

## **Sustainable Tourism Principles Reflected in Award-Winning Practices**

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### **Introduction**

There has been increased attention given to sustainable tourism monitoring and evaluation efforts, including corporate policies, guidelines and codes of conduct as well as certification programs (e.g., Dodds and Joppe 2005; Font and Harris 2004; Holcomb, Upchurch and Okumus 2007). Few studies, however, have examined sustainable tourism awards programs as a source of innovation and learning. Significant financial and non-financial benefits accrue to organizations receiving industry awards. These advantages can include publicity, competitive market advantage, opportunity to benchmark and share good practice, improved employee morale, and higher shareholder value for publicly traded companies (Balasubramanian, Mathur and Thakur, 2005; Bohoris, 1995; Ghobadian and Woo, 1994; Jenkins, 2006). While these benefits are moderated by award quality and level of consumer recognition (Dodds and Joppe, 2005), it is suggested that awards can also serve as an incentive to spur innovation and encourage positive societal contributions. In this paper, an analysis of award-winning commerce-based tourism practices was performed to identify and categorize the contributions made to sustainable tourism, providing an inductive approach to observe how responsible tourism practices are associated with sustainable tourism principles.

### **Methods**

Tourism awards programs were screened based on several criteria including: inclusion of a variety of responsible tourism practices; a representation of international initiatives; internet-accessible reporting of award-winning practices; and substantial focus on commercial tourism activities, which include corporate, government, or non-government organizational initiatives and partnerships. Awards programs that were solely marketing oriented (e.g., Travel Industry Association Odyssey Awards), not formally vetted (e.g., Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel case studies), focused on one country or region (e.g., New Zealand Tourism Awards) or one type of tourism (e.g., Skai International Ecotourism Awards), or did not award commerce-based initiatives (e.g., IIPT Peace Awards) were not included for analysis. Based on the criteria outlined above, four awards programs in the

tourism industry representing 136 commerce-based awards were identified for inclusion in this study (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Awards Programs Analyzed in This Study**

| Awards Program              | Awards Program Sponsor                        | Years Reviewed | Total Awards | Commerce-Based Awards |
|-----------------------------|---|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| The Geotourism Challenge    | Ashoka's Changemakers and National Geographic | 2008           | 15           | 13                    |
| Responsible Tourism Awards  | Virgin Holidays                               | 2004-2008      | 62           | 59                    |
| Tourism for Tomorrow Awards | World Travel and Tourism Council              | 2005-2008      | 46           | 38                    |
| World Saver Awards          | Conde Nast                                    | 2007-2008      | 26           | 26                    |

Following procedures appropriate for content analysis, two researchers independently categorized and coded winner and finalist practices into: representative sectors of the travel and tourism industry; world regions; and twelve sustainable tourism principles (CED 2008) used in the System for Measuring Excellence in Destinations (SMED), a United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)-approved system operated by the World Centre of Excellence for Destinations (CED). The twelve SMED principles were derived from the National Geographic Society's Geotourism Principles and the UNWTO Aims for Sustainable Tourism, and consistent with key indicators from Innovation Norway and the Best Tourism Cities of China Program. Award practices representing a number of contributions were coded in multiple categories. Any discrepancies were discussed between the two researchers and differences in coding were resolved during this stage.

## Findings

Although the four awards programs analyzed are administered in the United States or Great Britain, the award-winning practices were found to be geographically diverse. Over half of the award recipients are based in Africa (30.1%) and the Americas (25.7%). East Asia/Pacific and Europe host 21.3% and 16.9% of the honorees, respectively, with only one award (0.7%) given to tourism practice in the Middle East. Global awards programs (5.1%) were not based in a specific destination and were generally corporate-wide practices for multinational companies. Nearly three-fourths of the tourism practices analyzed were represented by the lodging (50%) or tour operating (24.3%) sectors, while the attractions (6.6%), transport (5.9%), and restaurant (0.7%) sectors were much less visible in the cases reviewed. All of the 136 award-winning practices analyzed were found to represent at least one, and often more than one, of the twelve sustainable tourism principles (Table 2).

**Table 2: Frequency of Sustainable Tourism Principles Represented in Award-Winning Practices**

| <b>Guiding Sustainable Tourism Principles (CED 2008)</b> | <b>Awards</b> | <b>% of Total Awards</b> |
|--|---------------|--------------------------|
| Employment quality                                       | 62            | 45.6%                    |
| Biological diversity                                     | 58            | 42.6%                    |
| Local quality of life and social prosperity              | 54            | 39.7%                    |
| Visitor fulfillment                                      | 49            | 36.0%                    |
| Economically viable tourism destinations and enterprises | 48            | 35.3%                    |
| Environmental purity and resource efficiency             | 44            | 32.4%                    |
| Local control and involvement                            | 43            | 31.6%                    |
| Cultural richness  | 26            | 19.1%                    |
| Quality of governance                                    | 24            | 17.6%                    |
| Evaluate outcomes  | 21            | 15.4%                    |
| Physical integrity of landscapes                         | 19            | 14.0%                    |
| Appropriate market positioning                           | 8             | 5.9%                     |

## **Conclusion**

By conducting a content analysis of recent award-winning commerce based tourism practices, this study demonstrated that award-winning organizational practices were found to play a positive role in sustainable tourism. Awards which enhanced environmental quality, fostered economic development, and nourished a sense of community were well represented in the practices reviewed. However, there were relatively few awards awarding practices involved with monitoring and evaluation, considered a critical component to ensure the sustainability of sustainable tourism.

It was determined that awards programs in tourism can serve a useful role in encouraging exemplary practices which promote peace through publicity and information sharing activities. Many award-winning practices were used by organizations to “brand” their websites. Unfortunately, the sharing of good practices and level of collaboration among award-winning organizations remains limited due to insufficient reporting and networking. However, the recently launched Geotourism Challenge provides a departure from the other awards programs with very detailed website reporting of winning practices as well as a hosted summit for awards recipients, in which innovations and best practices could be discussed among attendees.

Effective marketing of award programs to travel consumers could encourage candidates to apply for the awards and share proprietary information in the hopes of garnering positive publicity. In addition, consumer awareness of tourism practices contributing to peace would

be further strengthened. While there is a growing demand for sustainable tourism experiences (Font and Harris 2004), it is questionable as to how effective sustainable tourism principles and practices are being promoted to travel consumers. Many responsible tourism practices, for example, may be more readily adopted by businesses when determined to be relevant and important to travelers.

## **References**

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