

Are eco labels profitably employed in sustainable tourism? A case study on Audubon Certified Golf Resorts

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Abstract

The paper explores the critical role and significance of eco labels in green marketing for sustainable tourism regarding Audubon Certified Golf Resorts (ACGRs). Golf is witnessing rising strategic 'green' pressures to improve its environmental performance and participate in eco labels. The Audubon Co-Operative Sanctuary Programme (ACSP) is an international wildlife habitat management programme. Focus group interviews at an ACGR and survey on the Internet websites of thirty-four worldwide ACGRs revealed that golf tourists have very limited awareness and understanding on the ACSP since it is under marketed. Eco labels may affect the decision making of golfers subject to effective green marketing. The paper makes important contributions on how eco labels can be profitably employed in theory and practice. The paper has critical importance in increasing the perceived value for golf tourism in green marketing and eco labels for sustainable tourism.

Keywords:

Eco labels, Pro-environmental behaviour, Green marketing, Golf tourism, Sustainability

1. Introduction

Rising global population and unsustainable consumption present profound problems to human health and wellbeing and the natural environment (e.g. The Royal Society, 2012, p.3). Technical efficiency gains also tend to be overtaken by consumption growth (Midden, Kaiser and McCalley, 2007) the so-called 'rebound effect' (European Commission, 2011). Inducing more responsible environmental behaviours is therefore one of the most critical challenges for sustainability (Brewer and Stern, 2005). Thus, cost-effective mechanisms need to be identified to communicate and stimulate more pro-environmental behaviours. Eco labels are one possible instrument. They are broadly defined as any non-statutory environmental initiative that encourages businesses to voluntarily reduce their environmental impacts beyond the requirements established by the environmental regulatory system (Carmin, Darnall and Mil-Homens, 2003).

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to explore the role and significance of eco labels in stimulating pro-environmental behaviour within green marketing for enduring sustainability. This is done through a detailed case study on golf for the following reasons.

Golf's history, traditions and characteristics (Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews [R&A], 2014a), namely, its honesty, integrity, courtesy, etiquette and 'care of the course' in the Rules of Golf, within the spirit, in which the game of golf is played, is something which lifts golf, one could argue, *above* other sports. Whether it is through, for example, divot and pitch-

mark repair, the spirit of the game dictates that players make sure they give others on the course, often opponents, a fair chance to play the best shot they can. The game of golf is also self-regulating. There is seldom a referee present so golfers are reliant upon their own honest adherence to the Rules in order to enjoy the game. These inherent qualities of golf, trustworthiness, consideration, fairness and proper behaviour underpin all sustainable development for sustainability. Also, golf has a close affinity to a clean, healthy, natural environment and so it should be keen to promote, support and partake in eco labels. It can thus be argued that golf is one of the best-placed sport, tourism, and leisure activities to exemplify and champion pro- environmental behaviour for sustainability.

Indeed, golf resorts and golf clubs are experiencing growing strategic 'green' pressures (political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legislative) to improve their environmental performance (Minoli and Smith, 2011; Wheeler and Nauright, 2006). As a result, golf resorts and golf clubs are increasingly participating in eco labels (GEO, 2015a).

The leading eco labels in golf based on numbers are the Audubon Co- operative Sanctuary (ACSP), Golf Environment Organisation (GEO) OnCourse™ and Environmental par (E-pa!®). These environmental initiatives are next outlined.

In the mid-1980s, Audubon International, a prominent US non-for-profit organisation and the United States Golf Association (USGA) developed the ACSP. Audubon International's aims are to advance environmental sustainability, action conservation goals, build strong communities, inspire environmental stewardship and attain public recognition (Audubon International, 2014a). Audubon International has a range of programmes, for all organisations, but with a focus on golf courses, lodgings and communities (Audubon International, 2014b). In 2015, over 830 golf facilities, across twenty-four countries, predominantly in the USA, were certified to the ACSP (Audubon International, 2015).

In 2006, GEO a UK not-for-profit organisation was established. Its aims are to help, promote, support, reward, serve and inspire golf to fully embrace sustainability and promote a shared understanding of issues and solutions, working with and through industry associations and businesses (GEO, 2015b). GEO has developed three programmes for golf: OnCourse™, for the day-to-day management and operation of golf facilities (GEO, 2014a); the Legacy™, for golf developments and renovations (GEO, 2014b); and GreenDrive™, for all types of golf tournament and events (GEO, 2014c). In 2015, 686 international golf facilities, mainly in Europe were registered to GEO OnCourse™ (GEO, 2015a).

In 2009, E-par® was developed by the Australian Environmental Protection Agency, in conjunction with the Australian Golf Course Superintendents Association. E-par® is based on the globally recognised International Organisation for Standardisation's environmental standard (ISO) 14001. In 2015, 1200 golf facilities across more than 28 countries were clients of the E-par Group (E-Par®, 2015).

In 1996, the ISO environmental standard 14001 was introduced. It is part of the ISO 14000 family of standards that addresses various aspects of environmental management. It provides practical tools for companies and organisations looking to identify and control their environmental impact and constantly improve their environmental performance (ISO, 2014). It is estimated that around 150 golf facilities across the world have been certified to ISO 14001.

The bespoke golf eco labels, ACSP, GEO, and E-par®, are by far, the most common eco labels in golf. Generic eco labels, which are applicable for all organisations, regardless of size or activity, such as, ISO 14001, are not generally applied in golf as ISO standards were originally developed with heavy industry and manufacturing in mind. In total, there are around 34,011 golf facilities (R&A, 2015), of which an estimated 4,081 (12%) have participated in one of the above golf eco labels or an alternative voluntary environmental initiative, and this is a trend that is likely to continue for the aforesaid strategic 'green' pressures and next specific reasons.

Golfs governing bodies are strongly advocating sustainability in the sport. The R&A is

committed to improving the sustainability of the playing environment as the environmental credentials of golf come under ever-increasing legislative scrutiny (Dawson, 2011). The R&A is golf's governing body, outside of the USA and Mexico, which has the consent of 143 organisations from the amateur and professional game, and on behalf of over 30 million golfers in 128 countries throughout Europe, Africa, Asia-Pacific and the Americas (R&A, 2014b). The R&A and the USGA are working to protect the enjoyment of the game and to safeguard the financial operations of golf facilities, in a manner, which preserves natural environments and enhances community engagement (R&A, 2014c). The USGA also recognises that 'sustainable management practices are critically important to the future of the game and need to be encouraged throughout the world' (USGA, 2012). The USGA is golf's governing body in the USA and Mexico. The USGA has an environmental commitment to work to make the game more sustainable through research and education, and a commitment to protect the environment (USGA, 2014).

Further, surveys on golfers' attitudes on golf and its relationship to the environment revealed that golfers were often willing to promote and support environmental initiatives in golf (Sustainable Golf Project, 2012; Golf Digest, 2008). Furthermore, golfers need a basic awareness and understanding on the environmental aspects of golf resorts and golf clubs and the behaviours that cause them. In order to make informed choices on how to act and react to lower their impact in support of more responsible and sustainable golf (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Moreover, conflicts exist between management for wildlife and the demands of golfers and the provision of information for course managers, and communication with golfers, are therefore key issues for future improvement in sustainable golf (Hammond and Hudson, 2007). Also, conflicts and disputes can occur, among the local community and course designers and developers, for example, on the environmental, social and economic impacts of golf tourism (e.g. Briassoulis, 2011, 2007; Markwick, 2000). Eco labels, such as the ACSP and GEO OnCourse™ could help mitigate stakeholder opposition to golf tourism. Since measures to make golf courses more sustainable are a certification requirement of these programmes (GEO, 2014a; Audubon International, 2004). In addition, eco labels can cultivate positive brand reputation and develop customer loyalty (Prakash and Potoski, 2007; Zadek, 2007) in support of sustainable brands (Schultz and Block, 2013) and attract a price premium (Limehouse, Melvin and McCormick, 2010).

Recently governments have also been focusing their attention on applied models for pro-environmental behaviour, such as the UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) 4E model. DEFRA is the UK Government Department responsible for policy and regulations on environmental, food and rural issues (DEFRA, 2014). Its key aims are to grow the rural economy, improve the environment and safeguard animal and plant health. DEFRA is supported by 37 ministerial departments. The DEFRA 4E model was developed in order to help determine and formulate a policy intervention package for stimulating more responsible environmental behaviour in individuals and organisations (Collier et al., 2010; Environment Agency, 2009; DEFRA, 2008; Darnton, 2008; HM Government, 2005). Eco labels could have an important role in helping stimulate pro-environmental behaviour in sustainable golf tourism, as they should help 'encourage', 'enable', 'exemplify' and 'engage' more responsible environmental behaviour for sustainability (HM Government, 2005, p.113).

Government bodies and trade associations in golf, for example, Visit Wales, UK and the International Association of Golf Tour Operators (IAGTO) are also interested in eco labels and golf tourism. IAGTO is the global trade organisation for the golf tourism industry. Established in 1997, IAGTO's membership comprises 2164 accredited golf tour operators, golf resorts, hotels, golf courses, receptive operators, airlines, tourist boards, approved media and business partners in 96 countries including, at its core, 530 specialist golf tour operators in 62 countries. It is estimated that IAGTO's operators control over 85% of golf holiday packages sold worldwide

and turnover more than €1 billion per year (IAGTO, 2014a). In 2012, IAGTO formed a strategic partnership with GEO to support and promote sustainability in golf tourism around the world. In 2014, at the 14th IAGTO Awards Gala Dinner, four new awards were presented to golf courses for their achievements in sustainability (IAGTO, 2014b).

Similarly, Visit Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government's tourism team in the Department for Heritage, has a mandate to promote and assist sustainable Welsh tourism, under the Government Wales Act 2006 (Welsh Assembly, 2009). Thus, Visit Wales is marketing golf tourism, partly on the basis that it is played on the 'greenest of greens' in the 175 golf clubs within Wales (Visit Wales, 2015). However, so far very few golf facilities in Wales are in reality certified to any recognised, credible eco label. Thus, Visit Wales' golf tourism marketing campaign could be viewed as 'greenwashing'. Greenwashing is when a company, business or organisation spends more time and money claiming to be 'green' through advertising and marketing than actually implementing business practices that minimise environmental impact (Greenwashingindex, 2015).

On the other hand, golf resorts and golf clubs that are certified to credible eco labels can counter allegations of greenwashing. For example, the abovementioned GEO OnCourse™ programme is in fact the only sports eco label that is a member of the ISEAL Alliance (ISEAL Alliance, 2015). The ISEAL Alliance is a non-governmental, global membership association for sustainability standards with a mission to strengthen sustainability standards systems. Its membership includes the highly regarded and well-known organisations, Fairtrade International, Forest Stewardship Council and Marine Stewardship Council, and is open to all sustainability standards that demonstrate their ability to meet the ISEAL Codes of Good Practice (ISEAL Alliance, 2013). These codes and other criteria for successful eco labels are discussed in detail in the next section of the paper.

However, despite golf's unique characteristics and broad stakeholder interest in eco labels, there is surprisingly little, if any, practical inquiry on the function and value of eco labels in green marketing within sustainable golf tourism. Thus, this paper's inquiry on this topic is novel, important and particularly timely.

The paper's findings are drawn from a detailed study on Audubon Certified Golf Resorts (ACGRs) based on two units of analysis. The first unit comprised focus group interviews with golf tourists and golf managers at an ACGR. The second unit of analysis contained an in-depth survey on the Internet websites of thirty-four worldwide ACGRs. They were international, world-class and well-respected hotels entwined in golf tourism-leisure and major professional and amateur golf sporting events and also golf travel breaks and corporate/group golfing events.

The paper has value and interest not only for ACGRs but also other golf course operators and government, non-government and trade associations in the golf tourism and leisure industry and other tourism, leisure activities and areas of outstanding natural beauty as well. For example, beach visits, skiing, heritage sites, garden festivals, and local and national parks. Further influences would include major sporting events, for example, the Olympics and World Cup (football) and indeed other sectors and businesses that are involved in eco labels within green marketing for sustainability. The paper continues with a selected review of the literature, research approach, findings and conclusions.

2. Conceptualisation

2.1 *Pro-environmental behaviour and buying for sustainability*

Pro-environmental behaviour concerning this study refers to the degree in which golf tourists are aware of environmental problems and support efforts to solve them and/or indicate a personal willingness to contribute to their solution (Dunlap and Jones, 2002). One way in which golf tourists can support more responsible and sustainable golf is by 'shopping for good' (Rourke, 2012), which includes: visiting, staying and playing golf in green golf resorts and taking vacations at green golf destinations.

Indeed, golf tourists and golf club members can help create more sustainable golf resorts and golf clubs in support of sustainable tourism by taking golf holidays, visits and days out selectively. To facilitate this golf tourists need instant, reliable and highly trustworthy environmental information about the golf resorts and golf destinations that best match their personal values and beliefs. One way to achieve this is through trusted and widely accepted eco labels.

Eco labels are also meant to help catalyse more responsible environmental behaviour in golf resorts. This is because they were designed to build awareness of environmental issues (Zadek, 2007), communicate environmental information (Sammalisto and Brorson, 2008), and facilitate learning and adaptation (Genskow and Wood, 2011) that may induce pro-environmental behavioural in the longer term (Morgenstern and Pizer, 2007). The way in which eco labels affect pro-environmental behaviour concerning golf tourists buying decisions is now explored.

2.2 *Eco labels*

2.2.1 *A viewpoint*

Eco labels can be viewed as environmental 'indicators' (Zadek, 2007). As they communicate complex information about a golf resort, about which the customer wishes to be apprised of, in order to make informed decisions (Zadek, 2007, pp. 202-205). In this regard eco labels also seek to notify golf tourists on the environmental aspects and impacts of golf resorts and golf clubs and are accordingly designed as a benchmark of excellence. This is meant to encourage a positive switch towards more responsible and sustainable golf resorts. It also builds a sense of brand identification, brand value and brand loyalty and ultimately, brand sustainability (Schultz and Block, 2013). This in turn promotes greater awareness and action in the greening of golf resorts in support of sustainable tourism.

Eco labels are also intended to convey a positive message on the quality of the environmental practices in a golf resort. This is meant to inform and influence golf tourists' behaviour. This can be explained through the notion of 'windows and mirrors':

From the customer viewpoint, [eco labels] can be thought of as acting as both "windows" and "mirrors" ... as a "window", [eco labels] need to provide information that is accessible and trusted and which provides customers with a useful basis on which to make a decision. They need to know that [an eco label] exists and what it means ... (and) ... as a "mirror", the [eco label's] effectiveness as a marketing tool is secured by being associated with the triple benefits of self-expression, "feel-good factor" and positive social identity (Zadek, 2007, p.204).

Eco labels and their logos also represent 'the tip of an information iceberg' (Zadek, 2007, p. 205). Since they can imply a wide range of positive environmental messages about environmental: governance, management, accountability and performance in a golf resort. Promotional information on eco labels comes directly from the labelling designer and the retailer or manufacturer, and from other sources, such as governing and administrative bodies, trade associations, media and campaigning groups. Besides, the effectiveness of eco labels needs to

be understood in a wider context of awareness raising and education on the environmental and/or social issue concerned. This implies that the main mechanism for eco labels to work is not to change or make up the mind of a golf tourist, but to confirm an earlier decision made outside the market place influenced by marketing, the media and, crucially, civil processes (Zadek, 2007, p. 205). For example, the Forest Stewardship Council label emerged out of consistent NGO campaigning and media attention that effectively raised the issue's profile (Zadek, 2007, p.205).

2.2.2. Criteria and principles for effective eco labels

A number of criteria have been set out in support of effective eco labels, and they are as follows (Zadek, 2007, pp.204-205). Eco labels indicate that a golf resort is managed in accordance with the remit and requirements of the programme and is perceived to be relevant and important to golf tourists. This requires a degree of clarity, as golf tourists need to be aware of and understand the eco label and its logo so that they can buy into it. The eco label must also convey credibility and legitimacy, as this facilitates golf tourists' trust. In addition, the eco label must be accessible to participating golf resorts, and the implications of the programme communicated to customers of the golf resort. The verification process also has to be transparent, and preferably audited by a third party, on site visit. Registration and certification costs must also be reasonable, so they do not present a barrier to entry, and add significant value to the branding of the business. The eco label must be visible and not restricted to up-market businesses, but also include all types and sizes of golf facility. The eco label must complement, not displace local environmental regulations and policies and its tangible and intangible effects must outweigh any potentially negative side effects. Accreditation to an eco-label can convey intangible benefits; the visibility of the logo in marketing and other promotional material may influence customers' decision-making. Finally, accurate and meaningful eco labels will not necessarily capture the interest of key decision-makers in golf resorts unless they believe that such responsiveness is in line with peer expectations, while completely erroneous or unhelpful eco labels will of course lead to confusion and eventually be discredited and discarded.

Ten credibility principles for effective eco labels have also been established by the! SEAL Alliance (SEAL Alliance, 2013). Four of the ten principles are concerned with measures to encourage, engage, exemplify and enable pro-environmental behaviour for sustainability. For instance, eco label owners and retailers should do the following. (1) Clearly define and communicate their sustainability objectives and approach to achieving them and make decisions that best advance these objectives. (2) Provide meaningful and accessible opportunities to participate in governance, assurance and monitoring and evaluation.

(3) Make relevant information freely available about the development and content of the standard, how the system is governed, who is evaluated and under what process, and the various ways in which stake- holders can engage. (4) Facilitate access to information about meeting the standard.

The above criteria and principles for effective eco labels provide a means to evaluate the potential efficacy of eco labels within green marketing for sustainability. As mentioned, this *is* done through an in depth case study on a particular eco label, the ACSP and its actual implementation in an ACGR.

2.2.2. Practice

A key issue on eco labels in stimulating pro-environmental behaviour within green marketing for long-term sustainable golf is the willingness of golf tourists, golf members and corporate clients to choose to play golf at socially and environmentally responsible golf facilities i.e. credibly certified golf resorts and golf clubs. In this respect, a noteworthy survey of more than 15,000 golf courses in the United States combined with data from the ACSP on the environmental certification market of golf courses found that golf resorts and golf clubs certified to the ACSP can attract 'a substantial price premium' (Limehouse, Melvin and McCormick, 2010). The research however did no formal research on the costs of certification (Limehouse, Melvin

and McCormick, 2010, p.279). Notwithstanding that the study concluded:

... that there is a real demand for environmental quality on golf courses. This demand may come in the form of playing a course with an increased natural environment or the simple personal satisfaction of knowing that the course is environmentally friendly. Likewise, wearing a badge of certification may be a signalling device used to convey, certain ideas, or attitudes. In the end, whatever forces are driving the demand: certification appears to be a simple means of communicating the stewardship activities of a golf course, whether it is to golfers or third parties. We find that golfers pay about 10% to 18% more per round to play environmentally certified golf courses.

The ACGR, in this case study, has about 55,000 rounds of golf per annum (Director of Golf, 2015) and a normal round of golf costs an estimated £50. Thus, a 10% and 18% price premium on £50 equals £5 and £9, respectively. This extrapolates to £275,000-£495,000 (55,000 x £5-£9) for the aforesaid ACGR and £9.3-£16.8 million for all thirty- four ACGRs. As said, these figures exclude certification costs

Other related studies have examined visitor attitudes on eco labels at ski resorts and beaches, for example. These activities like golf are also reliant upon and have a close connection to an unpolluted, strong natural environment. Needham and Little's (2013) study at alpine US ski resorts found that few visitors were knowledgeable of eco labels or motivated to visit on their current trip because of these eco labels. But many intended to visit more often in the future if this area increases and promotes its eco labels. McKenna, Williams and Cooper's (2011) survey of beach visitor motivation also concluded that beach awards, such as 'Blue Flags', play an insignificant role in motivation to visit beaches. However, criteria closely identified with awards, notably cleanliness and water quality was very important. Similarly, Capacci, Scorcu & Vici's (2015, p.88) study at Italian coastal destinations concluded that 'Blue Flags' were effective in attracting foreign tourists. Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis, of over 80 published and unpublished research papers across a large number of product categories found that 'the mean percentage premium is 16.8% and that, on average, 60% of respondents were willing to pay a positive premium' on socially responsible products (Tully and Winer, 2014, p.255). Indeed, a growing number of international leisure travellers do appear to be increasingly motivated to select a destination for the quality of its environmental health, the diversity and integrity of its natural and cultural resources and environmental considerations are now an ever more significant aspect of travellers' destination-choosing process (Hudson and Hudson, 2010, pp.45-46).

2.3. Audubon Co-operative Sanctuary Programme for golf

2.3.1. A short history

As mentioned, in the mid-1980s, Audubon International, a prominent not-for-profit conservation organisation in the USA along with the USGA introduced and developed the ACSP for golf courses. ACSP is a voluntary education and certification programme that enables encourages and engages course managers to protect the golf course environment and preserve the natural heritage of the game of golf (Audubon International, 2004, 2002). The ACSP is the most widely adopted eco label in US golf resorts, but also internationally recognised. The characteristics of the ACSP emphasise the promotion of wildlife habitat management. Its mandate is to enhance the valuable natural areas and wildlife habitats that golf courses provide, improve resource efficiency, and minimise potentially harmful impacts of golf course operations (Audubon International, 2004, 2002). The programme serves as an important resource for the management of golf courses and, in common with other eco labels, is a pass-fail scheme.

2.3.2. Certification process and components

The Audubon organisation manages the entire ACSP; verifying courses, issuing certificates and providing support to participants. Courses that protect the environment, meet minimum performance criteria, conserve natural resources, and provide wildlife habitats gain certification. Certification is a public display of leadership, commitment, and high standards of environmental

management for a golf course. Each course develops and implements an individually designed environmental management plan and documents the results to gain certification. Support is provided by a previously certified mentoring golf course.

Environmental management practices and certification concerning the golf course are broken down into six key areas (Fig. 1) (Audubon International, 2004, 2002). The 'outreach and education' element is the concern of this paper since it is the mechanism that enables the golf resorts to engage, exemplify and encourage stakeholders such as golf tourists to promote and support more pro-environmental behaviour at the golf resort.

2.3.3. 'Outreach and education'

'Outreach and education' (Fig. 1) is a critically important part of the ACSP, as it ensures on-going support for stewardship initiatives, strengthens local community connections, and extends participation in environmental activities. It also improves a golf resort's ability to communicate and implement its environmental commitment, provides opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to environmental projects, and educates stakeholders on projects for improving the environmental quality of the golf resort.



Source: Adapted from Audubon International (2004, 2002)

Fig. 1. Audubon Co-Operative Sanctuary Programme for golf. Source: adapted from Audubon International (2004, 2002).

To facilitate this there is a Resource Advisory Group (RAG) that is an element of the 'Outreach and Education' requirement in the ACSP for golf. The RAG is tasked with the planning, implementation and communication on the environmental projects at a golf resort. It also aims to educate stakeholders on projects for improving the environmental quality of the golf course. In order to ensure support for stewardship initiatives, strengthen local community connections, and extend participation in environmental activities (Audubon International, 2002, 2004). It includes an appropriate person or organisation, for the planning, implementing and communicating of the environmental projects at the golf resort. Golf resort stakeholders are also invited to become members of this group and are encouraged to participate in stewardship projects, for example, the inventory of wildlife species. In addition, displays, written materials, and communication channels, must be developed and maintained, to describe the golf resort's involvement in the ACSP. A responsible person(s), such as the director of golf and/or course manager, is required to oversee all of the above aspects of the 'outreach and education'. Audubon International claims that its programme is an effective and practical initiative that benefits the environment and changes stakeholder attitudes and behaviour (Audubon International 2004, 2002). However, until now, there has been no real independent evaluation of this assertion.

3. Research strategy and methods

A case study was chosen to collect, analyse and interpret the data on the subjects of this study for the following reasons. The inquiry adopted a post-positivist position, namely that reality can *never* be fully apprehended but only approximated. A case study including mixed methods offered a way to capture as much of reality as possible (Guba, 1992). Further, the general principle of triangulation states that the collection of evidence from a range of individuals and settings, using more than one method, reduces the risk that conclusions will reflect only the biases or limitations of a specific research method (Creswell, 1994). Thus allowing for a better assessment of the validity and the generality of the explanations that are developed (Maxwell, 1996).

Furthermore, a case study was selected, as it fitted this type of social inquiry. There was *very* limited, if any, empirical research on eco labels and sustainable golf tourism management, thus this was an exploratory study. Also the research involved asking 'what' and 'how' questions about a contemporary event in its natural setting to make analytical generalisations. These research conditions are particularly suited to the case study strategy (Yin, 2009). The case study contained two units of analysis. The first unit of analysis was an ACGR. This was randomly selected, from a list of worldwide golf resorts, certified to the ACSP (Audubon International, 2015). The characteristics of the ACGR led to three embedded units of analysis. (1) Type of eco label: a golf specific label, the ACSP. The ACGR successfully achieved initial certification to ACSP in January 2010. Successful second and third recertifications in 2012 and 2014 followed this.

(2) Form of ownership: the ACGR was a large, privately-owned facility, managed by a leading, international tourism hospitality operator and franchisor, which has an extensive environmental and social responsibility programme in partnership with a wide range of organisations. (3) Stakeholders: golf tourists and golf managers at the ACGR.

The second unit of analysis contained a survey on thirty-four purposefully selected ACGRs (Audubon International, 2015). Surveys are a relatively cost-effective means to collect unbiased data that can lead to future replication (Hutton, 1990). The ACGRs Internet website homepages were analysed to explore the external marketing, advertising and communication of the golf eco label, ACSP, to golf tourists and golf club members, for example.

The validity of the study's research design was addressed through the steps described by Yin (2009, pp. 43-44). (1) For construct validity, several sources of evidence were triangulated on the topic of this study: documents, semi-structured interviews, on-site observations, face-to-face conversations, and Internet websites and videos. (2) To maintain internal validity, the analytical tactic of pattern matching was employed (described below). (3) To build external validity, the case study sought to make analytical, rather than statistical generalisations: it generalises a set of findings from its particular design (Yin, 2009). (4) To construct reliability, that is, to minimise errors and biases in the case study, a case study protocol and case study database were developed during procedures on data collection.

The collection of evidence involved preparation and collection phases. The preparation phase *covered* the procedures for protecting human subjects, the development of a case study protocol, and the selection of the candidate cases for the case study (Yin, 2009). The research followed conventional research ethics: informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality. The case study protocol contained an overview of the case study project, its process and interview topics.

The first data collection phase sought to capture the views and attitudes of golf tourists and golf managers in a ACGR. This was done through three focus group interviews. The first and second focus groups comprised six men and five women golf tourists, respectively. They were randomly selected from the men and women golf members committees at the golf resort. As such, they had the most knowledge, in comparison to other golf members, visitors and tourists on the day-to-day course management at the golf facility. This is because the Director of Golf and Head Greenkeeper, provided details on the course management at monthly club committee meetings. Further, all participants in the focus groups regularly went on away days, weekends and/or weeklong holidays for the sole purpose of playing golf and so had *valid* knowledge and experience on golf tourism.

Furthermore, all focus group participants were long-standing, avid golfers, as they had been playing golf for at least 15 years and so in total they had around 165 years of golfing experience (11 participants x 15 years). The third focus group included four ACGR golf employees, namely, Director of Golf, Head Greenkeeper, Head Professional and Marketing/Sales Manager. Thus, it can be argued that the three focus groups formed a valid unit of analysis for the case study.

The case participants' *views* were captured in focussed; semi-structured interviewing, for a period of time (20-30 min each). Since this method is a potentially powerful and effective way to capture people's feelings on a topic (Graham, 2005; Roulston, 2010). The interviews sought to discover the case study participant's attitudes on golf and its relationship to the environment and in particular their level of awareness, understanding and reaction on the fact that the golf resort was certified to the ACSP. The participants' comments on these topics were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed for analysis.

The second data collection phase involved an in-depth survey. It contained an investigation on the Internet websites of the thirty-four worldwide ACGRs and videos on the golf course of ten ACGRs. This was done because the Internet and video recording are potentially important mechanisms to cost-effectively market, advertise and communicate the golf eco label, ACSP, to worldwide stakeholders, including golf tourists.

The analytical technique of 'pattern matching' was used to analyse the collected evidence (Yin, 2009, pp. 136-141). Pattern-matching logic compared excerpts from the interview transcripts and information from Internet websites and video recordings of the ACGRs with the study's line of inquiry. Specifically, quotations were taken from the interview texts on golf tourists' awareness, understanding, attitudes and response towards ACGRs.

4. Finding

4.1. Unit 1 of analysis: semi-structured focus group interviews with golfers

As stated, the 'outreach and education' element of the programme is the principle mechanism for golf resorts to engage with its internal and external stakeholders. To facilitate this there is a RAG and an environmental champion. Further, the objectives of the ACSP are communicated by displays on golf resort notice boards, and certificates must be presented in prominent locations around the golf resort, such as the professional shop. The aim is to raise awareness and gain support from golf tourists, golfleisure members and ACGR golf employees for environmental initiatives that arise from the programme.

There is some evidence that the 'outreach and education' element of the ACSP is working as intended concerning golf tourists. This is shown in the following interview excerpts. Quotations from the women and men golf tourists and ACGR golf members of staff, are denoted with a 'W', 'M' and 'S', respectively.

When (the ACSP was) marketed with photographic evidence on the 'butterfly sanctuary' on the golf course I can honestly say that every- one seemed to be looking and noticing it ... because ... it was eye catching ... ideally we would like it to be there all the time to promote what is happening here (5¹).

However, in general the Audubon programme is under, marketed advertised and communicated to golf tourists. For example, most golf tourists had very limited knowledge and understanding of the programme, as demonstrated in the following interview quotations:

Never heard of the (ACSP) (M¹).

I heard of the (ACSP) ... but I do not fully understand what it's about

(M3).

I have to say I didn't take the (ACSP) in as being environmental (F¹).

(The golf resort) have got Audubon status ... it is to do with protecting wildlife ... rather than shrubbery ... they are leaving it wild with weeds and flowers (F¹).

This is regrettable for a number of reasons. Environmental governance is not only a corporate concern; it is also on the radar of golf tourists. Indeed, golf tourists expect golf resorts to conform to the highest standards and adopt responsible practices, and they would be 'disappointed' if the golf resort were not supportive of the environmental agenda. This is shown in the subsequent quotes:

I would expect the golf resort (to have adopted eco labels), if they didn't I would be disappointed (W¹).

If the golf resort has signed up (to the ACSP), that's the first satisfying thing (M²).

It is unknown if golf tourists would prefer a course affiliated to a golf eco label, such as the ACSP over one that was not. Even so, course aesthetics are an important part of the golf experience, which can be enhanced by the ACSP that may in turn encourage patronage, client retention and customer satisfaction. These points are revealed in the next interview excerpts:

(This golf course) ... its beautiful, it's got trees, you walk around it, and it's different every time you play ... because of the trees. It's a superb place to come ... to go and play (M¹).

(The wildlife is) part of the pleasure of the land, spotting it all (W³).

This is the ideal course because it's got nature all around it ... it's a mature course ... its got history, its got atmosphere (M²).

We haven't mentioned the trees, the magnificent trees (W³).

(A poor golf course environment) just looks a bit barren to be honest ... makes it bland to look at (M³).

You've got to get the balance right. I love nature, I love to see flowers, trees, I love to pick chestnuts ... cherries ... plums ... apples (M²).

I'd rather have it left naturally than tart it up just to make it look nice (w4).

However, the role and significance of eco labels, such as the ACSP on wildlife habitat management, golf course aesthetics, and golfing experience, need to be effectively marketed, advertised and communicated to golf tourists in order for them to buy into the programme. This is illustrated in the next interview excerpt:

I really don't think (ACSP) makes any difference to a golf tourist as to where he's going ... all he's going for is his game of golf ... (except if) ... the course is a little bit special (the golfer) might start to wonder well why it is a bit special and if it's because of the (ACSP) ... it might then make a difference (M⁵).

Moreover, golf tourists show latent support for stewardship initiatives on the golf

course, as revealed in the following interview excerpts:

I think if (golf tourists) were made aware of what (the ACSP) was, I'm sure if it is to do with the environment, yes, (golf tourists) would support it (W³).

I would like to know more about what (environmental initiatives) are being done on the golf course (W²).

Further, a lack of environmental communication can mean that the ACSP is misinterpreted which is totally counter-productive; for example, uncut grass was seen as unprofessional green-keeping practice, as illustrated in the following quotation:

I didn't like it at first because I thought it was really untidy ... "Oh its just lazy people haven't been cutting that" (S²).

Another important outcome of the programme is the issue of an award and certificate to the golf resort and the greenkeeper, respectively. Participation in eco labels, such as the ACSP exemplifies commitment to environmental management and governance. Environmental champions, such as the Head Greenkeeper, responsible for implementing the programme are rewarded with a certificate in recognition of their efforts, as shown below:

I am aware that (the Head greenkeeper) is working on (the ACSP) and he's very proud of it ... well he's been here since he was 16 and he loves the place ... when he talks about (the golf resort) he's passionate ... I understand he's got certificates for his achievements (SI).

However, the effectiveness of these awards and certificates could be greatly amplified. The golf resort could expend greater effort on the marketing, advertising, promotion and communication of the programme in general and associated environmental projects, as illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

There may be an opening for a book which could be updated as to what the (Greenkeeper) is doing, that wouldn't take up a Jot of space and that could be left on display in the foyer so if someone wanted to pick it up and read it (S¹).

Why don't they have a leaflet in the foyer which says "This is how (the golf resort) is looking after the environment" ... what great assets they have going on this wonderful piece of land ... and update it on a regular basis, to distribute, to show that they are doing something ... You get a (golfer) in here, he just knocks a ball around, "Oh that's a big tree", but if he knew a little bit more about it you'd take more care of the environment ... its good PR (M²).

Yet, there are attitudinal barriers that constrained the programme's capacity to engage with golf tourists on environmental management. For example, there was a perceived lack of space for displays on environmental initiatives at the golf resort and the communication of environmental issues was not perceived as high priority, as illustrated in the next interview excerpt:

Well the unfortunate thing is we are restricted for space to display things ... when (the Greenkeeper) put those things on the board he took a large space. We're crying out for space ... we just need so much to put things up, to advertise things and although he does put things up it cannot be there forever but I'm sure everyone is aware of what (the Greenkeeper) is doing ... (and) ... certain things take priority and that is a golfer's needs and the notices on the notice board up there are covering ... local rules, competition results, course report (S¹).

Furthermore, the ACGR could be more effective in publicising and marketing the programme

to golf tourists, as shown in the following series of interview excerpts:

(The ACSP) obviously hasn't been marketed as well as it could have been has it (w4).

If I was management and it was my company I would make sure people knew all about (ACSP) (W³).

I read up on it on the website, but I wouldn't have if you hadn't have made me aware that (the golf resort) do it, and there is quite a lot on the website by the way (M²).

The next unit of analysis explores the implementation of the 'out-reach and education' aspect of the Audubon programme on the Internet.

4.2. Unit 2 of analysis: survey on the internet websites of ACGRs

Table 1 gives details on the ACGRs and their communication and marketing of the golf eco label, ACSP, to golf tourists-visitors-members on the Internet. It shows that thirty-four golf resorts were certified to the ACSP for golf. Of which, 23 and 11 were in the Americas and Europe, respectively. Moreover, the table shows that the Audubon logo was not displayed on any of the ACGRs Internet homepage websites. Furthermore, the ACSP award was mentioned in just 4 out of 34 of their Internet websites. What is more, information on the role and function of the ACSP was evident in only 2 out of the 34 Internet websites of the ACGRs. In addition, the table shows that ten UK 'Marriott Certified Audubon Sanctuaries' (Nos. 24-33 in Table 1) had videos of their golf courses on their Internet websites. However, no information on the role and significance of the ACSP was included in the golf course videos. Finally, in November 2013, the ACGR (No. 12 in Table 1) won the highly prestigious 'Sustainable Golf Course of the Year' award in the inaugural IAGTO's annual sustainability awards (IAGTO, 2014a). Yet, the award was not mentioned on the above ACGR's Internet website, three months later.

Thus, based on the above two units of analysis of the study it is clear that the 'outreach and education' part of the ACSP, a key mechanism for engaging with internal and external stakeholders, for example, golf tourists could be better implemented and verified in green marketing within sustainable golf tourism-leisure.

5. Conclusions

This paper investigated the potential function and value of eco labels in helping stimulate pro-environmental behaviour within green marketing for sustainability, through a detailed case study on golf. The data came from: interviews with golf tourists, on-site observations and one-to-one conversations in a golf resort certified to the Audubon programme and, a survey on all thirty-four worldwide ACGRs.

5.1. Findings and implication of the study

The ACSP is an important and long-standing eco label for golf that continues to stimulate knowledge and awareness of environmental issues on the golf course. However, the Audubon programme including its 'outreach and education' component could be better employed in relation to green marketing for sustainable golf tourism. The main finding of the case study was that golf tourists had a lack of awareness and understanding on the ACSP, since the 'outreach and education' requirement of the programme was under-marketed to golf tourists at ACGRs. There were two explanations for this. First, the ACGRs marketing advertising and communication on the fact that its golf property was certified to the ACSP targeted the corporate client, since corporate responsibility affects their 'buying decisions' (Director of Golf,

2013). It is unknown if this is also the case for the golf tourist. Thus, the ACGRs have not really explored cost-effectively marketing their eco label to this customer segment. Second, the ACSP is a self-assessment programme, as such it does not involve independent, third party, on-site verification.

This is an important requirement for effective eco labels (ISEAL Alliance, 2013; Deleon and Rivera, 2010; Zadek, 2007). In addition, four conditions for effective eco labels should be better employed concerning ACGRs (ISEAL Alliance, 2013; Zadek, 2007). (1) Sustainability objectives on the golf course and the approach to achieving them should be further defined and communicated. More to hand opportunities to participate in environmental initiatives should be provided to golf tourists as they show latent and tacit support for more responsible environmental behaviour. (2) Freely available information on the ACSP and the environmental initiatives should be provided to golf tourists- members and other third parties.. and (3) the ACSP logo and certificates should be better promoted throughout the golf resort and on the Internet.

Table 1

ACGRs' internet marketing of the ACSP.

No.	Name	ACGRs		Internet marketing of ACSP	
		Geography	Logo	Award	Role
1.	ACGR	Americas	No	Yes ¹	No
2.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
3.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
4.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
5.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
6.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
7.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
8.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
9.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
10.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
11.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
12.	ACGR	Americas	No	Yes ²	Yes ³
13.	ACGR	Americas	No	Yes	No
14.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
15.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
16.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
17.	ACGR	Americas	No	Yes	Yes ⁴
18.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
19.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
20.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
21.	ACGR	Americas	No	Yes ⁵	No
22.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
23.	ACGR	Americas	No	No	No
24.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
25.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
26.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
27.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
28.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
29.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
30.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
31.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
32.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
33.	ACGR	Europe	No ⁶	No	No
34.	ACGR	Europe	No	No	No
		Totals	0/34	4/34	2/34

Notes:

(1) Audubon International: Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary, 2009 in 'Awards' section.

(2) Audubon International: Certified Audubon Cooperative

(3) Sanctuary in 'Going Green' section. (3) Very brief explanation on the ACSP.

(4) Two page explanation on the ACSP

(5) Audubon International: Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary 2008-2012 in 'Notable Awards' section.

(6) ACGRs with videos of the golf course.

In turn, this would heighten the programme's credibility and efficacy on pro-environmental behaviour for sustainability.

Heightening golf tourists' environmental awareness and understanding on eco labels may well affect their decision-making concerning golf vacations. There is a significant growing green consumer market and an element of green may even be a standard component of all products and services (Mintel, 2010). Indeed, sustainability considerations are a critical requirement in the staging of major sporting events. For example, The Open (The British Open), which is the oldest of the four major golf championships in professional golf, European Golf Professional Tour, and the Ryder Cup, a biennial professional golf event between teams from the USA and Europe (GEO, 2011). These international golf-sporting events must now be staged at GEO certified golf clubs (Allison, 2015; Gilyeat, 2015). This requirement might in future be extended to include major amateur sporting and corporate events and also golf facilities generally.

The fact that a golf resort has an eco-label, such as the ACSP also conveys the message that it is being managed in accordance with, and reflects, golf tourists' own personal values and expectations. There is some evidence to suggest that golfers expect and approve of golf facilities that engage in environmental governance. Eco labels also protect and conserve the golf course aesthetics, which are an important part of a heightened golfing experience. Thus, eco labels may have a potentially important role in customer retention and generation of new business opportunities. However, this is subject to appropriate and effective green marketing initiatives on eco labels that target golf tourism, leisure and sport event staging. This could involve eco label owners and retailers sponsoring regional, national and international golf competitions and local 'open-days'. In addition, it is essential that golf eco labels be effectively marketed throughout a tourism facility. Furthermore information on eco labels must be freely available to golf tourists. This information has to be disseminated throughout the golf resort, for example, the golf resort entrance, pro shop, changing rooms, 'starters hut' 'halfway house' and of course the golf resort's internet website. The starters hut is located beside the first hole of a golf course and halfway house is situated between the 9th and 10th hole in a golf course for the provision of hot and cold food and beverages. In addition, the fact that a golf resort has been certified to an eco-label should be communicated to the wider golf community, for example, the corporate and public client, golf tourist and golf 'nomad' via competition and travel websites on the Internet.

Regarding public policy three progressive approaches already exist to mitigate environmental problems. Traditionally they have been dealt with through environmental policy and legislation: the so-called 'command and control' approach. Governments, more recently, have employed market incentives (e.g. environmental taxes, subsidies and grants) to encourage more responsible environmental behaviour in business. Since the 1980s governments in conjunction with this approach have been increasingly interested in eco labels to support and advance public policy on the environment. Eco labels could cost-effectively help stimulate more pro-environmental behaviour, as they are popular tools of public policy and business practice. This hypothesis could be tested in further research. Finally any eco label which will be successful in the long run must not be perceived as simple greenwashing (Ramus and Monteil, 2005), but must have real, positive and tangible long term benefits to all key stakeholders.

5.2. Limitations and conclusion of the study

The findings of the paper should be interpreted in the light of its limitations. They were derived from a case study and survey on ACGRs. It is therefore not possible to make generalisations about other golf resorts' participation in alternative eco labels, for example, GEO OnCourse™, E-par® and ISO 14001. The study was also restricted to an investigation on the opinions of a small sample of men and women tourist golfers and some important management employees at one ACGR. Thus, the findings may not be generalised to include the views of other golf tourists and golf managers generally.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study is the first of its kind to investigate the important

role and significance of a long-standing eco label for golf, ACSF, in helping stimulate pro-environmental behaviour within green marketing for sustainable golf tourism. The paper provides initial insight on the current practices regarding eco labels and golf resorts in green marketing for sustainability. The study also offers an indication on how golf resorts are using and not using eco labels to market, advertise and communicate on their corporate social responsibility. The study thus provides initial understanding and insight on an important and much under-researched topic that has value for golf tourism and other sectors and businesses involved in this issue.

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