

Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Certification Programs: A Metagovernance Analysis of Global Sustainable Tourism Initiatives

FUTAGAMI, Mami, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Meijo University

Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness and impacts of voluntary initiatives that aim to set sustainability standards and create certification programs (or ‘schemes’) in the field of tourism. Although studies have shown mixed results regarding voluntary sustainability standards and certification schemes (VSSCSs) effectiveness in promoting sustainable tourism, the governance and governing mechanism of VSSCS remain as critical issues that require further exploration. Hence, a particular focus is placed on the roles and functions of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) as the leading non-state multi-stakeholder organization in setting standards and accrediting certification bodies globally. The theoretical framework of global private metagovernance developed in recent governance studies is adopted to analyze how the GSTC has integrated public, private, and civil governance approaches to achieve the best possible outcomes in promoting sustainable tourism. Based on content analysis findings of the GSTC’s primary documents and expert interviews, this study identifies the steps and phases in which the GSTC-initiated private metagovernance has evolved to expand its scope of functions and fulfil its stewardship role over the past decade. Further research requires exploration regarding the measures needed to further enhance the GSTC’s stewardship roles in expanding the market share of certified products and services.

Keywords: voluntary sustainability standards, certification schemes, GSTC, private global metagovernance

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, while growing concerns have existed about the negative impacts of tourism on the natural environment and local community, the positive economic impact of rapidly expanding travel and tourism industries have been prioritized. In regard to measures to minimize the negative impact while maximizing the positive impact of tourism, different modes of regulation and incentives have been introduced into the tourism sector as a whole and on a local level, as well as on national and global levels. One of the prevalent phenomena that has emerged since the early 1990s is the proliferation of various voluntary sustainability standards and certification programs in the tourism sector. Although it has benefited consumers and suppliers

by broadening the range of selection choices, the market of certification programs has become rather fragmented, such that confusion and skepticism has led to the undermining of the credibility and legitimacy of certification programs (Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014). Searching for a solution to tackle the fragmentation problem has resulted in the emergence of metagovernance initiatives through which private standards setting and certifying organizations around the world synergized to form a transnational partnership for setting a global standard and accreditation program. Out of such initiatives, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) has emerged to promote sustainability in tourism as the legitimate global metagoverning entity for establishing baseline standards and implementing standardized accreditation programs for sustainable tourism. While the importance of metagovernance has been revealed in various economic sectors (Fransen, 2015; Glasbergen & Schouten, 2015; Nesadurai, 2019), the concept of metagovernance has gained relatively little recognition in tourism studies (Amore & Hall, 2016). However, the few studies that have discussed the governance aspect of GSTC are mainly focused on the emerging phase of the GSTC as part of private governance initiatives (Betker, 2012; Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014), whereas the recent development of the GSTC from the perspective of global private metagovernance remains only partially investigated.

This study attempts to fill the gap in the research by adopting the concept of global private metagovernance to examine how the GSTC has evolved to enhance the effectiveness of VSSCS by metagoverning certification bodies for sustainable tourism globally. The present study, therefore, addresses the following three questions to gain insights into metagovernance functions of transnational certification initiatives carried out by the GSTC in promoting sustainable tourism at the destination level:

1. What is the basic theoretical framework of global private metagovernance applied to tourism?
2. What metagovernance functions has the GSTC performed through its decade-long initiatives?
3. How have the GSTC initiatives enhanced the effectiveness of sustainable tourism certification at the destination level?

This paper first reviews the existing literature regarding sustainability standards and certification programs, particularly focusing on its effectiveness on tourism. The analytical framework of metagovernance for sustainability is also reviewed to examine how it can be applied to tourism. Then the GSTC is examined regarding its institutional arrangement, functional aspects, and operational mechanisms. The case of Green Destinations, one of the GSTC-accredited certification bodies, is discussed in detail to understand how the transnational metagovernance mechanism works and how different stakeholders synergize to create a national

sustainable tourism certification program. The study then considers some practical implications, while also pointing out its limitations. Finally, it discusses further research that is needed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Emergence and Development of VSSCS in Tourism

The first environmental certification of tourism dates back to 1987 when the Blue Flag (BF) Campaign was implemented for beaches in Europe (Font, 2002). The application of sustainability standards and certification programs onto tourism on a large scale began to increase in the mid-1990s (Gracci & Dodds, 2015). It particularly proliferated between two events: the Earth Summit in 1992 and the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002. After the year 2000, the first systemic survey of Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainable Tourism (VIST), which is an ecolabel and certification system, was commissioned by the World Tourism Organization to ECOTRANS, a European network for sustainable tourism development based in Germany. It fully analyzed 104 cases regarding the development, requirements, procedure, effectiveness, and future trends of three main types of VIST (WTO, 2002). The survey revealed that one of the effects of VIST on tourism was the improved environmental performance per certified accommodation. Namely, certified accommodations outperformed the average in Europe. Such accommodations had 20 percent less consumption of energy or water per overnight stay. Then, major academic studies emerged that shed light on key concepts, research frameworks for sustainable tourism certification and ecolabels developed, and investigations into success factors of good practices of VIST globally began (Bien, 2007; Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001; Honey, 2002; Honey & Rome, 2001).

After almost three-decades of efforts to create sustainable tourism, studies on sustainability standards and certification programs have widened their scope with increasing focus on the demand side, i.e., tourists' and tour operators' perceptions of certified destinations, products, and services (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019; Martínez et al., 2018; Mzembe et al., 2020). The critical question underlying these studies is concerned with the effectiveness of voluntary standards and certification in driving the adoption of sustainability practices and behavioral changes by these stakeholders to impact the overall tourism sector. As for this question of effectiveness, however, the academic literature is divided on the value and significance of ecolabels and certification programs in making tourism more sustainable. Table 1 shows the main articles published in the past decade with the effectiveness of ecolabels and certification programs as the research focus. As indicated in this table, the literature reviews demonstrate a mixed picture of standards and certification programs as effective management tools in achieving sustainability goals through enhanced operating performance and market penetration.

Table 1*Previous Studies on Effectiveness of Ecolabels and Certification*

Potential Benefits	Key References	Ecolabels/Certification	Positive Effects	Low-level/ No Effects
Increase in inbound flows	Cerqua, A. (2017)	Blue Flag	Domestic tourism flow	International tourism flow
Tourist demand	Karlsson, L., & Dolnicar, S. (2016)	Blue Flag / EarthCheck	Existence of a niche segment of older and better educated tourists	Eco certification had no demand effect on all tourists studied
Increase in prices	Bilbao-Terol, A., & Bilbao-Terol, C. (2020)	Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)	N/A	No significant effect on accommodation prices
Enterprise performance	Hellmeister, A., & Richins, H. (2019)	Ecotourism Australia	Positive effect on financial and non-financial firm performance	N/A
Protecting tourism labor	Christian, M. (2017)	Tour Operator Initiative (TOI) and Travelife certification programs	N/A	Limited or no measures to protect against precarious employment, gendered divisions of labor, or emotional labor demands
Destination competitiveness	Dodds, R., & Holmes, M. (2020)	Blue Flag	Higher level satisfaction	N/A
Increase in sustainability level	Zielinski, S., & Botero, C. (2015)	Beach Certification Schemes (BCSs)	N/A	An average compliance level of only 33%
Customer perception	Martínez García de Leaniz, P. et al. (2018)	Environmentally Certified Hotels	Positive effect on a hotel's green image and customer behavioral intentions toward certified hotels	N/A
Customer choices	Gössling, S., & Buckley, R. (2016)	Carbon Labels in Tourism	A color-coded carbon label perceived positively by 60% of respondents	Most survey respondents (56%) found carbon labels / eco-certification with only factual information to be of no importance
Tourism sustainability	Arenado-Rodríguez, et al. (2017)	Biosphere Destination Standard	Key stakeholders of the city have made a great effort to implement certification	The strategic plan together with ecolabels has not achieved the expected outcome and local population became dissatisfied with tourism

As an example, BF (the oldest voluntary environmental certification for a coastal tourism destination) has been one of the most extensively studied and disputed ecolabel certification programs from an efficacy perspective. The critics of BF have claimed that it is not being used as an effective beach management tool for environmental protection (Fraguell et al., 2016; Klein & Dodds, 2017b; Lucrezi et al., 2015), but it is rather used as a tourism promotional tool (Klein & Dodds, 2017a). Even for the tourism promotional purpose, however, some critics have argued that BF is not effective at enhancing local economies (Bernini & Cerqua, 2020) or at exerting positive effects to increase international tourism (Cerqua, 2017). However, Dodds and Holmes' (2020) study on beachgoers to Canada's Great Lakes in Ontario showed that BF has positively affected overall satisfaction and the selection intentions of future beach destinations. Zielinski and Botero (2019) attempted to reconcile the rather inconsistent results of BF's effectiveness levels by laying out six main debatable issues that surfaced in previous studies, by clarifying the objectives BF was designed to meet to begin with, and what its true value is. They argued that "the political power of Blue Flag is perhaps its most underestimated strength" (p. 21). In addition,

they emphasized the importance of the framework that BF criteria provides, explaining that without it changes would not have occurred since the power of local governments increased as officials made efforts to initiate and maintain the program, and/or partnered “with educational, environmental, civil society and other governmental organizations” (p. 22). In fact, the issue of governance and governing functions of certification programs is the most intriguing and relevant yet least investigated issue in the effectiveness study of sustainability standards and certification in tourism. Among the few studies that examine this issue, Jenkins et al. (2014) specifically referred to non-mandatory “accreditation and certification schemes as good examples of self-governance” (p. 549). This study applied the concept of metagovernance to such an indirect form of governance based on self-governing networks. How the concept of metagovernance has been applied to the study of sustainability certification will be further reviewed in the following section.

2.2 Theoretical Framework of Metagovernance for Sustainability

The concept of metagovernance was proposed in the 1990s in Western Europe as “a reaction to the complexity of governance and the failures of the existing governance” (Jessop, 2011, p. 106). According to governance theorists, it is considered no longer effective for a government or a single form of governance to try to deal with meta-policy issues like *sustainability*, which requires new institutional arrangements and policy settings at global, national, regional, and local scales. Furthermore, the transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 has made all the 193 UN member states accountable for the achievement of the 17 goals within a timeframe of fifteen years. This requires all the countries and regions to adopt effective governance with more flexible, situation-adapted, and dynamic approaches to dealing with sustainability issues. Many scholars have envisaged such an effective governance as *metagovernance*, and defined it as combining three different governance styles (market, hierarchical, and network) styles of governance to achieve the best possible outcomes (see Table 2).

Meulman (2019) presented one of the most comprehensive frameworks of metagovernance for sustainability and discussed how the framework can be applied to the implementation of the sustainable development goals from the perspective of public managers. Although his book is largely concerned with public metagovernance, he admits that it is clear that metagovernance “takes place in the public as well as in the private domain” (p. 15). He also provides a short introduction to the metagovernance of private sector actors (p. 81-82).

Table 2*Definitions of Metagovernance in Political Science and Tourism Studies**

Authors	Definition of Metagovernance
Jessop (2003, p. 108)	It [metagovernance] is the organization of the conditions for governance and involves the judicious mixing of market, hierarchy, and networks to achieve the best possible outcome from the viewpoint of those engaged in metagovernance.
Sørensen & Torfing (2009, p. 245)	Metagovernance is a reflexive and responsive process through which a range of legitimate and resourceful actors aim to combine, facilitate, shape and direct particular forms of governance in accordance with specific rules, procedures and standards embodying the hegemonic conception of what constitutes 'Good Governance.'
Derkx & Glasbergen (2014, p. 43)*	The concept of metagovernance...a more narrowly defined set of goal-directed and collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing coherence in the voluntary standards landscape.
Meulman (2019, xiii)	Metagovernance or ' governance of governance ' is a means by which to produce some degree of coordinated governance , by designing and managing sound governance, to achieve the best possible outcomes from the viewpoint of those responsible for the performance of public sector organization: public managers as 'meta-governors.'
Meulman (2019, p. 75)	...metagovernance is not governance and it is therefore not a governance style. ... [It is] a method to design practicable governance frameworks by developing dynamic combinations of elements from different governance styles , and to manage such combinations.
Rasoolimanesh et al. (2020, p. 6)*	Tourism governance is based on a multiscale set of arrangements that encompass specific actors , including tourism-related policy-making institutions; private-public partnerships; regulatory bodies; supranational organizations; government at local, regional, and national levels; communities; and private enterprises. ... Such arrangements are framed by <i>metagovernance</i> .

Note. Authors with asterisks defined the term metagovernance in the context of sustainable tourism.

As pointed out in the introductory section, private metagovernance often predominates the standard-setting field. Furthermore, private metagovernance organizations provide standards-setting guidelines for the development of standards. As for such private metagovernance organizations, Derkx and Glasbergen (2014) discussed the coalition of private standards initiatives and the organizations backing them, focusing on the GSTC and three other cases in both tourism and non-tourism sectors.

Similar characteristics found regarding metagovernance initiatives in both tourism and non-tourism fields of study can be summarized as follows:

- The issues to be tackled are complex, multifaceted, and multi-scaled in nature.
- A wide range of public and private actors with relevant skills and knowledge participate in seeking solutions for issues beyond existing levels of state regulations.

- The three governance styles (market, hierarchical, and network) governances, are combined and coordinated to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Thus, the author hypothesizes that the GSTC's metagovernance initiatives enhance the effectiveness of the VSSCS's functions by consolidating relevant skills and expertise of public and private actors and by coordinating market, hierarchical, and network governances. The present study hereafter attempts to verify this hypothesis by conducting a structural analysis of GSTC and its affiliated certification bodies (CBs) and partner organizations from a global metagovernance perspective.

3. Data and Methodology

Data

The research underlying this study is based on the content and document analysis of primary resources and semi-structured interviews with sustainable tourism experts and officers who are responsible for developing and managing sustainability criteria and certification programs. Primary literature is comprised of ecolabels and certifications in sustainable tourism data compiled from the Tourism 2030 platform managed by the European Network for Sustainable Tourism Development (ECOTRANS), in addition to official documents published by the United Nations and other international organizations, and publications and media resources made available by the GSTC and its affiliated CBs.

Table 3

Framework of Data Analyses and Key Questions

<i>Dimension of Analysis</i>	<i>Key Questions</i>	<i>What to be analyzed</i>
1. Genesis and Evolution	What factors influenced the emergence of the GSTC? How has the GSTC evolved over time?	• List of initiators and partners • Scale/scope of membership
2. Functional	What functions has the GSTC attempted to fulfill? What measures have been taken in its operation?	• List of functions to be fulfilled • Outcomes of measures
3. Structural	What organizational arrangements have been made by the GSTC in fulfilling its meta-governing functions?	• Organizational structure • Internal and external tasks
4. Procedural	How are the GSTC criteria managed and applied? How have the GSTC destination criteria been revised?	• Process of revising the criteria • List of stakeholders involved
5. Systematic	What are the systematic characteristics of the GSTC accreditation system? How do the players interact with each other in the system?	• Rules and regulations set for the accreditation system • List of players and interactions

Note. The source for this table is the author's elaboration.

Methodology

One of the methods adopted in this study was an in-depth review of available literature to examine the GSTC from multiple perspectives (see Table 3 below).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2018 with ten sustainable tourism experts and officers of Green Destinations, a GSTC-accredited certification body, and its affiliated destinations, all of whom were engaged in developing, managing, and applying sustainability standards and certification programs within the metagovernance framework of GSTC. Table 4 below provides an overview of all interviewed representatives. A list of prepared questions was sent to the interviewees prior to the on-site interviews. A qualitative content analysis was utilized for examining the recorded and transcribed interview data.

Table 4

List of Interviewees and Their Role

Interview No.	Organization	Organization Type	Role
1	Green Destinations Foundation	Certification Body	Founder / President
2	Schouwen-Duiveland (The Netherlands)	Municipality	Sustainability Officer
3	Slovenian Tourist Board (STB)	National Agency	Research Division Officer
4	Ljubljana Tourist Board (Slovenia)	Capital City Office	Public Relations Officer
5	GoodPlace (Ljubljana, Slovenia)	NPO, CB Partner	Sustainability Expert
6	Bled Tourist Board (Slovenia)	Municipality of Bled	Sustainability Officer
7	Bohinj Tourism Institute (Slovenia)	Municipality of Bohinj	Sustainability Officer
8	Podčetrtek Tourist Office (Slovenia)	Municipality of Podčetrtek	Sustainability Officer
9	Rogaška Slatina Tourist Office (Slovenia)	Local organization	Public Relations Officer

Note: Schouwen-Duiveland is the first certified Green Destination in the world. Bohinj is the recipient of the Slovenia Green Destination Platinum label, the highest category of certification in Slovenia, whereas the other four Slovenian cities are all recipients of the gold label of the Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST). The GSST is based on the global criteria of the Green Destinations Standard (GDS).

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of descriptive analyses conducted regarding how metagovernance has been operationalized in sustainable tourism alongside the GSTC's emergence and the initiatives it conducted.

4.1 The Convergence of Two Metagovernance Initiatives

The GSTC emerged out of the interplay between two major metagovernance initiatives (Derkx, 2011; Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014) (see Table 5 below). The first metagovernance effort

was the movement of establishing an international Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) as an accreditation organization. The key initiator of the first metagovernance effort was the Rainforest Alliance (RA), which proposed a feasibility study which would examine the possibility of creating an International Accreditation Body for Sustainability and Ecotourism.

Table 5

Metagovernance Initiatives of GSTC Criteria-setting and its Accreditation System

The STSC Movement (Accreditation system)	Organizations: Initiators & Key Partners	The GSTC Partnership (Certification Criteria development)
2000 The STSC proposal is endorsed 2001 The STSC project officially starts 2001-2002 A feasibility study of the STSC is conducted 2005 The STSC Steering Committee set-up begins 2009 The STSC is established	Rainforest Alliance United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) / United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) UN Foundation	2000 The Mohonk Agreement concludes 2007 Partnership for GSTC criteria forms 2008 The first GSTC criteria launches
The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)		
2010 The STSC and the GSTC Partnership merge to become the GSTC (Council) 2011 The GSTC Assurance Panel begins its operation of recognizing standards and certification programs 2013 The GSTC begins operating as a self-funded organization independent of the UN Foundation and UNEP 2013 The first GSTC Destination Criteria are released 2014 The GSTS obtains legal status in the United States as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization 2014 ASI (Assurance Services International) becomes the GSTC's global assurance partner 2014 The GSTC merges with the Tour Operator Initiative (TOI) 2016 The GSTC Industry Criteria are released 2019 The GSTC Destination Criteria (second version) are released 2021 The GSTC formally becomes an ISEAL Community Member		

After the proposal was officially approved at the 2000 Mohonk Workshop (described further below), the RA conducted a feasibility study regarding the establishment of the STSC over an eighteen-month period (2001–2002), with funding from the Ford Foundation and support from Advisory Committees of NGOs, intergovernmental agencies, and industry representatives (Sanabria et al., 2003). The RA feasibility study proposed three phases of development toward the establishment of the STSC, resulting in the start of accreditation as early as 2006, although

progress was slower than planned (Font et al., 2003). The STSC was finally created in 2009 to give form to regional certification networks that had begun forming in 2003.

At around the same time of the implementation the first metagovernance initiative and independent of the STSC movement, another metagovernance initiative took place to develop a set of baseline criteria for sustainable tourism to come to a common understanding of how sustainable tourism can be defined and operationalized. This initiative was first highlighted at the Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Certification workshop in November 2000, which was funded by the Ford Foundation, convened by the Institute for Policy Studies, and attended by 44 experts from 20 countries (Honey & Rome, 2001). The workshop succeeded in formulating and unanimously accepting the “Mohonk Agreement: Framework and Principles for the Certification of Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism” (Mohonk Agreement, 2000), the first minimum standards for sustainable tourism. Furthermore, the workshop approved the above-mentioned RA’s proposal for doing a feasibility study on the potential of creating the STSC.

This second metagovernance initiative led to the formation of the Partnership for Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (PGSTC), which is a coalition of 32 organizations, including the RA, the UNF, the UNEP, and the UNWTO. In fact, the initial demand for a common standard and criteria came from the tourism industry. Hence, the first set of GSTC criteria was formulated in 2008, targeting industrial tourism sectors. The process of creating baseline criteria is characterized as a metagovernance effort. That is, the partnership reached out to approximately 80,000 stakeholders in the travel and tourism and analyzed more than 4,500 criteria from more than 60 existing certification programs, in addition to receiving over 1,500 comments from individuals (GSTC, 2015).

The members participating in the two metagovernance initiatives often interacted with each other within the framework of the UNEP-led International Task Force on Sustainable Tourism Development. With their overlapping missions and membership, the STSC movement and the GSTC partnership officially converged to form the GSTC in 2010 with approximately 30 of the founding organization members. Consequently, the GSTC has taken over the key tasks of its predecessors, that is, to manage and periodically revise the criteria in addition to launching and operating an accreditation system. These two tasks have become the core functions of the GSTC’s metagovernance initiatives in promoting sustainable tourism, which is analyzed in the following section.

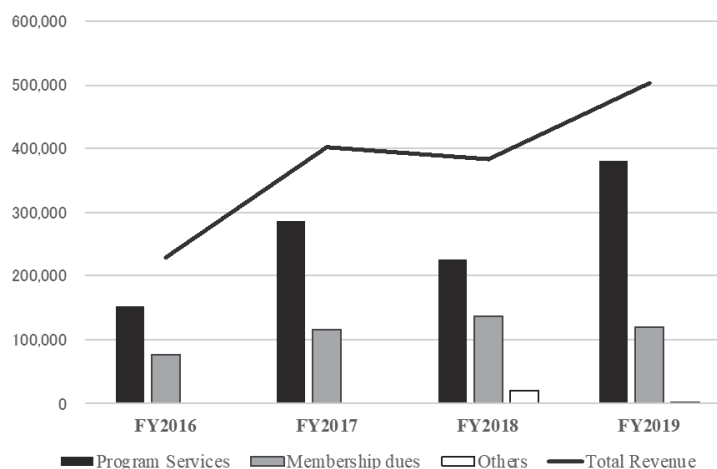
4.2 The Evolving Functions of GSTC Metagovernance Initiatives

A decade has passed since the GSTC was established due to the merger of the STSC

movement and the GSTC partnership in 2010. For the first two years of its establishment, the GSTC received financial and administrative support from UN organizations. The UN Foundation, in particular, had facilitated the merger and provided a secretariat until the end of 2012, while the UNEP provided significant funding to launch the GSTC. Since December 2012, the GSTC has been self-funded with donations, sponsorship, membership fees, and program service revenue as its main financial resources. As the GSTC has maintained legal status in the United States as a 501(c)(3) non-profit public charity organization since 2014, its financial statements are open to public and can be examined for the analysis of global governance.

Figure 1

Changes in the GSTC's Revenue by Source (FY 2016 to FY2019)



Source of Revenue	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019
Program services	\$152,317	\$286,481	\$225,610	\$380,854
Membership dues	\$76,634	\$115,306	\$137,349	\$119,934
Investment income	0	0	\$253	\$1,509
All other contributions, gifts	0	0	\$20,000	\$910
Total Revenue	\$228,951	\$401,787	\$383,212	\$503,207

Note. The data source is the author's compilation using U.S. IRS 990 forms from 2016 to 2019 data.

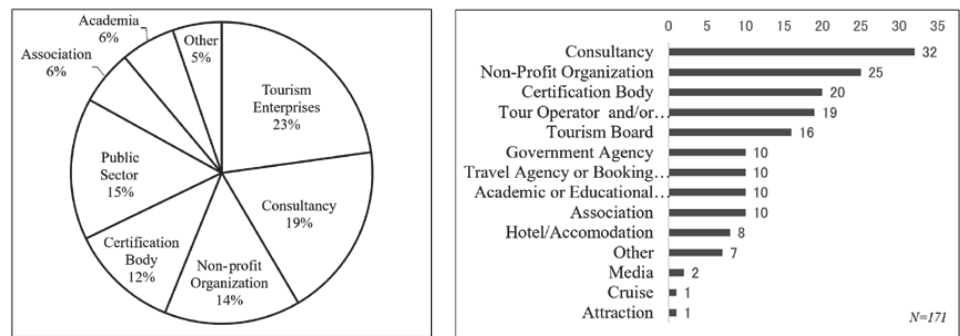
According to the latest financial statement of US- IRS Form 990 for the tax year 2019, the revenue of GSTC mainly comprises membership dues (24%) and all other program services combined (76%), which include training (Sustainable Tourism Training Program: STTP),

recognition of standards and systems, advisory services, and destination program. Figure 1 shows how the total revenue of GSTC has increased over the recent years; the revenue of financial year 2019 has more than doubled compared with the revenue of the year 2016. This demonstrates the expanding metagovernance functions of GSTC in the fields of standard setting, accrediting certification bodies, and providing certification training in tourism.

The analysis of GSTC’s organization membership data shows how GSTC has integrated the private, public, and civil organizations to engage in complex issues of sustainability in tourism by combining different approaches of marketing, networking, and regulating. The latest organization membership data, which are publicly available, has revealed that its membership has grown from about 30 founding organization members to 171 members as of November 2021. During the year of 2020 alone, the GSTC defines its members as stakeholders in tourism and categorizes its members into thirteen groups (Figure 2).

Figure 2

GSTC Organization Members by Category



Note. The data source is the author’s compilation using 2021 GSTC data. Tourism enterprises consist of tour operators/transport providers, travel agencies, and hotels/ accommodations. The public sector is comprised of government agencies and tourism boards.

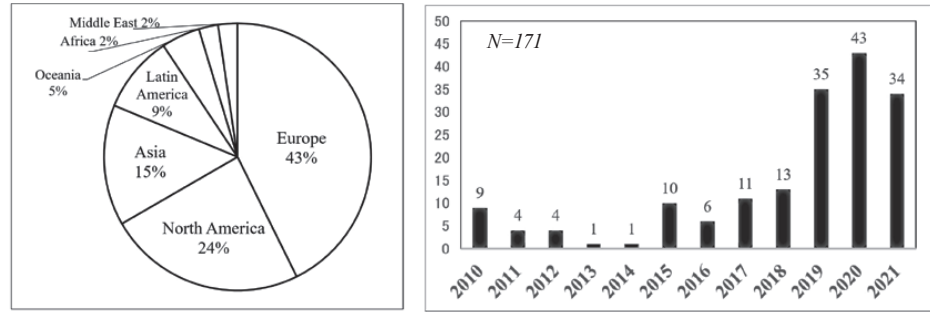
As for the distribution of organization members by category, consulting firms and NPOs together make up about one third of the total membership (see Figure 2 above). When the membership data are re-categorized to combine the organizations that directly operate travel and tourism business, the private for-profit organizations comprising tourism enterprises and consulting firms make up 42%, whereas the remaining share is relatively equally distributed among NPOs (14%), certification bodies (12%), and public organizations (15%). It shows that the GSTC has a diverse membership structure which has enabled the GSTC to apply different

sets of governance strategies in collaboration with some of the representative organization members.

The organization members are also analyzed regarding their geographical locations (see Figure 3 below). It is found that they are widely distributed among seven regions in the world, though they are concentrated in Europe (43%), the Americas (33%), and Asia (15%). Out of 171 organization members as of November 1, 2021, 34 organizations are from the United States, which is followed by the United Kingdom (16), Germany (9), Canada (9), and Australia (9). Among the 33 Asian organizational members, Japan (6), Thailand (6), China and Hong Kong (6), Republic of Korea (3), and Sri Lanka (3) are the five main countries that make up more than 70% of GSTC membership from Asia. Among Asian countries, Japan is one of the countries where GSTC organization members have significantly increased in number in recent years. This is due to the recently enhanced awareness of sustainable tourism in Japan since the national sustainable tourism standard for destination, that is the Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard for Destinations (JSTS-D), was implemented in 2020.

Figure 3

GSTC Organization Members by Region and the Year of Membership



Note. The data source is the author's compilation using 2021 GSTC data. Organization members as of November 1, 2021.

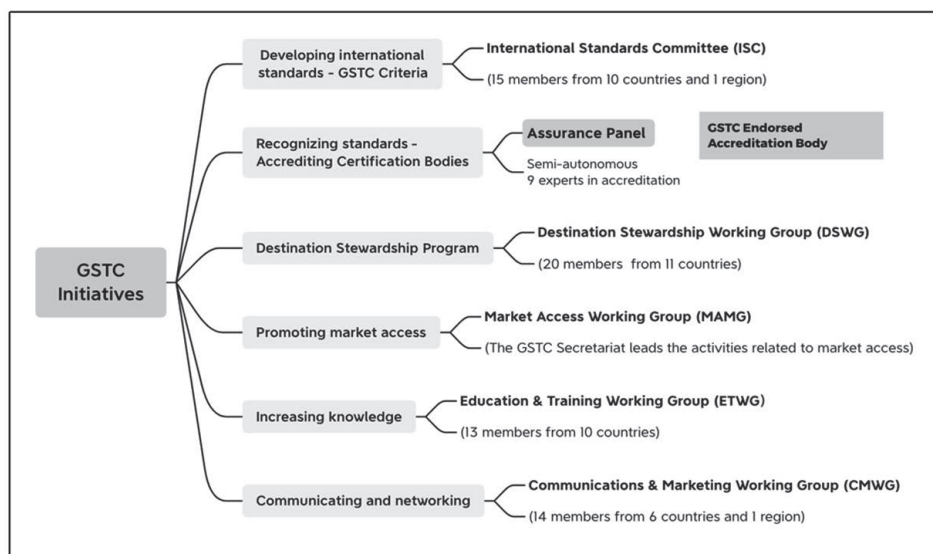
A further inquiry of organization membership regarding the year of joining the GSTC shows that more than half of the current organization members joined the GSTC in the last two years (Figure 3). The two types of membership that increased the most are governmental bodies, including national/local government agencies and tourism boards, and private consulting firms. The national agencies that recently joined include the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) and national tourism boards of Finland, Sweden, València, and Slovenia. The increase in the number of consulting firms indicates that there is a growing demand for sustainable tourism in the market

with increased pressure and incentive for private firms and governments to engage in sustainability issues as part of their main activities.

The GSTC has now evolved to become a leading global council to govern diverse organizations representing the public, private, and civil sectors, and to serve multiple functions as an umbrella organization. As discussed in Section 4.1, the GSTC was originally established out of the merger between two organizations (the PGSTC whose main function was developing baseline criteria and the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council whose main function was accrediting certification programs). Concurrently, the two organizations had also been pursuing “the same mission of education and awareness raising, stimulating, and rewarding improved sustainability performance in tourism, and meeting consumer and market demand for more sustainable options when people travel” (Derkx, 2011, p. 101). Consequently, the GSTC has inherited these missions and multiple functions from the predecessors since it was founded in 2010. Over the decade-long journey to sustainable tourism, the GSTC has evolved to expand its stewardship role in five major areas of corporate activities: 1) developing international standards known as GSTC Criteria for both tourism industry and destination, 2) serving as an accreditation body for sustainability by providing credibility to qualified certification bodies as well as by recognizing other standards that align with GSTC Criteria, 3) supporting destinations to apply GSTC Destination Criteria to their sustainable management programs, 4) promoting market access to sustainable travel and tourism products and destinations, and 5) raising awareness of the importance of sustainable tourism and providing training programs (GSTC, 2020). In fact, all five of these initiatives are interrelated and integrated to enhance the overall effectiveness of VSSCS on tourism performance at the destination level.

Figure 4

GSTC Initiatives and Organizational Structure



Note. The source of this figure's data is the author's elaboration based on 2020 GSTC data.

The analysis of organizational structure shows that the GSTC has taken the initiative in six major objectives in promoting sustainable tourism. Figure 4 shows the organizational structure of working groups within the GSTC that are assigned to fulfill each of the objectives. As for the objective of accrediting certification bodies, the GSTC has appointed the Assurance Services International (ASI) as an assurance partner since 2016, which collaborates with the Assurance Panel within the GSTC on semi-autonomous terms (GSTC, 2018). Among the multiple functions the GSTC is assigned to fulfill, the core functions lie in the task of developing and revising GSTC Standards for both tourism industries and destinations as well as accrediting certification programs, which will be more closely examined in the following sections.

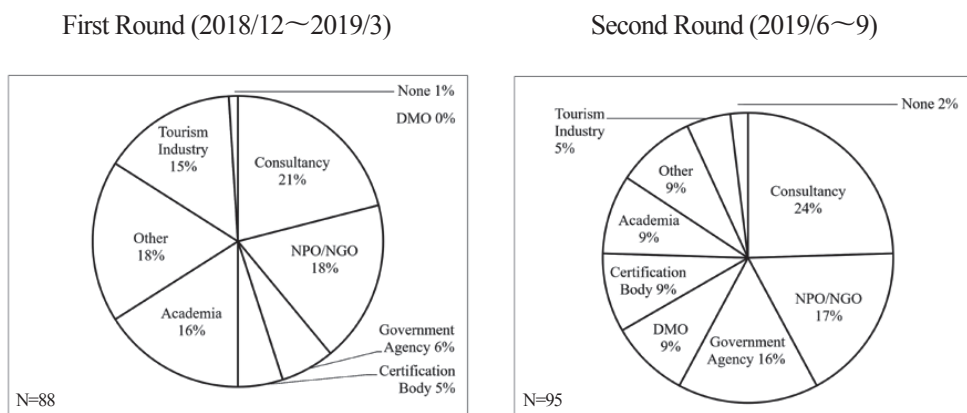
4.3 GSTC Initiative in Standards Setting and Revising Global Criteria

The GSTC has created and maintained two sets of sustainable tourism standards for tourism enterprises and tourist destinations following the standard-setting code of the ISEAL Alliance (GSTC, 2019). The GSTC Industry Criteria has been revised three times since the first version was released in 2008, whereas the GSTC Destination Criteria has been recently revised for the first time since the first version was developed in 2013. The analysis of the latest revision process of the destination criteria exemplifies how the GSTC standard-setting initiative has been

achieved through the networking of experts and stakeholders around the globe (GSTC, 2020). Internally, the GSTC's International Standards Committee (ISC) took charge of the whole process of revision over a year and three months while collaborating with the GSTC's Destination Stewardship Working Group (DSWG). The GSTC has also invited its stakeholders around the world to participate in an online public consultation over approximately a few months each time during the revision period. Diverse stakeholders have participated in these public consultations representing the private, public, and civil sectors (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Percentage of Participants in Public Consultation by Organization Type



Note. The source of this figure's data is the author's compilation using 2020 GSTC data. The first-round consultation survey received 883 comments made by 88 respondents, whereas the second-round consultation survey received a total of 312 comments from 95 respondents.

4.4 GSTC Initiative in Recognizing Standards and Accrediting Certification Bodies

One of the key functions of GSTC is to provide official assurance regarding sustainable tourism standards that are developed following the global sustainable tourism criteria by labeling them as GSTC-recognized standards. It is the Assurance Panel established by the GSTC that declares standards as GSTC recognized. Table 6 below shows the current list of standards for destinations that have achieved GSTC-recognized status. It is noticeable that six out of ten recognized standards, including Japan's standard (JSTS-D), are national standards, which are created to solely apply to destinations within the nation. Japan is one of such nations that have recently developed a national standard for sustainable tourism destinations and received recognition status from the GSTC. As demonstrated in Japan's case, it is critical for the central

government to engage in developing a nationwide program to impact various stakeholders and local governments.

Table 6

The GSTC -Recognized Standards for Destinations

Name of Standard	Developer/Owner of Standard	Category
Biosphere Responsible Tourism Standard for Tourism Destinations	Responsible Tourism Institute	Private
Criteria for Thailand's Community-Based Tourism Development	DASTA (National body)	Public
EarthCheck Community Standard	EarthCheck	Private
Green Destinations Standard	Green Destinations Foundation	Civil/Private
Indonesia Sustainable Tourism Destination Standard	Ministry of Tourism (National body)	Public
Innovation Norway Sustainable Destination Standard	Innovation Norway (National body)	Public
Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard for Destinations	Japan Tourism Agency (National)	Public
Korea Sustainable City Tourism Destination Standard	Republic of Korea (National standard)	Public
Mountain IDEAL Destinations Standard	Walking Mountains Science Center	Civil
Thailand's Sustainable Tourism Management Standard	DASTA (National body)	Public
GSTC Criteria for Destination	Global Sustainable Tourism Council	Baseline

Note. The source for this table is the author's elaboration based on GSTC (n.d.) data retrieved on October, 2021.

Another key function of the GSTC is to govern the procedure of accrediting a certification body according to the requirements and procedures specified by relevant accreditation manuals, such as the ISO/IEC 17065:2012 and the ISEAL Code of Good Practice. Unlike the 'GSTC-Recognized' status that validates standards only, the 'GSTC-Accredited' status assures the processes of certification follow international standards and good practices. The third-party accreditation is managed by a GSTC Endorsed Accreditation Body, that is, the Assurance Services International (ASI) for the certification of accommodations and tour operators (GSTC, 2021). For the implementation of the accreditation program, the GSTC applies a number of basic principles (e.g., integrity, credibility, impartiality, rigorousness, effectiveness, transparency) to "all aspects of the GSTC program, including work performed by certification scheme owners, CBs, and Accreditation Bodies" (GSTC, 2021, p. 9). In this way, the accreditation of certification bodies is being conducted following strict accreditation guidelines under the global governance of the GSTC.

Table 7 below shows the current list of certification bodies that have been accredited by the GSTC. As the accreditation procedure is strictly managed according to a high level of international standards, the GSTC-Accredited status provides certification bodies with credibility and trust-worthiness about their certification brands. Furthermore, tourism businesses certified by a GSTC-Accredited certification body can use the GSTC logo together with the logo of the

certification body, which gives further incentive to prospect businesses that are considering the acquisition of sustainability certification to choose accredited CBs over non-accredited ones.

Table 7

GSTC-Accredited Certification Bodies (CBs)

	CBs for Hotels/Accommodation & Tour Operators				CBs for Destinations		
CB	Bureau Veritas	Control Union	United Certification Systems Ltd	Vireo Srl	EarthCheck	Green Destinations	Vireo Srl
HQ	Hong Kong, China	Zwolle, Netherlands	Limassol, Cyprus	Padova, Italy	Brisbane, Australia	Leiden, The Netherlands	Padova, Italy
Scope	National	Global	Global	National* ¹	Global	Global	National* ¹
Accredited Year	2020	2016	2020	2018	2017 * ²	2018	2019

Note. This table is the author's own elaboration based on data from several sources. The data show GSTC-accredited status as of November 2021. *¹ Vireo Srl has so far certified hotels, tour operators, and destinations mainly in Italy but with a few cases in other European countries. *² EarthCheck went on to acquire accreditation status after it had its certification standard recognized by the GSTC in 2017.

Transforming businesses to more sustainable entities through the VSSCS is a significant and worthwhile approach to take in order to enhance the overall sustainability of the travel and tourism industry. However, it is the destinations that need to improve in sustainability in order to exert sustaining impacts on the three aspects of human well-being (people), socio-economic well-being (proliferation), and natural well-being (planet) on a wider scale. The following section therefore focuses on how the mechanism of VSSCS has operated within the framework of GSTC's metagovernance initiatives by paying a particular attention to the relationships between the GSTC, GSTC-Accredited CBs, and tourism stakeholders at the destination level. A case study of Green Destinations, a GSTC-accredited certification body, was investigated to understand what roles each of the key actors has played in establishing a nationwide program of VSSCS and branding the nation as one of the world's top green destinations.

4.5 The Role of GSTC-Accredited CB in Developing National Certification Program

The GSTC recognition and accreditation systems have empowered certification bodies to extend their certifying operation in the global market of sustainable tourism. The Green Destinations (GD), one of the three GSTC-Accredited CBs in the world, provides various destination management programs from start-up programs to more demanding awards and

certification programs. Table 8 and 9 below are personal communications and interviews conducted with the founder and current president of the GD as well as key informants of a national certification program in Slovenia.

Table 8

Excerpts From the Accounts Made About the Role of Key Players in Program Building

- Cooperation between the Slovenian Tourist Board, GoodPlace, and Green Destinations date back to 2014, when the new initiative for Slovenia Green began.
 - **Slovenian Tourist Board** is the owner of the brand Slovenia Green, which builds upon existing certifications, and rebrands them all as Slovenia Green.
 - **Green Destinations** operates the back office for destinations: the standard (GD Standard), the criteria and indicators, the destinations database, and the online Assessment and Reporting platform.
 - **GoodPlace** operates the program that deals with destinations and businesses, including assessments, organizing audits, financial administration, and award presentations. They are the Exclusive Green Destinations Representative Organization for Slovenia.
-

Note. Personal communication with the GD founder and GoodPlace director.

Table 9

Excerpts From the Interview With Division Officers of the Slovenian Tourism Board (STB)

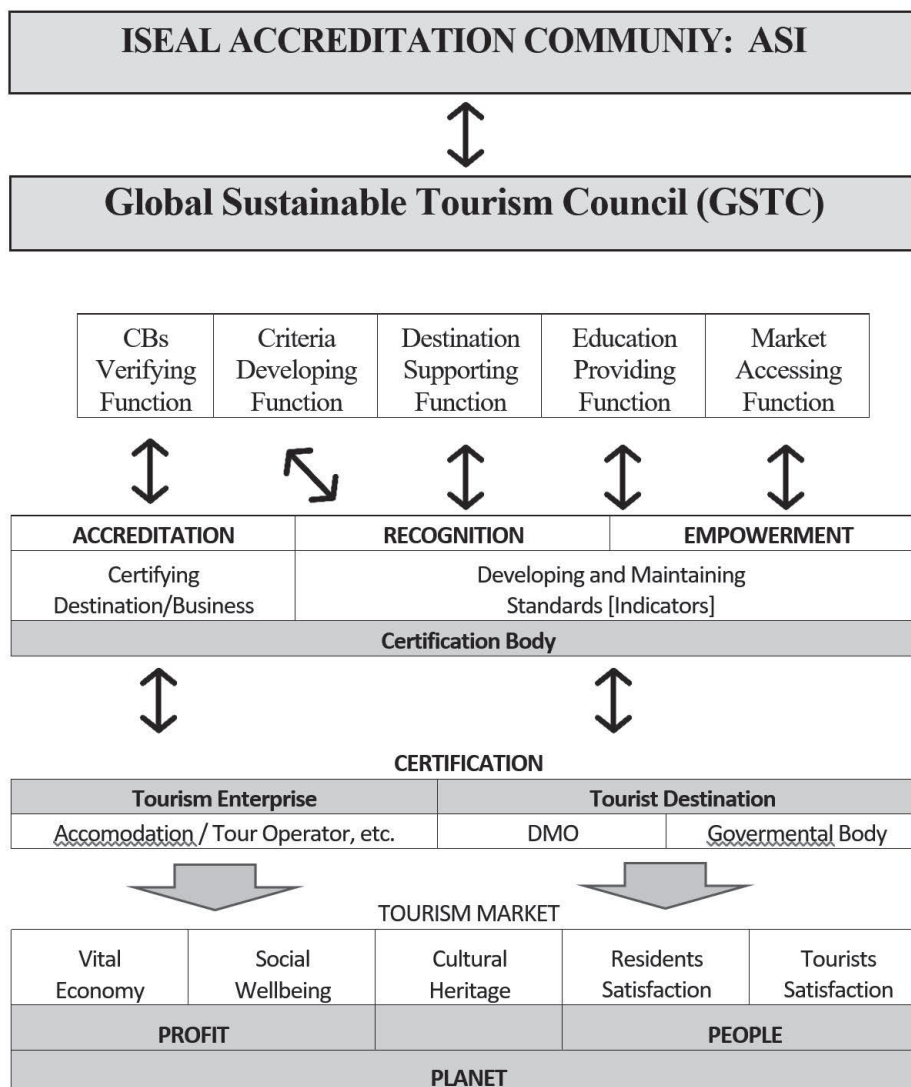
“After the pilot phase, we have each year called for destinations and providers for the tourism industry at the beginning of the year. We have formed a consortium Slovenia Green that is coordinated by **GoodPlace**...And the structure, **Slovenian Tourism Board** is the manager, is the owner of green theme in general, but we are doing it together with **accreditor partner GoodPlace** and **global partner Green Destinations**. We are using their scheme. This is the organizational and managerial structure. GoodPlace is actually accredited by Green Destinations. So GoodPlace went to all educational programs and certification trainings so they can assess our destinations according to Green Destinations’ standard. We don’t have any direct contact with Green Destinations, but GoodPlace does. GoodPlace is working for us each year doing workshops and assessing input regarding the platform Slovenia Green, etc. so we have contact with them. They are the accreditor.”

Note. The author interviewed two STB officials at the headquarters in July, 2018.

These communications and interviews have revealed how the GD enabled Slovenia to adopt the GD standard and to develop the Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST) to build the national brand Slovenia Green within the metagovernance framework of GSCT initiatives (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6

Metagovernance Framework of GSTC Initiatives in Sustainable Tourism

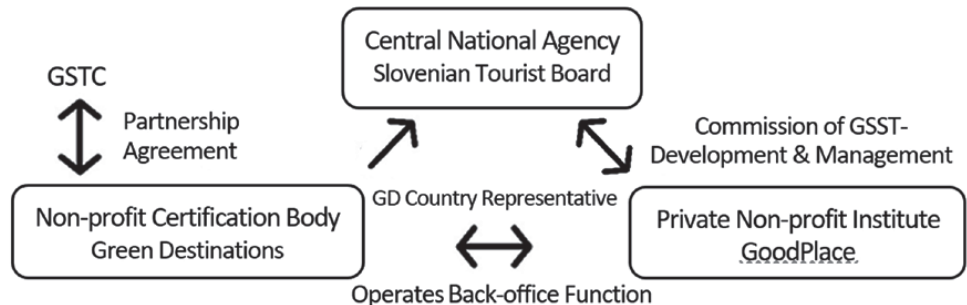


Note. Within the framework, GSTC initiatives are designed and managed by coordinating hierarchical, network, and market governances. The source of this figure's data is from the author's own elaboration.

As the excerpt in Table 9 above indicates, the Green Destinations and the key agencies in Slovenia, that is, Slovenian Tourist Board and GoodPlace as a GD accreditor, have respectively played different roles in building a national certification program (see Figure 7 below). The implementation of the national program of GSST has transformed Slovenia into one of the most sustainable destinations in the world. The Slovenian model has been further adopted by Estonia and is now closely being examined by the Japan Tourism Agency.

Figure 7

Main Interactions Between Main Actors in the Mechanism of GSST



Note. This figure is the author’s own elaboration based on data from the Slovenian Tourist Board (2018).

5. Conclusion

The present study first investigated the effectiveness and impacts of voluntary sustainability standards and certification systems (VSSCS) in the field of tourism by conducting a comprehensive review of previous research on the effects of ecolabels and certification programs. The content analysis of previous certification studies showed mixed results; some studies demonstrated positive effects, such as cost saving and enhanced image of company brand, whereas some others found no effect or less effect than had been expected, especially regarding increase in tourism demand and improvement in employment situation. The research on the Blue Flag certification program, however, indicated a significant insight about its political power that enhanced the capacity and involvement of diverse governmental and nongovernmental organizations. The most significant issue that emerged was the issue of governance and governing functions of certification programs that led to “new institutional arrangements and policy settings at international, national, and local scales” (Hall et al, 2015, p. 1). This finding has

led to applying the concept of metagovernance to the analysis of the GSTC as the key entity for enhancing the credibility of VSSCS in the tourism sector.

It was found that the GSTC had emerged due to two metagovernance initiatives being converged into one entity, which thereafter has evolved into a leading multi-stakeholder membership organization currently comprising approximately 170 organization members from the public, private, and civil sectors. Furthermore, the present study revealed that the emergence of the GSTC contributed to the building of a more solid foundation for sustainable tourism by developing baseline standards for both industries and destinations as well as by establishing CB accreditation programs following globally standardized procedures, such as those specified by the ISO/IEC 17065 and the ISEAL Code of Good Practice.

Based on the findings of the GSTC initiatives, the present study also conducted a case study of GSTC-Accredited CB, i.e., Green Destinations (GD), and the GD-based national certification program of Slovenia, i.e., Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST), for an analysis of the relationships between the three key actors, i.e., GD, GoodPlace, and the Slovenian Tourist Board (STB), as well as the back-office, auditing, and commanding functions by served, respectively. The study found that the case study was an exemplar of a successful model of a national certification program that has adopted a GSTC-accredited CB certification program and utilized their destination management platform. By doing this, each nation does not need to develop its own certification system from scratch, and more importantly, its system can gain national brand credibility due to its compliance with the global standard of the GSTC. This, however, does not mean that certified destinations are standardized and would result in the loss of distinctiveness. On the contrary, the interviews with the sustainability officers at the five destinations in Slovenia revealed that they were constantly pressed to pursue unique selling points about their destinations in order to differentiate their destinations from others under the national brand of Green Slovenia.

The implications of the present study about the role and functions of the GSTC and best practices of GSTC-Accredited CB programs have much bearing on the direction of some emerging nations, in addition to Japan, which is now attempting to implement a sustainable tourism program on the national level. This study has demonstrated that the GSTC has established a sustainable tourism certification system on a global scale using private global metagovernance and that following GSTC Criteria should be of vital interest to tourism enterprises and destinations, regardless of their size, if they want to gain assurance for their sustainable tourism initiatives. In 2021, the GSTC was officially accepted as a member of the ILEAL Community, which is currently comprised of 31 sustainability systems and accreditation bodies, including the Forest Stewardship Council and the Fairtrade International. Hence, the next

question for the GSTC is how to enhance its presence in the tourism market. Thus, further research should be conducted on this issue of sustainable tourism marketing.

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