Sustainability as a Process

The certification organisation for sustainable tourism TourCert certifies travel and tourism enterprises and destinations worldwide with regard to their economic, ecological, and social responsibility. In our interview, CEO Marco Giraldo explains key aspects of this kind of certification.

In 2019, TourCert will celebrate its 10th anniversary. The organisation has become a respected partner in the tourism sector. How did it all start?
Tourism is a global phenomenon of major importance. In as early as 2004, the environment and development organisation KATE, Tourism Watch (a tourism desk at Bread for the World), and Forum Anders Reisen (a tour operators' association for sustainable tourism) addressed the question of how tourism enterprises handle their environmental and social responsibility and how corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be measured at all. A guideline on CSR reporting was developed, translating social and environmental standards into the reality of tourism. A pilot phase followed, over several years and in cooperation with several travel and tourism enterprises. Eventually, TourCert was founded in 2009. We offer business and management systems for tourism enterprises and destinations seeking to improve their CSR and sustainability performance beyond legal requirements. We work according to norms such as the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), also known as EU Eco Audit, as well as the ISO guideline on corporate responsibility and in line with the criteria developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. The TourCert label is therefore recognised internationally. We are successful in our approach. In a study by the Consumer Initiative (Verbraucher Initiative e.V.) and the Centre for Sustainable Tourism (ZENAT) of 2017, TourCert ranked first, second and fifth. The aspects highlighted were transparency, credibility, and the holistic approach. Furthermore, it is important to us to offer tailor-made solutions to our clients, none of them should have to wear pinching shirts. We do not want to run around pointing out mistakes. We rely on an individual approach and continuous development – step by step.

That means you see sustainability mainly as a process?
Yes, for sustainability is not a state that can be achieved all at once. Possibilities continue to emerge, you cannot implement everything simultaneously – but you can embark on the journey. In a first step, we work with the company to analyse where they stand. We conduct training programmes and workshops. This

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process takes about eight months; then we issue the first label. The re-certifications that follow – first after two years and later after three years – are further milestones. We commission independent auditors to audit the compulsory sustainability reports in which companies provide information on the measures implemented. The reports include a number of key indicators and/or minimum standards which need to be implemented, also to ensure comparability – e.g. eco-friendly electricity, or climate offsetting of business trips. The social dimension is also relevant: What about the working conditions, staff satisfaction? For example, is there a system for employee suggestions in place? Auditors are quick at understanding what has been implemented and what has remained lip-service. In the course of the process, we dig deeper and deeper. Which are the focus areas, where can the biggest impact be made? We establish a management system; the sustainability approach becomes part of the business culture. We train people who will be in charge of sustainability management. In this way, we build learning structures and enable them to develop solutions themselves. We call this “empowerment“. Sustainability must grow from within.

How do you successfully take the step from sustainable business structures within a company to the question what happens at the destination?

This is an important question indeed, for the tourist obviously does not go sightseeing at the tour operator’s or travel agent’s office. Tour operators in particular have an extensive value chain with branches in many other areas that need to be considered in the entire process from an early stage, in the form of surveys and analyses of stakeholders, service providers, and suppliers. In a second step, the company needs to establish a code of conduct in its contracts, stipulating what matters in the light of its mission statement and international CSR criteria. Of course there are natural limitations, as one can only interfere with the operations of business partners up to a certain point. However, when companies seek to work sustainably themselves, they at some stage no longer accept partners who don’t play along – and eventually look for other partners. It is a kind of chain reaction. The more sustainable suppliers a company has along its value chain, the better its so-called CSR index which can measure this process. However, I doubt if 100 percent sustainability can be achieved in all respects, though. It is rather an appeal that fetches a reward if the index improves step by step.

And at some stage in this long chain you will also reach the customer?

Yes, the CSR index then also refers to products and services bought by end customers. The TourCert community already consists of about 300 tourism

providers covering the essential elements of the value chain. At this point, I would like to mention again that we mainly work business to business. We certify companies, not products, that's why we do only very little marketing with end customers. However, we help companies to translate their efforts into a language that consumers will find attractive. TourCert has its own academy where we offer workshops and webinars on sustainability communication. For customers the TourCert label provides a value added: They may not only travel with the good feeling that our service providers minimise the ecological impact of their trip, but they can also be sure that the staff at their accommodation is paid fairly and is employed in accordance with international standards, that a proven significant part of the money spent on the trip will remain in the host country, and that the population will benefit from it.

TourCert has expanded its approach to destinations. Saarland has even been certified as an entire federal state of Germany.

In Germany, we have already certified regions such as Uckermark, Juist and Mainau islands, the northern Black Forest, as well as towns such as Celle, Bad Herrenalb, Bad Mergentheim, and Stuttgart. Saarland was the first federal state of Germany that we were able to win over. Admittedly, certifying an entire destination is a major challenge. We need to get the different sectors at the table, such as the hospitality sector, attractions, retailing, and mobility. We closely work with superior bodies, e.g. tourism associations or municipalities. The approach is comparable to the one we use with companies. We pose questions on management, value addition, ecological and social aspects. The respective associations and/or administrations then start to get the respective service providers on board as partners. A body is put in place and assigned the task of keeping all this in mind. The destination model brings a major opportunity to design tourism and to develop a common vision and strategy. For many players often don't talk to each other, one hand does not know what the other is doing. This may also backfire. Attracting as many visitors as possible to a place is not a strategy. This kind of overtourism is the result of uncontrolled management. We need a system to break up deadlocked structures in order to get back onto healthy paths.

TourCert works internationally, especially also in Latin America. What is your approach when working abroad?

TourCert cannot build its own infrastructure everywhere. We are simply too small for that. We therefore cooperate with local certifiers, auditors and partner organisations worldwide, which will then be our own representations. That's how we can establish a close relationship with tourism service providers there. The

“local“ finds it easier to understand the “local“. We are supported by eight representations and members in about 30 countries. We have offices in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Costa Rica, among others. We also work in Africa and Asia with projects in development cooperation. In these cases, we work in the respective context. Especially in countries with deficits, some things need to be examined in more detail, such as human rights, gender issues, equal opportunities, security, or compliance with regulations. In such cases, in a hotel we do not only need to ask whether the staff is paid fairly, but also whether the employees have a work contract – and the hotelier a licence. Even if we set country-specific priorities, we always keep the minimum standards. We do not exclude certain topics either because they might not be relevant.

Let’s get back to the customers’ situation. It has often been criticised that the multitude of certificates and labels rather creates confusion. What can be done about that?

Indeed, something has to happen in this regard. Just go to a hotel and you will find at least five different labels displayed at the reception. Who could know what they all mean? Some labels certify eco-friendliness, some look at fair labour conditions. They each have their own right to exist, but the labels should be aggregated. In the food industry organic products were accepted when the hexagonal bio label according to the EU eco-regulation on organic production and labelling of organic products was introduced. This label unites the numerous other labels of producers, which are added on the product along with this single label. The holistic approach of TourCert in particular combines a variety of aspects. We therefore push for a consolidation of the different labels and are in contact with other certification organisations in order to develop a common standard which at the same time will allow everyone to remain independent. This standardization will be appreciated by the customers and will be considered in their decision to buy, I’m sure of that. If we are to reach a large number of consumers in the future, this can only be achieved if we change the label landscape.

About Marco Giraldo: Marco Giraldo has since 2015 been managing partner of the innovation, consulting and certification organisation for sustainable tourism TourCert gGmbH with its head office in Stuttgart. He was previously in charge of marketing and communication, and a consultant and project manager with KATE Ecology & Development. The German-Peruvian Marco Giraldo studied business administration with a focus on hospitality management and worked in sales departments of international hotel groups for many years.

Interview: Stephanie Arns