

Hotel certification and its relevance for sustainable development: examples from the European Alps

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Abstract

The tourism sector is currently characterized by a specialisation and ongoing segmentation to meet the ever more sophisticated demands of the respective target groups. Quality classification schemes and certifications have now become an integral part of the system. Therefore the tourist is confronted with increasing numbers of labels and classification systems. Besides the differentiation and the marketing aspects, certifications are also used as a tool to enhance the sustainable development of hotels and tourism enterprises. There are initiatives on regional, national, European and international level as well as private and governmental concepts. In this paper we analyse common labels in the German speaking part of the alpine area and discuss their possible impact for sustainable development in context with other evaluations. In order to understand the increasing “jungle” of certificates and labels we asked hotel managers of two different certificates about their decision making process when choosing a label. Overall the hotel managers perceived positive effects on the environment, on their specific target group and the economic development. The process had in several enterprises even a positive impact on their employees. The discussion also reveals that the main reason for the certificate is a strong personal engagement for sustainability as well as a long term marketing strategy. International initiatives are therefore less important in our case study area.

Keywords: certification, sustainable development, marketing strategies.



1 Introduction

Since the 1970s the tourist in Europe is familiar with different standards of hotels. All tourists know the difference between a one star and a four star hotel and have at least a superficial understanding of the main criteria behind these “stars”. The systematic evaluation process and the norms behind this classification system bring the advantage that each client can rely on a truly comparable signage and whatever evaluative information stands behind it. Furthermore the traditional hotel classification system is a helpful tool for the planning and development of hotels, and it can also contribute to the overall image of a region and its marketing. Finally it serves as an instrument to maintain or even improve the service quality [1]. On the other hand the tourism branch is currently characterized by an ever increasing trend to specialisation and segmentation that attempts to identify respective target groups ever more precisely. Therefore the tourist is confronted with an increasing number of labels and classification systems addressing concerns that go beyond the sole focus on hotel quality associated with the star system.

Beside the differentiation and marketing aspects certification systems are also used as a tool to enhance the sustainable development of hotels and tourism enterprises. As such these certifications play a key role in sustainable tourism management [2–4]. Certification has also been recognized as a valuable method to influence markets [5, 6]. Honey and Rome [7] define certification as a voluntary procedure which assesses audits and provides a written assurance that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards and it awards a marketable logo to those enterprises which meet or exceed baseline standards. Ideally the certification differentiates clearly sustainable from unsustainable organisations [8]. It is therefore perceived as an important tool of competitiveness and differentiation, which establishes consumer confidence [9]. The trend toward environmental or sustainable certification has increased in the last two decades. By now a large number of voluntary standards have emerged and many companies adopted them (see [10–12]) using these various certifying programs and their sustainability standards [4].

All these certifications have three crucial functions: environmental standard setting, third party certification of these standards and value-added marketing or environmental communication [9]. In addition to various voluntary approaches the International Organization for Standardization has developed more generic environmental certifications that do not apply to one industry in particular (e.g. ISO 14001 and ISO14004). In Europe also the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) serves as an environmental benchmark and plays an important role in various branches [13, 14].

The instrument of certification is also used by governmental initiatives to improve sustainable development. The Austrian Ministry of Environment developed a certification to enhance the sustainable development in various sectors with a strong focus also on tourism [15].

However, with the sheer quantity of various eco-labels on the market, the tourist as customer may struggle to identify which labels are valuable and

credible and which are not. The tourism and hospitality industries can choose from over 100 eco-levels worldwide and over 60 in Europe alone [9]. Furthermore the certifications vary between geographical areas. The Green Globe 21 Scheme was designed to harmonize this variety. New publications show that in Europe this label has still rather limited popularity [9]. Recent initiatives to increase the transparency of the “jungle” of certificates and to minimize the effects of “green washing”, such as the initiative VISIT (Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism) [16] or by the TSC (Tourism Sustainability Council) [17], are still facing a difficult task.

This task is also challenging because the various new “green” labels are based on different understandings of sustainability and focus their certification and label at a specific target group. The main argument of these diverse new approaches is that the existing labels are not covering the specific needs and requirements of a certain group of hotels and their target group or that the existing initiatives are not going “far enough”.

Even within the confines of the alpine region the client is confronted with an ever increasing diversity of “green” labels. Therefore in this study we tried to evaluate common sustainability labels in the German speaking Alps and their contribution to a sustainable development. In a second step we asked hotel owners about the decision making process when choosing a label. This is the bases for a critical discussion about the relevance of specific certifications to enhance sustainable development.

2 Methodological approach

2.1 Analysis of common labels in the alpine area

For the analysis of common labels in the German speaking part of the alpine area we selected twelve different labels. Five of them are characterized by an international or European background, such as “the Green Globe”, “The Green Key”, “EU Ecolabel”, “Travelife”, “EHC-Eco hotels certified”. Seven certificates had a national background such as “Viabono”, “Blaue Schwalbe”, “Bayerisches Umweltzeichen” initiated in Germany, the “Österreichisches Umweltzeichen”, the “Natur-Idyll-Hotels” and “Bio-Hotels” from Austria, and the “Steinbock Label” from Switzerland. Some of the labels are the result of a private initiative while others are based on state or local government initiatives. For the analysis we developed a set of criteria based on the key issues any certificate should address.

First of all the **main focus** of the certificate was analyzed. We checked whether the focus is on environmental, economic, social or cultural aspects or all of them. Ideally the certificate should have a broader focus. The process and frequency of the **evaluation process** is an important criterion. Ideally the evaluation should be undertaken by external experts over a short time period (2-3 years max). For a hotel owner the **costs** for the external evaluation, possible member fees and other costs must be considered for a specific label. Ideally the costs should be moderate to enhance the willingness of hotel owners to












cooperate. If a label considered **International or European norms** such as ISO or EMAS it raises the quality of the label because this ensures external standards and enhances their comparability for owners as well as clients. We also consider if the label is part of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI 2011) or member of the Tourism Sustainability Council (TSC 2009). Both initiatives contribute to more transparency and the embedding of the label into the international family of sustainable initiatives.

We also considered the **total number of certified enterprises** as an indicator for the relevance of this respective label in the marketplace. Finally we checked if the relevant **information about the certificate** is available in the internet and therefore transparent to the client. The sole source for all this information was the **internet** exclusively in order to ensure the comparability between the respective labels. If there was no information available we tried to contact the labels directly.

2.2 Interviews with hotel managers

In the second part we present qualitative interviews with four hotel managers. The main task of these interviews was to learn more about the decision making process when selecting a specific certification and label. We selected hotels with similar conditions. We selected four stars hotel with 50 to 100 beds and characterized by SPA-facilities and a broad family oriented offer. To increase the comparability we decided to ask only hotels which do not belong to a hotel chain

Table 1: Characteristics of the involved hotels.

	Involved Hotels						
	Hotel 1	Hotel 2	Hotel 3	Hotel 4	Hotel 5	Hotel 6	Hotel 7
Owner-ship	Family owned	Private investment	Family owned	Family owned	Private investment	Family owned	Family owned
Occup rate summer	55%	92%	60%	70%	76%	74%	40%
Occup rate winter	55%	92%	88%	65%	89%	98%	75%
No. of empl.	6	40	45	10	22	12	24
Certif. since	10 years	1 year	2 years	10 years	2 years	1 year	2 years
Label	 ÖUZ	 ÖUZ	 ÖUZ	Gives this certificate back	 ÖUZ		
							

and are free in their management decisions. Furthermore we selected also one hotel which actually had switched from one label to another, and hotels with several certifications. Table 1 gives an overview on the involved hotels.

3 Main findings

3.1 Analysis of common labels in the Alpine area

The main findings are summarized in table 2. Most of the analyzed labels are privately organized. Five labels are based on a governmental initiative. For many labels financial support may be provided..

Most of the labels in the alpine area are focused on environmental issues. Only two labels also take cultural aspects into account (the “Steinbock” label and “The Green Globe”).The majority of the evaluated labels are certified within a short period of time by external reviewers. Negative exceptions are the label “Travelife” and “Blaue Schwalbe”, which rely on very few checks.

Concerning the cost we found significant differences between the labels. Labels with fewer control mechanism are cheaper, and state owned labels also try to keep their costs low. The most expensive labels are “The Green Globe”, the “EU-ecolabel”, “EHC” and the “Steinbock” label. They charge more than 1000€ per certification. Several labels integrated additional norms such as ISO and EMAS. The new initiatives such as the TSC or the GRP are not considered by most of the labels used in the alpine area.

The number of members is not representative for the overall relevance of a label in the alpine area. Here the international labels are leading. But it is also obvious that some labels are not seeking to be dominant in the international market because they positioned their label to a specific regional target group, and in some cases a limited number of members may be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. A good example for this strategy is the label “Natur-idyll Hotel” from Austria. Their members want to position their hotels to clients by committing to environmental management in general, as well as to a specific attractive nature oriented ambience. The presentation on the website differs between the labels significantly, and not all sites provide complete information. Significant deficiencies were identified for both labels “Travelife” and “Viabono”.

To the tourist, differences between the labels are fairly visible. Already a first glance at the criteria in table 2 shows some highly reliable labels such as the “Steinbock-label”, “The Green Globe” or the “Österreichische Umweltzeichen”. Intensively controlled labels are easy to distinguish from the less controlled ones. However, several problems remain:

- **Regional representation:** our imaginary tourist in the alpine area will not be able to find all of these labels in all alpine countries. “The Green Key” can only be found in Germany and not in any other alpine country. “The Green Globe” is only represented in Austria and Germany. Others, such as the “Bio-Hotels” are only present in Austria.

Table 2: Overview on 12 labels.

		Certificates													
Criteria	Indicators	The Green Key	Green Globe	EU Ecolabel	Travelife	Blaue Schwalbe	Bio Hotels	EHC	Ö. Umweltzeichen	Naturidyll Hotels	Viabono	B.Umweltzeichen	Steinbock Label		
Organization	Governmental certificate.			x	x				x		x	x			
	Private certificate	x	x			x	x	x		x			x		
	Financial support	x		x	x				x	x		x			
Established since	1-5 years				x			x					x		
	6 - 10 years						x				x				
	More than 11 years	x	x	x		x			x	x		x			
Main focus	Environmental aspects	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
	Economic aspects	x	x		x				x	x			x		
	Sozial aspects	x	x		x			x				x	x		
	Cultural aspects		x										x		
External evaluation	Each year	x	x				x	x					x		
	Every second or third y.										x	x	x		
	every 4th year			x					x	x					
	rare				x	x									
costs	100 - 500 Euro				x	x						x			
	501 - 1000 Euro	x					x		x	x	x				
	More than 1000 Euro		x	x				x					x		
Consideration of norms	ISO Norms	x	x	x	N o i n f o				x		N o i n f o	x	x		
	EMAS	x		x									x		
	GRI														x
	Member of TSC		x												
Number of certified enterprises	< 50									x					
	51 - 100			x			x	x	x				x		
	101- 500					x					x	x			
	More than 500	x	x		x										
Information on the Website	very informative			x				x	x		x	x	x		
	informative	x	x				x			x					
	less informative				x	x									

- **Substantial methodological differences and levels:** The systematic within the evaluation methodology varies significantly between the respective labels. Some labels define basic criteria and bench marks which have to be fulfilled by the hotel. Other concepts, such as “The Green Globe”, list many criteria but only 51% must be fulfilled. A third group of labels uses various levels and define various requirements e.g. for the silver and gold level.
- **Marketing concept and main target groups:** A typical example for a target oriented certification is the Austrian Group of “BIO-Hotels”. The whole list of criteria is dominated by the concept to attract tourists supporting the concept of organic living (organic food, beverages, cosmetics etc.). The “Natur-Idyll-Hotels” clearly state that they want to attract the so called LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) clients as their main target group. They do not accept hotel chains as members. These kinds of certificates differ from those open for all type of hotels and each of them is characterized by a different definition or understanding of sustainability.

The overview shows that certification is more than simply defining truly sustainable criteria and indicators and inspecting them. Beside the criteria per se, a hotel owner will consider the regional representation of the label and its possible effect on his or her most important target group. Arguably, local and regional certification programs should be linked to an international accreditation system, but the limitations are quite visible. The varying content, and the varying levels of the different certificates (e.g. the “Steinbock”-Label offers from one to five Steinbock) makes it extremely complicated for the tourist to understand the certification system. This reduced transparency will undermine the ultimate goal of certification to change in function and effect from awarding excellence to actually becoming a de facto requirement of the trade ([10]:139).

3.2 Interviews with managers of certified hotels

3.2.1 Reasons for the certification and the selection of one specific label

Against the controversial “landscape “of certificates it was interesting to discuss the decision making process with hotel managers. In our study all these managers also own the hotel, which may impact their overall commitment and identification with the management concept.

The majority answered the question “why did you choose a certification?” with their personal principles and their perception of quality. Typical arguments were:

“I have managed my hotel from the beginning with organic food. Therefore the certification was easy for me. It supports and acknowledges my own principles.”

A second main argument deals with the required transparency and the strategy against “green-washing”. A typical answer was:

“It is necessary to present a transparent and reliable offer to the client. If my hotel is certified, the tourist knows that he or she can trust me.”

One hotel manager also argued that the certification is also a part of his marketing strategy.



The next question dealt with the selection of one specific label or combination of labels. Table 1 shows that two hotel managers decided to fulfill the criteria of two labels, one certification provided by the government (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen), and another private certification “Bio-Hotel”. Two hotels have chosen the “Österreichisches Umweltzeichen” only and three hotels are certified by the “Bio-Hotel” certificate only.

All managers of “Bio-Hotel” disclosed that it was that specific label which reflected their main personal motives and personal goals. The following statement is typical for this group:

“From the beginning I was excited about the concept. This was what I was looking for. It is necessary to support organic agriculture.”

The hotels certified by the “Österreichisches Umweltzeichen” argued that it is important to have a governmental certificate. For the client it is more reliable than a certificate by a private organization only. These managers highlighted mainly marketing aspects:

“Many German tourists already know this label and it is highly accepted within this important target group of Austrian hotels. This is also an advantage on the tourism market in Switzerland and Italy.”

A further discussion shows that managers believe that both certificates are important in the alpine area, and attract clients interested in the environment. Some managers also perceive an overall trend to more sustainable tourist offers and that many clients consider these additional aspects during their decision making process in addition to price.

The hotel owner who switched from the “Österreichischen Umweltzeichen” to the “Bio-Hotel” certificate explained that for him it was important to have a certificate tailor-made to his interests. From his point of view the “Bio-Hotel” certificate is more specialized and challenging.

Operators from the two hotels with both certifications argued that the two certificates have different requirements and different positive impacts on the management. All 7 hotel managers are willing to re-certificate their hotel. They underline the importance of a good controlling system which is essential for marketing purposes.

3.2.2 Expected and perceived advantages

After this more generic discussion about the decision making process, the seven hotel managers were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of certification in some specific questions. In each question, the manager had to distinguish between the expected effect before the decision to certify and the perceived or measurable effects after the certification.

The first question was: Are your clients more satisfied after the certification?

As figure 1 shows: the clients are more satisfied than in the past. About one third of the managers did not expect this positive effect on clients. The resulting discussion with the managers showed that it may be more the “Bio-Hotel” certificate that had a direct influence on the perception of the clients, because the

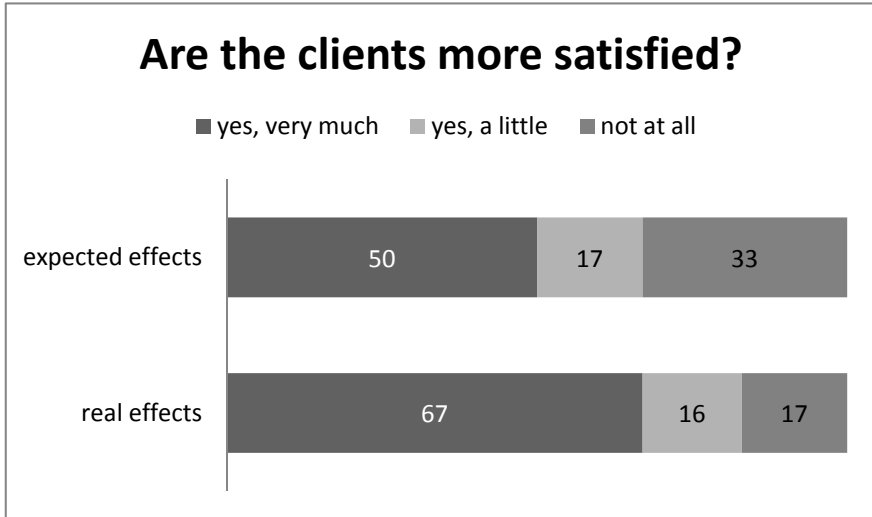


Figure 1: After the certification, are the clients more satisfied?

tourist is directly profiting from this change. Broader environmental effects such as waste water treatment or energy saving measures on the other hand are not that visible and personally relevant for the tourist.

The second question asked if a reduction of negative environmental impact was measurable. Figure 2 shows significant changes and a broad consensus between the hotels. All “Bio-Hotels” highlight a significant reduction of waste. The certified hotels with the “Österreichischen Umweltzeichen” mentioned also that they saved energy, water and waste.

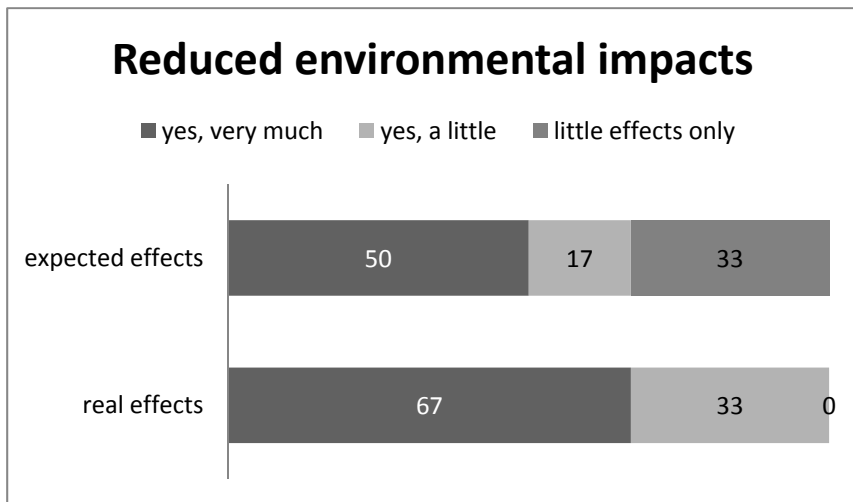


Figure 2: Did the certification reduce the overall environmental impact?

Asked about the costs it was interesting to see that half of the hotel managers believed before the certification that this process will lead to increased cost, the other half expected the opposite. Responses to this question also depend on the considered time frame. Many hotels argued that they had to invest in energy saving measures but this investment will pay back over time. Others were mentioning funding opportunities and long term effects. Some of the “Bio-Hotel”- managers argued that the certification led to higher prices for food and beverage because they are only allowed to offer organic products, but the management costs on the housing side of the operation had been reduced.

As mentioned before the marketing positioning plays an important role in Austria. This is also visible in the answers to the question “could you improve your market positioning?” Here a positive effect was expected by the majority of respondents and was also regarded as turning into a real effect at the end. Only one hotel which is only a short time on the market is not sure yet.

The role of the certification on employees is intensively discussed in the literature. Many authors highlight that the social aspects of sustainability are often underrepresented. Table 2 shows that the “Bio-Hotel-label” and the “Österreichische Umweltzeichen” both are focusing on environmental issues. The “Österreichische Umweltzeichen” also takes economic aspects into account. Therefore positive effects on the motivation of their personnel were not to be expected.

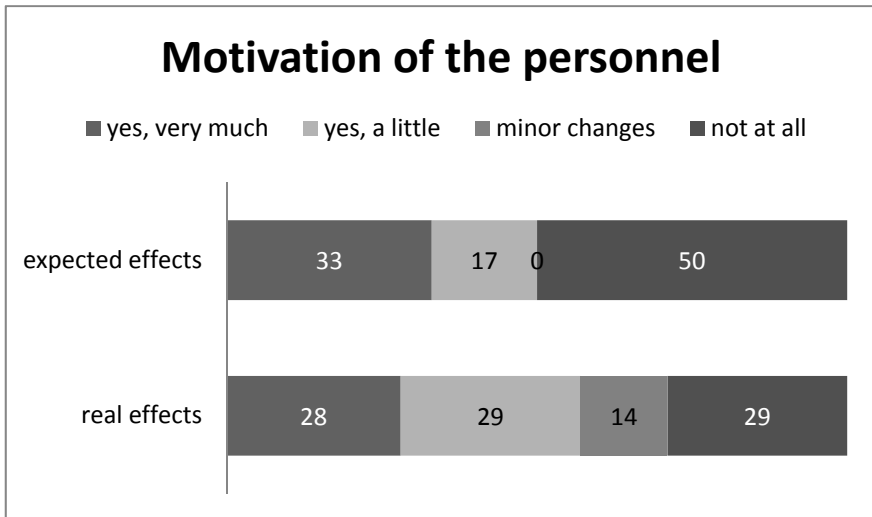


Figure 3: Has the certification had a positive impact on the motivation of your personnel?

Figure 3 shows, that the hotel owners shared this expectation. About 50% expected no effects, 17% some positive effects and 33% expected significant positive effects of the certification. The experience shows better results and a positive impact on the motivation. One hotel owner remarked that in a family

owned hotel the motivation of the family members, which are often in Austria a significant part of the personnel, cannot be influenced by any certification.

Finally we wanted to know whether the whole effort for the certification process is worth it. The majority of the hotel owners (six out of seven) are convinced that the great effort is not in vain. In the discussion the hotel owners reported that the process of the accreditation is time consuming and therefore also expensive, but necessary to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the label. Clear and easy rules or methodological approaches are required. This was explained with regulations about the amount of organic food: In the certified "Bio-hotels" the tourist knows 100% is organic. A certified EHC-eco-hotel has only to provide 50% organic products. From the clients' perspective these regulations are considered to be difficult and unclear. Also the evaluation might be more difficult.

Any regulations should be easy and clear. Some hotel managers believe that certification should be a challenge and not easy to obtain: "A hotel manager should be proud to get the label and to manage his enterprise accordingly." In the discussion the hotel managers also criticized labels offering several levels of certification. For the hotel managers this approach is misleading and the tourist, who is no insider, might get confused with the golden and silver level or the various amounts of "Steinbock"-predicates.

Finally managers criticised the travel agencies and travel organizations: They do not market sustainable hotels separately and they are more price oriented than sustainability oriented. Therefore the managers believe that it is necessary to develop specific platforms in the internet and to cooperate with other certified hotels. One hotel manager said that it would help the idea of sustainable hotel management if at the various platforms hotels with certification would be highlighted or listed separately.

4 Conclusions

In the introduction and the literature review it was obvious that the main hope is that certification in tourism may contribute to more sustainability in an effective way depending on the awareness, clarity and credibility of the respective label. In the conclusion we want to discuss these three aspects again and summarize our experiences.

Awareness: The discussion with managers of certified hotels in Austria shows that the awareness in the alpine area is important. International or European labels are less relevant for both the managers and the clients. In this context they also criticised that the travel agencies are not supportive. They could be helpful in promoting certified hotels and steer the tourist through the jungle of certifications. Several hotels tried to increase the awareness in using several certification in combination and in looking for a certificate which is tailor made to their concept and ideas. This is very much the case within the group of "Bio-Hotels" or the "Natur-idyll-hotels". In these cases, the certification provides also the platform for marketing and promotion.



Clarity: The hotel managers are quite aware that they have to fight against “green-washing” trends in the branch. Therefore they ask for a clear methodological approach and high standards which are easy to communicate. “The Green Globe” is perceived as a good example for an unclear approach, as it is intransparent for the tourist and difficult to understand even for insiders. The hotel managers express their fear that if business and consumers are satisfied with any claim to certification, the concept may become diluted to the point of uselessness. This aspect has also been mentioned in the literature [18]. If someone criticises the increasing amount of certifications, the limitations of the large ones and their broad methodological approach might also be a reason for an increasing amount of small but easy and clear new labels.

Credibility: The overview on twelve important labels shows already the diverse structure of these certifications and different approaches. This leads to significant differences concerning the credibility which has been compared by several studies of the various labels [19, 20]. The outcome is in most cases quite similar. Some labels, such as “Travelife” and “Blaue Schwalbe”, were criticised by the presented study as well as by the online evaluation tool (Barth and Weber [19], “Label Online” [20]).

The discussion with the hotel managers also reveals that for the credibility it is important whether it is a governmental certificate or a private one. For some hotel managers the certification by the state has a higher credibility and good visibility for the client.

For the interviewed hotel managers the credibility is also a part of their personal goals and visions. For an owner and operator of a “Bio-Hotel” the credibility is of high value, because he or she strongly believes in this way of living. For this group their personal credibility and the credibility of the label coincide. This leads to high demands toward the certificate and the controlling process.

Nevertheless the Austrian example and the interviews also showed that the high hopes to improve the sustainability by certification are still valid since we found more satisfied clients, reduced impacts on the environment, an improved market positioning and even effects on the motivation of the personnel.

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