

New Zealand Ecotourism Operators' Perceptions of Environmental Certification Schemes.

Tara Rowe – Graduated 2004

Abstract

Management of the environment and natural resources in tourist destinations has been, and continues to be a global key concern. The phenomenal growth and evolution of ecotourism has reinforced the necessity to create practical solutions that support the industry's sustainability. Many areas rely on compulsory regulations to protect the environment; however this method alone has often proved inefficient for tourism destinations. There exist numerous environmental initiatives which serve to enhance the environmental performance of ecotourism operations, yet environmental certification schemes are emerging as a recognised alternative form of environmental management.

New Zealand has acquired the label of a clean, green ecotourism destination; largely to the country's '100% Pure NZ' international marketing campaign. There is danger in terms of sustainability with the ecotourism label, and the lack of management tools to corroborate the country's image and marketing claims. Environmental certification schemes are recognised, yet have not permeated the New Zealand ecotourism industry. Green Globe 21 however, is an international certification scheme that is currently widely employed in New Zealand.

The purpose of this research was to examine the position of New Zealand ecotourism operators with respect to environmental certification schemes. A quantitative study was undertaken, using an online web based survey, sampling 226 ecotourism operators in New Zealand. A total of 66 completed and functional surveys were received, representing a 29% response rate.

The project produced a current database of New Zealand ecotourism operators, in addition to an up to date national ecotourism operator profile. The findings indicated a considerable difference of opinion between operators of the North and the South Islands. Comparisons from 2001 research illustrated operators are becoming more knowledgeable and perceptive of environmental certification schemes. Elements such as time and costs are preventing many operators from participating in these programmes, despite the perceived benefits of enhanced public image and added value to the New Zealand ecotourism industry. Because market demand for environmentally certified operators is perceived to be non-existent, operators could be influenced to adhere to less stringent and weaker forms of environmental initiatives (such as codes of best practice).

The thesis concludes that New Zealand is advantageously placed to become a global leader in ecotourism. Although New Zealand ecotourism operators are aware of environmental certification schemes, there exists confusion and scepticism surrounding the potential benefits as opposed to the barriers. The South Island operators appear to be more advanced with respect to their awareness and realisation of environmental initiatives in their operations. The need for an authoritative organization for environmental certification is prominent, perceived by operators as key to introducing credibility to their businesses, as well as the industry as a whole.