

## The WHL Approach

### What makes this approach different?

- **Free for the SME** accommodation provider to participate.
- It is up to the accommodation provider to decide what they do. This means programs are more likely to be **relevant to the local needs** either at the enterprise or the community level. This increases ownership.
- **Doing good makes good business sense.** Good ratings translate directly into more bookings. If travellers like what the accommodation provider is doing and provide positive feedback, this will influence others, resulting in more business.
- **Travellers are engaged.** They can select properties that care for the destination, feel good about where they are staying, and provide positive recommendations to influence others.
- **Regular, up to date traveller feedback** on the suitability of what the SMEs are doing to promote sustainability, and the extent of their commitment will keep everyone honest and where necessary encourage ongoing improvement.

### Towards a sustainable future...

This approach also ensures that costs are kept low, unlike most certification systems which currently rely on external funding and couldn't otherwise survive. (*Xavier Font, 2005*).

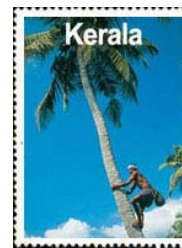
Font says, "Blue Flag has relied on European funds for nearly 15 years, struggling to survive when these finished. The International Network on Fair Trade in Tourism folded as soon as the grant run out."

The WHL scheme is market-driven and inclusive of all stakeholders. It does not detract from traditional top down expert certification. Rather, it complements it with a bottom-up, traveller and industry driven component.

### Small things can make big difference

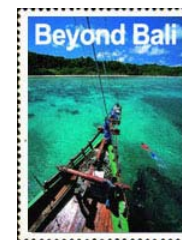
The WHL vision is to get enough SMEs and travellers engaged in this approach to make a positive contribution to the destination.

worldhotel-link.com



WHL is an online travel services network for the developing world. It offers an array of small and interesting accommodation and tours not found on other travel sites. Through a worldwide network of franchise operators in each destination, WHL offers local knowledge and contributes to local incomes. The WHL network also promotes "Caring for the Destination" - the first traveller-driven, sustainable tourism ratings designed with small accommodation providers in mind.

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WHL ...your *local* connection

## A Grassroots Approach to Sustainable Tourism



## Certification so far

For the past two decades, numerous tourism certification and labelling programs have been launched in the hope of promoting sustainable (mostly environmental) tourism practices. Such programs were also promoted as bringing a competitive advantage to participating firms. They have been voluntary rather than legislated for the most part and so far, their impact has been limited.

According to a survey of 59 sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programs by World Travel Organization (2002), only 7,000 tourism products (ranging from hotels to beaches or tours) were certified worldwide. Even then, the majority - 6,000 - were in Europe. This clearly demonstrates that such programs are "most suited to those countries with well-established infrastructures and the finances" (Xavier Font, 2005).

The end result:

- barely 1% of the industry is engaged in any form of certification or labelling today.
- over 95% of the 1% of certified firms are in the developed world (mostly Europe)
- travellers have no knowledge of these programs, and are confused by the industry jargon if they do.
- the focus is mostly (still) around environmental sustainability and rarely considers the sometimes more pressing social and cultural issues in the developing world.



## Certification and developing countries

According to The World Bank's *World Development Indicators Report (2002)*, more than 70% of the world's poorest countries rely on tourism as a key engine of economic growth. These are the very same countries not reached by current sustainable tourism certification and labelling programs.

**The need for a sustainable approach is clear.**

Siem Reap in Cambodia, home to the famous Angkor Wat and a UNESCO World Heritage Site presents as a fairly typical development story. Visitor levels increased by around 20% annually between 1995-2004, the highest rise in Asia Pacific. Hotel rooms in Siem Reap have mushroomed from 2,500 in 2002 to around 8,000 in 2006.

The town is experiencing power shortages, water shortages, inadequate garbage disposal, limited sewage treatment and a polluted local river. There are also growing social issues with prostitution, HIV/Aids and exploitation of labour. In short, without rapid action to address these issues the tourism sector in Siem Reap faces a bleak future. **So how can we engage businesses in places like Siem Reap in tackling sustainability issues?**

### What we know...

- The programs available today are **driven by certification experts** who have done a fine job setting out standards, but a poor job of engaging two critical stakeholders - the small and medium enterprise (SME) accommodation providers and the travellers. The programs are too complex, too difficult to understand and implement for the most part.
- As most of the programs involve external auditing / **verification by experts, costs are (relatively) high** and out of the reach of SME operators.
- **Travellers are not engaged.** However, increasingly they want to do good (or at least do no harm) when visiting developing countries, but there is no role they can play with existing schemes and the schemes do not influence their purchasing behaviour.
- The global or regional nature of the current schemes or programs **often fails to recognize specific local issues.**

## The WHL Approach

**Worldhotel-link.com** (WHL) had its origins as a pilot project (incubated by the International Finance Corporation's Mekong Private Sector Development Facility -IFC/MPDF) to market SME accommodation in the developing world to independent travellers.

WHL works as a franchise. Local partners with local knowledge own and operate the portals while being connected to WHL's global network. WHL provides the technical platform, the web marketing and management support.

In collecting information about SME accommodation providers, WHL identified many SMEs that are actively engaged in projects which were positive steps towards sustainable outcomes for the destination. None of the initiatives themselves were of "certifiable" standard, but they were good, meaningful to the SME involved and addressed specific local needs.

*For example, they included employing and training orphaned children, supporting local schools, running a turtle hatchery, restoring a damaged coral reef, teaching traditional building skills and restoring historical buildings.*

WHL then started to write up some of these initiatives as "brand differentiators" for the respective accommodation providers, highlighting to travellers what accommodation providers were doing.

**Some initiatives were small and some were large, but many offered guests either a unique experience, or at least an opportunity to feel that by staying with this accommodation provider they were doing some good.**

For small SMEs already competing in a difficult market, trying to differentiate themselves on price, location and facilities is generally ineffective. Tourists today are discerning enough to expect good service regardless of price and facilities.

The only real way to distinguish themselves is by selling a unique experience which is what WHL encourages them to deliver. This led to the idea of an "eBay style" bottom-up, sustainable tourism marketing model.

The SME accommodation provider promotes their initiatives - as a core part of their product and brand - and the traveller rates them after staying at the property, providing feedback online for other travellers to view.