

## Eco-Labels in the Tourism Sector in South Africa: Benefits and Barriers

Reshma Sucheran\*

*Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa, e-mail, [reshma@dut.ac.za](mailto:reshma@dut.ac.za)*

Lucinda Arulappan

*Department of Academics, MANCOSA, Durban, South Africa,  
[lucinda.arulappan@mancosa.co.za](mailto:lucinda.arulappan@mancosa.co.za)*

*\*Corresponding Author*

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### Abstract

The considerable increase in tourism activities over the years equates to notable economic and social benefits. Patent as one of the most emergent sectors of the global economy, the degree and prospect of tourism growth, however, raises concerns on its negative environmental and social impacts. Conserving these environments is of utmost importance as damage to environmental quality can eventually destroy the tourism industry. The launch of eco-labels to environmentally vulnerable tourism organizations and destinations is presently being implemented in many countries in an effort to protect the natural and socio-cultural resources of a destination. A number of eco-labels exist within the tourism industry in South Africa. These eco-labels are anticipated to have a profound effect on the contribution towards sustainable tourism within the country as these are considered to be highly compatible with sustainable tourism initiatives. This study provides an overview of eco-labels in South Africa and examines the benefits and barriers associated with eco-label certification. A quantitative research approach was used, and the data was collected utilizing an online questionnaire. A census sampling approach was used to target 104 tourism businesses in South Africa that have eco-label certification. The key eco-labels targeted in the study were the Blue Flag, Fair Trade in Tourism, Heritage Environmental Management Company, and GreenLine - certified by Heritage. The study revealed that tourism businesses in South Africa do experience several benefits through eco-label certification. However, businesses also encounter many barriers with eco-label certification in terms of high costs associated with being certified, the lack of general public awareness regarding eco-labels and the absence of government support. Consequently, cost reduction, promotion of public awareness as well as government support are the main areas of improvement suggested by tourism establishments with regards to eco-labels.

**Keywords:** Eco-labels, certification, tourism industry, barriers, benefits

### Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the world's fastest developing industries and is the primary source of foreign exchange earnings for many countries. According to the World Bank (2019), the number of international tourist arrivals increased from approximately 541 million in 1995 to 1.4 billion in 2018, reflecting a rapid growth in global tourism. Zhong, Deng, Song and Ding (2011) acknowledge that tourism growth is largely reliant on the natural and socio-cultural environments, as these environments offer the attraction and appeal of the tourist destination. However, the tourism activities have resulted in the degradation of the natural environment due to the excessive use of natural resources, high numbers of tourist arrivals, and the over-

development of tourism facilities (Sadeghian, 2019; Sharma & Rao, 2019). Poorly planned and operated tourism destinations and establishments can have a wide range of negative environmental impacts, including pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and impacts on local economies, environments, and cultures (Agarwal, Kariyapol & Pienchob, 2019). Tourism stakeholders have grown to realize that the natural environment is a vital tourism resource, and are therefore increasingly adopting and implementing environmentally compatible development measures to curtail the negative environmental impacts associated with tourism development. There are numerous claims that the implementation of sustainability practices in this sector will be fundamental for a destination's enhanced tourism competitiveness, tourist brand loyalty, corporate social responsibility overall community and economic well-being (Carić, 2018; Lai, Chiu, Yang & Pai, 2010; Mihalič 2000; Zhong, Deng, Song & Ding, 2011).

The tourism industry has become responsive to priorities associated with sustainable development and the growing demand by tourists for sustainable and socially responsible products and experiences. This has led to the emergence of 'green tourism' since the mid-1990s (Meghana, 2019), and consequently, the last two decades have witnessed an exponential increase in the number and types of voluntary eco-labeling/eco-certification schemes for the verification of ecological and social responsibility claims of tourism businesses (Font, 2002, Buckley, 2020). The emergence of certification in the tourism sector was as a result of Agenda 21, which was endorsed by 182 countries during the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit (Rio Summit). Agenda 21 stressed the need for businesses to comply with environmental regulations and policies to mitigate global environmental problems. Eco-label schemes are currently being utilized as instrumental tools for protecting the natural environment on which the tourism industry depends, and to ensure its environmentally compatible development (Bernini & Cerqua, 2019). Also, eco-labels usually encourage businesses to raise their standards of environmental allows destinations to demonstrate their environmental credentials to customers. Despite a proliferation of tourism eco-label initiatives and the benefits associated with them, several eco-labels are faced with challenges, and it is, therefore, necessary to understand conditions surrounding eco-label implementation and maintenance. This paper, therefore, provides an overview of eco-labels in South Africa and examines the benefits and challenges facing eco-labels in the tourism sector.

### **Literature review**

Tourism establishments have embraced various voluntary initiatives to make public their obligation and commitment to sustainable tourism (Ayuso, 2006; Carić, 2018). Many sustainable tourism approaches have subsequently been developed in recent years such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Paskova & Zelenka, 2019; Sandve, Marnburg & Ogaard, 2014; Xavier & Lynes, 2018), tourism voluntary initiatives (Ayuso, 2006; Blanco, Rey-Maqueira & Lozano 2009; Panzer-Krause, 2017), codes of conduct, best environmental practices, eco-labels, environmental management systems and other environmental performance indicators (Ayuso 2006, Buckley, 2020; Geerts, 2014; Spenceley, 2020). Eco-labels or eco-certification programs, believed to be one of the oldest forms of tourism voluntary initiatives, have become increasingly popular in recent years in an attempt to improve the environmental performance of the industry (Carić, 2018; Buckley; Blackman, Naranjo, Robalino, Alpízar & Riveria, 2014; 2020). According to Bowman (2011), a certification is a form of delivering positive affirmation that helps differentiate between less environmentally harmful products and services, therefore promoting sustainable tourism purchase and practice within the tourism industry. Eco-labels and/or certification schemes in tourism aim to emphasize the best practices for goods and services, and its purpose is to make certain that they are steering their business conduct with less harmful impacts on the environment, the social

order, and the economy alike (Bernini & Cerqua, 2019; Blackman, Naranjo, Robalino, Alpízar & Rivera, 2014; Costa, Rodrigues & Gomes, 2019; Dunk, Gillespie & MacLeod, 2016).

Eco-label certification is a voluntary procedure that assesses, monitors, and provides a written guarantee that a business product or service conforms to a particular requirement, and a business that meets the certification criteria is awarded the eco-label. Essentially, eco-label certification schemes encourage voluntary adoption of sustainability practices by the industry, contribute to the potential enhancement of profitability and inform prospective tourists on the sustainability performance of the establishment (Font, 2002; Geerts, 2014). The development of eco-labels in the tourism industry was presented as an official tool that developed as a result of Agenda 21. In an era of increasing concern regarding environmental preservation, eco-labels or environmental certification have gained the attention of both multidimensional tourism and multidimensional environmental businesses and is used as a tool for promoting sustainable tourism (Capacci, Scorcu & Vici 2015; Costa et al., 2019; Geerts, 2014). Consequently, the number of eco-labels in the tourism sector has grown substantially. Mihalič (2000) reported 30 different tourism environmental awards and eco-labels in 1998, and by 2018, the European Commission (2019) reported a total of 186 environmental certificates and eco-labels in operation at either the global, national or sub-national levels.

### ***Benefits of eco-labels***

According to Bowman (2011) and Duglio, Ivanov, Magliano, and Ivanova (2017), the application of tourism certification is one method used to promote sustainable tourism and to synchronize the conceptualization of sustainable practices. The implementation of the appropriate environmental management measures improves the environmental competitiveness of a destination. Geerts (2014) conducted a study on large hotels in central London and found that managers of all environmentally certified hotels appreciated the certification as a demonstrable allegiance to sustainability. Several studies have confirmed tourists interest in sustainable practices (Bakas, 2015; Penz, Hofmann & Hartl, 2017), and a sizeable amount of tourists consider eco-labels as a dependable measure for selecting environmentally friendly products and services (Bastič & Gojčič 2012; Buckley, 2020; Carasuk, Becken & Hughey, 2016). For example, Bakas (2015) concluded that more than seventy percent of tourists believe that establishments should be committed to preserving the natural environment. Capacci et al. (2015) further affirmed that certification on seaside coastal destinations in Italy positively impacted foreign tourist decisions to visit the destination. Tourists who are motivated by environmental sustainability tend to demonstrate loyalty to those destinations that implement sustainability practices and use green branding.

Cost-savings are widely recognized in the tourism industry as the typical benefit of sustainability through eco-label certification. According to Jarvis, Weeden and Simcock (2010), certification schemes assist businesses in becoming environmentally conscious by reducing the consumption of resources such as water and energy and reducing the discharge of waste. This in turn leads to economic benefits due to the lower usage of such resources. Chun and Giebelhausen (2012) concede that minor alterations such as changing to light-emitting diode (LED) or compact fluorescent light bulbs can result in significant savings concerning both economic expenses and natural resources. Similarly, eco-labels aimed at the management of water, waste, and energy lead to considerable financial savings in tourism establishments (Blackman et al., 2014; Dunk et al., 2016; Font, 2007). Geerts (2014) claimed that on average, eco-label certified members in the tourism sector, save between 20%-25% of their operational costs in the first year through improved efficiency. A study done in Costa Rica, found an association with higher hotel prices and environmental ratings since businesses that obtain eco-labels have the advantage of charging premium prices to environmentally conscious tourists

(Jarvis et al., 2010). Chan (2008) found that eco-labels are known to attract environmentally conscious tourists that obtain higher income and have higher conservational anticipations and are therefore willing to pay higher premiums of up to 5% for eco-friendly service delivery. Therefore, tourism managers have been keen on integrating environmental or sustainable measures into their current management policies and methods, but only if it resulted in high financial benefits and reduced costs (Buckley, 2020; Mihalič, 2000; Panzer-Krause, 2017).

From a marketing perspective, eco-labels act as tools for tourism businesses to differentiate themselves from competitors. Tippert, Ytterdal and Strand (2020) state that the key purpose of eco-labels in tourism is as a marketing tool which is a factor in consumer choice. Certification and environmentally focused conduct and practices can be used as a marketing tool to gain the attention of environmentally conscious tourists (Buckley, 2020; Bastič & Gojčič, 2012). Font (2007) affirms that for many large companies, the primary reason for eco-label certification is not to attract business, but rather as a method to safeguard their image and brand for public relations purposes against potential unfavorable publicity. The prospective for promotion as a benefit is frequently mentioned as the main incentive for eco-label certification, as benefits consist of an enhanced company image amongst consumers, a chance to gain a competitive advantage, and improved destination promotion opportunities (Tippert, Ytterdal & Strand, 2020; Jarvis et al., 2010).

### ***Barriers facing eco-labels***

The literature reveals several barriers associated with eco-labels which include high costs, economic concerns, poor eco-label management, inconsistencies of eco-labels, barriers regarding the actual certification and lack of government support (Conaghan & Hanrahan 2010; Jarvis et al., 2010; Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019; Sucheran, 2015; Tippert, Ytterdal & Strand, 2020, Tzschentke, Kirk & Lynch, 2008; Yusof & Jamaludin, 2018). Many tourism businesses tend to be apprehensive about the short-term profitability of sustainability initiatives, as the high cost of innovation makes it challenging for small businesses to adopt green measures. The increased expenses associated with membership and the implementation of tourism certification schemes are serious problems for tourism organizations. Businesses suffer significant financial and non-financial costs to fulfill eco-label certification environmental performance criteria, settle application fees, and other transactional costs (Blackman et al. 2014; Carasuk, Becken & Hughey, 2016; Tzschentke, Kirk & Lynch, 2008). Added limitations are the high expense of verification and the need for expertise in the application of standards, particularly when management structures and paper traces are essential. Gkoumas (2019) and Chan (2008) confirm that the high costs of eco-labels lead to increased prices of tourism products and services made available to the tourist. This could unfortunately discourage tourists from making a sustainable purchase and encourage visitors to contribute towards non-certified establishments and products. Tippert, Ytterdal and Strand (2020) stress that the implementation of eco-labels will increase costs initially, and these costs are critical for smaller and medium-sized tourism businesses, as they may not have the ability to commit the required financial resources to sustainable practices and eco-label certification. Gkoumas (2019) suggests that the main aim of any establishment is to create and produce a profit. Therefore, in instances where environmental developments fail to reduce expenses, it is probable that they will be undertaken with less drive.

Added to this, the low demand for environmentally-friendly products and services from customers is another barrier to adopting eco-labels (Minoli, Goode & Smith, 2015; Sucheran, 2015; Yusof & Jamaludin, 2018). Empirical evidence from a study conducted in the UK suggested that less than one percent of all outgoing holidays booked gave priority to the environment (Intel, 2005). Correspondingly, Chafe (2005) found that despite the majority of

tourists indicating their concern for the environment, only about ten percent of these translated this into purchasing decisions. These views are further corroborated by Geerts (2014) in a study of London hotels. In the tourism sector, where revenue limits are low and seasonal, it may be challenging to market certified or labeled products or services at a premium price (Gkoumas, 2019).

Tzschentke, Kirk and Lynch (2008), Sucheran (2015) and Minoli et al. (2015) confirmed that a lack of knowledge and expertise on sustainable measures, and the unclear responsibilities of staff are the key barriers that can prevent more extensive participation in sustainable practices. Often, staff may be required to wear two different hats and having two sets of work responsibilities to serve the eco-label. This results in an increase in staff workload due to additional environmental practices, which may affect the performances of their normal duties. Another barrier facing the implementation of eco-labels is the lack of government support. Svetlana and Valery (2017) and Tzschentke et al. (2008) confirm that governments have an integral role to play in sustainable tourism, but often do not encourage or assist in sustainable measures. Carasuk et al. (2016) and Yusof and Jamaludin (2018) and Gkoumas (2019) maintain that companies feel that they lack guidance from local government authorities concerning sustainable tourism and eco-label schemes. For example, countries such as The Dominican Republic, Fiji, Kenya and Venezuela, which were keen on implementing certification schemes, failed to do so, due to the lack of government support (Font 2007).

### **Tourism eco-labels in South Africa**

Janisch (2007) confirms that eco-labels in the tourism industry are extremely relevant for the African region. This is because tourism in the region offers new opportunities and employment and financial benefits for indigenous societies. Before 1994, the South African government viewed international tourism and environmental issues unimportant as these were understood to benefit those that were privileged (Akinboade & Braimoh, 2010; Pieterse, 2004). However, a shift in viewpoint was witnessed in 1996 when the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa was implemented. The focus of the White Paper was on Responsible Tourism and highlighted the role of tourism in South Africa and the importance of various key players in sustaining the sector. Spenceley (2020) confirms that the objective of the South African government is to control the country's tourism sector for the sake of sustainable development in a manner that promotes improved living for all citizens of the country. Therefore, in South Africa, tourism certification is considered a beneficial instrument to promote the country and encourage responsible and sustainable tourism development (Pieterse, 2004).

At the time of this study, several eco-labels were operating in South Africa that is tourism specific and include the Blue Flag, Certified Wildlife Friendly, EarthCheck, Fairtrade in Tourism South Africa, Green Globe Certification and the Heritage Environmental Management Company eco-label (Eco-label Index, 2017). This study focuses on four of South Africa's most prominent eco-labels for the tourism sector which are the Blue Flag Award, Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa, the Heritage Environmental Management Company and GreenLine- certified by Heritage. According to Font (2002), the first breakthrough in environmental accreditation and certification occurred in 1985, when the first Blue Flag was granted as a means of promoting compliance to European Commission law on the quality of bathing water. The Foundation of Environmental Education in Europe (FEEE) was extended to certifying more than 1800 beaches and 600 marinas in the year 2000. The Foundation also spread out of Europe to include South Africa and the Caribbean. Preparation of South African beaches to obtain Blue Flag status began in 1998 and South Africa was the first country outside of European borders to acquire Blue Flag certification for some of its beaches (Saayman &

Saayman, 2017). The South African Blue Flag eco-label is run by the Wildlife and Environmental Society South Africa (WESSA), which is a member of the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) International and is consequently the national manager of Blue Flag beaches. The label is managed in partnership with the Department of Tourism and participating in coastal authorities (Janisch, 2007). The key criteria of the Blue Flag award include environmental education and information, water quality, environmental management, safety and other services, with several sub-criteria. The local management authority is responsible for ensuring compliance with the criteria and regular inspection regarding water quality data and visibility of site criteria. The eco-label is a universal yearly accolade which may be withdrawn if criteria are not adhered to. A regional assessment report of eco-labels in South Africa compiled by Janisch (2007), found that the Blue Flag award as demonstrating high levels of success and there had been substantial growth in response from local authorities wanting to be a part of the scheme due to many benefits including escalating tourist statistics, the improved conduct of beach-goers, increased property values of homes near Blue Flag beaches and visitors appreciating a well maintained and managed beach. However, in March 2008, the Blue Flag status was revoked from four of the six Durban beaches that were Blue Flag accredited, resulting in a major financial loss to the city (McKenna, Williams & Cooper 2011). Nevertheless, the success and accomplishment of the Blue Flag eco-label are still visible and with much confidence, more tourism certification schemes will reach similar developments especially if constant progress in the travel and tourism industry is experienced (Conaghan & Hanrahan 2010, Saayman & Saayman, 2017).

Fair Trade Tourism (formally referred to as Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa - FT TSA) is a non-profit establishment that endorses tourism companies for functioning under the philosophies of 'Fair Trade' and responsible tourism. The eco-label deals with ethics of fair share, democracy, respect, reliability, transparency and sustainability (Fair Trade Tourism, 2020). The Fair Trade Tourism eco-label awards a distinct certification trademark (label/logo) to tourism establishments within South Africa that meet specific sustainability criteria established on global Fair Trade principles. Fair Trade Tourism was established under the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in South Africa in 2001, as a pilot project to assess the applicability of Fair Trade to the post-apartheid context. Since 2004, Fair Trade Tourism functions as an independent, non-profit organization in South Africa and certifies establishments across South Africa including hotels, safari lodges, backpacker lodges, guesthouses, cultural tours and eco-adventure activities. Furthermore, many of these products are small, emerging, and community-based businesses that are wholly or partially owned by rural black communities disenfranchised by apartheid (Fair Trade Tourism, 2020). For Fair Trade Tourism certified businesses, the logo offers reliability while at the same time allowing access to niche markets. The aim is to increase private encouragement for respectable environmental and social practices and analyze consumer and industry demand for 'fair' tourism experiences (Janisch, 2007). The eco-label focuses on six key principles which include fair share, fair say, respect, reliability, transparency and sustainability. These principles form the basis of the Fair Trade Tourism criteria which are fair wages and working conditions, fair operations, purchasing and distribution of benefits, ethical business practice, and respect for human rights, culture and the environment (Fair Trade Tourism, 2020).

The Heritage Environmental Management Company is a scheme developed by a private corporation to observe the ecological performance of enterprises in South and Southern Africa (Janisch, 2007; Mahony, 2007). It is specifically designed for the hospitality industry of South Africa, and is dedicated to achieving sustainability and persistent ecological enhancement in the service sector through the submission of internationally competitive management schemes, measures and operative exercises (Mahony, 2007). The GreenLine- certified by the Heritage

eco-label is also afforded by the Heritage Environmental Management Company. The GreenLine- certified by Heritage Programme is viewed as a Responsible Tourism Certification initiative, whereas the Heritage Programme is an all-inclusive Environmental Management System and Certification product. The focus of these eco-label schemes are on sustainable operations and management, social and cultural criteria, economic criteria, and environmental criteria.

## Methodology

The target population for this study was tourism businesses in South Africa that have eco-label certification. The key eco-labels targeted in the study were Blue Flag, Fair Trade in Tourism, The Heritage Environmental Management Company and GreenLine- certified by Heritage. These specific eco-labels were chosen due to its prominence, and prevalence during the time of the study. The sampling method chosen for this research study was purposive sampling which is a non-probability technique which included the following criteria: participants (tourism organizations/municipalities) established in South Africa, participants (tourism organizations/municipalities) permitted to participate in study surveys and participants (tourism organizations/municipalities) certified by either the Blue Flag award, Fair Trade Tourism, The Heritage Environmental Management Company or GreenLine- certified by Heritage. The selected, certified tourism businesses comprised of tour operators, travel agents, tourism attractions, accommodation establishments, and beaches and marinas. Due to the small number of units within the entire target population, a census study was employed. A total sample size of 74 establishments was eventually obtained which comprised 42 accommodation establishments, 15 beaches, 10 tourist attractions, and 7 tour operators. Data was obtained from the management of establishments via online structured questionnaires. This was accessible via email with an embedded web link. Questions consisted of various items in the form of multiple-choice questions, list responses, checkboxes, Likert scales, and open-ended questions. These types of question designs, more especially Likert scales, were appropriate in measuring beliefs, opinions and attitudes of the respondents with regards to eco-labels. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. The results were presented as descriptive statistics in the form of graphs and tables. Inferential techniques included the use of correlations and chi-square test values; which are interpreted using the p-values. Additionally, Cronbach's Alpha was used to test internal consistency and provided reliability scores for all relevant items that constituted the questionnaire (Likert questions).

## Results and discussion

### *Characteristics of tourism businesses*

The characteristic of tourism business characteristics focused on the type of business establishment, length of business operation, number of employees and the target market of the business and is depicted in Table 1.

**Table 1: Characteristics of tourism establishments (n=74)**

Characteristics of the business		Percentage (%)
Tourism sector	Accommodation	56.8
	Beach/marina	20.3
	Tourist attraction	13.5
	Tour operator	9.5
	Total	100
Length of business operation	1-5 years	17.6
	6-10 years	29.7
	More than 10 years	52.7
	Total	100
Type of eco-label	Blue Flag	20.3

	Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa	59.5
	Greenline Certified by Heritage	8.1
	Heritage Environmental Management Company	12.2
	Total	100
Duration of eco-label certification	1-5 years	78.4
	6-10 years	13.5
	More than 10 years	8.1
	Total	100

Tourism establishments were selected to partake in this study and comprised of accommodation establishments (56.8%), beaches/marinas (20.3%), tourist attractions (13.5%), and tour operators (9.5%). The majority of tourism businesses were in operation for more than 10 years (52.7%), whilst 29.7% were in operation for 6-10 years and 17.6% were in operation for 1-5 years. A large proportion of the tourism establishments were certified with the Fair Trade Tourism eco-label (59.5%), followed by the Blue Flag award (20.3%), Heritage Environmental Management Company (12.2%) and GreenLine Certified by Heritage (8.1%). Whilst all establishments confirmed that their participation in the eco-labels was voluntary, 27% of respondents believed that eco-labels should be mandatory and not voluntary. The data reflects that most tourism establishments (78.4%) had the eco-label for a period of 1-5 years, 13.5% for 6-10 years and 8.1% for more than 10 years.

**Table 2: Cross-tabulation: Type of eco-label by establishment characteristics**

		Blue Flag Award	Fair Trade Tourism	Greenline	Heritage Environmental Management Company	Chi-square
Type of establishment	Accommodation	0%	65.9%	100.0%	77.8%	.000*
	Beach/Marina	100.0%	0%	0%	0%	
	Tourist Attraction	0%	18.2%	0%	22.2%	
	Tour Operator	0%	15.9%	0%	0%	
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Number of years in operation	1-5 years	0%	22.7%	0%	33.3%	.002*
	6-10 years	6.7%	29.5%	83.3%	33.3%	
	More than 10 years	93.3%	47.7%	16.7%	33.3%	
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Number of years certified	1-5 years	73.3%	77.3%	100.0%	77.8%	.653
	6-10 years	20.0%	11.4%	0%	22.2%	
	More than 10 years	6.7%	11.4%	0%	0%	
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

\*Significant values ( $p < 0.05$ ) Chi-square analysis

A cross-tabulation was undertaken to establish the relationship between the type of eco-label and the characteristics of the establishments (Table 2). Clearly, of those establishments that obtained the Blue Flag award, all of them were beaches and marinas, and the majority of them (73.3%) had the Blue Flag award for 1-5 years and 20% had it for 6-10 years. A large proportion of establishments accredited by the Fair Trade Tourism eco-label were accommodation establishments (65.9%), followed by tourist attractions (18.2%) and tour operators (15.9%). Of these Fair Trade Tourism accredited establishments, 47.7% were in operation for more than 10 years, 29.5% were in operation for between 6-10 years and 22.7% were in operation for between 1-5 years. The majority of these establishments had the eco-label for 1-5 years (77.3%), with remaining having the eco-label for between 6-10 years and more than 10 years (11.4%). All establishments with the GreenLine eco-label were from the accommodation sector and all of them were accredited with the GreenLine eco-label for a period of 1-5 years. This indicates that the eco-label is relatively new. Of these accommodation establishments, 83.3% were in operation for between 6-10 years and 16.7% for more than 10 years. Certification of the Heritage Environmental Management Company was evident largely in accommodation





establishments (77.8%) and tourist attractions (22.2%). The years of operation these establishments were 1-5 years (33.3%), 6-10 years (33.3%), and more than 10 years (33.3%). Here again, the majority of establishments (77.8%) were certified with the Heritage Management Environmental Management Company for a period of 1-5 years with the remaining 22.2% for 6-10 years. A Chi-square analysis was carried out to determine the association between the various types of eco-labels and the characteristics of establishments. As depicted in Table 2, a significant association was noted between the type of eco-label and the type of tourism establishment, where  $\chi^2(9, n=74) = 79.6, p = .000$ . The chi-square test of association between the type of eco-label and the number of years that the establishment is in operation further yielded a significant association, where  $\chi^2(6, n=74) = 21.1, p = .002$ . There was no significant association between the type of eco-label and the number of years that the establishment is certified with the eco-label.

**Benefits of eco-label certification**

**Table 3: Benefits of eco-label certification: Mean, median and reliability coefficients**

Benefits of certification	Mean	Median	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )
Eco-label has reduced negative environmental impacts	1.69	2.00	.940
Improved the image of the establishment	1.96	2.00	.937
Attracted 'green' tourists to the establishment	1.91	2.00	.937
Helped gain a competitive advantage	1.99	2.00	.935
Increased customer loyalty in the establishment	2.18	2.00	.934
Improved relationship with the local community	2.28	2.00	.936
Promoted the equitable distribution of benefits	2.31	2.00	.936
Reduced operational costs within the organization	2.49	2.00	.944
Total	2.12	2.00	.942

*Respondents ranked their level of agreement for each benefit on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree.*

Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure the overall reliability coefficient of Likert scales. The benefits of the eco-labels subscale consisted of 8 items ( $\alpha=.942$ ), with all of the reliability scores above the recommended norm, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Establishments in the study reported on the benefits of being certified with an eco-label (Table 3). It was encouraging to note, that establishments agreed on all the stipulated benefits of having an eco-label (median=2.00). The strongest levels of agreement on the benefit of eco-labels were the reduction of negative impacts on the environment (mean=1.69), attracting green tourists (mean=1.91), improving the image of the establishment (mean=1.96), and helping the establishment gain a competitive advantage (mean=1.99). The findings of this study concur with that of several other studies. Bastič and Gojčič (2012) and Svetlana and Valery (2017) found similar results where tourists indicated a preference for destinations or organizations that protect and preserve their environment, and possess eco-labels. Correspondingly, Han, Hsu and Sheu (2010) and Yokessa and Murette (2017) note that more environmentally conscious consumers are beginning to pursue and purchase eco-friendly products over substitutes. In terms of improved and image and gaining a competitive advantage, Carasuk, et al. (2016) also found that tourism businesses implementing a sustainable tourism eco-label are in fact co-branding their products or services; this is especially significant for small businesses that lack international market recognition, where the label can be used as a symbol of quality and dependability. Capacci et al. (2015) also affirmed that tourists who are motivated by environmental sustainability tend to demonstrate loyalty to those destinations that implement sustainability practices and use green branding. Respondents also mentioned that the benefits of having being certified with the eco-label are the improved relationship of the organization with the local community and the eco-label promoted the equitable distribution of benefits and also reduced operational costs within the organization. Ardahaey (2011) states that in



developing countries the level of earnings is generally low, the distribution of income and revenue is typically uneven, there are large amounts of unemployment and underemployment, business development is under pressure and organizations are frequently owned by foreigners. Data revealed in this study are therefore favorable for South Africa as it confirms that these issues are being addressed through the implementation of eco-labels. In terms of the eco-label reducing operational costs within organizations, Hellmeister and Richins (2019) and Graci and Dodds (2008) concur with these findings and acknowledge that regardless of the start-up expenses and possible prolonged return on investment that is related to numerous initiatives and schemes, the economic benefits eventually frequently outweigh the costs resulting in long-term economic benefit.

**Table 4: Cross-tabulation: Benefits of eco-labels by establishment type, eco-label type, and duration of eco-label certification**

		Mean	Median	Std Deviation	Chi-square
Establishment type	Accommodation	2.19	2.00	.740	.354
	Beach/Marina	1.80	2.00	.676	
	Tourist Attraction	2.40	3.00	.843	
	Tour Operator	2.00	2.00	.557	
	Total	2.12	2.00	.739	
Type of eco-label	Blue Flag	1.80	2.00	.676	.016*
	Fair Trade in Tourism	2.18	2.00	.691	
	Green Line	2.17	2.00	.983	
	Heritage Environmental Management Company	2.33	3.00	.866	
	Total	2.12	2.00	.739	
Duration of eco-label certification	1-5 years	2.08	2.00	.755	.863
	6-10 years	2.10	2.00	.737	
	More than 10 years	2.50	2.50	.547	
	Total	2.12	2.00	.739	

\*Significant values ( $p < 0.05$ ) Chi-square analysis

A cross-tabulation was undertaken to assess how the overall benefits of eco-labels were influenced by the type of establishment, the type of eco-label, and the duration of eco-label certification. Apart from tourist attractions, other tourism establishments generally agreed with all the benefits associated with eco-labels. In particular, beaches and marinas, tour operators and to some extent, the accommodation sector, showed higher levels of agreement with eco-label benefits, compared to tourist attractions. A chi-square test for independence indicated no significant association between the benefits of eco-label certification and the type of tourism establishment where  $X^2(9, n = 74) = 9.95, p = .354$ . Although all types of eco-labels agreed on the overall benefits of the eco-label, the Blue Flag award presented stronger levels of agreement with the overall benefits of eco-label certification, with the Heritage Environmental Management Company showing lesser levels of agreement with such benefits. The chi-square result indicated a significant association between the benefits of eco-label certification and the type of eco-label where  $X^2(9, n = 74) = 20.28, p = .016$ . Establishments that have been certified with eco-labels for a period of 1-5 years and 6-10 years, revealed stronger levels of agreement on the overall benefits of eco-labels, compared to those that were certified for more than 10 years. There was no significant association between eco-label benefits and the duration of eco-label certification where  $X^2(6, n = 74) = 2.55, p = .863$ .

**Table 5: Barriers facing eco-labels**

Barriers	Mean	Median	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )
The huge financial cost to implement certification standards	1.89	2.00	.822
The implementation of the eco-label is time-consuming	2.00	2.00	.819

Certified products become more costly to the consumer	2.39	2.00	.816
There is a lack of awareness by the general public on eco-labels	2.31	2.00	.827
There is a lack of support from the government for eco-labels	2.46	2.00	.812
There is a lack of eco-label promotion and marketing	2.58	3.00	.832
There is a lack of market demand for the eco-labels	2.89	3.00	.812
There is a lack of employee skills and expertise on eco-labels	2.97	3.00	.807
There are insufficient resources for the eco-label	2.92	3.00	.811
There is a lack of economic benefits associated with the eco-label	3.19	3.00	.821
A regulatory body is absent for the eco-label	3.34	3.00	.830
Total	2.67	3.00	.830

*Respondents ranked their level of agreement for each challenge on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree*

Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure the overall reliability coefficient for a set of variables and the internal reliability of Likert scales. The barriers facing the eco-labels subscale consisted of 11 items ( $\alpha=.830$ ), with all of the reliability scores above the recommended norm, indicating a high level of internal consistency. The data in Table 5 confirm stronger levels of agreement (median=2.00) were found with eco-labels being costly to implement and maintain (mean=1.89), time-consuming (2.00), the public's lack of awareness on eco-labels (mean=2.31), certified products being costly for the consumer (mean=2.39) and the lack of support from the government for eco-labels (2.46). There were lesser levels of agreement on the lack of benefits from eco-labels (3.19) and the absence of a regulatory body for the eco-label. Overall, the data reflects that most establishments were leaning towards being 'neutral' or unsure of the barriers facing eco-labels (median=3).

Geerts (2014) and Yokessa and Marette (2019) concur with these findings and argue that many businesses withdrew their certification due to cost issues and value for money. Moreover, the high costs associated with the certification of eco-labels often prevent small-scale tourism enterprises and other underprivileged, resource-deficient establishments from adopting eco-labels. Tippet et al. (2020) also agree that financial, human and implementation and maintenance costs, need to be allocated and provided continually to ensure the effectiveness of eco-labels. The installation of some green infrastructure and equipment require the injection of large amounts of money, and very often, the financial inadequacy and incapability of tourism establishments to meet the stringent standards and criteria set by eco-labeling schemes, discourages them from participating. Also, although participation may eventually lead to a significant reduction in operational costs, the initial outlay for membership fees and the improvement of facilities or equipment is often beyond the financial means of small businesses, and the payback period is long or a return on investment is not guaranteed. Tourism businesses may increase the price of tourism services and products, due to costs incurred by tourism establishments in acquiring eco-labels, coupled with the costs linked to running an environmentally sensitive operation. However, the high costs of certified products may dissuade them from making 'high-priced' purchasing decisions. For example, Chen, Alfnes and Rickertsen (2015) found that although guests may agree to stay in environmentally-friendly hotels, they were not willing to pay extra for the green practices.

The lack of demand for eco-labels may be attributed to a lack of public awareness of such schemes. Minoli et al. (2015) concur that tourists do not know what eco-labeling means and how reliable such certificates are, as there are many different standards with varying levels of quality control. However, the lack of demand is also linked to the perception that certain green initiatives reduce the quality of tourism services. Ordinarily, guests expect to receive comfort and luxury indulgence during a trip. Dunk et al. (2016:1590) also concur with the results of this study in that the time required to collect information and complete the paperwork for eco-label certification and maintenance was a concern for several tourism businesses with limited human resources. There were claims that "the scheme was becoming very bureaucratic

with too much useless statistics required to be collected which did not add anything to the business and created a lot of needless work”. Mahony (2008) concurs that the accreditation process for the Fair Trade in Tourism eco-label s detailed and time-consuming, especially, for smaller organizations that lack expertise and access to necessary information.

Whilst the data in this study reveals that businesses were somehow unsure of the economic benefits of eco-labels, Bernini and Cerqua (2019) found that that there was a lack of economic impact from the Blue Flag award, with no significant impact on the local economy or other tourism-related economic sectors. In terms of lack of awareness and expertise, Dunk et al. (2016:1592) argued that many respondents found problems with eco-label schemes, citing issues with “criteria, assessments and recommendations, time and red tape, and issues with scheme management and customer service”. Many businesses also withdrew from such schemes due to a lack of understanding or awareness from the certification body of the barriers they faced and the rigidity of the eco-label criteria. There is a lack of knowledge and skills in eco-labels with the lack of green experts and green knowledge. This is because green practices are a fairly new application in the tourism sector in South Africa, and it will require some time to develop expertise in this area. Government support for eco-labels and green initiatives is essential and can be a coercive mechanism that exerts pressure on the organization to become a green operation and Carasuk et al. (2016) and Yusof and Jamaludin (2018) agree with these findings and maintain that companies feel that they lack guidance from local government authorities concerning sustainable tourism and eco-label schemes.

**Table 6: Cross-tabulation: Barriers facing eco-labels by establishment type, eco-label type, and duration of eco-label certification**

		Mean	Median	Std Deviation	Chi- square
Tourism sector	Accommodation	2.61	3.00	.660	.041*
	Beach/Marina	3.13	3.00	.915	
	Tourist Attraction	2.30	2.00	.823	
	Tour Operator	2.57	3.00	.534	
	Total	2.67	3.00	.760	
Type of eco-label	Blue Flag	3.13	3.00	.915	.100
	Fair Trade in Tourism	2.50	2.50	.664	
	Green Line	2.83	3.00	.752	
	Heritage Environmental Management Company	2.66	3.00	.707	
Duration of eco-label certification	1-5 years	2.72	3.00	.744	.541
	6-10 years	2.60	2.50	.699	
	More than 10 years	2.33	2.00	1.032	
	Total	2.67	3.00	.760	

\*Significant values ( $p < 0.05$ ) Chi-square analysis

A cross-tabulation was undertaken to ascertain whether the overall barriers facing eco-labels in establishments were affected by the type of establishment, the type of eco-label, and the duration of eco-label certification. The attraction sector revealed a stronger level of agreement with barriers facing eco-labels, compared to other tourism sectors (mean=2.30, median=2.00). Moreover, the chi-square result indicated a significant association between the barriers facing eco-label certification and the type of tourism sector, where  $X^2(9, n = 74) = 17.5, p = .041$ . The Fair Trade Tourism eco-label showed stronger levels of agreement with barriers (mean=2.50, median=2.50), and no significant association was found between eco-label barriers and the type of eco-label, where  $X^2(9, n = 74) = 14.64, p = .100$ . Establishments that were eco-label certified for more than 10 years, showed stronger levels of agreement with barriers (mean=2.33, median, 2.00), whereas establishments that were eco-label certified for between 1-5 years were in lesser agreement with the various barriers faced (mean=2.72, median=3.00). Chi-square analysis revealed no significant association between eco-label barriers and duration of eco-label

certification, where no significant association between eco-label benefits and the duration of eco-label certification where  $X^2(6, n = 74) = 5.02, p = .541$ .

**Figure 1: Ways to improve eco-labels**

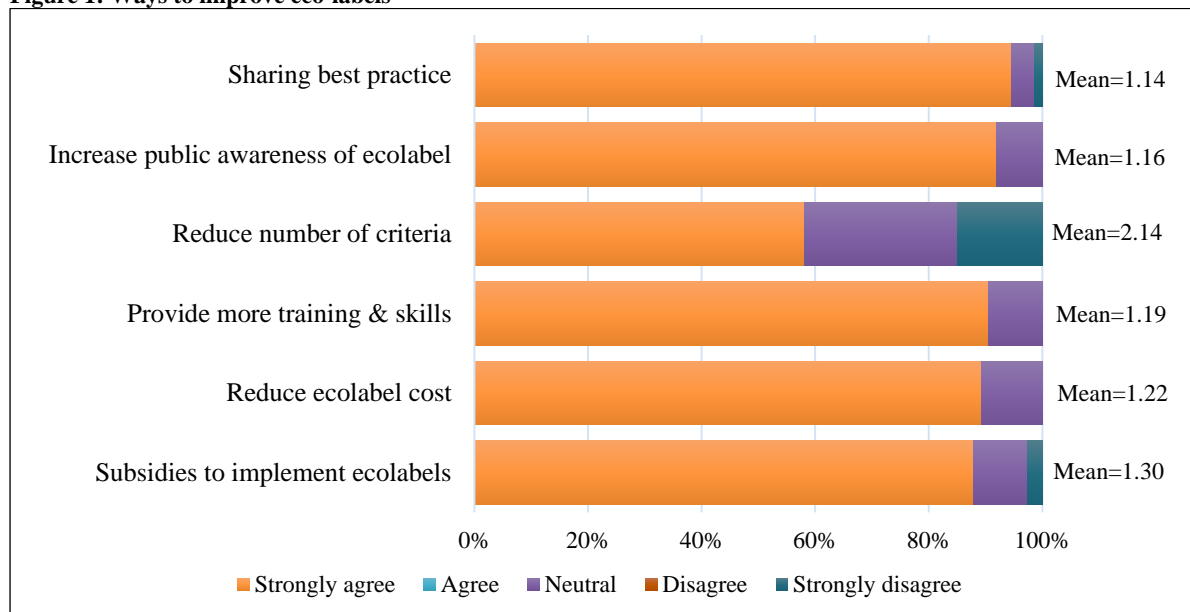


Figure 1 presents the data on suggested means to improve the existing eco-labels. Establishments strongly agreed overall on the suggested ways to improve eco-labels (median=1.00). More specifically, establishments agreed that the improvement of eco-labels should focus on the sharing of best practices (mean=1.14), an increase in the public awareness of eco-labels (mean=1.16), more training on eco-labels (mean=1.19), reduced costs of eco-labels (mean=1.22), subsidies to assist in eco-label implementation (mean=1.30), and a reduction in the number of eco-label criteria (mean=2.14).

## Conclusion

The study presented an overview of eco-labels in the tourism industry in South Africa, with a focus on the benefits of eco-labels and barriers facing eco-label adoption. In general, establishments strongly noted that eco-labels benefited them through a reduction of negative environmental impacts, improvement in the image and brand of the establishment, attracting green tourists, and increased customer loyalty. An improved relationship with the local community, the equitable distribution of benefits and a reduction in operational costs were also cited as benefits of having an eco-label. The key barriers facing eco-labels in the study were that eco-labels are expensive to obtain and maintain; implementation and maintenance are time consuming; there is a lack of government support; eco-label certified products are usually more expensive in terms of funding; the lack of skilled employees; the lack of resources and the low levels of consumer demand for certified products and services.

It is recommended that, given the large costs associated with eco-label implementation and maintenance, eco-label schemes should acknowledge the environmental preferences and priorities of smaller scale and underprivileged establishments in the certification process. The findings of this study identify the importance of government to understand the barriers inhibiting the adoption of eco-labels so that various incentive schemes and other appropriate measures can be offered and implemented to reduce the barriers. Process management is also needed to influence government and tourism stakeholders towards accelerated change directed towards sustainability goals. Without the availability of adequate resources, tourism

establishments can be excluded from or can experience delays in the adoption and implementation of eco-labels. Membership costs need to be re-examined and should take into consideration the size and profitability of the establishment. The financial benefit of eco-labels also needs to be adequately recognized by the establishment to ensure long term commitment to the eco-label. Eco-label criteria should also be made more flexible and should recognize the specific locational barriers faced by some establishments. It is also recommended that criteria and guidance be in accordance with the type of and size of the establishment with the development of appropriate tools that would simplify the monitoring process and thereby reduce the amount of time and human resources required and the red tape. In terms of obtaining tourists' perceptions on eco-labels, it is recommended establishments encourage tourists to provide ratings on the green credential of the establishment similar to Tripadvisor. In this way, the establishment can re-assess its position should it receive a low customer rating. This rating can complement the audit assessments undertaken by the eco-label. Furthermore, a sustained marketing effort is recommended to advance the profile of tourism eco-labels in South Africa to address concerns regarding a lack of eco-label awareness among tourism consumers. The tourism industry needs to raise awareness on the importance of sustainable tourism since changing beliefs does not necessarily mean changing behavior. Eco-labels are a growing trend in the tourism industry. It is anticipated that the findings in this study can be used to enhance the adoption of eco-labels in the tourism sector by reducing the barriers identified and putting forward possible strategies to reduce impediments in the adoption of eco-label certification schemes. The study further lends support for increased promotion and awareness of eco-label certifications and their respective benefits for the tourism sector in South Africa.

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