Marketing Ecotourism through the Internet: An Evaluation of Selected Ecolodges in Latin America and the Caribbean

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The advance of Internet technology worldwide has contributed to the growing impacts of online marketing of ecotourism destinations. Despite much discussion devoted to defining ecotourism conceptually, knowledge regarding how ecotourism is actually practiced and how it is marketed through the Internet is still lacking. The purpose of this study was to address these issues by exploring how ecotourism is marketed through the Internet. A sample was selected from ecolodge operators listed on the website of The International Ecotourism Society. Content analysis was used to examine the online marketing information of these ecolodges. The study findings suggest that ecolodge operators sampled in this study provided a variety of ecotourism products to meet the diverse interests of the ecotourist market. The online marketing messages of these ecolodges also indicated that most of them only partially aligned with ecotourism principles. Recommendations are made regarding social marketing and ecolabelling for online ecotourism marketing to better shape tourist expectations, attitudes and behaviours in ways that support the sustainable practices professed as ecotourism.

Keywords: ecolodge, Internet marketing, sustainable ecotourism

Introduction

Use of the Internet has been growing rapidly since its first application in 1990 (Werthner & Klein, 1999). It was estimated in the US alone that Internet users had increased 190% between 1996 and 1999 (TIA, 2000). A 2002 report by eMarketer (2002) projected that the number of the Internet users worldwide would double from 352.2 million in 2000 to 709.1 million in 2004. A more recent survey by Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell and Yankelovich Partners showed that 63% of their respondents used the Internet to plan leisure travel in 2004, a jump from 53% in 2002 (eMarketer, 2004). The information-based nature, ease of use, interactivity, and flexibility of Web-based interfaces of the Internet (Dollin *et al.*, 2002) are particularly appealing to tourism, including ecotourism, due to the information-demanding nature of the industry (Gretzel *et al.*, 2000; Werthner & Klein, 1999).

Research has shown that the Internet is a major source of travel information for ecotourists. For example, a study by the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2002a) indicated that Canadian ecotourists invested a significant amount of effort collecting pre-trip information and the Internet was one of

the primary sources. In another study by WTO (2002b) to understand the US ecotourism market, results indicated that online marketing was perceived as the most important or next to most important marketing tool compared to traditional methods (e.g. brochure, newspaper, magazine and word-of-mouth) by more than half of the US ecotour operators who responded to the survey.

The prevalence of information available through the Internet has raised the possibility for remote ecotourism venues to become more accessible to the market. In other words, marketing ecotourism destinations through the Internet is likely to expose them to a wide range of ecotourists who, according to Wight (2001), are motivated to take ecotours for various reasons. Attention has not been directed toward examining if there is congruence between the practice of online marketing by ecotour suppliers, and the concept of ecotourism as well as the benefits pursued by ecotourists. This study aims to answer two questions in a specified context. The first is how ecotour operators respond to the demands of the diverse ecotourist market and the second, how they demonstrate their business practices through the Internet to address the sustainability issues of ecotourism.

The Ecotourism Concept

Ecotourism has been widely advocated as an economic tool for biological conservation and community development in recent decades (Brandon, 1996; Brandon & Margoluis, 1996; Campbell, 1999). The concept has been defined using various approaches. Defining ecotourism based on its key components or dimensions is one way to distinguish ecotourism from other forms of tourism. For example, Fennell (2001) identified that where ecotourism takes place, conservation, culture, benefits to locals and education were the five most common elements cited in the 85 ecotourism definitions that he reviewed. Diamantis (2004) found that nature-based experiences, education and sustainable management were shared by various ecotourism definitions. Buckley (1994) conceptualised ecotourism as having a four dimensional structure with dimensions of nature-based, sustainable management, environmental education, and support for conservation. A similar framework was proposed by Blamey (2001) who suggested that ecotourism should be nature-based, include environmental education, be sustainably managed, and feature small-scale and personalised experiences.

Another approach to understanding ecotourism is to examine who the patrons of ecotours are, and the types of activities sought by this group. Ecotourists' motivations or activity preferences have been examined in studies of ecotourist segmentation such as Eagles and Cascagnette (1995), HLA/ARA (1994), Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002), Hvenegaard and Deardon (1998), Mackoy and Osland (2004), Palacio and McCool (1997), Weaver and Lawton (2002), Weiler and Richins (1995) and Woods and Moscardo (1998). These studies show that nature-based experiences and activities are most frequently indicated. Other ecotourism benefits identified include experiencing local cultures, learning about the natural and cultural heritage of ecotourism destinations, and being responsible toward the environment while

on vacation. On one hand, ecotourists seem to be different from other tourists in their preferences for certain aspects of tourism activities. On the other hand, they share benefits similar to those sought by general tourists, such as being away, enjoying personalised services, sharing experiences and interacting with others, a healthy lifestyle, and spending money wisely.

Guidelines for Sustainable Ecotourism Development

Regardless of how ecotourism is defined, it is generally recognised that the goal of ecotourism is to achieve biological conservation using tourism as an economic incentive to involve local communities (Brandon, 1996; Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996). This is not only reflected in the common elements of the eco-tourism definition identified earlier but also expressed in the widely adopted definition provided by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). TIES, the largest and oldest ecotourism organisation in the world, has been devoting itself to promoting responsible travel since its establishment in 1990. The orga-nisation defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that con-serves the environment and improves the well-being of local people' (TIES, 2004). In order to promote sustainable ecotourism practices to the tourism industry, TIES has developed a Code of Conduct (Table 1) to guide ecotourism operation.

In addition to TIES's Code of Conduct, various ecotourism guidelines and principles have been suggested for sustainable ecotourism development. For example, Wall (1997) recommended that, for ecotourism to contribute to sus-tainable development, the practices needed to be economically viable, environ-mentally appropriate, and socio-culturally acceptable. Others, including Honey (1999), Mehta *et al.* (2002), Tourism Concerns (1992), Wallace and Pierce (1996) and Wight (1994), have defined principles, criteria, or characteristics for sus-tainable ecotourism and addressed the three aspects of sustainable ecotourism suggested by Wall. Education is also cited by these researchers as an essential tool to achieve sustainable ecotourism.

Table 1 Ecotourism guidelines (TIES, 2005)

Code of conduct
(1) Minimise impact
(2) Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect
(3) Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
(4) Provide direct financial benefits for conservation
(5) Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people
(6) Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate
(7) Support international human rights and labour agreements

The Practice of Ecotourism

Despite the effort devoted to defining ecotourism and identifying ecotourists, research conducted to examine ecotourism practices by tour operators is

relatively limited (Armstrong & Weiler, 2002; Osland & Mackoy, 2004; Weaver *et al.*, 1996). Bottrill and Pearce (1995) indicated that discussions of the ecotourism definition among academics primarily focused on its conceptual components. The proliferation of ecotourism businesses in the recent decades, has led to a concern about whether the tourism industry really understands and attempts to practice the concept (Font, 2001; Honey, 1999).

The research by Sirakaya *et al.* (1999), using a sample of 127 US-based ecotour operators, identified 14 major themes in ecotourism definitions. Environmental-friendly tourism, described as 'tourism that is environmentally safe, minimises impact on nature and wildlife, and contributes to environmental protection and dynamic conservation', was the most agreed upon definition. Sirakaya *et al.* concluded that the perceptions of ecotourism revealed by their sample were consistent with the ecotourism literature. A content analysis by Fennell (2001) aimed at understanding the ecotourism definition and revealed a somewhat different picture. Fennell's analysis of ecotourism definitions provided insight on differences between academic professionals and ecotourism practitioners. Results indicated that researchers tended to define ecotourism with statements of tourism impacts without referring to specific geographic areas. On the other hand, governments and tourism associations usually focused at the level of region or country and frequently included 'conservation' in defining ecotourism. Education, ethics, sustainability, local benefits and culture were also frequently mentioned in their definitions but in a more general sense when compared to academics.

The definition of ecotourism is also expressed by ecotourism practitioners through the ways they operationalise the concept. Wallace and Pierce's (1996) evaluation of ecotour lodge and boat operations based on six principles of sustainable ecotourism in the state of Amazonas in Brazil is one example. Their findings suggested that although these ecotourism businesses did contribute economic and social benefits to local communities, the other essential aspects of ecotourism, including conservation education, resource protection and involvement of local residents, were less prominent. A survey of 26 ecolodges in 12 countries by Russell *et al.* (1995) provided another example of research on ecotourism practices. The major features of these ecolodges were identified, including small-scale business, isolated and protected natural settings, and facilities designed with a local or exotic quality. Meanwhile, food, comfort, relaxation, and experiences of learning and interacting with nature were emphasised and marketed.

The rationale for promoting ecotourism is often based on the assumption that tourists are becoming more environmentally sensitive (Font, 2001). However, studies suggest that not all ecotourists are interested in playing the role of environmentally responsible consumers (Blamey & Braithwaite, 1997; Sharpley, 2001; Wight, 2001). This has created a challenge for ecotourism practitioners to market ecotourism to such a diverse group if the goal is to achieve economic viability, environmental sustainability, and socio-cultural responsibility. The way that ecotourism destinations are marketed online can have significant impacts on the type of ecotourists attracted and the way they behave in ecotourism destinations. Therefore, marketing, in general, has been recognised as one of the issues emerging from ecotourism development

(Grant & Allcock, 1998; WTO, 2002c). Examining how ecotour operators market themselves online provides an approach to evaluate ecotourism practices in addition to onsite evaluations.

Marketing is defined by the American Marketing Association (2004) as 'the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives'. In the context of ecotourism, marketing should be developed to meet the demand of the ecotourist market and the need to sustain ecotourism destinations. Marketing in an appropriate manner can communicate 'best practice' messages to potential ecotour clientele and help them create realistic expectations and pertinent attitudes in accordance with the objective of sustaining ecotourism destinations (Wearing & Neil, 1999). This study is a preliminary step to examine ecotourism as portrayed by ecolodges through Internet marketing. Content analysis has been applied to evaluate environmental marketing claims of general advertisements in magazines (Carlson *et al.*, 1993; Polonsky *et al.*, 1997). However, this approach has not been applied to understand how ecotour operators convey ecotourism online. For this study, marketing messages of selected ecotour websites were content analysed to examine the practices portrayed by selected ecotour operators. The focus of the analyses was to determine if the content of web-based marketing was aligned with ecotourism principles.

Study Description and Methods

Since a universally accepted definition of ecotourism and standards of practicing ecotourism have yet to be achieved, the use of this term is subject to various interpretations based primarily on reasons motivating ecotour businesses to adopt this concept. The large number of websites of self-claimed ecotour operators found through the Internet represents a wide range of operations. The effort to estimate the size of this population can be problematic and controversial. Considering that the purpose of this study is primarily to provide an exploratory understanding of how ecotourism is marketed online the sample of the study was purposefully selected from the ecotour businesses listed on the website of TIES (http://www.ecotourism.org/) under the 'Travel Choice' section.

TIES provides its business members the benefit of using its webpage of Travel Choice to promote their products. As a requirement for membership enrollment, these ecotour operators are asked to sign the Code of Conduct (Table 1) and to follow the principles defined therein. The sample frame for this study consisted of the ecotour operators who used TIES's website to market their services. Meanwhile, they also voluntarily followed the ecotourism principles suggested by TIES. It was assumed that these ecotour operators were more likely to conceptualise ecotourism in the way defined by TIES and that they would promote their products in accord with the image of the organisation.

Even with the sample frame narrowed to TIES's business members, this group still comprised a wide range of ecotourism businesses across different continents and provided various natural and cultural elements for ecotourism experiences. Cater (2001) indicated that an effort to make a worldwide generalisation of ecotourism practices was less likely to produce a meaningful

result due to the substantial variation among different regions. For the present study, the sample was further limited to local-based ecolodges operated in Latin America and the Caribbean and excluded those who operated tourism boats to reduce the heterogeneity of the sample. Another reason for selecting only ecolodge operators in this region was because of its high-profile as an ecotourism destination (Weaver & Schlüter, 2001). The marketing performance of ecotour operators in this region was judged as likely to have impacts on the natural, socio-cultural, and economic environments of the region.

After examining all the ecotour operators on TIES's website based on the aforementioned criteria, a sample of 35 ecolodges across 14 countries was selected (Table 2). Eighteen ecolodges were located within national parks or protected areas of public or private ownership. Five were close to publicly owned protected areas. The information presented on the websites of these eco-lodges was collected between October and December in 2003. Content analysis was applied to examine the written text of the marketing information used by ecolodge operators.

Content analysis is an inferential process which includes systematic and objec-tive categorisation of communication messages into groups of identifiable characteristics (Holsti, 1968). In order to analyse data objectively, explicit rules or criteria of selection need to be applied before any data analysis is performed (Berg, 1995). The criteria of selection contain a set of exclusive and exhaustive categories to sufficiently enclose the variation in the target message without creating confounded results (Berg, 1995; Weber, 1985). In this study, categories of ecotourism products, including natural resource-based activity, cultural resource-based activity, being environmentally responsible, nature-based learn-ing, culture-based learning, and a category of other to cover products similar to those provided by mass tourism, were developed from the studies of ecotourist segmentation (Table 3). These categories were then used to investigate how the ecolodge operators presented themselves to the ecotourist market.

Two types of 'natural resource-based activity', i.e. land and water activities, were identified and the numbers of ecolodges providing these activities were recorded. Ecolodges offering the products of cultural attraction or interaction were recorded in the category of cultural resource-based activity. The category of 'being environmentally responsible' contained the ecolodges which pro-vided the opportunities for ecotourists to physically participate in conservation

Table 2 Number of ecolodges in each country

Country	Number of ecolodges	Country	Number of ecolodges
Argentina	1	Honduras	1
Bahamas	1	Jamaica	3
Belize	1	Mexico	1
Brazil	3	Nicaragua	1
Costa Rica	10	Panama	2
Ecuador	5	Puerto Rico	1
Guatemala	1	Peru	4

Table 3 Categories and types of ecotourism products

Natural resource-based activity[a,b,c,d,e,f,g,h,i]   (1) Land activity   (2) Water activity
Cultural resource-based activity[d,g,i]   (1) Cultural attraction and interaction
Being environmentally responsible[h]   (1) Physically participating in conservation   (2) Volunteer/internship   (3) Financial support   (4) Patronising the ecolodge as an act of conservation
Nature-based learning[a,b,f,g]   (1) Nature-based online educational information   (2) Nature-based guided or interpretation tours/exhibits
Culture-based learning[b]   (1) Culture-based online educational information   (2) Culture-based guided or interpretation tours/exhibits
Other[a,b,c,e,f,g,h,i]   (1) Escape/relaxation/peace

[a]Eagles and Cascagnette (1995); [b]HLA/ARA (1994); [c]Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002); [d]Hvenegaard and Deardon (1998); [e]Mackoy and Osland (2004); [f]Palacio and McCool (1997); [g]Weaver and Lawton (2002); [h]Weiler and Richins (1995); [i]Woods and Moscardo (1998).

(e.g. reforestation and rehabilitation), volunteer or practice internship, financially support conservation (e.g. donation and adoption), and simply patronise the ecolodge as an act of conservation. Both the categories of 'nature-based learning' and 'culture-based learning' comprised the ecotourism products of online educational information and onsite guided or interpretation tours or exhibits. Ecotourism products provided to meet the demand of escape, relaxation and peaceful environment, were recorded for the category of 'other'.

Four dimensions of sustainable ecotourism operation derived from the literature of ecotourism principles, as indicated earlier, were employed to content analyse how online marketing of the ecolodge operators addressed the need to improve biological conservation and community well-being (Table 4). The online marketing information was examined against criteria adopted for each dimension. The criteria were selected and modified to assist the evaluation of online marketing performance.

Three criteria were applied to determine the ecolodge practices pertaining to environmental sustainability. The first criterion, 'managing the lodge facilities in a sustainable manner', was used to examine if the management of an ecolodge adopted measures to sustainably use natural resources and to minimise resource consumption or waste production. The second criterion, 'minimising tourist impacts on the natural environment', referred to any performance that actively controlled and reduced impacts from tourist activities on wildlife and their natural habitats. Practices that helped improve or maintain the natural status of wildlife populations and ecosystems qualified the criterion of 'contributing to biological conservation'.

Table 4 Dimensions and criteria for sustainable ecotourism operation

Environmental sustainability (1) Managing the lodge facilities in a sustainable manner[b,c,d,e] (2) Minimising tourist impacts on the natural environment[a,c,d,e] (3) Contributing to biological conservation[a,b,c,d,e]
Socio-cultural sustainability (1) Improving the social well-being of the local community[a,d,e] (2) Involving local participation in ecotourism planning[a,b,c,d,e] (3) Preventing the socio-cultural impacts[a,b,d,e] (4) Preserving the cultural traditions[b,d,e]
Economic sustainability (1) Providing direct or indirect employment opportunities[a,c,d,e] (2) Demonstrating efforts to sustain the local economy[a,c,d,e]
Education (1) Attempt to influence visitor attitudes or behaviours[a,b,d,e] (2) Attempt to influence local people or lodge staff's attitudes or behaviours[a,b,c,d,e]

[a]Honey (1999); [b]Mehta *et al.* (2002); [c]Tourism Concern (1992); [d]Wallace and Pierce (1996); [e]Wight (1994).

For the evaluation of socio-cultural sustainability, four criteria were used. Performances that addressed the improvement of the well-being of a community as a whole or the sub-groups of a community, such as children, teenagers and elders were evaluated as meeting the criterion of 'improving the social well-being of the local community'. The second criterion was achieved by providing opportunities for local people to participate in the planning process of ecotourism development. The criterion of 'preventing the socio-cultural impacts' was evaluated by examining if there was any attempt by ecolodges to show the awareness of possible adverse consequences of ecotourism on local people or the community and to avoid or reduce these impacts. The achievement of the last criterion of 'preserving the cultural traditions' was made by measures that helped preserve local cultures and traditions.

Economic sustainability was examined using two criteria. Creation of economic opportunities by employing local people and provision of education or information for them to locate other economic sources were examples which qualified the criterion of 'providing direct or indirect employment opportunities'. The criterion of 'demonstrating efforts to sustain the local economy' was met if a lodge purchased locally produced goods or farm products.

Two criteria were selected to examine the performance pertaining to the dimension of education. Online information provided in an attempt to educate potential ecolodge patrons to become aware of the sustainability issue in the destinations or to support the sustainability of the destinations was evaluated as qualifying for the first criterion of 'attempt to influence visitor attitudes or behaviours'. The criterion of 'attempt to influence local people or lodge staff's attitudes or behaviours' was met by providing educational opportunities to help local people or lodge employees to form positive attitudes toward sustainable development and perform sustainable practices.

All the written texts presented on the website of each ecolodge were systematically analysed. Ecolodges representing the categories in Table 3 and

addressing the dimensions in Table 4 were recorded. Reliability was addressed by examining all the written texts of the online messages twice to ensure the stability of the analysis and the consistency of content classification over time (Weber, 1985).

Results

Meeting the demand of the ecotourist market

Product and service

Table 5 summarises the ecotourism products offered by the ecolodges sampled in the study. All 35 ecolodges provided land-based activities for eco-tourists to experience nature with hiking/trekking, birding, visiting national parks/protected areas, horseback riding and wildlife watching being the five most frequent activities. Twenty-six of them also promoted water activities, such as fishing, canoeing, kayaking and snorkelling. Culture-related products, including visiting archeological attractions, community tours, cultural interactions, and souvenir shopping or visiting local market, were indicated by 20. Less than half ($n = 15$) addressed ecotourists' interest in being environ-mentally responsible by involving them in volunteer or internship programmes ($n = 6$), physically taking part in conservation ($n = 5$), financial support ($n = 5$),

Table 5 Ecotourism products provided by the ecolodges

Ecotourism product	Number of ecolodges promoting
Natural resource-based activity (35)*	
Land activities	35
Water activities	26
Cultural resource-based activity (20)	
Cultural attraction and interaction	20
Being environmentally responsible (15)	
Volunteer/internship	6
Physically participating in conservation	5
Financial support	5
Patronising the ecolodge as an act of conservation	3
Nature-based learning (34)	
Nature-based online educational information	32
Nature-based guided/interpretation tours/exhibits	28
Culture-based learning (17)	
Culture-based online educational information	10
Culture-based guided/interpretation tours/exhibits	8
Other (23)	
Escape/relaxation/peace	23

*The number in each of the parentheses represents the total count of websites which qualified the corresponding category of ecotourism product.

or by patronising the ecolodges as an environmentally responsible behaviour ($n = 3$).

Nature-based learning opportunities were advertised by the majority, be it online educational information ($n = 32$) or onsite guided tours/interpretation ($n = 28$). The online educational material regarding destinations' natural heritage, such as biological, geological and ecological resources, was frequently furnished. However, only a few provided detailed and specific information, such as lists of species and the geological details of the area. Culture-based learning was less evident. Less than one-third ($n = 10$) displayed online information related to local cultural traditions and even fewer offered onsite guided/interpretation tour services ($n = 8$). In addition to the products specifically targeting at the ecotourist market, tourist experiences not distinct from the general tourism market, such as escape, hideaway, relaxation, tranquility and peace, were addressed by the majority ($n = 23$).

Meeting the principles of sustainable ecotourism development

Environmental sustainability

Criteria related to lodge facility management, tourist impact control, and contributions to conservation, were used to gauge environmental sustainability. Table 6 shows that over two-thirds ($n = 26$) included online information related to the sustainable management of lodge facilities. Recycling, energy

Table 6 Evaluation of ecolodge websites related to sustainable performance criteria ($n = 35$)

Sustainability criteria	Number of ecolodges
Environmental sustainability (33)[*]	
Managing the lodge facilities in a sustainable manner	26
Minimising tourist impacts on the natural environment	11
Contributing to biological conservation	26
Socio-cultural sustainability (15)	
Improving the social well-being of the local community	12
Involving local people in ecotourism planning	7
Preventing the socio-cultural impacts	4
Preserving the cultural traditions	4
Economic sustainability (22)	
Providing direct or indirect employment opportunities	22
Demonstrating efforts to contribute to the local economy	11
Education (18)	
Attempt to influence visitor attitudes or behaviours	8
Attempt to influence local people or lodge staff's attitudes or behaviours	14

[*]The number in each of the parentheses represents the total count of websites which met the criterion of the corresponding sustainability dimension.

saving practices, ecological design/construction, waste-water management and reduction were most frequently conveyed.

Regarding the criterion of tourist impact management, less than one-third ($n = 11$) advertised this aspect. Among these, three specified using a carrying capacity to limit their tourist activities and five practiced different kinds of measures to reduce tourist impacts on wildlife, such as site rotations, avoidance of the nesting seasons of wildlife, maintenance of certain distances while watching wildlife, prohibiting certain behaviours that could interfere with turtle behaviours, and wearing boots provided by the ecolodge to prevent the introduction of exotic species. The remaining three indicated the need of tourist impact management without explaining how it might be achieved.

Contributions to conservation were indicated by the majority ($n = 26$). Most websites contained information purporting to have benefited the natural environment by restoring rainforest, creating or managing protected areas, and raising funds or providing financial support for conservation programmes. Other conservation efforts, such as conducting research, species breeding/restoration, and promoting/providing economic alternatives for locals to stop exploitative activities, were also conveyed but less frequently.

Socio-cultural sustainability

Improvement of social well-being, involving local residents in tourism planning, preventing the socio-cultural aspect of tourist impact, and preserving the cultural traditions were used for evaluating socio-cultural sustainability (Table 6). Although providing social benefits to local communities was most frequently addressed, only one-third ($n = 12$) indicated this need through sponsorship of local activities, hospitals, schools and students, as well as maintaining or enhancing community infrastructure. The second criterion was met by seven ecolodges by expressing the responsibility of involving local people in ecotourism planning. The rest of the criteria, prevention of socio-cultural impacts and preservation of cultural traditions, were only shown on four ecolodge websites each. The majority ($n = 20$) did not market in a way that demonstrated any notable effort to sustain the socio-cultural environment in which they operated.

Economic sustainability

Two criteria, direct or indirect employment opportunities and efforts to sustain the local economy, were applied to examine economic sustainability. The majority ($n = 22$) stated that they provided employment opportunities or helped local people locate economic opportunities. Among these ecolodges, half of them ($n = 11$) also purchased or recommended their customers to purchase local products or services to help sustain the local economy. The rest ($n = 13$) did not indicate either of the criteria in this dimension.

Education

The education dimension was evaluated based on efforts to influence visitors and local people or lodge staff. Only a few ($n = 8$) displayed an attempt to influence visitor attitudes or behaviours. Tourism guidelines and guest education were some of the examples. Fourteen websites conveyed attempts to educate

local communities or lodge staff to behave in an environmentally responsible way. One of the examples was to provide educational programmes for local farmers to acquire the knowledge of environmentally friendly farming. Overall, about half ($n = 18$) indicated some form of education deemed appropriate by ecotourism principles.

Overall sustainable performance

Among dimensions of sustainable ecotourism, more ecolodges addressed environmental aspects of sustainability through online marketing information followed by economic sustainability, education, and last, socio-cultural sustainability. Figure 1 displays the number of ecolodges that conveyed different numbers of sustainability dimensions. None of the ecolodges met all 11 criteria adopted in this study. Only nine ecolodges addressed all four dimensions although the numbers of criteria which they achieved varied. Eleven ecolodges conveyed three of the four sustainability dimensions on their websites. Six ecolodges achieved two dimensions and eight achieved one. One ecolodge failed to meet any of the dimensions.
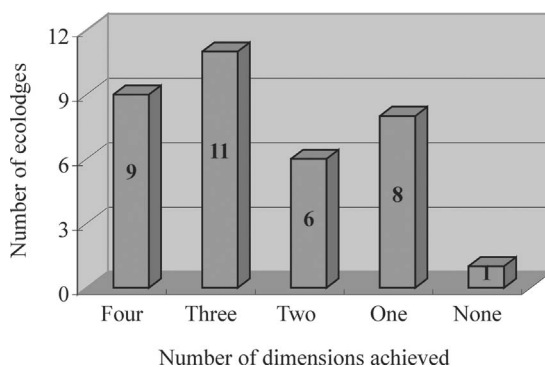
Figure 1 Overall sustainability performance of ecolodge websites

Discussion and Conclusions

An ecolodge, according to Russell *et al.* (1995: x) is a 'nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism'. The present study examined the online marketing messages developed by the selected ecolodges, business members of The International Ecotourism Society based in Latin America and the Caribbean. These ecolodges positioned themselves in accord with Russell *et al.*'s definition regarding the nature-dependent quality. Most of them were located within or close to protected areas, which is consistent with the common geographic features of ecotourism venues (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; Eagles, 2002; Hawkins & Lamoureux, 2001). Furthermore, the ecotourism activities and learning opportunities provided by these lodges were primarily natural resource-oriented. It is not surprising that a wide variety of land and water activities were provided due to the diverse ecological and geographical features found in this region. These

ecotourism activities were predominantly 'non-consumptive' with the exception of fishing. Among the 13 ecolodges providing fishing opportunities, only one specified the catch-and-release practice. Some have debated whether consumptive activities, such as fishing, qualify as ecotourism (Fennell, 2000; Holland *et al.*, 1998). Compared to the natural elements of ecotourism products, findings of the present study indicated that culture-based activities and learning opportunities were less evident. Research on ecotourist segmentation also suggests that the cultural aspect of ecotourism products is less important to ecotourists than the natural aspect (HLA/ARA, 1994; Woods & Moscardo, 1998).

Although ecotourism aims to promote biological conservation, the idea of traveling while actively contributing to the natural environment is not necessary embraced by all ecotourists (Blamey & Braithwaite, 1997; Wearing *et al.*, 2002). This seems to be reflected in the ecolodges sampled in this study. Less than half offered the opportunities to directly or indirectly participate in conservation. Meanwhile, the ecotourism activities identified in this study indicated that the majority supplied their products to meet the diverse interests of ecotourists. The ecotourism products contained not only the benefits frequently used to identify ecotourists but also those used to attract most other vacationers. Another reason for the diverse ecotourism products might be due to attempts of ecolodge operators to market themselves to a wide range of tourists.

The second feature of an ecolodge, as defined by Russell *et al.* (1995), is the goal to achieve the philosophy and principles of ecotourism. In this study, all of the ecolodges except one marketed at least some sustainability principles. However, only a few addressed all four dimensions of sustainable ecotourism. Practices to sustain the natural environment were most frequently indicated and achieved by a variety of measures with the emphasis on the management of lodge facilities and contributions to conservation. The number of ecolodges expressing an intent to actively manage tourist behaviours and reduce their impacts on the natural environment was much lower. It can be inferred that these ecolodges were more reluctant to require visitors to self-regulate their behaviours while on vacation. Findings from the literature about onsite ecotourism operations have been mixed. For example, Botrill and Pearce's (1995) survey of nature tour operators in British Columbia, Canada revealed that all the operators reported that they employed environmental practices to reduce tourism impacts. Other researchers (Burton, 1998; Ziffer, 1989) have shown that only few nature tour operators actively involved themselves in conservation.

Analyses of the marketing information related to socio-cultural sustainability showed that this dimension was least achieved among the four sustainability dimensions. For those who did achieve this dimension, more addressed the criterion of improving social well-being of communities. The information related to involving local people in ecotourism planning, preventing social-cultural impacts, and preserving cultural traditions were communicated less often. Although minimising impacts on and sustaining the socio-cultural aspect of ecotourism destinations are essential ecotourism principles (Blamey, 2001; TIES, 2005; Tourism Concerns, 1992; Wight, 1994), they were

not recognised as important online marketing messages by most of the ecolodges examined in this study.

The need to sustain the local economy was demonstrated on most of the ecolodge websites. The majority mentioned the economic opportunities which they created for local communities. A similar finding was reported by Bottrill and Pearce (1995). However, most of the operators in their study also expressed the intention to help sustain the community economy by purchasing local goods and services. The criterion of sustaining the local economy was indicated only by few in the present study.

The educational dimension of sustainable ecotourism was largely ignored. Among those who demonstrated educational elements online, the majority invested in educating their staff and local people while only a few provided visitor guidelines, or encouraged visitors to perform environmentally friendly behaviours. A similar finding was reported by Armstrong and Weiler (2002). In the present study, the lack of attempt to influence visitor attitudes and behaviours is consistent with the finding that most ecolodges failed to achieve the second criterion in the dimension of environmental sustainability. These findings suggest that the ecolodges surveyed in this study were reluctant to influence the behaviour of their future clientele.

Despite that the four dimensions of sustainable ecotourism commonly identified in the ecotourism literature were addressed to some degree by a majority of the study sample, these dimensions were not equally emphasised. The dimension of sustainable environment was most frequently expressed followed by economic sustainability, education, and socio-cultural sustainability. Although the study sample had agreed to follow TIES's Code of Conduct, their online performance suggests that they only selectively followed these guidelines. For example, TIES's first code of conduct related to impact minimisation was only partially conveyed through managing lodge facilities. The other criteria associated with impact control, including tourist impact management and prevention of socio-cultural impacts, were expressed only by a few. The problem of voluntary compliance of ecotourism principles has been discussed by Sirakaya (1997). Overall, most of the sample failed to communicate all the necessary elements online to shape the expectations, and influence the attitudes and behaviour of its future clientele.

The concept of ecotourism is to promote a travel pattern which will contribute to the benefits to the overall society in addition to satisfying individual needs. Wearing *et al.* (2002) suggested that marketing should be appropriately designed and distributed to address the problem of tourists' lack of intention to behave responsibly during a vacation. Ecotourism marketing requires an integrated approach to address the demand of the ecotourist market as well as the sustainability of ecotourism destinations (Wearing & Neil, 1999). The traditional customer-oriented marketing approach where making a profit and satisfying demand is often the priority (Seaton, 1996; Sirakaya *et al.*, 1999) is less likely to take into account the need to sustain and conserve the environment. Social marketing differs from the general commercial marketing primarily in that social marketing is applied to benefit individuals or society rather than to gain profits exclusively for the marketer's organisation by directly influencing behaviour while keeping target audience's needs in

mind (Andreasen, 1995). In the context of ecotourism, the social marketing approach is desirable since ecotourists' behaviour and support of sustainable ecotourism practices are a prerequisite for a destination's sustainability.

Although social marketing encourages the creation a friendly political environment to market socially beneficial products, in reality rarely is there any political entity willing to regulate ecotour-related development to sustain local communities. As a consequence, any sustainability principle or guideline is subject to voluntary compliance. Promoting a trustful ecolabelling framework and raising ecotourists' awareness of the impacts of their travel decisions may provide solutions for this problem.

Further steps to improve the understanding of the impacts and practices of Internet marketing by the ecotourism industry will be necessary. The current study is confined by its focus on the evaluation of web-based messages. It is not known if there is congruence between the messages delivered through the Internet and the onsite operations by ecolodge businesses. Onsite observations or visitor evaluations would help enhance understanding of congruence or the lack-there-of. Furthermore, a longitudinal study to examine the change in the content of the Internet marketing messages and how the industry adjusts its marketing strategies to accommodate the market demands and the need to sustain destinations' environments will also provide more insight on the dynamic nature of the ecotourism market.

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