VOLUNTARY INITIATIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Worlwide Inventory and
Comparative Analysis of
104 Eco-labels, Awards
and Self-commitments

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The following structure is applied for the chapters on Ecolabels, Awards and Self-commitments:

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1.   Executive summary

1.1 General introduction

Voluntary initiatives play an increasing role in regulating tourism operations; they usually address environmental, economic and social issues, targeting tourism suppliers, such as accommodation, restaurants, sport and leisure facilities, tourist attractions, destinations, tour operators, (tourist) transport companies, tourist associations. They have two principal definitional elements: on the one hand, the initiator is not obliged by law to propose and run the initiative; and on the other, the target groups are not obliged to apply or join. Examples of such voluntary schemes are, among others, eco-labels and certification schemes, prizes and awards, environmental management systems, codes of conduct, self-commitments and self-declarations.

Notwithstanding their value, the increasing number, variety and popularity of voluntary schemes stress the need for consolidation, based on an evaluation of the effectiveness of existing schemes.

The **United Nations Economic and Social Council** recommended a worldwide review of voluntary initiatives for more sustainable development, to give content and direction to the multi-stakeholder dialogue (UN/E/CN.17/1999/12). The proposed key elements for review give guidance for co-ordinating bodies and for outlining studies studies on this topic.

The **World Tourism Organisation** stressed a number of reasons why voluntary instruments are attractive to tourism companies, governments, and other stakeholders involved, underlined the potential for more sustainable development and stressed the need for consolidation ("Voluntary Initiatives in the Tourism Industry: A Proposal to Consolidate Existing Measures", WTO, 1999).

This proposal defined the following approach and objectives, among others:
"The research process should start with an inventory of voluntary schemes world wide (codes of ethics, charters for sustainable tourism, self-commitments, eco-labels and awards), should evaluate the effectiveness esp. in terms of sustainable development, should lead to a consolidated framework and finally to universally recognised voluntary schemes. The comparison work should consider the "Key elements of a review of voluntary initiatives" (UN/E/CN.17/1999/12) and should give answers to the development phase, the procedure, the requirements and the effectiveness of the initiatives."

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) in August 2000 commissioned the study entitled "Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainable Tourism" (VIST) to ECOTRANS, a European Network for Sustainable Tourism Development (Germany), supported by Oceans Blue Foundation (OBF), a Canadian and American environmental charitable organisation with a vision for environmentally responsible tourism. The collaboration of OBF was possible thanks to the generous contribution of the Canadian Tourism Commission. ECOTRANS is an independent non-profit organisation that has been monitoring, analysing and publishing voluntary schemes and best practices in tourism for over 10 years (cf. ECO-TIP). ECOTRANS provided access to its complete information base, and spent considerable staff time as its own contribution to the whole study. Without the trustworthy collaboration with all 104 cases it would have been impossible to succeed in this first global assessment of voluntary Initiatives for sustainable tourism.

This study, based on the analysis of 104 voluntary initiatives world-wide, provides an evaluation of the effectiveness of existing schemes by identifying similarities and differences among voluntary initiatives, finding out the factors that make them successful in terms of sustainable tourism development. Based on the results, guidelines are provided to tourism companies who wish to adopt one of these voluntary schemes; organizations that run these

initiatives, to assist them for improving their existing schemes or create new ones; as well as for governments and NGOs to provide them with technical criteria and guidelines for the support and/or supervision they may wish to give to such initiatives.

As a further step, WTO is currently supporting a feasibility study concerning the establishment of an independent, global accreditation body to grant approval to certification schemes, thus giving higher credibility to these and other voluntary initiatives in tourism.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Methodological frame

This study is based on desk research and online communication. It is not based on physical visits of the initiatives compiled and analysed. Their own knowledge of some initiatives, long lasting (for 3 or more years) and trustworthy contacts with the VIST organizations in more than 50% of the cases, helped the consultants to get reliable, previously unpublished information.

The collection and verification of information concentrated on:
- existing documents in the ECOTRANS, OBF and WTO archives
- email and telephone contacts with the VIST organisations of the reviewed initiatives: questionnaires, interviews, documents, verification of specific data
- permanent Internet research

For the comparative analysis a database was created including all assessed answers to more than 70 issues, quantified as far as possible.

1.2.2 Working steps

The following working steps led to the final report and the manuscript for publication:

Step 1: Identification and Compilation of a long list of 500 Voluntary Initiatives

WTO consulted with its Member States and compiled information from its own sources. ECOTRANS focused its research on Europe (Western and Eastern Europe), Africa and Middle East, OBF focused on the Americas (including Canada and North America, South and Central America), Asia/Pacific and Russia. Altogether about 500 initiatives related to tourism were identified.

Step 2: Reduction of the long list to relevant 260 cases

From this list ECOTRANS and OBF deleted measures that were not of principal interest or value to the study: e.g. such initiatives that no longer exist or have been taken over by other initiatives; or are only executed by a single tourism enterprise; or those which are merely publications of guidelines or conferences; or those which did not provide further information on request. In total the reduced list contained *260 Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainable Tourism.*

Step 3: Selection of 100+ for further research

To concentrate on the most interesting cases, the 260 voluntary initiatives were then assessed according to the following criteria: (i) mainly or exclusively tourism related - the involvement of tourism associations or tourism players; (ii) the initiative is directed to tourism; open to a broad base participation, e.g. to all tourism players in a given area or to a certain sub-group of tourism services (e.g. hotels); and finally (iii) committed and controllable requirements - demanding certain activities/ quality standards from participants or members

of the initiative. In total *133 voluntary initiatives* fulfilled the above-mentioned three key criteria.

Step 4: 100+ data sheets

▪ *questionnaires "key elements"*
About 100 cases were analysed in detail. To compile the information the research work considered the "*Nine Key Elements for the Review of Voluntary Initiatives*", recommended by the United Nations (UN/E/CN.17/1999/12). Theses key elements were completed and specified with further questions concerning the development, requirements, procedure and effectiveness of the schemes. Structured questionnaires were sent in English, German, French and Spanish with a cover letter to the VIST organisations of the 100+ cases. About 50 relevant cases sent back -completedquestionnaires. OBF sent all documents and short descriptions of their pre-selected initiatives from the Americas and Asia/Pacific to ECOTRANS.

▪ *Completion and update*
For specific questions ECOTRANS contacted all 100+ cases again by email or phone. The other VIST organisations which did not answer the questionnaire were contacted 1-2 times by email and 6 – 9 times by phone. Non English documents and texts were analysed and translated as far as necessary. Permanent research on the Internet completed and updated the data sheets with 70 issues. At the end detailed data on 107 initiatives were assessed.

Step 5: 100+ individual descriptions

For all 107 cases up-dated structured descriptions were written including the individual analysis results, each case 1-2 pages. Each text was sent to the responsible VIST organisation in order to check and agree on the contents. More than 80 positive responses agreed, and a few provided slightly updated information. Three cases withdrew their participation - two initiatives for golf courses who did not feel themselves to be "tourism" initiatives, and one private certifier of accommodation (a tour operator).

The total for the final analysis amounted to 104 VIST examples:
• 29 cases in the America/Asia/Pacific areas and
• 75 cases in the European/African/ Middle East areas (place of VIST organisation).

Step 6: Comparative analysis of 100+

The 104 data sheets were compiled into a total database (excel) and grouped according to the main types of voluntary initiatives: Eco-labels (59), Awards (17) and Self-committing initiatives (28).
All cases per group were compared to each other according to factual evidence. The results include total figures and percentages/ shares (statistics). They show similarities and peculiarities for the main components of the analysed voluntary initiatives in terms of development, requirements, procedure and effects. Additionally, individual strengths and difficulties, as well as future steps were considered, insofar as they were mentioned by the VIST organisations. The statistical results for the group of *Eco-labels* can be seen as highly representative of all existing Eco-labels world wide.

Step 7: Analysis and drawing up conclusions and recommendations

All comparative results were analysed again in order to show tendencies and relevant conclusions concerning the development, requirements, procedure, effectiveness and future trends of the three main types of VIST. The conclusions, together with identified common and individual factors for success or difficulties, were considered in the recommendations to VIST organisations of such initiatives, to governmental bodies as setters of conditions and as supporters, and to tourism businesses as participants.

Step 8: Report

To illustrate particular results for every type of VIST, this report includes specific charts. For a quick overview all relevant cases per type of VIST are summarised in tables with key information and short texts. For those who want to use the publication for the planning of its own initiative, an illustrating model (Philippines) is included at the end of the publication.

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<u>VIST study (09/00 – 10/01)</u>

Identification of 500+ Voluntary Initiatives (VI) world wide, many relevant for tourism (11/2000)

⇩

1st preselection of 260 VI, relevant for tourism (12/2000)

⇩

2nd preselection of 133 VI, highly relevant for the study (02/2001)

⇩

Data sheets on 107 VI (06/2001)

⇩

Analysis per case: 107 descriptions (07/2001)

⇩

Final list of 104 cases (10/2001)
(59 Eco-labels, 17 awards, 28 Self Commitments)

Analysis per type of VI (07 - 10/2001)

⇩

Results, Conclusions (08 – 09/2001)

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1.3 Contents of the report

The report consists of **part I**: **General Results and Recommendations** and of **Part II: Main Results and Conclusions per type of Voluntary Initiatives**.

Part I includes the **Executive Summary** (Chapter 1), introduces the **Framework of the study**, and presents the **General results and conclusions**, as well as **Recommendations. Part II** contains in more details the **Main results and conclusions per type of VIST** (eco-labels, awards and self-commitment initiatives). **Part III** gives detailed and comparable information about each of the 104 individual cases.

The **Framework of the Study** (Chapter 2) gives an introduction to the reader and puts the study into a global context. Tourism is one of the world's leading industries, giving it a high potential value in the global economy, as well as a responsibility to undertake sustainable development practices. Many voluntary initiatives within the *global context* aim to contribute to the reduction of negative impacts and the growth of positive trends. Within this context, the chapter includes a general *working definition on voluntary initiatives in sustainable tourism.* It introduces the main *components* for the global comparative analysis and for the individual descriptions. The *checklist* combines the main components with the key elements and all specific issues for the review of the VIST cases.

The **General Results and Conclusions** (Chapter 3) summarise the current situation and some tendencies during the development phase, as well as the requirements, procedures and effectiveness of the reviewed groups of eco-labels, awards and self-commitments.

Based on the results and conclusions, the **Recommendations** (Chapter 4) are directed to three main groups of decision makers: to those who are or want to become a *VIST organisation* or partner of a voluntary initiative, to those who are responsible for the improvement of the conditions for the operation and the success of the VIST process, e.g. *governmental organisations*, and for those who may consider participation in or co-operation with a VIST. *Eleven main recommendations* are provided with a view to improving the conditions for more voluntary initiatives, and for better effectiveness and co-operation. More specific recommendations are given for *the planning, assessing and operation* of voluntary initiatives. For all initiatives dealing with eco-*labelling* a detailed checklist is provided to support the decision-making process in all phases. The indication of some *crucial issues* and a set of *principles* close this chapter.

Part II reflects the current situation world wide for the selected groups of **Eco-labels** (Chapter 1), **Awards** (Chapter 2) and **Self-commitments** (Chapter 3): for each grouping of VIST cases, the section **Development** includes results about the number of assessed initiatives, their life time and their geographical spread, the type of VIST and partner organisations, and the sources for initial financial support. The **Requirements** section shows the types of tourism target groups and the criteria for successful participation. Special attention is given to the focus of the criteria in terms of sustainable tourism objectives. The section on **Procedure** summarises the application process, the steps for the verification of the compliance with the requirements, the certification or awarding, and the marketing activities. The **Effects** section concentrates on the number of participants in each initiative. Also, individual **Strengths and Difficulties** and **Further Steps Planned** - which were mentioned by the VIST organisations - illustrate the changes and specific requirements or a re-evaluation of some initiatives.

Part III profiles all **104 Cases in detail**: the *overview list* includes the title, the first year of operation, their geographic spread and tourism target group(s). The *short information per case* gives a first impression on the VIST organisation, effectiveness or other peculiarity of the initiative. The *individual descriptions* give detailed information about the development, the requirements, the procedure and the effects of the initiative so far (up to November, 2001). For further information the reader may also use the final list of *addresses* (Appendix 2) and contact each initiative directly, or visit their web sites on the Internet.

1.4 Main conclusions

Policy makers, business managers, government officials and consumers need clear and reliable information about goods and services in the tourism industry. Eco-labels, awards and self-commitment schemes provide that orientation, along with guarantees of quality standards for different tourism-related products and services.

One of the over-riding conclusions from the hundred plus case studies in this report is that eco-labels, awards and self-commitments have entered the tourism supply chain, and although their current impact has been minimal across the sector as a whole, they are revealing tremendous potential to move the industry towards sustainability, but not without careful nurturing and support from the key industry stakeholders.

Under the statistical microscope of the VIST analysis, quality marks reveal some very important information for implementing sustainable development. The study provides a detailed picture of how the tourism industry has reacted in practice to processes stimulated ten years ago by Agenda 21. For the industry, this process has been one of coming to terms with the limits of the tourism product in the modern global economy. Limits on consumption of the natural resource base, limits on destination space, limits on pollution, - in short, the limits of mass tourism.

To deal with these limits, to show that a product or service does not have a negative environmental or socio-economic impact, quality assurance logos have appeared in the market place, placing themselves at the heart of the sustainable development debate. In proclaiming sustainability, these logos become powerful icons of the information age, capable of influencing production and consumption patterns. Their effect until now is modest, reflecting the relatively recent start and consequent immaturity of the process- half of all existing eco-labels are only four years old. Given the enormous volumes of transactions in the tourism supply and demand chain, the quality marks have scarcely made their presence felt in this short period of time. The current picture looks like this:

❑   In total in 2001 about 7,000 tourism products have been certified worldwide, most of them in Europe (about 6,000).

❑   2/3 of the eco-labels are led by private tourism associations and other non-governmental organisations or consultancies, 1/3 are led by governmental organisations.

❑   2/3 of the eco-labels have been co-operating from the outset in multi-stakeholder groups representing tourism, environmental, social and consumers' interests.

❑   The costs for the development of eco-labels are covered by private (1/3), by public (1/3) or by corporate private-public sources (1/3).

❑   47% of the reviewed eco-labels were implemented between 1996-2000, 47% are older, while 6% are still in their testing and implementation phase.

❑   78% of the certificates focus on tourism products in Europe, 17 % on other continents, 5 % in various continents.

❑   In the last five years the eco-labels for accommodation in Europe together with their 1,000-3,000 certified enterprises saved as much energy, water and waste as 2.000 hotels or camping sites consume and produce in one year.

❑   The environmental performance per certified accommodation enterprise can be taken as about 20 % better than the average performance of enterprises in Europe, e.g. 20% less consumption of energy or water per overnight.

It can be seen then, that altogether these voluntary initiatives contribute to raising the overall standard of the whole tourism sector. The increase in the number of labels and awards demonstrates a healthy growth curve, but it still fails to dent the global picture of mass unsustainable tourism development. Clearly, ecoabels are still in their infancy, but many

have matured rapidly. Given that sustainable development as an overall field is in the process of evolving, this part of the picture is similarly coming off the drawing boards and into the marketplace. A vision of what is a sustainable tourism industry has yet to be formed in detail, so the performance of quality marks is likely to be equally undeveloped. But as purveyors of good practice, they do shape the debate about how to achieve sustainable tourism.

The UN Report listing nine key review elements (*Key elements of a review of voluntary initiatives- published in: UN/E/CN.17/1999/12*) stated that voluntary initiatives and agreements constitute one type among a range of instruments that can be used to achieve sustainable development. The particular needs of developing countries, including capacity building of various stakeholders, should be given special attention. Southern initiatives and joint North-South partnership projects highlight how they are an excellent instrument to exchange and disseminate best practice, so long as care is taken to allow for regional and cultural differences during their implementation.

The hard facts of the report reveal that policy gaps are apparent evidenced in the uneven spread of labels across different areas of the supply chain.
The VIST can both pre-empt and complement regulation of the industry, and are doing their best to avoid and eradicate 'green-washing'. Their experience of defining best practice in the market place offers an excellent opportunity to develop regulations to suit and stimulate best practice.
As such, they currently offer a patchwork landscape of sustainable development practice in the tourism sector, enabling both the vision and reality of sustainability to materialise in the form of sustainable tourist dollars, euros and yen. Good for business, their regional manifestations show how the global economy can be harnessed for the production and exchange of goods in a way that preserves traditional cultural and natural heritage.
As agents of standards and guarantees of quality to all manner of consumers, they have had excellent success in meeting their stated objectives, but not without all the difficulties naturally encountered in stakeholder interaction. Stakeholders have been carefully identified and their participation has been a key objective, with networking being the main participative arrangement. Issues of the responsibility of different stakeholders have given rise to several public –private -NGO partnership arrangements, with NGOs and the private sector taking a leading role in their development and implementation.

Each initiative offers the opportunity to access high quality information on the respective concerns of the labels or commitments. This information has been widely disseminated among the stakeholders and the public, but the volume of information put out by the tourism industry dwarfs these attempts to reach a mass audience within the sector at the moment. The continual search for multi-stakeholder participation has opened up and connected several cross-cutting networks, particularly on themes pivoting around tourism, nature protection and mobility, subjects which require immediate social and economic attention at all levels in the current global economy.

Voluntary initiatives for sustainable tourism already form an excellent basis for a development framework of a system of comprehensive certification schemes across the tourism sector. The evolution of such a framework is the subject of the recommendations of this report.