

Sustainable Tourism is it All About Green Washing?

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Abstract

Sustainable Tourism has been a buzz word for a few decades now. It has become part of the tourism ecosystem. The question however, emanates, is it all about Sustainability in tourism or does it lead to ‘green washing’ which has been considered as a tool of deceptive marketing where tourism organizations, make false statements and portray products and service offerings as which are environmentally friendly or ‘green.’ In fact, it is well-known to tourism business, that green washing has led to (i) unsubstantiated claims, viz., terminology like nature-based, ecofriendly; (ii) Misleading labels/imagery; (iii) focusing on small and minor green features; (iv) claims of sustainability which become irrelevant; and (v) fake/false ‘net zero’ goal claims. Thence, it can be seen that green washing has been resorted to intentionally, which leads to (a) eroding trust in the customer; (b) deceives the customer; and (c) hinders climatic action. The research papers interacts with hospitality operators, academics, and researchers to ensure an understanding about Green Washing, besides, focusing of the available literature, and places a perspective about Green Washing and its avoidance, which will help the sustainable tourism ecosystem to ensure for itself.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Green Washing, Impacts, Claims, Trust

Introduction

Sustainability is not just word in a dictionary, but a buzz word in the tourism and hospitality businesses. When we make efforts to understand sustainability in the domain of tourism, sustainability certification becomes an important facet that has been the not unique, but a critical part of the business. As mentioned by Rakesh Mathur (Mathur, 2025), President, Responsible Tourism Society of India (<https://rtsoi.org>), “Sustainability certification in Tourism is a mandate today, considering the fact that the tourism ecosystem was to have a quality assessment about the service offerings and the impacts that tourism and hospitality have on the industry, the community, it becomes pertinent that certification should be looked with a deeper lens and detail, which will enable an understanding of the certification mechanism and yes, the negative aspect of ‘green washing’ that has unfortunately gone beyond the imagination of anyone in the business.” Certification is defined as “a process that assesses, monitors, and even gives written assurances that a business, product, process, or service conforms, to a set of standards and in

most cases, compliance of the norms is rewarded with a selective logo once the assessments are done in a voluntary fashion (Honey, 2002).”

With an ever increasing number of ecotourism destinations, it would be a task to ensure certification at the international level, and promote ‘green’ tourism through certification. With a multitude of tourism products, the ambition of having certification programs that will dissect all the ecotourism scenarios, is a question that any administrator will ponder. The question about criterion, that too a global one, to be accepted by all the stakeholders, is something that any tourism and hospitality professional would like to pause and ponder. The idea of having localized accreditation bodies, who would gauge the requirements and juxtapose with the certification requirements is worth an effort. Another facet that should be noted, is that certifications do not come for free, there is an investment from the stakeholders to ensure a qualification for the certifications that one would apply for, receive the certification, and amplify the same for better business and yes, protection and conservation of the ecological resources.

The ISEAL alliance is a global organization that has made efforts to ensure transparent sustainable systems with benchmarks that are accepted by the tourism ecosystem. Peeling (2021) confers to the fact that, the alliance works at the national, sub-national and ground levels, to augment a qualitative approach in the certification mechanism. The idea of evolving and developing deforestation-free supply chains, ensuring workers’ rights, promoting gender equality, supporting regenerative agriculture or managing climate and water risks have been considered as important for they directly support the very facet of conservation and protection of the ecosystem that is very much required for the tourism products to be evolved successfully.

Research Methodology

The study has been undertaken by the authors to ensure an understanding and proliferation of the thoughts towards understanding and stemming the ironic growth of green washing in the domain of sustainability certifications in tourism, and hospitality domain.

Objective

Primary objective is to ensure a conversation and the creation of a narrative that will uphold the uniqueness of the eco labeling and certification in the realm of green washing and how to avoid the same. The single purpose of the study is to ensure availability of information inputs that will help in assuaging thoughts and creating a feed forward mechanism for the tourism ecosystem that has got to the negative functioning of green washing.

Data Collation

Though the subject of green washing has been there for more than a decade, there are no data points to ascertain the uniqueness of the scenario. The authors efforts is to create a deep-dive effort and ensure an understanding through informal interaction with tourism ecosystems functionaries and enable a thought process that will usher in an interest which will take the practitioners and academics to further working on the subject line.

Literature Review

Though the subject has been dealt with at the international level, the dearth of information in the form of research papers, and texts is a lag. Global Organizations like the United Nations and other organizations working towards climate change too have contributed to the thought process through articles and write-ups, which are generic in nature, but create an attribute that will help the planners to administer better. Climate Action (n.d.) in its thought provoking green washing, the deceptive

tactics behind environmental claims has put forward a multitude of thought that augur well for the understanding. Swarna et al., (2023) focusing on sustainability certifications for tourism, travel, hospitality and the Indian industry response, have argued to the impacts of green washing, which is has been appreciated. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) speaks about the fact that when an organization creates the impression of sustainability through false statement or misleading claims, it tantamount to green washing (FSC, 2024). Though lot of thought articles are available, there are dearth of text books or reference books that hamper a narrative.

The Green Washing conundrum

Sustainability certifications have had wider ramifications, on account of the legal connotations that that have been created across the world. For sustainability benchmarks, the European Union (EU) offers a strong platform with the adoption of new rules on green certification. According to a dossier by Ernst and Young (EY, 2024), the EU introduced (12th March 2024) these rules to combat false or misleading environmental claims, referred to as “green washing.” These measures aim to curb companies from falsely marketing their products and services as environmentally friendly. The EU Green Claims Directive (GCD) mandates that businesses conducting explicit environmental claims undergo rigorous assessments and provide supporting documentation. This directive seeks to prevent deceptive advertising from obstructing the green transition. Under the GCD, only businesses that can verify their environmental claims will benefit commercially from green labeling.

With the rise of green washing, there is growing speculation about their global impact. Many stakeholders now question how these new rules will shape the future of sustainability certification worldwide (Swarna, et al., 2025). Climate Change (n.d.,) states, green washing undermines credible efforts to reduce emissions and address the climate crisis. Through deceptive marketing and false claims of sustainability, green washing misleads consumers, investors, and the public, hampering the trust, ambition, and action needed to bring about global change and secure a sustainable planet.

Authoring the Planet Tracker report Willis et al., (2023), found it disturbing and inform that green washing appeared to have become increasingly sophisticated across the globe. The report mentions that the best of communications and marketing minds are put to use by the corporates and highlight the fact that green washing has now branched into various definitions which is alarming (Table 1), in fact it has become a concerted effort to ensure green washing is avoided. Willis et al., (2023) speak about (i) Green Crowding (to avoid discovery of any aspect that is hidden); (ii) Green Lighting (ensuring false publicity of the achievements and cover up on the environmental losses); (iii) Green shifting (idea of shifting blame); (iv) Green labelling (misleading the stakeholders and customers, which aspects not achieved); (v) Green rinsing (bringing in changes at every milestone, when there are no changes to record), and (vi) Green hushing (under reporting, and keeping data away from the view of the stakeholders) which have become the leading lights to the totality of green washing as a syndrome that is being adopted by the stakeholders in an unabashed manner. In fact, the tourism ecosystem flaunts the certification, as if to prove a point to the customers, the government, and the non-governmental sector.

Mahadevan Parasuraman (Parasuraman, 2025) the Regional Coordinator (South Asia) for Green Destinations (<https://www.greendestinations.org>) states that “Green washing is not a reality, but has existed over a period of time. There are tourism and hospitality businesses to get certified and ecolabelled on a few aspects, but start to promote and ensure an identification for other nuances of sustainability, which they may not be entitled for. This becomes misleading for the very business of sustainability, and there is a question mark and an element of suspicion in the minds of the tourists, and the organizations that market the products and service offerings.” A Professor of tourism in a

Central University, who wanted to remain anonymous mentioned, “Green washing, that has been practiced by some of the business entities in tourism and hospitality has led to all being brandished as organizations which are having ‘cheat sheets’ which enable a business conversion though they are not entitled. It is this that needs to be stopped. Besides, in 2025 once the European Union (EU), which creates laws and rules to ensure acceptance and abidance, brought a halt to the certification mechanism, leading to the withdrawal of a multitude of eco labels and certifying entities across the world and their certifications, led to a lull in the practice of certifications. 2026 would be a year to watch out for the new breed of certifications that would have to come and ensure and engagement, a conversation with the tourism and hospitality ecosystem. It can be said that green washing has eroded the consumer trust, ensured no genuine climate change actions, regulatory fines (as applicable), and even reputational damage to the tourism product, leading to a suspicion on the front of eco labeling and sustainability certifications” Paras Prakash (Prakash, 2025) a Convener of RTSOI in Himachal Pradesh, states, RTSOI no doubt adopted the ‘self-certification’ mandate, where the tourism and hospitality organization gets an accreditation from RTSOI and is able to market the property as a sustainable entity. A few have already got certified which ensures that there is a traction and further enablement of the certification and eco labeling. But with the spectre of green washing looming on the business, it is clear that there is a clarion call to ensure a qualitative construct that will help the tourism and hospitality business to develop systems that are robust and beyond suspicion. However, time is the essence, and it will tell.”

The researchers who have been working in the domain of certification for the past ten-years and collaborated at the global level have this to say. The implications of green washing are phenomenal, and if they are not arrested right away, the issues will bleed the tourism and hospitality and bring it to a standstill. Some of the finer aspects that have led to green washing creating an abyss for the tourism and hospitality are as follow:

- Trust and reputation of the organizations: the customers and collaborators of the organization selling tourism and hospitality products and services will ensure that the products are not purchased or sold leading to a fall in business.
- Genuine efforts get undermined: though there are lot of entities which work towards to genuine certification and also implement and the schemes that are relevant to the certifications, their efforts get undermined on account of a few who have enabled the cancer of green washing to come up.
- Environmental harm to tourism: it is plausible that adoption of measures that actually have no impact or simply put, post certification nothing is being done with the tourism and hospitality products, which ensure adequate harm to environment. This needs to be adhered. An Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer, who wanted to remain anonymous commented, “Ecotourism needs certification, but the way it is marketed once the organizations receive certifications is something that one needs to watch out for. In a way it can said, there is more harm to the environment that good happening.”
- Scrutiny from regulatory bodies: Once there is scrutiny from legal and regulatory bodies, this leads an unending legal connotations, which will further hamper the issues for the service providers and one needs to watch out for the same. The issue of ethics and corporate governance comes up, which needs to be tackled, and regions like the EU, which have mandated the certifications, and which is being applied globally will further accentuate the question of eco labeling.

The United Nations (UN) too has come out scathingly towards green washing, for it represents a significant obstacle to tackling climate change. By misleading the public to believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it actually does. Green washing promotes false

solutions to the climate crisis that distract from and delay concrete if not credible action (Climate Action, n.d.). The UN leadership clearly articulates the fact that organizations promoting any kind of sustainability, and sustainable certifications, should focus on the ‘Planet’ over ‘profit’; and if green washing is to be eliminated, then the genuine facet of managing green washing should be endured, in a more compliant manner.

Conclusion

Karthik Davey, of Dholes Den (<https://dholesden.com>), near the periphery of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve (BTR) in Karnataka, states, “sustainability is a lifestyle and not an act for a purpose, certification helps in attaining a leverage, but then those who are into green washing simply waste an opportunity to contribute towards climate change through the tourism ecosystem and earn a bad for everyone in the business. Whilst I wanted to promote green tourism through certification, I had to infuse capital and ensure the systems are in place. And for this, we need to optimistically speak about green tourism, rather than green washing, which enable many opportunities.”

What can be done more to arrest the green washing syndrome. Climate Action (n.d.) has the answers which could have to be understood well.

- Learn more: as a consumer, understanding the common green washing tactics is critical. One needs to look out for sustainable practices, products, and services which is crucial to recognize and avoid green washing.
- Look out for openness and accountability: it is often hard to know if companies are on track to meet their net zero commitments, and the absence of standardized and comparable data makes it hard to assess progress.
- Usability in marketing: certifications should ensure that it helps the organizations to get the best of the certifications are meant for, which will further enable the customers (visitors/tourists) and the tourism ecosystem to benefit from

Green washing came about on account of competition, and it should be washed away such that one can easily ensure a success in the field of sustainability and sustainability certification.

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