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Executive Summary

Greening America's First Resort: Evaluating the Success of Sustainable Tourism Certification in Rhode Island

Purpose:

The goal of this study was to evaluate the success of green tourism certification in Rhode Island. More specifically, this study aimed to investigate whether the state's green-certified hotels are indeed more "sustainable" than their non-certified competitors.

Introduction:

Tourism is Rhode Island's 4th-largest industry and the source of 10% of the state's jobs. In 2008 the R.I. Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) and the Rhode Island Hospitality Association (RIHA) joined together in an attempt to "green" this massive industry. The Rhode Island Green Hospitality Certification (RIHGC) currently recognizes 46 hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality-related businesses that have scored at least 100 points on the program's self-certification workbook.

Background:

Green tourism is an industry- and consumer-driven response to the adverse environmental and social impacts of conventional travel and tourism. Though tourism's economic impact can be immense, tourist destinations in developing countries often see only a small portion of expenditures, and monies that do stay in the country or region are rarely distributed equitably. And though conventional tourism may at times achieve certain environmental goals—especially for conservation—the travel and tourism industry as a whole contributes to contamination of pristine ecosystems, stresses urban infrastructure, and contributes handily to global climate change via emissions, deforestation, and induced changes in land use. Socially, mass tourism contributes directly to congestion and architectural change, and tourism has also been linked to social disruption, loss of skilled jobs, increased crime rates, the growth of sex industries, and even the spread of infectious diseases.

For these reasons and many others, industry professionals, academics, and local peoples alike have sought out more socially responsible and environmentally sound forms of tourism. Green tourism—or more broadly, sustainable tourism—is defined as travel-related activities that minimize adverse impacts and maximize potential social and especially environmental gains (UNWTO, 1996). The green tourism movement has its roots in the 1960's and 1970's but only started develop

standard practices and gain mass appeal in the 1990's. The travel industry's rapid adoption of sustainable tourism principles and practices stems from the cost savings, increased consumer demand, and marketing benefits associated with the movement.

As promising as is the growth of green tourism, poorly planned and unregulated green tourism projects can be just as damaging as conventional mass tourism development. And green consumers are generally skeptical of companies' environmental claims (Erskine and Collins, 1997). Thus, there exists the clear need to *certify* that firms advertising environmentally responsible operations are indeed adhering to sustainable tourism practices. The tradition of certification is well established, but only recently have organizations begun using environmental criteria in their evaluations. Currently there are more than 350 green certification programs that certify upwards of 6000 travel-related businesses, yet these businesses constitute just 1% of the market (UNWTO, 2002). Accordingly, green tourism certification suffers from a multitude of diverse programs with differing standards that confuse potential consumers. Though there have been notable efforts to accredit certification bodies and standardize criteria, the market share remains low. Yet green certification has already produced significant savings for participating businesses, and it is hoped that increased standardization and better marketing will lead more and more consumers to demand green certified tours and accommodations.

Methods:

This study surveys and compares dozens of international, national and regional tourism certification schemes. I used this survey to develop a customized certification scheme based on criteria from seven highly varied certification programs. I then used this customized certification workbook, in combination with the RIHGC certification, to evaluate the performance of six (6) RIHGC-certified and seven (7) non-certified hotels in Rhode Island. At the end of each evaluation, one member of the hotel's staff was asked to complete a brief questionnaire regarding perceived practices and attitudes toward green certification.

Key Findings:

1. RIHGC-certified hotels, on the whole, earned much higher scores than their non-certified counterparts.
2. RIHGC certification criteria were consistent with criteria from other certifications in that both the RIHGC workbook and my custom workbook ranked the hotels in a similar order.
3. As an aggregate, hotels consistently met or exceeded standards relating to maintenance, housekeeping, waste disposal, recycling, and community involvement, but scored very poorly with criteria dealing with advanced technologies, installed runoff management, renewable energy, and environmental education and leadership.
4. Larger hotels did not necessarily perform better than smaller ones, but more expensive and fancier hotels did generally earn higher scores than cheaper or lower-rated hotels.

5. Independent hotels generally performed better than franchise or chain hotels.
6. None of the 13 hotels were certified by any green certification program other than RIHGC, and hotel staff members were mostly unaware of other sustainable tourism certifications.
7. The RIHGC process is extremely transparent and seems to reflect an effective collaboration between RIDEM and RIHA, but it is difficult to locate accurate, current information about the hospitality sector in Rhode Island
8. Both RIHGC-certified and non-certified hotels generally approved of the organizational partnership between RIDEM and RIHA.

Key Recommendations for the RIHGC Program:

1. RIDEM and RIHA should improve marketing by requiring certified hotels to display the certification seal, educating RIHA members about the program, increasing the collaboration between RIHGC and the Rhode Island Tourism Division, and regularly publishing a list of certified properties.
2. RIHGC should improve the certification process by scheduling regular 3rd party audits, hiring professional auditors, soliciting guest feedback, digitizing certification forms, and more actively working with participating hotels, tourists, and community partners.
3. In order to further legitimize the program, RIHGC should investigate accreditation programs, establish a tiered rating system to reward exceptional hotels, and consider adding baseline requirements for all participating hotels.
4. The Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC) in combination with the RIHA should maintain regularly updated, accurate information about the location, size, and economic impact of accommodations in Rhode Island.
5. To better match international standards, RIHGC should incorporate more criteria based on community outreach and social responsibility.