

How do tourism businesses operationalize sustainable tourism and what motivates them to be more sustainable in their operations?

Kari Roberg, directed by Christine Vogt, Ph.D.

The Problem

With over one billion people (and rising) traveling around the globe, managing the impacts of tourism to environment, culture, and economy is necessary in order to meet the needs of current and future destination visitors, residents, and the industry. Sustainability discussions often focus on large businesses and environmental impacts; however, small businesses face unique challenges and motives that need to be considered for greater adoption of sustainable tourism; and cultural and economic components need to be included for a holistic approach to destination management.

The Research

ASU's Center for Sustainable Tourism partnered with Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA) to study the sustainability practices of small tourism businesses in Alaska and their motives for becoming certified (or considering becoming certified) in Adventure Green Alaska (AGA), Alaska's only sustainable tourism certification program. Adventure Green Alaska (AGA) is managed by ATIA, which at the time of this study, was in the process of reviewing AGA certification standards to align with global standards set by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. An online survey was utilized to gather data from small businesses. All of the current AGA certified businesses were asked to participate (N=42) and another 35 tourism businesses were invited to consider sustainability. The findings are intended to advance broader and deeper implementation of sustainable practices by the tourism industry, grow participation in sustainable tourism certification, and aid outreach and communication efforts in sustainable tourism.

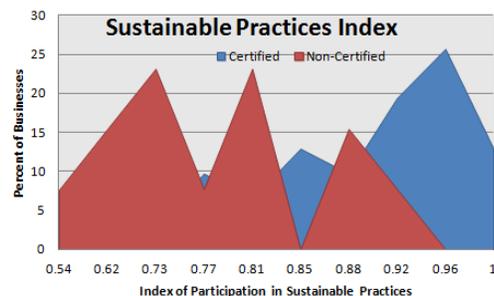


The Findings

The Alaska tourism businesses responding to the survey were found to be internally motivated to implement sustainable practices. They also indicated high involvement in sustainability practices overall, showing their commitment to sustainability. Of the 44 respondents, 100% performed at least five of a list of 26 sustainability practices. Businesses certified with Adventure Green Alaska participated in more sustainable practices (mean = 23) than non-certified businesses (mean = 20). Sustainable practices with high levels of engagement included actively encouraging customers' respect for the culture and customs of the area, and choosing local suppliers for equipment or services on a regular basis. Practices that only a few (< 57% of respondents) implemented are having a documented sustainability policy, and implementing advanced environmental practices such as using renewable energy.

In survey research, it is common to see a higher response from individuals interested in the survey topic as 74% of the certified businesses completed the survey. The survey was sent to non-certified small businesses and yielded a lower response (37%).

An inference could be made for the findings; there are small businesses in Alaska that are unaware or uninterested in sustainable tourism or certification and they are practicing fewer sustainable initiatives. From the findings of certified and non-certified businesses, it is likely businesses with little interest in sustainable tourism would be motivated by external factors, such as consumer interest, marketing benefits, and competitive advantage, over internal factors such as viewing sustainable tourism strategies as good for society and/or environment, and core values of the company.



The Recommendations

Associations and organizations should implement different approaches to engage businesses highly involved in sustainability in comparison to businesses less involved or unaware of sustainability. Appealing to core values of a company, as well as making a business or economic case for sustainable tourism would be advised for those looking to engage small businesses in sustainability. As the consumer is imperative to business success, industry associations would benefit in continuing to grow the marketing of certification and sustainability to consumers and the industry supply chain.

Early adopters have sustainability as core value for firm and self

Late adopters need consumer interest or supply chain to modify business practices

A rating system, or levels of certification, can inspire businesses to participate in certification, as well as help consumers differentiate between companies that are highly engaged in sustainable practices and companies that are less engaged. Third-party assessment of a business is highly recommended for certification bodies to remove bias and greenwashing from a certification program. Where resources do not allow for third party assessment, on-site interviews add an additional authority to the certification process. Large tourism businesses are present in most destinations; therefore, consideration to make certification appealing and equitable to both large and small businesses is needed. Those seeking to engrain sustainability into the core of a company should increase the importance of sustainability policy in a state or by industry groups to guide and sustain a company's commitment and achievement of sustainability goals. Adoption of global standards is recommended to aid in mainstreaming sustainability. Balancing consideration of the unique resources of a destination, yet seeking to align with global standards, will aid in the achievement of sustainable tourism and a more just and healthy planet.