Juggling expectations and certification standards: Journey of a Norwegian destination towards acquiring the sustainable destination label.

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Abstract:

External third-party audits are crucial to guarantee the quality of sustainability in tourism. Certifications and accreditations serve as indispensable tools in achieving this goal. Certifications provide credibility through regular assessment and monitoring of the sustainable tourism practices. Eco-labelling or certification, a voluntary process, involves setting, assessing, monitoring, and offering written assurance that a business, product, process, service, or management system complies with specific requirements. In 2018, Innovation Norway's Sustainable Destination Standard achieved the esteemed "GSTC-Recognized Standard" status. This standard comprises 45 criteria and 108 indicators, thoroughly assessed, recorded, and monitored. It covers various aspects, including nature, culture, environment, social values, community engagement, and economic viability. The comprehensive nature of this standard ensures a thorough evaluation of sustainable tourism practices.

The complexity of sustainability, particularly within highly fragmented tourism destinations, necessitates collective and coordinated efforts. These efforts aim to implement measures that contribute to more sustainable tourism development. In this context, the local Destination Management Organization (DMO) plays a central role as a steering organization. Rjukan in Tinn municipality, situated in the northern region of Vestfold and Telemark County in Norway earned the "Sustainable Destination" label from Innovation Norway in 2021. This paper discusses about the challenges and opportunities that sustainable destination labels present for a destination from a management perspective. Stakeholder theory and institutional theory are used to provide a conceptual background for the decisions made by the manager of the DMO. Managers must balance the different various expectations of the stakeholders, which are often at conflicts among each other. Moreover, they have to deal with the rising expectations from the conscious tourists and changing national and regional regulations. In this regard, DMO Visit Rjukan is used as a case to describe the managerial perspective of acquiring the sustainable destination label in Norway. This is presented in three stages: before applying for the label; two, during the application process and three, after acquiring the label. The insights from this paper highlight the challenges and opportunities that manager face at each stage. Further, the role of communicating the label to the tourists and combating greenwashing is also discussed in the light of sustainability marketing. This paper will contribute to the literature of role of DMOs in ensuring sustainability of tourist destinations in a country and provide critical insights for the managers that look forward to getting their DMOs labelled for sustainability.