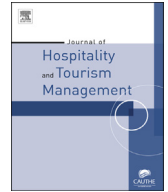




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Coastal resorts setting the pace: An evaluation of sustainable hotel practices

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ABSTRACT

The property development and hotel management industries are becoming active in adopting and operationalising sustainability practices. Despite this, empirical data that comprehensively describes and organises these practices are lacking from the literature (Weaver et al., 2013). This paper aims to address this by examining the sustainable hotel practices of Asia-Pacific hotels utilising green building certification programs as a lens to inductively content analyse self-reported award submissions. A total of 64 award submissions over a two year period were content analysed and over 594 sustainability practices were identified. The results were geographically differentiated between urban (n = 38), coastal (n = 19) and other (n = 7) locations. Urban located hotels reported the most number of sustainable practices (290), followed by coastal (247) and other hotels (57). However, coastal hotels averaged about twice as many sustainable practices per application (13.0) when compared against other (8.1) and urban hotels (7.6). Importantly, this research demonstrates that the role of sustainability practice adoption is an important consideration for coastal hotels and resorts. The paper concludes there is a need for greater integration between a scorecard approach to certification in building and hotel design and the self-reporting mechanisms of hotel award applications.

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1. Introduction

The travel and tourism industries contribute extensively to economies across the globe. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2016a, p. 3) travel and tourism industries generated approximately US\$7.2 trillion and approximately 284 million jobs for the global economy in 2015. Furthermore, investment in travel and tourism equates to approximately 5% of total global investment or approximately US\$814.4 billion (WTTC, 2015). A similar story can be narrated in relation to the growth and contribution to the world's economy by the property industry. It is estimated that 50% of the world's assets are comprised of real estate (Baum & Hartzell, 2012), or approximately US\$217 trillion (Savills World Research, 2016). The fact that “the value of global real estate exceeds by almost one-third the total value of all globally traded equities and securities debt instruments highlights the important role it plays in economies worldwide” (Savills World

Research, 2016, p. 4). Much of this property value is focussed on the Western world, due to the maturity of these markets, however the Asia Pacific region has been a major recipient of cross border flows of capital in the last 10 years.

In recent years, the Asia Pacific region has become a major generator of travel and tourism product with direct contributions of US\$636 billion to gross domestic product (GDP), 65.2 million jobs and US\$296.5 billion of total investment (WTTC, 2016a). Forecasts indicate that travel and tourism's economic contribution to world gross domestic product and global investment will continue to grow through until 2025 (Ernst & Young, 2015; WTTC, 2015, 2016a).

Despite the growth and contribution of tourism, hotels and real estate globally, these industries, like many others, are both contributors to and victims of the impacts of climate change (Pang, McKercher, & Prideaux, 2013). The travel/tourism and property industries are a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, a contributing factor of climate change (Climate Commission, 2013; Pang et al., 2013; Garnaut, 2011; Green Building Council Australia, 2016). “The property and construction industry is responsible for the indirect emission of greenhouse gases as a result of material production used in construction and on an ongoing

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basis due to energy consumption and waste disposal" (GBCA, n.d.[b], p. 6). Furthermore, hospitality businesses (hotels and resorts) are also proving to be major contributors to climate change by emitting significant proportions of carbon dioxide, dumping waste and consuming large quantities of water (Gössling, 2011; Simpson, Gossling, Scott, Hall, & Gladin, 2008).

Climate change is posing a significant threat to the long-term sustainability of tourism based industries (Njoroge, 2015; Song, Dwyer, Li, & Cao, 2012), particularly in the Asia/Pacific region. The Asia Pacific region is highly susceptible to the impacts of climate change, particularly in coastal communities where inundation, erosion and cyclonic weather patterns can lead to displaced communities and increased costs for management and defence (Preston, Suppiah, Macadam, & Bathols, 2006). It is predicted that the Asia Pacific region will be affected by temperature increases, greater rainfall (particularly in the summer monsoon), rises in global sea level and increases in intense tropical cyclones (Preston et al., 2006). According to Moreno and Becken (2009), coastal areas in particular are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Extreme weather events, such as cyclones and tidal surges impact coastal and marine areas with devastating effects. In turn, the tourism industry is significantly impacted as these coastal areas represent tourist hotspots due to their attractive marine and coastal features.

According to Preston et al. (2006, p. 4), "[c]limate change in the Asia/Pacific region may be ameliorated through two complementary strategies: greenhouse gas mitigation and adaptation." Although the developed world is leading the charge in relation to greenhouse gas reduction, effective adaptation measures can be implemented at the regional or local levels in the short term. "[D]evising sustainable environmental management practices that harmonise economic development and wealth generation with natural resource management ... is core" (Preston et al., 2006, p. 4). Coupled with this, certification and auditing schemes are another approach that environmental nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), industry associations and social groups have adopted (Auld, Gulbrandsen, & McDermott, 2008). These are often voluntary, however, forestry, fisheries, sustainable tourism, park management and palm oil production industry norms have initiated pressure on participants to engage and drive 'best practice' and professionalism for these sectors.

The issue of sustainability in the tourism and hospitality field has been widely researched with a focus on sustainable tourism development, yet the impact of operations is often overlooked (Moreno & Becken, 2009; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2013). Research shows that although business leaders in the hospitality industry are aware of the impact of climate change, they are not committed to mitigate its effects (Su, Hall, & Ozanne, 2013). For these reasons, climate change remains a significant threat to the long-term survival and success of the tourism and hospitality industry (Gössling, 2011; Simpson et al., 2008). To overcome such threats, tourism and hospitality leaders ought to engage in certified sustainability schemes to systematically implement, scientifically assess and celebrate success for making further improvements (Aragon-Correa, Martin-Tapia, & dela Torre-Ruiz, 2015; Njoroge, 2015; Song et al., 2012), as well as be more strategic in approaching the question of sustainable practices (Srinivas, 2015).

The implementation of sustainable practices by the tourism industry should have binary aims. As a contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, one aim is to mitigate the negative environmental impacts by reducing emissions and waste. The second aim is to utilise and conserve resources in a sustainable way in order to minimise the impacts that climate events may have on the industry. Certification schemes promoting sustainable practices provide a

benchmarking platform, steering industries toward best practice. As Auld et al. (2008, p. 187) note "certification schemes have emerged in recent years to become a significant and innovative venue for standard setting and governance". These schemes provide leadership and guidance to organisations by highlighting the types of practices that can be implemented, encouraging involvement and evaluating performance.

Despite the magnitude of the industry sectors, and the range of sustainability initiatives being championed, little is understood about the overlap in the sustainability certification processes and practices. Milder, Newsom, Sierra and Bahn's (2016) acknowledged that there is limited empirical evaluation of tourism standards and certification systems. Building on this and Weaver et al.'s (2013) call for research to identify the range of sustainable practices that hotels are adopting. This paper seeks to 1) identify sustainable practices hotels are self-reporting, and 2) explore the difference in geographic location upon adoption of such practices. Due to the significance and diversity of hotel developments and the data sourced for this research, the practices are limited to hotels within the Asia-Pacific region. The research also provides methodological insights, utilising the bricole lens of green building certification programs to categorise themes.

2. Sustainability certification and rating schemes

Sustainability, generally implies achieving a balance between environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects, otherwise known as the 'triple bottom line' (Elkington, 1998). As Lew, Ng, Ni, and Wu (2016, p. 19) note "[d]espite achieving the greatest advances in technology and science that humankind has known, global governance under the sustainability paradigm does not appear to be capable of fully addressing these issues, which are only likely to intensify". This has led to a proliferation of self-monitoring and management of sustainability practices by businesses, industry sectors and government agencies.

Sustainability concepts and practices are well entrenched within the property development industry. Over the last 25 years, sustainable rating tools and certification schemes have been developed in order to assess the environmental performance of buildings (Haapio & Viitaniemi, 2008; Nguyen & Altan, 2011; Wei, Ramalho, & Mandin, 2015; Zuo & Zhao, 2014). However, it has only been more recently that the social aspects of sustainability (e.g., community impacts, social capital and liveability) have been incorporated within some of these certification and rating schemes. The foundation schemes, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Methodology) originating in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively provided key categories and criteria to benchmark sustainability in buildings (Wei et al., 2015). Although, many countries have since developed and implemented their own schemes, taking into account of diverse economic and ecological conditions, LEED and BREEAM continue to be the exemplar models (Nguyen & Altan, 2011).

In the Asia-Pacific region, many countries have or are in the process of developing rating tools and certification schemes tailored to their specific local environmental requirements. Table 1 highlights the Asia-Pacific countries participating in the sustainability ratings programs, the rating tool used or being developed, the inception date of the scheme and whether hotels and other lodging facilities apply to the scheme.

As Zuo and Zhao (2014, p. 272) note, "the structures of these green building assessment tools are similar to a large extent, e.g. covering various aspects of sustainability, a number of credits available under each category, different rating tools for various types of projects." However, each of these rating schemes are

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