Raising industry standards

By Mark Hardy and Judy Gona

We’ve all heard of the 5 star rating system for hotels and have a fairly good understanding of what it means. But how many Kenyans or tourists are aware of the rating systems that are being used in the tourism industry around the world today? So when repeated calls are made for the development of an ecorating scheme for Kenya, what are we talking about?

It has been suggested that a system be developed for verifying a tourism organization’s performance when evaluated against an agreed suite of criteria. The criteria would include not only environmental parameters but also importantly social and cultural factors. An organization that complied with the system’s criteria would then be awarded formal certification in recognition of its performance. This voluntary industry initiative is being adopted worldwide as a tool for both improving performance and marketing. It would provide an opportunity for tourism practitioners to continually improve performance to a standard recognized as best practice. This is ecorating. Ecorating differs considerably from codes of conduct and guidelines because it seeks to measure and confirm performance and outcomes rather than relying on vague statements of intention or commitment.

In the late 1990s, tourism practitioners in Kenya began to discuss the idea of developing an ecorating scheme to help the tourism industry define best practices and market the country as a responsible tourism destination provider. In October/November 2000, ESOK organized workshops to provide the industry with practical information on issues significant to the development of an ecorating scheme. One of the major issues the industry faced during the discussions was whether to develop and implement a Kenyan scheme or adopt an already existing scheme. The industry unanimously endorsed the development of a Kenya Scheme. Other issues discussed included: industry sectors to be rated; criteria to be used for rating; approach to assessment; management of scheme; costs of accrediting, auditing, financing of the scheme etc. The delegates also selected a technical committee, with ESOK as chair, to provide input and guidance to the ecorating initiative. Additionally, support was provided for engaging a consultant to design the ecorating scheme.

According to the adopted process and timeline, it is hoped that a Kenyan ecorating scheme will be in place by early 2002.

But as more and more schemes emerge, there are concerns over possible confusion, particularly in the market place. More frequent calls are now being made for rationalization of schemes and perhaps the development of an international tourism accreditation system. A workshop held in New York this November, in which ESOK participated, discussed among other issues the possibility of developing an international accreditation scheme while acknowledging the efforts of countries and regions operating or developing certification schemes. While the workshop did not reach any consensus on this very sensitive matter, it was the general feeling of most participants that an international scheme may not
Marketing Ecotourism

- By Anjali Saini

In coming up with the concept for this article, I found myself posing the questions that you as an industry player may be asking. What is the size of the ecotourism market? What are the characteristics of an ecotourist? How can this market specifically be tapped? Are environmental issues really significant in the travel choices that a customer makes?

In order to talk of marketing ecotourism, “ecotourism” needs to be clearly defined and yet debates still rage about the definitions. Meanwhile more and more tourist destinations and companies throughout the world are proclaiming the fact that they are adopting the principles of ecotourism. To quote Jake Grieves - Cook, “there is a distinct possibility that some are simply jumping on the bandwagon or just paying lip service as a means of obtaining marketing advantage”.

In reviewing some of the latest material on the internet for this article, I found an emphasis on the increasing environmental awareness of the consumer, and a growing feeling of disenchantment at the confusion which has been created by the multitude of “green labels” and operations individually calling themselves “eco-friendly”. After all, what is the credible basis for this kind of claim? Who is judging the operation, and on what kind of standards?

A fundamental for any kind of marketing strategy is to supply a product that matches up to the claims made about it, otherwise the product and the company offering it loses credibility, and the customer loses confidence. In the tourism business, as we’ve seen time and time again, isolated actions can affect not only one’s own business, but the image of a destination as a whole. We’ve also seen the power of just one negative item appearing in the international press. With the expansion of internet technology, such information can be promoted almost instantaneously and to far more people. The converse is also true, and if “eco-scepticism” poses a threat in the marketplace, then the opportunities lie in providing credible and sincere information, and harnessing the media to promote it effectively.

Another fundamental concept in marketing is to look for ways to continually improve, look after and repackage the product, listen to customer demand, and ensure that the product can compete well in the marketplace. Currently in Kenya there are many individual companies which are making great efforts to operate their businesses in an environmentally sensitive manner. An ecorating scheme (see feature articles in this newsletter) could be one way in which such companies could apply for a nationally and internationally recognised “stamp” that certifies the companies’ environmental achievements. Ecorating could also provide a systematic way to guide companies wanting to improve their environmental performance, but who do not even know how to begin! The advantage of such a scheme would mean that, given broad based industry participation, we could have a stronger basis for the marketing of Kenya as a destination that is making efforts to protect the environment, in addition to each individual company being able to promote their own environmental achievements.

Currently it seems that ecotourism operators are marketing directly to their clients using such tools as the internet or advertising in speciality media. Mainstream travel agents serve as an important link for connecting customers with suppliers, so why shouldn’t they be able to sell an environmentally sensitive product? Just try calling up a high street travel agent in one of Kenya’s source markets and asking for an ecotourism product, and the most likely response will be “huh??”. Here lies the next marketing fundamental – constant education. Education of the customer to stimulate demand for ecotourism and to implement at least 3 community based ecotourism projects.

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UNDP Funds ESOK

ESOK has signed a funding agreement with UNDP. Under this 3-year project, ESOK’s objective will be to increase community based biodiversity initiatives to generate income and improve livelihoods. The expected outputs of this funding are

- to enhance the capacity of ESOK and two other NGOs to enable them to support communities to develop and manage ecotourism enterprises
- to produce a survey report of areas with potential for ecotourism and wildlife farming initiatives in the targeted districts
- to produce 15 community based management plans for ecotourism and/or wildlife based initiatives
- to implement at least 3 community based ecotourism projects

Details on the website.

ECORATING - Raising industry standards

fully address the specific local characteristics of different products and destinations. However, it was proposed that a set of international guidelines/principles is drawn to assist countries or regions seeking to develop certification schemes to come up with credible systems. Kenya’s discussion paper on ecorating provided a useful input to the workshop in coming up with the proposed guidelines. But as debates continue on whether to develop international guidelines for certification as opposed to an international accreditation scheme, Kenya must move forward with the development of its own scheme.

If you would like to obtain a copy of the workshops discussion paper, please contact ESOK or download the document from the ESOK website, www.esok.org. Also available on the website is the ecorating workshop report.

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Towards sustainable energy solutions in Kenya

- By Mark McCloy

McCloy Services, a Kenyan owned company specialising in heating applications, is offering alternative energy solutions in Kenya.

They design and develop ideas from concept to manufacturing using sound and accepted engineering principles. They strive to provide tailor made solutions for every situation. Over the past few years they have, in conjunction with NGOs and leaders in Tourism, worked at finding an alternative to or reduction in the use of wood and charcoal for heating water and cooking especially in camps and lodges.

The main impetus for change has come from lodges who have acknowledged pressure from their international guests, many of who are familiar with conservation/environmental issues and are aware of the damage caused to the environment from using wood as a major fuel source, particularly in areas such as the Masai Mara.

McCloy Services provide an interface between professional engineering and appropriate technology. Their briquette machine offers the user a choice of making fuels from a number of mixtures, including horse & cow manure; (of particular interests in areas of the Mara where large quantities of cow manure can be used in lodges as an alternative to wood), sawdust, coffee husks, water hyacinth, sugar cane, bagasse etc. The machine is also capable of producing small compost seedling briquettes for horticultural and agricultural purposes. To compliment the briquette machines, McCloy Services offer a highly efficient range of Eezy Heat multi-fuel water heaters. A first in Kenya and developed with the existing conditions, installing an Eezy Heat boiler can reduce your power bill by at least 50% and in some cases by 75%. McCloy have recently patented a charcoal making machine that will be able to make charcoal from water hyacinth, sawdust, sugarcane bagasse, wood chips etc.

As members of the Ecotourism Society of (ESOK), McCloy Services are committed to continuing the search for ways to further develop alternative energy as one way of promoting sustainable tourism practices.

For more details please call them on: Mobile 072 512196 or Tel: 503267 or Fax: 501585 or Email: mccloys@swiftkenya.com

ESOK on the web

ESOK has developed its very own website. This website is dedicated to providing information on strategies, policies, technologies and investments that promote sustainable tourism. Additionally, the site will continuously provide members and the industry with information on world trends on ecotourism and sustainable tourism. Also included will be a database of studies, reports and works that have been done in the area of ecotourism, with emphasis on works that have been done in Kenya and East Africa, case studies on best practices by tourism companies in Kenya, plus much more!

You can visit the website on: www.esok.org
Learning by Example:
A possible approach for Kenya  - Mark Hardy

The current move to develop an ecotourism scheme for Kenya, which will provide a clear framework for tourism companies to improve their practices, is a very positive development. Yet this process, if it is to be successful, will be complex and time consuming necessitating a good deal of technical input and consultation with the industry. In the mean time what can be done to foster improved practices and prepare operators for an accreditation system that will demand higher standards?

One option is to begin identifying some of the so-called ‘best practices’ that are already being employed within the industry and building case studies to illustrate how some operators are rising to the challenge of pursuing sustainable tourism in this country. Such information is desirable both in the short and long term, eventually forming an integral component of any future ecotourism scheme, falling under the technical services and clearing house functions that a scheme would be expected to offer to its members.

‘Learning by example’ has been applied in many other countries in an effort to expedite the adoption of better practices. Operators are often overwhelmed by the day-to-day challenges of running a business and find it daunting to both identify problems and seek out solutions. The sharing of knowledge and experiences between operators can be a very effective instrument of change. In Australia for instance, a considerable amount of work was undertaken in order to identify and promote better practices within the emerging ecotourism industry. Diverse examples emerged of innovative approaches such as the use of composting toilets in alpine environments, providing visitors with video surveillance of bat colonies to avoid disturbance of the creatures, micro-hydroelectric power generation, and worm farms to decompose organic wastes on tropical islands. Gradually other operators became aware of the opportunities and the case studies expanded. Making the information available on-line has further enhanced promotion of better practices.

While its certainly useful to examine international examples of ‘best practice’ in order to identify novel and perhaps ‘state-of-the-art’ approaches, Kenya’s own unique circumstances will often require home-grown solutions. Herein lies the benefits of promoting Kenyan examples of improved practices. If an operator has developed a method of reducing consumption of PET drink bottles, let’s hear about it. If water consumption at a coastal hotel has been drastically reduced so that groundwater reserves might be protected, shouldn’t all hotels in the area be encouraged to adopt similar practices?

Yet sometimes the novel approaches are not public knowledge perhaps because they offer a competitive advantage. How can the information be made more readily available? One approach is to work with companies to improve their practices so that both the baseline data and information on improvements can be shared with the industry. For example, in Jamaica and Egypt, USAID is supporting projects that involve conducting environmental audits of hotels. Out of this will flow information on the best and worst performers across the industry, types of improvements and resulting benefits (particularly financial). This way participating companies will benefit directly from the project and other operators will learn by example. Perhaps this is something we should be pursuing in Kenya? Collecting the evidence and building our case in order to convince some of the more hesitant operators that sustainability is a worthwhile goal.

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the product, education of agents and buyers so that the products can be sold more effectively, education of suppliers to supply the kind of product that customers are demanding, education of operational staff.…..and the chain continues.

The internet provides a good opportunity for learning about ecotourism trends and finding ways of tapping the market. There are a multitude of sites devoted to ecotourism – it’s actually a little overwhelming. ESOK too has just launched its own website, and amongst the features planned are “resources” and “links” sections that will attempt to monitor and organise some of the marketing information that will be useful to our members, Kenyan tour operators/facility owners and community based ecotourism projects.

There are no clear-cut answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this article. It is part of ESOK’s aim for the next year to find a way of conducting such baseline research in order to know the customer better, and therefore to be better able to promote the principles that embody ecotourism to the industry and customer alike. Knowing your customer well is after all yet another fundamental in any marketing strategy.

ESOK’s New Chairman:

Mr.Jake Grieves -Cook is the new chairman of the Ecotourism Society of Kenya. Jake, a Kenyan citizen, has a wealth of experience in the tourism industry, spanning over 30 years. Commenting on his election, Jake says, “Kenya tourism industry is now more aware than ever before of the importance of good environmental practices in the operation of safaris in our wildlife parks and reserves. As chairman of ESOK, I am pleased to have the chance to work closely with other stakeholders to promote responsible and sustainable forms of tourism in Kenya”