” (Diamantis, 2004)

The ultimate goal of any conformity assessment system is earning the consumers’ trust in the certified item. It is of special importance to see certification not as a single activity, but in the context of conformity assessment. A certification program without consumer recognition and acceptance is without value to the certified company as well as the certification body.

Conformity assessment

“The determination of whether a product or process conforms to particular standards or specifications. Activities associated with conformity assessment may include testing, certification, accreditation, and quality assurance system registration.” (National Research Council, 1995)

“any activity concerned with determining directly or indirectly that relevant requirements are fulfilled.” (Seaver, 2003)

“An industrial term for laboratory testing that relates to product performance, health, or safety considerations.” (Tracey, 2003)

A widely-accepted model illustrating conformity assessment has been developed by the author Martha Honey (figure 9). In this model steps involved in conformity assessment can be clearly identified. Conformity assessment starts with setting industry relevant standards. It continues with the assessment of conformity to these specified standards of a company or its products, processes, or management systems. If the assessment detected that the standards are met, certification is being rewarded to the applicant. In order to reach recognition and acceptance from the consumer, the certifying body itself is subject to certification. The ultimate goal of conformity assessment is to gain recognition and acceptance from the market.

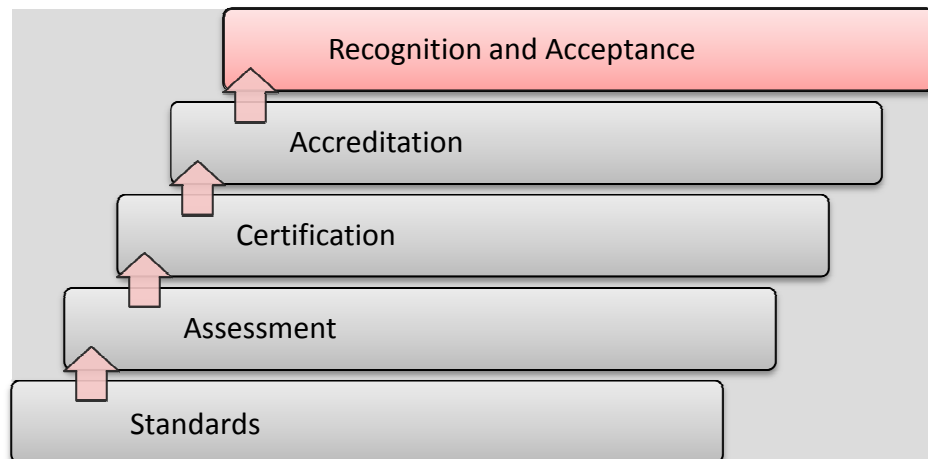


Figure 9: Essential components of conformity assessment systems (Honey, 2002)

Standards

In order to enable the certification body to measure the conformity of the suppliers' product, process, service or management system with the specified requirements, standards have to be set. There are three different methodologies which certification bodies can use to develop their standards:

- **Prescriptive standards**

"Prescriptive standards describe the way required characteristics can be achieved by prescribing how a product will be made and used or how a process will be accomplished." (Honey, 2002)
An example in the tourism industry could be the requirement to install water saving shower heads in each guest's bathroom. Since the implementation of the requirement is strictly formulated, applying the methodology of 'prescriptive standards' leaves almost no room for interpretation and innovation from the applicant's site.

- **Performance standards**

"Performance standards describe what functional or operational characteristics are to be achieved but not how to accomplish them." (Honey, 2002)
To use the example above the requirements could be to provide water saving measurements in the hotel. Performance standards leave room for innovative solutions from the side of the applicant. However, the assessment of requirements gets more complex, and thus more time-consuming and expensive.

- **Management system standards**

"Management system standards specify the elements and processes of a model management system on the premise that such a system demonstrates the capabilities of a supplier." (Honey, 2002)
Now the requirement for a hotel could be to undertake an assessment of the water use throughout their operations, detect and eliminate overconsumption and waste and from there onwards further monitor operations. Management system standards are process based. Rather than giving characteristics which have to be achieved, they give indication on which process should be made use

of. Examples of management system standards are ISO 9000 for quality management and ISO 14000 for environmental management. (Honey, 2002)

Assessment

Assessment stands at the core of any conformity assessment system. The assessment part of the process is the point, where the supplier's level of conformance with the set standards is being assessed. In general, there are three types of assessment to be distinguished:

- **First-party assessment**

In a first-party assessment the supplier himself declares that his company, product, process, service or management system conforms to the specified requirements. Therefore this process is also called self-assessment.

- **Second-party assessment**

Second-party assessment is being carried out by the consumer. Methods in this form of assessment vary greatly. An example would be the assessment of a product or company by a wholesaler or tour operator. Tour operators usually have their own rating systems for product, they want to purchase.

- **Third-party assessment**

Third-party assessment is being carried out by an unbiased and independent party, not related to the supplier or purchaser. Third-party assessment is claimed to be the most efficient and trustworthy method of assessment, since the party assessing has no commercial interest in selling the product which is subject of assessment. (Honey, 2002)

Certification

In conformity assessment, certification is the process where written assurance is being given on the conformity of the company, its products, processes, services or management systems with the specified requirement. Written assurance can be given in the form of a logo, certificate, label, or listing, or all of these elements. Certification can be given on the basis of a pass and fail system, or a grading system (ex. Bronze, Silver and Gold certification). Certification programs can be categorised according to their assessment methods used:

- **First-party certification**

First-party certification or supplier's declaration of conformance is when the first party self-certifies his company or product. First-party certification is mostly undertaken in "low- to medium-risk areas (...), where society can tolerate non-compliance in this area since the ramifications do not negatively impact safety, health or environment". (Gillerman, 2002)

An example of first-party certification could be the light sensitivity of photographic films. The light sensitivity is measured according to standards set by the industry itself. A manufacturer produces his products according to the industry set standards and then self-assesses his product accordingly. Then he declares on the package of his product to which level of light sensitivity it conforms. If his

declaration of conformity should have been made falsely, the market will give feedback, by not buying his product anymore and the manufacturer will, in his own interest, improve his product. (Gillerman, 2002) In the tourism industry first-party certification is rarely used.

- **Second-party certification**

In second-party certification the consumer certifies the supplier, the supplier's product, process or management system. Second-party certification is often being made use of by major corporations. For example, a major tourism corporation's central purchasing department certifies a supplier's product as meeting their standards and recommends its local branches to purchase and use this product in their operations. By doing so the corporation guarantees a uniform level of quality throughout their operations. (Honey, 2002)

- **Third-party certification**

Third-party certification is being given by an unbiased and independent party, not related to the supplier or purchaser. A well know example of third-party certification in the tourism industry is Ecotourism Australia, where suppliers are certified by the independent third party of Ecotourism Australia, who is neither purchaser nor supplier.

Accreditation

"Accreditation refers to the procedure by which an authoritative body formally recognizes that a certifier is competent to carry out specific tasks. In other words, an accreditation program certifies the certifiers". (Honey, 2002) Accreditation of certification programs is of special importance, since it gives additional credibility to the system for purchasers, suppliers and consumers.

Recognition and acceptance

Recognition is the ultimate goal of each conformity assessment system, or as William Theobald formulates it in his publication 'Global Tourism':

"The overall aim(of conformity assessment) is that the label of this certification programme will be recognised by consumers or distribution channels, and considered as added value that leads to its acceptance in the marketplace, to support the marketing of companies that meet standards." (Theobald, 2005)

Therefore the ultimate goal of any conformity assessment system is not only to improve efficiency and effectiveness in a sector, but to gain consumers' trust. The consumers are able to identify good quality companies, products, processes, services or management systems with the help of certification programs.

2.3 Tourism and Sustainability

In order to fully understand issues in sustainable tourism certification and ecotourism certification, not only a general understanding of certification processes has to be reached, but also general characteristics of sustainable tourism and ecotourism have to be understood. Therefore in this section a summary of the most important issues in sustainable tourism and ecotourism will be given.

2.3.1 Sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism is a form of tourism that encompasses ideas and characteristics of sustainable development. It is the aim of sustainable tourism, to use resources in such a way that future generations can still enjoy the world in the same way we presently are able to. Thus, ideally in sustainable tourism, tourists of the future will enjoy the same natural and cultural beauty as today's tourists.

Tourism

"The activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for more than one day and less than one continuous year, for leisure, business and other purposes." (Black, et al., 2007)

Sustainable Tourism development

"Sustainable Tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity 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 ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (The World Tourism Organization (WTO))." (Cooper, et al., 2005)

Sustainable tourism is built on four main pillars; environmental/ ecological sustainability, social sustainability, cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability. All four aspects are interrelated to each other and have to be well balanced. Below an explanation of the four characteristics of sustainable tourism can be found:



Figure 10: Essential elements of sustainable tourism

Environmental/ Ecological sustainability

Environmental or ecological sustainability aims at the protection of the natural environment the tourism activity takes place.

Social sustainability

Social sustainability aims at the protection of local or national communities. In sustainable tourism negative impacts of visitors and tourists on the local community should be avoided, no disharmony should evolve between tourists and the host community.

Cultural sustainability

Cultural sustainability aims at the protection of local, regional, or national customs and traditions. Even though culture is a dynamic process and to some degree always subject to change, it should be ensured that core values and traditions in the region are kept intact, despite new influences outgoing from sustainable tourism operations.

Economic sustainability

Economic sustainability aims at ensuring a steady level of income drawn from sustainable tourism operations. Sustainable livelihoods should be ensured in the region and sustainable tourism incomes should support the region and its inhabitants. An important factor in economic sustainability is local ownership and a high multiplier effect.

2.3.2 Ecotourism

Ecotourism falls into the category of sustainable tourism (figure 11). The first definition of ecotourism was made in 1987, by the Mexican architect Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin (Weaver, 2001). In this definition an emphasis was made on the nature based character of ecotourism, where the eco-tourist would study and admire natural areas.

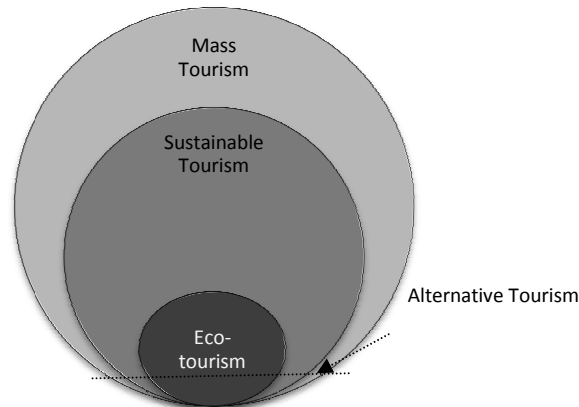


Figure 11: Location of Sustainable tourism and ecotourism (Weaver, 2001)

First definition of ecotourism by Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin

“travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.” (Weaver, 2001)

Today’s definitions of ecotourism are broader than the original definition made by Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin. Besides the nature based character of ecotourism, today’s definitions include sustainable tourism characteristics, conservational attempts to preserve the natural as well as social environment the tourism activities takes place in, and the provision of financial benefits for the local population. Three widely-accepted definition of ecotourism are:

Definition of ecotourism according to David B. Weaver

A form of tourism that is increasingly understood to be: (i) based primarily on nature-based attractions; (ii) learning-centred; and (iii) conducted in a way that makes every reasonable attempt to be environmentally, socio-culturally and economically sustainable.” (Weaver, 2001)

Definition of ecotourism according to Martha Honey

Ecotourism is “travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveller; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.” (Honey, 2002)

Definition of ecotourism according to 'The International Ecotourism Society' (TIES)

"Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people" (TIES, 2007)

In general ecotourism encompasses four dimensions:

- **Nature based**

As already defined in the first definition by Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin, ecotourism's primary feature is its nature based character. Nature based tourism has been defined as being "primarily concerned with the direct enjoyment of some relatively undisturbed phenomenon of nature" (Weaver, 2001). Motivations of eco-tourists to experience nature can vary between individuals, however in most cases the tourist has the desire to "get back in touch with nature, (...) to escape the pressures of everyday life, (to see) (...) wildlife before it is too late, and specific interests and activities such as trekking, birdwatching, canyoning and white-water rafting and kayaking" (Weaver, 2001).

- **Education and interpretation**

Education and interpretation are the most distinctive factors of ecotourism to other forms of tourism. Ecotourism it is focused on the conscious and planned transfer of knowledge. In contrast to learning, which is a natural process and mostly occurs incidentally, education and interpretation focus on a "conscious, planned, sequential and systematic process, based in defined learning objectives and using specific learning procedures" (Weaver, 2001). Education and interpretation should be part of any ecotourism activity, since it first of all satisfies the need of tourists to acquire knowledge about the natural- and social-environment they are partaking their holidays in. Secondly because the tourist's knowledge about the environment, its fragility and threats enhance the tourist's understanding for the need of conservation. A tourist, who is educate well about the area and its local inhabitants, will be more likely to understand the need for its protection and possibly even actively support protection of the area in some way (Weaver, 2001).

- **Sustainable managed**

Ecotourism forms part of sustainable tourism. Therefore in ecotourism principles of sustainable tourism have to be fulfilled. In ecotourism two aspects of sustainable tourism are of special concern: the support of local economies and the support of conservation (Weaver, 2001).

- **Personalised and small groups**

In many classical ecotourism products special attention is being paid to the size and character of travel groups. Most ecotourism products are of small scale and have a personalised character (Weaver, 2001).

Derived from these four dimensions, David Weaver constructed a model for ecotourism. Ecotourism in its classical sense consists of a combination of all four dimensions; education and interpretation, nature based, sustainable managed and small groups/personalised. 'Popular ecotourism' excludes the dimension of small groups/ personalised. 'Popular ecotourism' can also consist of bigger groups, where the personal character of the product is missing. However, also in popular ecotourism the product has a nature based character, an educational and interpretational approach, and is sustainably managed.

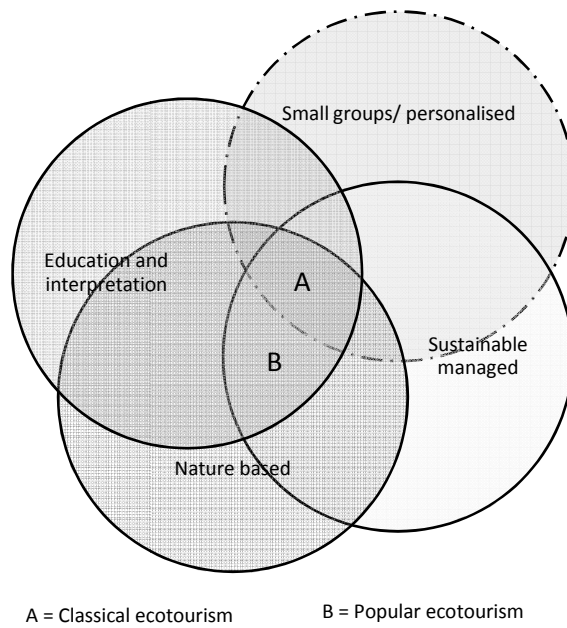


Figure 12: Dimensions of ecotourism (Weaver, 2001)

2.3.3 Consumer demand for quality assurance in sustainable tourism and ecotourism

Taking a holiday does not only require a major investment of money, but also an investment of precious leisure time. For these reasons tourists want to ensure that they are getting the best possible qualitative experience at the lowest price. Therefore price and quality are still among the most important underlying factors while choosing for a holiday. Build on Maslow's well-know 'hierarchy of needs' Ariane Janer, working for Eco-Brasil, developed a model presenting the needs of tourists (figure 13) (Black, et al., 2007).



Figure 13: Hierarchy of tourist needs (Janer, 2003)

This model shows that the most basic need of any tourists is safety and health. After assuring that safety and health are guaranteed during their holiday, accessibility of the destination is being assessed. After a positive evaluation of safety, health and accessibility, the tourist is concerned with the quality of the experience. Only after a positive evaluation of all elements, the tourist is concerned with environmental and cultural sustainability. In practice this means, that an excellent sustainable product might still fail to attract tourists, if the lower needs of safety, health, accessibility and quality are not ensured. A product for example which fulfils sustainable requirements and is of high quality, but which is situated in an unsafe and difficult to access destination might suffer from a lack of demand.

A tourist seeking a sustainable holiday can find information about the destination's safety and accessibility easily via the internet, general media, own knowledge, or family and friend's perception of the destination. When it comes to an assurance of quality, the consumer is faced with more difficulties. Naturally, the company who offers a certain product will praise this and not admit any lacks of quality. In this case sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs can be of great support. They offer the tourist an independent opinion about the product's quality and its conformity to sustainable measurements.

Even though the adoption of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs by Ariane Janer for tourism is questionable concerning its completeness, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is often used in subjects related to quality. An example is an adoption of Maslow’s traditional hierarchy of needs to the service industry, as shown in figure 14. (Hung-Chang Chiu, 2006)

Maslow’s seven need categories and their related service quality contents	
<i>Category of needs</i>	<i>Contents of service quality</i>
Physiological needs	Comfort, convenience, responsiveness
Safety needs	Assurance, reliability, consistency, secrecy
Belongingness and love needs	Relation, approval, empathy
Esteem needs	Self-esteem, superiority, politeness, acceptance
Self-actualisation needs	Growth, show, care of the social fairs
Knowledge and understanding needs	Innovation, learning
Aesthetic needs	Appreciation of nature, arts and literature

Figure 14: Maslow’s seven need categories and their related service quality contents (Hung-Chang Chiu, 2006)

All models adapted from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs have in common that before a consumer can concentrate on higher goals, or to say more idealistic goals, his or her basic needs have to be fulfilled. As in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the basis of every tourism product should be the fulfilment of consumers’ physical needs, followed by the fulfilment of safety needs, needs related to the social context of the consumers and needs related to the consumer’s esteem. Only after the fulfilment of his basic needs, the consumer will be able to concentrate on higher goals exceeding his personal well-being. Therefore certification programs operating in the sustainable tourism or ecotourism sector should not solely focus on issues directly related to environmental sustainability, social sustainability, cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability, but also should cover areas related to the fulfilment of basic tourists needs.

2.4 Certification in the tourism industry

2.4.1 Definition of tourism certification

Since the beginning of the 1990s tourism certification programs, especially ecotourism labels experienced an enormous growth in number. The World Tourism Organisation identified alone more than 100 ecotourism certification programs in the year 2007. (Diamantis, 2004)

Tourism certification programs in general assess if tourism enterprises, facilities, products, processes, services, or management systems conform to specified standards which are industry relevant. If these standards are met, a tourism certification program awards the applicant with a certificate, logo, seal, or the like. Martha Honey, an expert in the field of tourism certification programs, defines tourism certification the following:

Tourism certification programs

“Certification within the tourism industry refers to a procedure that audits and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process, service, or management system meets specific standards. It awards a logo or seal to those that meet or exceed baseline criteria or standards that are prescribed by the programme. “ (Honey, 2002)

In general, a certification program can design its criteria either based on performance or process (or a combination of both approaches). Management system standards (explained in section 2.2.2) of tourism certification programs belong to process-based certification, since it gives indication on which process should be made use of.

Performance-based certification programs are making use of “a set of externally determined criteria that are applied uniformly to all businesses seeking certification” (Honey, 2002). A widely known example of a performance-based certification program is Ecotourism Australia. A business seeking certification with Ecotourism Australia has to conform to a set of defined criteria, which are applied on every applicant. The standards upon which certification is granted do not vary between businesses. **Process-based certification program** on the contrary “are internally generated management systems for monitoring and improving procedures and practices.” (Honey, 2002) A well known example of a process-based certification program is Green Globe 21. A company seeking certification with Green Globe 21 has to undergo a contract with Green Globe, in which the applicant declares to commit himself to make a plan of annual improvement to be achieved in regard to environmental and social sustainability. (Honey, 2002)

Certification programs in the tourism industry are distinguished into three elementary types:

- **Conventional tourism certification programs**

Conventional (or mass) tourism certification programs are designed to cater for the mass tourism industry or conventional tourism industry. These certification programs are using environmental management systems and focus on the physical plant, product, or service. Conventional (or mass) tourism certification programs often base their standards on ISO 14001 or similar ISO standards. Conventional (or mass) tourism certification programs are argued to be the “narrowest least effective of the certification models: they can lead to some green innovations, but they are insufficient to ensure sustainable development”. (Honey, 2002)

- **Sustainable tourism certification programs**

As the name already indicates, sustainable tourism certification programs concentrate on the sustainable tourism sector. In sustainable tourism certification, companies, products, and activities are assessed upon their conformity with specified standards which focus on environmental and social sustainability. Principally sustainable tourism certification programs involve multiple stakeholders during the assessment and make use of third-party certification. (Honey, 2002)

- **Ecotourism certification programs**

Ecotourism certification programs are especially designed for the ecotourism sector. Ecotourism certification programs are assessing businesses, services, and products that operate in the field of ecotourism. Besides the assessment of standards, which are also applied in sustainable tourism certification, ecotourism certification also assesses standards which are specifically designed for the protection of natural areas and local communities. This is of necessity in ecotourism certification programs, since the majority of applicants are located in rural natural areas, which are fragile in terms of natural and cultural heritage. In ecotourism certification the ultimate goal is to have certified businesses and products that have almost no negative social, economic and environmental impacts. (Honey, 2002)

2.4.2 Key stakeholders in ecotourism certification programs

In order to fully understand processes in ecotourism certification programs key stakeholders have to be identified and relations between the various stakeholders analysed. In general, five main stakeholders can be identified playing important roles in ecotourism certification programs:

- ❖ The tourism market
- ❖ the applicant
- ❖ the awarding body
- ❖ the funding body
- ❖ and the verifying body

The below model has been developed by X. Font and R.C. Buckley and illustrates relations between the five main stakeholders in third-party ecotourism certification.

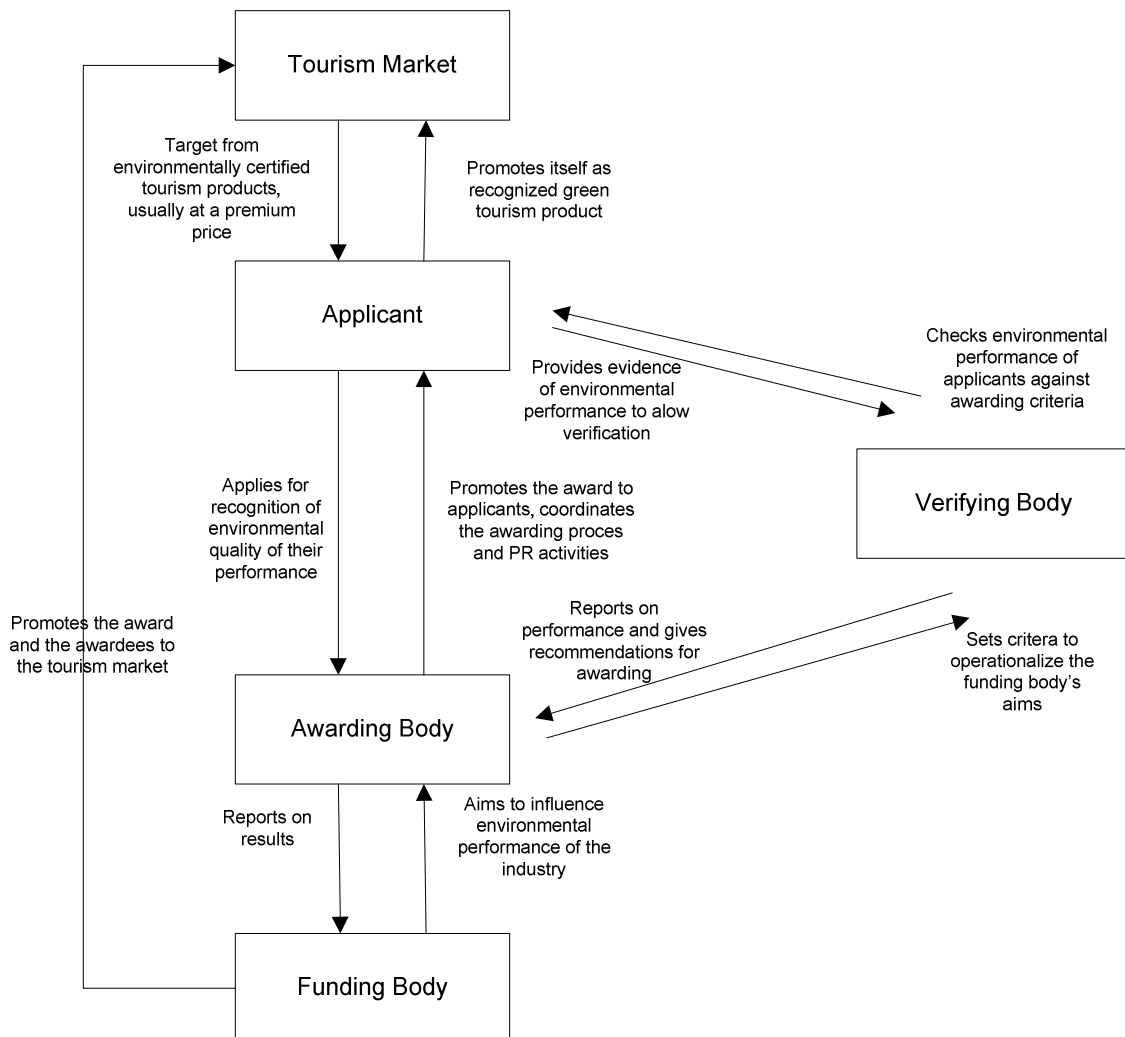


Figure 15: Key stakeholders in ecotourism certification (Buckley, 2001)

Funding body

The Funding body can be any non-governmental organisation, governmental institution, industry associations or tourism company, who pays for the majority of the costs involved in the development or management of an ecotourism certification program. Funding bodies are of a vital importance to ecotourism certification programs, because in most cases certification programs are not run profitably and thus cannot financially support themselves. (Buckley, 2001)

In many cases the reason behind funding an ecotourism certification program is the funding body's aim to improve sustainability, especially environmental performances, in the tourism industry.

Awarding body

The awarding body is the centre of any certification program. The awarding body coordinates all process of the certification program. In some cases, especially with small-scaled ecotourism certification programs, the funding and awarding body may be the same institute. However, in most cases the awarding body works independently from the funding body. The awarding body sets standards and decides if prescriptive standards, performance standards, or management system standards are being used. After defining the standards applicants have to conform with, the awarding body outsources the task of assessment to a third-party (the verifying body). As discussed in section 2.2.2, the assessment can also be carried out by first-party or second-party, however especially in ecotourism certification third-party assessment is regarded to be the most feasible and trustworthy method, or as X. Font and R.C. Buckley argue:

"The most powerful and useful approach to ecolabelling must be third party seals of approval, involving outsourcing the task to an independent body." (Buckley, 2001)

After determination of the standards applicants have to conform to, the awarding body has to promote the certification program's credibility and advantages to the applicant in order to motivate the applicant to get certified.

Verifying body

When standard are set, the verifying body is taking over the task of assessment. The verifying body assesses to which degree an applicant conforms to the standards set by the awarding body. In general an assessment of an applicant in ecotourism certification programs is made through desk-research with information given by the applicant, followed by an onsite audit.

After the assessment of the applicant, the verifying body is reporting back to the awarding body and gives recommendations for awarding. If the applicant proofed his conformance to the set requirements in the assessment, the awarding body grants certification.

Applicant

The nature of the applicant depends on the target audience the awarding body and its funding body aimed the certification program at. A basic division in applicants of ecotourism certification programs can be made between “providers of tourism products (such as hotels, airlines, attractions and destinations) and distribution channels (travel agents and tour operators).” (Buckley, 2001)

In some cases a fee has to be paid by the applicant for certification. To ensure no financial relations exist between the applicant and the verifying body, the verifying body is compensated by the awarding body.

Tourism Market

The tourism market includes any person or organisation interested in purchasing a product from the applicant. In order to successfully market the ecotourism certification program to the tourism market, it is important to gain the market’s recognition and acceptance (as explained in section 2.2.2). Only if the tourism market is aware of the existence of the certification program and trusts the program’s recommendations, the certification program works effectively.

2.4.3 'Certifying the Certifier' - Accreditation in sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification

Sustainable tourism certification and ecotourism certification became extremely popular over the last two decades. In the ecotourism certification sector alone, more than 100 certification programs were identified by the WTO in 2007 (Diamantis, 2004). Despite the growing amount of certification programs there is no official global agreement for the design of certification programs in the tourism industry.

As explained in section 2.2.2 any successful tourism certification program should form part of conformity assessment. Currently certification programs in the tourism industry only include the elements of setting standards, assessment and certification. Accreditation, the certification of the certifier, is not practiced in tourism certification (figure 16).

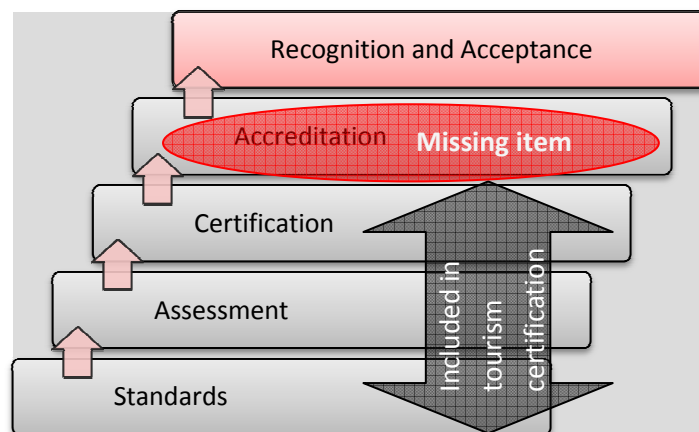


Figure 16: Conformity assessment in the tourism industry

The Rainforest Alliance analysed that “the lack of a global accreditation body has become one of the main obstacles in turning (tourism) certification into an effective tool for change” (Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, September 2005). Applying accreditation in the sector of tourism certification would enhance the chances of tourists’ recognition and acceptance of the various certification programs. Currently, the consumer is lost in the multiplicity of certification programs. Without an extensive study of the various methods applied on setting standards and assessment- and certification-methods used by a certification program, the consumer is unable to detect which certification program is meeting his needs. The large quantity of certification programs, of which some deliver poor results concerning quality and sustainability of their certified products, confuse and disorient the vast majority of consumers which could eventually lead to a loss of consumer’s trust in certification.

The tourism industry, involved in sustainability and certification, detected this arising problem already in the late 1990s. An initiative, lead by the Rainforest Alliance, studied the issue of accreditation in sustainable and ecotourism certification programs and concluded that there is an immediate urge for a global accreditation body in tourism certification. (MacLaren, 2007) In the year 2001 the Rainforest Alliance launched their project,

called 'Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council' (STSC). In the launch event the program's importance was highlighted:

"In recent years the tourism industry has seen a proliferation of ecolabels and environmental programmes. The industry and the consumer have become confused about the quality of many programmes. The STSC initiative aims to work with the tourism industry, the myriad of certification agencies world-wide and NGOs to develop a global accreditation body that will act as a 'certifier of the certifiers', raising the standards of tourism ecolabels and providing the consumer -- the tourist -- with a sound basis for choosing an environmentally and socially responsible holiday." (Sanabria, 2001)

Even though the project team of the 'Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council' includes highly talented professionals, such as Xavier Font, the project delivered little results until now (Sanabria, 2001). It proved to be a time-consuming and sensitive subject to develop an accreditation program for the tourism industry. The mere quantity of certification labels in sustainable tourism and ecotourism, of which all believe to have the most feasible approach on certification, makes it difficult for the stewardship council to obtain consensus about the criteria upon which certification programs should be evaluated.

2.4.4 Critical success factors of any sustainable and ecotourism certification program

As discussed in the previous section, there is no global accreditation body in place yet, which assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of certification programs in sustainable and ecotourism. There are however, internationally acknowledged principles and elements, which any certification program in sustainable and ecotourism should encompass.

In November 2000, a workshop on sustainable and ecotourism certification programs took place at the Mohonk Mountain House in New York State, USA. 45 tourism certification specialists, originating from 20 countries, attended the workshop and discussed about the subject of certification in sustainable tourism and ecotourism. (MacLaren, 2007) The result of this workshop was a document that sets “general principles and elements that should be part of any sound ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification program” (Workshop, 2000), named after the place the workshop took place; Mohonk Agreement.

The Mohonk Agreement is divided into three main sections, firstly giving an overall framework for certification in the tourism industry, secondly giving criteria for sustainable tourism certification programs, and thirdly giving additional criteria for ecotourism certification programs.

An extraction of the most relevant principles of the Mohonk Agreement can be found below (the full version of the Mohonk agreement can be found in the appendix):

Extract from the Mohonk Agreement

“1. Certification Scheme Overall Framework

Basis of Scheme

- The development of a certification scheme should be a participatory, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral process
- The scheme should provide tangible benefits to tourism providers and means for tourists to choose wisely
- The scheme should provide tangible benefits to local communities and to conservation
- The scheme should set minimum standards while encouraging and rewarding best practice
- The scheme should be designed such that there is motivation for continual improvement—both of the scheme and of the products/companies to be certified

Criteria Framework

- Criteria used should meet and preferably exceed regulatory compliance
- Criteria should embody global best practice environmental, social and economic management

- Criteria should be adapted to recognizing local/regional ecological, social and economic conditions and local sustainable development efforts
- Criteria should be principally performance-based and include environmental, social and economic management process elements

Scheme Integrity

- The certification program should be transparent and involve an appeals process
- The certification body should be independent of the parties being certified and of technical assistance and assessment bodies
- The scheme should require audits by suitably trained auditors

2. Sustainable Tourism Criteria

Overall

- Environmental planning and impact assessment has been undertaken and has considered social, cultural, ecological and economic impacts
- Environmental management commitment by tourism business
- Staff training, education, responsibility, knowledge and awareness in environmental, social and cultural management
- Accurate, responsible marketing leading to realistic expectations

(Furthermore social/cultural, ecological and economic principles have been formulated in the Mohonk Agreement.)

3. Ecotourism Criteria

- Focus on personal experiences of nature to lead to greater understanding and appreciation
- Interpretation and environmental awareness of nature, local society, and culture
- Positive and active contributions to conservation of natural areas or biodiversity
- Economic, social, and cultural benefits for local communities
- Fostering of community involvement, where appropriate
- Minimal impact on and presentation of local (indigenous) culture” (Honey, 2002)

2.5 Collaboration and Partnerships

Tourism is an industry characterised by its diverse range of stakeholders. Rarely one company controls all components of a tourism product. Vertical integration, “the acquisition and ownership by one organisation of all or part of a tourism distribution channel” (Mill, et al., 2002)” and horizontal integration, “the acquisition and ownership of similar businesses by one organisation in the tourism distribution channel” (Mill, et al., 2002) are rarely found in the tourism industry to a full degree. And thus, in order to offer tourists a comprehensive tourism product, in which all elements, from transportation to accommodation and activities at the destination are included, different fragments of the tourism industry have to have some degree of cooperation. In order to manage fragmentation in the tourism industry, “intra-industry co-operations” (Bramwell, et al., 2000) have been founded, such as the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), which form a platform for tourism organisations to cooperate with each other.

Partnerships however, go beyond cooperation. Parties involved in a tourism partnership can origin from different sectors, however, work together on achieving a common goal.

Partnerships in tourism

“The term partnership is used (...) to describe regular, cross-sectoral interactions between parties based on at least some agreed rules or norms, intend to address a common issue or to achieve a specific policy goal or goals.” (Bramwell, et al., 2000)

Especially in tourism planning and development partnerships are of growing importance. It is believed that by bringing together different stakeholders, their knowledge, expertise and experiences, as well as their human and financial capital, can design a competitive advantage for the whole destination or issue. (Bramwell, et al., 2000) Partnerships in tourism planning and development can mainly be of two natures: they can “bring together interests in the same destination but in different sectors, or else parties in different destinations but with mutual interests in one issue or related issues.” (Bramwell, et al., 2000)

Each tourism stakeholder possesses a certain level of resources such as knowledge, expertise, and human and financial capital. However, in order to reach a certain goal, these resources might be insufficient. For this reason it might be feasible for the stakeholder to form a collaboration or partnership with other stakeholders aiming at achieving the same goal. Through this partnership of stakeholders aiming to reach a common goal, mutual benefits can be delivered to the various stakeholders. A selection of potential benefits of collaboration and partnerships in tourism planning are listed below:

Potential benefits of collaboration and partnerships in tourism planning	Potential problems of collaboration and partnerships in tourism planning
“The involvement of several stakeholders may increase the social acceptance of policies, so that implementation and enforcement may be easier to effect.	“Collaborative efforts may be under-resourced in relation to requirements for additional staff time, leadership and administrative resources.
More constructive and less adversarial attitudes might result in consequence of working together.	Those stakeholders with less power may be excluded from the process of collaborative working or may have less influence on the process.
The parties who are directly affected by the issues may bring their knowledge, attitudes and other capabilities to the policy-making process.	Power within collaborative arrangements could pass to groups or individual with more political skills.
A creative synergy may result from working together, perhaps leading to greater innovation and effectiveness.	Some key parties may be uninterested or inactive in working with others, sometimes because they decide to rely on others to produce the benefits resulting from a partnership.
Partnerships can promote learning about the work, skills and potential of the other partners, and also develop the group interaction and negotiating skills that help to make partnerships successful.	Some partners might coerce others by threatening to leave the partnership in order to press their own case.
Parties involved in policy-making may have greater commitment to putting the resulting policies into practice.	The need to develop consensus, and the need to disclose new ideas in advance of their introduction, might discourage entrepreneurial development.
There may be greater consideration of the diverse economic, environmental and social issues that affect the sustainable development of resources.	Involving a range of stakeholders in policy-making may be costly and time-consuming.
When multiple stakeholders are engaged in decision-making the resulting policies may be more flexible and also more sensitive to local circumstances and to changing conditions.” (Bramwell, et al., 2000)	The complexity of engaging divers stakeholders in policy-making makes it difficult to involve them all equally.” (Bramwell, et al., 2000)

Figure 17: Potential benefits and problems of collaboration and partnerships in tourism planning (Bramwell, et al., 2000)

2.6 Conclusion of chapter two

In this chapter it was explored that certification programs in the sustainable tourism industry consist of several elements. It is not only the certification process itself influencing the success of a program, but also quality of the product, its sustainable and ecotourism measurements, its communication with and thus acceptance of the market and its communication with its partners.

Tourism certification programs can be divided into three broad categories: conventional tourism certification programs, sustainable tourism certification programs and ecotourism certification programs. Certification cannot be seen as a single activity, but rather in the context of conformity assessment, consisting of multiple steps, leading to the ultimate goal of any certification program: consumer recognition and acceptance.

It was further detected that there are different methods existing to set standards, conduct assessment and certification. This section will conclude with the methods which are the most effective tools for a specific goal. A framework will be given, identifying factors influencing a certification body in choosing for methods of setting standards, conducting assessment and certification.

Based on theoretical research findings on certification programs in sustainable tourism and ecotourism, a matrix could be created showing the relations between method of certification and assessment (figure 18).

		Assessment		
		<i>First-Party assessment</i>	<i>Second-party assessment</i>	<i>Third-party assessment</i>
Certification	<i>First-Party certification</i>	Questionable		
	<i>Second-party certification</i>		Efficient	
	<i>Third-party certification</i>			Very efficient

Figure 18: Matrix: Relation of certification method and assessment method

First-party assessment and certification are the weakest tools to carry out a certification program, because both solely rely on the first-party’s judgement about his performance. Even though second-party assessment and certification can be valued as an efficient tool form a certification program, the most efficient tool for a certification program is third-party assessment and certification, because in this process an unbiased third-party carries out the assessment and the awarding body of certification has no financial interest in the certification of a certain product.

In chapter two explanations were given on which elements a certification program consists of, which stakeholders play important roles in a certification program. An analysis was done on which critical factors are influencing the success of a certification program. Theory which has been reviewed concentrated on the already existing certification programs. However, the question remains how certification program are being designed from scratch. Which are the first steps when a certification program is being developed? Which elements have to be decided upon?

In general tourism certification programs are developed because of a specific aim or need that arises. In the case of Ecotourism Australia for example, during a general tourism conference in 1991, a group of tourism professionals with a strong background in sustainable tourism, determined that the Australian tourism market was in need of an independent and non-partisan body, which would provide leadership in the development of the sustainable tourism industry. Shortly after the conference, Ecotourism Australia was founded, with the aim to provide the industry with clear guidelines for sustainable tourism operations (Ecotourism Australia, 2008). In the case of the PAN Parks Foundation the need to support nature protection throughout Europe is that specific aim.

But the question remains which actions have to be taken after the initial arise of a specific aim or need. Unfortunately no sources and models could be found to answer this critical question. Therefore a model is developed which outlines general steps in the development of a certification program (figure 19).

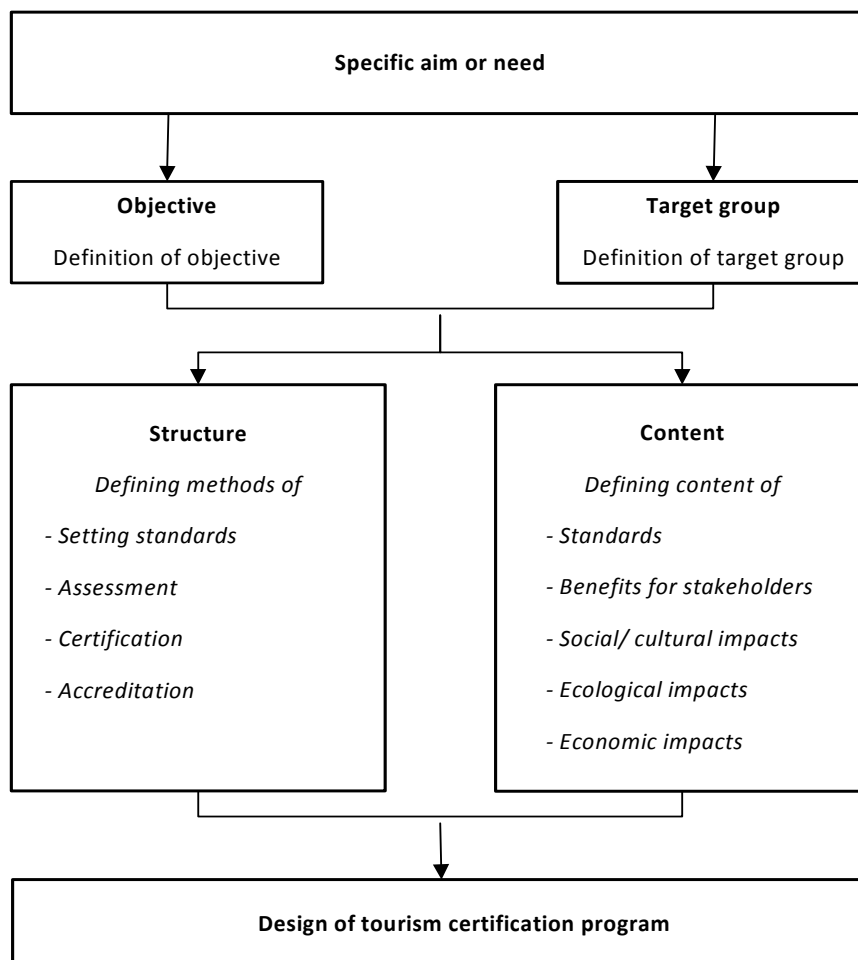


Figure 19: Certification program development model

After a specific aim or need was identified by a group of individuals, an organisation, an association or a special interest group, objectives have to be set and the target group of the certification program defined. The definition of objectives and the target group form the basis of certification program's development. These three elements are subject to the Funding Body's perspective and therefore no theoretical requirements can be applied on these elements. Nonetheless the requirement for these elements is that they should be defined in a way making them feasible to form the basis for the elements of structure and content. Objectives should be defined following SMART principles; **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**imed. (Masterson, et al., 2004) After the definition, the core of the certification program will have to be determined. The core body of the development of a certification program consists of two separate but interrelated subjects; the structure of the certification program and the content of the certification program. Items included in the structural development of a certification program were derived from the model of conformity assessment developed by Martha Honey. In this section methods of setting standards, assessment, certification and accreditation have to be defined. The second part of the core body is dedicated to the definition of content related issues and is derived from the Mohonk Agreement. The certification program's content of criteria, benefits for stakeholders, social/ cultural impacts, ecological impacts and economical impacts have to be defined. After structural methods and content have been defined the core of a certification program has been designed. However, management issues, such as financing, organisational structure and organisational responsibilities will still have to be defined.

CHAPTER THREE: The PAN Parks Foundation and its Certification process

3.1 Introduction to chapter three

In chapter three an introduction will be made to the PAN Parks Foundation's methods of operation. The organisational structure of the PAN Parks Foundation will be explained and partnerships investigated. A detailed analysis will be made of PAN Parks certification program with a special focus on the certification program of local business partners.

3.2 The PAN Parks Foundation

3.2.1 Introduction to PAN Parks

PAN Parks stands for Protected Area Network Parks. The PAN Parks initiative was founded in 1997 by the WWF Netherlands (World Wide Fund for Nature Netherlands) in cooperation with the Dutch tourism company Molecaten. PAN Parks was founded with the aim to increase management efficiency in European protected areas and at the same time raise awareness of Europe's last wilderness among the public. Even though the European continent offers a broad diversity of true wilderness, the public awareness about this forgotten natural and cultural heritage is extremely low. PAN Parks' goal is to offer a concrete tool to protected area managers on long-term nature protection, as well as sustainable tourism strategies to improve the economic situation within the park and its surroundings. (PAN Parks)

PAN Parks tries to build a successful symbiosis of nature protection and sustainable tourism, by forming a platform for all stakeholders involved. Therefore, PAN Parks works closely together with national parks, local communities and businesses in proximity of the national parks, international nature conservation organisations and tourism organisations. It is PAN Parks' aim to combine the interests of all parties involved, in order to provide the national parks with a secure long-term nature conservation strategy and the local stakeholders with positive economic benefits. (PAN Parks)

Between the years 1997 and 2002 PAN Parks formulated their core criteria, upon which protected areas are certified as PAN Parks. PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C) cover the areas of:

- natural values (P&C one),
- habitat management (P&C two),
- visitor management (P&C three),
- sustainable tourism development strategy (STDS) (P&C four),
- business partners (P&C five).

The PAN Parks Foundation's initial aim was to support and enhance nature protection focussing on lesser-known destinations with rural characteristics. For the assessment of the protected area the P&Cs one to three have been formulated. After the formulation of the P&Cs one to three, the first PAN Parks located in Finland, Poland and Sweden were certified in 2002. (PAN Parks)

Only at a later stage tourism has been identified as an important factor to the overall success of the program and thus has been included in the certification program with the P&Cs four and five as addition to the three existing P&Cs. PAN Parks is the only certification program worldwide which certifies protected areas and at the same time tourism enterprises. In fact, PAN Parks delivers a certification program which normally is managed by two different parties; one certifying protected areas such as Natura 2000 and one certifying sustainable or ecotourism enterprises such as Ecotourism Australia.

Over the last years, and after further improvements of the P&Cs one to five, PAN Parks to present certified ten national parks within Europe as PAN Parks, covering a total area of 590.503 ha. (PAN Parks) One third of the total PAN Parks area is designated as 'wilderness area', in this core zone no human activities are permitted, besides maintenance or restoration. The non-fragmented wilderness area is designed to give space to fauna and flora, as well as giving visitors the freedom for a true wilderness experience.

From PAN Parks' head office in Győr (Hungary) National Parks' applications are being processed. A national park wanting to be certified as a PAN Park has to fulfil all of 'PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C)'. Throughout the application process, parks are regularly assessed by independent verifiers, specialised in the field of nature conservation. Certification of PAN Parks is divided into three steps:

1. certification of the protected area (covering principles one to three)
2. the 'Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy' (principle four)
3. and local business partners (principle five)

First, the protected area is assessed. If the P&C regarding the protected area are fulfilled, the prospect PAN Park is asked to form a 'Local PAN Park Group (LPPG)'. The LPPG has to represent all key stakeholders from the area. It is the LPPGs task to formulate a 'Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS)'. In the later stage of the STDS, the management of local business partners has to be determined. It is aimed that the certified PAN Parks work closely together with local enterprises. The parks' LPPGs have to set criteria with which local businesses have to conform to be rewarded as a 'Local Business Partner' (LBP). Set criteria should cover fields, such as environmental practices, quality control, visitor experience and education, staff's environmental education and social responsibility. As part of the certification the certified NP as well as the LBP is under regularly control to insure a steady level of quality.

PAN Parks' vision

“Rushing wild rivers, ancient forests, towering mountains; in Europe there is a jungle, indeed there are many. Bears, wolves, eagles and bison live in these jungles, Europe's national parks. And yet, most Europeans are unaware of all but a few well-known forests and mountain ranges. The lack of awareness is reflected in a lack of investment, institutional resources, and pride for these jewels of nature.

But these jungles are ours, and they must be preserved. WWF, the conservation organisation, in partnership with the Dutch leisure company Molecaten, have founded PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks. This initiative brings all stakeholders of Europe's wilderness areas together. It employs a comprehensive approach to meet the complex ecological and social needs of Europe's protected areas.

The PAN Parks logo represents a reliable and respected trademark for conservation management and sustainable development. It is a trademark for outstanding nature and high quality tourism facilities, well balanced with the needs of wilderness protection and community development.” (PAN Parks)

PAN Parks' mission statement

“PAN Parks Foundation co-operates with protected area managements and sustainable tourism businesses in order to make it possible for people to support, preserve, enjoy Europe's wilderness!” (PAN Parks)

3.2.2 PAN Parks organisational structure and PAN Parks partners

The PAN Parks Foundation is primarily operating from its head office in Hungary. Within the PAN Parks team, professionals are operating in their field of expertise (figure 20). The team is lead by Zoltán Kun, who is PAN Parks’ executive director.

<i>The PAN Parks team (January 2008)</i>	
Executive Director	Zoltán Kun
Conservation Manager	Vladivoj Vancura
Communications Manager	Gavin Bell
Business Development manager	Gerben Weening
Marketing and Research Officer	Mylene van der Donk
Finance and Office Supervisor	Helga Hoffmann
Tourism Development and Events Officer	Barbara Mayer

Figure 20: PAN Parks management team (January 2008)

PAN Parks has a diverse range of partners, ranging from founding partners to tourism partners. Part of PAN Parks’ goal to success is close relation with a broad range of commercial organisations, governmental institutions, NGOs and the general public.

As stated before, PAN Parks has two **founding partners**: WWF Netherlands and Molecaten. PAN Parks is and has been financially supported by WWF and works closely together with the Molecaten group on their PAN Parks Accommodation project.

Furthermore, PAN Parks works intensively together with its **protected area partners**. All certified PAN Parks are considered protected area partners: Bieszczady NP in Poland, Borjomi Kharagauli NP in Georgia, Central Balkan NP in Bulgaria, Fulufjället NP in Sweden, Majella NP in Italy, Oulanka NP in Finland, Paanajärvi NP in Russia, Retezat NP in Romania, Rila NP in Bulgaria and Archipelago NP in Finland.

PAN Parks further pays special attention to its **local partners**. Local partners are further divided in three separate groups: local government in the PAN Parks’ regions, non-governmental organisations and local business partners. Currently PAN Parks has 54 certified local business partners, which is expected to further increase in the coming years. Local Business Partners (LBP) are tourism related enterprises, which are in proximity to the PAN Parks and undergone certification with the Local PAN Parks Group. These enterprises are aimed to fulfil best-practices concerning environmental issues and at the same time deliver a high quality tourism product.

Also **conservation partners**, such as IUCN/WCPA, Europarc Federation and Large Herbivore Foundation and various **business partners**, such as Canon Europe are part of the diverse range of partners of PAN Parks

PAN Parks is extensively working on partnerships with tourism enterprises. PAN Parks has currently five **tourism partners**, operating from The Netherlands (SNP and Trailfinders), Germany (Exodus and Rucksack Reisen) and The United Kingdom (Newmarket Travel). PAN Parks is ambitious to extent their network of tourism partners, because it is the idea that PAN Parks tourism partners include Pan Parks areas in their list of products and if given include PAN Park's certified local business partners. (PAN Parks)

3.3 PAN Parks certification process

3.3.1 PAN Parks five dimensions of certification

“What is a PAN Park?”

A Pan Park represents a best-managed wilderness area in Europe. Through a quality standard process, it combines good conservation management with sustainable tourism development.” (PANParks, 2007)

PAN Parks developed a set of principles and criteria to assess whether a park is meeting sufficient management standards in the area of conservation and sustainable development and managing the certification process of local business partners. The so called ‘PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C)’ form the core of the PAN Parks project. The P&C cover environmental, social, economic and cultural subjects. There are five sets of principles and criteria:

Principle 1: Natural Values

Principle one of ‘PAN Parks Principles and Criteria’ focuses on the natural values of the applying park. Under this principle the applicant has to clearly defend their capacity to protect the area, either through an enforced act of decree or a private initiative. Furthermore the area’s importance has to be proven, showing that it offers excellent examples of Europe’s natural and cultural heritage as well as wildlife and ecosystems representative for Europe’s indigenous wilderness. Moreover, the area has to have a minimum size of 20.000 hectares.

Principle 2: Habitat Management

Principle two of ‘PAN Parks Principles and Criteria’ together with Principle three are aiming at investigating management processes implemented in the applying national park.

Under Principle two the park’s management has to deliver information about implemented regulations, their long-term conservation strategy in form of a management plan and monitoring strategies applied. The area should further be well managed in terms of zoning or similar effective methods; a minimum of 10.000 hectares of the park has to be zoned as a non-fragmented wilderness area, where no human activities are permitted, except for maintenance or restoration.

Human activities within the boundaries of the park, but outside the non-fragmented wilderness area, should be compatible with nature conservation goals. Human activities finding place outside the park’s boundaries, should not negatively impact conservation goals set for the park.

Furthermore the park’s management should pay special attention to the protection of threatened and/or endemic species and habitats.

Also, training programs on conservational issues should be made available to the park's staff or others involved.

Principle 3: Visitor Management

Principle three is investigating the park's visitor management. The park is required to have an implemented visitor management plan, which is monitored and assessed on a regular basis.

Through the visitor management plan, visitors should be provided with a high-quality experience, adequate facilities and activities confirm with conservational goals. The visitor management plan should aim at creating an appreciation for nature and the visitor's support for the conservation goals of the park.

Principle 4: Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS)

Principle four is a multi-stakeholder principle, which exceeds the National Park's responsibility. Under the P&C four, a Local PAN Park Group (LPPG) has to be formed, consisting out of representatives from the Protected Area administration and relevant partners in the PAN Parks region. It is the Local PAN Park Group's responsibility to develop, implement and monitor a 'Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy', as well as designing a verifying system for local business partners. The 'Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy' sets standards for all tourism activities in and around the National Park, ensuring that existing as well as planned tourism activities are meeting sustainable standards. The Local PAN Parks Group is looking at issues, as carrying capacity, sustainable use of natural resources and sustainable use of socio-economic resources.

Principle 5: Business Partners

Principle five focuses on PAN Parks local business partners. PAN Parks' business partners are obliged to be committed towards sustainable tourism and are required to implement and actively support the PAN Park region's 'Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy'. All business partners are obliged to be registered as a commercial business, comply with relevant national and regional legislation and comply with the highest national or international standards of environmental management. The precise criteria applied upon local business partners are being determined by the LPPG. (PAN Parks, January 2007)

Every applying National Park has to undergo certification according to the set 'PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C)'. The assessment of the protected area is being carried out by independent verifiers. There are three phases in the certification process of an applicant:

Phase one: Certification of the protected area (covering principles one to three)

Through desk assessment and field trips, independent certifiers assess whether the applicant is meeting the set criteria.

Phase two: The ‘Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy’ (principle four)

After the certification of the protected area, the focus is put on a sustainable tourism development in and around the area. In this second phase of certification, a multi-stakeholder workgroup has to be formed, the so called ‘Local PAN Parks Group’ (LPPG). The LPPG consists of members of the National Parks management and relevant local actors. It is the responsibility of the LPPG to develop a ‘Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy’ (STDS). After its completion the STDS is assessed by PAN Parks’ independent verifiers, if necessary recommendations for improvement are being given to the LPPG.

Phase three: Local business partners (principle five)

Criteria applied on local business partners form part of the ‘Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy’ (STDS). Every PAN Parks applies their own set of criteria upon local business partners. In the final phase of certification the ‘Local PAN Parks Group’ (LPPG) has to formulate the certification program of PAN Parks’ local business partners. The certification program is also being assessed by PAN Parks’ independent verifiers upon its efficiency and effectiveness. (PAN Parks)

3.3.2 Certified PAN Parks

In January 2008 PAN Parks had a total number of ten certified parks, all located within the boundaries of the European continent. The first three National Parks were certified in 2002: Bieszczady National Park located in Poland, Fulufjället National Park in Sweden and Oulanka National Park in Finland. Further Certification of seven parks located in Georgia, Bulgaria, Italy, Russia, Romania, Finland and Bulgaria followed in the years after. All PAN Parks are located in rural areas, where additional employment and income generated from tourism are an opportunity for the local population. Therefore the successful implementation of the P&Cs four and five are not only of importance to the PAN Park Foundation, but also to the tourism entrepreneurs located in proximity of the certified Pan Parks.

All ten certified PAN Parks are different in characteristics. However, all parks fulfil the requirements set in 'PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C)'. As for example, that all PAN Parks have a minimum size of at least 20.000ha, ranging from the smallest PAN Parks Bieszczady NP in Poland with an area size just over 29.000 ha to the largest PAN Park Paanajärvi NP located in Russia with over 100.000 ha. Furthermore, all PAN Parks fulfil the requirement of having a wilderness zone of at least 10.000 ha. In some PAN Parks, the wilderness zone even covers over half of the National Park's area.

PAN Park	Country	Area (ha)	Wilderness zone		Number of visitors	PAN Parks Verification	Local partners
			ha	%			
Bieszczady NP	Poland	29.202	18.425 ha	63,10 %	250.000	2002	8
Borjomi Kharagauli NP	Georgia	76.000	50.325 ha				0
Central Balkan NP	Bulgaria	71.669	21.019 ha	29,32%	25.000	2003	12
Fulufjället NP	Sweden	38.414	22.140 ha	60,00 %	40.000	2002	10
Majella NP	Italy	74.095	16.200 ha	22,00 %		2005	5
Oulanka NP	Finland	27.720	15.027 ha	36,07 %	150.000	2002	13
Paanajärvi NP	Russia	104.000	30.000 ha	96,00 %	10.000	2005	0
Retezat NP	Romania	38.138	14.215 ha	37,27%	22.000	2004	0
Rila NP	Bulgaria	81.046	16.350 ha	37,27%	22.000	2004	6
Archipelago	Finland	50.219	10.600 ha				

Figure 21 Certified PAN Parks January 2008

Even though all PAN Parks fulfil the same criteria, differences between the parks are enormous. This is of specially concern regarding the subject of this thesis, the implementation of the P&C five, covering the certification management of local business partners. In some destinations, such as Majella National Park, a long history of cooperation with local entrepreneurs has been established long before its entry to the PAN Parks network (Majella, October 2007). In other PAN Parks, such as Paanajärvi NP in Russia, there are hardly any local entrepreneurs located in proximity to the park, due the area's rural character (Paanajarvi, May 2007). This example shows that the situations concerning local business partners vary greatly from park to park.



Figure 22: Map of all PAN Parks, December 2007

By analysing the various PAN Parks locations, it becomes visible that there is also an economic diversity existing between the countries the parks are located in. Especially in regard to the implementation of the P&C five, this has to be taken into consideration. Environmental practices effortlessly implemented in one country might cause tremendous economic challenges in other destinations.

For the further analysis of the problematic issue of PAN Parks' certification process of local business partners (LBP) and the later recommendations made on how to improve the certification process, the parks' diversities, their economic and cultural differences, as well as their dissimilar histories and practices, have to be taken into consideration. So that, ultimately a solution will be found, that is manageable and feasible for all certified parks and prospect PAN Parks.

3.4 PAN Parks certification process of local business partners (LBP)

3.4.1 Model of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners (LBP)

As explained in section 3.3.1 the execution of the certification process of PAN Parks' local business partners is the responsibility of the Local PAN Parks Group (LPPG). The LPPG is obliged to include a detailed description of the certification process, including set standards and methods of assessment in their Sustainable Tourism Strategy (STDS).

Despite the fact that set standards and methods of assessment in the certification process of local business partners differ in each PAN Park, there are general components in the certification process which are similar in each park. In figure 23 an adoption of the model 'key stakeholders in ecotourism certification' developed by X. Font and R.C. Buckley can be seen, which visualises PAN Parks' certification process of local business partners.

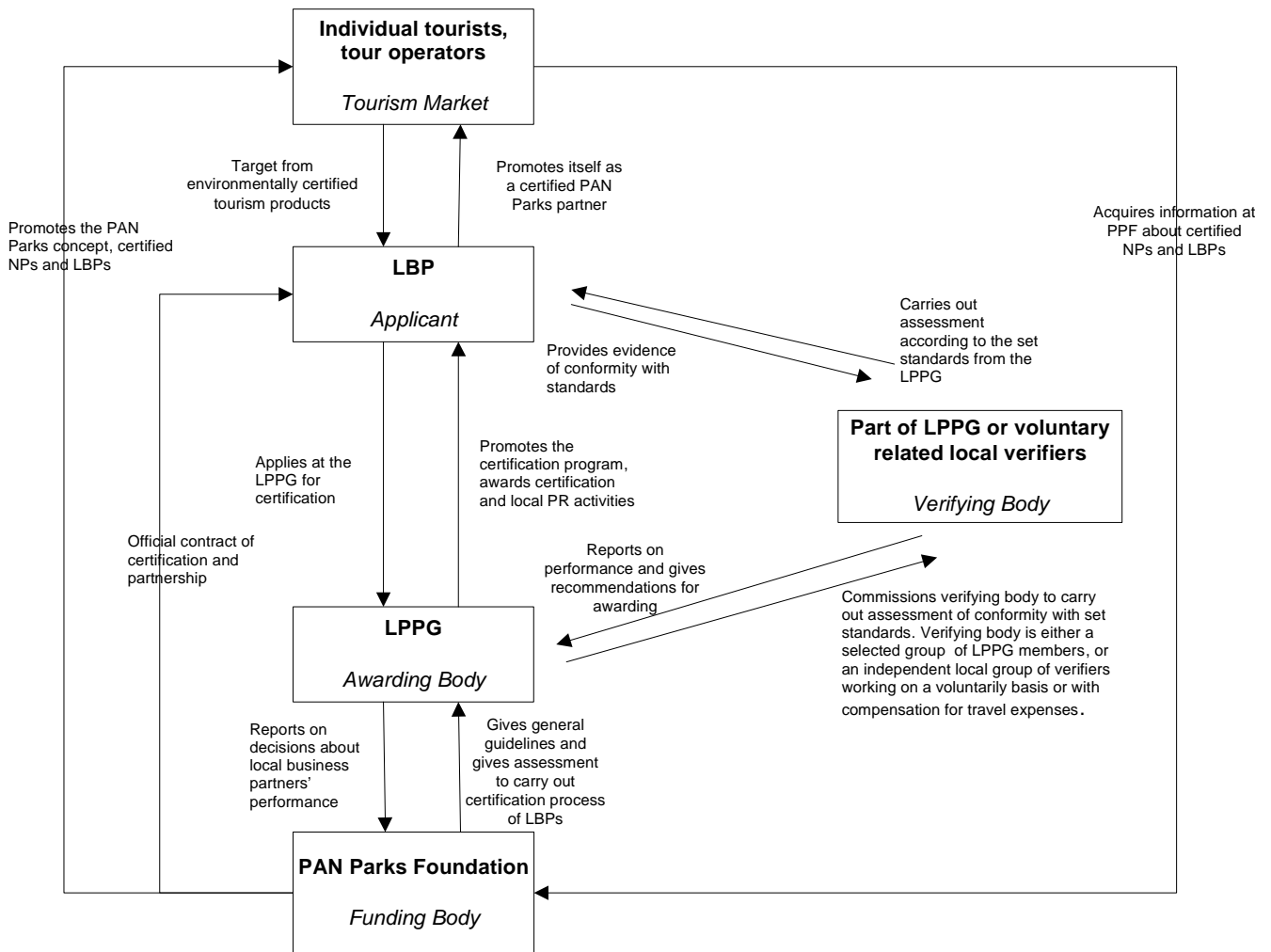


Figure 23: Key stakeholders in PAN Parks' certification of local business partners

In general five stakeholder groups are involved in the process of PAN Parks' certification of local business partners:

- *Tourism market:* **Individual tourists and tour operators**
- *Applicant:* **LBP**
- *Awarding body:* **LPPG**
- *Verifying body:* **Part of LPPG or voluntary related local verifiers**
- *Funding body:* **PAN Parks Foundation**

The relations between the five stakeholders will be analysed in detail below:

Relation: PAN Parks Foundation (*Funding body*) and LPPG (*Awarding body*)

The PAN Parks Foundation, as the funding body, addresses the LPPG to formulate the certification program of local business partners, also called P&C five. General guidelines for the formulation of standards are given by the PAN Parks Foundation (appendix IV), these however only cover very basic requirements and the LPPG has the duty to formulate extensive requirements which PAN Parks local business partners have to conform to. The LPPG further has to determine the method of assessment. After the formulation of the certification process has been assessed as sufficient by the PAN Parks Foundation, the LPPG is assigned to carry out the certification program.

The LPPG is expected to communicate results of certification activities to the PAN Parks Foundation.

Relation: LPPG (*Awarding body*) and LBP (*Applicant*)

It is the duty of the LPPG to promote the PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners in the region and to convince local tourism enterprises of the certification benefits. The LPPG operating in the Central Balkan National Park for example promotes the following benefits of certification:

- " 'Green' clients
- Contacts with famous European tour operators
- Access to the PAN Parks communication channels
- 'Green' image
- Collaboration with the park's administration" (Iliev, 2006)

When local tourism enterprises are interest in certification they can contact the LPPG for more information and eventually apply for certification. The LPPG is also responsible for commissioning and monitoring the assessment process of applicants. After the assessment, the LPPG informs the applicant about their performance in the assessment. However, the official certification contract is being signed between the applicant and the PAN Parks Foundation. After official certification of an

applicant it is the LPPG's responsibility keep in close contact with the certified business and to monitor the certified business's performance.

Relation: LPPG (*Awarding body*) and Part of LPPG or voluntary related local verifiers (*Verifying body*)

After the LPPG receives an application for certification, the LPPG commissions' assessment carried out by the verifying body.

The verification body is either a small group of LPPG members, or a group of local professionals chosen by the LPPG. Since the verification body consists of members of the LPPG or is in some way related, it cannot be spoken of an independent group operation separately from the LPPG. If chosen for a group of local professionals, mostly this does not consist of professional verifiers but of professionals with special skills in the areas of nature protection or tourism. In no case the verifying body is being paid for, except for the compensation of costs related to travel and accommodation.

In the PAN Park Central Balkan National Park, for example, three individuals from the LPPG carry out the assessment of an applicant. The group is neither paid by the Pan Parks Foundation nor by the LPPG for this job. Only a compensation for transportation and accommodation is given by the LPPG.

In the PAN Park Rila National Park, a small group of local verifiers is being commission with the assessment of local business partners. The group of local verifiers in Rila National Park consists of professionals operating in the field of nature protection and tourism and are related to the LPPG. As also practiced in Central Balkan National Park, the verifying body is only being compensated for costs generated from travel and accommodation.

On completion of the assessment, the verifying body reports to the LPPG on the performance of the local business. The verifier reports if the applicant conforms to standards and gives recommendations whether the applicant should be awarded with certification.

Relation: Part of LPPG or voluntary related local verifiers (*Verifying body*) and LBP (*Applicant*)

The verifying body carries out assessment according to the standards given by the LPPG. The local business partner provides the verifying body with relevant information.

Relation: LBP (*Applicant*) and PAN Parks Foundation (*Funding body*)

After the PAN Parks Foundation receives the outcomes of assessment from the LPPG in which the local business partner is being declared to conform to set standards, the PAN Parks Foundation awards the local business partner with certification and undergoes a certification contract with the enterprise.

Relation: PAN Parks Foundation (*Funding body*) and individual tourists and tour operators (*Tourism market*)

The PAN Parks Foundation promotes their certified PAN Parks and the certified local business partners to the tourism market. Reaching Individual travellers and tour operators is tried via fairs and the PAN Parks webpage. Tour operators are also contacted directly where the PAN Parks Foundation tries to promote PAN Parks and local business partners to the operators and convince them to include these in their packages. Therefore tourism partnerships with tour operators are of crucial importance.

Relation: LBP (*Applicant*) and individual tourists and tour operators (*Tourism market*)

In theory individual tourists should get attentive of PAN Parks local business partners by the PAN Parks Foundation's promotional activities. Tourists should feel assured of the certified business's quality and sustainable practices through the PAN Park certification. The local business partner should use his certification for marketing purposes and therewith attract tourists paying attention to sustainability issues. Later in this report the relation between local business partners and tourists will be analysed in more detail. Tour operators should be assured through the certification of the quality delivered by the business and should therewith prefer to work with theses business when visiting the region.

3.4.2 Analysis of the certification process of LBPs per National Park

Now that main stakeholders and their general relations in the certification process of local business partners have been identified, an analysis of the formulation of principle five of 'PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C)' can be given per National Park. In principle five the LPPGs formulate their management of local business partners and as discussed in the previous section, principle five differs from park to park. The information gathered in this section is of vital importance to the further study of the issue, since it gives an indication how principle five is managed in the various PAN Parks. Analysis on how efficiently the various PAN Parks formulated and implemented principle five of PAN Parks P&Cs is given.

Below a short summary on each park's formulation of principle five is given. The data upon which the below analysis has been made, was provided by Vladivoj Vancura, Conservation Manager at the PAN Parks Foundation. The analysis of the parks' formulated P&C five has been extracted from the parks' latest STDS versions upon which the parks gained certification. Further information used for this section is taken from panparks.org.

Bieszczady NP

In the Bieszczady National Park's an LPPG was founded in 2003. It consists of 22 members who represent stakeholders of the Bieszczady region. After two meetings had taken place in 2003, the STDS of the Bieszczady National Park still had to be formulated, including regulations on identifying, verifying and monitoring of business partners. Work on the STDS began in the first quarter of the year 2005. (Bieszczady, September 2004)

There are four certification schemes taken into consideration, which could possibly be used in the certification process of local businesses:

- Act of tourist services - categories of accommodation and licence guiding service; state controlled
- Classification of bed & breakfast "Galicyskie Association of Guests House Holds" – Bieszczady branch in Lesko
- In 2002 the Bieszczady Centre Certification and Promotion of Local Products was founded. It is aiming at collecting information on existing or potential local tourist products and creating top local products in different categories (food, handicraft, service, etc).
- In 2003 the NGO "Bieszczady Association of Wood artists" was founded. It focuses on gathering local wooden handicrafts, supporting them and promoting different products (sculptures, tools, house building, etc.) based on wood (Bieszczady, September 2004).

Borjomi Kharagauli NP

Borjomi Kharagauli National Park is in its early stage of PAN Parks' certification. So far there has no STDS been developed and there are no concrete plans on the management of local partners. (Dr. Steinmetzer, et al., April 2006)

Central Balkan NP

Principles one to five were certified by PAN Parks. In Central Balkan's STDS a general outline is being given, which states that a Local PAN Park Group will monitor local partners. However, there are no clear guidelines or criteria given in the STDS, which are applied upon local PAN Parks partners.

Fulufjället NP

In Fulufjället National Park, a Local PAN Park Group (LPPG) was formed to verify and monitor local business partners. The LPPG set their own standards, which local business partners have to fulfil. (Fulufjället, 2006) Although these criteria deliver local partners of high quality, a monitoring report made by Pan Parks independent verifiers in 2004 suggested an investigation of the possibility to implement the criteria of the Swedish eco-label 'Natures Best'. Currently the possibilities are investigated. (Fulufjället, 2006)

Majella NP

Majella National Park established close partnerships with local entrepreneurs already before their entrance to the PAN Park network. From 1997 onwards the park's authority granted their "logo to some services, handcraft and agro-food products (water, oil, honey, mushrooms, baked products, meat, vegetables, etc)." (Majella, October 2007) Majella National Park completed their proposal of principle four in October 2007 and certification is now pending. In order to fulfil requirements of principle five (the certification of local business partners), Majella National Park is aiming at improving their already existing set of criteria for local business partners and setting standards for each specific tourism segment, upon which local business partners will be certified. Currently a small number of local business partners have been granted with the PAN Park logo. However, this was done without an external certification of the local enterprises. Certification was handed out upon an agreement between the park's authority and the business, in which the local business guaranteed to run their enterprise in accordance with the park's goals. Local Business partners have to pay a fee to be member. (Majella, October 2007)

Oulanka NP

In the PAN Park Oulanka National Park, a multi-stakeholder group was formed, called Oulanka Cooperation Group. The group consists of representatives from Metsähallitus ("a state-owned enterprise that runs business activities while also fulfilling many public administration duties")

(Metsähallitus) in the wider region), the local municipalities, local people, the local tourism sector and NGOs active in the region. Oulanka Cooperation Group is an equivalent of LPPGs in other PAN Parks. The role of the LPPG is:

- to explain the sustainable tourism development strategy for businesses
- to attend to the certification, approval and monitoring of local partners
- to handle the approval of national and international partners and participate in monitoring

The certification of entrepreneurs is carried out by the local PAN Parks coordinator and the chairperson of Oulanka Cooperation Group.” (Oulanka Cooperation Group, October 2004)

Oulanka National Park’s LPPG set concise criteria for their local business partners. They furthermore developed a transparent application framework, which clearly states processes of application. (appendix I)

Paanajärvi NP

A Local PAN Park Group was founded in Paanajärvi National Park in October 2006. It consists of representatives from the local authorities, the administration of Paanajärvi National Park, local NGOs, and representatives of tourism businesses in the region. (Paanajarvi, May 2007) Paanajärvi National Park has been certified on criteria one to three in 2005. Principles four and five are still in the process of being developed. It is expected that Paanajärvi National Park will face problems finding local partners, since there are practically no potential tourism related partners in the area. This is caused by a “full absence of tourism infrastructure and first of all of roads, places of accommodation and catering facilities” (Paanajarvi, May 2007) in the wider Russian region.

Retezat NP

Retezat National Park is one of PAN Parks’ latest members to join the network. Retezat National Park has been successfully certified upon ‘PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators (P&C)’ one to three in the year 2004. (PAN Parks) This means, that the protected area itself passed certification, however, principle four and five, covering the ‘Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy’ and the certification program of local business partners are still in the process of development and certification will follow in the coming years. Retezat National Park is planning to handle certification of local business partners in cooperation with the Association of Ecotourism in Romania. It is planned that the set of criteria developed by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania will be applied upon all partners. Certification and monitoring of local business partners would therewith be outsourced to the Association of Ecotourism in Romania. (MacGregor, et al., November 2006)

Rila NP

Rila National Park passed certification of principles one to three, the certification of principles four and five are still in process. In Rila National Park a Local PAN Park Group has been set up. Rila National Park is currently engaged in developing a scheme for certification of local partners, which shows some interesting initial ideas. The LPPG drafted initial ideas on the general requirements local partners have to fulfil and the PAN Parks certification scheme of local business partners in Rila National Park will fulfil the following criteria:

- “Nature conservation
- Guarantee for the quality of services
- Sustainability of the products and services
- Conservation of the authentic way of life, local culture and traditions
- Sets a standard which is to be kept, sets fashion
- Give legitimacy in the sector
- Give more opportunities for to the local communities
- Provides opportunities for marketing and advertising
- Creates opportunities for professional information and consultations” (Rila, 2008)

3.4.3 Transparency issues in the certification of PAN Parks local business partners

Before drawing final conclusions on this section, the limitations of the data analysed has to be discussed. The analysis of section 3.3.1 has been done with the parks latest STDS versions.

The figure below has been designed with information given in the parks’ latest STDS versions provided by the PAN Parks Foundation and information displayed on PAN Parks’ webpage (www.panparks.org). It gives the name and location of the PAN Park and the parks’ state of certification. As explained in section 3.2.1 the certification process of a PAN Park consists of three phases: first the protected area is being assessed (P&C one to three), thereafter the park’s ‘Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy’ (P&C four) and finally the park’s certification process of local business partners (P&C five). P&Cs one to three are grouped, as well as the P&Cs four and five. The division has been made, because for this study the P&C four and five are of essential importance. The reader is being provided with the park’s year of certification (again divided into P&C one to three and P&C four and five), as well as the park’s latest STDS version.

PAN Park	Country	LBP	State of PAN Parks Certification		Year of certification of P&C 1-3	Year of certification of P&C 4-5	Latest STDS version
			P&C 1-3	P&C 4-5			
Bieszczady NP	Poland	8	✓	✓	2002	2005	2004
Borjomi Kharagauli NP	Georgia	0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	2006
Central Balkan NP	Bulgaria	12	✓	✓	2003	2004	2004
Fulufjället NP	Sweden	10	✓	✓	2002	2003	2003
Majella NP	Italy	5	✓		2005		2007
Oulanka NP	Finland	13	✓	✓	2002	2004	2004
Paanajärvi NP	Russia	0	✓		2005		2007
Retezat NP	Romania	0	✓		2004		2006
Rila NP	Bulgaria	6	✓		2005		2007
Total		54					

Figure 24 Process of PAN Parks Certification

Analysing the table, it shows that all PAN Parks passed certification of the P&Cs one to three except for Borjomi Kharagauli NP in Georgia(no data available), however only four parks passed certification of the P&C four to five (Bieszczady NP, Central Balkan NP, Fulufjället NP and Oulanka NP). This would consequently mean that Borjomi Kharagauli NP, Majella NP, Paanajärvi NP, Retezat NP and Rila NP could not have any certified local business partners. However, comparing the information on the state of certification with the information given on the distribution of local business partners, it becomes obvious that Majella NP and Rila NP do have local business partners, even though they are not certified upon the P&Cs four and five (figure 24). This would be a clear violation of PAN Parks’ regulations: a PAN Park can only have certified local business partners when passed certification upon the P&C four and five.

Due to this disaccord Vladivoj Vancura, Conservation Manager at the PAN Parks Foundation has been interviewed. Mr. Vancura reported that the information given on panparks.org was not up to date and updated the figure 24. After the update the figure is the following:

PAN Park	Country	Local partners	State of PAN Parks Certification		Year of certification P&C 1-3	Year of certification P&C 4-5	STDS latest version
			P&C 1-3	P&C 4-5			
Bieszczady NP	Poland	8	✓	✓	2002	2005	2004
Borjomi Kharagauli NP	Georgia	0	yes	yes	2006	2006	2007
Central Balkan NP	Bulgaria	12	✓	✓	2003	2004	2004
Fulufjället NP	Sweden	10	✓	✓	2002	2003	2003
Majella NP	Italy	5	✓	yes	2005	2007	2007
Oulanka NP	Finland	13	✓	✓	2002	2004	2004
Paanajärvi NP	Russia	0	✓	yes	2005	2007	2007
Retezat NP	Romania	0	✓	yes	2004	2006	2006
Rila NP	Bulgaria	6	✓	yes	2005	2007	2007

Figure 25: Process of PAN Parks Certification updated by Vladivoj Vancura

The figure above shows that all PAN Parks, in contrary to information given in the parks’ latest STDS versions and the information given on panpark.org, passed certification of all P&C s. While investigating this issue in more detail, it became apparent that the information given on panparks.org was outdated. Furthermore, Vladivoj Vancura reported that besides the certified PAN Parks write their STDS in the locally used language and only a summary of it is being given in English. This resolves in the fact, that only a general outline of the management of local partners is available in English. In some cases, parks further formulated their management process of LBPs, without including it into their latest STDS version. These extended documents are then only being shown and explained to the independent verifiers, who make the judgement about its efficiency and effectiveness. These documents are however not made available to the PAN Parks Foundation. A full evaluation of the parks’ certification process of local partners from an outsider’s point of perspective is therefore hindered. The example of Bieszczady NP will shows the issue in practice:

Bieszczady NP, located in Poland, has successfully been certified upon all P&Cs and has eight certified local business partners. The park has passed certification of the P&Cs one to three in 2002 and the certification of the P&Cs four to five in the year 2005. However, in their latest STDS version from 2004 it clearly states that, the STDS of the Bieszczady National Park still has to be formulated, including regulations on identifying, verifying and monitoring of business partners and that work on the STDS began in the first quarter of the year 2005. (Bieszczady, September 2004)

Despite the absence of a clear framework on the certification process of local business partners in Bieszczady NP’s latest STDS, an independent verifier’s monitoring report commissioned by the PAN Park Foundation from 2005 states: “Based on the documents reviewed, the sites visited and discussions held

during this and previous verifications, we believe that the Bieszczady National Park and its partners in the surrounding region are developing a sustainable model of tourism. The Draft Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy that was adopted in April 2005 is well supported by the stakeholders and presents a good framework for future cooperation and activities in the PAN Parks region.” (Strtih, 2005)

When consulting Vladivoj Vancura, the conservation manager of the PAN Parks Foundation, about the issue, he stated that the parks only give a summary of their STDS and the certification program of local business partners to the PAN Parks Foundation. Since the STDS is being written in the native language of the country, it would require too much time and human resources to fully translate the document. As a result, the draft version on Bieszczady NP’s Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy has only been made available to the independent verifiers in form of an oral summary and not the PAN Parks Foundation.

These practices make it difficult to full evaluate the certified PAN Park’s certification programs of local business partners. This is not only of concern to this thesis report, but also to the PAN Parks Foundation, certified PAN Parks and outsiders. The lack of transparency of the various certification programs of PAN Parks local business partners make it difficult to compare the effectives of the certification programs between the various PAN Parks.

3.5 Conclusion of chapter three

In chapter three the PAN Parks Foundation's operations were explained and analysed. It was explained that PAN Parks certification program consists of five dimensions divided into three different phases of certification, namely: certification of the protected area (covering principles one to three), the 'Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy' (principle four) and local business partners (principle five).

It was detected that design, management and monitoring of the certification program of Pan Parks local business partners is the responsibility of every certified park's Local PAN Park Group (LPPG). The LPPGs are provided with general guidelines about the certification program's design; however the group is free to choose methods and criteria which they believe suit best to their specific needs and requirements. It was further detected that the certification programs of local business partners vary between the various certified PAN Parks, however general structural common elements could be identified.

While analysing the structure of the certification program of local business partners the model 'key stakeholders in ecotourism certification' developed by X. Font and R.C. Buckley could be adopted to visualise PAN Parks' certification process of local business partners. In further research it was detected that PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners was not fulfilling the requirement of outsourcing the assessment to an independent third-party. It was identified that in general the assessment is being undertaken by either a part of the awarding body, namely the LPPG, or a group of professionals operating in the field of nature protection or tourism, which is in some way related to members of the LPPG.

Later, a more in-depth analysis of the various certification programs' contents was made. The analysis was conducted upon sources supplied by the PAN Parks Foundation and in the process of analysing it became apparent that information was outdated and to some degree missing. It was detected that LPPGs do not supply the PAN Parks Foundation with a full report of their certification process. Solely PAN Parks' independent verifiers are supplied with more detailed information while performing the assessment of P&C four and five.

It can be said that in the analysis of PAN Parks certification program several questionable issues were raised which require a more in-depth investigation:

- Limited control of the PAN Parks Foundation on certification processes of LBPs
- Lack of transparency, cause by language barriers and limited information transfer
- Lack of independent third-part assessment
- Different standards upon which PAN Parks local business partners are being certified between certified PAN Parks
- PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners is a certification program within a certification program

CHAPTER FOUR: APPLYING THE 'CERTIFICATION DEVELOPMENT MODEL'

4.1. Introduction to chapter four

Through the research of theory insight has been gained on which elements a tourism certification program consists of, important stakeholders and their relations were analysed as well as critical content related success factors. As a conclusion to chapter two the following model has been developed which gives a framework for the development of a certification program.

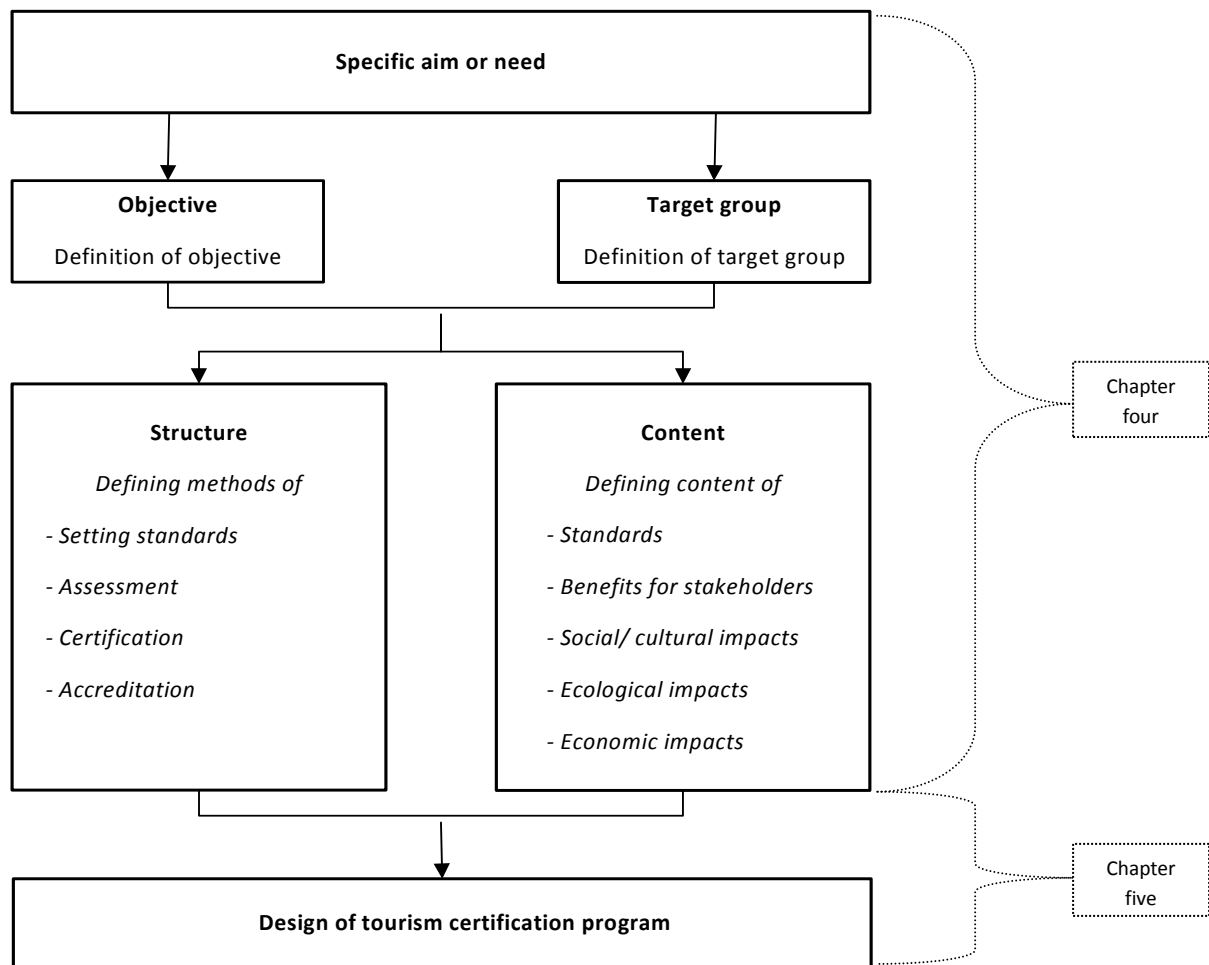


Figure 26: Framework for the design of chapter four and five

As shown in figure 26, chapter four will describe the arise of a specific need or aim for the development of PAN Parks certification program of local business partners, will name its objective and chosen target group. These three elements are subject to the Funding Body's perspective and therefore no theoretical requirements can be applied on these elements. Nonetheless the requirement for these elements is that they should be defined in a way making them feasible to form the basis for the elements of structure and content. Objectives should

be defined following SMART principles; **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**imed. (Masterson, et al., 2004)

The core body of the development of a certification program consists of two separate but interrelated subjects; the structure of the certification program and the content of the certification program. Items included in the structural development of a certification program were derived from the model of conformity assessment developed by Martha Honey. It will be analysed if PAN Parks' methods of setting standards, the assessment, certification and accreditation meet theoretical requirements. The second part of the core body is dedicated to the definition of content related issues and is derived from the Mohonk Agreement. PAN Parks' certification program's content of criteria and benefits for stakeholders will be analysed and it will be detected if theoretical requirements are met. An assessment of impacts is excluded from this study because these are currently subject to a research project done by PAN Parks and it would exceed the focus of this research project.

Chapter four's analysis and firsts recommendations of the structure and content of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners will form the basis for the development of an improved certification program in chapter five.

4.2 Arise of specific aim or need

In the year 1997 the Dutch leisure company Molecaten, which owns and operates “eleven vacation parks in the Netherlands, one park in Hungary, three luxury safari camps and two safari lodges in Africa” (Molecaten, 2008) had the initial idea to extend their business by establishing holiday villages in natural and rural areas located in Scandinavia, Eastern and Central Europe. Through further investigations it was discovered that the construction of these holiday villages and thus tourism development was highly welcomed and supported by the local population. It represented an opportunity for additional employment and income to the local population. Conservationists active in the regions however, were extremely sceptical and mostly opposed to any form of tourism development. The Molecaten Group, more specifically the managing director Cees Slager, then decided to cooperate with the Dutch conservation NGO WWF (Honey, 2002). WWF-Netherlands saw several opportunities in the cooperation:

- “It could benefit the communities near the parks through increased tourism business
- it could give the parks some bargaining power in efforts to cut back on illegal poaching and hunting
- and it could help protect the parks through improved management” (Honey, 2002).

From the need of these two parties the PAN Parks Foundation was established as a corporation between the Molecaten Group and the WWF-Netherlands in 1997.

4.3 Objective

Objective for PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners

“The objective (of PAN Parks' local business certification) is to create a framework for development of high quality and sustainable tourism products and to offer partners the privilege of using the PAN Parks logo in return for their commitment.” (PAN Parks, January 2007)

The certification of local business partners aims at creating a network of high quality tourism enterprises operating according to sustainable practices. PAN Parks' local business partner certification program aims at encouraging local enterprises in the field of tourism to operate according to, and to comply with sustainable standards. Certified local business partners are awarded with a certification logo and can use this for promotional activities. Additional value of certification is created by promotion to the domestic tourism market as well as the International tourism market by Pan Parks.

Analysing the objective of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners it becomes evident that these were not formulated according to SMART measurements.

When the objective of PAN Parks' local business partner certification program is formulated specific, stakeholders will know what to expect from the program and PAN Parks is able to monitor and assess actual performance against the specific objectives set. Defining an objective that is measurable will enable monitoring status of the defined objective. Formulating an objective achievable ensures it has been set in a realistic way and is reachable with the means available. Responsibilities are addressed to stakeholders capable of realising objectives. Relevant objectives should be in line with the organisation's overall vision and structure and give additional value. By adding a timeframe to an objective measurement of progress is enabled. Steps the objective consist of can be ranked to confine the timeframe within the objective has to be reached. (Masterson, et al., 2004)

4.4 Target group

"The target group of PAN Parks certification program of local business partners are legal enterprises that are committed to sustainable tourism located in proximity to certified PAN Parks." (PAN Parks, January 2007)

In general any legal enterprise operating in the field of tourism and which is located in proximity to a certified PAN Park can apply for certification. However, it is most common that local business partners are belong to one or more of the four different categories:

- Accommodation (Hotels, campsites, Bed & Breakfasts, pensions, etc.)
- Attractions (Visitor centres, museums, art galleries, etc.)
- Tours (Adventure tours, special interest tours, etc.)
- Restaurants (Restaurants, cafes, bistros, tec.)

The above defined target group of the PAN Parks Foundation is feasible so no recommendations are needed.

4.5 Structure

In the 'certification program development model' the element 'structure' is derived from the model of 'conformity assessment'. In its most basic essence conformity assessment aims at reaching consumer's recognition and acceptance. In the theory of conformity assessment, certification is not seen as a single activity but as a part of related activities which ultimately result in recognition and acceptance from the target market. As discussed in section 2.2.2, conformity assessment consists of five interrelated activities, starting with setting standards followed by the assessment where it is assessed if the applicant conforms to set standards, the actual certification where a written proof of conformity is being handed out by the certifier to the applicant, the accreditation where the certifier is being certified, all leading to the ultimate goal of recognition and acceptance amongst the tourism market.

In principle, the idea and methods of conformity assessment can be applied to PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners. Actually, the first three steps of a conformity assessment, namely setting standards, commissioning the assessment and undertaking the actual certification are all responsibilities of the various LPPGs. The LPPGs are responsible for their own local scheme of certification. The PAN Parks Foundation could be seen as the accreditation-body, which assesses if the certifier and methods of assessment are feasible and well implemented. Consumer recognition and acceptance are, as in any other conformity assessment program, the ultimate goal of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners. All steps involved in determining the structural part of developing a certification program according to the theory will be compared to PAN Park's local business partner certification program.

4.5.1 Setting standards

The set standards are the foundation of any certification program. Standards enable the certification body to measure the conformity of the suppliers' product, process, service or management system with the program's specified requirements. Well formulated standards are the key to a qualitative certification brand. As explained in section 2.2.2, there are three different methodologies which certification bodies can use to develop their standards: **prescriptive standards**, which "describe the way required characteristics can be achieved by prescribing how a product will be made and used or how a process will be accomplished" (Honey, 2002), **performance standards** which "describe what functional or operational characteristics are to be achieved but not how to accomplish them" (Honey, 2002) and **management system standards** which "specify the elements and processes of a model management system on the premise that such a system demonstrates the capabilities of a supplier" (Honey, 2002).

Currently, the PAN Parks Foundation requires that every certified PAN Park forms a Local PAN Park Group (LPPG) which is responsible for the design, implementation and monitoring of the certification program of local

business partners. Every LPPG is free to choose their method of setting standards. This results in different applied methods of setting standards in each PAN Park. PAN Parks' local business partners are therefore being assessed upon standards which make use of different methods. When different methods are used throughout the formulation of PAN Parks certification program of local business partners, LPPGs are unable to compare standards and learn from the expertise of others.

In order to create a conform method of settings standards, all LPPGs should be required to use the same method to develop standards. Standards of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners should be developed as performance based standards, where functional and operational characteristics to be achieved are described. Performance based standards leave room for the applicant's interpretation on how to achieve these functional and operational characteristics. PAN Parks' local business partners are situated in different economic regions therefore performance based standards give the opportunity to every local business partner to achieve functional and operational characteristics within their financial framework. The application of performance based standards in each LPPG's formulation of the certification program of local business partners will deliver more measurable and comparable standards for all involved stakeholders. A uniform method of setting standards enables the various LPPGs to compare their set standards.

4.5.2 Assessment

After having ensured that methods for setting standards are uniform, the question is 'who should assess if local business partners conform to set standards?'. As discussed in 2.2.2, there are three different methods of assessment. **First-party assessment**, where the supplier himself declares conformity, **second-party assessment**, where the consumer carries out the assessment and **third-party assessment**, where an unbiased and independent party not related to the supplier or purchaser carries out the assessment. (Honey, 2002)

PAN Parks' current method of assessment falls in none of these three categories. As it was visualised in figure 23 ('Key stakeholders in PAN Parks' certification of local business partners' page 50), the assessment is being carried out by either a part of the awarding body, or a group of voluntary related local verifiers.

To ensure having an unbiased opinion about the performance of a local business partner it is vital to make use of third-party assessment, where independent verifiers assess the tourism enterprises' conformity to set standards. An assessment undertaken by independent verifiers will give additional credibility to PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners.

4.5.3 Certification

As discussed in section 2.2.2, certification is the process where written assurance is being given on the conformity of the company, its products, processes, services or management systems with the specified requirement. (Honey, 2002) There are three different modes of certification identified in theory. **First-party certification**, also called supplier's declaration of conformance, where the first party self-certifies his company or product, **second-party certification**, where the consumer certifies the supplier or the supplier's product and **third-party certification**, where an unbiased and independent party not related to the supplier or purchaser certifies the applicant.

In PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners the actual certification is performed by a third-party, the LPPG. The LPPG is neither related to the supplier (LBP) nor the purchaser. As a result PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners can be classified as third-party certification.

4.5.4 Accreditation

In accreditation a reliable body officially accredits that the certifying body is capable of carrying out the process of certification. "In other words, an accreditation program certifies the certifiers". (Honey, 2002) Accreditation of a certification program gives additional credibility to the program and might increase its recognition and acceptance amongst the desired target group. However, as discussed in section 2.4.3, so far there is no officially recognised accreditation body established in the industry of tourism certification.

The general idea behind accreditation, namely 'certifying the certifiers', could be applied on PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners. And in principle this is already practiced: The LPPGs are the awarding body, who manage certification. Except for the official certification contract between the local business partners and the PAN Parks Foundation, the LPPG is of full control over the certification program. Therefore the PAN Parks Foundation is and further should act as an accreditation body, assessing whether the certifying body is capable of executing the management of the certification program.

4.6 Content

In the 'certification program development model' the element 'content' is derived from the 'Mohonk Agreement' which gives general content related requirements for an efficient and effective tourism certification program.

In this section it will be investigated whether PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners is meeting the requirements set in the "Mohonk Agreement". It will be looked at the content of standards and delivered benefits to stakeholders of the certification program.

4.6.1 Standards

The PAN Parks Foundation requires every certified PAN Park to formulate own criteria for the certification of local business partners. The consumer it is not aware that PAN Parks' local business partners are being certified with different measurements. However, local business partners are being equally promoted to the public. It is vital for the PAN Parks brand to have certified business partners of homogeneous quality. Tourists choosing for the PAN Parks experience should be able to expect the same quality from every local business partner. While researching the defined standards of the various LPPGs for the certification program of local business partners it became apparent that standards are not documented well. Outsiders and the PAN Parks Foundation could in no case be supplied with certification manuals stating standards upon which local business are being assessed. During field research it became clear that standards were mostly defined orally and that if hard-copies existed these were only available in the locally spoken language.

Therefore the PAN Parks Foundation should formulate general baseline standards to which every local business partner has to conform. The LPPGs should include these baseline standards in the formulation of standards and if needed or desired add locally feasible criteria.

When the PAN Parks Foundation is formulating overall baseline standards it is of vital importance to pay attention to the model developed by Ariane Janer on the "Hierarchy of tourist needs", which can be found in section 2.3.3. Although it might be argued that the model is incomplete, its core statement is of importance to the formulation of standards for the certification process of PAN Parks local business partners. The model states that before the tourist can concentrate on quality issues related to environmental and cultural sustainability, general needs have to be fulfilled. The PAN Park Foundation gives LPPGs guidelines for orientation while formulating standards for the certification program. Looking at the guidelines it becomes evident that it is mainly focuses on standards related to sustainable management, support of the protected area and tourist education about the natural and cultural setting (figure 27 and appendix IV).

PAN Parks guidelines of the formulation of standards of local business certification (summary of headings)

Criterion 5.1 - The PAN Park's business partner is committed to sustainable tourism, is registered as a commercial business and complies with all relevant national and regional legislation.

Criterion 5.2 - The PAN Parks business partner actively cooperates with the Local PAN Park Group to effectively implement the PAN Park region's Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.

Criterion 5.3 - The PAN Park's business partner supports the certified PAN Park and its conservation goals.

Criterion 5.4 - The PAN Park business partner complies with the high national/international or, at least the best possible standard for environment management.

Criterion 5.5 - The PAN Parks business partner provides special training to its staff.

Criterion 5.6 - The PAN Parks business partner respects the limitations of the destination and minimizes negative impact of its business on nature and culture.

Criterion 5.7 - The PAN Parks business partner supports the local economy

Criterion 5.9 - The PAN Parks business partner promotes the joy of local discovery, knowledge and respect.

Criterion 5.10 - The PAN Park's business partner considers safety and quality all the way through.

Criterion 5.11 - The PAN Parks business partner is using the services of or subcontracting only those partners whose practises do not cause environmental damage.

Figure 27: PAN Parks' guidelines for setting standards of local business partner certification

Only criterion 5.10 in PAN Parks' guidelines for setting standards of local business partner certification aims at the fulfilment of basic tourist needs. While setting recommended baseline standards the PAN Parks Foundation should ensure that the fulfilment of basic tourist is covered in more detail in the areas of:

- Safety and Health
- Accessibility
- Quality of experience

4.6.2 Benefits for stakeholders

This section it will concentrate on the benefits PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners delivers to certified businesses.

PAN Parks' local business partners are operating in rural areas. In general rural areas are characterised by lower standards of living than found in urban areas, a lower level of education, a low population density, migration of the young population resulting in low birth rates, limited capital available in the area and limited entrepreneur-ship, a preponderance of the agricultural sector with limited profitability and an absence or limitation of the secondary industry and service sector (Beunders, 2007). However, to a growing number of tourists "a rural region holds the promise of a more authentic experience – the chance to live among simple folk whose values are more 'true' than those of sophisticated urbanites" (Loverseed, 2007). To rural areas tourism represents an additional source of income and is therefore mostly welcomed by the local population.

Nonetheless, for entrepreneurs operating in proximity of certified PAN Parks it is rather difficult to reach the international tourism market. In a field research undertaken in the certified PAN Park Central Balkan National Park it has been investigated, if the local business partners' expected benefits were matching delivered benefits. The PAN Parks Foundation promises local business partners to deliver the following benefits from certification:

- "Contact with European tourism companies
- More nature based tourism
- Effective international marketing
- Support in development of tourism package
- Training services
- Proof of responsible business
- Access to experience of other businesses" (van der Donk, 2006)

Surprisingly, through in-depth interviews with local business partners it has been ascertained that the main reason of engaging in the certification program is the enhancement of the area's protection. Local business partners find the unspoilt character of the protected area and its preservation the main target, since it is the basic essence of their tourism product. Most tourists visiting the area are said to be attracted by the natural environment and the authenticity of the region. International tourist numbers are estimated to be below 10% of the total amount of visitors. Nonetheless, stakeholders in the area (such as local entrepreneurs and the National Park management) desire an increase of international visitor numbers and a greater international public awareness of the Central Balkan region. Local business partners also expect to gain more public awareness through the PAN Parks certification, domestically as well as internationally. Local business partners expected an increase of visitor numbers to the area and thus an increase of guest numbers in their facilities. A summary of in-depth interviews with local business partners in the Central Balkan National Park can be found below (figure 28). Six of the twelve local business partners were interviewed because the field-research took place in the pre-season not all local business partners were present. Local business partners in the Central Balkan National Park are far-scattered and in order to visit six local business partners a distance of over 550km was travelled.

The figure below summarises expected benefits of local business partners in Central Balkan National Park and secondly how benefits are perceived.

	Expected benefits	Experienced benefits
Benefits directed at common gain	Enhancement of the area's protection	Limited enhancement of area's long-term protection
	Networking/cooperation with other local business partners would increase	Better networking with other tourism enterprises in the region
	Strengthen relationship with National Park management	Strong relationship with National Park management
	Strengthen sustainable tourism development in the region	Inclusion of more stakeholders in the development of tourism in the region
	Increase of public awareness of the region, especially concerning the European market	No increase of public awareness of the region
Benefits directed at personal gain	Additional marketing tool, especially reaching international target group	Majority of tourists are not familiar with the PAN Parks certification brand
	Increase of number of tourists in the region	No increase of the number of tourist in the region could be experienced
	Increase of customers	No increase of customer numbers through the certification could be experienced
	Certification would represent a symbol of quality to tourists	No customer awareness of certification brand. When certified business explain concept, it serves as an additional value for customer
	Certification would represent a symbol of environmental quality to tourists	No customer awareness of certification brand, however when certified business explains concept it serves as an additional assurance of sustainable practices

Figure 28: Expected and perceived benefits of PAN Parks' certification of local business partners in Central Balkan National Park

Expected benefits which were named by local business partners can be grouped into two different fields of benefits: benefits directed at common gain and benefits directed at personal gain. It is noteworthy that expected benefits directed at common gain are fulfilled to a greater extent than benefits directed at personal gain. Local business partners said to be quite satisfied with the corporation between the National Park management and local business partners, as well as the corporation between local business partners and their involvement in decisions on sustainable tourism development in the region. Local business partners were dissatisfied with the marketing successes delivered by the certification program.

4.7 Conclusion chapter four

This chapter has been concentrating on the evaluation of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners comparing it to the 'certification program development model'. More specific, the structure and content of the certification program were analysed. Investigation showed that it is recommendable to the PAN Parks Foundation to create a uniform certification program for all local business partners. Until present PAN Parks' local business partners are being certified upon different standards. As a result PAN Parks' local business partners do not deliver a homogeneous level of quality. Despite this, PAN Parks' local business partners are promoted in a uniform way and the consumer is not aware that local business partners comply with different standards. Through certification of local business partners, consumers are promised a constant level of quality delivered from PAN Parks local business partners. In order to comply with this promise, the PAN Parks Foundation has to develop a uniform foundation for certification program for every PAN Parks' local business partner with baseline standards as a tool. The key to shape a uniform level of quality delivered from PAN Parks local business partners are the standards upon which enterprises are assessed. In this chapter it has been outlined that it is strongly advisable to formulate baseline standards upon which all local business partners will be assessed. These baseline standards should guarantee that basic tourist needs are fulfilled (such as safety and health, accessibility and quality). In addition to these baseline standards, LPPGs would formulate specific standards directed at local requirements. Further it is recommended that standards should be performance based, where functional and operational characteristics to be achieved are described. Performance based criteria are especially suitable for PAN Parks certification program of local business partners, since these leave room for the applicant's interpretation of how to achieve standards and are especially suitable for this certification program (applicants are located in areas with different financial means).

It was further investigated that third party assessment should be made use of, so that an unbiased and independent body assesses whether applicants conform to standards. Interviews showed that local business partners are rather satisfied with benefits of certification concerning networking with the protected area's management and their inclusion in decisions about sustainable development in the region. Local business partners are dissatisfied with benefits from certification regarding their personal gain. Local business partners expected an improvement of international marketing of their business and thus an increase of business. However, due to their opinion this expectation has not yet been met.

Chapter four investigated issues related to the structure and content of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners. With the research findings from chapter four an improved certification model will be developed in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction to chapter five

In chapter four structure and content of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners were investigated and recommendations for improvement were given. Chapter five concentrates on the management perspective of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners. Relations and responsibilities are investigated in detail and recommendations given. In chapter five a model will be developed upon which the PAN Parks Foundation will be enabled to design and implement improvements to their certification program of local business partners.

5.2 Identification of stakeholders and their relations in the improved certification program of PAN Parks' local business partners

Figure 29 introduces to the improved model of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners. In this first model general relations between the various stakeholders are shown.

The most central issue in the management of PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners is a lack of transparency. The PAN Parks Foundation has little insight into how the certification program is precisely managed and executed by the different LPPGs. Therefore it is difficult for the PAN Parks Foundation to identify if the various LPPGs are executing the certification program in an effective and efficient manner.

In PAN Parks' certification program of local business partners the LPPGs play a central role. The LPPGs are responsible for developing, implementing and monitoring the certification program of local business partners. Throughout the development of the certification program, the LPPGs receive guidance from the PAN Parks Foundation. After the certification program of local business partners has been fully developed it is being assessed by one of PAN Parks independent verifiers. After the certification program has been assessed as fulfilling PAN Parks' requirements, the LPPG is solely responsible for the implementation of PAN Parks certification program. From this point onwards the PAN Parks Foundation only commissions independent verifiers to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the certification program every five years.

As discussed earlier, an LPPG consists of stakeholders from the park management, local authorities, entrepreneurs and inhabitants. Members of an LPPG join voluntarily and do not get any financial compensation for their time invested. On average LPPGs meet not more than twice a year. Most LPPG members have limited spare time at their dispose. Further, as PAN Parks are located in rural areas distances between the locations of LPPG members can be rather far. In the case of Central Balkan National Park LPPG

members have to travel distances exceeding 300km in order to reach the point where the LPPG meeting is being held. Therefore, for LPPG members meetings do not only require an investment of time, but also a financial investment. In many cases it was expressed that the driving force behind LPPG meetings would be the management of the certified PAN Park itself. But also this body only has limited spare time at their dispose.

Summarising it can be said that in PAN Parks certification program of local business partners most responsibilities are directed to a group of stakeholders which has limited time, limited resources and a limited level of knowledge about certification programs. Through desk-research via the PAN Parks STDS and monitoring reports as well as through field research in the PAN Park Central Balkan National Park it has been investigated that the certification program of local business partners is missing a driving force. The executing body of the certification program is joining on a voluntary base and meetings are held on average only twice a year. Therefore the development, implementation and monitoring of the certification program are of a rather slow pace and the certification program is not working as efficiently as it should. A body is missing which can coordinate the whole certification program. Therefore it is recommendable to create a body which has sufficient time and means available to manage the coordination of PAN Parks certification program of local business partners. This coordinating body should be an elected person from the LPPG dedicated to the enhancement of sustainable tourism in the region. Below the nature and function of the LPPG Coordinator will be explained in detail.

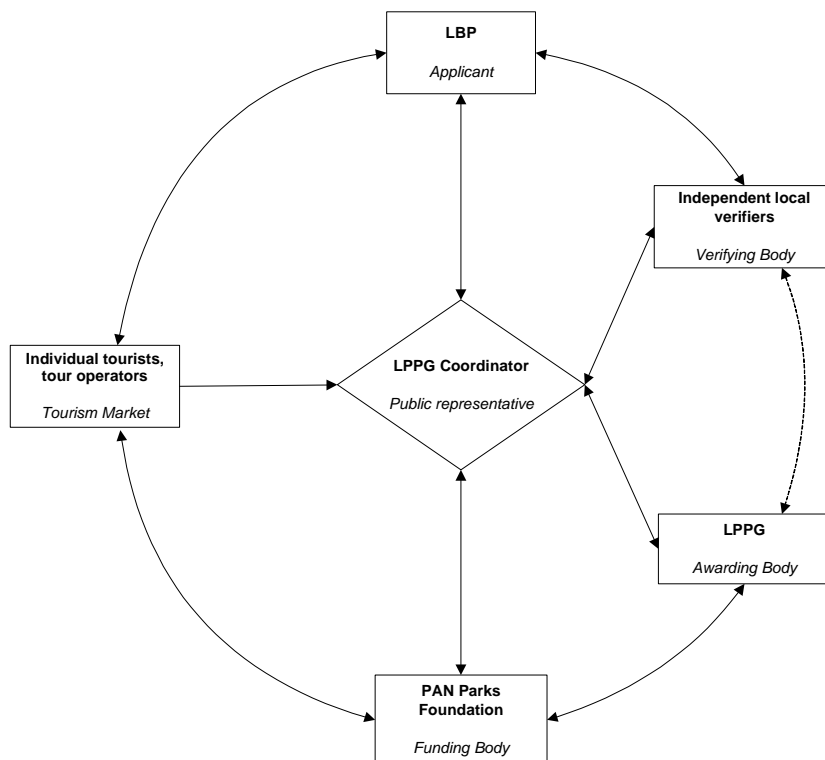


Figure 29: Key stakeholders' relations in PAN Parks improved certification program of local business partners

LPPG Coordinator

It is the main goal of the creation of a LPPG Coordinator to interconnect all stakeholders in the certification program. The LPPG coordinator should represent a main contact for all stakeholders and the general public. In every PAN Park a LPPG coordinator should be elected by the LPPG. In order to ensure that the LPPG Coordinator can dedicate sufficient time to the management of the certification program, this person should be contracted by the PAN Parks Foundation and get financially compensated for his work.

Summarising the LPPG Coordinator should:

- be a LPPG member
- be elected by the LPPG and accepted by the PAN Parks Foundation
- not be a member of the management team of the PAN Park to avoid conflicts of interest
- not be a local business partner
- have a paid part-time function (payment should be done by the PAN Parks Foundation)
- be provided with office space centrally located in the region which is easily accessible (provided by the certified PAN Park)
- have sufficient knowledge about tourism
- have a sufficient level of the English language, as well as the locally spoken language

Summarising the PAN Parks Foundation should:

- provide payment of all LPPG Coordinators
- provide training for LPPG Coordinators
- provide access to the network to the LPPG Coordinators
- provide the LPPG Coordinators with a separate section on their webpage to communicate with all stakeholders, the general public and the tourism market
- organise annual meetings of LPPG Coordinators so that information can be exchanged between the various LPPG Coordinators and the PAN Parks Foundation

The introduction of LPPG Coordinators will deliver the following benefits:

- enhance communication and transparency of PAN Park's certification program of local business partners
- increase of effectiveness and efficiency of the certification program of local business partners

- increase the PAN Parks Foundation's insight into the development, implementation and monitoring of the certification program
- increase the PAN Parks Foundation's insight into the quality of local business partners
- increase presence of PAN Parks and its certification program of local business partners in the regions
- increase communication with local enterprises and other stakeholders
- increase tourism market's awareness about PAN Parks certification program of local business partners

In the following section the LPPG Coordinator's role will be visualised and explained in more detail.

5.3 A model for PAN Parks improved certification program of local business partners

The LPPG Coordinator has been introduced in the previous section. In this section the LPPG Coordinator's function will be implemented in PAN Parks certification program of local business partners.

Outgoing from the model "Key stakeholders in ecotourism certification" developed by X. Font and R.C. Buckley (page 28) general components in PAN Parks certification program of local business partners have been identified and adopted in the model (page 50). In this section the model will be used to visualise a more efficient management of PAN Parks certification program of local business partners, including the newly developed function of a LPPG Coordinator.

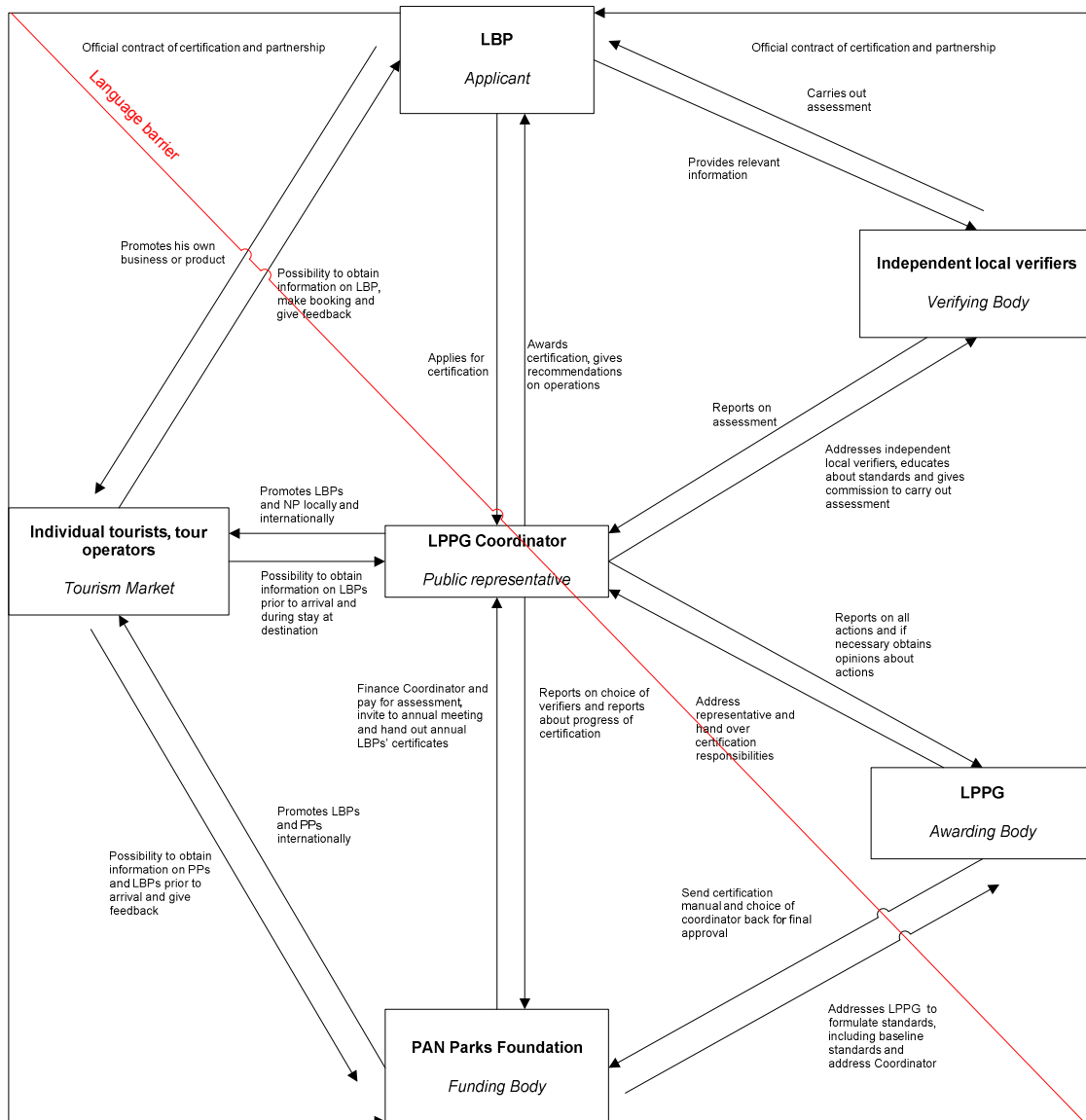


Figure 30: Key stakeholders in PAN Parks' improved certification program of local business partners

The model visualises that the LPPG coordinator takes a central function. The LGGP Coordinator is related to every stakeholder in the certification program. The LPPG coordinator further acts like an intermediate between the various stakeholders. As it can be seen in figure 30, there is a language barrier between the PAN Parks Foundation, the tourism market and the LPPG, the local business partners (LBP) and the independent local verifiers. To present this negatively influences communication. But it is not only a difference in language which negatively influences communication between the PAN Parks Foundation and local business partners, as an example from Central Balkan National Park will show:

In 2007, the PAN Parks Foundation wanted to inform local business partners about marketing achievements. An informative PDF had been created using the English language and was sent to local business partners by email. Local business partners in Central Balkan National Park stated that the remoteness of their region prohibits officials to provide telephone cables and thus internet connections to their homes. Local business partners then have the choice to go online using their cell phone connections, or visit an internet cafe in one of the bigger settlements an hour's drive away. Local business partners further stated that they only check their mail every few weeks and that big sized PDF documents would be challenging to download. Therefore the information provided by the PAN Parks Foundation failed to reach local business partners in two ways; the medium by which it was sent was inaccessible and the language it had been written in was inappropriate.

The implementation of a LPPG Coordinator will improve information transfer between the various stakeholders. In the above case, the information could have been sent to the LPPG Coordinator. He could have translated it into the Bulgarian language and could have chosen a more appropriate medium.

The advantages of the newly developed certification model and its improvements from PAN Parks current certification program will be explained in detail below. For this purpose the model has been divided into three sections: The development of PAN Parks certification program, the certification and communication with the market.

5.3.1 The development of PAN Parks certification program

In this section the relation between the PAN Parks Foundation, the LPPG and the LPPG Coordinator will be elaborated. These three parties are responsible for the design of PAN Parks certification program of local business partners. Their relations, as well as divided responsibilities are shown in figure 31, which is an extract from the model “Key stakeholders in PAN Parks' improved certification program of local business partners” on page 78.

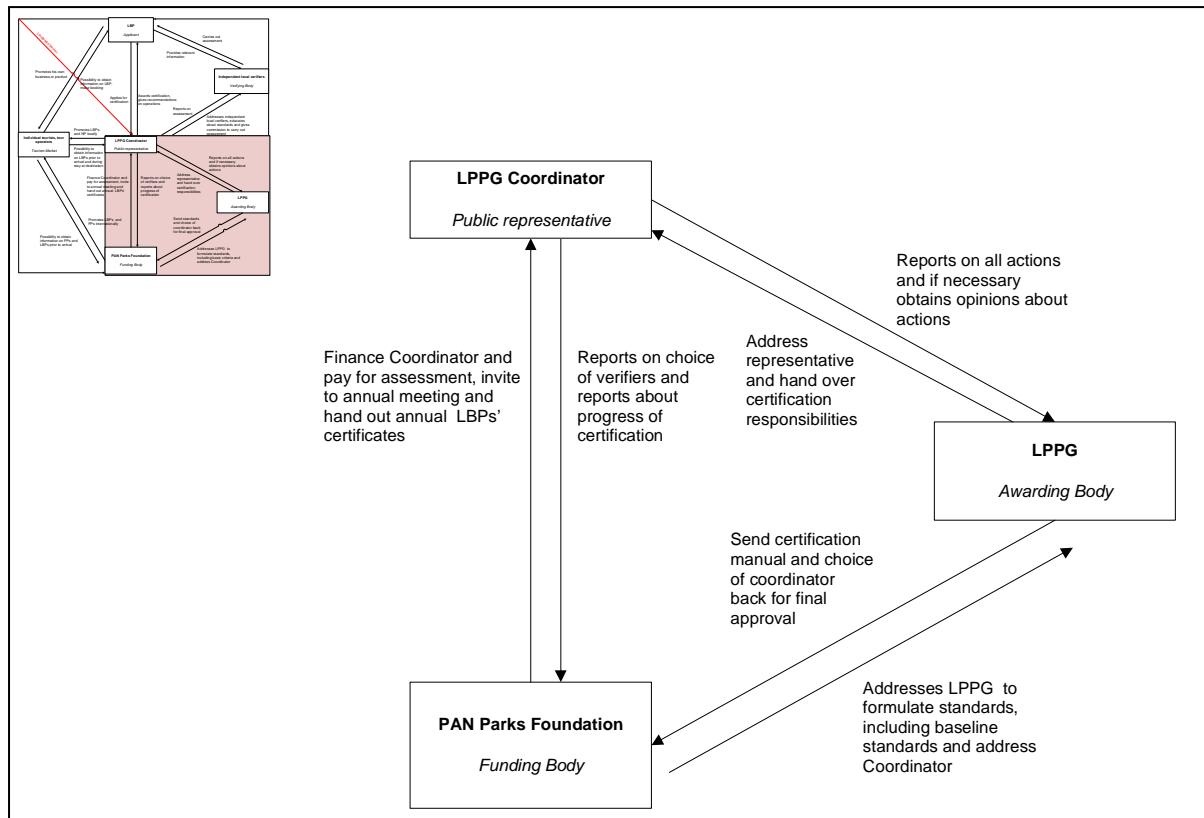


Figure 31: Development of PAN Parks' certification program extract from 'Key stakeholders in PAN Parks' improved certification program of local business partners'

Up to present the PAN Parks Foundation addresses LPPGs to design PAN Parks certification program of local business partners for their specific area. General guidelines are given, which the LPPGs can orient on, but further the LPPGs are free to design the structure and content of their local certification program. As discussed in chapter four, in order to improve PAN Parks certification program and to uniform the quality of all local business partners all LPPGs should be required to set performance standards, including baseline standards. The LPPG should design a certification program for PAN Parks local business partners, which includes baseline standards and further locally specific standards. All standards should be performance based standards, describing “what functional or operational characteristics are to be achieved but not how to accomplish them.” (Honey, 2002)”. After completion of the certification program’s design, including standards and method of assessment, the LPPG will have to present their certification manual to the PAN Parks Foundation

for approval. Further the LPPG has to nominate the LPPG Coordinator. The LPPG Coordinator has to be a member of the LPPG and has to be elected by the LPPG. After the nomination of the LPPG Coordinator the PAN Parks Foundation has to be introduced to the nominee. If for any reason the PAN Parks Foundation evaluates that the LPPG Coordinator is not suitable for the position, a mutual agreement has to be found between the LPPG and the PAN Parks Foundation, in a worst case scenario a second nominee has to be presented. After the PAN Parks Foundation has approved of the choice of the LPPG Coordinator an employment contract will be signed between these two parties. From this point onwards the PAN Parks Foundation mainly communicates with the LPPG via the LPPG Coordinator and it is his responsibility to ensure that the LPPG stays informed about all actions.

Local stakeholder's limited knowledge about tourism and certification is one of the weaknesses of the current certification program. The PAN Parks Foundation, being an international operation with many tourism specialists involved, on the contrary possess much knowledge. However, to present the knowledge transfer from the PAN Parks Foundation to the various stakeholders has been difficult. With the introduction of LPPG Coordinators this issue will be resolved. The PAN Parks Foundation can train this small group of representatives, in order to reach many other stakeholders. The multiplier effect is therewith enlarged: by training LPPG Coordinators from the various PAN Parks, all local business partners will be reached.

It is recommendable that the Pan Parks Foundation organises annual meetings for the LPPG Coordinators. During this annual meeting the Pan Parks Foundation will be provided with first-hand data on their local business partners. Further LPPG Coordinators can be informed about recent developments and strategies and an exchange of information and practices between the various LPPG Coordinators can take place and ultimately improve the management of PAN Parks certification program. Moreover, annual certification logos can be implemented. The PAN Parks Foundation will distribute annual certification logos to the LPPG Coordinators after having been informed about the performance of the local business partners. By doing so, it would not only be ensured that the PAN Parks Foundation will get annually monitoring reports about their local business partners, but it also will ensure that at least once a year contact will take place between the LPPG Coordinators and local business partners.

5.3.2 The certification

In this section the assessment and certification of PAN Parks improved certification program of local business partners will be presented.

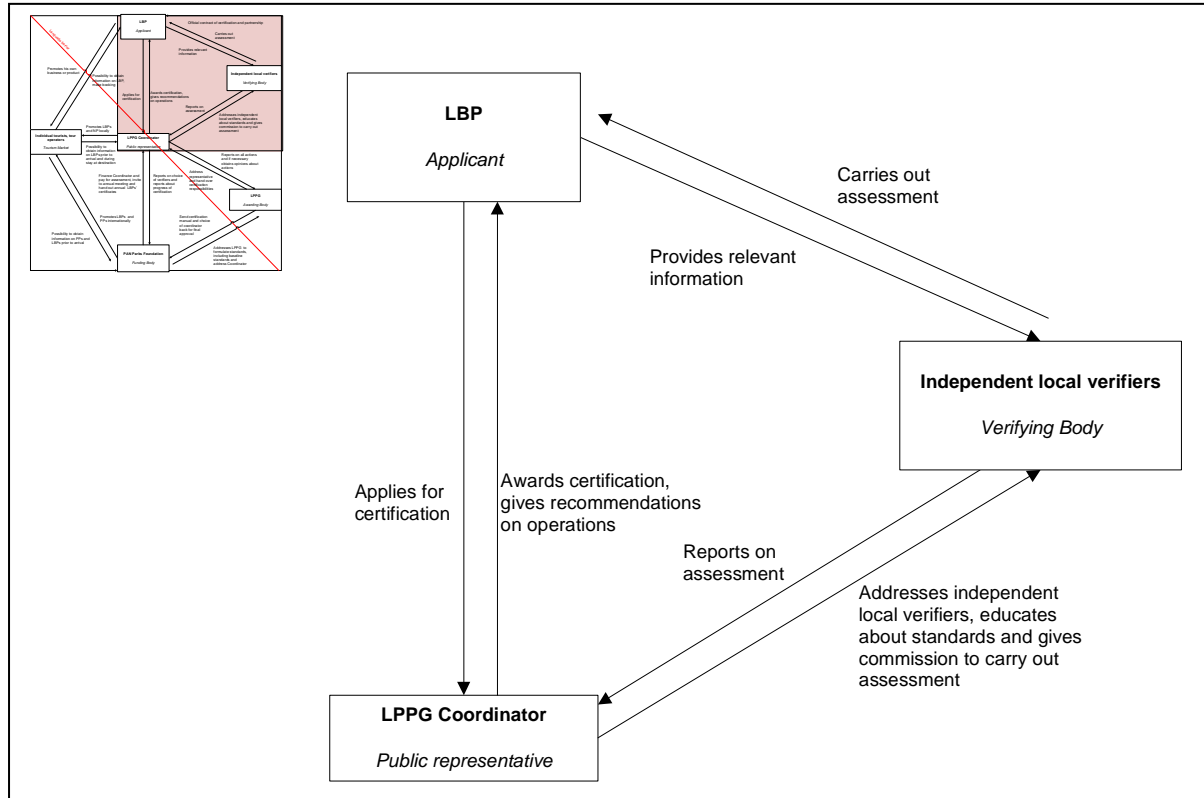


Figure 32: The certification extract from ‘Key stakeholders in PAN Parks’ improved certification program of local business partners’

As identified in chapter four PAN Parks certification program of local business partners does not make use of third party assessment. However, to ensure having an unbiased opinion about the performance of a local business partner it is vital to make use of third-party assessment, where independent verifiers assess the tourism enterprises’ conformity to set standards. In the model above the recommended certification and assessment process can be seen.

After a local business partner has applied for certification at the LPPG, more specifically at the LPPG Coordinator, the assessment is being outsourced to a group of independent local verifiers.

Special attention has to be paid to the fact that these independent verifiers differ from the verifiers used by the PAN Parks Foundation for the assessment of PAN Parks Principles, Criteria & Indicators one to four. The PAN Parks Foundation is making use of independent verifiers, who are experts in the field of nature conservation and tourism. Vladivoj Vancura, Conservation Manager at the PAN Parks Foundation reported that due to the high specialisation and competence of these experts, high costs are related to the assessment of

the P&C one to four. He further stated that the PAN Parks Foundation is being charged over €15.000 for a three day assessment.

Therefore, outsourcing the assessment of PAN Parks local business partners to the same group of experts would be unfeasible. Especially because PAN Parks local business partners are located in remote areas, which are difficult to access, assessment outsourced to independent international verifiers would most likely have to be bundled and the certification of local business partners would unnecessarily be delayed.

Therefore it is recommendable to make use of independent local verifiers. These verifiers do not necessarily have to be experts in the field of certification. However, independent local verifiers should have a good knowledge of the sustainable tourism industry.

The LPPG Coordinator instructs the team of independent local verifiers about the set standards and provides them with a certification manual. The certification manual has to clearly state to which standards the local business partners have to conform to. The team of independent local verifiers should undertake an on-side visit to the applicant's enterprise where an investigation will be done whether standards are met.

After the assessment has been undertaken, the team of independent local verifiers will have to submit an assessment report to the LPPG Coordinator who informs the LPPG and the PAN Parks Foundation about the assessment's outcome. If the assessment has shown the applicant's conformity to set standards and all parties (PPF, LPPG and LPPG Coordinator) agree to certify the business, the PAN Parks Foundation will set up an official certification and partnership contract.

5.3.4 Communication with the market

In this section recommendations will be given on the improvement of communication between the PAN Parks Foundation, the LPPG, PAN Parks local business partners and the tourism market.

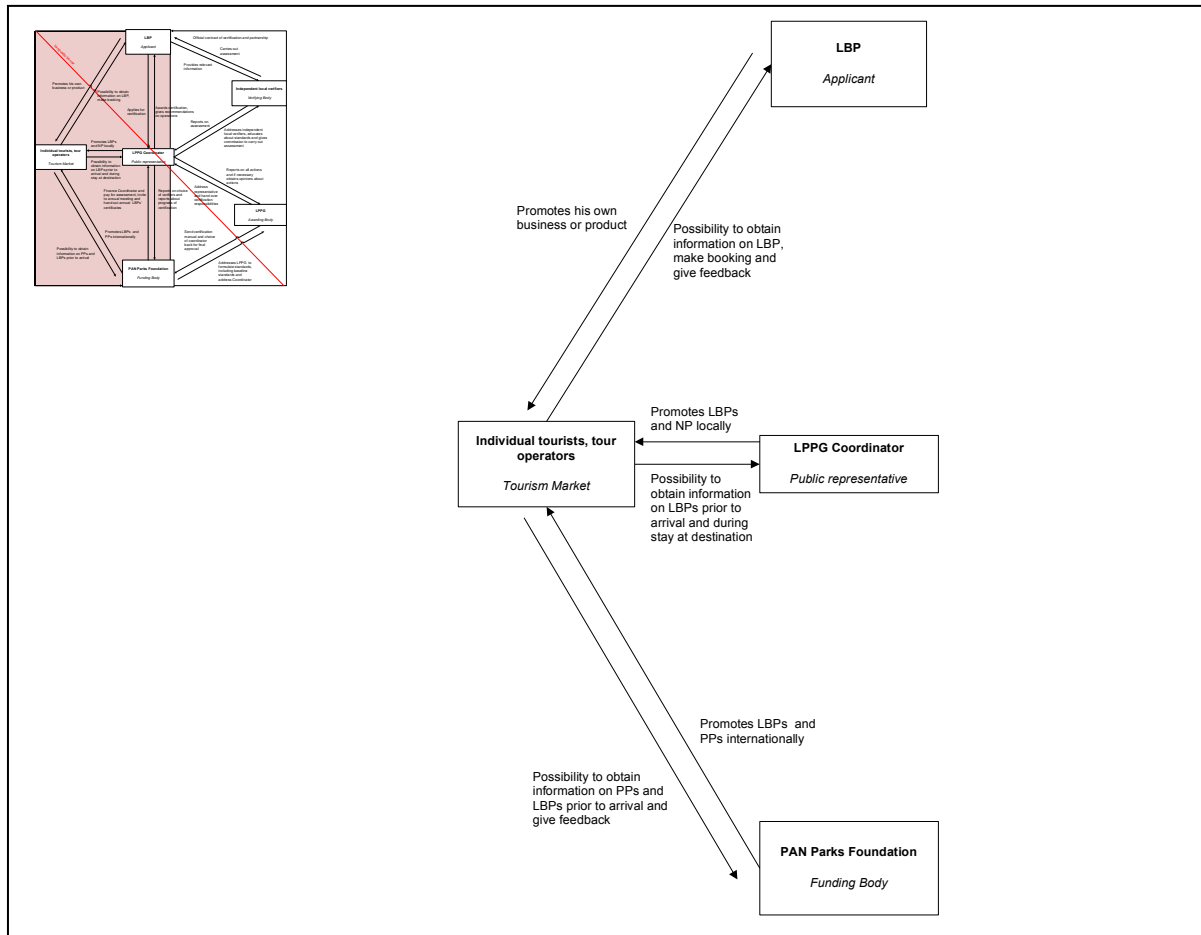


Figure 33: Communication with the market extract from 'Key stakeholders in PAN Parks' improved certification program of local business partners'

In chapter four it has been investigated that the PAN Parks Foundation promises to deliver several benefits to local business partners from certification. Amongst others, it is promised to provide “contact with European tourism companies” through certification, to deliver “more nature based tourism” and to create an “effective international marketing” tool (van der Donk, 2006). Through field research undertaken in the Central Balkan National Park it has been investigated that local business partners were rather unsatisfied with benefits related to an increase of marketing activities.

At this stage it proves to be difficult for the PAN Park Foundation to promote their local business partners. PAN Parks local business partners offer single services which are not bundled into a tangible product (except for cases where a tour operator is being included).

When a consumer is interested in planning a holiday to one PAN Park, he can obtain information about the certified PAN Park via PAN Parks’ webpage (<http://www.visitpanparks.org/ourparks>). Under this link the interested consumer can find information about the park’s natural environment, possible experiences in the park, facilities and services provided within the park’s boundaries, a description on its accessibility, maps of the park’s area, as well as a list of verified local business partners (LBP).

For the case of a person wanting to plan an active holiday in and around the area, making use of PAN Parks’ local business partners (LBP), he or she has to get in contact with the following stakeholders:

- Visit PAN Parks webpage to obtain general information about the PAN Park and its local business partners
- Communicate with the certified PAN Park via mail or telephone to acquire more information
- Communicate with LBP to obtain information and make a booking

In order to plan a holiday to the PAN Park’s region, the consumer has to get in contact with various parties (figure 34). The consumer has to get in contact with each party he wants to make use of during his holiday. First of all with the PAN Park itself, in order to get essential information, such as, best time to visit, which activities can be undertaken and which facilities are available. Thereafter, the consumer has to determine which local business partners suit his needs and he wants to make use of. PAN Parks local business partners offer a range of products, such as tours, attractions, restaurants and accommodations. After obtaining information on local business partners on PAN Parks webpage, the consumer has to get into direct contact with all local business partners he wants to make use of to arrange a booking.

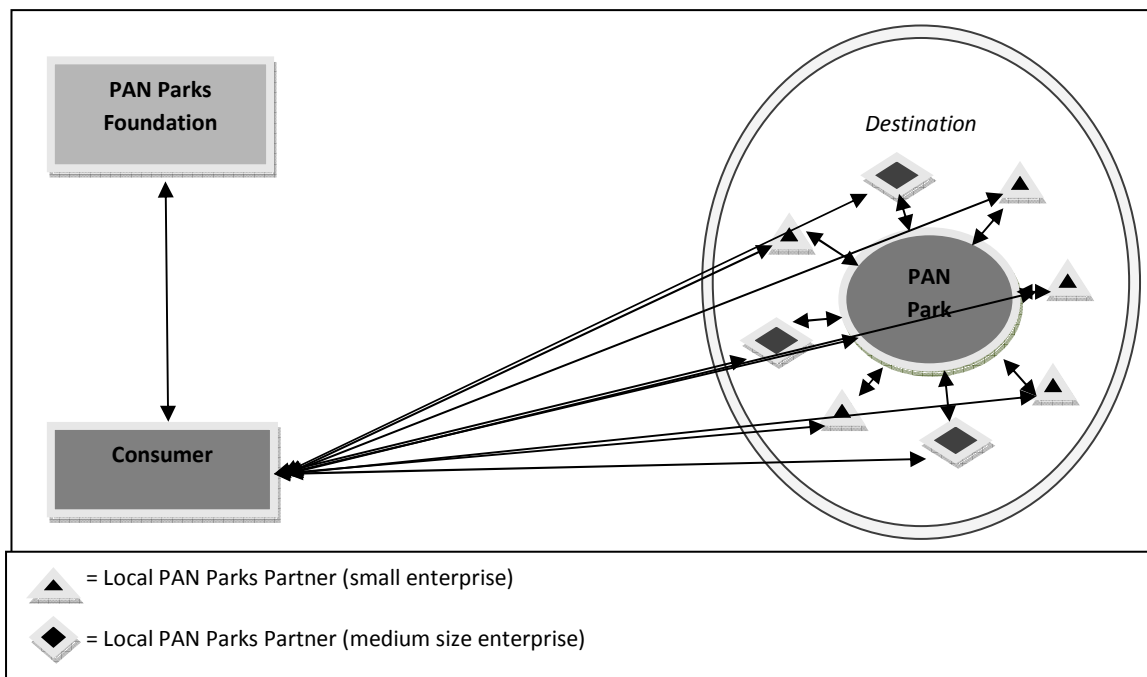


Figure 34: Communication model of consumers and local business partners

For consumers this process of holiday planning is rather time consuming and complicated. Potential consumers have been interviewed at the ITB tourism fair in Berlin this year and many stated that this process does not suit their needs. Potential consumers stated that they would prefer to book a package in which all essential arrangement have been made. There are two different scenarios which the PAN Parks Foundation could make use of in order to overcome this issue. Inbound tour operators or outbound tour operators can be contracted to arrange and sell packages to the PAN Parks’ regions including local business partners. Presently the PAN Parks Foundation has partnership contracts with six international outbound tour operators (Exodus Travel, GoForNature, New Market Travel, Rucksack Reisen, SNP Nature Travel and Trailfinders (PAN Parks)). However, these tour operators do not include all PAN Parks and challenges have to be faced as an example from Central Balkan National Park will show:

In an interview with Siya Cholakova, operations manager at Balkan Trek, which is a local business partner in Central Balkan National Park and organises adventure tours in the region, the issue has been discussed. Balkan Trek organises adventure hiking tours in the Central Balkan National Park and sells these products via Exodus Travel to the British market. It was Balkan Trek’s ambition to include other local business partners in the region in their packages. However, from the twelve local business partners only one partner was suitable to deliver what Balkan Trek was searching for. Other local business partners were either too small to accommodate their tour groups of twenty guests, delivered insufficient quality, or were located too remotely.

This case shows that not all local business partners are suitable of being included in commercial packaged tours and therefore an alternative to market these partners has to be found. An alternative could be presented by the introduction of the LPPG Coordinator. The LPPG Coordinator, being equipped with an office in the region and a webpage linked to PAN Parks webpage could represent the first contact person for individual tourists (figure 35).

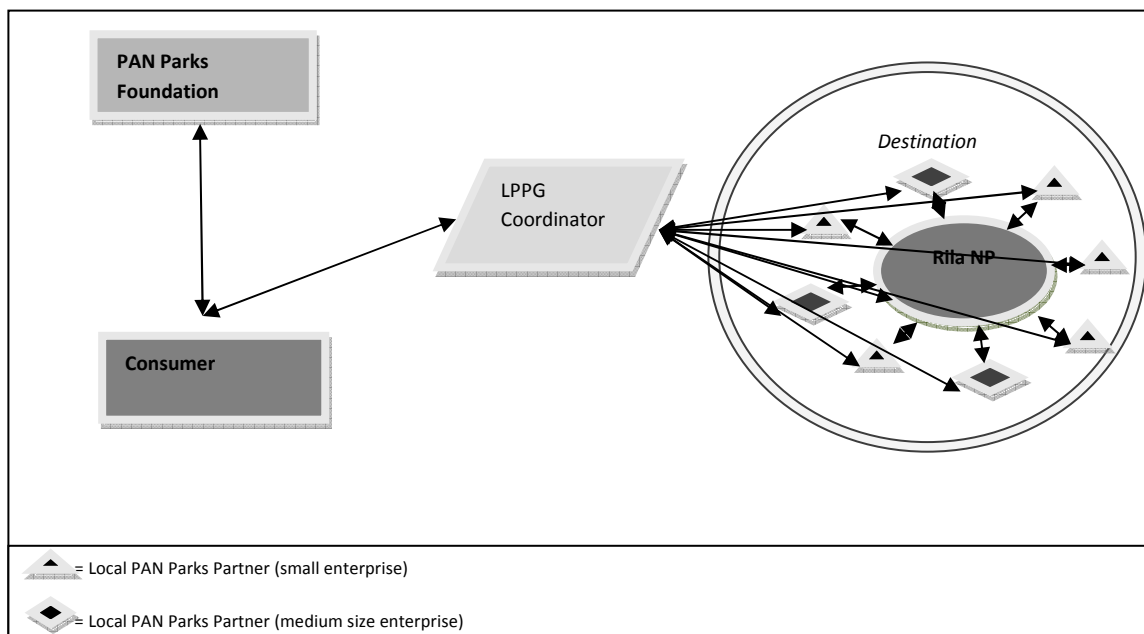


Figure 35: Improved Communication model of consumers and local business partners

With the introduction of LPPG Coordinators consumers have a contact point, where they can obtain information about the PAN Park, its wider region and local business partners.

As figure 33 visualises, the consumer has the possibility to obtain information about local business partners from three bodies: the PAN Parks Foundation, the LPPG Coordinator and the local business partners.

It is recommendable that the Pan Parks Foundation stays responsible for marketing activities directed at the international tourism market and that local business partners further try to promote their businesses via private WebPages. As an additional marketing approach to those which are already in place it is recommendable that the LPPG Coordinator also carries out marketing activities locally as well as internationally. The LPPG Coordinator will be provided with an office located centrally in the region. The office can be used as a 'PAN Parks visitor centre' where visitors to the region can obtain information about the PAN Park and local business partners. Prior to arrival the LPPG's webpage can serve as a 'virtual visitor centre' where suggestions about travel programs can be given and visitors can post their travel stories. The newly introduced webpage for the PAN Park region will offer the PAN Park and the local business partners the possibility to promote themselves more personally and up-to-date.

An issue which has not yet received the attention it deserves is customer feedback. To present, customers are not encouraged to give feedback on their experience and if customer feedback is being given little is done with the recommendations. Customer feedback should be better channelled and customers should be encouraged to give their opinion about the 'PAN Parks experience'. The authors Janelle Barlow and Claus Møller state that "a complaint is a gift" (Barlow, et al., 1996) which companies should make use of. They further describe that "Customer complaints can give businesses a wake-up call when they're not achieving their fundamental purpose-meeting customer needs. They are a feedback mechanism that can help organizations rapidly and inexpensively. Businesses that don't value their customers' complaints suffer from costly, negative word-of-mouth advertising. (...) Companies must view complaints as gifts if they are to have loyal customers." (Barlow, et al., 1996) Customer feedback can easily and inexpensively be encouraged and channelled to the right bodies. It is recommendable that the PAN Parks Foundation develops a short online survey where customers can express their opinion about the experience. This feedback should be received by two parties: the PAN Parks Foundation and the LPPG Coordinator where the holiday has been undertaken. The PAN Parks Coordinator should be responsible for taking actions upon customer feedback and should report these actions to the PAN Parks Foundation.

5.4 Feasibility of recommendations

PAN Parks is a unique undertaking which can be found nowhere else in the world. No other certification program includes that many aspects in the certification. PAN Parks is an extraordinary undertaking where nature protection and sustainable tourism is trying to be merged. PAN Parks certification process is extensive with many stakeholders involved. However, the main focus of PAN Parks still lies in the enhancement of nature protection and the tourism aspect did not yet receive the attention it deserves and requires.

Especially the certification program of PAN Parks local business partners is in high demand of change. To present responsibilities are not clearly divided and a lack of transparency prohibits proper monitoring. Responsible stakeholders have too little insight in certification management and a body is missing which is fully dedicated to the coordination of the process. With the implementation of recommendations it is believed to create a transparent and reliable certification program for all of PAN Parks local business partners. The certification program will receive support and input from all stakeholders, will be managed locally (LPPG) and monitored centrally (PPF). A uniform certification program will be created which at the same time is tailored to local perspectives and requirements. Through third-party assessment a reliable and independent certification program will be created, which deserves the market's recognition and acceptance. A certification program will be created which is customer orientated and values their consumer's feedback. Consumers have the possibility to obtain information prior to arrival, but also during their stay. Further, the certification program will deliver more tangible benefits for stakeholders.

However, also this approach holds a weakness. Even though the implementation of recommendations would deliver multitude improvements, it is a rather expensive approach. The PAN Parks Foundation would have to pay LPPG Coordinators for their activities, which might seem unfeasible to the Foundation, which is already suffering from financial short comes. During the process of defining the most feasible approach for improvement, also other scenarios have been taken into consideration.

Scenario one: Perpetuation of existing certification process

PAN Parks would maintain the currently implemented certification process of local business partners, in which the LPPG set standards for the certification process and monitoring of their local business partners. In this scenario local business partners would be monitored on an ongoing basis and goals would be set for yearly improvement of the enterprises.

Scenario two: Third party certification executed by international/national labelling scheme

PAN Parks local business partners would be certified by an independent third-party. The third-party institution would be a national or international labelling scheme, which would then certify and monitor the local business partners.

Scenario three: Third party certification executed by independent PAN Parks verifiers

PAN Parks local business partners would be verified by an independent third-party. The third-party institution would be independent PAN Parks verifiers, who are also responsible for the certification of the protected area (principles one to three).

An analysis of the three scenarios' advantages and disadvantages had been undertaken.

	Scenario one	Scenario two	Scenarios three
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Manageable cost - Involvement of local partners in evaluation of businesses - Inexpensive - Ability of certification program to handle growing number of partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Credibility - Outsourcing of responsibilities - Partnership possibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Independent assessment - Promotion of PAN Parks brand
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No transparent certification process - Lack of control - Existing weaknesses are unlikely to be changed - Delivers no uniform quality level of local business partners - Lack of independent certification and monitoring - Dissatisfied customers - Consumer's loss of trust in the brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High cost for LBPs -Not applicable to all types of partners, several brands would have to be used for only one destination - Existing certification schemes are not always credible - Conflict with other labelling schemes - Possible loss of the existing LPBs - Promotion of other quality brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High costs - Certification would have to be bundled which results in long waiting times for LBPs certification - Independent verifiers would have to use different assessment standards - Disempowerment of LPPG - Lack of local support

Figure 36: Advantages and disadvantages of alternative improvement scenarios

In all scenarios disadvantages outweigh advantages. Therefore, the presented scenario of improvement is seen as the most feasible approach. It delivers multiple advantages and only holds one disadvantage: the financial costs involved. Research of other certification programs has shown that almost all certification programs suffer financially and are mostly running at a loss.

Even though implementing the recommendations made in this thesis would represent big financial investments to the PAN Parks Foundation, running the certification program of local business partners further in this manner will ultimately cost the PAN Parks Foundation its credibility. Expensive marketing activities undertaken to attract customers will fail, when the certified product does not deliver what is promised. Further PAN Parks certification program will lose it credibility amongst local business partners, who ultimately might not see benefits of certification anymore and withdraw from the certification program. Although the recommendation will be costly to implement, ultimately it will improve PAN Parks' recognition and acceptance amongst the tourism market, which should be of highest priority.

5.5 Final recommendations

According to the authors Buckley and Font ***“an ideal tourism ecolabel scheme (tourism certification program) would appear to need a global brand name and audit process, local implementation, detailed technical criteria for different types of tourism activity or service, multiple labelling levels, and high transparency and public accessibility of information.”*** (Buckley, 2001)

Even though I do not totally agree to their opinion about an ideal tourism certification scheme, I think the statement holds much truth. Formed through desk and field research and own working experiences at Ecotourism Australia it is my opinion that a successful certification program in the sustainable or ecotourism sector should:

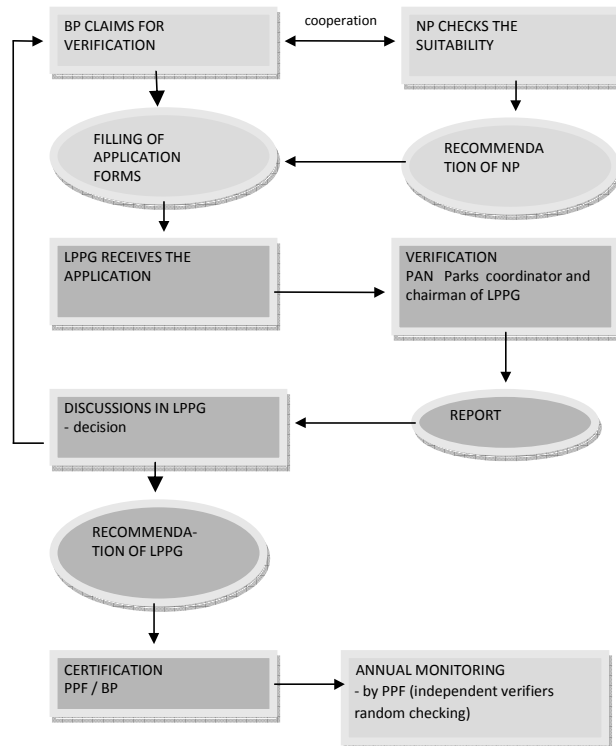
- primarily, be recognised and accepted by the tourism market and the general public
- be a third-party certification program
- be truthfully supported and accepted by all stakeholders
- have a clearly formulated certification manual where standards are precisely described
- set performance base standards, describing (what functional or operational characteristics are to be achieved but not how to accomplish them.” (Honey, 2002))
- include standards which secure that certified parties fulfil basic tourists needs, as well as sustainable measurements
- regularly review standards
- make use of third-party assessment
- be transparent to all stakeholders and the general public
- be open to customer feedback and implement customer’s recommendation (negative and positive)
- regularly monitor certified parties
- be financially self-sustaining (due to high assessment costs certification programs are rarely financially self-sustaining. However, it should be ensured that the awarding body operates independently from the funding body)

The recommendations made in chapter five are believed to meet all requirements of a successful certification program and ensure that PAN Parks’ certification program of local business partners finally meets requirements from all stakeholders.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX I: Verification process of local business partners in Oulanka National Park

“PAN Parks’ local business certification process in Oulanka National



The following matters are associated with the verification of local PAN Parks partners:

Letter of recommendation from Oulanka National Park:

- activity complies with the regulations for protected areas and with the management plan
- a cooperation agreement has been made, if activities are to be carried out in protected areas
- protected area marketing and communications are truthful
- additional requirements for activities taking place in a national park
- groups are small (normally 15 at max.)
- movement only under one's own steam or by natural means
- waste is minimised, waste management complies with municipal regulations
- product respects nature and life
- small scale fishing trip possible in assigned areas
- customers informed about nature and culture
- product emphasises locality
- product is safe.

Letter of recommendation from Oulanka Cooperation Group

- product is networked with other tourism offers
- company is committed to principles of regional development or tourism
- regional centre's general policy, internationalisation strategy

- business has sufficient knowledge of sector and product has been tested for suitability for foreign markets
- target groups have been defined and their special needs taken into account when offering the service
- product can be bought by, and is accessible to` the customer
- reservation channels and time have been specified
- accessibility of site has been defined
- language ability has been defined, at minimum English
- unambiguous price has been set for product
- what price includes, whether a certain minimum group size is required, possible discounts
- consumer price
- travel organiser's price (commission 20%)
- literal description of products (from customer's arrival to departure)
- programme service product must satisfy the official consumers' regulations in relation to safety (written safety documents)
- company has a good customer feedback system
- best possible environmental solutions are adopted in investments
- use of chemicals, etc, loading the environment is minimised
- waste management follows the regulations for the area
- local products purchased and used wherever possible.

General environmental and quality criteria:

- company commits itself to principles of Quality Project for area
- common definitions for satisfying of environmental and quality criteria
- before the area's Quality Project, a quality assurance programme/ ecolabel (e.g. Laatutoni, Maakuntien Parhaat, Nordic Swan, ISO 9001, ISO 14001) or a quality classification (e.g. MALO, MoNo, Setla) is recommended for the company, or the company needs to demonstrate that it has a good quality assurance programme or quality award." (Oulanka Cooperation Group, October 2004)

APPENDIX II: Fulufjället National Park's applied criteria upon local partners

Ecolabel

Fulufjällsringen Economic Association has signed an environmental policy, which concerns all prospective local business partners:

Fulufjällsringen and its members will work for an environmental sustainable development in our region. This will be achieved by

- Minimizing the use of chemicals with negative impact on environment
- Treating waste according to local regulations
- Working for better public transport
- Looking for the best environmental solution, when investing in new equipment
- Favouring our local entrepreneurs and producers when purchasing
- Contributing to open landscape and biodiversity by making the right choices
- Working for minimizing wear of soil and vegetation and other negative impact on environment, as well as considering the regulations for Fulufjället National Park

Fulufjällsringen Economic Association has also signed a quality policy:

Fulufjällsringen and its members will stand for good quality and satisfaction with the products/services we offer, both for us and our interested parties. This we will achieve by

- Working for the long-term
- Giving the customers what we promise. Preferably a little more....
- Being keen and flexible in relation to our interested parties
- Working continuously with changes and improvements
- Keeping a good accessibility, adapted to each business and professionally communicated
- Furthermore, in everything we do, we want to co-operate with our local partners and towards our customers communicate our history, culture, nature and traditions.

APPENDIX III: Mohonk Agreement

Mohonk Agreement:
***Proposal for an International Certification Program for Sustainable
Tourism and Ecotourism***

Mohonk Agreement
*A framework and principles for the
certification of sustainable and ecotourism.*

Background

This document contains a set of general principles and elements that should be part of any sound ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification programs. This framework was unanimously adopted at the conclusion of an international workshop convened by the Institute for Policy Studies with support from the Ford Foundation. It was held at Mohonk Mountain House, New Paltz, New York on November 17-19, 2000.

Workshop participants recognized that tourism certification programs need to be tailored to fit particular geographical reasons and sectors of the tourism industry, but agreed that the following are the universal components that must frame any ecotourism and sustainable certification program.

1. Certification Scheme Overall Framework

Basis of Scheme

The objectives of the scheme should be clearly stated. The development of a certification scheme should be a participatory, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral process (including representatives from local communities, tourism businesses, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, government, and others).

- The scheme should provide tangible benefits to tourism providers and a means for tourists to choose wisely
- The scheme should provide tangible benefits to local communities and to conservation
- The scheme should set minimum standards while encouraging and rewarding best practice
- There is a process to withdraw certification in the event of non-compliance
- The scheme should establish control of existing/new seals/logos in terms of appropriate use, an expiration date and, in the event of loss of certification, withdrawal
- The scheme should include provisions for technical assistance
- The scheme should be designed such that there is motivation for continual improvement— both of the scheme and of the products/companies to be certified

Criteria Framework

- Criteria should provide the mechanism(s) to meet the stated objective(s)
- Criteria used should meet and preferably exceed regulatory compliance
- Criteria should embody global best practice environmental, social and economic management
- Criteria should be adapted to recognizing local/regional ecological, social and economic conditions and local sustainable development efforts
- Criteria should be subject to a periodic review
- Criteria should be principally performance-based and include environmental, social and economic management process elements

Scheme Integrity

- The certification program should be transparent and involve an appeals process
- The certification body should be independent of the parties being certified and of technical assistance and assessment bodies (i.e., administrative structures for technical assistance, assessment and auditing should avoid conflicts of interest)

- The scheme should require audits by suitably trained auditors
- The scheme should require mechanisms for consumer and local community feedback

2. Sustainable Tourism Criteria

Sustainable tourism is tourism that seeks to minimize ecological and socio-cultural impacts while providing economic benefits to local communities and host countries. In any certification scheme, the criteria used to define sustainable tourism should address at least minimum standards in the following aspects (as appropriate):

Overall

- Environmental planning and impact assessment has been undertaken and has considered social, cultural, ecological and economic impacts (including cumulative impacts and mitigation strategies)
- Environmental management commitment by tourism business
- Staff training, education, responsibility, knowledge and awareness in environmental, social and cultural management
- Mechanisms for monitoring and reporting environmental performance
- Accurate, responsible marketing leading to realistic expectations
- Consumer feedback

Social/Cultural

- Impacts upon social structures, culture and economy (on both local and national levels)
- Appropriateness of land acquisition/access processes and land tenure
- Measures to protect the integrity of local community's social structure
- Mechanisms to ensure rights and aspirations of local and/or indigenous people are recognized

Ecological

- Appropriateness of location and sense of place
- Biodiversity conservation and integrity of ecosystem processes
- Site disturbance, landscaping and rehabilitation
- Drainage, soils and storm water management
- Sustainability of energy supply and minimization of use
- Sustainability of water supply and minimization of use
- Sustainability of wastewater treatment and disposal
- Noise and air quality (including greenhouse emissions)
- Waste minimization and sustainability of disposal
- Visual impacts and light
- Sustainability of materials and supplies (recyclable and recycled materials, locally produced, certified timber products, etc.)
- Minimal environmental impacts of activities

Economic

- Requirements for ethical business practice
- Mechanisms to ensure labour arrangements and industrial relations procedures are not exploitative, and conform to local laws and international labour standards (whichever are higher)
- Mechanisms to ensure negative economic impacts on local communities are minimized and preferably there are substantial economic benefits to local communities
- Requirements to ensure contributions to the development/maintenance of local community infrastructure

3. Ecotourism Criteria

Ecotourism is sustainable tourism with a natural area focus, which benefits the environment and communities visited, and fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation, and awareness. In any ecotourism certification scheme, the criteria should address standards (preferably mostly best practice) for sustainable tourism (as per above) and at least minimum standards for:

- Focus on personal experiences of nature to lead to greater understanding and appreciation

- Interpretation and environmental awareness of nature, local society, and culture
- Positive and active contributions to conservation of natural areas or biodiversity
- Economic, social, and cultural benefits for local communities
- Fostering of community involvement, where appropriate
- Locally appropriate scale and design for lodging, tours and attractions
- Minimal impact on and presentation of local (indigenous) culture

APPENDIX IV: PAN Parks principles and criteria (principle 5)

PAN Parks

PRINCIPLES AND CRITERIA

January 2008

Principle 5

Endorsed by the PAN Parks Supervisory Board

Principle 5 sets a minimum PAN Park standard for **local business partners**. This standard **should always have**

- a *local aspect* relating the BP with the certified park and its surrounding STDS region
- a *general aspect* relating the BP practises with the best possible (usually the highest local and national) environmental standard of the park country.

PAN Parks Foundation together with the certified PAN Park and the Local PAN Park Group prefer to liaise with those business partners that are already (or willing to soon be) meeting the high national standard of environmental management.

The relevant suitable eco-labelled standard(s) is identified by the LPPG and approved by the PAN Parks international Verifiers during the verification procedure of P&C 4-5. **In case that an existing eco-label is not used by the LPPG as the binding one for all businesses, the LPPG has to design a tailor-made standard for its local business partners. For this process the quality standard attached to this Principle can be used as a guideline in a specific PAN Park.** In this case the certified PAN Park and the Local PAN Parks Group have to ensure an *independent verification and regular monitoring* of local business partners. The PAN Parks international Verifiers check this tailor-made standard, the independence of verification and, on a random base during their monitoring, the performance of local business partners.

Definition

Principle 5 is meant to indicate the verification standard for tourism-related **business partners (BPs)**. **They are verified by the LPPG.**

Principle 5, like Principles 2 [*conservation management*], Principle 3 [*visitor management*] and Principle 4 [*sustainable tourism development strategy*] is a **management/process principle**.

Principle 5, like Principle 4, exceeds the responsibility of the management of the certified Park and involves the Local PAN Park Group. Principle 4 is a **stakeholder principle**.

Structure of the P&C

1. Body text of P&C includes the principles, criteria and indicators.
2. Footnotes are sometimes added to criterion or indicator. Footnotes aim to provide an explanation on how to interpret and understand a criterion or indicator correctly.
3. Appendix reflects the philosophy of the PAN Parks Foundation with respect to the verification of business partners.
4. Attachment [separate document] provide a quality standard guideline for PAN Parks Tourism Business Partners

Principle 5: Business Partners

PAN Parks' tourism-related business partners are legal enterprises that are committed to sustainable tourism and support the goals of certified PAN Parks. They actively cooperate with the Local PAN Park Group to implement the PAN Park region's *Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy* and ensure their businesses to comply with a high national/international standard of environment management.

The following criteria and indicators are verified for each BP by the LPPG:

Criterion 5.1

The PAN Park's business partner is committed to sustainable tourism, is registered as a commercial business and complies with all relevant national and regional legislation.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.1.1: The company and its business are both registered (with chamber of commerce number if legally required) and, if appropriate, taxed within the area of the destination (PAN Parks region).

Indicator 5.1.2: The company and its business are committed to sustainable tourism.

Indicator 5.1.3: The company and its business offer sustainable tourism products that are suitable for the PAN Parks concept.

Indicator 5.1.4: The company and its business comply with all relevant national and regional legislation.

Criterion 5.2

The PAN Parks business partner actively cooperates with the Local PAN Park Group to effectively implement the PAN Park region's Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.2.1: The company and its business actively participate in the implementation of the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy in the certified PAN Park.

Criterion 5.3

The PAN Park's business partner supports the certified PAN Park and its conservation goals.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.3.1: The company and its business respect and support the conservation goals of the certified PAN Park.

Indicator 5.3.2: Information material about the values of nearby protected areas, landscape and nature conservation measures are easily available for the BP customers.

Indicator 5.3.3: Information about the concrete threats to the nature and culture of the site is available for the BP customers.

For the further qualification of Business Partners, two alternatives are indicated below:

- Either, the LPPG decides that the BP is verified and certified by an existing eco-label system (Criterion 5.4), or
- this BP verification & certification process is executed by, or under the supervision of the LPPG (Criteria 5.5 to 5.11 below constitute a proposal). This option is applied by most LPPGs and preferred by the PAN Parks Foundation.

In the both cases the quality standard must be approved by the PAN Parks Verifiers during the verification procedure for P&C 4-5. *Alternative I: Simple Criterion 5.4 and Indicators*

Criterion 5.4

The PAN Park business partner complies with the high national/international or, at least the best possible standard for environment management.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.4.1: The company and its business comply with the high national/international or, at least the best possible standard for environment management that is regularly verified and monitored.

Criterion 5.5

The PAN Parks business partner provides special training to its staff.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.5.1: The BP identifies and implements relevant training that promotes quality ecotourism.

Indicator 5.5.2: There are specific goals, target groups, methods, and time schedules of the BP training programmes for the various staff.

Criterion 5.6

The PAN Parks business partner respects the limitations of the destination and minimizes negative impact of its business on nature and culture.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

General indicators [*applying for all BP*]:

Indicator 5.6.1: The BP and its subcontractors know the destination character and limitations very well and transfer this knowledge to their customers.

Specific indicators for **tour products**:

Indicator 5.6.2: The BP group sizes meet the local area carrying capacities.

Indicator 5.6.3: All BP activities are based upon an ecologically sustainable and ethically acceptable usage of the resources.

Indicator 5.6.4: The BP guarantees that if there is a significant risk for environmental impact or damage connected through the activity, he/she will refrain from carrying it out.

Indicator 5.6.5: The BP early informs the responsible nature conservation authorities about each tour product to make sure that sensitive nature values will not be affected.

Indicator 5.6.6: Hunting, fishing and snowmobiling (or other motorized transport) are not carried out in PAN Parks, at least not in its wilderness area.

Indicator 5.6.7: Hunting, fishing and motorized transport carried out by the BP company outside of the certified PAN Park respects national and regional legislation.

Indicator 5.6.8: There is no feeding of wildlife in the certified PAN Park, at least not in its wilderness area, even if done for observation purposes, or with the expressed permission of the landowner and/or relevant authorities.

Indicator 5.6.9: Resting or staying overnight (e.g. tenting) and lighting of campfires in the outdoors is always done in respect to park, national and local rules or legislation.

Criterion 5.7**The PAN Parks business partner supports the local economy**

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.7.1: The BP company contributes to local development work.

Indicator 5.7.2: The BP company employs and/or contracts local staff.

Indicator 5.7.3: The BP company co-operates as much as possible with local businesses and purchases its products and services preferably locally.

Indicator 5.7.4: BP customers are encouraged to buy locally produced and sold products.

Indicator 5.7.5: The BP company policy aims to give local authenticity to all services and activities, like food, lodging, transportation and guiding.

Criterion 5.8**The PAN Park business partner makes all company operations environmentally sustainable.**

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

General indicators [*applying for all BP*]:

Indicator 5.8.1: The BP company has its own written environmental care plan, describing the impact of operations on the environment, the efforts to mitigate and the results/effects achieved by reducing this impact.

Indicator 5.8.2: The BP company uses environmentally friendly transport, lodging and catering for its customers.

Indicator 5.8.3: The BP company practices sustainable supply chain management: In choosing new products it considers local production, poverty alleviation, the best available environmentally friendly technology and sustainable material.

Specific indicators for **accommodation BP**:

Indicator 5.8.4: Lodging has energy saving and water saving policies.

Indicator 5.8.5: Lodging has a policy to reduce and avoid the use of harmful chemical products.

Indicator 5.8.6: Lodging has a waste reduction, reuse and recycling policy.

Indicator 5.8.7: Any new construction is built in environmentally friendly ways.

Indicator 5.8.8: In the restaurant, meeting rooms and other public rooms, there is at least a non-smoking section or non-smoking rooms available.

Criterion 5.9**The PAN Parks business partner promotes the joy of local discovery, knowledge and respect.**

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.9.1: The BP company made sure that all staff with visitor contact, especially guides and tour leaders, have good knowledge about the destination's natural and cultural values.

Indicator 5.9.2: Basic information about the destination is readily available in the BP's marketing material (brochures, web site, shop etc.).

Indicator 5.9.3: The BP customers receive pre-tour information about the travel and the destination, together with suggested readings, required equipment and a Code of Conduct.

Indicator 5.9.4: The BP customers receive good personal encounter/guiding/ instruction prior and during the tourism service to fully enjoy the local features.

Criterion 5.10

The PAN Park's business partner considers safety and quality all the way through.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

General indicators [*applying for all BP*]:

Indicator 5.10.1: The BP company has the necessary insurance coverage, at least for the related tourism and visitor activities.

Indicator 5.10.2: The BP company continuously works at improving the quality of the operation and uses customer satisfaction forms or similar feedback to improve its quality.

Indicator 5.10.3: The BP company marketing strategy creates realistic customer expectations on destinations and activities.

Specific indicators for **tour products**:

Indicator 5.10.4: The BP company has health and safety practices towards staff and customers, including regular training.

Indicator 5.10.5: The BP company conducts risk analyses on all its activities and follows the appropriate standards for risk management.

Indicator 5.10.6: The BP company has routines and back-up plans for unexpected and unwanted circumstances.

Indicator 5.10.7: At least one BP guide on all guided tours is trained to provide First Aid, CPR or eventual other activity-specific life-saving techniques.

Indicator 5.10.8: If domestic animals are used during the activities (for example dogs, reindeer or horses), the BP company treats them with dignity and respect.

Indicator 5.10.9: The BP company has routine cooperation with local Safety and Rescue Services.

Criterion 5.11

The PAN Parks business partner is using the services of or subcontracting only those partners whose practises do not cause environmental damage.

To meet the Criterion, the following achievements are required:

Indicator 5.11.1: The BP company sets clear and concise environmental standards to its subcontractors

Indicator 5.11.2: The BP company selects suppliers of services and products, and ensures that they act in a sustainable manner.

Appendix V: PAN Parks' local business partners

PAN Park	Name of local business partner	Category of operations	Number of Local business partners
Bieszczady NP	Irmina Sokólska	Accommodation	8
	Chata nad Czarnym, Wojciech Grzanecki	Accommodation	
	"Leśny Dwór" Pensjonat Rodziny Ostrowskich	Accommodation	
	"Wilcza Jama" Gospodarstwo Agroturystyczne	Accommodation	
	"Domek Myśliwski" w Muczmem	Accommodation and tours	
	Ośrodek Informacyjno-Edukacyjny	Accommodation and attraction	
	"Dzika Przyroda" Grzegorz Sitko	Tours	
	Horseback tourism in the High Bieszczady Mts	Tours	
Borjomi Kharagauli NP			0
Central Balkan NP	Sevlievo Plaza Hotel	Accommodation	12
	Dan Kolov Family Hotel	Accommodation	
	BHH Bulgaria Ltd.	Tours	
	Skandaloto - 1896 Family hotel	Accommodation and tours	
	Eco Art House	Accommodation and tours	
	Traditional arts and crafts museum	Attraction	
	Villa Colour	Accommodation	
	Ritz - M Family hotel	Accommodation	
	Central Balkan Information centre	Attraction	
	Tsutsova House	Accommodation and tours	
	Sandeva House	Accommodation and tours	
	Pandion-D	Accommodation and tours	
Fulufjället NP	STF Turistgården	Accommodation	10
	Sälens Vandrarhem	Accommodation	
	STF Björkhagen	Accommodation	
	Knappgården Pensionat & Soho North Restaurant	Accommodation and restaurant	
	PAN Parks Accommodation in Sweden AB	Accommodation	
	Nordisk Vildmarksupplevelse	Tours	
	Njupeskärsserveringen	Accommodation, tours and restaurant	
	Stenvallens Fäbod, Vita Villan	Tours	
	Evert Spånberg Flugfiskekurser	Tours	
	Hormunds Fiske och vildmarksguide	Tours	
Majella NP	No information available		5
Oulanka NP	Green Line Safaris	Tours	13
	Basecamp Oulanka	Accommodation	

	Wilderness Wolf Naturesafaries	Tours	
	Oulanka National Park Campsite		
	Kuru Taksi	Transportation	
	Kuusamo Bird Touring	Tours	
	Cafeteria Neidonkenkä	Restaurants	
	Park Cafe Oulanka	Restaurants	
	North Trek	Tours	
	Boreal Tours	Tours	
	Alba Racing Kennel	Tours	
	Sallan Tunturipalvelut Oy	Accommodation	
	Salla Reindeer Park	Attraction	
Paanajärvi NP			0
Retezat NP			0
Rila NP	No information available		6
Archipelago			0
Total number of local business partners			54

Appendix VI: Outline of interviews with PAN Park's local business partners (Central Balkan National Park)

1. Interview with Siya Cholakova from 'Balkan Trek'

Expected benefits

- Mountains are and will stay protected. The unspoiled and authentic character of the region is the core of the tourism product and therefore protection of the region is of importance to Balkan Trek.
- An increase of customer numbers for the certified product, especially hoping for European tourists.
- That the certification would represent a symbol of quality to tourists.
- That the certification would represent a symbol of environmental quality to tourists.
- Benefits were not expected in the short term future, but benefits of certification are rather seen as a long-term investment in nature protection.
- Networking/cooperation with other local business partners would increase.

Real Benefits

- It is questioned if the mountain area can be protected in the long-term. Especially looking at examples from other Bulgarian National Parks, in which major construction work is taking place which is not in line with nature conservation.
- No increase of customer number through the certification could be experienced.
- And therefore the certification so far also failed to act as a symbol of quality.

2. Interview with 'Skandaloto Family Hotel'

Expected benefits

- The concept of PAN Parks and its efforts to support protected areas and local communities was very much appealing to the owner of Skandaloto family hotel
- The owner expected a growth of international and Bulgarian tourists through the certification and thus an increase of income
- The owner mainly sees the certification as a marketing tool
- Through the certification and PAN Parks efforts in the region the owner hoped that Central Balkan would become more widely know, especially concerning the European market

Real Benefits

- Only a slight increase of international and domestic customers could be related to the certification.
- The owner mainly experienced that domestic as well as international guests accommodated with him are not familiar with the PAN Parks concept; however after being informed by him, the guests value it as a positive operation.
- The owner claimed that the PAN Parks Foundation would perform weak marketing activities, especially in Bulgaria.
- Also the owner explained that he would wish to work more closely with European tour operators, which organize small scaled tours through the region.

Recommendations

Domestic (Bulgarian) certification brands are claimed to be more important than PAN Parks certification, because especially the domestic market is claimed to be unaware of PAN Parks certification.

Importance

PAN Parks certification is claimed to be less important than domestic certification brands, such as 'Authentic Bulgaria'.

3. Interview with 'Eco Art Family Hotel'**Expected benefits**

- To contribute to the protection of the National Park and the region, since the mountain area has a long history of providing the local population with food, firewood and work.
- To develop sustainable tourism in the region.
- An increase of guests' awareness about the natural environment and as a consequence an increase of nature protection.
- In increase of international (European) guests through marketing activities carried out by the PAN Parks Foundation.

Real Benefits

- An improvement of relations with the National Park directorate. The guest house is now provided with up-to-date informational material about the National Park by the directorate of the park.
- Inclusion in decision making processes for sustainable tourism development in the region
- Through the network of local business partners and the National Park, the guesthouse is now provided with more information about the domestic tourism market.
- More support for sustainable tourism projects in the area.
- However, no increase in tourism numbers through the certification could be experienced. Great majority of tourists are unaware of the PAN Parks brand. When tourists are educated about the PAN Parks project they value it as positive.

Recommendations

PAN Parks certification is seen as a very positive tool for nature protection, however, it would be desired to put more focus on social and cultural aspects.

Importance

Besides the national obligatory certification for accommodations, PAN Parks certification is the only certification brand the guest house is included in. PAN Parks certification is seen as an international tool to improve awareness about the National Park and the region.

4. Interview with 'Dan Kolov Family Hotel'**Expected benefits**

- PAN Parks' certification was mainly obtained to increase international as well as domestic visitor numbers. However this increase was not expected to happen in the short time future, the owner expects numbers to increase through PAN Parks certification within the next five years.
- As a second objective the business engaged in the certification program to support protection of the National Park and its surroundings.

Real Benefits

- The network of local business partners and the National Parks management is seen as the biggest advantage of certification. The business could built close relations with other certified businesses as well as the National Park management.
- However, no increase in international and tourism numbers could be related to the PAN Parks certification.

Recommendations

PAN Parks should provide more educational information about the international tourism market to the local business partners.

Importance

Besides the national obligatory certification for accommodations, PAN Parks certification is the only certification brand the family hotel is included in. The PAN Parks project is seen as a unique tool for nature protection and sustainable tourism development in the region.

5. Interview with 'Sandeva House'**Expected benefits**

- PAN Parks certification is mainly seen as a marketing tool to help increasing international tourism numbers, as well as domestic tourism numbers.
- The work of the PAN Parks Foundation it is hoped to help securing the protection of the natural environment.

Real Benefits

- Training given by the LPPG has helped to more understand the international tourism market
- Except for the director of the PAN Parks Foundation, no guests knew about the PAN Parks concept and thus no tourists could be directly related to PAN Parks marketing efforts.
- No new networking benefits could be monitored

Recommendations

The local ecotourism association, which is also a partner of PAN Parks, did sent tourists in the beginning operations. However, due to a lack of finances the facility does not actively operate anymore. The owner would recommend to finance the association, so that visitors can be informed about the area and local business partners.

Importance

Besides the national obligatory certification for accommodations, PAN Parks certification is the only certification brand the family hotel is included in. The network between this business and the National Park management has always been good and thus the certification was not needed to improve this relation. However, the owner is proud to be a partner of the PAN Parks Foundation.

6. Interview with 'Tsoutsova House'**Expected benefits**

- An increase of tourists numbers (international and domestic origin)

- An increase of marketing activities (internationally and domestically)
- Enhancement of nature protection

Real Benefits

- No increase of tourist numbers could be detected or related to certification
- No increase of marketing activities could be detected
- Networking with National Park management and other local business partners could be detected. Relations between NP management and local business partners are perceived as excellent.

Recommendations

It has been perceived that marketing activities should be improved, nationally and internationally. Customers making use of the hotel are not familiar with PAN Parks' certification program. It is further desired to supply local business partners with more market relevant information and train local business partners on how to operate service oriented towards the international market.

Importance

Besides the national obligatory certification for accommodations, PAN Parks certification has been obtained as well as certification with 'Authentic Bulgarian'. All certification logos are displayed onsite and on the hotel's webpage. It is perceived that certification logos add value to the product.

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