

# Tour Link

**Demonstrated how an integrated ecolabelling and tour operating supply chain management strategy can foster sustainability in tourism**

Layman report in the frame of the EU – LIFE Environment project

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# 1. Background

## Situation in Europe

A sustainable tour operator supply chain can only be achieved if tourism suppliers and tour operators and independent initiatives for sustainable tourism collaborate with each other based on a common strategy.

The commitment of the Dutch ANVR tour operator association and the UK Federation of Tour Operators to introduce sustainable supply chain management approaches among all their members in combination with the establishment of the European VISIT platform (unifying 10+ Ecolabels) and the introduction of the EU Ecolabel for tourism (making certification available all over Europe) provided a unique opportunity to develop and implement joint approaches and actions in order to foster sustainable tourism.

## Partners for a joint initiative

To develop and test a common tour operator supply chain management system the Tour Link project established under the leadership of ECEAT (NL) a broad European partnership including: the ANVR tour operator association (NL), the Federation of Tour Operators (UK), the Catalan Ministry of Environment (SP), the Austrian Ministry of Environment, the Leeds Metropolitan University (UK), the International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics (SE), the Dutch Alps Platform (NL) and the Royal Awards foundation (DK).

In addition to the project partners international stakeholders and networks for sustainable tourism in Europe have advised and supported the TOUR-LINK project, such as VISIT (Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism), UNEP (Tour Operators Initiative), ECOTRANS (network of experts), World Tourism Organisation (Sustainable Tourism department), ECTAA (Group of National Travel Agents' and Tour Operators' associations in the EU), ABTA (Association of Belgium Tour Operators) and the German Forum Anders Reisen.

European experts have been involved to use best and update knowledge and experiences for specific tasks. The project period was three years (July 1, 2004 – June 30, 2007).



## Results

Within the Tour Link project an integrated set instruments and tools has been developed and tested in order to effectively promote sustainability within the tour operator supply chain:

### **Management system and tools**

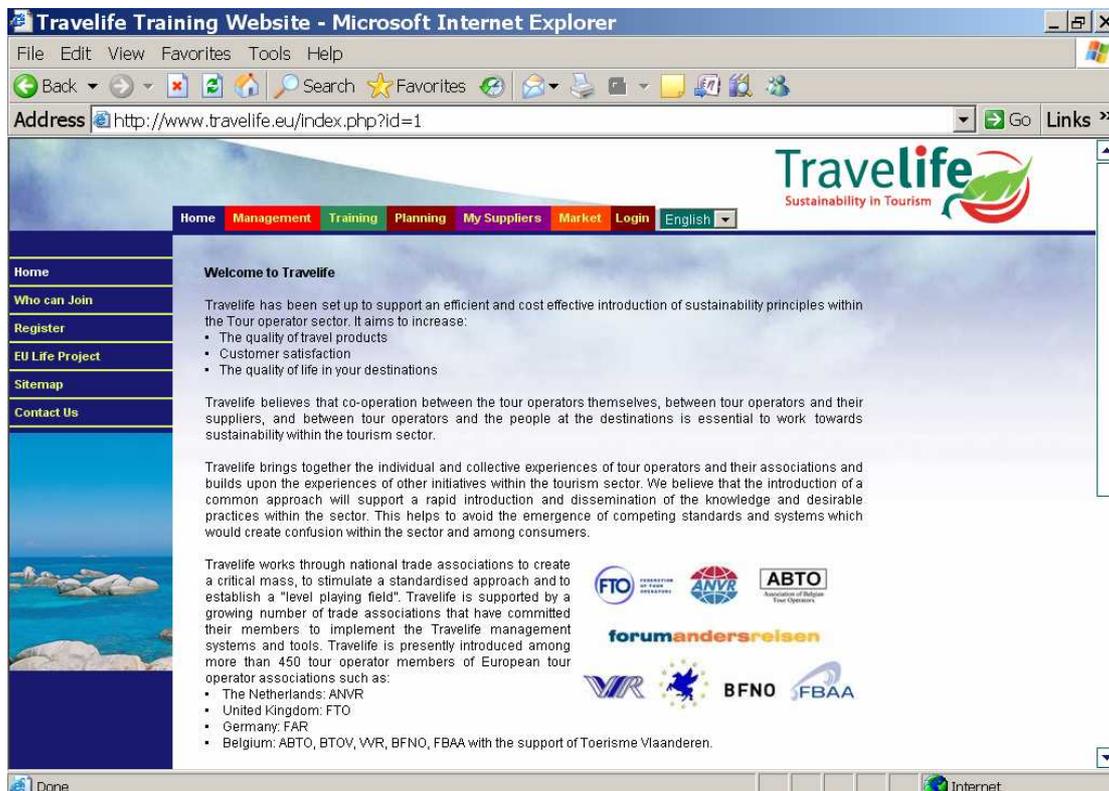
- Management system
- Training package and system
- Action planning and reporting system



### **Tour operator supply chain**

- Suppliers sustainability standards
- Suppliers assessment system
- Market place
- Consumer communication tools
- Destination co-operation tools

These instruments and tools have been commonly branded as “Travelife”. All tools are accessible through the travelife.eu web site which facilitates tour operator associations in managing and monitoring their member’s activities and facilitates individual tour operators in managing their staff’s performances.



## 2. Common tour operator management system and tools

### Tour operator and sustainability

Tour operators play a central role in the tourism industry. As intermediates between tourists and tourism businesses, they can influence the choices of consumer, practices of suppliers and the development within destinations. Through their unique position tour operators can make an important contribution to promote sustainable development and to protect the environmental and cultural resources.

More and more tour operators and tourism businesses are taking an active approach towards sustainability, not only because consumers expect them to do so, but also because they are aware that intact destinations are essential for the long-term survival of the tourism industry.

Key operating areas where companies can integrate sustainability practices are:

- Internal management (e.g. office supplies and printed materials).
- Product development and management, by planning tours and selecting holiday package components that minimise environmental, economic and social impacts.
- Contracting with suppliers, by integrating sustainability principles into the selection criteria and service agreements of suppliers.
- Customer relations, by providing information on the environmental and social aspects of the product offer, responsible behaviour (e.g. code of conducts) and sustainability issues in destinations.
- Relations with destinations, by supporting destination stakeholders' efforts to address sustainability issues, and financially contributing to conservation and development projects.

As tour operators are the central party within the tourism supply chain having direct business relations with a critical part of all destinations, suppliers and consumers they can play a key role in developing and disseminating a common global approach.

### Common supply chain management system

As part of the project the different approaches from the ANVR, FTO and FAR tour operator associations and the Tour operators' initiative have been harmonised into a common (global) system. The Travelife supply chain management methodology includes 6 steps: commitment and capacity building, baseline assessment, policy statement, action planning and implementation, monitoring and reporting. The systems are in line with the EU EMAS system with which consultations took place. A detailed training and implementation manual was developed clearly describing each step and how to comply with them.

## **Training**

In order to raise awareness of tourism impacts and support effective introduction of sustainability management approaches the project has developed a state of the art training and coaching package for tour operators. Practical tools and online training modules for different staff members and product groups are offered on the following themes and sub themes:

- The tourism supply chain (transport, accommodation, excursions, food)
- Tourism types (winter sport, cruise, golf, soft adventure, wildlife tourism)
- Working with destinations
- Internal management
- Communication with clients

Each module discusses the issues and the possible solutions from the tour operator's perspective. The training is enriched with more than 200 existing good practices showing what tour operators already do to tackle the issues. The training is concluded with an online exam, providing a personal Travelife certificate to candidates. There is a testing exam, which provides hints towards the correct answer and a formal exam with 85 multiple choice exam questions. The system provides full flexibility for different tour operator associations, target groups or levels: the number of questions asked from different themes, the threshold for success and the time of the exam can be set. The training is also open to students and other professionals and is available in English and Dutch. Translation to German and Spanish is planned.

### **Action planning and reporting tool**

The Travelife online action planning and reporting tool provides an easy online tool in order to plan and report on concrete steps promoting sustainability. The tool includes more than 120 actions grouped in 5 main themes: Sustainability Management, Internal Management, Supply Chain Management, Working with Destinations and Consumer communication. While the tool provides a wide range of actions that tour operators can take, each association or individual company is able select the actions that are most appropriate to its business activities and suppliers. The actions presented are suitable for tour operators of any size and are based on what (other) tour operators already successfully do. New actions and approaches can easily be added. The action planning and reporting tool provides Tour Operators' associations the opportunity to monitor their member's commitments and progress and to benchmark tour operators with each other, over time and with other associations. The system produces an automatic a PDF sustainability action plan and report.

### **Introduction among tour operators**

The supply chain management system and tools have been introduced among all members of the Dutch ANVR (190) and UK FTO (14) tour operator associations representing respectively 95% and 80% of the Dutch and UK markets. In each country information and training meetings were conducted and special newsletters were issued. Individual tour operators have been trained and coached.

In addition also the German Forum Anders Reisen, the Belgium ABTO and the Italian ASTOI have been committed to introduce the Travelife system.

### 3. The tour operator supply chain

#### Best practice standards

In order to provide clear direction and avoid confusion amongst suppliers (e.g. Hotels), Tour Link has developed a set of best practice standards which are meant to inspire suppliers world-wide and which are used by tour operators to evaluate and compare suppliers. So far standards have been developed for accommodations, animal attractions and marine recreation providers. To develop the standards existing standards and sustainability checklists as used by different tour operators have been harmonised. The Travelife best practice standards include both social and environmental criteria and are comparable with established systems such as the European VISIT ecolabel standard, the EU Flower for Hotels and Campsites and international fair trade and social standards. The standards are accepted and presently disseminated by major European tour operators such as TUI, First Choice, My Travel, Virgin Travel, British Airways and Thomas Cook.

<b>02.03.00</b>	<b>RENEWABLE ENERGY</b>			
02.03.01	Do the regulations in your country specify that you must buy all of your energy from a specific energy supplier (for example, a Government owned energy generation company)	Yes	No	NA
02.03.02	Are renewable sources of energy captured on site and used (eg the sun, wind, bio gas or other non-fossil source)	Yes	No	NA
02.03.03	Is renewable energy purchased for use on site?	Yes	No	NA
<b>02.04.00</b>	<b>WATER MANAGEMENT</b>			
02.04.01	Are you actively engaged in achieving a reduction in water consumption (also reduces costs)	Yes	No	NA
02.04.02	Are water saving devices fitted to reduce water consumption. These devices may include any or all of the following: flow restrictors, aerators, percussion (push) taps or limiters on water pipes?	Yes	No	NA
02.04.03	Are employees regularly reminded to save water?	Yes	No	NA
02.04.04	Is grey water recycled and treated appropriately before use?	Yes	No	NA

#### Supplier's assessment and support system



A common sector wide sustainability suppliers assessment system was developed in order to support tour operators to assess the sustainability performance of tour operator suppliers (e.g. hotels) and support them towards sustainability. Through a web based facility (its4travel.com) tour operators can evaluate and compare the

performance of their suppliers based on the Travelife best practice standards.

Information is shared between tour operators, avoiding the need for tour operators to personally audit all their suppliers and eliminating the need to maintain individual and expensive company based information systems.

When a supplier reaches a certain performance level it can apply for an onsite assessment which provides once passed the threshold, the opportunity to be noted in the catalogues of tour operators through a common sustainability logo. The Sustainability System also provides suppliers advice and support tools to improve their environmental and social performance, such as; a training handbook, reference to sustainable devices and a benchmarking management tool (developed by the EU LIFE Tour Bench project) to help them manage their energy and water consumption (and costs). The system is available in more than 10 languages.

## Market place

Globally hundreds of sustainable suppliers and certification initiatives are existing. For tour operators it is often difficult to locate these initiatives and suppliers. The Travelife market place was developed to provide an overview of existing sustainable suppliers, initiatives and destinations. The web based matching service (greentravelmarket.info) links up through an intelligent search and data-base system more than 800 sustainable products and initiatives with more than 500 European tour operator. It includes separate sections for tour operators, suppliers, media and other professionals.

Special marketing actions through for example telephone marketing, presentations at fairs and tour operator newsletters took place for initiatives such as: Kyrgyz ecotourism products, European Ecolabel Hotels, car free resorts from the Alps, Costa Rican Community Based Tourism products and Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa certified businesses.



## Consumer awareness and information

The choices and behaviour of tourists is a key contributor to the overall sustainability of a holiday package. Tour operators are ideally positioned to raise awareness and support and influence responsible behaviour by their customers. In order to facilitate tour operators with this task a manual for tour operators was compiled based on best practices in the promotion of sustainable tourism products to consumers. Common tour operator logo's (bronze, silver and gold) and messages were developed to indicate and promote sustainable products in catalogues.



## Co-operation with destinations

A Market-led approach was tested in two exemplary pilot regions: Catalonia and Austria. In co-operation with local stakeholders such as Hotel associations, tourism boards (Catalonia) and the Catalan and Austrian ministries of Environment (project partners), tour operator suppliers (hotels) were encouraged to work towards sustainability and comply with certification standards. Inventories were made in each destination of the main 150 hotels contracted by British and Dutch tour operators. Information and motivation workshops for these hotels were conducted and through visits and telephone actions hotels were personally approached. This work was sub contracted to local stakeholders who also were trained as part of the project in this innovative approach (the sustainable tourism NGO Respect in Austria and the Girona University in Catalonia). To raise effectiveness in addition also the participating tour operators approached the selected Hotels. Based on the pilot approach it can be concluded that about 20 % of the hotels are seriously interested to comply with sustainability standards; 50 % would first need more information or would like first to see an established system; 30 % did not see an added value, even if tour operators would reward them with extra promotion within the tour operators' catalogue.

A free publicity campaign to promote "sustainable" holiday packages from the pilot destinations Catalonia and Austria was tested in co-operation with the Catalan tourism board (including a journalist FAM trip, consumer brochure and TV programme) and tour operator TUI – Netherlands for sustainable winter sport to Austria.

## 4. Dissemination, innovation, sustainability and next steps

### Dissemination

The dissemination of the vision and results started from the beginning of the project and continued after project termination as Travelife was established as a permanent initiative from the on-set. In order to address the different target groups a leaflet for tour operators and a leaflet for suppliers (Hotels) was published and distributed. In addition stand alone banners and a fair stand was developed. Dissemination was successful due to the leading role and consequently large network of the partners in their specific sectors (business, governments, ngo's, academics). During the project the following dissemination actions were recorded: 63 conference presentations, workshops and lectures; 89 media coverage's in news papers, magazines, radio and TV; and 66 web publications or references. Own project events included stands presentations at 6 tourism fairs and 4 public "Tour operators go green" conferences at travel fairs in Vienna (Reisemesse), London (WTM), Milan (BIT) and the final launch event in Berlin (ITB) with key note speaker Eugenio Yunis from the UN – World Tourism Organisation. In addition supplier's conferences have been organised in Vienna and Barcelona. A conference on consumer communication and sustainable tourism was organised in Brussels in co-operation with the German Invent project. In co-operation with Dutch public broadcasting organisation Llink and ARTE TV two television programmes have been produced and broadcasted with Catalonia and Austria as demonstration regions.

*"(..) The phase of pioneering is already over, we need to convince the entire industry to become more sustainable, and that is why we support strongly the Travelife initiative. It is a very recommendable one as it will expand the application of good practices throughout the industry in Europe. We are pleased to see already the commitment of Tour operator associations from the UK, The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy (..)"*



*Eugenio Yunis UN – WTO at launch event ITB Berlin, March 7, 2007*

## **Innovation**

The project was innovative (compared to past and other sector initiatives) in many aspects:

- Sector wide approach: system and standards facilitating an industry wide introduction (instead of reaching a few individual show cases).
- Flexible: enabling different levels of involvement of as well associations as individual companies (instead of providing a rigid bleu print).
- Triple bottom line: integration of the full set of sustainability issues (instead of focus on only environment or social concerns).
- International approach: common European and even global standards all over (instead of national / company standards).
- Widely agreed: support for standards from as well industry, NGO's as government (instead of standard battle between NGO's and Industry).
- Cost effective: common tools, single assessment of suppliers information sharing of data (instead of duplication of efforts).
- Open: all tools online and multilingual available at a global scale (instead for limited group).
- Clear communication: sector wide logo for communication in all tour operators' promotion materials (instead of confusing consumers).
- Realistic and practical: criteria and actions based on what tour operators already do (instead of theoretical solutions).
- Transparent, comparable and accountable: common performance based reporting standards (instead of enabling green washing or false claims).
- Industry wide: for all types of companies (instead of different approaches and standards for e.g. multinational and small companies).

## **Project sustainability**

The Travelife system is presently fully accepted and implemented by a critical part of the European tour operator sector. No competing systems are existing. Travelife Sustainability co-ordinators have been appointed and trained and presently special personal is attracted by the tour operators to implement the approach along the full supply chain.

In order to further disseminate, develop, update and manage the project results different partners have taken responsibility for the different Travelife tools. In order to maintain consistency between the tools a management board has been established.

## **Next steps**

As a next step it is important to involve the remaining not yet active European tour operators associations and their members (contacts have already been established) To raise visibility among the sector a "Royal Award for Sustainability", under the protection of the Spanish and Danish crown, will be issued for best sustainable tour operator in 2008.

Partnerships between tour operators and major destinations will be established in order to promote sustainability among tour operator suppliers. Initiatives and projects have already been started in different destinations in Europe but also in other regions such as West Africa, South East Asia and Latin America.

An essential next step objective will be to create further harmonisation and mutual recognition between the different existing certification standards such as those of the VISIT ecolabels, the EU Flower and the tour operators' standard. At a global level this process is facilitated by the UNEP in close consultation with all relevant partners including the tour operators. It is expected that this will lead to a global Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC).

## Travelife photos



**Photo 1: ANVR Training meeting – The Netherlands**



**Photo 2: BIT Milan, To Go Green Conference - Italy**



**Photo 3: Cooperation Agreement with ASTOI - Italy**



**Photo 4: Forum Anders Reisen, General Assembly - Germany**



Photo 5: ITB Berlin 2007, Travelife stand – Germany



Photo 6: Reisepavillon Hannover 2007 – Germany