
Shrouded in a fetishistic mist: commoditisation of sustainability in tourism

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Abstract: In this paper we first provide a theoretical argument of commodity fetishism of sustainability in tourism, with a focus on the emergence of certification for sustainability as a means of elucidating the means of production of tourism in destinations and distinguishing responsible forms of tourism from more exploitive counterparts. We then look specifically at Costa Rica and its widely-respected Certificate for Sustainable Tourism Programme (CST) for empirical evidence which speaks to the effectiveness of certification to demystify the production of sustainable tourism. Although limited, our data indicate a disconnect between tourists, who have a strong interest in travelling responsibly, and the programme's capacity to affect their consumption patterns. We conclude that certification programmes are yet to attain their objectives of directing tourist-consumers' attention to the on-the-ground social and environmental inputs and impacts of the tourism experience they enjoy.

Keywords: commoditisation; fetishisation; means of production; ecotourism; responsible tourism; sustainable tourism; sustainability; certification; Costa Rica; anthropology; commodity fetishism.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Hunt, C.A. and Durham, W.H. (2012) 'Shrouded in a fetishistic mist: commoditisation of sustainability in tourism', *Int. J. Tourism Anthropology*, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp.330-347.

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1 Introduction

Commodity fetishism is the tendency for commodities to be represented in a way that obscures the means of their production and the impact of that production on the social welfare of those producing the goods (Marx, 1906 [1867]). Tourism is an industry where the relations between demand-side consumers and supply-side producer are typically shrouded in what has been called a 'fetishistic 'mist'' with tourists being "generally unaware of the conditions of life experienced by the waiters, cooks, tour guides...the people who service their holidays" [Mowforth and Munt, (2008), p.62]. This interface between 'guests' who consume tourism products and services, and their many 'hosts' in the destination who produce and provide the tourism experience, has been central to the anthropology of tourism since the earliest writings on the subject (Smith, 1977). A particular focus of early scholarship was upon ways that tourists seek out and distinguish more 'authentic' experiences from more staged, commoditised, and fetishised offerings (Boorstin, 1961, in MacCannell, 1976; Greenwood, 1977; Cohen, 1979, in Cohen, 1988).

As more thought was given to the impacts of tourist-consumers on the people and environments they visit, the industry differentiated into numerous alternative forms of travel (Stronza, 2001). A supposed characteristic of these new forms of travel is the "ability to transcend the fetishism characteristic of mass tourism and to meet real people in real places producing real things" [Mowforth and Munt, (2008), p.71]. Yet despite the potential of tourism to dismantle the fetishism, much contemporary tourism simply sees these relations intellectualised and reoriented towards an increasingly broad array of attractions within the industry including indigenous cultures (Carrigan, 2009), biodiversity (Foale and MacIntyre 2004), whales (Neves, 2010), viewsapes (Van Auken, 2010), *cubanidad* (Roland, 2010), hip hop (Xie et al., 2007), sex (Truong, 2007), favelas (Ziederman, 2006), and sites of tragedy (Robb, 2009).

It is therefore not surprising that scholars have begun to describe the production of ecotourism – the tourism industry's fastest growing sector over the last two decades (UNWTO, 2010) – in terms of commodity fetishism (Carrier and MacLeod, 2005; Carrier, 2010).

Here we endeavour to contribute to the line of scholarly thought on fetishisation in tourism by focusing on the ways that ideas of sustainability and responsibility are reified and reproduced within ecotourism. In subsequent sections we provide a discussion of the most relevant theory from tourism research over the last several decades of the 20th century that establish a commodity fetishism perspective of the tourism industry. We argue that the arrival of the sustainable development paradigm prompted the emergence of alternative forms of tourism including ecotourism and sustainable tourism (Stronza, 2001; Black and Crabtree, 2007; Mowforth and Munt, 2008). We further contend that this emergence in turn lead to the proliferation of certification for sustainable tourism as a means of internalising the social, environmental and economic means of production of

tourism in destinations in order to help tourists distinguish more responsible forms of tourism from more exploitive counterparts (Bien 2002; Black and Crabtree, 2007; Honey, 2008; Stronza and Hunt 2012). We look more specifically at one of the best known sustainable tourism destinations – Costa Rica – and its widely-respected Certificate for Sustainable Tourism Programme (CST) for examples of the ways that sustainability and responsibility are both represented on the supply side by providers of sustainable tourism ‘commodities’ as well as on the demand side by tourists who consume such sustainable tourism products.

Finally, we introduce secondary data from a series of previously published studies coordinated by the Center for Responsible Travel (Honey et al., 2010) where the authors are affiliated. Though not explicitly designed to assess in-depth tourists’ knowledge and attitudes towards sustainability or the CST system, selected responses to several of the surveys gathered as part of a multi-study assessment of impacts of tourism along the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica speak to the effectiveness of certification to demystify the production of sustainable tourism. These data indicate a near total disconnect between tourists, who have a strong interest in consuming responsible tourism products, and the programme’s capacity to affect their consumption patterns or otherwise illuminate the production of the tourism products they consume during their travels. We thus argue in the last section that certification programmes are not attaining one of their most important objectives of directing tourist-consumers’ attention to the on-the-ground social and environmental inputs and impacts of the tourism experience they enjoy. We conclude the paper with the theoretical implications of this perspective for future empirical research on commodity fetishism in tourism as well as for enhanced effectiveness of tourism certifications in Costa Rica and elsewhere.

At the outset, we wish to acknowledge that a wide range of definitions exist in the literature for key terms in this paper, ‘sustainability’ and ‘responsibility’, not to mention ‘ecotourism’ (e.g., Fennell, 2001). A full discussion of these intertwined concepts, although admittedly worthwhile, is well beyond the boundaries of this paper (see Donohoe and Needham, 2006). Since the International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “*responsible* travel to natural areas...” and since the highly regarded ecotourism certification programme in Costa Rica calls its product, ‘CST’ (emphasis added in both cases), in this paper we look at both of these components of ecotourism. Both represent a favourable quality or a continuum that various aspects of the tourism industry (operators, hotels, lodges, tourists, etc.) may possess in lesser or greater quantities and that the relevant certification programmes are designed to ensure.

2 Fetishism and tourism

Historically Marx (1906 [1867]) argued that the “exchange of commodities is evidently an act characterized by a total abstraction from use-value”, often leading to commodity values far exceeding their utility. He termed the process by which the valuation of commodities becomes inflated beyond the costs of production and socially detached from the people and means that produced them as *fetishisation* of commodities. As Van Auken (2010, p.522) elaborates:

“use of the term fetishism implies a perversion of sorts, which is precisely what Marx intended, as he argued that commodity fetishism causes the social relations of production (relationships between people) to be perverted and

replaced by what appears to be a relationship between things (commodities and the market). A 'veil of ignorance' causes the consumer to see only the commodity, rendering the (potentially exploitative and destructive) relations of production invisible to those outside of them."

Thus fetishism leads to what Hagar Cohen (1997, p.13) describes as commoditised entities being "sealed off from their origins, ensconced from their own true stories, which are the stories of people, of work, of lives...in what we term the developed nations of the Earth such facts have gone hazy, have taken on properties, almost, of fairy tales: the notion of connections seems charming, but not quite real".

Veblen (1899) eventually extended the ideas of fetishism beyond specific commodities, to notions of conspicuous consumption and leisure, including travel. While "the travel and tourism industry provides a wide range of products and services without a unifying characteristic of a single commodity" [Conroy and Bien, (2002), p.123], the applicability of the ideas of commodity fetishism was not lost on early tourism anthropologists. Although departing from Marx in certain respects, MacCannell (1976, p.21) fully embraces the Marxist notion that "the most important relationship in modern society is not between man and man (as in peasant society) but between man and his productions". In his seminal writing *The Tourist*, MacCannell (1976, p.41) describes tourism as the search for authenticity, a quest which by its very nature commoditises "the empirical relationship between a tourist, a sight [or a site for that matter], and a marker (piece of information about the sight)". The pressure applied on destinations to provide this authenticity in turn opens the door to a staging of authenticity (MacCannell, 1976; Cohen, 1988; Van den Berghe, 1994) and further obscuring the means of production of tourism from the tourist-consumers who are increasingly fixated on the *markers*.

Thus as Boorstin (1961, in MacCannell, 1976) first posited, and Carrier and MacLeod (2005) elaborate, this separation equates to tourists travelling in a bubble that insulates them from the local conditions in the destinations in which they travel and controls that which falls under the tourists' gaze by manipulating the information about the sights and sites that the makers provide (Jacobsen, 2003; Jaakson, 2004; Urry, 1990). Extending this line of thinking, Mowforth and Munt (2008) describe an inevitable fetishisation within the travel and tourism industry that will extend beyond the traditional tourist amenities of sun, sand, sea and sex to more characteristically postmodern draws of local culture and indigeneity (Carrigan, 2009), biodiversity (Foale and MacIntyre 2004), and other 'unsavoury' qualities of 'third world' countries – inequality, poverty, and political instability.

Indeed, the fetishism of many types of tourism products is already embodied in newer forms of tourism documented in recent scholarly writings. Van Auken (2010) provides a pertinent description of how completely abstract concepts such as a viewscape, and in particular, enchanting photographic images capturing the viewscape, are inherently disembodied from their ecosystems or historical contexts, and that these photographic 'artifacts' become more desirable than the objects in them. Even in a society whose leaders embrace Marx's critique of capitalism and favour a socialist system that defetishises the products of labour, Roland (2010) astutely describes how Cuban identity, or *cubanidad*, is fetishised in the process of being bought and sold in the free market in the form of Fidel Castro dolls and even through the sexual services of young men and women. Truong (2007) elaborates on the fetishisation of sex-based tourism, and in particular, that based on 'fresh and untouched' children and the "exotic...submissive Asian female".

In their article *Gazing the Hood*, Xie et al. (2007) highlight three technologies of gazes (initial, mass, and authentic) present in an emerging tourism industry based on the production of hip-hop music, each gaze with varying capacities to turn certain urban [neighbour]hoods in the USA into fetishised commodities. Likewise, Ziederman (2006, p.8) contends that the poor favela slums of large Brazilian metropolises have become a 'commodity (image)' with "inaccessibility, opacity, and threat hovering above these places that make favela tours popular and desirable to tourists". Even sites of 'human misery and death' can become fetishised, as Robb (2009) explores in various sites including Rwanda, and in the process contribute to what West (2004) terms 'conspicuous compassion'. Along this lines, certain forms of tourism, when presented as a more 'compassionate' antithesis (e.g., whale watching) to a historically more environmentally exploitive activity (e.g., whaling), perpetuate fetishisation by equating the new forms of tourism as being environmentally (or socially) benign thus deflecting tourists' attention away from the impacts of their activities (Neves, 2010).

Among these new forms of travel is ecotourism, the industry's earliest and most obvious manifestation of sustainability in response to the Brundtland Report (WECD, 1987; Honey, 1999). Carrier (2010) clarified the ways that fetishisation in ecotourism can involve more than the means of production but also such 'background of things', and thus how a hotel or certification programme touting sustainability of a certain hotel to potential guests has turned sustainability itself into a commodity. As a result, fetishisation in ecotourism "continues to direct our attention in certain directions rather than others. In doing so, it continues and even strengthens the mystification of objects of consumption..." (2010, p.686). Hunt and Stronza (2011) illustrate the ways in which the production of what is marketed as sustainable tourism can involve many socially, environmentally and ethically questionable practices that negatively affect local residents and employees yet still lead to a favourable tourist experience, itself far too-short lived to reveal such practices.

Here we extend the reviewed lines of thinking to argue that sustainability in tourism has developed into a commodity itself characterised by both fetishised destinations (e.g., Costa Rica) and fetishised markers (e.g., sustainable tourism certification). We contend that this fetishisation deflects short-term tourists' gaze from the 'work, people, lives' and environments where tourism is produced and away from other aspects of tourism production, such as from the aircraft emissions that are responsible for most of the global environmental impact of their travel (Gossling, 1999). It is *the production of sustainability*, and the closely aligned though equally vague term responsibility, in tourism which is the focus of this paper moving forward. Both concepts remain largely removed from the social and environmental means to produce them, especially in the context of ecotourism which so often occurs in underdeveloped countries where extremes of guest wealth and affluence often contrast sharply with hosts' impoverishment.

2.1 *Ensuring sustainability and responsibility in tourism*

While a few scholars questioned tourism's relationship to social and environmental outcomes going back into the 1970s (Smith, 1977; Budowski, 1976; deKadt, 1979), the attention to such outcomes grew enormously alongside the rapid emergence of the ecotourism sector in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Stronza, 2001; Stronza and Hunt, 2012). Yet just as quickly as this phenomenon emerged it was followed by concerns about devaluation of the term ecotourism (Bien, 2002), green-washing within the sector

(Duffy, 2002; Honey, 2008), eco-sell (Wight, 1993) and ethical abuses in the industry (West and Carrier, 2004; Duffy, 2002; Hunt and Stronza, 2011). Largely in response to this greenwashing the tourism industry began to develop certification and/or accreditation initiatives to help support those projects making legitimate efforts to operate in socially and environmentally sustainable ways, and thus to “separate the wheat from the chaff” (Honey, 2008; Black and Crabtree, 2007; Bien, 2002; Honey and Rome, 2001). Toth (2002, p.97) further describes the initial impetus for sustainable tourism certification and its objective of differentiating tourism products on the basis of their means of production:

The demand for some well-established sustainable tourism programmes came from hoteliers and tour operators who were sincerely committed to sound sustainability, environmental, ecological, and socioeconomic practices. They faced what they perceived as unfair competition from ‘cowboys’ or ‘greenwashers’, who claimed similar practices but had taken no concrete action. The image and reputation of the entire tourism industry could suffer if tourists came away with the impression that sustainable tourism was a marketing theme that was not really put into practice. Differentiating conscientious suppliers from less reputable ones has always been an objective of certification.

While phenomenon of sustainable tourism certification is still only a couple decades old, over 150 ecolabels have already been developed worldwide (Buckley, 2002). This does not include other types of endorsements including Fair-Trade tourism and Pro-Poor Tourism, many of which are spearheaded by NGOs such as Rainforest Alliance and the United Nations Foundation. Yet in contrast to the large body of sustainable tourism and ecotourism research, the body of scholarly attention on the subject of certification in tourism remains quite sparse. Beyond what is cited in the following sections, writings are limited to the following short list of articles, books, and edited volumes, all largely inaccessible to the lay tourist (Bendell and Font, 2004; Black and Crabtree, 2007; Font and Harris, 2004; Font, 2002; Gosling and Hultman, 2006; Jarvis and Weeden, 2010; Kozak, 2004; Linsheng et al., 2007; Morrison et al., 1992; Skinner et al., 2004; Spenceley, 2005; Strathern, 2000; Tepelus and Córdoba, 2005; Warnken et al., 2005).

Existing certification programmes are typically characterised by

- a voluntary enrolment
- b a marketable logo or seal
- c criteria that comply with or go beyond regulations
- d published commitment to sustainable development
- e some form of assessment/auditing; and lastly
- f membership and fees for running the programme and conducting audits (Honey, 2008).

Although there are efforts underway to create global certification bodies (Crabtree et al., 2002), most notably the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) and the Tourism Sustainability Council (TSC), the prevailing opinion is that locally-developed certification schemes are the most appropriate at smaller, regional scales, while larger accreditation bodies are most appropriate for “certifying the [regional] certifiers” [Honey, (2008), p.259].

Proponents of certification cite its potential to reduce greenwashing and reward commitments to responsible tourism production by encouraging more sustainable use of

resources, promoting efficient technologies, allowing operators to charge a premium, and by giving consumers a compass for decision-making (Font and Buckley, 2001; Honey and Rome, 2001; Buckley, 2002). In serving as a compass for decision-making for tourist consumers, certification of sustainability in tourism or of ecotourism provides additional details about the differing means of production of the different certified tourism commodities. In providing assurances a tourism product conforms to minimum requirements of social and environmental responsibility (Toth, 2002; Black and Crabtree, 2007; Honey, 2008), certification sheds light on, or *demystifies*, specific aspects of tourism's production and can thus be said to contribute to the defetishisation of sustainability in tourism.

In theory, certification programmes influence both supply and demand for sustainability in tourism by drawing greater attention to its social and environmental impacts (Buckley, 2002; Font and Harris, 2004). Certification programmes promote operator performance and accountability in face of increasing pressures to cater to the rapidly growing ecotourism sector (Buckley, 2002; Medina, 2005). They also play an important role in allowing tourists' to make more informed decisions about their choice of destinations and their purchases within those destinations (Buckley, 2002; Honey, 2008). Yet given the relatively recent emergence of these mechanisms, little empirical evidence exists documenting the capacity of certification programmes to accomplish these objectives (Medina, 2005).

Critics of certification, on the other hand, point out additional shortcomings: it can privilege interests of the 'global north' over those of developing countries, and of dominant classes and races over those less influential; its standards can be too low for adequate environmental protection (Sasidharan et al., 2002); conversely, its standards can be too high for small and medium enterprises (SME) to afford attaining the certification (Medina, 2005); the market is not sufficiently large for programmes to be economically viable; and rapid profusion of so many certification mechanisms has left consumers confused as to what they mean (Sharpley, 2001; Sasidaran and Font, 2001; Medina, 2005). Despite the objective of ensuring increased sustainability of tourism products and services, certification programmes may simply provide a checklist, or blueprint of steps that tourism projects are required to pass through in order to arrive at a desired end-state of 'sustainability'.

In their theoretical contribution, Jamal et al. (2006, p.8) address certification's capacity to accomplish these objectives, noting how its "'positive' norms appear neutral or morally appropriate because the discursive structures that deliver them *deflect* questioning the kind of experience, or the social behaviours and types of human ecological relationships being formed" (emphasis added). This is very consistent with Carrier's (2010, p.674) perspective that fetishisation in tourism involves "ignoring or denial of the background of objects...whether material or not".

In agreement with Carrier we argue that it is this deflection of interest, and the associated lack of questioning of how tourism experiences are produced, that is the lynchpin to the fetishisation of sustainability. Yet at this juncture there are few empirical tests of whether or not sustainable tourism certification is effective for defetishising tourism commodities by differentiating them based on their means of production (Toth, 2002). Does certification affect tourist decision-making by providing assurances that the tourism commodities they consume have been produced according to the principles of sustainability and ecotourism? Or, as Carrier (2010) suggests, has ecotourism and sustainability become fetishised along with the markers associated with that sustainability,

that is, the certification programmes? To address these questions we now explore one of the most well-known destinations for sustainable, responsible ecotourism and the capacity of one of the most influential sustainable tourism certification programme – Costa Rica’s ‘certificate for sustainability in tourism’ (CST) programme – to clear aspects of the fetishistic mist shrouding the production of sustainability in tourism.

3 Sustainable tourism certification in Costa Rica

Since former President Figueres Olsen (1994–1998) rhetorically offered up Costa Rica “to the world as a ‘laboratory’” for the ideas of sustainable development, this small Central American country has served as a global model for sustainable ecotourism development [Hall, (2000), p.49]. This outlook was fully embraced by the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT) which eventually developed the initial guidelines for the CST programme (Bien, 2002). In describing the need for tourism certification in Costa Rica initial CST architect Rodolfo Lizano expresses a concern for clarifying both the context and the production the ‘activity’ of tourism:

“Without exception, tourism develops in a physical space in which the attractions that are its marketable product are a fine mix of natural (natural resource), cultural, and social elements. For this reason, the activity cannot be isolated from its context, as often happens in industrial or agricultural activities, where negative externalities do not directly affect the quality of the product. In tourism, on the contrary, the quality of the product is highly dependent on environmental quality, natural resource conservation, the stability of ecological processes, and the social developments around it.” [Bien, (2002), p.147]

Initiated in 1997, CST awards up to five green leaves for tourism lodgings as well as tour operators that perform well on up to 150 criteria in these five categories:

- 1 physical-biological parameters
- 2 infrastructure and services (exclusive for lodging companies)
- 3 service management (exclusive for tour operators)
- 4 external client relations
- 5 socio-economic environment.

After a slow start the programme has flourished with increased funding from the former Arias administration in 2005 and, at the time of this writing (July 2012), includes 202 certified hotels and 61 certified tour operators (ICT, 2012). The programme continues to be heralded the world over by scholars and other certification proponents in their reviews of existing programmes (Honey and Rome, 2001; Rivera, 2002; Sasidharan et al., 2002; Font and Harris, 2004; Medina, 2005; Haaland and Aas, 2010); however, the lone scholarly assessment has been Rivera’s (2002) supply-side analysis of CST as an example of a voluntary environmental initiative. Little empirical information is available in the literature about the influence of the CST system on tourist-consumer decision-making, its ability to communicate shed lights on the means of production of different tourism products, and its influence on suppliers of sustainable tourism.

If the CST system functions adequately, we would expect it to clear much of the ‘fetishistic mist’ and illuminate previously obscured social and environmental impacts of tourism production, and effects would be expected on both the supply and demand side of the tourism sector. On the supply side, making tourism production more transparent via the CST should hypothetically create internal competition among operators to provide the highest quality and most sustainable product possible in order to capture a greater segment of the ecotourism market (Bien, 2002; Buckley, 2002; Honey, 2008). On the demand side, we would anticipate seeing better informed tourist-consumers who are more capable of distinguishing the production of idealised forms of ecotourism from green-washed counterparts. We would expect their collective purchasing decisions to further reward those making the greatest efforts to ensure tourism’s sustainable and responsible production (or ‘punish’ those that are simply staging sustainability). Conversely, if the means of production of tourism are in fact shrouded in a fetishistic mist, then we would anticipate tourism consumers to exhibit little awareness of the means required to produce sustainability or responsibility in the tourism commodities they purchase.

In order to explore these hypothetical outcomes of certification we now turn to select findings gathered in research along the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica which speak to the impacts of the CST system on both suppliers and consumers of sustainable tourism products.

4 Researching sustainable tourism production in Costa Rica

Between 2006 and 2010, researchers from the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) coordinated a series of studies on coastal tourism development along the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. Summary reports of these efforts are available publicly on the CREST website (Honey et al., 2010), and portions of these research efforts not touched upon here have been published elsewhere (Almeyda et al., 2010; Broadbent et al., 2012; Zambrano et al., 2010; Driscoll, et al., 2011). Although these studies were not specifically designed to assess the CST system, CST was included within the range of topics considered. In the following section we present a brief selection of secondary data from survey work which dealt directly with tourist perspectives of sustainability in tourism and of CST lodging ratings in particular. We first begin with a brief description of the methods utilised in each of the three studies drawn upon here.

4.1 2006–2009 research with tour operators along the pacific coast

From 2006–2009 a coordinated effort on the part of CREST and its Costa Rican collaborators resulted in a collection of 16 individual studies assessing tourism development along the Pacific coastline (Honey et al., 2010). Of special interest during these studies were the impacts of Costa Rica’s new-at-the-time second international airport in Liberia, Guanacaste, and the subsequent socially and environmentally exploitive growth of large scale resort and residential tourism that challenges the country’s image as a green destination (van Noorloos 2011). A further intention was to assess the impacts of the economic recession on these developments. One of the studies of particular value to the current discussion is an assessment of tour operator perspectives of the CST system (Vega, 2010). CREST-contracted consultants conducted

semi-structured interviews with 12 individuals working at certified lodging enterprises along the Pacific Coast or at the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism.

The primary objectives were to assess their experiences with the CST criteria (and those of other certification systems), their motivations and driving forces to seek certification, and recommendations for the CST programme. Secondly, these interviews evaluated operator perspectives on climate change and the economic crisis. The results are relevant to our current discussion in that they provide a supply side perspective of tour operators. Tourists, however, were not directly assessed until later studies, described below.

4.2 2009 study in Manuel Antonio National Park

In the summer of 2009 a CREST-affiliated research team comprised of Stanford faculty, graduate and undergraduate researchers as well as students from the University of Tourism, Costa Rica, carried out a second study. At two CST-certified ecolodges – *Hotel Parador* and *Sí Como No* – located near of Manuel Antonio National Park, they conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample (Babbie 2003) of 47 visitors staying at the lodge (plus additional interviews with tourism workers and others – see Honey et al., 2010). Once again, while CST was not a specific focus of the research at this point, the protocols for tourist interviews included a number of questions about CST and about tourist's concerns for environmental and social responsibility. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with hotel staff and managers of these two ecolodges in order to assess their socio-economic and environmental practices.

4.3 2010 study in the Osa Peninsula

In August of 2010 the authors led another team of Stanford student researchers, as well as University of Costa Rica-Golfito student collaborators, in a case study focused on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica, home of the country's biodiversity gem, Corcovado National Park. Since the opening of Costa Rica's second international airport radically altered the socio-ecological landscape of the Guanacaste region (Van Noorloos, 2011), this study offers a timely baseline assessment of the impacts of current forms of tourism since plans are underway to construct a third international airport the entrance to the Osa Peninsula. Splitting into two teams, one based out of Puerto Jimenez and one based out of Drake's Bay, the two research teams conducted interviews at lodges that did not have CST certification, thus providing a potential counterpoint to the previous year's study. The two teams purposively sampled 73 visitors to determine their awareness of the CST system and efforts they made to ensure social and environmental responsibility both before and during their travels. Similarly to the previous study, the research team also conducted semi-structured interviewed with ten ecolodge operators in order to assess their socio-economic and environmental practices. The following section reviews pertinent results from all three of these studies

4.4 Producing sustainability in tourism

The first source of secondary data is the study described above which included 12 qualitative interviews conducted with tour operators and ICT staff (Vega, 2010). These interviews assessed the perceived benefits and drawbacks participating in the CST

certification programme. Among the valuable insights provided by these producers of sustainable tourism include the following conclusions. First, interviewees describe the programme as creating a competitive internal environment among local producers of tourism, namely hotel and ecolodge operators in Costa Rica as they vie for the coveted four and five green leaf ratings. This finding was corroborated in interviews with ecolodges operators in the two subsequent studies, as well as in personal communications with an operator of multiple CST-certified hotels (personal communication with Hans Pfister, Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, 16 February 2010).

Secondly, interviewees claim that the programme elicits greater involvement of expensive hotels, many of which are part of international hotel chains, as well as higher end boutique ecolodges, all of which cater to affluent, luxury-seeking clientele. They note that since some of the adaptations required to achieve certification are economically prohibitive for the more rustic SMEs, these ecotourism projects are inadvertently excluded from the programme. Third, interviewees called for an extension of the certification to the vacation home and residential tourism sector that is growing exponentially along the Pacific Coast is sorely needed (Honey et al., 2010). Furthermore, the criteria are in need of updating to better illuminate the obscured social relations involved in the production of sustainable tourism, that is to say, the social outreach efforts of hotels and tour operators. Lastly, producers lament the lack of tax incentives from the government for participating in the programme. Despite these concerns, producers of tourism remain convinced that participation in the CST programme is of high value for their staging of sustainability via marketing efforts.

4.5 *Consuming responsibility in tourism*

The 2009 research effort in Manuel Antonio provided some of the first empirical data from tourist-consumers staying in CST-certified hotels. First, when asked about the importance they place on a hotel's *environmental* responsibility, 78% of tourists said important or very important (see Table 1). With respect to the importance of a hotel's *social* responsibility, 91% of tourists rated this as important or very important. Nevertheless, when asked about the importance of CST rating, the response rate was much lower: only 21% said that it was important or very important for their hotel to have a CST rating. Thus despite a high demand for a sustainable tourism product, the CST marker of sustainability was having little influence on the choice of tourism products.

In the ensuing 2010 study in the Osa Peninsula, similar questions were asked although in these cases respondents were not staying in CST certified lodges. On questions related to the importance of travelling responsibly, a comparable 84% of tourists said this was either important or very important. Nevertheless, only 8% reported purchasing carbon offsets during their travel. This is especially interesting due to the fact that at least half of the flights to the Osa Peninsula take place on NatureAir, the world's first carbon neutral airline. Because NatureAir *automatically* includes carbon offsets in the price of their fares, far more than 8% of those interviewed had actually purchased carbon offsets during their travels yet that effort to ensure sustainable travel was not communicated to the tourists.

When asked how important it was that their hotel be environmentally responsible, 81% responded with either important or very important. When asked how important it is that their hotel be socially responsible, 83% of tourists responded with either important or very important (see Table 1). Again, demand for sustainable tourism products appears to

be high. One couple on their honeymoon proudly claimed to have brought along a 'poop shovel' as an indication of the importance they place on being environmentally responsible. For many others, travelling sustainably was the reason for choosing Costa Rica as a destination in the first place.

Table 1 Tourist perspectives of travelling responsibly and the CST system

	2009 study CST-certified hotels (n = 47)	2010 study Non-CST certified hotels (n = 73)
Importance of travelling responsibly (important or very important)	NA	84%
Importance of being environmentally responsible (important or very important)	78%	81%
Importance of being socially responsible (important or very important)	91%	83%
Did you take steps to ensure your hotel's environmental responsibility? (did nothing)	NA	73%
Did you take steps to ensure your hotel's social responsibility? (did nothing)	NA	81%
Importance of hotel having a CST rating (important or very important)	21%	NA
Have you heard of the CST system? (no)	NA	82%

As in the 2009 data, the most surprising findings of the 2010 study related to how tourists verified their hotel's responsibility. Despite considering both social and environmental responsibility highly important, 81% of tourists said they did *nothing* to verify their hotels social responsibility, and 73% of tourists did *nothing* to verify the environmental responsibility of their accommodations. When effort was made to verify responsibility, internet research was the leading means employed (see Table 1). Again, most tourists seemed to think that simply deciding to come to Costa Rica versus another destination was sufficient assurance of sustainability in tourism. Yet perhaps of most surprise among the findings were tourists' knowledge of CST. When asked about their awareness of the programme, only 8% acknowledged having come across information about the CST programme prior to the survey, either before their travels or on earlier legs of their trip. Clearly, CST can do little to dispel the fetishistic mist shrouding tourism in Costa Rica if 82% of visitors are ignorant of the CST system.

5 Sustainability in Costa Rica demystified?

In this paper, we have discussed how sustainability and the related concept of responsibility are commodified in tourism. We hypothesised, on the supply side, that by making tourism production more transparent, certification creates internal competition among operators to provide the highest quality and most sustainable product possible in order to capture a greater segment of the ecotourism market. This hypothesis is largely supported by the secondary data reviewed here. Interviews indicate hotel owners and tour operators are well-informed about the CST system and its requirements. Furthermore, those working with certified hotels, as well as others in uncertified tourism businesses in

Costa Rican, report a perceived marketing advantage of being affiliated with the CST system. Interviews, participant observation, and personal communications all confirm that competition exists between operators vying for the coveted four and five green-leaf status. With respect to the hypothesised role of certification in enhancing aspects of sustainability on the supply side, the CST system does in fact appear to achieve the stated objectives of favourably affecting supply and promoting greater internal pressure to adhere to principles of sustainability (Bien, 2002; Buckley, 2002; Honey and Rome, 2001; Font, 2002).

Yet with respect to the ability to demystify and defetishise the means of production of tourism for tourist consumers, certification appears less successful. On the demand side, we expected to find increasingly informed tourist-consumers better capable of distinguishing the production of idealised forms of ecotourism from its more green-washed counterparts and of using their collective purchase decisions to further reward those making the greatest efforts to ensure tourism's responsible production. This hypothesised outcome was not supported. While the secondary data reviewed here confirmed the high demand for socially and environmentally responsible tourism products, there was also clear evidence of a disconnect between tourists and the means of production of the tourism they experience. Despite a demand for responsible travel, only 21% of visitors staying in CST-certified lodges considered the certification important. Moreover, 82% of tourists staying in the non-certified lodges were completely *unaware* of the CST programme. CST is therefore not demystifying the social relations and environmental impacts of the production of tourism, and according to our sample has virtually no impact on consumers' primary means of influencing sustainability in tourism, via their travel purchase decisions. Furthermore, even when purchase decisions did in fact include measure to offset the environmental impacts of travel via the carbon credits included in NatureAir fares, the majority of tourist consumers remained unaware of their contributions.

There is also a concern among SME that some requirements of the CST certification, such as costly energy- and water-saving equipment, are beyond their economic means and that the CST system inadvertently favours larger, wealthier producers. At an aggregate level these SMEs are very important to the character of tourism in Costa Rica as they provide much local employment, rich cultural experiences, and low environmental impact. Yet the indication is that that certification continues to direct tourist attention away from the numerous smaller-scale sustainable tourism products which provide direct access to cultural and natural features specific to Costa Rica, leaving them even further obscured by only placing the markers of sustainable tourism in the larger operations that provide enclave luxury to wealthier travellers.

6 Conclusions

The data presented here thus support the conclusion that sustainable tourism in Costa Rica indeed remains shrouded in a fetishistic mist, and that the CST programme is concealed within that mist, largely out of view of tourist consumers. We found tourism consumers exhibiting little awareness of, or interest in, the means required to produce sustainability or responsibility in the tourism commodities they purchase. Instead, they commonly cited the choice of Costa Rica as a destination as sufficient indication that

theirs was a sustainable tourism experience and were thus content to let sustainability to remain obscured in the mist. The social relations and environmental inputs required for producing tourism products are concealed from the view of the consuming, touring public not by the markers of the CST system but rather by the country's widely held image as a green destination (Carrier, 2010). This fetishised image of Costa Rica as the embodiment of sustainability in tourism continues to have far greater influence than the CST brand despite the certification's objective of providing a decision-making compass and assurances that tourism projects have complied with a minimum standard in the production of their products. This empirical data challenges the both the theory and practice of sustainable tourism certification and highly justifies further empirical research.

This paper also continues the discussion of authenticity, commodification, and fetishisation in tourism initiated by early tourism anthropologists (Boorstin, 1966, in MacCannell, 1976; Cohen, 1979, in Cohen, 1988; Urry, 1990), extending to contemporary tourism buzzwords of 'sustainability' and 'responsibility'. The insights of those earlier scholars helped pave the way for an era of increasing concern about the social relations and environmental impacts of tourism's production (Stronza, 2001). When coupled with the sustainable development paradigm, those insights helped generate many new forms of alternative tourism (Stronza and Hunt, 2012). By bringing those lenses back to bear on tourism today we hope to contribute to the next era of conscientious tourism development. More than anything else, the research presented here highlights many avenues for future research as well as opportunities for improvement within CST and other certification systems. Improved communication mechanisms are needed for reaching and affecting consumers, and for rewarding their responsible choices. For example, increased integration of CST with social networking media seems likely to promote favourable tourism purchase decisions.

Looking forward, if tourists are not aware of the CST certification programme in Costa Rica, widely considered a model programme, what are the prospects for effective sustainable tourism certification elsewhere? It is easy to imagine tourism certification going down a path of least resistance toward some form of crowd-sourcing, a trend some might say is already well underway with entities like 'Trip Advisor'. While this may not bode well for existing certification programmes, promising opportunities exist for comparative analyses of these two types of mechanisms for influencing tourist demand and of the feasibility of creating a linkage between them. We hope that future research and experimentation will help the CST programme – and other programmes of the kind – achieve greater demand side success in demystifying sustainability in tourism and in doing so, ensure more favourable social and environmental outcomes from the production of tourism.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the Center for Responsible Travel and the Tinker Foundation for supporting the field research that inspired this manuscript. They would also like to thank Claire M. Menke for providing feedback on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

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