

QUALITY SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES IN AGRO-ECOTOURISM ENTERPRISES: A CASE STUDY IN THESSALY.

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ABSTRACT

Tourism comprises a self-contained phenomenon synonymous to consumption and spare time and its growth, due to the development of technology and the improvement of the standards of living, has taken global dimensions. As a result tourism has developed to a pure industry, leading the economy and society in local, regional, national and global level to important changes. Based to the quality and the value of the natural and cultural heritage, as well as to the growth of the level of the given services, tourism is directed to the boom of alternative types of tourism and especially agro-ecotourism, which went through an enormous rise and demand. The change of the consumer's behavior and the tourist's consideration of the environment has led organizations taking actions in the sector, to the adoption of high level of standards in all aspects of the generative procedure. The main reason for this continual improvement of the service level and the quality of the given services, as well as the clamp-down for the protection of the environment, was the reason that sustainable tourist growth

became a strategic aim. The quality and the practices that ensure sustainability are a continuous procedure which is accomplished with the implementation of quality systems, aiming to achieve the Total Quality. Companies which comply with the specific standards receive quality marks, which conform to this kind of favour that will remain to the consumer's consciousness.

In that perspective, the aim of the research was to examine whether agro-ecotourist enterprises are certified for the given services, for the protection for the consumers/ tourists, as well as for the protection of the environment. The research was carried out in the first two months of 2013 in the region of Thessaly, and more specifically in the prefecture of Karditsa.

Through the use of questionnaires and personal interviews, data was gathered and analyzed with the use of SPSS. Through statistical analysis, we detect that the majority of the organizations do not apply any certification system for the services that offer. However, most of the entrepreneurs were disposed to learn them and apply them to their companies.

Key words: Tourism enterprises, quality systems, consumer's protection, Karditsa, Greece.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current challenges make the constant search and adoption of sustainable touristic development necessary. This kind of development has both the human and the environment in the centre of interest. The touristic development should aim to both increase the level of the offered services' quality and to incorporate activities that would upgrade the environment. The first main point of environmental certification took place in 1985, when the first blue flags were

awarded as a way to encourage the abeyance of the European Council's legislation for swimming water quality.²

In 1996, the organization of international standards launched ISO 14001, which is awarded to organizations, industries and touristic enterprises. In 1998, the environmental program of the United Nations published its first report concerning ecological signs for tourism. EMAS was invented by the local authorities and it is the only version for the services.

The incorporation of an environmental direction to the touristic enterprises may well contribute to their sustainable development. On the one hand the preservation of the quality of the environment is necessary to maintain a good quality level in the touristic industry. On the other hand, being environmentally conscious and developing such activities, may be used as tools by the touristic enterprises in order to attract visitors.³

The main strategic target of touristic development is the constant improvement of the services and products provided.

2. QUALITY AND CERTIFICATION IN THE GREEK TOURISTIC INDUSTRY

According to the evaluations and predictions so far, the visitability of the Greek touristic destinations has been severely damaged by the crisis while other destinations' visitability has remained intact or ever increased. The current adverse situation brings forward the eternal problems of Greek tourism and it makes it necessary for the touristic enterprises to change their developmental strategies.

Since the beginning of the 90s, the characteristics of the activity of the Greek touristic industry have utterly changed. However, Greek tourism has not managed to live up to the modern challenges and expectations. Little attention was paid to

² Avlonitis S. (2003) Control Data & Quality Ensurance, Ellin publications, Athens

³ Spanos I., Lagoudi A. (2002) Complete environmental management for hotel units. The prerequisites of development, www.hotel-restaurant.gr

the development of the general touristic product and to the upgrade of the services offered.

The current decade is characterized by deep recession that has brought into surface all the structural weaknesses and the problems of the Greek touristic industry. The establishment of special institutions and scientists brought about the necessity to adopt new entrepreneurial policies that would focus on the upgrade of the services and the pursuit of quality in order to ensure sustainability and competitiveness.

The Greek touristic industry is in the middle of a critical crossroad. The consumerist attitude has changed, new destinations and markets have appeared, new forms of tourism have developed, new technologies have emerged and the touristic products now follow different paths.

Under the shadow of the current adverse situation, quality is considered to be one of the main targets that will eventually lead the touristic industry out of the crisis.

Despite the excessive touristic mobility and the large profits made out of it, it is a fact that we have not yet reached the desired level of services and infrastructure.⁴ Many hotel units, small or large, have adopted policies and strategies so as to improve the quality of the services their offer.

The installation of standardization qualifications prepares the ground for satisfied costumers, high productivity, satisfied employees and increased competitiveness.

3. CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS IN GREEK AGROTOURISM

So far in Greece there is no commonly accepted certification system. The term “certification” is widely used but every time it refers to different things.

All the touristic institutions agree that the qualification systems for sustainable tourism should incorporate elements of both the procedure and the execution. However, the emphasis should be on execution. The certification signs are

⁴ Tsiotras G. (2002), Quality Improvement Mpenou publications, Athens

awarded by non-governmental organizations, private companies and governmental organizations. They are awarded to all those businesses that meet certain criteria.

The lack of specific methods to impose sustainable development in the touristic industry has provoked the emergence of a number of voluntary initiatives in the form of ethic codes, guidebooks, awards and ecological signs. There are many ecological signs that are characterized by different meanings, criteria, geographical field, complex messages, covering thus the requirements of an evaluation process. Due to the large number of the existed qualification systems, there is a confusion concerning the advantages of each one.

The certification systems that exist today are:

♥ **Agrocert certification system:** it provides certification to protected destination of origin and protected geographical indication products as well as to special poultry products.

♥ **Agrotourism Certification System:** it was established in Greece by AGROTOURISTIKI S.A and it is awarded to touristic businesses of the countryside.

♥ **Local Quality Agreements:** Globalization and open markets have resulted in the increase of competitiveness for the agricultural regions. In order to face the new situation, to promote themselves in the market, to support their local services and products, many regions in Greece and Europe have established the “Local Quality Agreements”. The Local Quality Agreements in tourism focus on the improvement of the quality of the services offered in the countryside. They differentiate the touristic products by incorporating elements of traditional legacy (architecture, gastronomy), that is the identity of each region. The target is to exploit the local production of agricultural products.

There are the following certification systems in the field of the research:

◆ **Local Agreement PINDOS:** The main target of this certification is to form the appropriate circumstances for sustainable development in the mountains. The implementation of an alternative developmental model aims to withhold the current population and to attract new. The entrepreneurs that will be awarded by PINDOS, will obtain several privileges, such as the preservation of the agricultural

identity, the designation of cultural legacy and the proposition and implementation of initiatives.

◆ **The Local Quality Agreement “Xenios Zeus”**: The local quality agreement for tourism in the prefecture of Kozani, titled as “Xenios Zeus”, is a modern cooperation of private character that is charged with the responsibility to benefit the society and its citizens. This company, which was created mainly for the local quality agreement, is of social, educative, scientific, environmental and nonprofit nature.

4. THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

4.1 The methodology of the research

In order to examine the degree of adaptation and implementation of certification systems in agrotourism, a field research was realized in March 2012. The field of the research was certain agrotouristic enterprises in the prefectures of Kozani and Florina. These two prefectures are engaged with an agrotouristic identity and development that has been upgraded during the past decade.

The 25 enterprises that participated in the research invested on their businesses and were funded by the Community Initiative operational Program LEADER+ and by the programs of agricultural regional growth (OPAAH) in order to upgrade or establish restaurants and coffee shops.

The research was realized through structured questionnaires that were completed by the means of personal interviews. The questionnaire includes four units. The first unit is about the demographic characteristics and it consists of two subunits which have six and five questions respectively. The second unit includes eighteen questions and examines the evaluation of Leader+ in the prefectures of Kozani and Florina. This unit defines and assesses the impact of the program, positive or negative, on the local economy. The third unit consists of nineteen questions that refer to the evaluation of the certification systems ISO and HACCP, the respective local systems and their contribution to the increase of competitiveness. Finally, the participants make their propositions and talk about their plans to acquire a

kind of certification system and they also talk about the future of agrotourism in general and their business in particular.

4.2 The findings of the research

After statistically processing the answers, the following conclusions can be reached:

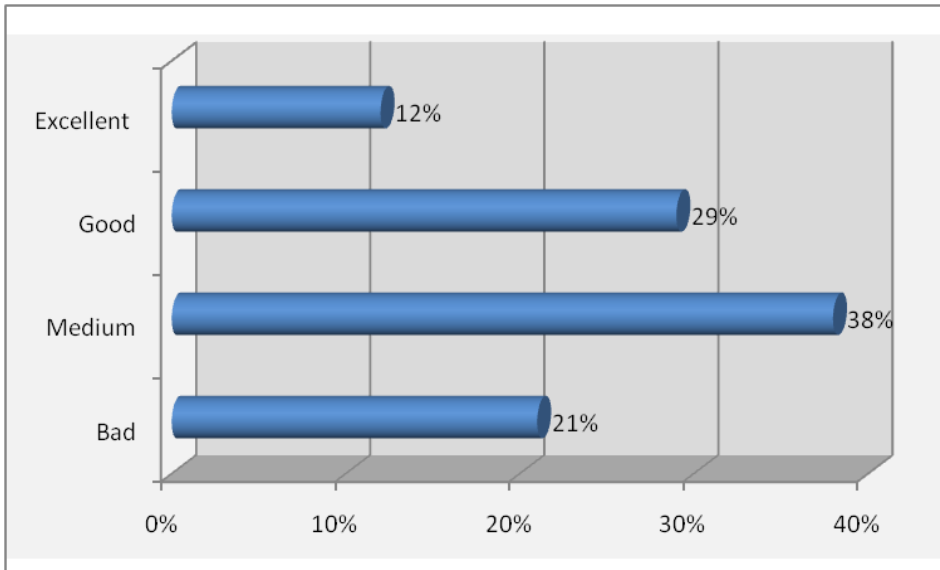
The majority of the participants in the research are men between 31 and 40 years old while women of the same age represent on 8% of the respondents. 21% and 13% of the participants are men of 41-50 and 51-60 respectively while the respective percentage for women is much lower: 4%.

What is quite interesting is the level of education of the participants. 71% of them are secondary education graduates. 21% of them are upper education graduates and only 8% are primary education graduates.

Most of the respondents (54%) have been working in the touristic industry from 6 to 10 years. Those who have been active in tourism business from 1 to 5 and from 11 to 15 years share the same percentage: 21%. Only 4% have been in the business from 16 to 20 years. Therefore, the research is mainly about “young” enterprises.

The participants’ evaluation about the level of quality of agrotourism in the prefectures of Kozani and Florina was recorded as follows: medium (38%), good (29%), bad (21%) and excellent (12%). Here is the relative graph:

1st Graph: Level of quality in Agrotourism



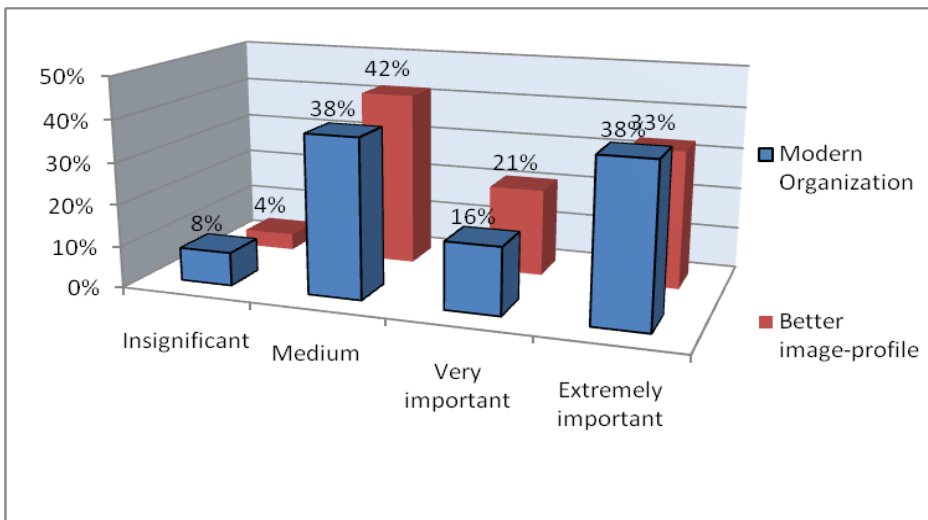
The vast majority of the agrotouristic enterprises (92%) are not ISO certified. That leaves only a percentage of 8% of enterprises that are certified.

The agrotouristic enterprises argue that an ISO certification gives an enterprise a comparative advantage. This comparative advantage concerns the modern organization, the better image, the better quality of services offered and eventually the satisfied customer.

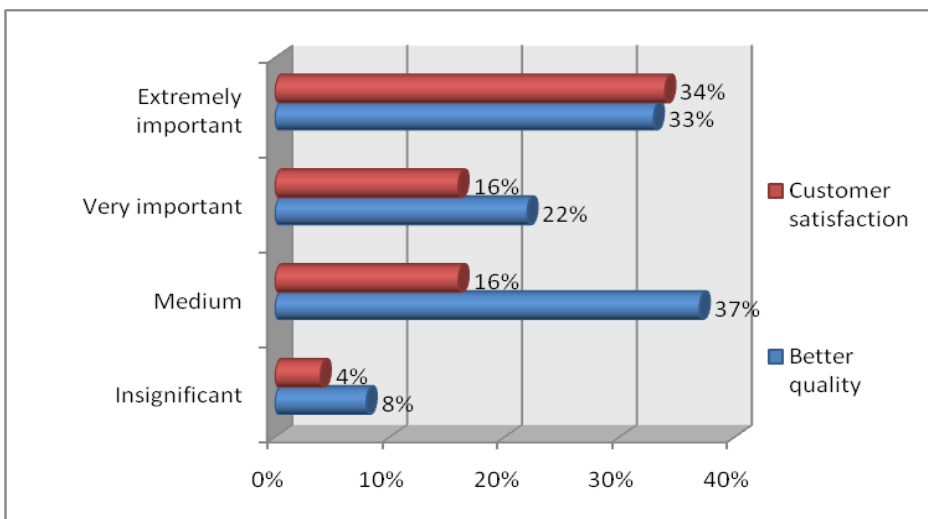
More particularly, the advantages are evaluated to be of medium importance to of extreme importance. Only a low percentage of the participants (4-8%) consider that the advantages from an ISO certification are indifferent.

These evaluations are presented in the following diagram:

2nd Diagram: Evaluation of the advantages from ISO certification



3rd Diagram: Evaluation of the advantages from ISO certification



Only 8% of the enterprises are ISO certified.

The biggest part of the participants consider that the benefit from HACCP certification is extremely important. The evaluations are presented in the following table:

3rd Table: Evaluation of the advantages from HACCP certification

	Medium	Much	Very Much
Costumer's satisfaction	21%	33%	46%
Food quality	21%	29%	50%
Product Security	25%	33%	42%
Employees' Security	25%	29%	46%
Sanitary Production Conditions	21%	33%	46%

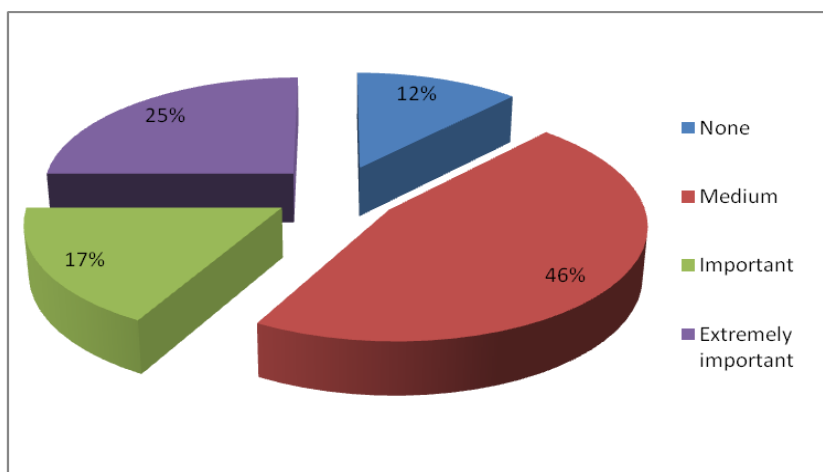
The only local certification that some of the enterprises have been awarded to, is the local quality agreement "Xenios Zeus". 17% of the participant enterprises are certified by "Xenios Zeus".

Most of the respondents consider that the contribution of local certification systems to the increase of competitiveness in agrotouristic enterprises is of medium importance. The evaluations are presented in the following graph:

When it comes to the contribution of the program Leader+, the evaluations seem to consider it of medium importance for the reduction of local inequalities (34%), the new investments (35%), the upgrade of traditional settlements (42%) and the utilization of local products (34%).

The respondents think that the impact of Leader+ on the enhancement of entrepreneurship (46%), on the creation of new jobs and attraction of new investments (37%), is important.

4th Graph: Contribution of local certification systems to the increase of competitiveness in agrotouristic enterprises



The majority of the participant enterprises think that the local economy has been importantly benefited from the new investments by creating new jobs and additional incomes.

The participants seem to consider medium or minimum the impact on the rise of prices (37%), on the income outflow (37%). They also believe that the negative impact on the local economy is of minimum importance (46%).

Many respondents appear to be rather pessimistic about the future course of agrotourism due to the economic crisis, the problematic infrastructure and the limited accessibility and transportation.

Another restraining factor is that a big part of the funding was given to entrepreneurs that did not have the technical knowledge to offer quality services to the costumers.

The majority of the respondents predict that the future of their enterprises will be from stable to worse and they mainly justify this prediction to their pending bank loans.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The current challenges make the constant search and adoption of sustainable touristic development necessary. This kind of development has both the human and the environment in the centre of interest. The touristic development should aim to both increase the level of the offered services' quality and to incorporate activities that would upgrade the environment.

The Greek touristic industry is in the middle of a critical crossroad. The consumerist attitude has changed, new destinations and markets have appeared, new forms of tourism have developed, new technologies have emerged and the touristic products now follow different paths.

Under the shadow of the current adverse situation, quality is considered to be one of the main targets that will eventually lead the touristic industry out of the crisis.

Despite the excessive touristic mobility and the large profits made out of it, it is a fact that we have not yet reached the desired level of services and infrastructure.⁵ Many hotel units, small or large, have adopted policies and strategies so as to improve the quality of the services their offer.

The lack of specific methods to impose sustainable development in the touristic industry has provoked the emergence of a number of voluntary initiatives in the form of ethic codes, guidebooks, awards and ecological signs. There are many ecological signs that are characterized by different meanings, criteria, geographical field, complex messages, covering thus the requirements of an evaluation process.

The realization of the empirical research leads us to the following conclusions:

The majority of the Greek agrotouristic enterprises consider that the certification systems in tourism, local or not, contribute from moderately to significantly to the competitiveness of their enterprises.

⁵ Tsiotras G. (2002), Quality Improvement Mpenou publications, Athens

While most of the agrotouristic enterprises seem to be interested in ISO and HACCP certifications, only very few of them are certified or wish to get certified in the future.

The agrotouristic enterprises are aware of the advantages of a certified business: modern organization, better profile, better product quality, more satisfied costumers, and sanitary conditions of production, food quality and security for both their employees and their products.

Most of the enterprises are not familiar with the Local Quality Agreements, even though the entrepreneurs are young. Most of the participants do not intend to acquire a sort of certification due to lack of information and reservation during the economic crisis.

Many respondents appear to be rather pessimistic about the future course of agrotourism due to the economic crisis, the problematic infrastructure and the limited accessibility and transportation.

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