

“We Cannot Love Nature to Death”

An evaluation of the implementation of Nature’s Best ecotourism certification in Sweden

Louis Eberstål

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Lund University Centre for
Sustainability Studies



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Abstract

Ecotourism is the concept of travelling responsibly to natural areas where the environment and the well-being of the local people are sustained, where the economic profit is reinvested in the area and where knowledge is communicated to decrease visitor impact and maintain the local environment. Ecotourism is the fastest growing segment of the global tourism industry and therefore it is important to have an efficient implementation strategy so that it can realize its full potential and thus prevent tourism from degrading the nature it depends on.

The general aim of this study is to understand the process of transforming ecotourism theory into practice. More specifically this thesis studies the implementation of the Swedish ecotourism certification, Nature's Best, from theory to practice, by examining the process of adoption and implementation by five certified ecotourism operators. The research design is based on mixed-methods, as a document analysis was used to analyze the criteria of the certification, and semi-structured qualitative interviews were performed to investigate the implementation strategy among the operators.

The results of this study show that Nature's Best acts as a mechanism for the transfer of knowledge about the principles of ecotourism and how to implement these principles in practice. The study finds that the less experienced operators use the certification process and criteria to transition their business into more sustainable practices, while the more experienced operators use the certification as a quality-marker for their sustainability work. Once certified, the operators transfer their knowledge to the visitors as they discuss sustainability in relation to the local nature, where sustainability related topics are discussed in innovative ways using relatable examples. By creating a positive experience of nature, the goal of ecotourism is to develop interest and respect for nature among the tourists which has the potential to encourage pro-environmental behavior. However, several of the operators within this study argue that systems structures, time-constraints and lack of awareness hinders the potential of ecotourism, as they are limited in their ability to decrease the direct and indirect negative impacts on the environment related to tourism in general, such as transportation.

Keywords: nature conservation, sustainable tourism, sustainable development strategy, knowledge transfer, voluntary governance mechanism, rural development

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Abbreviations

NB – Nature's Best

SEA - The Swedish Ecotourism Association

SEPA - The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

STC – The Swedish Tourism Council

TIES – The International Tourism Society

UN – The United Nations

UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme

UNWTO – United Nations World Tourism Organization

WWF - World Wildlife Fund

1. Introduction

“With more than one billion international tourists now traveling the world each year, tourism has become a powerful and transformative force that is making a genuine difference in the lives of millions of people. The potential of tourism for sustainable development is considerable. As one of the world’s leading employment sectors, tourism provides important livelihood opportunities, helping to alleviate poverty and drive inclusive development...” - Ban Ki-moon (2015)

This introductory statement was made by the former general-secretary of the United Nations, when he declared 2017 to be ‘The International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development’. By putting tourism on the agenda, UN aims to inspire policy changes regarding practices and consumption (UNWTO, 2017). UN (2017) envision sustainable tourism as an instrument to promote development through inclusive and resilience-building practices that empower local communities and promotes cultural diversity and traditions. Thus, breaking down barriers between the visitors and the hosts and to increase the awareness of tourism impacts.

Including sustainability aspects in the tourism sector is pressing, as it is one of the largest and most rapidly growing sectors in the world (UNWTO, 2016). In 2015 over 1.1 billion individual travels were made and it is estimated to reach 1.8 billion in 2030: with a total of 10 percent of the global GDP as well (UNWTO, 2016). Tourism is also ranked third as a global export category, after fuels and chemicals (UNWTO, 2016), adding pressure to the environment both locally and globally. Tourism can bring negative impacts on the environment in form of pollution of air and water, land use changes, degrading ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, but also negative social and economic impacts for the local communities, degrading cultural heritage, and causing conflicts of interest (Hanneberg, 1996).

Demand for sustainable tourism is increasing; more than a third of travelers prefer environmentally friendly tourism and are willing to pay more for this experience (UNEP, 2011). Ecotourism is one model of sustainable tourism. It entails travelling responsibly to natural areas where the environment and the well-being of the local people is sustained, where the economic profit is reinvested locally and where knowledge is communicated to decrease visitor impacts and maintain the local environment (Hill & Gale, 2009). If ecotourism is successfully implemented and the knowledge of ecotourism is transferred, it can be a feasible tool to change local practices and inspire change of consumption and policies, in line with UN’s targets for the International Year for Sustainable Tourism (UNWTO, 2017).

In this study, I investigate the Swedish ecotourism certification scheme known as Nature's Best, as an example of a concrete attempt to utilize ecotourism in practice as a means to contribute to sustainable development of tourism. In Sweden, tourism is one of the biggest export sectors (Tillväxtverket, 2016a) which highlights the urgent need to include the aspect of sustainability in the sector's further development. Current studies of ecotourism have mainly focused on the global south, but it is equally important to study in the global north. It is important to study the issue in the context it is situated in, to understand the problem in depth and learn from it. This study is appropriate to conduct in Sweden, as it is one of the leading countries of environmental performance (YCELP, 2016), the assumption being that if ecotourism does not work as it is meant to do in Sweden then it is less likely to work as it is meant to in other contexts. Therefore, this study aims to study the implementation of ecotourism in a Swedish context to understand the process of transforming ecotourism theory into practice, as well as identifying potential barriers and suggest ways of addressing those potential challenges.

1.1 Problem Formulation

It is important to include dimensions of social, economic and environmental sustainability into nature-based tourism, to plan for natural areas and not solely in them (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2013). The environmental impacts of tourism can be divided into direct and indirect impacts. Direct impacts are connected to the footprint that the operator and tourists leave at the destination, for example littering (Hanneberg, 1996). Indirect impacts are connected to transportation and consumption of products and goods, contributing to climate change and contamination of water and land (Hanneberg, 1996). Ecotourism is a practice that has the potential to alleviate current environmental problems, conserve natural- and cultural values, help sustain communities in rural areas and promote sustainable development for those places not protected by National parks (Hanneberg, 1996). National ecotourism organizations, such as the Nature's Best in Sweden, offers tourism businesses (*operators* henceforth) a set of standards and guidelines (*criteria*) that the operators must implement into the management of their destination, to be certified as an ecotourism operator. To reach the true potential of ecotourism, it is important to have an effective implementation strategy to transfer knowledge of ecotourism principles, so that the certification is fulfilling the set standards. But ecotourism needs willing operators and tourists, so information about ecotourism first needs to be communicated, and secondly to attract and educate tourist. Educating visitors can form a support for the environment and ecotourism, encouraging the operator to continue their work for sustainable practices (Hill & Gale, 2009; Marion & Reid, 2007).

1.2 Research Questions and Aim

To investigate the implementation and knowledge transfer of ecotourism this study is based upon a multiple case study, where the criteria of the Swedish certification for ecotourism, Nature's Best is studied from theory to practice. The aim of this thesis is to understand the process of transforming ecotourism theory into practice, including the barriers and opportunities experienced by ecotourism practitioners and find suggestions for how to address them.

Overarching research question

- How is the theory of ecotourism translated into the management of a tourism operator?

Sub-questions

- How does the criteria of the Swedish ecotourism certification, Nature's Best, represent the principles of ecotourism?
- How have ecotourism operators implemented the Nature's Best criteria into their businesses, and what challenges and opportunities has the certification brought to them?
- How is the knowledge of ecotourism transferred, from Nature's Best to the operator, and from the operator to the visitor?
- How can the adoption and implementation of the certification be improved?

1.3 Connections to Sustainability Science

Understanding the interaction between nature and society is a core concern of sustainability science (Kates et al., 2001). This study on ecotourism can therefore contribute to an understanding of social, ecological and economic characteristics of a specific place and sector, and make the knowledge accessible to both science and society. This helps to justify the topic for this study, as the aim is to investigate the process of transforming ecotourism theory into practice, locating the challenges and possibilities, to contribute to an improved certification and possibly a tool inspiring for sustainable development of tourist destinations.

Sustainable development as a concept or goal infers to that while we develop means for people, the economy and society, we also need to sustain the life-support systems of Earth (Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005). Sustainable tourism has been suggested as a promising tool contributing to sustainable development as it aims to help conserve nature and promote social wellbeing (UNWTO, 2015). Sustainability science is fundamentally connected with sustainable development, and as

ecotourism has been argued to be a mechanism instigating for sustainable development (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015), thus ecotourism is of fundamental interest to sustainability science.

The results of this study can help to strengthen the potential for ecotourism and initiate a social learning process of how ecotourism can contribute to sustainable tourism. In line with sustainability science this study is critical and problem-driven (Jerneck et al., 2011): with the aim to understand the process of transforming ecotourism theory into practice. The real challenge for the success of sustainability work is not the science itself, it is the implementation of the knowledge to solve the environment- and development challenges (Kates, 2011). Therefore, it is of high interest to study how ecotourism can be utilized for social change and a strategy to shape the environment as the practice of ecotourism aims to do (Hill & Gale, 2009; Marion & Reid, 2007).

2. Background and Theoretical Foundation

In this chapter I provide you with the theoretical foundation needed to fully comprehend the topic and purpose of this thesis. Starting with an introduction to ecotourism, and how certifications can be used as a voluntary governance mechanism. Furthermore, information about how ecotourism can be used to conserve nature, as well as how it can be utilized as an alternative development strategy is presented. As this thesis focuses on how the theory of ecotourism is transferred to practice, I present theory suggesting how information best is communicated in the context of tourism. Lastly, critique against ecotourism is presented.

2.1 Ecotourism

A global environmental movement to change the conventional tourism industry started in the 1990's and ecotourism was introduced as a practice (Honey, 2002, p1-8). In 1991, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) took charge and established international principles for ecotourism. Ecotourism focus on: "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015). Thus, ecotourism can be defined by: small scale, regional development, cultural- and environmental sustainable and community participation (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015, p57). According to TIES (2015), ecotourism aims to combine conservation, communities and sustainable travel, and those who implement the theory and practice of ecotourism should take on the following principles:

- Minimize physical, social and behavioral impacts
- Establish cultural and environmental awareness and respect
- Provide quality experiences for visitors
- Provide financial resources for conservation
- Generate financial benefits for the community
- Deliver memorable and informative experiences to visitors to help raise awareness and form respect for the host community and the environment
- Adopt and operate low-impact facilities
- Cooperate and value the rights and spiritual beliefs of the local people to create empowerment

2.2 Certification – Voluntary Governance Mechanism

National ecotourism associations are responsible for the ecotourism certification within their own country. Where national established criteria set the standard for the certification. Certifications can be a tool to inspire transformation, a voluntary governance mechanism to meet or balance the needs and interests of different stakeholders without involvement of the government (Honey, 2002, p50-53). The definition of certification within the tourism industry is a program that audits and reassures if a facility, management system, service, process or product meets the appointed criteria for the factual certification (Honey, 2002, p4-6). Those meeting the standards usually gets awarded with a logo or seal which can act as a quality-marker that adds value to the operator and attract visitors (Honey, 2002, p4-6). Ecotourism regulates the management of tourism operators with the criteria of the certification, where aspects of social-, economic-, and environmental sustainability is incorporated (Tillväxtverket, 2016a) and thus balancing competing interest (Honey, 2002).

2.3 Conserving Nature – from Enclosure to Ecotourism

A common method for nature conservation is to establish national parks or nature reserves to protect valuable nature. To receive formal protection the area needs to be of national interest, which means that the nature needs to be relatively untouched and host a wide range of biodiversity, or host one or several species that are of specific value (SEPA, 2005). The aim is to protect and conserve areas that are representative of Swedish nature (SEPA, 2005). The first nine national parks in Sweden were established in 1909, nowadays there are 29 national parks protecting 1.6 percent of land area (SEPA, n.d.) In addition, 10 percent of the Swedish land area is protected in the form of nature reserves (SEPA, n.d.). Therefore, it is important to find a model or strategy to conserve and protect nature that does not fulfill the criteria for achieving formal protection in the form of national parks or nature reserves.

Tourism can be used as an alternative strategy to protect and conserve nature, that might not be of national interest, but is important for local communities. Ecotourism has been recognized as an effective tool for environmental conservation by several researchers in the field of sustainable tourism (Buckley, Morrison, & Castley, 2016; Gössling, 1999; Hellmark, 2004). By inviting tourists to an area where the nature is displayed and creating economic value, which can reduce the incentive to exploit (Hanneberg, 1996; Hellmark, 2004). For example, in the Borneo rainforest ecotourism in form of safaris and volunteer projects are used to deter against deforestation and illegal poaching to preserve the rainforest and ecosystems within it (Earth911.com, 2016).

2.4 Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

Tourism can contribute to stable local economy, helping sustain communities and develop infrastructure (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997, p40-41). However, it is important to implement a sustainable form of tourism, so that tourism does not bring negative social, economic and environmental impacts upon the area (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997, p41-44).

Broadly, development is: “synonymous with progress, implying positive transformation or good change” (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015, p19). Ecotourism promotes less dependence on technology, where operators are expected to go back to the basics (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015, p185-188), downscale production and consumption as a form of de-growth model (Schneider, Kallis, & Martinez-Alier, 2010). As an alternative development strategy, ecotourism promotes development that is driven by the destination’s needs and resources in cooperation with external actors (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015, p185-188). Ecotourism is promoting the traditional practices where you work within the social- and ecological carrying capacity (Hanneberg, 1996; Hellmark, 2004). Making ecotourism a potential development strategy to reach sustainable development of tourism destinations (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015).

In the global north ecotourism can be used as a protection to conserve nature but also as a tool to promote rural development. Tourism is especially important to sustain livelihood in rural areas, where few job opportunities are provided (Fredman, Wall Reinius, & Lundberg, 2009; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Ecotourism, which supports local ownership and communal management can promote sustainable development in poor communities, making the society less vulnerable and simultaneously protecting the ecosystems (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015, p185-202). To make the concept and principles of ecotourism tangible to implement, national ecotourism organizations offers established certification schemes.

2.5 Knowledge Transfer

By experiencing a positive visit in nature, it is likely that visitors form an interest for nature, resulting in an increased environmental awareness (Sandell & Sörlin, 2008, p.225-237). Educating visitors can form a support for the environment and ecotourism, but it can also bring increased satisfaction to the visitors (Hill & Gale, 2009; Marion & Reid, 2007). For the tour-guides and managers within ecotourism to be able to share knowledge to visitors, they themselves first need to gain the necessary knowledge. Regarding both the theory of ecotourism and how to practically implement ecotourism in their

business, as well as knowledge about local natural- and cultural values (Newsome et al., 2013): It is critical to see how a natural area fits in to the bigger context to understand how and why you should protect the resources (Newsome et al., 2013). A study done in Hong Kong, investigated how effective this pro-environmental training is considering changing knowledge and attitudes of the tour guides and interpreters in order for them to be able to effectively conduct high quality tours (Cheung & Fok, 2014). The study shows that the participants knowledge significantly improved and that their attitudes and behavior became more environmental responsible (Cheung & Fok, 2014), thus educating the operators is essential when implementing ecotourism.

Nature has a great potential to be used as a classroom for educating visitors. A previous study conducted at the Galapagos Islands shows that ecotourism can be used as a tool to increase both site-based knowledge and influence pro-conservation attitudes (Powell & Ham, 2008). The study argues that well-planned ecotourism can build support for conservation by connecting tourists to nature and in the end, contribute to more sustainable tourism (Powell & Ham, 2008).

According to Moscardo (1999) some principles should be followed to communicate information effectively to the visitors. The operator needs to get the visitors attention, this is best made by participative exercises and a dialogue, where it is important that the visitor understands the information communicated, to increase acceptance (Moscardo, 1999, p59-71). Moscardo (1999, p83-94) argues that the most effective way to communicate information is with storytelling where the visitor's interest is combined with good and relatable examples connected to the local context, information should not be presented as isolated facts. According to Moscardo (1999, p4-18), well communicated information can contribute to sustainable tourism by enhancing the experienced quality of the visit, strengthening the interest for nature-based tourism, decreasing the direct negative environmental impacts from visitors, as well as assisting and empowering the operator to continue with their sustainability work.

2.6 Critique Against Ecotourism

Naturally, there are risks with ecotourism and critique against it. As it is a practice within nature-based tourism the biggest risk is that it will degrade the environment that it depends on (Hanneberg, 1996). Therefore it has been argued that knowledge is the most central component of ecotourism, knowledge of the ecosystems and how to conserve and protect them (Hanneberg, 1996). According to Hanneberg (1996) there is a risk that ecotourism can cause conflicts of interest between the locals and the tourists. For example there has been conflicts on the Galapagos Islands where the local fishermen have been

repressed by the visitors interest for recreational fishery (Hanneberg, 1996). Therefore, it is important to empower local people and value their interest in the implementation process and in the management (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015, p193-195). Balance between the social, environmental and economic aspects of the business is also important, where one cannot be more valued than the other, otherwise ecotourism will only have short-term benefits (Hanneberg, 1996; Sharpley & Telfer, 2015). For example, too much focus on profit can lead to unhealthy expansions of the facilities and increased numbers of tourists, which will increase the negative impacts on the environmental (Hanneberg, 1996). Responsible implementation and management is crucial to form a good ground for the practice.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the research design for this study is discussed. Followed by a description of the mixed-methods applied in this study, where document analysis and semi-structured interviews was used. I then describe how the analysis of the results was conducted and lastly, I discuss the limitations of this study.

3.1 Research Design

For this study, it is necessary to perform a case study, as the aim understand the process of transforming ecotourism theory into practice and how the knowledge is transferred among the actors; Nature's Best, the operators, and the visitors. This is a topic that only can be studied in a real-world context through a case study, where the certification has been translated and operationalized (Yin, 2014, p2-23). Practical context-dependent knowledge is important to obtain a higher level of understanding for a context, this understanding provides a basis for theoretical generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The general approach for the analysis is abductive, as it is driven by the mystery behind the certification and the material is collected and broken down to solve the mystery (Brinkmann, 2014). The goal is not to find universal knowledge but to find the logic in the specific context, based on one's understanding (Brinkmann, 2014).

3.2 Methods

First, the criteria of the certification scheme, Nature's Best, were analyzed with a document analysis to understand the theory of the Swedish ecotourism certification (see 3.2.1). Secondly, a preparatory interview was conducted to complement and confirm the document analysis (see 3.2.2). Thirdly, operators currently holding the certification were interviewed to study the implementation strategy and the translation of the principles in practice (see 3.2.3).

3.2.1 Document Analysis

The criteria of Nature's Best were studied to fully understand how they are structured and what content the criteria includes. This was carried out through a document analysis of two documents. First, the criteria document from 2005: 'Nature's Best – A Swedish quality marking for environmentally friendly experiences in nature' (The Swedish Ecotourism Association, 2005). Second, the report of the

pre-study that was conducted by Per Jiborn before the certification was implemented, mandated by the Swedish Ecotourism Association (2001). The documents were obtained on Nature's Best's webpage¹. During the evaluation of these two documents, the principles for ecotourism (see Chapter 2.1) and the critique towards ecotourism (see Chapter 2.6) was considered to see how the Nature's Best represents the theory of ecotourism. From an evaluation of these documents an understanding was formed around: 1) how it was created, 2) how the criteria are structured into different levels and groups, 3) what topics and issues the criterion covers 4) how it represents ecotourism theory.

3.2.2 Preparatory Interview

According to Bryman (2012, p554-556) data obtained from documents should be validated with data from other sources, such as interviews to compare if the reality described in the documents coincide with the reality in the context you aim to understand. A preparatory interview was therefore conducted with an expert on ecotourism and Nature's Best, Per Jiborn, the general secretary of Nature's Best. The information from the interview complements and confirms information obtained through the document analysis. Jiborn supplied information about how and why Nature's Best was introduced and discussed the limitations for the certification. The interview was conducted via telephone February 14th, 2017.

3.2.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Since there only is one certification for ecotourism in Sweden, it came natural to study the certification scheme of Nature's Best. In total 77 operators carry the NB certification. To find suitable cases for this study, I contacted 16 operators that were active with land-based tourism during the winter of 2016/2017, and the spring of 2017. Of the 16 operators I contacted, five companies answered and agreed to participate in the study. Nine operators declined the offer and the remaining two operators did not reply. The operators will be fully introduced in Chapter 4.3. For contact list see Appendix 1.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the operators to understand how the theory of ecotourism is implemented in practice. An interview-guide was constructed before the interview (see Appendix 2) to ensure consistency and credibility (Bryman, 2012, p389-393). However, follow-up questions were not excluded as they could bring more depth to the interview (Bryman, 2012, p471-

¹ Nature's Best – This is Nature's Best: <http://www.naturesbasta.se/nb/grundprinciper.asp>

472). Bryman's recommendations for how to construct interviews were considered before the questions were formed, and the most important questions were placed first, the questions were easy to understand and the questions were not too tiring (Bryman, 2012, p472-479). I also made sure that the respondent was informed about the purpose of the study before the interview started and they were ensured that the interview was voluntary.

The interviews were conducted over the telephone and recorded to simplify the data collection. To construct the validity of this study the informants were asked to review a draft of the transcription of the interview (Yin, 2014, p45-49). The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish. Excel was used to structure and analyze the data obtained in the interviews. First, the data was structured under the questions that were asked (see Appendix 2 for interview-guide). Secondly, the data was structured under categories of discussion-topics that were frequently brought up in the interviews, such as: marketing, quality-marker, guidance, knowledge, knowledge transfer, information, criteria, implementation process, challenges, dialogue, capacity, respect, rural development, commercial tourism, and more.

3.3 Limitations

Several implications could have limited my ability to understand the case. I was denied access to the template of the steering-document that is supplied to the operators when they buy the start-package. The denied access to this private document could influence the credibility of the data obtained from the cases as the personal information from the interviews could not be compared to the actual reality. This makes the comparison of the data from the criteria document and the personal information even more important, to ensure the validity of the study. Furthermore, the interviews were limited by time, as the respondents wanted the interview to be conducted in around 30 minutes, therefore I made sure that the most important questions were asked first, but I am aware that this could have influenced the depth of the information received. These implications were considered to make sure that the study is investigating the issue that it aimed to do.

4. Case Context: Swedish Ecotourism and the Nature's Best

In this chapter, you will get a brief introduction to the Swedish tourism sector, followed by an introduction to Nature's Best. Lastly, the five operators chosen for this case study will be introduced.

4.1 The Swedish Tourism Sector

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA, 2010) points out that Sweden is a particularly attractive country for nature-based tourism because of the wide range of unique natural features not found in many other European countries. Nature-based tourism, is according to researchers at the European Tourism Research Institute regarded to be important for Swedish tourism and has a big influence on Sweden's image (Fredman et al., 2009). In 2015, 60 million stay-overs were counted of which 44.9 percent was domestic stay-overs (Tillväxtverket, 2016a).

A challenge for the tourism industry is the complexity of different stakeholders and decision-makers (Tillväxtverket, 2016b). Tourism is not one separate sector, it includes many different sectors and actors; private and public actors, different governmental actors and councils, municipalities, and organizations (Tillväxtverket, 2016b): thus, it can be hard to form consensus for measures needed to reach a more sustainable sector. However, the government has recently acknowledged the importance of nature-based tourism for rural development and as a national interest to attract international visitors (SEA, 2017). The government has proposed to decrease value-added taxes on guided tours in nature-based tourism from 25- to 6 percent in the next national budget, 2018 (SEA, 2017). However, the tax-reduction is not explicit for operators within any sustainable practice of tourism.

4.2 Nature's Best – The Swedish Certification for Ecotourism

Led by the Swedish World Wildlife Fund, the Swedish Ecotourism Association (SEA) was established in 1996 (SEA & STC, 2002b): to inspire a change in tourism and introduce a certification for ecotourism in Sweden (SEA & Jiborn, 2001). Just in time for UN's year of ecotourism in 2002, SEA conducted a pre-study to develop a certification for ecotourism (SEA & Jiborn, 2001). The purpose of the study was to explore pre-conditions and possibilities for implementing ecotourism in Sweden. The aim was to find sustainable solutions for the problems that conventional tourism brings, with the goal to give nature a monetary value that could protect local nature and culture, and inspire for more sustainable tourism (SEA & Jiborn, 2001).

It was decided that the product that the tourists are buying, the activities and tours are the unit that should be certified, but the operator that produces the product also needs to be approved. It was set to be a cost-effective certification as the sector involves many smaller businesses with limited resources, where it also could be a marketing opportunity for the certified members (SEA & Jiborn, 2001). In 2002, the SEA introduced the Swedish certification scheme 'Nature's Best' (NB), with the aim to increase the quality on, and increase the volume of Swedish Ecotourism (SEA & STC, 2002a). The goal is to inspire the tourism industry to develop environmentally adapted and locally anchored arrangements with a high quality (SEA, 2005). NB focus on rural tourism businesses, giving them an advantage against bigger tourism businesses to provide financial resources and stimulus to conserve nature, and to maintain rural development and job opportunities (SEA & STC, 2002b). As of the writing time of this thesis in 2017, NB has 77 certified members all over Sweden with 150 certified tours (Nature's Best, n.d.).

4.3 The Cases where Nature's Best is Evaluated

The cases chosen for this study represents five of the 16 active nature-based operators during the winter/spring season of 2016/2017, certified by NB. Five operators that differ regarding geographical location (see Figure 1, next page), size of the business, the time they have been certified but also the type of tours or activities that they offer. The cases are:

Case 1 – STF Abisko Mountain Station. An operator located in the most northern province in Sweden, Lappland. STF Abisko has been certified since 2009 and offers a Northern-light experience on the nearby mountain, operating within a National Park. This operator is a part of a bigger chain of hostels, as well as it is a bigger operator considering the number of employees, with 20 full-time employees and 80 seasonal workers in the high season.

Case 2 – ResKlara. An operator located on the High Coast in Västernorrland County, that has been certified since 2010. The operator is offering a hiking-package within the UNESCO World Heritage site, the High Coast, in collaboration with multiple Bed and Breakfast facilities along the trail.

Case 3 – Sweden Husky Tours. A dogsledding company in Hälsingland county, who offers two types of guided husky-tours. The operator has been certified since 2016.

Case 4 – Ulvsbomuren Wildness- and Farm-life. An operator that offers a wildness and country-life experience in Västmanland County. The operator has been certified since 2013 and are offering the farm-life experience, with mushroom-picking in the fall and skiing tours in the winter.

Case 5 – Urnatur. An operator located in Östergötland County, where the founder was included in the start-up of NB certification scheme. The operator has been certified since 2008 and are offering the experience to stay in their timber-and tree-houses, take a swim in the lake or hike within the forest.



Figure 1. A Map Displaying the Operators' Location

5. Results: The Principles and Structure of Ecotourism within Nature's Best

In this chapter I present the theory of ecotourism within the example of the Swedish ecotourism certification, Nature's Best. Information gathered from the document analysis, with a focus on answering the questions of 1) how Nature's Best was created, 2) how the criteria are structured, 3) what topics and issues the criteria covers, and 4) how they are linked to ecotourism theory.

5.1 The Logic of Nature's Best

The NB's criteria document was introduced in 2002. Since SEA recognize the need to be flexible based on changing contexts, the criteria was updated in 2005 (SEA, 2005). It was supposed to be revised and updated a second time in 2010, but due to a heavy work load and lack of resources this have not been done, says Per Jiborn, the general secretary of NB, in an interview (Jiborn, personal communication). When the certification was introduced in 2002, the staff consisted of five people, but since then the staff has decreased due to financial constraints, and from 2014 to 2016 only Jiborn worked for NB. However, in 2017 a new staff member was added to carry the workload together with Jiborn, something that might strengthen the organization and their capacity (Jiborn, personal communication).

When the operators apply for the certification, they pay to get the start package where the application documents are included, but also sources for information, instructions for the application, how to do an environmental plan and a destination-analysis (Jiborn, personal communication). SEA offers a mandatory course for operators before they apply for the certification, that at least one of the key-actors within the management needs to go through to be able to transfer the knowledge to their staff (SEA, 2005). This is supposed to teach the managers what NB is, how sustainable practices of tourism should be implemented and performed and how the knowledge is best communicated to their visitors (Jiborn, personal communication). After the course the operator are free to apply, and SEA audits the operator and their tours. However, Jiborn said that: "Since all the operators are very different the audit of the operators and their tours is more like judging ice-skating and not ice-hockey, it all depends on the circumstances and can vary from case to case" (Jiborn, personal communication). Jiborn pointed out that the criteria are adjusted for the operators and their activities, and that the business is evaluated holistically instead of on a detailed level, as the criteria needs to be considered in the current context (Jiborn, personal communication).

5.2 The Structure of the Criteria

Since 2005, the criteria have been structured into six groups (see 5.3 for criteria content), with 93 basic criteria in total, that needs to be meet both for the operator in general and for the activities. 42 bonus criteria are also divided among the six groups, of which the operator needs to fulfill 25 percent of to be approved (SEA, 2005). The structure of the criteria is visualized in Figure 2, below. For some activities like hunting, fishing and birdwatching special criteria apply. Besides the detailed criteria there are overarching criteria compelling the operators to: work with nature-based tourism characterized by environmental protection and respect, incorporate continuous sustainability work, offer good hosting services, be aware of and to follow current legislation and regulations, and to fulfill the mandatory NB course (SEA, 2005, p11). Since the bonus criteria and the special criteria vary depending on the operator’s activities, this thesis focus on the detailed criteria as these criteria steer the operators how to implement ecotourism principles and are relevant for the cases.

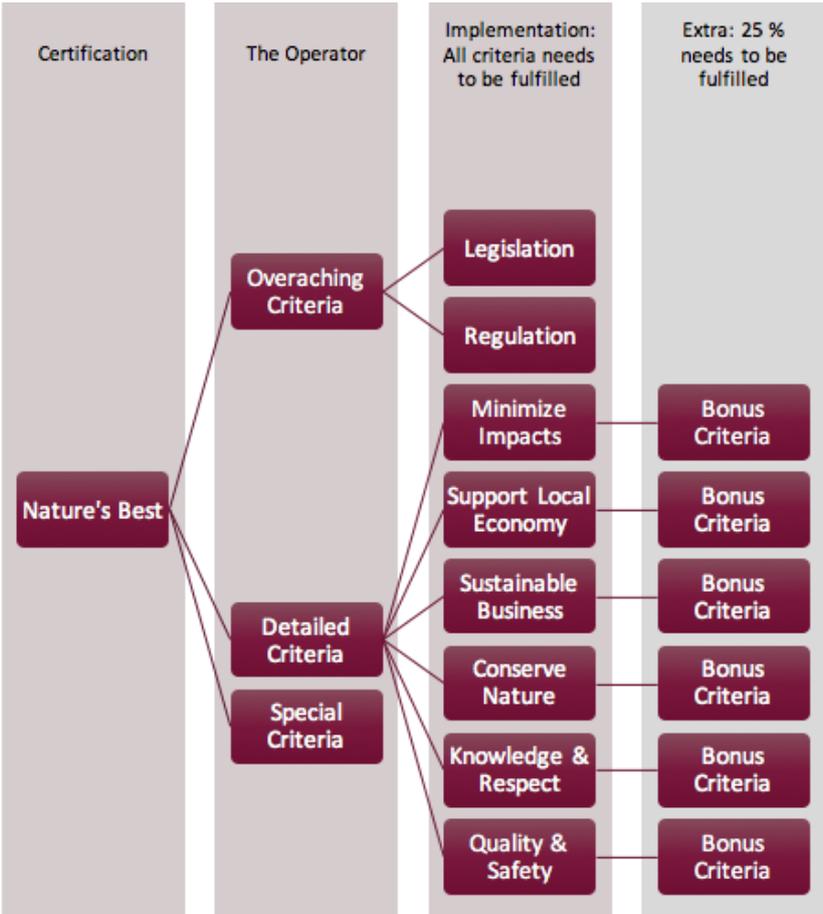


Figure 2. The Structure of the Certification Process and Criteria

5.3 The Content of the Criteria

The detailed criteria for the activities and tours are structured into six groups of criteria (visualized in Figure 2). In this sub-chapter I present what is included into the six groups of criteria and how the principles of ecotourism incorporated within them (SEA, 2005, p13-29):

1. **'Respect the limitations of the destination – minimize the negative impacts on local nature and culture'**. Ecotourism principles focus on minimizing physical, social and environmental impacts, as well as to cooperate and value the rights of the local people to create empowerment (TIES, 2015). This principle is the aim of the first criteria group, adopted by the NB's certification. These criteria include measures that need to be considered to respect and preserve the cultural and ecological systems in the area. To meet these criteria, operators need to have solid knowledge about the area and work closely with other actors. An analysis of the destination, performed by the operator and confirmed in the certification process, should guide how the business is operated. The criteria also state that the sub-contractors need to be informed about the carrying capacity as well as the codes-of-conduct, and a good dialogue needs to be established with the landowners in the area.
2. **'Support the local economy'**. Ecotourism is focused on community development, therefore the values and interests within the community are important to consider to decrease the risk of conflicts of interest (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015), a risk considered in this criteria group. NB criteria offers an opportunity to maintain and provide livelihoods in the community. The criteria states that the operator should buy as many services and products as possible from local businesses, and efforts should be made to promote other local businesses toward the development of the community which is in line with the principles of ecotourism (TIES, 2015).
3. **'Make the business environmentally sustainable'**. To be certified with NB, the operators must set a good example and promote environmental sound excursions and guides. This criteria group is connected to the principles of ecotourism 'to minimize impacts' and to 'adopt and operate low-impact facilities' (TIES, 2015). Internal policies established by the operator should regulate the activities to minimize the environmental impact by always taking the best possible option. This can mean, for example, promoting collective transport, but also to avoiding areas when the flora or fauna is extra vulnerable. The operators should aim to buy ecologic, organic, or other certified products. The operator should also have an environmental plan with a clear sustainability strategy that is published on their webpage or accessible for visitors. The criteria also include concrete goals regarding waste-management, and transportation where collective

transport always should be promoted for the visitors and transportation means on the destination should be minimized.

4. **'Contribute actively to nature and cultural conservation'**. This group involves the responsibility the operators must take to preserve the biodiversity and cultural heritage, and is connected to the principle that ecotourism should combine conservation, communities and sustainable travel (TIES, 2015). This group of criteria is also in line with the ecotourism principle to 'provide financial resources for conservation' (TIES, 2015). This can be done in various ways, but the operators must find a win-win situation, where neither the nature or culture is degraded due to tourism. Indirect support can be given to local environmental protection organizations where the operator also should hold a membership. Direct support must be given to promote conservation and the operator must stay updated regarding the different interest of the area, and work against external threats. Something that also should be communicated to the visitors.
5. **'Promote knowledge and respect and the joy of discovery'**. This criteria group is in line with the ecotourism principle to; 'establish cultural and environmental awareness and respect', and to 'deliver memorable and informative experiences to visitors to help raise awareness and form respect for the host community and the environment' (TIES, 2015). It also considers the risk that tourism activities can degrade the environment (Hanneberg, 1996), and underlines the importance of knowledge to decrease this risk. NB states that respect for nature is built upon knowledge and values, therefore knowledge transfer is a natural part of the criteria. It is stated that good knowledge and guidance is the key to a memorable trip where personal meetings with locals and knowledgeable guides are prioritized. The information that should be communicated includes: local environmental protection regulations, appropriate behavior considering the local nature and culture and the Right of Public Access.
6. **'Quality and safety all the way'**. This group of criteria adopted the principle of ecotourism to 'provide quality experiences for the visitors' (TIES, 2015). Ensuring the quality of the visit and meeting the visitor's expectations is important for operators to achieve credibility, sustain their reputation and to ensure the future of their business. The operator should be welcoming and service-minded, and information should be communicated regarding; the price, accommodation, transportation and contact information. Visitors also need to feel safe and ensured and guaranteed with assurances if something happens, which is the main content of the criteria in this group. A risk analysis also needs to be carried out to create routines for unforeseen events.

In summary, the criteria of NB incorporates the aim of ecotourism and all the principles of ecotourism set by TIES (2015) into actionable criteria in its certification. Moreover, it considers the critique towards ecotourism and incorporates it in the criteria. Therefore, it can be argued that the certification of Nature's Best can be a model that represents the theory of ecotourism in Sweden. However, while reflecting ecotourism principles in theory is important, it is just as crucial to translate these principles into effective implementation; in other words, to move from theory to practice. This is what I will focus on henceforth.

6. Results: Implementation of Nature's Best in Practice

In the following chapter, evidence from the five operators is presented regarding how they encountered ecotourism and NB, incentives to be certified and their implementation strategy including encountered barriers and opportunities. The analysis of the results was performed through a comparison between the aim of the certification and the actual implementation of the practice, thus comparing the results from the document analysis and the interviews.

6.1 Pathways to the Certification

The pathways which connect operators to the certification is important to understand, as this is how the theory of ecotourism is spread among operators within the sector. Three operators, Ulvsbomuren, Sweden Husky and ResKlara, encountered NB through personal business contacts that inspired them to take the mandatory course which is connected to the first criteria of NB, where the operators should obtain solid knowledge on how to preserve local culture and nature (see Chapter 5.1). For example, ResKlara (personal communication) explained: "...we got information about what is needed of us to get certified and regarding the certification process... Then we applied at the same time as another operator in the area". Sweden Husky, similarly, was inspired by the Inn they cooperated with who was certified, as they first were certified as sub-contractors: "I took the course as a sub-contractor for an Inn, many years ago. This might be an unusual way to get in contact with Nature's Best, but that's how it happened for us" (Sweden Husky, personal communication).

The operator Urnatur however, was included in the establishment of the certification and considered their company to be more than qualified to be certified, however to not risk being accused for bias they waited six years to apply. Other operators, however, are less clear on the pathway to certification. STF Abisko, for example, do not know how they encountered NB, since their staff has been replaced multiple times since they implemented the certification in 2009, which in this case led to this incomplete transfer of information (further discussed in Chapter 6.5.2.4): "I tried to do some digging but I have not found a good answer. Our staff changes pretty often and this is one of the challenges with being a seasonal destination" (STF Abisko, personal communication).

The reliance on personal business contacts was the most common pathway for connecting tourism operators with the NB certification, though prior involvement in certification/conservation efforts also emerged as a potential pathway. Furthermore, the potential for operators to lose track of how or why they came to be certified is also apparent, related to the rate of turn-over of the company employees.

6.2 Motivations for Certification

When the operators were asked why they believe it is important to implement ecotourism into their business all operators discussed the importance of an environmental sustainable practice that preserves the nature they work in. “We always had this approach, but with Nature’s Best it became very clear what it takes to be more sustainable, but this the kind of work is never done, we can always strive to be better, more sustainable and minimize our footprint”, (ResKlara, personal communication). Ulvsbomuren and STF Abisko also discussed the importance to communicate a more sustainable business-model and vision to their visitors. “It gives my guest a better insight of nature and how to behave in this environment” (Ulvsbomuren, personal communication). Getting certified was therefore seen as a natural step for all the operators and the certification became the proof of their standpoint. “It felt natural to include when we developed our business after we had fulfilled the course with Nature’s Best... It’s a standpoint.” (Ulvsbomuren, personal communication). It was a natural step because NB’s criteria were in line with the sustainable approach that the operators have, something that seems self-explanatory for them as they are active in nature. “In general I think it is important to consider these aspects, not only for your business but also for your whole existence, we should live as sustainably as we can” (ResKlara, personal communication). This approach can be connected to the first and third criteria of NB, which considers that the business should have solid knowledge to make their business sustainable and leave minimal impacts. Thus, overlap between the operator’s vision of a sustainable business model and the principles of ecotourism made the certification a natural step.

The other main motivation is the economic incentives connected to the certification. Urnatur and Sweden Husky discussed the importance of ecotourism to generate job opportunities in rural areas in Sweden, by putting the nature on display instead of exploiting the resources: “With this form of tourism, I believe that it is possible to create long-term and sustainable job-opportunities” (Sweden Husky, personal communication). Similarly, Urnatur (personal communication) explained: “In the best of all worlds, ecotourism is a great opportunity to both create livelihoods in rural areas, but also to create and sustain natural- and cultural values”. Another economic incentive is the marketing value that the certification brings. The operators and their activities can be found on NB’s website where tourists interested in nature-based tourism or ecotourism can find them. The operators can also use the logotype of NB in their own information material and webpage, to market themselves as an ecotourism operator. The operators see advantages with being certified as it acts as a quality-marker, both to ensure the visitors that the operator has taken a standpoint for sustainable tourism, but also to give them an advantage on the competitive tourism-market: “The certification acts as a quality-marking, that makes us stand out from our competitors”, (Ulvsbomuren, personal communication).

The motivators among the operators seems to be two-sided, on one side it is in-line with their own sustainability approach and their standpoint, with the certification being a natural step after completing the course. This links to the aim of ecotourism, and NB's third criteria: to make the business sustainable, and the first criteria: to minimize their impact. On the other hand, there are economic incentives connected to job-opportunities, marketing-opportunities and the value-adding quality-marker that could attract more visitors. To provide financial resources for conservation, or generate financial benefits for the community, is essential for ecotourism and stated in the second and fourth criteria of NB. Thus, both economic incentives and the aim for a more sustainable business are in-line with the principle of ecotourism, however it is important to maintain a balance of the competing interests to minimize the negative impacts on the environment.

6.3 Implementing the Principles of Ecotourism

During the interviews, it was clear that the operators approach to sustainable practices was similar to the theory of ecotourism. This was apparent as it seemed hard for the operators to answer how they incorporate NB into their daily work. It was hard for the operators to know where one starts and where the other ends. As Ulvsbomuren (personal communication) put it: "It's something that pervade our whole business". The operators all discuss the importance of making conscious decisions for their business, based on the knowledge about the nature and culture in the area. This includes the ecological carrying capacity and to working in harmony with the nature instead of exploiting the resources. This can be connected to the first NB certification criteria regarding the importance of solid knowledge about the local area to decrease impacts. Sweden Husky (personal communication) highlighted an example of a conscious decision made for their business: "We could have worked with scooter-tours instead of dog-sledding, but dogsledding is considerably more sustainable and leaves less pressure on the nature". Thus, the operator has explicitly chosen to adopt an activity that has less physical impact to make the business more sustainable, in line with the principles of ecotourism and NB's first certification criteria.

The meaning of sustainable tourism for the operators is about making conscious decisions, as just mentioned, to decrease the ecological footprint as much as possible and to stay within the carrying capacity of the area to preserve the nature for future generations: "It is about sustaining the nature I work in, now and for the future... You have to realize that if you use the resources incorrectly the next generations will not be able to experience the same things that we can experience now" (Ulvsbomuren, personal communication). This perspective can be connected to NB's fifth certification

criteria, to promote knowledge and respect, and the joy of discovery, as the operator's knowledge needs to be communicated to the visitors to minimize their impact. The operators all have certified tours and activities adapted for their region, where they take the visitors out into the nature and make their profit by showcasing the local nature. For example, Ulvsbomuren arranges mushroom picking and ResKlara offers hikes within the High Coast World Heritage site.

To tailor activities to the specific region, it is important for the operators to have knowledge about the area so that they know which boundaries to adapt, which reflects the content of NB's first and third certification criteria. As the manager from ResKlara puts it: "It is important to be aware and respect the boundaries of the nature in the area, so that we don't love the nature to death". Urnatur claimed to already have had a sustainable business model before getting involved with NB, are focusing more on how they can create and preserve natural and cultural values; in line with NB's fourth certification criteria. The manager of Urnatur said that he calculated what they would earn if using their property for forestry, and that it would be a negligibly small amount: "We would not survive if we used our property for agriculture and forestry, it would be impossible. But with ecotourism we can make a livelihood" (personal communication). Their strategy is to be self-sustaining, so they grow most of the vegetables they serve, produce their own meat, and the tree-houses they build are made of timber forested on their property. The manager tells me that their visitors usually joke and say: "When we visit you we are not satisfied with near-produced food, we want here-produced food" (Urnatur, personal communication).

While the operators have implemented the principles of ecotourism in similar ways, there is an imbalance regarding their major focus. For example, some focus more on behavioral impacts and some more on nature conservation. Below, I examine how these principles have been translated from theory to practice within the certified operators.

6.4 The Implementation Process

To implement the criteria of NB into management activities, the operators had to conduct theoretical and practical work, though to differing degrees. The theoretical work in the certification process is to create steering-documents, such as destination-analysis, environmental impact assessment and environmental plan (SEA, 2005). These steering-documents are mandatory and are both a part for the application process, but are also supposed to help the operator to evaluate their business to find a strategy to implement NB. Thus, all the operators created or filled out these documents when they applied for the certification. ResKlara considers the theoretical work to be helpful: "it forces you to

evaluate your business and consider aspects you might not thought about, and make you put your foot down and take a standpoint”. Ulvsbomuren also found the theoretical work helpful where: “the criteria act as a guide or a template for how to implement a more sustainable practice”.

The practical work often includes changing their operation, their facilities and strategies to fulfill the criteria. Example include waste management, transportation means and their energy- and electricity supply. Figure 3, illustrates how the implementation process differed among the operators. For two of the operators who claimed to have had implemented sustainable practices in their management before they applied for the certification, there were less need for practical measures to be implemented. Although, the practical process helped the operators to adjust their business to the practice of ecotourism. These are: Urnatur who claims to have always worked with a holistic approach and played an active role in establishing the certification, and Sweden Husky who was certified as a sub-contractor to an Inn (see Figure 3).

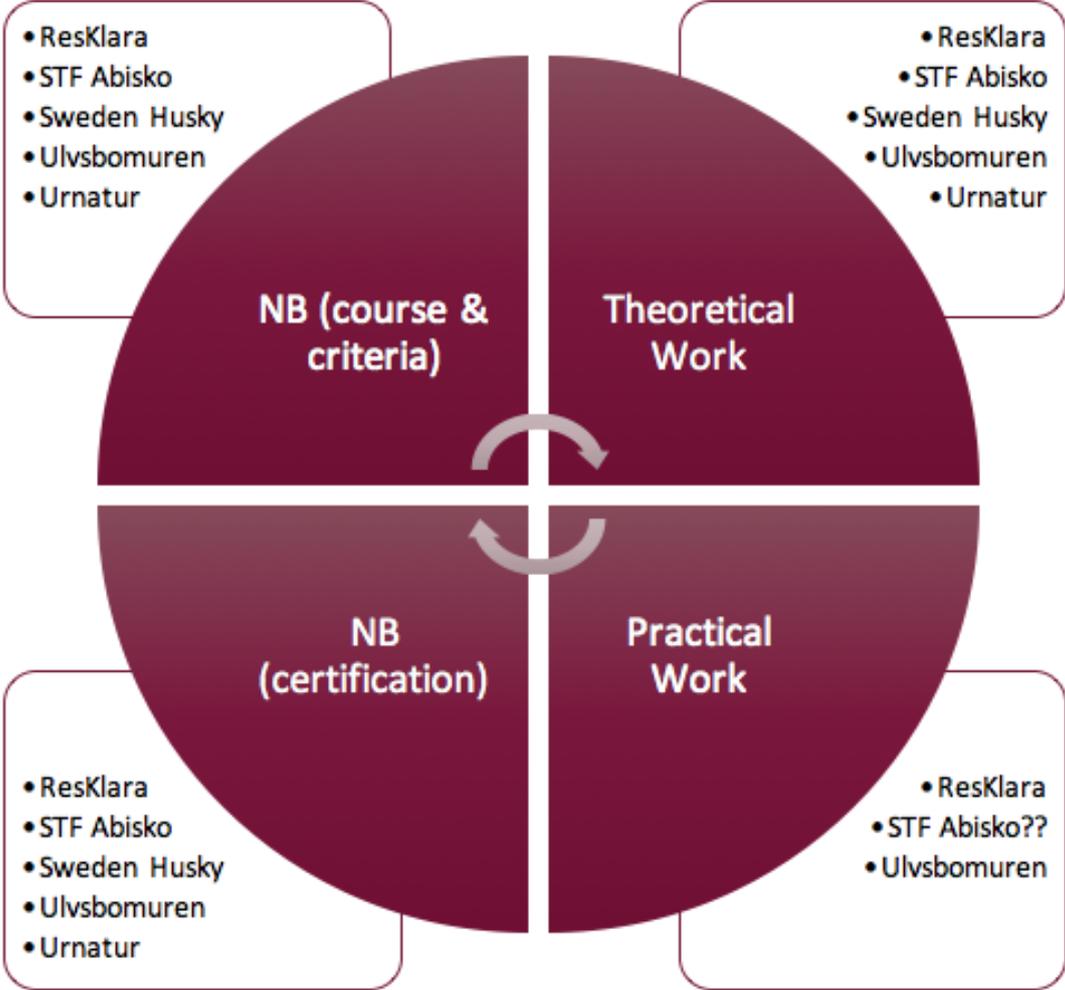


Figure 3. The implementation process among the operators. Showing how the path to certification differs. Where all operators went through the first, second and fourth step, but some had less practical work to do.

For two of the operators; Ulvsbomuren and ResKlara (see Figure 3), both the practical work as well as the theoretical work needed to be carried out. Ulvsbomuren and ResKlara describe the criteria as very thorough and the certification process to be educating: they learned a lot about sustainable business strategies and processes, but also about their own work and the nature around them. Due to problems communicating information among the staff at STF Abisko, the current personnel could not supply me with information regarding the implementation process as none were around when the process took place. This possible challenge of transferring knowledge and information in a bigger company will be discussed in Chapter 6.5.2.4.

6.5 The Implementation Strategy

The implementation strategy of NB can be distinguished between more experienced operators: The Veterans, and less experienced operators: The Novices, based on their previous experience of sustainable models of tourism. The Veterans consist of the Urnatur, STF Abisko and Sweden Husky who claimed to have implemented a holistic and sustainable practice before they applied for the certification. Urnatur and STF Abisko also implemented their own strategy to increase their performance for sustainable practices as a complement to the certification criteria. The NB certification NB and the theory of ecotourism was in many ways in line with the operators' approach for sustainable practices before they applied for the certification to increase their market exposure and to obtain the quality-marking.

The Novice operators, which includes Ulvsbomuren and ResKlara, who in contrast to the Veterans, used the implementation process as an educational process and as a guide to adopt a more sustainable practice into their business. As stated, NB includes all the principles of ecotourism and can be a good representation for ecotourism. This makes the criteria a good tool to use to transfer knowledge and form an approach in line with ecotourism principles, which the Novice operators took full use of. Implementing the theory of ecotourism in practice, however, is not without its challenges as I discuss in Chapter 6.5.2. In the following sub-chapter the operator's strategy to transfer knowledge to the visitors, a core principle of ecotourism generally and NB specifically, will be presented.

6.5.1 Communicating the Theory Ecotourism

According to the first and fifth certification criteria of NB, it is important for the operator to communicate their knowledge about the local culture and nature to form an interest and respect in

their visitors, as this helps visitors know how they can limit their environmental impact and support nature conservation (SEA, 2005). The operators consider it to be crucial to have knowledge about the nature, flora and fauna at their destination, the history of the area and threats ecotourism helps mitigate. To communicate this information, the operators suggest that good communicative skills are important to create an interest: "An important characteristic to have as an operator is the ability to get people interested in the information you are communicating. If you don't have that ability it doesn't matter how knowledgeable you are" (Ulvsbomuren, personal communication). Furthermore, in line with the fifth NB criteria, the operators also argue the importance to create a good dialogue with the visitors, to form an understanding for what the visitors want out of their visit and to deliver a good experience. This involves giving visitors information to know what to expect upon arrival, showing an interest for them and creating a dialogue at the destination.

However, the operators also discussed that they are careful to not shower the visitors with *too much* information. Therefore, they do not present the codes-of-conduct in the form of a rulebook as the fifth NB criteria suggests. Instead, it is more relaxed and all the operators are focusing on creating a dialogue face-to-face with the visitors: "We are trying to incorporate some storytelling into our guided tours, using examples and showing them that the water that runs through here comes from the glaciers and runs out into the lake. We are trying to communicate what is happening to the environment and that it is important to protect it." (STF Abisko, personal communication). The operators are using the dialogue to interact with the visitors to tell them stories about the nature that they are present in and how it is connected to the bigger picture: "It is important to give the visitors information about the area they are in, why it is unique and why we should preserve it. I have my business in a world heritage site and therefore I believe it is important to highlight the reason for why it is a world heritage site, so that the visitors understand this when they are out hiking in the area" (ResKlara, personal communication). Which ties back to the first criteria to communicate knowledge to limit the degradation of the environment, as well as the fifth criteria to 'form respect and joy of discovery'.

The operators point out that it is important to listen to the visitors, acknowledge their interest and proceed from the information they are interested in to give them a positive experience. This tie back to the sixth NB criteria, to give the visitor a quality experience and meet their expectations to sustain their reputation, thus the future of their business. Ulvsbomuren (personal communication), for example, explained that: "What the visitor is interested in is what is most important, this is where you should proceed from and then you can sneak in all kinds of information when you are communicating". The operators' tactic is to start with the basics and then gradually increase the amount of information to the visitors in line with their interest. Urnatur (personal communication) offered this lucid example:

“We have been pretty cautious before with giving the visitors too much information... we didn’t believe that they were interested about learning about ecology or forestry. But last year we got the feeling that people are getting more and more interested, and after the introduction, that I now hold everyday about forestry and ecology, visitors could come up and say; ‘that is interesting, I never understood how it is connected, we live in a country filled with forests but I have now realized I don’t know much about forests’”. In the discussion (Chapter 7.1) I examine more fully the importance of knowledge transfer in ecotourism operations.

6.5.2 Challenges

6.5.2.1 Time-management

The certification also brings challenges, both theoretical and practical. Among the main challenges regarding completion of the required theoretical work is fact that it is extremely time-consuming to create the steering-documents. The operators are busy running their business and find it challenging to balance this process with their daily work. This is something that the operators believe can frighten other operators away from applying for the certification: “As a tourism operator, there is a tremendous amount of reports, permits and actors you need to work with... and if a destination analysis and other documents is added on top of that I understand if many operators say, ‘forget it’” (Urnatur, personal communication). This constraint can also lead operators to choose not to apply for certification of their other activities and tours, that are not yet certified. Activities that they might not had included in the first certification process due to various reasons, or newly introduced activities. They all discuss the time-management aspect and the heavy workload as a main reason. For example, Ulvsbomuren said: “It is a challenge to get certified, it is an important process but it is very comprehensive, and the question is how many operators that get frightened along the process”.

6.5.2.2 Fulfillment of the Criteria

Some criteria can also be hard to interpret and therefore the criteria may not be implemented in the way that it was supposed to. According to the fourth criteria in NB and the principles of ecotourism, the purpose is to create a value for local nature by letting the profit flow back to protect the nature and cultural values in the area from degradation or exploitation of the resources. In a discussion with Urnatur, the operator points out that “the fourth goal of the certification, to contribute actively to nature and cultural conservation, is the Achilles’ heel of NB”. NB’s vision is to encourage operators to create and preserve nature and cultural values while creating livelihoods in the rural areas (SEA, 2005).

However, as Urnatur points out: “Most of the time the criteria is misunderstood and advisors might help operators to just come up with something to check the criteria, like a donation for each guest to the local environmental protection organization”. This means that instead of providing financial recourses for conservation according to the principles of ecotourism (TIES, 2015) the profit might go to a local organization which focuses on nature in a bigger region, rather than contributing explicitly to the area the operator operates in.

Urnatur is the only operator among the cases analyzed that owns the whole land-area on which they are operating their business, which means that they are the decision-maker when it comes to how the resources are managed and can reinvest the profit into their land. Ulvsbomuren also owns parts of the land, but still their guests have the possibility to hike along trails and pick mushrooms on the land owned by other stakeholders. To manage this issue Ulvsbomuren is active in an organization that works with preserving the hiking-trail. Sweden Husky owns a small portion of the land they are operating on, but they also discuss the fact that they do not have any conflict of interest. So far there has been a balance among the interest in the area, and the nature resources have not been subject to external threats. ResKlara and STF Abisko however, are special cases since they are operating within a world heritage site, and within a National park, respectively. This shows that a dialogue with the stakeholders in the area in line with the first NB criteria can be a good solution to utilize implementation of the fourth NB criteria without ownership of the land. To have an active dialogue with other stakeholders in the area seems to be an alternative strategy to protect and conserve the local nature.

Also, it is hard for some operators to meet all criteria due to system structures, such as technological lock-ins and infrastructure. A good example is transportation, regarding both how the visitors choose to get to the destination and how the operators transport goods. The operators, however, emphasize there is no such thing as strong sustainable tourism, because as soon as a tourist travels to another destination and consumes, it is unsustainable: “If we just walked outside our door and into the forest, then maybe tourism wouldn’t damage the environment, but as soon as we travel we consume...” (Sweden Husky, personal communication). The operators cannot keep tourists from visiting the destination by plane, and sometimes they themselves need to transport waste or goods. For operators like STF Abisko this challenge is apparent. As the Abisko manager puts it: “We are located where we are located... so we cannot manage practicalities like waste management without transportation. The same challenge goes for the visitors, we are trying to promote transportation by train, but often the flights are cheaper and more accessible. The infrastructure needs to change to make it easier to be sustainable”. This means that the implementation of sustainable practices can be hindered by

structures in the system; infrastructure and technological lock-ins, which the operators nor the Nature's Best has any influence over.

6.5.2.3 Lack of Awareness

The operators assume that the average consumer is not aware of what ecotourism is, nor about NB certification, which can decrease the visitors' appreciation of the certification. Consumers are exposed to multiple certifications on the market and it can be hard for them to be aware of the difference between them or the purpose behind them. According to the manager of Urnatur the reason could be that "the tourism sector in Sweden has not been consistent with their promotion of tourism certifications, as they switch between promoting NB to creating their own certification like Swedish Welcome, and back". The operator Urnatur thinks that the tourism sector should work together with the government and politicians, and form a consensus to promote one certification and stick to it: "because if the people do not believe in the certification, operators will not venture to apply for the certification" (Urnatur, personal communication).

However, the operators did not report having taken any special initiative to promote NB themselves, especially if the visitor did not bring up the topic first: "The visitors can see that we are certified by Nature's Best on the webpage, and this is not something we go into deeper when they visit us" (ResKlara, personal communication). This may seem contrary to the wish that the operators have: That consumers were more aware and would choose their tours based on ecotourism. Therefore, it would be natural if they themselves promoted NB, thus, communicating and transferring the knowledge of ecotourism and NB. One reason why the operators lack motivation to promote NB could be that the certification is not acknowledged on the international market: "We have a lot of international visitors that do not know what Nature's Best is..." (STF Abisko, personal communication). This shows that the promotion and marketing of ecotourism and NB should be improved, to raise the awareness and increase the appreciation of the certification, from all actors involved; SEA, NB themselves, and the operators.

6.5.2.4 Challenges for Larger Companies

Concerning STF Abisko, the problem of information transfer was uniquely present. As mentioned in Chapter 6.1 and 6.4, the staff has been replaced multiple times since they implemented NB and therefore it is hard to know how the certification was implemented. However, they have found internal solutions to integrate their sustainability approach into their management and to transfer knowledge

within the company. For example, STF Abisko has their own environmental coordinator both at the mountain station, and at the head-office. The whole staff also undergoes an education in sustainability each year so that the whole staff forms the same approach. They also have their own internal environmental plan that they revise every year and that steers their sustainability work. As they are a well-known company in Sweden, they have noticed the increased demand for sustainable tourism, and are trying to supply the demand: "Our guests demand a certain sustainability approach", (STF Abisko, personal communication). STF Abisko in response to the challenges of operating within a large company with high employee turnover, have managed to adopt an internal strategy for how to implement sustainability into their management. However, as they could not supply this study with information regarding how they implemented NB nor how they incorporate ecotourism within their management, it is hard to definitively judge whether they are representative as an example of an ecotourism operator.

7. Analytical Discussion

In this chapter, the results of this study are discussed using the theoretical foundation of this thesis. I begin by discussing the knowledge transfer among the actors. Following this, I discuss how certifications can act as a voluntary regulatory mechanism and give the operators incentive to work for sustainability, including the challenges the certification faces. Further, I discuss NB's potential to promote nature conservation in Sweden, and the potential for ecotourism to provide an alternative development strategy more generally.

7.1 Knowledge Transfer Between the Actors

A sufficient transfer of knowledge between the actors is important for ecotourism: First, the transfer of knowledge from NB to the operators, to increase the likeliness of a sufficient implementation of ecotourism principles within the operator's businesses. Secondly, the transfer of knowledge to the visitors to increase the likelihood that ecotourism can help to form an interest and respect for nature. Each represents different crucial moments of translation of principles to more concrete contexts, thus different stages in the translation of ecotourism theory to practice.

7.1.1 Knowledge Transfer from Nature's Best to the Operator

To transfer knowledge from Nature's Best to the operators, the key-actors within the organization need to go through the basic course about ecotourism and NB before they apply for the certification (SEA, 2005). This is supposed to teach the managers what NB is, how sustainable practices should be implemented and how the knowledge best is communicated to the visitors. All the operators in this study have gone through this course. As previous studies show, e.g. (Cheung & Fok, 2014) training and courses in ecotourism can be an effective way of providing the tour-guides and managers with useful pro-environmental knowledge, which in turn enhance their capacity to raise awareness about ecotourism for further development of the practice. In this study, it is hard to know how the operator's knowledge was changed by the course since their knowledge level before the course is unknown in this study. Although, it is certain that the course introduced them to the practice of ecotourism and gave them the knowledge needed to implement the principles of ecotourism, in line with the first criteria of NB. This course is an important tool for NB to spread the knowledge of ecotourism to operators. However, in this study it became apparent that contact between the NB course and the operators was largely made through informal business contacts.

To inspire future operators to implement the practice it is therefore needed to market this introduction course of ecotourism in a more comprehensive way. Because NB's course is the first point of knowledge transfer between NB and operators, it plays a crucial role in paving the way for operators to get affiliated with the idea of certification as well as to provide the information needed to undertake the further steps needed to become certified. However, operator reliance on informal relations to come into contact with the course reduces its potential reach and thus may lead to fewer operators becoming certified. NB and other ecotourism certification providers should aim to ensure that such courses are actively and strategically advertised to ensure the widest reach possible.

The results of this study also show that it can be difficult for bigger companies, such as STF Abisko, to transfer the information of NB within internal organization. STF Abisko's staff has been replaced multiple times since they implemented the NB certification in 2009, which has led to incomplete transfer of information. Other large operators with high employee turnover rates may be faced with similar obstacles. However, as discussed before (Chapter 6.5.2.4) STF Abisko have created their own environmental strategies to form a similar approach to sustainability within the staff. Thus, though the obstacle for incomplete information transfer is present in such operators, it can be overcome through the adoption of internal mechanisms for knowledge transfer within the organization.

NB's course and the criteria are meant to help the operators to implement the principles of ecotourism, as well as evaluating their business and adopt a more sustainable approach. However, this study shows that the operators dependency of information from NB varies i.e. that Veterans already had the knowledge so the certification process did not provide them with new knowledge, while the Novices used the process as a way of learning about sustainability and ecotourism. The more experienced operators, The Veterans; STF Abisko and Urnatur, do not depend on information from NB to implement a sustainability approach. Instead it has been important for them to develop internal processes to ensure continuation of increased knowledge. Compared to the less experienced operators that depend on the certification on a higher level to guide them in their sustainability work: The Novice; Ulvsbomuren, and ResKlara, two operators that used the implementation process as an educational process and as a guide to transcend their business into a more sustainable practice. For the operators that uses the course and the criteria as a guide and an educational learning process it is therefore important that the criteria are updated to ensure continuation of increased knowledge. Thus, the understanding of sustainability and what constitutes as sustainable practices changes over time, and therefore the criteria needs to stay updated to retain the credibility for the certification to be a tool for educating for sustainable practices.

7.1.2 Knowledge Transfer from the Operators to the Visitors

Although, the outcome of the knowledge transfer to the visitors was not investigated in this study, information gathered from the operators give an indication for its effect. Information according to Moscardo (1999) is more effectively communicated through participative exercises and dialogue, where it is assured that the visitor understands the information to increase the acceptance for information. In this study, the operators focus on creating a dialogue with visitors and the personal engagement is prioritized. Operators acknowledge the importance of listening to the visitor and their interests which is an important component of effective communication (Moscardo, 1999). This communicative strategy is in effect the operationalization of the fifth criterion of NB, where it is stated that good knowledge and guidance is the key to a memorable trip, where personal meetings with local people and knowledgeable guides are prioritized (SEA, 2005, p24-25).

Recognizing that too much information can lead to ineffective communication, the operators strategically start with communicating basic information and then gradually increase the amount and complexity of information to the visitors, adapted to the visitors' interest. Furthermore, Moscardo (1999) suggest that an effective way to communicate information is by storytelling where the visitors interest is combined with relatable examples with a local context. The operators in this study are also following this strategy, as they all discuss sustainability in relation to the local nature at their destination, where either historical examples, or the impacts of exploitation and climate change is discussed with relatable examples. Using such communication strategies can also help to decrease one of the risks with ecotourism, i.e. that tourism can degrade the environment that the operator is depending on (Hanneberg, 1996) by effectively communicating knowledge pro-environmental behavior can be formed. This conclusion follows the idea that educating tourists can help develop a respect for nature that can foster an environmental understanding for how we and society affect nature, and form support for nature conservation and ecotourism (Hill & Gale, 2009; Marion & Reid, 2007; Powell & Ham, 2008). Thus, regarding communication strategy, the NB certified operators are operating in line with scientific best practice.

As mentioned, the operators in this study have generally been cautious with how much information they communicate to the visitors, but recently they have experienced an increased interest from visitors. This may indicate that the apparent trade-off between communicating information about sustainability and giving the visitors a positive experience is getting smaller. As the sixth goal of Nature's Best states that the operator should be welcoming and service-minded and that the destination must live up to the expectations based on the information the visitor got from the operator

before the visit (SEA, 2005, p26-28), this criterion will be easier to meet and combine with the fifth criterion (form respect and joy of discovery) when the visitor's interest and understanding for sustainability increases. This shows an opportunity for synergies between different criteria, which NB should recognize and take advantage of.

7.2 Nature's Best – Voluntary Regulation Mechanisms for Sustainable Tourism

Ecotourism started as a movement to inspire for sustainable tourism and to highlight the polarized difference between conventional mass tourism and small-scale, rural and responsible tourism (Hanneberg, 1996) as well as to supply a wider range of options to tourists. As most of the operators in this study operate in nature unprotected by any formal protection, they have taken the initiative to contribute to the protection for their local nature, through ecotourism. However, this has not been an easy process for the operators. The main challenges found in this case study: time, fulfillment of the criteria, and lack of awareness (discussed in Chapter 6.5.2), all influence the motivation for the operators to certify more of their tours and activities, and could also discourage future operators to apply for the certification. These challenges should be addressed to increase the accessibility to certification and enhance the feasibility of implementing more sustainable practices. Firstly, lack of time is a big challenge for the smaller nature-based tourism operators. The implementation process of the certification has a time-consuming theoretical and practical process (creating the steering-documents and adjusting the business operations) considering that this needs to be balanced with their daily work which in many cases is substantial. Therefore, NB should provide support to operators in need, to make the certification process more accessible and achievable for small operators

Secondly, the challenge of implementing and fulfilling some criteria can be hindered by system structures, such as infrastructure or technological lock-ins, as their inability to influence the indirect negative impacts on the environment is limited. Therefore, it is important that these external factors are acknowledged and put on the agenda, to inspire for change of policies, practices and consumption, in line with the UN's aim for The Year of Sustainable Tourism (UNWTO, 2017). Thus, making it easier for tourism operators and tourists to make conscious decisions.

Thirdly, NB would benefit from more strategic marketing and promotion of the certification to raise the awareness of sustainable tourism practices. This would likely be enhanced through increased support and collaboration between NB, the government and other organizations within the tourism sector. However, it is up to the government and decision-makers to decide if NB and ecotourism will be the future of sustainable tourism practices in Sweden or not. If so, then enhancing support for the

already existing and well-structured SEA and NB through marketing opportunities and financial resources, instead of introducing new certification schemes for tourism, could support this goal. The effectiveness of ecotourism and the NB certification scheme would be enhanced through government officials and other responsible organizations cooperation, particularly since NB as an organization has been struggling with both financial and human resources in recent years, which has influenced the potential of the certification. However, lobbying from SEA has recently resulted in the government acknowledging the importance of nature-based tourism to attract visitors to Sweden. As a result, it has been proposed that the value-added taxes on guided tours in nature-based tourism should be decreased from 25 to 6 percent, to further incentives ecotourism operations (SEA, 2017). This could be an indication for that the bottom-up movement of ecotourism, where the operators voluntarily regulated their business, has influenced the agenda and changed the national strategy for sustainable tourism.

7.3 Nature's Best Potential to Promote Nature Conservation

Ecotourism has been argued to be an alternative strategy to conserve and protect nature areas that do not fulfill the criteria of formal protection, for example areas which might not be considered of national interest. However, the nature is still important for the local community. The ambition of SEA when they introduced the certification NB was to inspire a change in tourism and introduce a Swedish quality-marking for ecotourism that could put an economic value on natural and cultural heritage that otherwise would not be there (SEA & STC, 2002b). The operators share the same standpoint, and they are using the quality-marking as proof for the standpoint they have taken to protect and conserve the nature they operate in. The operators have not experienced any conflict of interests in the area they operate in yet, but if they would, arguments based on economic profit from the tourism, job opportunities and environmental protection can be used to deter against exploitation. The operators also have good dialogue with the landowners in the area, and are aware of possible external threats, in line with the criteria, thus the operators continuously work to limit the risk for conflict of interests. In this study, it has been found that the ecotourism operators use two different strategies to conserve the local nature they work within. Either operators own the land that they are operating on, making them the decision-maker of how the resources should be managed, or the operator has established good relationships to other stakeholders in the area. This enables them to influence the decisions made without owning the land and to use the value of the tourism in the area as an argument against exploitation.

7.4 Nature's Best – An Alternative Development Strategy

According to Sharpley & Telfer (2015) ecotourism can be used as an alternative development strategy to reach sustainable development of tourism destination. Ecotourism in Sweden with the certification Nature's Best has a big opportunity to promote sustainable development in rural communities, in line with the principles for ecotourism, empowering the communities and simultaneously protecting the ecosystems. NB is focusing on rural businesses in Sweden, giving them an advantage against bigger tourism businesses with better resources for marketing, to provide financial resources and stimulus to conserve nature, and to maintain rural development and job-opportunities (SEA, 2005, p4-9).

As this study focus on how the principles of ecotourism were implemented among the cases, I cannot discuss the outcome of the implementation of ecotourism. However, I can discuss how different operators implemented the certification and what their motivations where. Shown among the operators in this study, the incentives have been divided between the desire to practice sustainable tourism and use the label to prove their standpoint, and the economic incentives the certification brings. The label can give them an advantage on the market and attract visitors to help sustain the livelihoods in the community and conserving the nature.

However, to truly work as an inspiration and to promote sustainable development in rural areas, the awareness around ecotourism needs to be increased to empower the operators and the organization to continue their work but also to attract future members. Ecotourism certifications such as NB also need financial support and human resources to ensure the quality and credibility of their work, for example to be able to revise the criteria on a regular basis so that the criteria are complete and up-to-date. If the policy-makers in Sweden decide that the focus should be aimed on ecotourism to encourage more sustainable tourism, then it would be necessary to empower and support the certification, contribute to the marketing of the certification and make it easier for operators to implement sustainable practices. The government's recent acknowledgement of the importance of ecotourism could be a step in the right direction for the promotion of ecotourism and nature-based tourism.

8. Conclusion

This study has investigated the implementation process of Nature's Best, a Swedish ecotourism certification, among five different ecotourism operators to understand the process of transforming ecotourism theory into practice, including the barriers and opportunities experienced by ecotourism practitioners. This study of Nature's Best can be used as an example to understand the potential of ecotourism to promote sustainable development of tourism. The results of this study have shown that Nature's Best transfer knowledge about ecotourism theory and how to implement the theory into practice through a series of mechanisms, including a mandatory introductory course and the production of policy documents and practical action plans. The less experienced operators used this knowledge and the criteria to transition their business into more sustainable practices, while the more experienced operators used the certification to label their sustainability work. This is also one of the two major incentives for the operators, as they use the certification as a proof for their standpoint, as well as the economic incentives that the certification brings.

Furthermore, the operators transfer their knowledge of ecotourism to the visitors as they discuss sustainability in relation to the local nature, where either historical examples, or the impacts of exploitation and climate change is discussed with relatable examples. By creating positive experiences of nature, interest and respect for nature can be developed among the tourists which evidence suggests can encourage pro-environmental behavior. However, this level of knowledge transfer, from the operators to visitors, needs to be further studied to fully understand the relation between nature-experiences and pro-environmental behavior, thus understanding how to reconnect people to nature. With the current increase of interest for nature and for nature-based tourism, the future of sustainable tourism is bright, as when the demand for sustainable tourism increase the supply will follow. Ecotourism has the potential to decrease the direct impacts and the ecological footprint that visitors leaves at their travel destination, as ecotourism operators helps educate for responsible- and pro-environmental behavior.

However, several of the operators within this study have argued that systems structures such as technological lock-ins and infrastructure hinders their ability to fulfill some criteria, as their inability to influence the indirect negative impacts on the environment is limited. The operators cannot stop visitors to travel to them by plane, especially not the operators which host many international visitors. Therefore, even if the local management of the destination practice sustainable tourism, considering the total impacts tourism makes for a serious challenge if ecotourism is to be as comprehensive as possible.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Contact List

Operator/Name	Position/Title	Interview Date	Interview Duration
Per Jiborn	General Secretary Nature's Best	February 14, 2017	18 min
Ulvsbomuren	Owner	March 16, 2017	36 min
Urnatur	Owner/Former board member of NB	March 16, 2017	49 min
Sweden Husky Tours	Owner	March 22, 2017	23 min
ResKlara	Owner	March 27, 2017	26 min
STF Abisko Mountain Station	Manager	March 30, 2017	46 min

Appendix 2 – Interview Guide

Explanation:

Bold: Categories

Normal: Questions

Italic: Possible follow-up questions or examples

Ecotourism and Nature's Best

1. How did you come in contact with ecotourism?
2. Why do you think it is important to work with ecotourism?
3. Why did you decide to apply for the certification, Nature's Best?

Implementation of Nature's Best

4. Can you describe how you experienced the certification process, from when you encountered Nature's Best until you became certified?
5. Can you describe how you incorporate ecotourism and Nature's Best in your management?

6. How did/do you go about translating the criteria into your practice?

- If you have found this to be a struggle, how did you decide to work with environmental- and sustainability issues in addition to Nature's Best?

- Why do you think this has been hard for you to translate the criteria?

- How do you believe that this could be improved?

7a. What does sustainable tourism mean for you?

7b. How do you work to conserve nature- and cultural values?

8. For my understanding the operators should create different kinds of steering documents when you apply for the Nature's Best (destination-analysis, internal environmental policies, and environmental impact assessments). How useful have these documents been for you?

Benefits and challenges

9. What benefits do you see with the certification?

10. Do you see any down-sides with the certification?

11. How would you describe your collaboration/relationship with the Nature's Best?

- For example: communication, monitoring, information, updates, interaction, support.

12. From your experiences with Nature's Best as a certified operator, how would you suggest that NB should be improved in the future? *- What are you missing now, or what could be better?*

Communicating information

13. What kind of knowledge do you think is important for an operator to obtain to succeed with ecotourism?

14. What information do you think is important to communicate to the visitors?

15. Can you give some examples for the techniques you use to communicate information?

- Example: Before, during, after? On tours?

- Example: Website, letter, email, poster, signs, maps, guided tours, personal meetings

- Example: Codes-of-conduct, gear-list, recommendations, sensitive flora and fauna, rules

16. What feedback do you get from your visitors, about your business and ecotourism?