

EIMAS – EUROPEAN INTERDISCIPLINARY MASTER IN AFRICAN STUDIES

Ecotourism certification in Kenya.
A qualitative overview of the Eco-rating scheme by
Ecotourism Kenya

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June

2022



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Master's thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Master in European Interdisciplinary Master African Studies, supervised by Professor Helena Vilaça and by Professor Miguel Filipe Silva, mentored by Professor Esther Munyiri.

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto | Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto

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Examination Committee

Professor

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Final classification:

For and With Mirko,

Always and forever.

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Declaration Of Honor

I hereby declare that I am the author of this Master's thesis, which has never been used in other course units or subjects at this or any other institution. All references to authors (statements, ideas, thoughts, quotes) have scrupulously met the applicable citation rules and are, therefore, referenced in the text and in the bibliographical references, in accordance with the referencing rules. I am aware that plagiarism and self-plagiarism is an academic offenses.

Porto, 30/06/2022

Silvia Diazzi

Acknowledgements

Every journey becomes better when it's shared. This work is the result of months of hard work, brainstorming and passionate advice from several people that I would like to thank deeply. To Miguel Silva for a constant academic and psychological passionate hard work, support and friendship until the very last day of this project, and for believing in me since the very first day. It has been a true honor to learn and work together during this adventure and I am looking forward for the next chapters. To Amelia Polonia for her caring, passionate and inspiring guidance. To Helena Vilaça for her support and flexibility for the organization of this work. To Esther Munyiri for sharing her precious contacts, advice and the passion for her wonderful country. To Cornelius Okello for his cheerful and caring support, and precious insights. Thanks to all the research participants for dedicating their time and expertise in contributing to this study. To my parents, for supporting every crazy decision I have made in the last ten years and for traveling the world with me with pride, love and for letting me be myself. To my friends for being amazing human beings and role models, and for always listening and supporting me in a physical distance while being very close in heart. To Konstantinos for opening doors to new unexpected worlds and sharing with me his network of quality, with support and care. To my family for letting me express myself in my own way and allowing me to share it with them.

Abstract

Ecotourism is a global phenomenon that promotes responsible tourism practices to overcome the damaging impacts of mass tourism and overcome greenwashing. The *Eco-rating scheme* by Ecotourism Kenya is an ecotourism certification program developed in Kenya. This study aims to identify if the certification can be a strategic business opportunity for tourism accommodation facilities. The study is based on data collected with qualitative methods through semi-structured interviews with major stakeholders in the tourism sector in Kenya and an online survey for *Travelife*-certified tour operators. The research identified perceived attractive factors, performance and financial benefits, and challenges of the *Eco-rating* scheme. It also provides insights on the relationship between eco-rated facilities and *Travelife*-certified tour operators and the future of sustainable tourism and the ecotourism certification program in Kenya.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Kenya; Certification; *Eco-rating* scheme; business approach.

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INTRODUCTION

“We need to promote development that does not destroy our environment.”

Dr. Wangari Muta Maathai

The natural environment is the most precious resource available on earth. Humans have lived in a symbiotic relationship with nature since the origins of civilization. However, in the most recent decades, human activities have contributed to the degradation of the natural environment. Ecotourism was born to ease the negative impacts of mass tourism on resources, and ecotourism certification might be a weapon against greenwashing and false claims. Kenya has a well-developed tourism sector, and interest in ecotourism recently bloomed. Sustainability calls for economic development that grows with respect for nature and local communities. In order to bring everyone on board with ecotourism, it is necessary to understand if it is a fruitful investment for businesses and their long-term survival in Kenya.

The tourism sector in Kenya represents one of the largest employers, generating the greater source of international earnings after tea and horticulture (Karuma, 2016, p. 10). Kenya's tourism sector primarily depends on wilderness and wildlife, which have been damaged by the impacts of mass tourism and unsustainable tourism practices (Atieno & Njoroge, 2018, p. 52). Hence, it is fundamental for Kenya to develop and promote sustainable tourism practices that enhance environmental conservation, socio-cultural support and financial advantages to benefit the businesses, the local communities and the natural resources.

Ecotourism certifications have proved to be tools used to fight against greenwashing and promote tourism actors that produce beneficial environmental and social impacts with their operations. Following this trend, the organization Ecotourism Kenya developed the *Eco-rating scheme* among their other programs for promoting responsible tourism. So far, business owners, with some sustainability sensitivity, and other actors in the tourism sector have adopted and promoted the program. Moreover, to upscale the certification program and potentially transform Kenya into a sustainable tourism destination, it is necessary to understand if the *Eco-rating scheme* creates long-term strategic business opportunities for

the facilities that adopt and invest in it. This research aims, in a more practical way, to pave the way for further collaboration among all stakeholders in developing sustainable tourism in Kenya, particularly those promoting, adopting, and using the *Eco-rating scheme*.

At the time of writing, no available documents or data prove the program's success or uptake¹ in terms of financial performance, business strategy, or future investment prospects from the point of view of the eco-rated facilities. The identified problem responds to the need to understand if business owners and managers acknowledge that sustainability incorporates the economic pillar and that businesses investing in sustainability can seize opportunities to improve and evolve their businesses in the present, but more importantly, in the future. Especially in a country like Kenya that heavily relies on nature-based tourism, primarily found in rural areas, the environmental conservation and community protection approaches are fundamental to ensure the inflow of tourists in the long term.

Wilderness degradation and loss of wildlife would mean a significant loss for the planet and the business of accommodation facilities and tourism-related income activities. At the same time, an area with high rates of conflicts among businesses and local communities would also face a reduction in local and international visitors. Businesses have the opportunity to adhere to the *Eco-rating scheme* as a way to demonstrate that they are implementing good practices for all the three pillars of sustainability². It is also important to highlight their side of the equation as they can provide employment opportunities and implement conservation projects. In order to generate mutually beneficial outcomes, it is fundamental that a business continues to generate income.

This study provides additional value to the ecotourism certification research area by adding a qualitative perspective on the popular *Eco-rating scheme* by Ecotourism Kenya. As previous studies highlight, within the vast field of ecotourism studies, there is a need for further knowledge creation beyond descriptive analysis (Das & Chatterjee, 2015, p.13) and more

¹ Or at least the author could not find them.

² The concept refers to sustainability's economic, social, and environmental pillars. A sustainable approach to resource use and development means utilizing the available resources in the present day in a way that does not compromise the use of the same resources for future generations.

production of perspectives from qualitative approaches (Almeida García et *al.*, 2015, p. 38). Thanks to the participation of important stakeholders and experts in the field of tourism, responsible tourism, and education in Kenya, this study brings to light a qualitative outlook and the novelty of a unified vision of professionals from different expertise and experiences in the industry from the supply side.

Previous studies on Ecotourism Kenya have been produced. For instance, Karuma's research (2016) has assessed the role of the *Eco-rating scheme* in promoting sustainable tourism, and it narrowed down the scope of the study to selected facilities that are part of the program. Additionally, Atieno & Njoroge (2018) have conducted an ideological analysis to pinpoint how businesses interpret and adapt concepts of ecotourism to their practices.

The present study contributes to and enriches the insights from previous researchers by focusing primarily on the Eco-rating program. It investigates attractivity factors, potential performance and financial benefits, and challenges of the scheme. Moreover, it provides an overview of the relationship between tour operators and eco-rated facilities and the future of certification and sustainable tourism in Kenya.

This study is organized in four main chapters. The first chapter *State of the Art* provides an introduction on the evolution of ecotourism, its definitions and ecotourism certifications inside and outside academia. The second chapter *Methodology* exposes the methods implemented to design the research, collect and analyze the data reported in the following sections. The third chapter *Case Study* presents the organization Ecotourism Kenya and its programs related to responsible tourism. Moreover, it delves into the *Eco-rating scheme* at the core of this research, its requirements, goals and features. The chapter introduces the *Travelife* certification for tour operators and their role in the tourism sector in Kenya. The fourth chapter *Results and Discussion*, contains a report and analysis of the data collected by the author. It is organized following the study objectives and questions of the study, which are presented below. In the end, the researcher presents some major Conclusions, limitations, and further research the author wishes to develop shortly.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to identify if *Ecotourism Kenya's Eco-rating scheme* can be a drive for strategic business opportunities for tourism accommodation facilities. The specific objectives of the study are:

- i) To define factors that attract facilities to invest in the certification;
- ii) To identify performance benefits for eco-rated facilities;
- iii) To understand if the certification increases potential clients;
- iv) To identify potential challenges of obtaining the Eco-rating certification;
- v) To determine the relationship between eco-rated facilities and *Travelife*-certified tour operators;
- vi) To provide an overview of the long-term sustainability of the *Eco-rating scheme*

Research questions

With the above-mentioned objectives in mind, the research questions of the study are:

1. Which factors attract facilities to invest in the certification?
2. What are the performance benefits for eco-rated facilities?
3. Does the certification help increase potential clients?
4. What are possible challenges to obtain the Eco-rating certification?
5. Which relationship connects eco-rated facilities and *Travelife* tour operators?
6. What is the long-term sustainability of the *Eco-rating scheme*?

CHAPTER ONE

1. STATE OF THE ART

This chapter aims to introduce the reader to the current status of academic findings on the topics of ecotourism and its certifications. The first two sections explore the concepts of ecotourism, the description of its evolution inside and outside of academia, its success, and the complex definition(s) of its parameters. Moreover, the latter section offers an overview of ecotourism certifications with several arguments from previous research and findings.

1.1. Evolution of ecotourism: growing significance and research trends

The first official appearance of the term ecotourism dates back to 1978 when Parks Canada published a booklet on Rideau Canal (Mckercher, 2010, p. 15). In academia, Hector Ceballos-Lascurc is commonly given credit for his pioneering definition in 1987.

*[Ecotourism is] traveling to **relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas** with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its **wild plants and animals**, as well as any existing **cultural manifestations** (both past and present) found in these areas* (1987, p. 14).

It is reported that ecotourism has been steadily rising at a pace of 10-20% in the last decade and it is considered the fastest-growing tourism category in the market (Davila, 2020, p. 2). For Wondirad (2019), ecotourism rapidly increased in popularity thanks to the highly productive work of academia, the dissatisfaction over the negative impact of mass tourism, and a growing environmental awareness that emphasized the value of protected areas and environmental conservation (p. 1047). Various worldwide events, such as the establishment of the *International Year of Ecotourism* (IYE) by the United Nations (UN) and the development of a peer-reviewed *Journal of Ecotourism* in 2002, are not insignificant indicators of the growing relevance of ecotourism in recent decades (Rahman et al., 2021, 33). Furthermore, as Barna et al. (2011) noted, the global presence and influence of ecotourism are highlighted by its position in numerous international agreements³.

³ For example the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (1999), the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Code of Ethics (1999), the Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development Issue by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD, 2003), the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism (2002), and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002).

It is remarkable to mention the foundation of several international associations with the mission of promoting and developing ecotourism practices in the tourism sector. *The International Ecotourism Society* (TIES) was launched in 1989 in Florida as the first NGO to spread awareness on conservation, sustainable development, and their connection to ecotourism (TIES, 2019). Moreover, the *Global Sustainable Tourism Council* (GSTC) was created in 2007 as a partnership among several international institutions⁴ to spread awareness of ecotourism by using evaluation criteria for sustainable tourism⁵ (GSTC, 2021). The *Global Ecotourism Network* (GEN) is one of the latest organizations and it was founded in 2015 by former members of TIES to further promote advocacy activities⁶ (GEN, n.d.).

Likewise, ecotourism's success in academia is significant. Ecotourism is available as an elective or core subject in many university and college tourism programs as well as the subject of a degree on its own (Weaver & Lawton, 2007, p. 1168). These courses are supported by an expanding collection of textbooks, both general in scope and addressing specific ecotourism topics⁷. The contribution of the research field to the popularity and spread of ecotourism is remarkable. Many, in line with Mckercher (2010), argue that ecotourism as the tourism industry product would not exist in its current popular form without the prolific work of the academic community.

Interest and academic research on ecotourism have grown during the past twenty years and the following paragraphs will provide an overview of researchers' efforts to identify evolutionary phases and recurring themes. McKercher (2010) recognized three phases of ecotourism research: the "New Dawn", the "Crisis of Legitimacy" and the "Sustainable Product Niche". From his analysis, the initial phase welcomed ecotourism with a general

⁴ Among others: Rainforest Alliance, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Foundation (UN Foundation), the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), ECOTRANS, Expedia, Inc., Federation of Tour Operators (FTO), Kenyan Ecotourism Society.

⁵ The valuation criteria for sustainable tourism are aimed at destination managers (policy-makers, destination managers) and industry actors (hotels and tour operators) (GSTC, 2021).

⁶ Members apply their expertise towards the evaluation of ecotourism practices and providing a dissemination platform for approaches, social entrepreneurship, advocacy towards a better form of ecotourism (GEN, n.d.).

⁷ For specific ecotourism topics see: Black & Crabtree (2007) for quality evaluation and ecotourism certifications; Buckley (2004) for environmental impact analysis of ecotourism; Fennell & Dowling (2003) for planning and policymaking in ecotourism; Garrod & Wilson (2003) for marine ecotourism; Zeppel (2006) for indigenous ecotourism, village ecotourism, rainforest ecotourism, wildlife and forest ecotourism.

optimistic spirit and expectations was followed by the second disenchanted phase in which scholars focused on highlighting ecotourism's failures to achieve its social, economic, and environmental goals. The third and current stage aims at providing a more realistic overview of ecotourism's capacity to deliver results and measure them (p. 23).

The scientometric bibliographic review by Xu et al. (2022) on ecotourism recalls and provides an in-depth updated review of McKercher's three research phases. The first phase is identified as the "Human disturbance research stage" between 2003 and 2010. The authors focused on the impact of human activities, particularly tourism and tourists, on the natural environment, ecosystems, animals, and habitats⁸ (Xu et al., 2022, p. 17). In the second phase, "Ecosystem services research stage," between 2011 and 2015, scholars explored a wider diversity of topics encompassing evaluation of ecosystem services, biodiversity protection, responsible behaviors, and circular economy. The most remarkable themes and authors in this phase are cultural ecosystem services (Milcu et al., p. 2013), evaluation practices for cultural ecosystem services⁹, the efficacy of willingness-to-pay evaluation (Naeem et al., 2015), the phenomena of green grabbing (Fairhead et al., 2012), the connection among biodiversity, humans and ecosystem service¹⁰, responsible ecotourism behaviors (Chiu et al., 2014), opinion of locals on tourism expansion (Sharpley, 2014), and volunteerism (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Finally, in the third phase "Sustainable development research stage", from 2016 until the present, the dominant themes are the circular economy (D'Amato et al., 2017), the environmental footprint of tourism (Ozturk et al., 2016; Ulucak & Bilgili, 2018,,), sustainable tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018) and the impact of COVID19 on the sector (Gössling et al., 2021). Among the major findings, they identified a need to further incorporate research methodologies from other fields to better formulate efficient management and planning strategies, policy recommendations, and program implementation (Xu et al., 2022, p. 21).

⁸ E.g.: the impact of nature-based tourism on protected areas (West et al., 2006), the decline of animal species due to close contact with humans (Köndgen et al., 2008), negative consequences of ecotourism on the biology of species (McClung et al., 2004)

⁹ See Burkhard et al. (2012), Chan et al. (2012), Fisher et al. (2009), de Groot et al. (2010)

¹⁰ See Bennett et al. (2015), Cardinale et al. (2012), Díaz et al. (2015), Mace et al. (2012)

Another thematic analysis conducted by Wondirad (2019) pinpoints that ecotourism is often presented and analyzed under the dimensions of local community participation and empowerment, environmental conservation, thorough planning and management, and responsible tourists experience (p. 1054). From his findings, the primary research themes regard the relationship between ecotourism and the economic benefits¹¹, engagement¹², empowerment¹³, and involvement¹⁴ of local communities. The second most explored topic regards ecotourism development from a managerial perspective, specifically related to planning methodologies¹⁵ and models and factors that can lead to sustainable growth¹⁶. Ecotourists¹⁷ emerge as the third most recurring area of research interest. Generally, scholars compare ecotourists and mainstream tourists based on motivations, values, behavior, willingness to pay¹⁸, and self-perception. The theme in the fourth place is the contribution of ecotourism toward biodiversity protection, with a particular focus on developing countries¹⁹. Moreover, the fifth position is occupied by studies on the impact of ecotourism²⁰. Generally, most researchers agree that proper planning and development can contribute to implementing a sustainable and responsible type of tourism. The topic of this study ecotourism certifications reaches the sixth position. Some scholars focus on evaluating ecotourism practices²¹ and others specifically on certifications²². Among the other major themes, Wondirad (2019) identified ecotourism experience, consumer perception, marketing, the scale of ecotourism development, ethical dilemmas and developmental challenges, collaboration and partnership issues, ecotourism's role in poverty reduction, and the consumptive nature of ecotourism.

¹¹ See Stem et al. (2003), Spenceley & Goodwin (2007)

¹² See Krüger (2005), Butcher (2006)

¹³ See Scheyvens (2000), Mendoza-Ramos & Prideaux (2018), Zhang & Lei (2012), Reimer & Walter (2013)

¹⁴ See Nault & Stapleton (2011), Serenari et al. (2017), Schweinsberg et al. (2018)

¹⁵ See Chaminuka et al. (2012), Lee et al. (2012), Sakata & Prideaux (2013)

¹⁶ See Vincent & Thompson (2002), Wollenberg et al. (2011), Doan (2000), Karst (2017), Xu et al. (2017), Schweinsberg et al. (2018)

¹⁷ See Lian Chan & Baum (2007), Rivera & Croes (2010), Lee et al. (2014), Thapa & Lee (2017)

¹⁸ See Deng & Li (2015), Gurung & Seeland (2008), Kerstetter et al. (2004), Lee & Jan (2018), Rivera & Croes (2010)

¹⁹ See Hawkins (2004), Pegas & Castley (2014), Butcher (2006), Peakea et al. (2009), Moskwa (2010)

²⁰ See Almeyda et al., (2010), Pegas et al. (2013), Saayman & Saayman (2006), Sharpley (2006), Spenceley & Goodwin (2007)

²¹ See Baral et al. (2012), Buckley (2009), Ross & Wall (1999), Tsaor et al. (2006)

²² See Bustam et al. (2012), Dunk et al. (2016), Esparon et al. (2017), Jamal et al. (2006), Sipic (2017)

1.2. Defining ecotourism

The debate over the definition and concepts of ecotourism has kept the debate among scholars very active in the last three decades. One possible and significant conclusion is that the field of study is highly active and actual. Academia has produced several schools of thought around ecotourism's definition, impacts, and functions. These debates are also tangible proof of the growing interest in this study area. It can be observed that given the social phenomenon nature of ecotourism, one distinct academic definition of what it entails is somewhat unrealistic to reach (Wondirad, 2019, p. 1050).

According to the reviewed literature, it is possible to identify two main contrasting schools of thought related to ecotourism. First, many researchers identify ecotourism as a tool to foster sustainable economic development, environmental protection, and cultural restoration²³. They recognize the beneficial effects of ecotourism when it is well planned, developed, and managed. On the other side, other scholars question the efficacy of ecotourism in achieving its varied objectives²⁴. For this critics' faction, on a global scale, the conservation impact of ecotourism remains unclear, regardless of the successful impact on conservation in specific case studies (Wardle et al., 2018, p. 113). This group considers the dangers of ecotourism to become a greenwashing instrument that encourages tourists to reach untouched and fragile ecosystems, with very similar effects to mass tourism. They see ecotourism as an elite-oriented form of tourism, fundamentally unavailable to ordinary travelers, and the tourism industry may easily hijack it as a marketing tactic.

Finally, this study will be based on the definition provided by Peter Björk in 2000. Björk (2000) recognizes the importance of efficient resource management to **preserve the environment, empower local communities**, and ensure **long-term financial benefits** from the tourism activity. In his conceptual reflection, he analyzes the definition of ecotourism as a "unique tourism form." For him, *Ecotourism* is a type of sustainable and distinct tourism. Likewise, it is made up of principles that all forms of tourism should, ideally, adhere to (Björk, 2000, p.

²³ See Che (2006), Cobbinah et al. (2017), Jamaliah & Powell (2018), Masud et al. (2017), Mayaka et al. (2018), Ormsby & Mannle (2006), Pegas & Castley (2014), Shoo & Songorwa (2013), Snyman (2014), Svoronou & Holden (2005)

²⁴ See Butcher (2011), Chan & Bhatta (2013), Manyara & Jones (2007), Mckercher (2010), Ondicho (2012), Sharpley (2006), Southgate (2006), Wardle et al. (2018), Wheeler (2005)

197). This author finds it crucial to adopt a win-win strategy involving all tourism stakeholders present in a tourism destination. In fact, for Björk, ecotourism must benefit the environment, businesses, tourists, and the host community, which must be involved in the development process (pp. 196-197).

In his research, Björk (2000) highlights the fundamental aspect of a holistic approach toward ecotourism, which requires active collaboration and cooperation activities by the local governments, tourism industry actors, visitors, and local communities (p. 196). In this study, the focus on effective interactions among tourism sector actors is highly relevant and considerably embedded in the Eco-rating certification scheme, which is the primary subject of this research and will be further illustrated in the following chapter. The approach by Björk (2000) primarily suggests utilizing tourism products in a sustainable way that does not exploit nor spoil environmental, socio-cultural, and traditional resources (p. 196).

Sustainability is a founding value of this study. Its three pillars of environmental, social, and economic impact shall be considered equally fundamental for the enduring success of any sustainable strategy implementation. Responsible tourism is embedded in developing and achieving targets outlined by the UN in its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has the potential to contribute indirectly to all goals, and it is directly included as a target in

- **SGD 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth:** 10% of the global GDP depends on tourism, 30% of the world's services exports, and it creates one out of every ten jobs worldwide. It is fundamental to create employment opportunities for youth and women and to improve the socio-economic impacts on local communities;
- **SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production:** the implementation of responsible tourism practices can contribute to a global shift towards sustainability and better economic, social, and environmental impacts from the sector;
- **SDG 14 Life Below Water:** tourism must be involved in the development of "Integrated Coastal Zone Management" to support the conservation of marine ecosystem and sustainable use of its resources in the blue economy.

As presented by Barna et al. (2011, p. 89), the ideal ecotourism model fosters the sustainable growth of the touristic destination by improving the quality of life of the local people. With

their diverse agendas and priorities, ecotourism stakeholders such as entrepreneurs, local governments, and tourists must work together to increase community welfare while preserving the environment and supporting the local businesses (Barna et al., 2011, p.89). The benefits discussed involve the long-term survival of the tourism destination; thus, it entails aspects related to environmental protection, financial stability, and community wellbeing. It is important to remember that ecotourism is a tourism form that sells a tourism product to customers. This principle is embedded in a strong environmental characterization as the prefix “eco” derives from ecology, around which everything evolves in terms of financial benefits and awareness creation (Kalaitan et al., 2021, p. 374). However, to guarantee that environmental investments and practices are sustained over time, financial returns and socio-economic gains for the local communities living in the natural environment must be ensured and well utilized (Davila, 2020, p. 9).

1.3. Ecotourism certifications

Ecotourism supports the development of a sustainable tourism destination while also serving as a mechanism for promoting ecologically responsible behaviors. An ecotourism strategy with proper planning and management can provide significant economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits (Wondirad, 2019, p. 1048). Strategic management and performance benefits can be considered consequent outputs of efficient planning of the ecotourism product promotion and implementation.

Besides several reported and documented benefits of ecotourism, especially at a small scale, there are serious risks, disadvantages, and negative effects that poorly implemented ecotourism strategies can inflict on the local communities, the natural environment, and, in general, the overall goals of ecotourism itself (Buckley, 2009, p. 666). For instance, ecotourism greenwashing is a practice that discredits the sector’s reputation and efforts. Honey (2002) describes it as deceptive advertising that claims an environmentally friendly facility, product, or service when, in fact, it does not respect ecotourism guidelines (p. 6). Greenwashing constitutes a dangerous tool that fake sustainable businesses can use to increase prices for tourists that have the illusion of paying for sustainable tourism activities. While, on the other side, instead of implementing useful projects and practices for the well-being of local communities and environmental conservation, businesses are solely pursuing higher profits.

It is necessary to measure, monitor, and evaluate implemented operations to provide updated and better solutions and ensure transparency and efficacy (Xu et al., 2022, p. 21). Ecotourism certification schemes can enable further transparency and reliability while contrasting greenwashing for the ecotourism niche as they set standards and criteria to verify if the ecotourism actors follow its principles (Davila, 2020, p. 11).

This research considers a tourism certification as a “voluntary procedure” in which a business, service, product, or organizational system is subjected to assessment and monitoring by a third party to obtain written proof of compliance with specific requirements (Honey & Rome, 2001, p. 17). As Spenceley & Bien (2013) highlight, any ecotourism certification must include socio-economic, cultural, and environmental parameters (p. 406). Moreover, the certification guarantees the complying members some benefits, including a “marketable logo,” information access to an exclusive community, networking platforms, and others.

1.3.1. Efficacy of ecotourism certifications

This section explores conclusions from several research studies that produced information on the benefits and criticisms of using ecotourism certification in the tourism sector, with a preference for studies that examined tourism accommodation certification, as the case study of this research focuses on a tourism accommodation facility certification in Kenya, which will be exhaustively presented in chapter 2.

The primary argument favoring using ecotourism certification in the tourism sector implies that they help identify successful tourism actors and their good practices of supporting conservation and socio-economic benefits (Davila, 2020, p. 147). Moreover, they can help fight greenwashing and contribute to further transparency in the industry (Spenceley, 2018, p. 2). At the same time, from the perspective of the accommodations that become certified facilities, it helps identify processes, services, gaps, and weaknesses that can be improved with ad-hoc programs and projects to increase sustainability and financial performance²⁵. Hence, certifications can help accommodations reduce operations costs by using more efficient technologies and practices and revising internal managerial strategies that benefit

²⁵ See e.g. Ponnepureddy et al. (2017), GSTC (2011)

performance, credibility, and attractiveness toward sustainability-sensitive customers (Spenceley, 2018, p.3). Moreover, thanks to the implementation of standard practices, facilities are more likely to obtain tax benefits or subsidies directly from governments supporting sustainable tourism (Rome et al., 2006, p.88). Considering the governmental sphere, since ecotourism is predominantly found in remote areas, of the African continent, for example, it strongly depends on the support from the local communities, and the various stakeholders can achieve a mutually beneficial status from ecotourism's activities (Snyman, 2017, p. 251). Consequently, ecotourism embodies the potential to support sustainable development, particularly by transforming rural areas' economies and empowering rural inhabitants to develop different businesses related to tourism's supply chain (Gill & Reed, 1997, p. 133). Several developing countries have identified the opportunity to bring change in their remote communities by including ecotourism in their economic development and environmental protection strategies. Certifications are identified as tools for monitoring and improving such programs (Amalu et al., 2018, p. 1258).

However, at this stage of the development of ecotourism, it is not yet possible to state that all the certified accommodations or tour operators are the best in terms of their sustainability policies, practices, and impacts. (Klein & Dodds, 2017, p. 48). Several critics of ecotourism certifications claim that the eco-rating programs have not contributed effectively to achieving ecotourism's goals (Davila, 2020, p.163). As research demonstrates, part of the challenge seems to depend on a high level of complexity since there are several different certification programs (Ko, 2005, p. 435). This confuses the tour operators and the travelers in choosing which one(s) to rely on. Moreover, as Weaver (2009) pointed out, there is an issue of market dissemination as the certifications are predominantly voluntary and the awareness is not well distributed; the majority of ecotourism actors have not adhered to the programs, regardless of their good practices and/or positive impacts on the local realities they operate in (p. 34).

Previous studies²⁶ reveal that the criteria for eco-rating programs are too low to produce noteworthy social, economic, and environmental effects. More on the business side of the matter, another fundamental aspect regards the low demand for certified facilities and

²⁶ See Amalu et al. (2018), Medina (2005), Sasidharan et al. (2002)

operators (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016, p. 707). Even if they are sustainability-sensitive, most tourists are not aware of or well-informed on ecotourism certification programs (Esparon et al., 2014, p. 164). Hence, the demand for certified facilities remains low as there are still few incentives for them to participate from the demand side of the equation (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016, p. 707). On top of that, it is difficult for businesses to justify maintaining certification program membership and evaluation fees, and it is unknown whether certification expenses are amortized²⁷.

This study builds on the reported observations from the previous literature. It aims at contributing to the science in terms of producing knowledge, data, and information useful for enhancing awareness of the specific certification scheme by Ecotourism Kenya that operates in Kenya. As Snyman (2017) claims, academic research in providing, creating, and elaborating data help clarify to the sector's experts, tourists, and stakeholders the role of ecotourism in developing socio-economic growth and environmental protection strategies (p. 252).

1.3.2. *Ecotourism certifications in Africa*

The *Eco-rating scheme* under the scope of this study is operated by a company called Ecotourism Kenya, which recalls that it operates in Kenya and is inserted in the larger picture of the African context. Hence, the author of this work considers it relevant to present a general overview of the sector's situation in Africa. This section primarily draws observations (with the appropriate updates) from the report realized by Dr. Anna Spenceley (2018), which was commissioned by the *African Development Bank* (AfDB)'s African Natural Resources Centre (ANRC) to provide data on the field and recommendations on further actions. Spenceley's (2018) work represents one of the most complete and recent studies on the certification status in the African continent (p. 5).

Today, over **280 sustainable tourism certification programs** are operating worldwide; specifically, 39 schemes are recognized by GSTC (DESTINET, 2022). There are twelve²⁸

²⁷ See El Dief & Font (2010), Rome et al. (2006), Rowe & Higham (2007)

²⁸ For worldwide sustainable tourism certifications see: [Green Globe](#), [Green Key](#), [Green Pearls](#), [TourCert](#), [Green Destinations](#), [Blue Flag](#), [Green Tourism](#), [QualityCoast](#), [Biosphere Responsible Tourism](#), [Travelife for Accommodations](#), [Travelife Tour Operators](#), and [EarthCheck](#).

certifications for ecotourism operating worldwide and eight²⁹ established and operating on the African continent (DESTINET, 2022). The nature of the programs is different, as the governments run some (e.g., *Green and Ecotourism Certification Program Botswana* and *The Seychelles Sustainability Label*), and others are part of non-governmental initiatives (e.g., Ecotourism Kenya, *EcoAwards Namibia*). At the continental level, there are about 800 certified facilities in over 20 African countries (Spenceley, 2018, p. 8).

Over the last decade, various governmental and non-governmental initiatives have backed and introduced programs to support the uptake of ecotourism in Africa. Primarily, visibility and promotion is the most used technique to support certified facilities. It has been used by various evaluation bodies and websites to provide a platform for the complying business to improve access to the clientele niche of *sustainable travelers* (Spenceley, 2018, p. 7).

Once a facility obtains the certification, it can expose in its virtual and physical spaces a logo that testifies its compliance with the programs; this serves as a guarantee to the clients that a third party has evaluated them and helps promote the business on sustainable tourism platforms. Moreover, governments have introduced loans or subsidies for facilities to purchase energy-efficient technology³⁰. Another way to encourage more facilities to participate in the programs is to guarantee them access to exclusive tour operators' itineraries that help secure high occupancy rates and financial returns³¹ (Spenceley, 2018, p. 8). Also, governments have attracted facilities to certifications by covering the costs of audits or discounting application fees (Spenceley, 2018, p. 9). Finally, many certification authorities, such as *The Long Run*, provide the certified members with access to the support of technical experts and consultants to follow their sustainability journey continuously and holistically.

²⁹ For African-based sustainable tourism certifications see: [Green Star Hotel](#) (Egypt), [Ecotourism Kenya](#) (Kenya), [Responsible Tourism Tanzania](#) (Tanzania), [South Luangwa Eco-Awards](#) (Zambia), [Green and Ecotourism Certification Program Botswana](#) (Botswana), [Fair Trade Tourism](#) (South Africa, Madagascar, Mozambique), [Eco Awards Namibia](#) (Namibia), and [The Seychelles Sustainability Label](#) (Seychelles).

³⁰ For example, in Egypt, the *Green Star Certification* has introduced interest-free loans for hotels to purchase technologies or tools to improve their sustainability performance (Spenceley, 2018, p. 8).

³¹ For example, the NGO *Futouris* has developed an incentive in the *Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area* (KAZA TFCA), which involves businesses from Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Once facilities obtain the highest ecotourism certification, they are eligible to enter the exclusive sustainable itinerary called *Fair Trade Holiday*. In this case, the incentive of being eco-rated produces a market advantage compared to non-certified facilities. These initiatives alone increased by 40% in one year (from 2015 to 2016) the number of certified facilities in the KAZA TFCA area (Spenceley, 2018, p. 11).

The qualitative part of Spenceley's (2018) research, based on interviews with several stakeholders, highlights that accommodation facilities are attracted to pursue certifications for two main reasons (p. 9):

- **Communication:** facilities want to effectively interact with and engage their target group of clients, which are sustainability-sensitive tourists;
- **Cost reduction:** environmental conservation and energy efficiency help reduce operational costs in the long run.

From the perspective of businesses, one fundamental point of concern regards the lack of leadership of governments to promote, develop and support the uptake of ecotourism certifications (Spenceley, 2018, p. 13). In particular, businesses complain that since all programs are based on voluntary initiatives, there are no guaranteed nor regulated rewards for businesses that invest in sustainability and conservation (Spenceley, 2018, p. 3). For this research project, the author of this research has taken into consideration the identified main sphere of interest and concerns to elaborate main themes and hypotheses for the data collection (see Chapter two: Methodology).

CHAPTER TWO

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter portrays the methodology implemented by the author for designing the study and helps understand how the results have been produced and analyzed, inserting it into the existing academic production illustrated in *Chapter One*. As stated in the *Introduction*, there is a research gap for further knowledge based on general descriptive analysis. Therefore, this work tries to bring an analytical approach to the thematic using primary qualitative data to fulfill the mentioned gap: the lack of qualitative stakeholders analysis on the Eco-rating certification impacts on business performances, including the perspective of tour operators as intermediaries. The author goal is also to provide a lecture key of sustainable management as a success key factor for Eco-tourism business development.

2.1. Research design

The primary data for this research is generated from semi-structured interviews conducted in person with stakeholders with expertise in the tourism sector in Kenya. Under the research objectives, semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate tool to report, analyze and combine insights from professionals with diverse types of expertise in the sector (Horton et al., 2004, p. 340). Moreover, the choice of the semi-structured interview is backed by the idea of exploring the same topics with different participants and a level of flexibility that adds details and nuances to the same questions according to different people's perspectives (Scapens, 2004, p. 267; Stoner & Holland, 2004, p.41). As Kallio et al. (2016) illustrated, this methodology is considered the most efficient in enabling an open dialogue between the researchers and the study participants, allowing follow-up questions and related deep dive into the stakeholder's historical knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of the topics (p. 2955).

This research's preliminary design envisaged a combined data analysis approach: a survey from a large sample of facilities and qualitative semi-structured interviews with a small sample, but high expertise levels, of study participants. As explained later, challenges in gathering data from the facilities survey caused a restructuring of the data collection and analysis for this study. Therefore, this research primarily utilizes data from semi-structured

interviews with a small sample of participants. Following the recommendations of Vasileiou et al. (2018), the selection of a small sample has been reached after thoroughly evaluating the study's scope and parameters (p.2). The sample can be considered adequate as it involves at least 10 participants (Boddy, 2016, p. 429). The results from this study do not incorporate the opinions of large groups of participants.

Several advantages justify the choice involving a few stakeholders. First, the small sample enables a closer contact between the researcher and the respondents, fostered by more communication opportunities and increased trust and familiarity (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 491). Then, because open questions in qualitative research tend to produce richer and more usable data from each research participant, fewer respondents are needed to obtain high-quality data (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p.2)³². Last but not least, the very nature of social studies upholds the use of smaller samples. Since researchers and participants engage in continuous interactions, they allow greater understanding of each other's positions, thoughts, and experiences to not define fixed categories but to understand a dynamic reality in constant evolution (Boddy, 2016, p. 429).

As this research investigates the possible enhancing of strategic business opportunities for tourism accommodation facilities eco-rated by Ecotourism Kenya's *Eco-rating scheme*, it includes a general perspective that involves all eco-rated facilities in Kenya participating in the program by EK. The information was primarily collected during semi-structured interviews with relevant sector stakeholders and an online survey for selected tour operators.

The eleven study participants are selected stakeholders from tourism and hospitality in Kenya. They are representatives of institutions and organizations involved directly or indirectly with the development of the *Eco-rating scheme* in Kenya. The organizations that contributed to the present study are Ecotourism Kenya (EK), *Kenya Association of Hotelkeepers and Caterers* (KAHC), *Tour Operators Society of Kenya* (TOSK), *Kenya Association of Tour Operators* (KATO), *Sustainable Travel and Tourism Agenda* (STTA), *Global Tourism*

³² Moreover, previous studies highlight how extensive samples do not produce deep enough case-specific data needed for qualitative analysis (Boddy, 2016, p. 429).

Resilience and Crisis Management Centre (GTRCMC-EA), Kenya Utalii College (KUC), and the Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife. Moreover, the six consulted tour operators are KATO members and are all Travelife certified.

It is crucial to recognize that the study participant's work for organizations that are connected with Ecotourism Kenya and its *Eco-rating scheme*. Their positions might be biased toward a more positive evaluation of the scheme's effectiveness (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015, p. 275). Therefore, while producing this study's results and analysis sections, the author carefully utilizes critical thinking and carefully evaluates how to present the participants' answers and positions (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p. 44).

The data were collected over a period of three months between February and May 2022 during a study visit to Nairobi, Kenya, in collaboration with the *Global Tourism Resilience and Crisis Management Centre (GTRCMC-EA)* of Kenyatta University. Thanks to the established network of stakeholders of the GTRCMC-EA, it was possible to organize in-person visits and interviews with the representatives of the involved organizations and institutions.

2.2. Interviews with tourism sector stakeholders

Eleven out of thirteen pre-identified stakeholders were able to be involved in the research project and contributed to the data collection. The perspectives of the eleven stakeholders were obtained through semi-structured interviews, as indicated in **Annex I**. In particular, the study includes views from three representatives of EK, two representatives from KATO, and one from each of the remaining organizations such as KAHK, TOSK, STTA, GTRCMC-EA, KUC, and the *Ministry of Tourism (Table 1)*.

All the research participants have been asked preliminary privacy questions, and they appear in **Table 1** and the following sections according to what they have agreed on (See **Annex I**). The author has obtained oral consent from six study participants to utilize their full names, roles, and affiliations. Moreover, five participants have agreed orally to share their roles and affiliations in the study. None of the study participants has decided to remain fully anonymous. All the interviews, including the privacy questions, have been recorded by the researcher and can be provided with the appropriate edits for privacy purposes upon request.

Table 1: List of stakeholders and interviews

	NAME	ROLE	ORGANIZATION	DATE
01	Dr. Florence Njau	Nairobi Region Chair	KAHC - Kenya Association of Hotelkeepers and Caterers	28/02/2022
02	Representative	Managerial	EK - Ecotourism Kenya	01/03/2022
03	Anthony Ochieng	Chief Technical Advisor	TOSK - Tour Operators Society of Kenya	02/03/2022
04	Mr. Robert Kamiti	Chief Tourism Officer	TOURISM - Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife	02/03/2022
05	Representative	Team leader	EK - Ecotourism Kenya	03/03/2022
06	Representative	Team member	EK - Ecotourism Kenya	03/03/2022
07	Researcher	Lecturer & PhD candidate	KUC – Kenya UTALII College	08/03/2022
08	Judy Kepher-Gona	CEO	STTA - Sustainable Travel and Tourism Agenda	16/03/2022
09	Mr. Fred Kaigua	CEO	KATO - Kenya Association of Tour Operators	16/03/2022
10	Dr. Esther Munyiri	Director	GTRCMC - Tourism Resilience and Crisis Management Centre – Eastern Africa	25/03/2022
11	Representative	Private sector	KATO - Kenya Association of Tour Operators	30/03/2022

Source: Author's elaboration

2.3. Survey for Travelife-certified Tour Operators

There are eight Travelife certified tour operators in Kenya, and they are all part of *KATO*. Six out of eight companies replied to the online survey which was submitted with the support of the CEO's office on 17.03.2022. The data was collected through an online survey reported in **Annex II** and it was created with the Google Form tool.

2.4. Data Collection Challenges

The data collection plan was changed throughout the study visit to Nairobi. The author prepared a questionnaire to submit to eco-rated facilities through an online survey made with the Google Form tool. The questionnaire was submitted to all the eco-rated facilities by the secretariat of Ecotourism Kenya on 10.03.2022. After that, the EK team forwarded reminders via email to the facilities. However, only two facilities replied to the online survey up until the end of April 2022. Consequently, the author and the supervising team agreed to omit the facilities survey from the present study because of the definite lack of replies and data³³.

2.5. Data analysis

According to the nature of the data collected, a qualitative methodology is adopted to analyze and provide results and observations in the following Chapter. As regards the stakeholders' interviews, the author adopts an inductive coding technique to identify the main codes and themes, arising directly from the data collected. In this way, it is possible to provide a less biased report of the various opinions expressed by stakeholders, considering the small sample utilized and the diversified expertise knowledge of the participants³⁴.

The study participants that contributed to this research work in private companies, sectorial organizations, academia and research, public sector, tour operators and consulting. Moreover, the results from the Survey address at *Travelife-certified* tour operators are presented in qualitative form. As the survey involved only six members, it is impossible to draw statistical conclusions on the overall industry. However, the survey included an open-ended question which allowed respondents to express further their views over the *Eco-rating scheme* and sustainable tourism in Kenya. A deductive coding technique is implemented to portray results from the tour operators survey.

The data analysis evolves following the three main objectives and related research questions, which are divided into sub-questions. A content analysis methodology is implemented to

³³ The low response rate to the survey highlights a lack of engagement and awareness of the eco-rated facilities for academic research and continuous information sharing. This observation constitutes feedback for the organization to sensitive further their network of facilities on how research can contribute to improving their services and performances in the future.

³⁴ See Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019, p. 12); Kuczynski & Daly (2003, p. 382).

report results from the data collected according to each theme. **Table 2** reports the research questions highlighting the source of data used to address each question and it provides an overview on how the *Results and Discussion* chapter is organized.

Table 2: Data Analysis Sources

Research question	Source
I. Which factors attract facilities to invest in the certification?	Stakeholders' interviews
II. What are the performance benefits for eco-rated facilities?	Stakeholders' interviews
III. Does the certification help increase potential clients?	Stakeholders' interviews
IV. What are possible challenges to obtain the Eco-rating certification?	Stakeholders' interviews
V. Which relationship connects eco-rated facilities and <i>Travelife</i> tour operators?	Tour operators survey
VI. What is the long-term sustainability of the <i>Eco-rating scheme</i> ?	Stakeholders' interviews & Tour operators survey

Authors' elaboration

CHAPTER THREE

3. CASE STUDY

This chapter contains an overview of the case study, which is the core focus of this research. After introducing the academic background and the implemented methodology, this study delves further into the organization that implements in practice and on the ground an ecotourism certification for tourism facility accommodations in Kenya, and that promotes the diffusion of awareness over sustainable tourism in general in the country.

3.1. Ecotourism Kenya Overview

Ecotourism Kenya (EK) was created in 1996 with the initial name of *Ecotourism Society of Kenya* (ESOK), which was changed in 2006 (**Figure 1**). EK is a civil society organization aiming to spread awareness of ecotourism and engage the tourism sector to implement more sustainable practices (Ecotourism Kenya, 2022). The mission of EK, as stated on the website ecotourismkenya.org is “to link **tourism, conservation, and communities** for sustainable tourism development through **awareness** creation, **networking**, and promotion of **best practices** in responsible tourism operations” (Ecotourism Kenya, 2022). Hence, the core values and driving forces of its operations are the conservation of the environment through the production of financial benefits for the tourism sector while protecting and improving the wellbeing of local communities.

Figure 1: Ecotourism Kenya logo



Source: <https://ecotourismkenya.org/>

One of the key assets of Ecotourism Kenya is its well-assorted **network**. Indeed, EK is a membership-based organization. Currently, it counts over **550 members** from Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), tourism-related companies, and individuals from any region of the country, making it a national-wide organization. The business model they have developed is consistently backed by the support of the network and its members that revolve around the tourism sector, which significantly contributes to the national GDP³⁵. The *Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife* is among the key supporters of EK, which also include: the *United Nations Development Programme (NDP)*, *National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA)*, the *Kenya Tourism Board*, the *Tourism Fund*, the *Centre for the Promotion of Imports - Netherlands (CBI)*, the *African Wildlife Foundation (AWF)* and the *Ford Foundation* (Ecotourism Kenya, 2022).

3.1.1. Organizational Structure

Figure 2: Organizational Structure of Ecotourism Kenya



Source: Author's elaboration, data from ecotourismkenya.org

³⁵ The GDP contribution of the tourism sector represented between 8% and 11% of the Kenyan economy during the last 10 years, before the global covid pandemic started in 2020 (Tourism Economics, 2021, p. 14).

Figure 2 shows the organizational system implemented at EK. The **Executive Committee**, active professionals and sustainable tourism experts, meets once a year during the Annual General Meeting, in which they outline the strategic plan. The **Chief Executive Officer (CEO)** leads the **5 Advisory Committees**, responsible for executing operations aligned with the general mandate, and the **5 Program Managers** (see more in the following section).

3.1.2. The Five Programs of Ecotourism Kenya

The organization pursues its vision of being a “*leader in the **knowledge and practice of sustainable tourism***” by implementing five core programs (Ecotourism Kenya, 2022). Indeed, together with the network, sustainability expertise is the second most distinctive characteristic of Ecotourism Kenya and how it organizes its operative activities. Ecotourism Kenya connects the different network members by enabling knowledge sharing and networking over successful sustainability and communication practices, leadership enhancement, research production, and community empowerment. Indeed, each program is designed to foster the realization of the organization's strategic objectives (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Ecotourism Kenya’s five programs, strategic goals, and activities

Programs	Strategic Goals	Activities
1) Standards & Best Practices	Enhance the tourism industry standards and best practices	● Eco-rating Certification ● Sustainability for Tour Operators ● Green Destination Guidelines
2) Leadership & Mentorship	Nurture appropriate leadership skills, knowledge, and attitude in responsible tourism	● Recruiting ● Training ● Internship placement ● Mentorship ● Certificates of completion ● Alumni community
3) Research & Consultancy	Strengthen ecotourism organizations’ conservation capacity and sustainability	● SUS-TOUR Project
4) Awareness Creation & Information Sharing	Increase awareness and share information on quality tourism sites, products, and services	● Ecotourism Kenya Website ● Resource Center ● Publications ● Meetings ● Newsletter for members

		● National conference ● Regional workshops
5) Community Enterprise Development	Improve community tourism enterprises	● Community Mobilization ● Community Advisory Services ● Promotion of Community-Based Tourism Enterprises

Source: Author's elaboration, data from ecotourismkenya.org

As the table reports, the first program, **Standard and Best Practices**, evolves into three main activities. The Eco-rating certification is the flagship activity and service of Ecotourism Kenya. It is also the point of interest for this research which will be further presented in the dedicated section **4.2** and analyzed in the following chapters. Other than that, EK provides capacity-building training for tour operators that aim to obtain the Travelife certification and has drafted a guidelines manual to promote and support the recognition of Green Destinations in Kenya on the global market (see 2.3. for more on the Travelife certification).

The second program, **Leadership & Mentorship**, targets students enrolled in Kenyan universities or colleges to empower the future leaders of the tourism industry with sustainability knowledge and experience. With this service, the organization aims to bring closer businesses and new ideas from fresh graduate students, and it utilizes its solid network to create mutual learning opportunities for its members.

The **Research & Consultancy** program has been developed through a *SUS-TOUR* project backed by the *European Commission* under the *Switch Africa Green* funds framework. Its implementation dates back to 2017, and it produced a guidebook for Community-based tourism, a policy draft on sustainable tourism, and the establishment of a professional regional training center.

The **Awareness Creation & Information Sharing** program is based on Ecotourism Kenya's network and shared knowledge principles. It is primarily pursued by publishing information on the website, newsletters, the organization of workshops, members' meetings, and an annual conference nationwide.

With the “**Community Enterprise Development Program**,” EK supports community-based initiatives to benefit from the general tourism sector by building their capacity to develop entrepreneurial ideas and explore opportunities for their development in different regions of the country. This program revolves around the three central pillars of mobilization, advisory services, and promotion, which translates into actions such as training, workshops, product development support, fundraising, and communication tips.

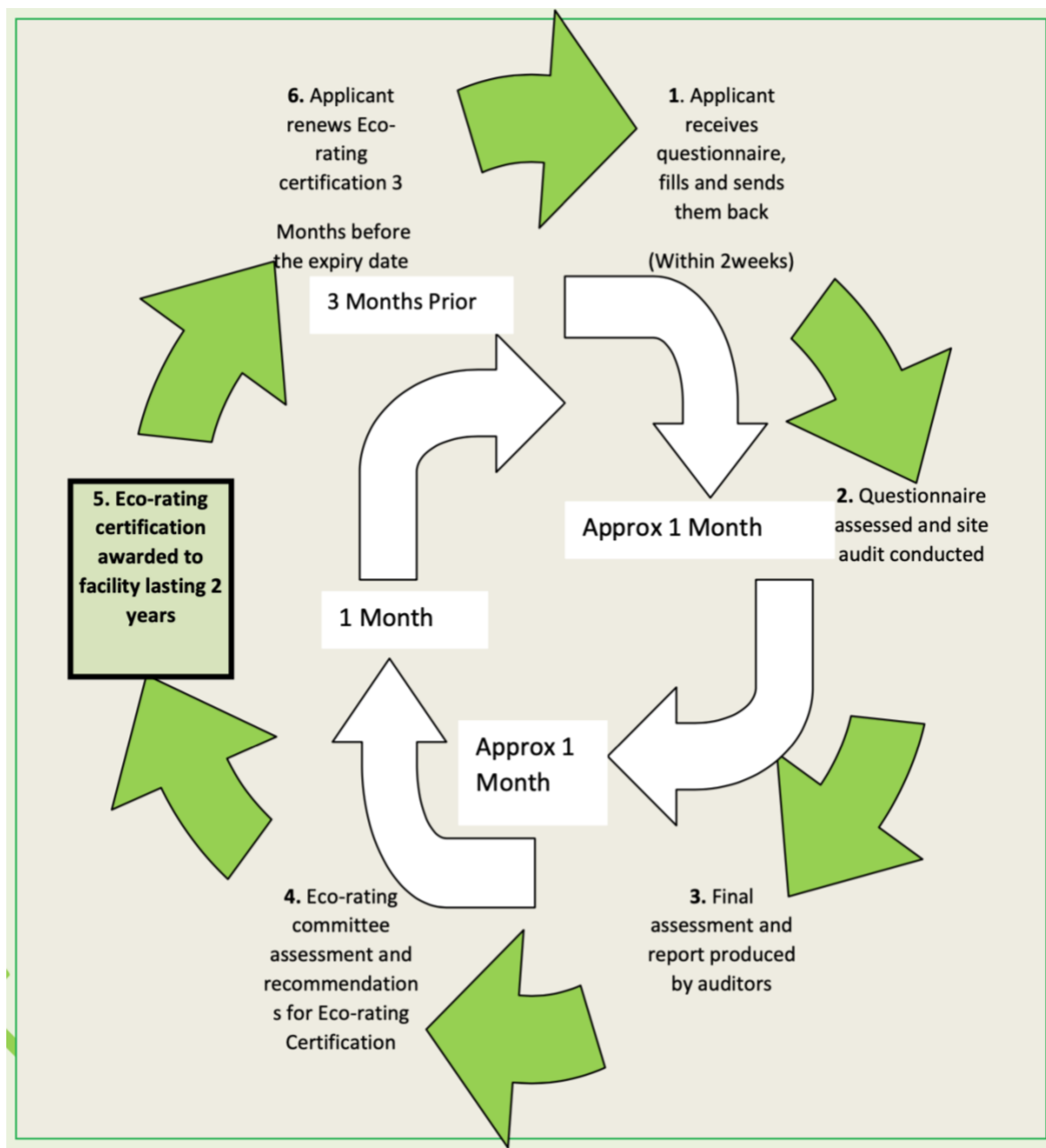
3.2. The Eco-Rating Certification Scheme

Ecotourism Kenya is primarily known for the *Eco-Rating Certification Scheme* implemented and developed at the national level since 2002. The scheme is the flagship program that differentiates the organization and its services in Kenya. It is developed under the strategic goal of enabling sustainable tourism good practices to thrive in Kenya. The certification scheme is accredited by *The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria* (GSTC), which, as previously indicated, constitutes a global reference for evaluation and standards of performance and operations for sustainable tourism actors as the UN backs it. Moreover, the scheme by EK is specially created and developed to fit the reality of the Kenyan tourism sector and the nature of its businesses (Ecotourism Kenya, 2016, p. 5). This section will describe how the program works and its requirements.

The target group of this certification is tourist accommodation facilities encompassing ecotourism practices in their strategic and managerial approaches. It is open to any type or facility, such as hotels, lodges, camps, bush homes, and homestays (Ecotourism Kenya, 2016, p. 5). So far, only facilities located in rural areas have been eco-rated and included in the program. Currently, the database of Ecotourism Kenya reports 87 eco-rated facilities.

Once a facility decides to pursue the certification, several steps are to follow (**Figure 3**). First, the interested business contacts EK to receive the **eco-rating certification application questionnaire**. It has to be filled and returned to the organization in the following two weeks (Ecotourism Kenya, 2013, p. 10). Then, Ecotourism Kenya evaluates whether the facility is suitable to continue the procedure by conducting a desk review of the questionnaire. If EK approves the application, before proceeding to the following steps, the facility must pay an **application fee** of USD 150 (*ibid*, p. 10).

Figure 3: The eco-rating certification cycle



Source: Ecotourism Kenya (2016), p. 8

Once the application is approved, and the fee is paid, the EK team will conduct a **Facility Site Audit** in the following month for one or two days, according to the size and needs of the evaluated facility. The data collected from the desk evaluation and the site visit is collected to produce a report submitted and evaluated by the **Eco-rating Committee** within one month. The information is inspected according to the **Eco-rating certification criteria** of evaluation which will attribute the level to which the facility belongs (see 4.2.1). In the final stage, a maximum of two months after the site visit, the facility receives the evaluation outcome and

its level. The facility must pay the certification fee in the following 14 days to receive their Eco-rating Certificate award, certification badge according to their level, and evaluation report (Ecotourism Kenya, 2013, p. 10). At this point, the facilities can display the appropriate badges and emblems on any communication material.

The certification is valid for two years, and the awarded facilities must request a certification renewal three months before it expires. The facilities will need to pay USD 150 for the application fee and USD 1000 for the renewal of the certification, regardless of the level achieved (Ecotourism Kenya, 2013, p. 10).

Ecotourism Kenya specifies a detailed procedure in cases of annulment or suspension of the certification. As mentioned, a facility must apply for the certification renewal three months before its expiration day (2 years after the certification award). If the facility does not intend to renew the certification, it will simply expire, and the official labels cannot be displayed. If the renewal procedure continues, the facility will be evaluated with an audit that can confirm or block the certification renewal. If the legal requirements are not met, or any further criteria fail to be respected, Ecotourism Kenya will issue a suspension of the certification until the facility restores proof of compliance with the requirements (Ecotourism Kenya, 2013, p. 13).

Moreover, the scheme provides guidance if EK records any compliant consumer feedback or evaluation that the eco-rated business does not meet the criteria. In this case, an official communication will be issued to the facility and its management. They will be granted a period of 2 months to reply on the issue and a total of 6 months to correct the problematic practice (Ecotourism Kenya, 2013, p. 13).

3.2.1. Eco-rating Certification Levels

The *Eco-rating scheme* awards three different types of certification levels: Bronze, Silver, and Gold (**Figure 4**). Currently, there are **87** eco-rated facilities: **2 Bronze**, **39 Silver** and **46 Gold** (Ecotourism Kenya, 2022). All the awarded facilities are recognized to be operating with a sustainability approach towards resource use, environmental conservation, and local community protection. However, the scheme delineates different parameters for which some facilities are performing better than others (Ecotourism Kenya, 2013, p. 6).

Figure 4: The badges of eco-rating certification levels



Source: Ecotourism Kenya (2013), p. 13

The three progressive levels demonstrate different achievements and policy results implemented by the facilities that apply to obtain the label (**Table 4**). Bronze is the entry level, and its criteria correspond to the minimum that a facility can reach to enter the program. It primarily displays that the business is **committed** to improving its sustainability performance and that the management achieved a good level of awareness and commitment toward ecotourism best practices. Silver constitutes the intermediary position in which facilities have moved **from commitment to implementation**, and they show that their activities are moving towards obtaining excellent results in the future. Finally, the Gold awarded facilities have achieved excellence in their policies and practices, and **what they have created can be replicated by other facilities as good practices** for the industry. Moreover, each level of the certification has a different certification fee price: USD 350 for Bronze, USD 850 for Silver, and USD 1350 for Gold.

Table 4: Levels and selection criteria

Level	Pre-requirements	Questionnaire score	Practices
Bronze	Legal compliance	40% score	- Shows awareness and commitment to sustainable practices - No formal complaints issued by authorities related to Eco-rating criteria

Silver	• Bronze requirements	• 60% score	• Clearly defined policies and strategies for social support, education and environmental conservation • Show effective practices for responsible use of resources, environmental protection and community wellbeing support
Gold	• Silver requirements • Obtained Silver at least for 6 months	• 80% score	• Achieved excellent and replicable results in sustainability practices • Shows innovative practices and outstanding outcomes from environmental, social and economic parameters

Source: Author's elaboration, data from Ecotourism Kenya (2013), p. 6

3.2.2. Certification Evaluation Criteria

The Evaluation Committee has the responsibility to assess the level of compliance of each applying facility. They follow the parameters indicated in the document “**Ecotourism Standard for Tourism Accommodation Facilities,**” easily accessible from EK’s website for transparency. The document contains a table with all criteria and related indicators that the evaluators consider while awarding the certification. It is also indicated if the indicators are mandatory, as minimum requirements to meet, or desired, determining if the facility will obtain bronze, silver, or gold levels (Ecotourism Kenya, 2016, p. 9).

The focus of this study does not relate to the specific criteria for the evaluation of the certification. However, it is relevant to provide the reader an overview of which aspects of sustainability are considered in the certification scheme, to understand the nature of the facilities that eventually benefit and promote their business through the certification. For this, **Table 5** provides a summary of the evaluation criteria for the *Eco-rating scheme*.

Table 5: Summary of the Evaluation Criteria

Parameter	Criteria
1) Conservation	● Legal requirements ● Environmental Criteria ○ Environmental/ Sustainability policies ○ Environmental conservation ○ Waste water management ○ Solid waste management ○ Pollution ● Resource management ○ Water ○ Energy ● Visitor education ● Architectural design ● Chemical use
2) Community	● Legal requirements ● Employment policy ● Community empowerment ● Support or promotion of sale and use of local community's goods and services ● Legal agreements with rights and duties of the facility if it is located in community-owned land ● Support of the local socio-economic infrastructure ● Local communities access to livelihoods and essential services
3) Culture	● Legal requirements ● Protection of important sites for the heritage of local communities ● Architectural design ● Socio-cultural promotion and communication
4) Business Practice	● Legal Requirements ● Procurement/Purchasing policy that prefers sustainably and locally produced goods ● Health and Safety ● Economic Criteria ○ Employment and remuneration ○ Child labor, abuse and human rights ○ Staff education and awareness training ● Financial obligations ● Monitoring customer/client satisfaction ● Fair marketing based on factual and unbiased information

Source: Author's elaboration, data from Ecotourism Kenya (2016), p. 9-24

The evaluation criteria are fundamental to understanding the nature of the certification and comprehending what activities and policies can an eco-rated facility have. The Eco-rating program has been selected because of its significant attention to environmental performance and safeguarding local communities' well-being and attention towards continuous training and education for employees. It is possible to identify several points that highlight particular considerations of how resources are utilized to guarantee the long-term survival of the natural environment and the tourism business. Moreover, on the community side, EK established clear standards on how the accommodation facilities should promote locally sourced products and services to their customers and support the development of helpful infrastructure for the local inhabitants, such as schools, roads, and communication resources. Another relevant aspect highly emphasized under the scheme's criteria is the protection of employees' rights. The socio-economic criterion reflects the holistic approach and attention of Ecotourism Kenya's program towards the tourism industry practices.

One key specification is necessary to advance on the evaluation criteria selection. The reader might have noticed the great arresting absent element: carbon emissions. There are two considerations to introduce at this point. The Kenyan Government has indeed pledged to reduce its carbon emissions by 30% of its business-as-usual value by 2030 and achieve a carbon-neutral economy by 2050³⁶. However, it is fundamental to remember that the certification is purely voluntary, and its attainment is not mandatory nor financially backed by the government. For this, the scheme can still be considered valid and inclusive of several relevant sustainability parameters, other than being the most popular and successful sustainable tourism certification program in Kenya (Spenceley, 2018, p.8).

3.2.3. Goals of the program

Ecotourism Kenya created the *Eco-Rating Certification Scheme* with the collaboration of relevant tourism stakeholders to promote awareness of responsible tourism and identify best practices implemented by tourism actors in Kenya (Ecotourism Kenya, 2013, p.5). The patrons of the scheme recall how the industry needed a push to identify sustainable tourism practices

³⁶ See Bounagui (2015) and Obulutsa (2021)

and, especially, to “market the country as a responsible tourism destination provider” (Hardy & Gona, 2000, p.1).

The scheme is helpful to EK and all the tourism operators to recognize and acknowledge best practices for a sustainable business strategy related to education, behavioral, sustainable development, and environmental conservation goals (**Table 6**). The table depicts the impacts that Ecotourism Kenya aims to produce for the different goals it attributes to the scheme. The table can be interpreted as a declaration of responsibility and intention by the organization, and it sets the direction for future improvements of the program.

Table 6: Goals and Impacts of the *Eco-rating scheme*

Goal	Impact
Education Attitude change towards environmental governance & social responsibility	Increase awareness of environmentally and socially sound business practices
Sustainable Development	Enhance the socio-economic development of the local communities where tourism accommodation facilities are located and operate
Sustainable Development	Increase the contribution of the tourism industry to community development
Environmental Conservation	Enhance the contribution of tourism practices to the conservation of the natural resources upon which tourism is dependent

Source: Author’s elaboration, data from Ecotourism Kenya (2016), p. 5

3.3. Travelife certification for Tour Operators

Travelife is a sustainable tourism certification aimed at worldwide tour operators and travel agencies (Travelife, 2022). The *Travelife Sustainability System* started in 2007 from a joint effort of several European players such as the tour operator associations of the Netherlands (ANVR) and the UK (ABTA) with the support of the *UN Environment Programme* (UNEP), *Leeds Metropolitan University*, *Lund University*, and the *European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism* (ECEAT) (Altintas & Güzel, 2018, p. 1307). Its standards are built in compliance with the guidelines from the EU EMAS III (Eco-Management and Audit Scheme),

ISO 14001 (International Standard for Environmental Management), GRI (Global Reporting Initiative), the UNEP's *Tour Operators' Initiative*, GSTC's Criteria, OECD's Guidelines for multinational enterprises and the ISO 26000 guidelines for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principles (Altintas & Güzel, 2018, p. 1307).

The **Travelife Sustainability Certification System for Tour Operators and Travel Agencies** includes several measures that help organizations reach compliance with the certification, including training and sustainability planning tools for management planning and reporting (Travelife, 2022). The certification program encompasses three consequent stages from **Travelife Engaged** and **Travelife Partner** until the last step of **Travelife Certified** (Figure 5). Currently, there are **20 Travelife Partners** and **8 Travelife Certified** members in Kenya³⁷.

Figure 5: Travelife Certification Stages Logos



Source: www.travelife.info

The Travelife Certification adopts guidelines that determine which stage is more appropriate for an applicant company (Table 7). Other than following the previously mentioned international standards, the program adopts evaluation criteria based on sustainability themes and issues: energy efficiency and conservation, water and waste management, greenhouse gas emissions, labor practices, human rights, community relations, ecosystem, conservation, cultural impacts, health and safety, fair business practices, customer protection, animal welfare (Travelife, 2022).

³⁷ It is possible to see the updated database of Travelife awarded companies per country on their website in the section: Certification - Awarded Companies. It is possible to access the list of awarded companies in Kenya at https://www.travelife.info/index_new.php?menu=certifiedcompanies&lang=en

Table 7: Travelife Phases Characteristics

Stage	Description	Costs (year) ³⁸
Engaged	● Commitment and learning phase ● Appointment of an internal Sustainability Coordinator + related Travelife training exam ● Access to best practices, action planning tool, internal reporting tool, self-evaluation tool, sustainability improvement plan ● Networking with Travelife Partners and Certified companies	● Small: EUR 200 ● Medium: EUR 300 ● Large: EUR 400
Partner	● Desk audit by Travelife team to achieve the status and permission to use Partner logo ● Access to the Travelife Training and exam for ten staff members ● Support to develop Travelife ISO 14001, EMAS III and ISO 26000 management system. ● Access to the Travelife certification tool to work on compliance with the certification standard	● Small: EUR 200 ● Medium: EUR 300 ● Large: EUR 400
Certified	● Independent third-party audit to obtain Certified status that proves an internationally recognized high sustainability performance + logo use ● International promotion for its sustainability achievements	● Depends on the company of registration and company size ● Range between EUR 400 and EUR 2000

Source: Author's elaboration, data from www.travelife.info

3.3.1. The role of Tour Operators in Kenya's tourism sector

A significant amount of research has been conducted on the role that tour operators play in Kenya's tourism industry. It is essential to emphasize their role in displaying the market structure and understanding the influence that the decisions made by tour operators have on the growth of ecotourism and responsible tourism within the particular national setting.

In Kenya, such as in other developing countries, the tourism sector heavily relies on tour operators (Cavagnaro et al., 2015, p. 137). They retain a unique and critical position as they

³⁸ Small = Small companies with less than full-time employees
Medium = Medium companies with less than 25 full-time employees
Large = Large companies with more than > 100 full-time employees

provide the link between demand and supply (Cavagnaro & Ngesa, 2011, p. 3). They operate within the tourism value chain by interacting and negotiating with local businesses that offer services or products to ultimately sell them to tourists as part of packages at a unified final price (Cavagnaro et al., 2015, p. 136). Hence, tour operators have the power to decide which destinations, services, products, communities, and types of experiences they present to their customers (Okech, 2004, p. 81). This is why they play a pivotal role in the diffusion of ecotourism and in promoting eco-rated facilities.

Tour operators are vital sustainability practice diffusion players in Kenya due to their intermediary role and the dependency of the national tourism industry on them. Tour operators can take advantage of their intermediaries' position to foster responsible destination management practices by influencing customers to choose eco-rated facilities (Thiong'o et al., 2021, p. 8) and, at the same time, by creating a barrier to entry³⁹ to exclude non-sustainability-oriented businesses (Kyunguti & Makau, 2014, p. 17). As Cavagnaro & Ngesa (2011) highlight, to make progress toward sustainable tourism, both the supply and demand sides must take action (p. 3). Hence, the *Eco-rating scheme* for facilities cannot be successful without the promotion of the eco-rated businesses by tour operators, both crucial players on the supply side of the ecotourism equation.

The Eco-rated facilities from the Ecotourism Kenya program and the *Travelife* certified tour operators in Kenya pursue similar goals:

- They contribute to spreading awareness about ecotourism and responsible tourism practices.
- They create a network of like-minded business owners and actors that shape how the industry behaves and will behave in the future, thanks to education and training programs implemented.

³⁹ The concept of *barrier to entry* refers to Porter's (2008) Five Forces related to the competition among actors operating within the same market. Suppose a tour operator decides to sell packages with services only from eco-rated facilities. In that case, the other facilities will be excluded entirely from the potential flow of clientele served by that tour operator. In this case, competition can happen among existing or new businesses to access the flow of tourism customers. Hence, if all tour operators would decide to do business only with eco-rated facilities, all the not eco-rated and hypothetically less sustainable facilities would be excluded from the market. inflow generated by tour operators.

- Both communities support the development of Kenya as a sustainable tourism destination.

For these reasons, this research includes the participation of relevant stakeholders in the Kenyan tourism sector that are certified by the Travelife program for tour operators (further details in Chapter three). There is a potential for collaboration and cooperation among certified members from both programs, and it is crucial to understand further how both can benefit from one another.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter contains the data analysis of this work, and it provides an overview of the main findings of this research. The chapter is structured around the research objectives and related research questions provided in the *Introduction*. It reports insights from the interviews with stakeholders, the online survey with *Travelife*-certified tour operators, and a few field observations from the author. All the used data is available for consultation upon request.

4.1. Factors that attract facilities to invest in the certification

This section reflects on factors that can improve the attractiveness of the Eco-rating certification for the eyes of facilities that are not yet eco-rated. First, there is a report on the perceived success of the program and then a further description of the perceived factors of attractiveness according to the study participants. The information utilized in this section arises from the stakeholders' views collected during the semi-structured interviews.

It is relevant to report the overall opinion of the study participants to understand the value of the Eco-rating certification seen by experts and active actors in the tourism sector. It is fundamental for this research for the stakeholders to be aware of the scheme and responsible tourism as a concept. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked as a preparatory question if they were aware of the *Eco-rating scheme*, and they all replied positively (**Annex I**). Among the preliminary questions, they were all asked opinions on sustainable tourism in Kenya to prepare for follow-up questions and exchanges during the interviews.

Participants were asked if they considered the Eco-rating certification scheme a successful program in Kenya. As **Table 8** reveals, nine participants consider the scheme a successful program in Kenya, except for one neutral answer and one negative reply. It is fundamental to mention that three out of eleven participants are currently working for Ecotourism Kenya. Therefore, their answer can be biased because of their organizational affiliation and also considering that all the three representatives are actively involved in developing and managing the scheme.

Table 8: Views on the *Eco-rating* scheme success

Is the Eco-rating certification scheme a successful program in Kenya?	
Dr. Florence Njau (KAHC)	Yes
Management Representative (EK)	Yes
Anthony Ochieng (TOSK)	Yes
Mr. Robert Kamiti (Ministry of Tourism)	No
Team leader (EK)	Yes
Team member (EK)	Yes
Researcher (UTALII)	Yes
Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)	Neutral
Mr. Fred Kaigua (KATO)	Yes
Dr. Esther Munyiri (GTRCMC-EA)	Yes
Private sector representative (KATO)	Yes

Source: author's elaboration, data from interviews

Judy Kepher-Gona is the CEO and founder of STTA, former CEO of Ecotourism Kenya, and she is one of the founders and creators of the *Eco-rating scheme*. Her views on the program's success and evolution can be considered holistic as she has an overview of the certifications' initial design, implementation, and experimental evolution. Her neutral position toward the success of the *Eco-rating scheme* can be further understood by her comments on how to measure the success of a certification scheme. Her doubts are expressed in the reflections below, and she provides a way to critically reflect on the positive replies provided by the other participants:

“What are the indicators for measuring a successful certification program? (...) Is the measure of success of a certification in the **numbers for eco-rated facilities**⁴⁰ or is the measure in the **transformation that is actually brought in these destinations**? Can you actually say that Kenya has had a certification program for over 25 years? And what can we say about it other than the number of those who have bronze silver and gold levels?”

Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)

The negative feedback over the scheme's success comes from Mr. Robert Kamiti (*Ministry of Tourism*), who explains that the program cannot be considered successful as it is “an ongoing

⁴⁰ All the parts in bold in the interviewees' citations are from the author.

process.” A representative from EK explains that the program is successful because “we have witnessed an increase in uptake by camps and lodges in Kenya that want to be eco-rated.” There is an evident diversity in how stakeholders from different parts of the tourism sector interpret the ecotourism certification as successful or not. Some identify the process of producing and developing the program to measure its success; others identify the number of facilities and requests to be certified as a proper criterion. However, as Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA) highlights in the design phase of the *Eco-rating scheme*, the founders have not been successful in providing a methodology to evaluate whether, in the long term, the program would provide good impacts in the areas where it is implemented, for example establishing measurable goals and performance indicator:

“And I was there, and I was piloting the certification at that time. (...) on the process that we went through in developing the certification program, (...) **we did not set indicators for success** together with the industry, not just as Ecotourism Kenya. Together with the industry at that time, I think we should have set some indicators for success. And, for example, we would have said that we would have seen success if by 2010 50% of the industry would have adopted solar energy. And this would have actually come to the number of businesses. (...) Then we would have said in another five years by 2005, we would have considered this certification scheme a success if some of these **guidelines** were adopted by the government and became part of the regulation for licensing tourism. Now that kind of indicator would have allowed us to say there was this set of goals in our first 10 years, and then we establish the new set of indicators for the next ten years. (...) But in the absence of indicators, which we don't have until today, we only have the metrics of who has signed up for bronze, silver, and gold.”

Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)

It is possible to delve further into the factors that drive facilities to invest money and resources into obtaining the eco-rating certification. As **Table 9** summarizes, stakeholders mentioned a series of recurring themes while replying to the question: “What are the factors that drive tourism accommodation facilities to invest in the eco-rating certification scheme?” The participants used different words to describe the different factors, which have been coded accordingly to categorize them under the same macro themes.

Table 9: Factors that attract facilities to invest in the certification

Factors	Mentions
Market access	4
Trend	3
Operations improvement	2
Regulations compliance	2
Competitive advantage	2
Recognition	1
Environmental conservation	1

Source: author's elaboration, data from interviews

The factor which more participants mentioned is **market access**. Meaning that facilities are willing to invest time and resources (both human and financial) with the hope of reaching a “(...) type of **clientele** that is potentially willing to spend money in a property that has implemented sustainability best practices with innovations, and they want this to be certified” (Team leader, Ecotourism Kenya). Moreover, as a private sector representative (*KATO* member) describes, “(...) there is demand [for eco-rating], and tourists demand that people have a model for conducting sustainable tourism businesses. My **client base would demand** accommodations that have in place some **sustainable branding, rating, and practices**.” Therefore, it appears that facilities are pushed by a desire to satisfy the requests and demands of a growing group of clients sensitive to sustainable practices and demands for evidence in the form of certification.

Moreover, participants mentioned that sustainability is a **trend** in the tourism sector and that more businesses are pursuing it, even if they are unaware of what it means. According to Judy Kepher-Gona (*STTA*), a group of facilities are “(...) just following the trend. They really don't know how this will affect their business. But they think: yes, everybody's doing it. So, I'm going to do it.” It is fundamental to observe that some facilities might seem the certification only for marketing purposes, while they do not realize other benefits that arise from pursuing the ecotourism certification. Moreover, another observation from a *KATO* member similarly reflects on the general sustainability trend that the industry is adopting and how operators start grasping that the future of tourism in Kenya is in the direction of sustainability:

“The first factor it's sustainable branding. Right now, in the industry sustainable tourism is **trendy**. So, everybody wants to do a little bit of it but it is more serious than just coming in and going to collect certificates and investments. People understand that this is the future; **sustainability is the future.**”

Private sector representative (KATO)

Two participants also mention the **improvement of operations** from a technical perspective as an appealing characteristic of the program. By accessing the EK network, businesses access a pool of experts and consultants that know good practices from several other facilities. Therefore, they are attracted by the possibility of access to people with excellent know-how, for example, on cost savings operations and efficient resource management in their specific business sector. As reported by one study, participant facilities ask several questions after they are eco-rated and access the network of EK:

“Once they become our members, they normally reach out to us and ask: What systems do you see that work best for the situation? Which one works best for this? And we normally advise them on areas we can or refer them to the relevant people running the facilities with the systems we consider efficient”.

Team member (Ecotourism Kenya)

Regulations compliance is another aspect that can be interesting for facilities. Since “*there are certain laws and regulations that **all businesses** are supposed to comply with, whether in the tourism industry or in other industries*” (Team leader, EK), they can be motivated to pursue the certification to make sure they are compliant, and they also receive benefits offered by the program. From a similar perspective, Dr. Esther Munyiri (GTRCMC) also affirms that businesses want to “make sure they are **compliant** with the **environmental practices and requirements**. So, they have measures to protect the environment and support communities, and they are committed to ensuring their measures are in place”. Indeed, there is an intersectionality between showing commitments and ensuring that businesses comply with the law requirements. In this way, it can be seen as a win-win situation: companies obtain benefits from the *Eco-rating scheme* (more on them in the following section), and they are also sure that they comply with national regulations, and this is certified by a third party, which will provide assistance and feedback in case some requirements are not fully satisfied.

Competitive advantage and **return on investment** are perceived as attractive factors by the stakeholders. As Mr. Fred Kaigua (KATO) highlights, businesses pursuing the eco-rating certification want to obtain “(...) a good **return on investment** when they decide to become sustainable, as opposed to being unsustainable, where they can lose business from people who do not wish to associate with them for being unsustainable.” In this way, it is considered attractive for facilities to become eco-rated to gain more clients and market access rather than non-eco-rated facilities. Moreover, the fact that the GSTC recognizes the *Eco-rating scheme* plays a factor in its attractiveness:

“Another important factor is **competitive advantage**. The EK scheme is recognized by the GSTC. And this is really, really a big one. GSTC usually shares the list of accredited properties with other online agents that market the eco-rated properties, so there are a number of agents that are promoting them (booking.com among others). They share the list with all these tour operators, and this basically increases the market, compared to those that are not eco-rated.”

Team Leader (Ecotourism Kenya)

Continuing with **recognition**, Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA) believes that there is a group of facilities that were paying attention to sustainability also before strategically identifying the certification as a tool and they pursue it because they are “(...) genuinely just looking for affirmation. They have been doing good and want somebody to confirm that they have actually done good and give them that particular label”. Eventually, only one stakeholder mentioned the **environmental conservation** as a factor that attract facilities to invest in the program with the perspective of preserving the environment but also their business in the long term:

“The first factor, ideally, is that they want to make a **contribution to the future of the tourism product** that we so much rely on in Kenya. They aim at doing their best to safeguard this product while using it and hopefully leaving it even better than it was when they found it.”

Mr. Fred Kaigua (KATO)

4.2. Performance benefits for eco-rated facilities

This section reports the perceived performance benefits of eco-rated facilities, and the purpose of the related objective is to understand if financial benefits arise directly from adhering to the program. The focus of this section revolves around the topic of performance benefits and whether the eco-rating label has the potential to increase clients for a facility. First, **Table 10** reports the principal codes mentioned by different stakeholders during in-person interviews, and they are summarized under similar concepts, which have been expressed differently by each participant. The performance benefit perceived by most stakeholders is competitive advantage. Moreover, benefit as a marketing tool and improved community relations are perceived at a similar rate. Eventually, at least two respondents have identified advantages in the areas of compliance and reporting, and return on investment. The following paragraphs analyze each code and its meaning for the study participants.

Table 10: Performance benefits for eco-rated facilities

Benefits	Mentions
Competitive advantage	4
Marketing tool	3
Improved community relations	3
Compliance & Reporting	2
Return on Investment	2

Source: author's elaboration, data from interviews

a) Competitive advantage

According to the interviews results, the most popular benefit is **higher competitive advantage**⁴¹ compared to non-eco-rated facilities. In particular, it is a common perception that the eco-rated facilities improve their attractiveness to the niche of tourists interested and conscious of sustainable practices. For Mr. Kamiti from the *Ministry of Tourism*, "If there is an eco-rated facility it is going to get **more customers** than the others. They gain direct and indirect benefits for their performance." Moreover, as the researcher from UTALII states "(...) the major benefit is **guest attraction**. Most guests want to go to eco-rated places, because they feel safer there. And also, they feel motivated that the hotel is working towards

⁴¹ Competitive advantage in this study is considered as a characteristic that enables an eco-rated tourism accommodation facility to gain more customers than its competitors without the eco-rating certification.

conservation and sustainability.” The certification is perceived as a selling point that makes a facility more likely to get a particular type of client than another. Indeed, Dr. Munyiri from the GTRCMC-EA observes that “(...) tourists who are more sensitive to the environment and communities tend to search for facilities that are respectful of that. Therefore, the eco-rating certification opens more possibilities for facilities.” The study participants present similar views on how the facilities can benefit from using the awarded label. It is crucial to remind the reader that participants were not asked to evaluate whether the certified facilities have more environmentally-sounds practices than non-certified ones. The scope of the study, once again, concentrates on the use of the certification, distancing itself from the evaluation of environmental or social impacts of eco-rated facilities’ practices.

“If you look at some of the facilities, which have been ecorated as gold; they are very conscious about on what they do, how they treat the environment, their culture, their employees, so it is very important. And **they get more business than the ones who are not eco-rated.**”

Anthony Ochieng (TOSK)

The fact that the perceived benefit of competitive advantage is the most shared point of view among the study participants is fundamental to answering the research questions of this work. As previously observed, beneficial economic results are fundamental for a sustainability-oriented business to continue operating its economic and social projects parallely to its principal business scope. Without adequate financial funds to sustain the day-to-day operations, it would be impossible for a facility to invest in environmentally-friendly projects for conservation or promote community-oriented actions. Therefore, as sector experts share the idea that competitive advantage is a benefit for eco-rated facilities, it would mean that they can also make ends meet and produce higher profits to support their sustainability goals continuously. Environmentally sound practices such as using solar panels, more efficient resource management and consumption (water, electricity), and improved education for the facilities' employees also result in cost-saving practices that improve business performance over the long period, helping offset costs of investments for innovative technologies⁴².

⁴² Field observation during an informal conversation with Judy Kepher-Gona in the STTA office (16/03/2022)

As always, sustainability cannot be unpacked and analyzed only from one or the other category. The complexity and correlations of actions, investments, and strategy toward a long-term, environmentally and socially responsible tourism management is not easy to measure under the numerical term unless under different criteria. That is why perceptions and ideas from field experts are essential to corroborate the value of investing in an ecotourism certification. Indeed, competitive advantage is something that active professionals on the ground can perceive over time by comparing, for example, former and current requests from travelers, research trends, market trends, demands from the supply side of the equation, topics of training and conferences, consultancies' requests, and so on, according to the field of each stakeholder.

b) Marketing tool

The **marketing tool**⁴³ benefit has been mentioned by three different participants. The eco-rating label with the awarded level can become a marketing tool to gain visibility in the sustainable tourism niche and enter different channels of sales, especially international ones. With the eco-rating, facilities acquire accessibility to an internationally recognized network of professionals that operate in the field of sustainable tourism thanks to the *GSTC* recognition. It gives them a position that non-eco-rated facilities cannot reach without the *Eco-rating scheme* (regardless of their sustainability good practices, as mentioned above). As Dr. Njau (KAHC) mentions, "(...) it is good for businesses to operate with an **internationally recognized certification**". Ecotourism Kenya has direct contacts with *GSTC* and can provide a list of certified facilities to international businesses to promote their compliant members. In fact, the Management Representative from Ecotourism Kenya explains:

"(...) as members of *GSTC*, the certified members within our portfolio are able to **access** further advertising and **visibility**. So, if booking.com wants to see who are the most sustainable businesses in Kenya, they'll come to Ecotourism Kenya and we give them a certified member. So, we don't give them all our members, just the ones that are eco-rated and that they can verify that they've done what they say they've done. So, there's that there is a competitive advantage benefit to it."

Management Representative (EK)

⁴³ Here the author uses the tool of communication strategy applied by a facility to promote its services, stimulate interest in its potential customers and encourage action (booking). See Kotler *et al.*, (2022)

Also related to marketing benefits, some stakeholders mentioned the possibilities of obtaining revenues thanks to the tourism niche attracted by the eco-rating label. For the Researcher from *UTalii College*, “the hotels **get revenue because of the badge**. We can call it an improved image or improved marketing, which is obtained with the ecotourism labels”. Therefore, it is possible to state that the eco-rating logo constitutes a communication key that allows facilities to open doors to reach climate-sensitive tourists searching for responsible facilities that can demonstrate by a third-party declaration (the badge of the certification) that they are contributing to community development and environmental conservation.

According to the study participants, facilities see the eco-rating labels as marketing tools to enrich their **online and offline communication strategies**, as they have the permission to display the badges on their websites and their premises. With the assumption that all eco-rated facilities implement and sincerely support sustainability practices, the perceived benefit of their marketing campaigns is a characteristic that helps offset the initial investments' costs to obtain the certification. As mentioned in the state-of-the-art chapter, in ecotourism, certifications are a tool to fight **greenwashing** by companies that use them to ask for premium prices based on false claims. Green businesses are still businesses that operate with similar dynamics and, most importantly, needs as any other business. Therefore, it is beneficial for responsible tourism operators to know that investing funds and resources in an eco-rating certification enhances marketing strategies and revenues⁴⁴. This way, managers can better understand the benefits of "going green" and prove it by a third-party declaration.

The perceived benefits of competitive advantage and marketing tools are strictly interconnected since the business strategy of a facility incorporates marketing and business development as they complement one another. Effective communication is a crucial element that can help facilities approach more customers or different market portions. In fact, customers, especially international ones, can only see what is communicated online or how tour operators promote facilities. If a facility implements impactful projects for the environment or the communities but does not know how to communicate them to the

⁴⁴ Field observations from an informal conversation with the Management Representative of Ecotourism Kenya (01/03/2022) in the EK's offices during a presentation of the organization made by the team.

outside world effectively, it is as if they are not happening, unfortunately. **The point here is that if a facility conducts good sustainability practices, the eco-rating certification is perceived as an effective communication tool to gain a competitive advantage in the eyes of potential customers.** In this case, the eco-rating label becomes a communication “language” tool that facilities can strategically use in their marketing campaigns to gain a competitive advantage against their competitors.

c) Improved community relations

When asked which benefits are primarily arising from the use of the eco-rating certification, three participants indicated improved relationships with the local communities. It is not by chance that this observation originates from the three representatives from Ecotourism Kenya. Indeed, as the organization operates the scheme it also provides and gains insights from complying facilities. As far as the evaluation might be positively biased because of their affiliations, the perceptions of EK’s employees are fundamental as they have a close access to information, requests and feedback from the eco-rated facilities. The contacts with local communities have evolved during the years of implementation of the *Eco-rating scheme*. As the Team member from EK reports “(...) initially, there was **tokenism**⁴⁵ in the market where the communities were paid little money for access to their ancestral land and resources. But now, the eco-rated facilities have long-term plans to support communities in a major way.” Moreover, “(...) there has been an immense contribution to **community development**; communities that live in very rural and remote areas are seeing the **benefits of ecotourism**.” (Team leader - EK).

Behind businesses, there are people, and when a tourism facility decides to operate in a given environment, it always has to deal with the inhabitants of that location that gather in the local communities. In the context of Kenya, and especially of the eco-rated facilities, which are –

⁴⁵ Tokenism is a social phenomenon that might happen between a dominant and an excluded class. In particular, it occurs when the dominant class is pressed to share privileges, power, or resources with the excluded ones. Researchers identified a characteristic of social mobility in which members from the excluded class are given similar access to named commodities as the dominant class members (Laws, 1975, p. 51). However, it is verified that mobility always occurs under determined and fixed terms, without completely assimilating the tokenized subjects into the dominant class. Therefore, it implies that in tourism, some businesses have used tokenism to show only on the surface that they were supporting local communities by building schools and promoting few success stories of social mobility or improved well-being.

for now – solely located in remote areas, primarily near national parks, the local communities are strong and well structured⁴⁶. It is fundamental for businesses to gain the respect, trust, and approval of the local communities and their leaders to guarantee long-term support.

“When facilities have a **good relationship with the community**, then they establish a sort of **sybiotic relationship**. They get to hire good employees supplied directly by the surrounding community. They also get **protection**. For example, if there are issues in the area, but owners and the employees have a good relationship with the tourism facility they are protected for the benefit of the long-term sustainability of the business. In this way, the community will see the facility, the owner, and the people who work there as part of their community as they experience the benefits that ecotourism brings.”

Management Representative (EK)

d) Compliance & Reporting

Another major benefit, primarily reported by Ecotourism Kenya representatives relates to increase capacity for regulation compliance and reporting. As the Team leader (EK) reports “[facilities] see the benefits of being eco-rated and how complying with the standards and the criteria they have implemented help them conserve the environment.” So far, the certification is voluntary in Kenya, however there are several standards and requirements that the government slowly enforces when it comes to reporting and providing information on facilities’ operations. EK employees have observed how the requirements of the certification help businesses be more ready to comply and effectively respond to requests from the *Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA⁴⁷)*.

⁴⁶ Field observations during a visit in Meru County with Dr. Esther Muniyiri (06/03/2022). The author and a group of researchers visited the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and the Maasai village of Ngare Ndare. The group had informal conversations with the owner of Lewa, who also owns a luxury lodge (not eco-rated yet), and a Catholic pastor from the Maasai community who is a prominent spiritual and political leader for the local community. The area has become infamous for violence and a few dangerous episodes involving tourists, and the purpose of the meeting was to understand the status of the relationships among businesses and local communities. For example, being Lewa Wilderness a privately owned reserve, the Maasais cannot go to graze their cattle inside their ancestral land, which is now under the private reserve. This creates conflicts with other pastoral tribes with similar habits and needs, such as Samburus and Pokots, and with the owners of lodges and other touristic facilities that offer a human-free safari experience to their clients. However, for example, Maasai Mara is a public natural park, allowing its ancestral communities to graze their cattle inside.

⁴⁷ <https://www.tourismauthority.go.ke/> (last seen on the 26th June, 2022)

Most study participants mentioned the *Green and Ecotourism Certification Program* enforced and implemented by the government of Botswana as an excellent example they would like Kenya to follow. Indeed, during an informal meeting with five members of the TRA, the employees mentioned plans of the national authority to incorporate sustainability criteria in the star classification of the accommodation facilities (under TRA's mandate). Unfortunately, due to the privacy needs and the delicate nature of such reforms in the system, it is impossible to report the planned changes and updates exhaustively to the regulations in this study. However, it is possible to mention that change is coming. The more facilities are ready to report and provide numbers related to their resource use and sustainability practices, the more they will be ready to face changes easily and benefit from them. On a similar note, the TRA members observed that the *Eco-rating scheme* help facilities obtain a higher score in the stars classification they conduct.

“The certification helps them **optimize their businesses**, how they conduct their businesses, how they're able to communicate what they're doing with their employees, with the community with their visitors, and with their suppliers of goods and services. (...) In general, they don't know what they're reporting, and they don't know how to keep records. **And the way businesses are being done is going to change. So being members of Ecotourism Kenya gives them a heads up in terms of how they're going to be able to keep records for sustainability that the national authorities will more and more require.**”

Management Representative (EK)

e) Return on Investment

The changes to the business operations necessary to obtain the *Eco-rating scheme* are perceived to provide companies with enhanced returns on the initial investment they perform. On this topic, two primary comments are reported from the interviews. First, for the Private sector representative member of KATO, the certification “(...) is definitely **worth the investment**. It might be a little bit expensive at the times, especially on things like renewable energy which are expensive solutions to purchase. Nonetheless, **it's all paid down**.” One more time, a combination of factors related to sustainability provides an overall view that the investments made to comply with the eco-rating requirements are worth it and bring even more benefits to the businesses. It appears that, by implementing environmentally-friendly

strategies, businesses automatically benefit their pockets thanks to - among others - operational savings, more efficient resource use, and improved human resource management.

“When facilities are being sustainable, taking care of the environment, and practicing sustainability, they are operating sustainably. It means they achieve **operational efficiency**. So, they operating sustainably and they are operating profitably, while not diminishing or depleting resources for future generations. **One of the characteristics is that it makes businesses operate efficiently**. It also instills disciplining people. It also, of course, makes the environment clean.”

Dr. Florence Njau (KAHC)

4.3. Understanding if the certification increases potential clients

This section reports the study participants' perceptions regarding the impact of the eco-rating certification on the potential clients. During the interviews, stakeholders were asked a direct question on this topic: six replied with a favorable opinion, one with a negative view, and four did not express a standing on the matter (**Table 11**).

Table 11: Eco-rating certification and potential clients increase

Does the eco-rating label increase the number of clients interested in staying in a facility?	
Yes	6
No	1
Not sure	4

Source: author's elaboration, data from interviews

The author has observed that when confronted with this type of question, all the respondents could primarily provide personal opinions and without answers backed by proven numerical data. Several stakeholders have reported a lack of data on the topic, revealing there no organization has taken the lead in collecting this type of information to provide a quantitative analysis of the impact of the *Eco-rating scheme*⁴⁸. As Dr. Munyiri (*GTRCMC-EA*) explained,

⁴⁸ Collective field observation after conducting interviews with all study respondents (02/04/2022)

“There is no system in place to measure the difference in the number of tourists that are attracted to the facility before and after the ecotourism label.”

Overall, some replies report strong favorable positions over the theme. There is a perception that the eco-label attracts more clients, but not all types of clients than without the eco-rating. As Mr. Ochieng from *TOSK* states, “Not only do they attract more clients with the eco-label, **but specifically conscious clients** from the European market, as they are very selective when it comes to sustainability. And, **they are willing to pay more as they are niche tourists.**”. As stated by almost all study respondents, Kenya’s tourism strategy for the following years is to rebrand as a sustainable tourism destination. This direction might be beneficial for further uptake of the Eco-rating scheme, as more facilities might be encouraged to use the certification for sustainability branding purposes and to attract the right types of clients. For example, according to the KATO member, “(...) it is **absolutely true**. Because a destination, we are branding and targeting sustainable tourism. So, any eco-rated property benefits from the sustainable tourism focus. Many clients are sent by tour operators - many are coming based on their own selection.”

Fred Kaigua of *KATO* provided crucial information during the conversation over this question, and it is fundamental for this research as it provided another perspective to analyze the uptake of the *Eco-rating scheme*. Most reservations in the Kenyan tourism market are made by tour operators, not by the final customers. One key characteristic is that tour operators suggest a selection of accommodation they have previously reviewed and narrowed down. As previously mentioned, tour operators are crucial intermediaries in the supply-demand equation as they collect information from both sides. In this case, the insights from the CEO of *KATO* are unmistakable and valuable to grasp how the Kenyan market operates and who is making the critical decisions. Mr. Kaigua reports that according to his insights, around 70% of accommodation bookings in Kenya are done by the tour operators, not the final clients. Therefore, their role in the offer selection and the weight of their decisions for accommodation facilities is noticeable. Among others, that is why the research includes views from *Travelife-certified* tour operators (more details in section 4.5).

“Who does the booking to these properties? Most of the time it is the tour operator. (...) So, you might find that at the end of the day, the client did not have

much input as to which particular lodge they ended up being. **The client is not the one directly booking the property most of the time.** Even if there are some clients who already know where they want to be stay, I would say that the vast majority of the traffic is on the tour operators deciding where tourists go. When **70% of the hotel bookings are being done by the tour operator**, who's deciding where to go?"

Fred Kaigua (KATO)

4.4. Challenges of obtaining the Eco-rating certification

This section presents perceived challenges to pursue and maintain the Eco-rating certification for tourism accommodation facilities. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of which barriers might prevent businesses to join Ecotourism Kenya's program. Moreover, feedback on challenges can be useful for *EK* and the other stakeholders to identify critical areas to improve to attract more facilities. In **Table 12** it is possible to observe all the codes related to the challenges mentioned by the study respondents and how many times they have been mentioned during the interviews. The most popular themes regard high costs and lack of awareness. Other relevant challenges are lack of sustainability expertise, resistance by business culture and unclear information of return on investment. Moreover, issues of compliance, location barriers and relationships with local communities have been mentioned at least once. Eventually, Mr. Kamiti (*Ministry of Tourism*) assumes that there are no challenges as "(...) the program is operating and accessible for everyone who wants to participate." The challenges are presented in depth in the following paragraphs.

Table 12: Challenges of obtaining the Eco-rating certification

Challenges	Mentions
Costs	6
Lack of awareness	4
Lack of sustainability expertise	3
Business culture resistance	2
Unclear Return on Investment (ROI)	2
Compliance	1
Location barriers	1
Issues with local communities	1

Source: author's elaboration, data from interviews

a) Costs

About half of the participants have mentioned costs as a barrier for potential businesses to join the Eco-rating scheme. It is relevant to mention that what is meant here relates primarily to the perceived costs that a facility undertakes to obtain the certification. Apart from the fixed costs of the eco-rating procedure, which were mentioned in the *Case Study* chapter, all other expenses are relative to each facility, size, management, and existing procedures. As Mr. Ochieng of TOSK highlights “sustainability is perceived as very expensive.” However, sustainability also means saving money in the long term by using the latest technologies and implementing sustainable resource use practices.

“Some activities things may be expensive to initiate, which means a use of capital in the short term. For example, you need to purchase the panels when switching to solar power, but of course, inevitably it will be **cheaper in the long run.**”

Dr. Florence Njau (KAHC)

Facilities can face high costs when they must comply with laws and requirements. “These are the minimum requirements and they're their cost is not low. They actually have to spend some good amount of money to comply with all these documents in the case”, confirms the team leader from EK. It is considered expensive to maintain operations to keep the certification because if they do not fill the requirements, EK has the right to withhold the certification until they comply again. Moreover, not all facilities might foresee the long-term benefits of their investment if they are pursuing primarily profits without considering any social or environmental activities in their strategies.

“In terms of challenges and costs, compliance is quite expensive and therefore, not all facilities will go the extra mile to ensure that they are compliant. Therefore, it's also because one pursues profits and not the other angles like the environmental and social compliance.”

Dr. Esther Munyiri (GTRCMC-EA)

Another fundamental aspect related to costs as barriers of access to the *Eco-rating scheme* regards the size of the facility that wants to pursue the certification. Very often small and medium businesses struggle with other basic expenses and the seasonality of the cash flow. Therefore, it can be considered as a risky investment. They have been heavily affected by the

global Covid19 pandemic which limited global tourism and the usual intake of international tourists, which for most of them comes during only one season of the year. The researcher from *UTALII* points out that “With covid came in different perspective. Most hotels did not have money because guests who were not coming, so there was no money to invest or maintain anything new.” Moreover, their struggle to find funds to invest and maintain the certification might be higher than for larger accommodations which can rely on greater financial support as part of chains or bigger groups of hotels. So the cost represents a barrier especially for smaller-sized facilities, even if they are implementing good environmental and social practices that might comply with the Eco-rating scheme's requirements.

“The barrier has to do with **the cost of certification**, as there's always a cost. You will find out that it is the medium and small businesses that struggle with paying this cost. They could be doing well. They could be doing good. They could be responsible, but they are not able to participate in the certification scheme. So, the cost is a barrier for them.

Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)

b) Lack of awareness

Another highly perceived challenge regards the lack of awareness towards what is the scheme, its requirements, benefits and, in general, how can responsible tourism practices benefit facilities. For the CEO of *KATO* “The first obstacle is **ignorance or lack of knowledge**. You can't access what you don't know about.” As the team leader from *EK* puts it, “(...) there are so many tourism enterprises in Kenya but not all, are in the eco-rating certification scheme. And I think this is basically due to the lack of being **aware** of the existence of the program”. So, there is a perceived need for more information on the program, its impacts on the business, and what it means practically to apply and remain eco-rated over time. The need arises from the ground and from the institutions' representatives, who complain about a lack of coordination among interested organizations to spread more awareness of ecotourism in the country. It is one of the preliminary remarks in this research. It is perceived that facilities and their managers do not have enough information on the program to evaluate properly how they can benefit from participating and the concrete steps to take to be eco-rated. Moreover, as the stakeholders highlight, it would be more beneficial for all the actors involved in ecotourism and sustainable tourism to operate more cohesively to spread awareness and

create training and networking opportunities for more facilities to know and understand the *Eco-rating scheme*.

c) Lack of sustainability expertise

For some respondents, a challenge for the uptake of the *Eco-rating scheme* might be due to a lack of sustainability experts and capacity in facilities. “We have very **few sustainability experts** in the tourism industry” Anthony Ochieng of *TOSK* denounces. The internal capacity of facilities is an issue for developing a sustainability strategy to at least apply and implement the *Eco-rating scheme* requirements. Technical expertise, and human and financial resources are necessary to bring the necessary systemic and strategic changes for the certification. Judy Gona from *STTA* also confirms that operations, documentation, and procedures are fundamental to obtaining the eco-rating label.

“**Certification comes with a lot of documentation.** And therefore, you need internal resource people or resources. If you do not have the resource people, then you should be able to have somebody who can help you with putting this information together so that it is in a form that can be consumed when your evaluators come. So that is a common challenge for small businesses, who are few people in the organization, and **they do not have so many extra resources** to even pay for training, if there is a training to be paid, or have a full-time dedicated person or resource to put this information together for them. It feels like it's taking too much of the time when they're still small businesses and community organizations businesses trying just to remain afloat. So, **for example we find that certification is not common amongst SMEs.** Not because they don't want to. They are good SMEs in tourism, but probably they are lacking the required resources.”

Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)

d) Business culture resistance

Two of the study participants reflect on the potential internal challenges that a facility might face. Firstly, some management and employees might resist the change that sustainability practices bring. Therefore, business culture and resistance might be a barrier for a business to embark on the eco-rating journey. As Dr. Njau of *KAHC* pinpoints, “(...) there may be a bit of a culture change and a bit of **resistance** from the staff.”

“I would say another challenge is probably the **priorities** of the management team in place at the accommodation facility, we need to realize there is a **management hierarchy** of a facility. There are some people who are sustainability-focused, and there are some people who are not ready to go that direction yet because of **business-as-usual practices** they are not willing to change for sustainability or due to costs or other motivations.”

Team member (EK)

e) Unclear Return on Investment (ROI)

The theme of return on investment often recurs during the interviews with the stakeholders. Experts denounce a lack of tools, data, and methods to measure how concretely the eco-rating certification benefits a business. It can constitute a barrier for more facilities to apply because they do not have a clear idea of what benefits, not perceived but real, on their revenues they can get after investing in the certification. They need clear answers to concrete questions such as “(...) **what's in it for me?** What do I get out of it? Does it increase my revenues? Does it increase our market share? Does it sustain my position and increase my image? What drives me to do that?”, as Mr. Fred Kaigua (*KATO*) puts it. Moreover, Judy Gona of *STTA* has a similar position on the matter:

“It’s huge gap. Measuring return on investment and having all that metrics, again becomes a challenge for many businesses. And **because that is not very clear for many businesses, it will be a barrier**. They ask themselves: Why am I doing this? How will I know that it has contributed to my new markets and access? How do I measure that? And a lot of certification schemes do not offer this kind of knowledge on how you will measure return on investment using the certification.”

Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)

f) Compliance

The team leader from *EK* has mentioned issues of compliance as potential *challenges*. It can be cumbersome for some facilities to prepare and comply with all the minimum requirements requested by the certification. Partially, it can be due to their small size, lack of funds, lack of reliable infrastructure in their area, and partially due to their complexity, lack of transparency

of specific procedures, or lack of information. Therefore, compliance can become an obstacle to attracting more facilities to join the Ecotourism Kenya certification as they might not be willing to engage in such a complex journey. Moreover, facilities might lack human resources with technical expertise in conducting such compliance operations or might not have the funds to pay an external professional to handle it for them.

“Another challenge is compliance with the regulations and laws and legislations. As part of the compliance, there are certain audits that accredited facilities are supposed to conduct, for example, environmental audit, safety audit, fire audit. They are supposed to apply for a state license if they're discharging their wastewaters into the environment where they're supposed to conduct effluent test results. They're supposed to have the property registered and obtain what is called a Certificate of Registration. So, **all these are legislative and regulatory requirements that they're supposed to meet before they are eco-rated.**”

Team leader (EK)

g) Location barriers

At the moment, the *Eco-rating scheme* involves exclusively facilities that are located nearby national reserves. Therefore, for many urban businesses, there is no possibility of obtaining the eco-rating label. The team member of EK specifies that “(...) currently, the ecorating scheme is focused on facilities within **protected areas and national reserves**. So, facilities within the town areas and cities don't fit the bare minimum requirement to be eco-rated.”

h) Issues with local communities

Communities are crucial actors in facilitating the successful development of a tourism business in their areas. Good relationships with them are also a key element and requirement for obtaining the eco-rating certification. Therefore, the lack of approval and acceptance from a local community can represent for a business a real obstacle to join the EK program. Assuming the issues are not related to the operations of a facility itself, which in this case should be respectful of the social and environmental surroundings, there might be cultural issues of acceptance arising.

“Communities want their land to be to do what they want with their land, not for others to establish their activities or do different ones. (...) If you run an eco-lodge

next to a neighboring community that is not accepting you to come in with your ideas, **it could be very challenging as they may not really accept it.** They may not understand what you're doing and have their own setbacks. They don't want businesses to interfere in their activities.”

Researcher (UTALII)

4.5. The relationship between eco-rated facilities and *Travelife* tour operators

This section reports data obtained from *Travelife*-certified tour operators with an online survey and a few field observations during meetings and conversations with the stakeholders. The respondents of this survey are six out of the eight *KATO* tour operators certified by *Travelife*. It is forward-looking to understand the connection and identify opportunities for collaboration between eco-rated facilities and *Travelife*-certified tour operators.

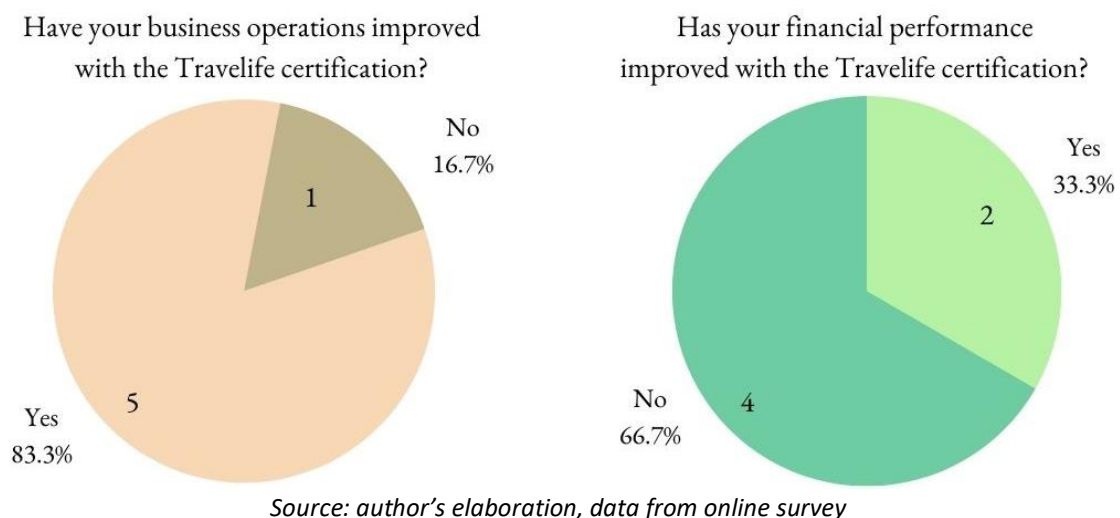
First, views regarding the *Travelife certification* are reported. The respondents were asked why they invested in the certification and were given a list of options and the possibility to choose multiple answers (**Annex II**). All the respondents claim that their primary motivations are to contribute to environmental conservation, support sustainable travel, have a better social impact on local communities, and learn good practices in sustainability (**Figure 5**). Half of the tour operators were triggered to invest with the prospects of entering the sustainability client niche, accessing the network of members, and obtaining higher visibility. Moreover, one respondent claimed interest in the certification as a marketing tool and another in the possibility of increasing service prices. It is relevant to mention that the question related to the motivations of tour operators to invest in *Travelife certification* was not an open question, therefore the motivations that the participants could select were previously chosen and narrowed down by the author. Other than that, in this specific context it is fundamental to keep in mind that participants were asked to participate in a survey to contribute to a thesis on ecotourism and responsible tourism. Therefore, their willingness to highlight thematic related to environmental conservation, social impact and sustainability rather than marketing or business strategy could be influenced by the topic of the research itself. Moreover, they were invited to participate by the CEO of *KATO*, who is also a member of the sustainability committee of the organization.

Figure 5: Drivers for tour operators to invest in the *Travelife* certification?



Moreover, tour operators' managers reflected upon the performance impacts that the *Travelife* certification has on their businesses. As **Figure 6** reports, five out of six participants confirm that their business operations have improved since the achievement of the certification. However, as indicated in **Figure 6**, four out of six tour operators affirm that the *Travelife* certification did not have any impact on their financial performance, while for two of them it has enhanced their financial performance.

Figure 6: Impact on business operations and financial performance



The survey also includes direct questions on eco-rated facilities under the *Eco-rating scheme* of Ecotourism Kenya. All respondents consider the program to have a successful uptake in Kenya. All of them collaborate directly with eco-rated facilities and consider relevant the presence of the eco-rating certification when choosing the facilities to collaborate with. Moreover, two out of six facilities work exclusively with eco-rated facilities, while the other four work also with non-eco-rated ones (**Figure 7**). While, it is not mandatory for *Travelife* operators to collaborate exclusively with eco-rated facilities. For now, few prefer to do so as a marketing and branding strategy. However, as it appears from several conversations, the aiming direction of tourism in Kenya is to brand the country as a sustainable tourism destination. Therefore, it could be an opportunity for a facility to be an early adopter and collaborate with sustainable tour operators that can open new niche markets for them. So far, the numbers are still low: only 2 facilities collaborate exclusively with eco-rated facilities and there is a total of 87 eco-rated facilities in the country. This means that any early adopter of sustainability certifications has the potential of becoming Kenya's pioneers in ecotourism. Therefore, the range for business opportunities that can be unlocked from this position starting – from setting the market's standards, to building customers loyalty to maintain in the long term, among others – is huge.

Figure 7: Exclusive collaborations with eco-rated facilities

Do you work exclusively with Eco-rated facilities?

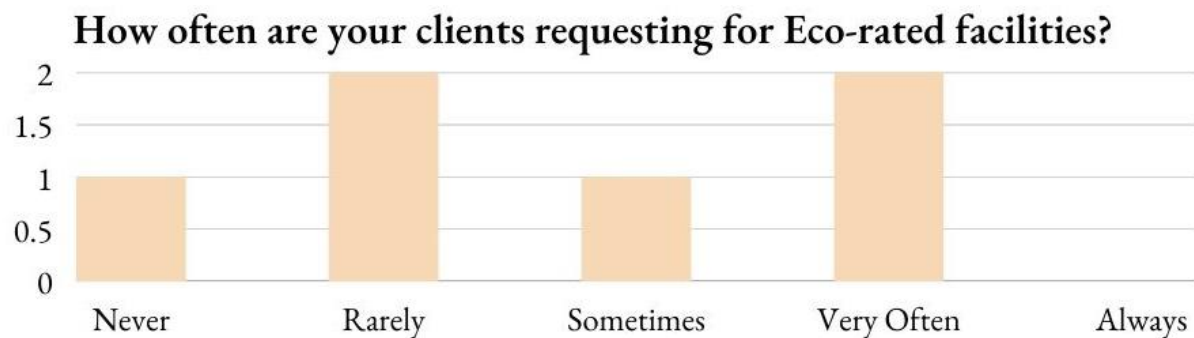


Source: author's elaboration, data from online survey

Tour operators report different experiences regarding how often their clients explicitly request to stay at an eco-rated facility (**Figure 8**). On a five-point scale from never to always,

one tour operator never had such a request; two respondents rarely receive the request, one sometimes, and for two tour operators, it happens very often.

Figure 8: Clients requests of eco-rated facilities

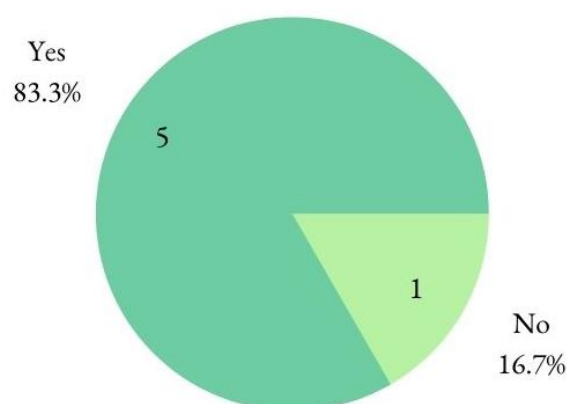


Source: author's elaboration, data from online survey

Eventually, tour operators were also asked if they perceived a willingness to pay higher prices for eco-rated facilities. Five respondents observed that their clients are willing to pay a premium price to stay in sustainable facilities that have obtained the eco-rating certification (**Figure 9**).

Figure 9: Willingness to pay for eco-rated facilities

In your view, are sustainability-sensitive tourists willing to pay more for an Eco-rated facility?



Source: author's elaboration, data from online survey

It is relevant to observe that there are only eight *Travelife* certified tour operators in Kenya. As of this study, five of them openly report that travelers interested in sustainable tourism

and accommodation do not have restraints to pay higher prices in exchange for staying in eco-rated facilities by the *Eco-rating scheme* of EK. This information is previous for any facility manager evaluating the investment for such certification. Considering all the factors and perceptions related to responsible tourism growth in Kenya, the possibility to access the niche market of higher-paying sustainability-sensitive customers and the opportunity to collaborate with ecotourism-oriented tour operators can constitute strategical business choices for a facility. As previously seen, costs and system changes can be challenging to implement. However, with a properly planned strategy, the benefits could offset costs in the long run and ensure a durable business and all its advantages over the long period.

The sectorial organizations for tour operators are fundamental for bringing change in the sector as they reunite the key intermediaries that gather information from the supply and demand side of the tourism offer. It is not by chance that KATO has organized a sustainability committee that begins a more structured plan to lobby for further implementation of responsible tourism practices among its members. During a committee meeting where the author was invited, several points were made about the organization's future, its strategy, and how the market will evolve⁴⁹. The committee members have openly explained that they aim to bring forward more strategies and actions to bring change in the Kenyan tourism sector and make it more sustainability-oriented.

It can be observed how the high pressure from international customers to have sustainable tourism products and services is penetrating the Kenyan businesses and, in a way, forcing them to adapt to the western concepts of sustainability and responsible business practices. It is fundamental to recognize how market requests from customers of stronger economies have the power to shape internal dynamics in the Kenyan sector. For example, a tour operator owner described how there are facilities specialized in accommodating guests from the USA, and they provide any kind of service that the USA tourist-target group might demand, including the type of served food, which might imply the use of non-local crops or products creating a non-sustainable practice. Likewise, a German-speaking tour operator attracting guests from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland has reportedly received complaints and

⁴⁹ Field notes from a KATO sustainability committee meeting available upon request (31/03/2022)

specific requests related to environmental practices in the hotels, such as lack of recycling, and high use of plastic products (e.g., water bottles instead of reusable ones), among others. In a way, it is positive if international pressure brings change related to the responsible use of resources and community-oriented operations. However, it is crucial to remember how these concepts are embedded in a western view of sustainability. To express this concept with the words of the private sector representative from *KATO*:

“I would like to say that we are naturally sustainable people in Africa, we are not wasteful traditionally. People like to talk about sustainability and very complicated SDGs. But bring it down to the grassroots level, and you will realize that many things are already happening here in Africa.”

Private sector representative (KATO)

4.6. Long-term sustainability of the *Eco-rating scheme*

This section provides an overview of the perceived future trends and features of sustainable tourism and the *Eco-rating scheme* in Kenya according to the research respondents. As a matter of fact, each respondent provided various assumptions according to their industry expertise and trends that they experience in their daily work. In this part, larger quotes from the stakeholders will be utilized in order to present a more profound qualitative overview of the motivation behind their trend predictions.

Firstly, conjectures related to the evolution of the sustainable tourism sector in Kenya are presented. For Dr. Njau of *KAHC*, there are optimistic prospects for a larger number of facilities to obtain the eco-rating certification. For her, one of the key sectoral strategies that need to be implemented by the government and the tourism professionals is to work together for the successful branding of Kenya as a sustainable tourism destination. This way, a beneficial cycle will engage more businesses to become eco-rated, and demand for ecotourism products and services will flow in the country.

“There are prospects for more establishment hotels and even tourism practitioners to be eco-rated are big. Because at the end of the day, **if in the country most of the establishments are eco-rated, then it gives it a better standing in the international market.** So, the prospects are really big and good. The benefits will increase because if most of the establishments are eco-rated,

the quality-of-service delivery will improve. And the bottom line will be that profits will also increase. There'll be a repeat clientele and a niche market that will likely come to our country, and even the positioning of Kenya as a destination will be better. So **overall, globally and regionally we will be standing out as a country that practices eco-tourism, conscious of the environment, and operating in a sustainable manner.** We need to grow more the tourism sector. And for us to be able to grow it more we need to differentiate ourselves from any other country. **Having the eco-rating certification in most of our establishments will be differentiating our sector and the destination branding as an upmarket."**

Dr. Florence Njau (KAHC)

Similarly, Mr. Kamiti of the *Ministry of Tourism* believes that promoting and disseminating information about the benefits of the eco-rating certification is needed to stimulate more facilities to join the program. According to him, "Businesses will understand more that it's good to be eco-rated. If they understand that more facilities and tourism actors can benefit from it then, they will be **more motivated to be eco-rated and involved in the ecotourism value chain.**"

Both CEOs of *TOSK* and *KATO* have expressed complementary viewpoints, particularly related to a need for further lobbying with the government to incorporate sustainable parameters into the stars assessment conducted by the TRA. As Ochieng of *TOSK* reveals "as private sector stakeholders through Ecotourism Kenya, we are trying **to push a sustainable tourism policy** that will not only force them but at least it will start inculcating sustainable tourism principles for businesses.". The shared principle is that if sustainability requirements are more widespread and considered fundamental for all tourism facilities, the uptake of ecotourism in the country will be faster and more efficient. Effective communication and spreading awareness, as stated before, are also essential factors considered by both stakeholders.

"The tourism sector in Kenya, left on its own it may not get we're supposed to be. We have been discussing the need for **minimum standards to push people towards sustainability.** We need to set a minimum standard for hotel classification. We need to inject that and make it so basic that everybody can be able to do it without stream. Then from there, you reward those that are going

over and above that. But **the minimum standard for sustainability**, I think is what we need. But minimum realistic standards will help shape the future if we don't risk having those that are not compliant and enjoying good business discouraging bad business."

Mr. Fred Kaigua (KATO)

Judy Kepher-Gona of *STTA* illustrates the belief that an external push for customers will persuade and, in a way, force more facilities to implement ecotourism and obtain the certification. According to Gona, the bottom-up trend will shake the tourism sector operators in Kenya and convince the more reluctant managers to invest in the *Eco-rating scheme*.

"But that future will be if the tourism industry is not going to do it by themselves. That future will be pushed, and **the shift will be pushed by travelers**. The travelers are going to start **demanding** very soon. I don't know whether that soon is a decade or more, but the travelers will now start demanding, and the beauty is that when consumers start demanding, they contribute to the development of tools that they can use. So I see the power of sustainable tourism decisions, moving from the businesses to the consumers."

Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)

For the Private sector representative (*KATO*), "(...) everybody must be engaged in sustainable tourism at the same time: all stakeholders, the supply chain, and managers, everybody must get engaged. And Ecotourism Kenya should create easily accessible platforms for everyone to be engaged." Likewise, the director of the *GTRCMC-EA* believes that the general trend of the Kenyan tourism market will evolve towards sustainability and engage everyone in its value chain. She also recalls that the major drivers for these trends are led by an international push and because of Kenya's goal to cut its carbon emissions of 30% by 2030.

"The future of tourism is local and eco-friendly. Why? Because that's the trend across the world. We have various climate change directives coming from the international, national, and county level. In the forums, it is obvious that eco-friendliness and eco-rating will become more and more important. That is a big step towards sustainable tourism development. What I see is that more and more

facilities want to be associated with that and therefore we the awareness creation then more and more facilities then included in the tourism category.”

Dr. Esther Munyiri (GTRCMC-EA)

It is relevant to report that for all the *KATO's Travelife*-certified tour operators that contributed to the online survey, sustainable tourism is the future direction of the market in Kenya. As one of them states, “(...) Kenya as a Tourism destination has committedly embraced Sustainable Tourism for the development of the sector”. Indeed, it is perceived that responsible tourism will become a driver of sustainable development for the tourism sector and the country's economy as a whole. Moreover, for them, “The world and consumers are demanding it too.” As previously mentioned, the need for an internal market change is coming from outside and the demands of international tourists. For the tour operators, it is fundamental to share more knowledge on sustainable business practices in the tourism sector among all players in the tourism value chain.

“I feel, there is a great niche for it and **Kenya could become Africa's green destination** as it has the potential. However, it is important to **create awareness** to international consumers, create awareness with local hotels, lodges, camps and tour operators on best practices.”

CEO of a Travelife-certified tour operator

The following paragraphs report several views on the future developments of the *Eco-rating scheme* of Ecotourism Kenya. To begin with, it is valuable to report the plans and views of EK's representatives, who provide an overview of the internal goals and strategies for the program's evolution in the following years. The management representative reveals that a review committee is working on updating the *Eco-rating scheme* guidelines and requirements. One of their missions is to make the program at the same time demanding enough to guarantee satisfying environmental and social outcomes but also not too strict not to deter more facilities from pursuing the certification. As it emerges, the fact that EK is a private initiative prevents them from establishing stricter standards. They need cash flow and the *Eco-rating scheme* to attract facilities willing to comply with their requirements and pay for the service. Since Ecotourism Kenya is also a business, it has to provide salaries, pay for its suppliers and maintain operations sustainable in the long term. Its main goal of spreading

responsible tourism implies enticing more facilities towards the *Eco-rating scheme*, among other programs. If criteria become too strict and fewer facilities are persuaded to join the program, the company cannot survive for long without earnings from the certification. That is why several stakeholders push for further involvement of the government to incorporate sustainable standards in their classification criteria to oblige more (and possibly all) facilities to comply and contribute to sustainable tourism in Kenya.

“Currently, **the certification criteria are under review**. The review committee is looking at each and every criterion and to improve it. And then also, what do we need to add because we currently don't do carbon footprinting. So, we would want to add that in the future. But again, we're asking ourselves, what is the aim of certification? The aim of certification should be to **promote responsible tourism business**, so if it becomes too laborious, but if there are too many boxes to tick, the uptake will be very slow, and we will not meet our objective, which is a great objective. **We're not here to certify perfect business, but the objective is for them to be responsible.**”

Management Representative (EK)

Both the team member and the team leader of EK report how important it is for the future of the certification to create more awareness of the benefits of begin eco-rated. The team leader specifies how the eco-rating will provide higher benefits in terms of improved relationships with the local communities in the long term. The facilities will be able to perceive it better and also communicate it better, as “when they continue to be ecorated, there is increased relations with the communities in areas that have not maybe benefited for a long time.” Moreover, the team member from EK mentions how the program is getting prepared to suit and also involve urban facilities: “We have a plan to **have city hotels on board** and all that so in the long run, we intend to have the **tourism sector more focused on responsible tourism**.” It appears that if EK manages to engage greater numbers of businesses in its Eco-rating scheme, it will benefit all stakeholders interested in branding Kenya as a sustainable tourism destination. They perceive, in this case, the larger number of eco-rated facilities as a higher level of success for the uptake of responsible tourism in the country. The more facilities become eco-rated, the better the development of sustainable tourism in Kenya, its awareness, and the benefits for those who are part of the program.

Moreover, it is crucial to introduce the key stakeholders' perceptions that enrich the vision for the future of the eco-rating program. First, the CEO of *STTA* offers the concrete perspective of a sustainable consulting company. For her, the *Eco-rating scheme* and EK need more accountability and transparency to grow bigger and more successful. The perception is that the demand side of the equation will demand greater accountability from businesses, and these requests will shape the development of sustainable tourism and certification. Facilities can run out of business if, in the following years, they cannot provide data on how they help conserve the environment, support the livelihood of local communities, improve the way their employees are treated and implement sustainable resources use on their premises. Being eco-rated can help businesses provide more information and be more transparent with their customers and with the tour operators that promote and choose them as business partners.

“The certification would have to be more accountable. They have to produce data even for businesses themselves, businesses will believe in this once they see a return on investment. So significant data are showing performance. What companies are doing. (...) Today there is so much concern about greenwashing using certification. **The future of certification is in full detailed disclosure.** And we can no longer operate on broad general guidelines. (...) We have to look broader into the issues, and therefore there have to be in this data tools that are acceptable, that are universal that speak the language of the traveler will be able to understand them. Travelers must be able to know what is behind this.”

Judy Kepher-Gona (STTA)

For Mr. Kaigua of *KATO*, “No particular assessment scheme can remain static forever.” He pushes the idea that the scheme needs to be continuously reassessed and improved every five years to make it always actual and relevant to the market evolutions. He shares the same concern that if the standards become too demanding, they might disengage businesses. The perception is that in the long term, it is not sustainable for Ecotourism Kenya to head the certification and, simultaneously, make the requirements more demanding. The perception is that, at one point, public institutions need to support or take the lead on the certification to get everyone on board and raise the standards.

“My view is that every five years they should review the criteria and perhaps **slightly increase the bar to make it more efficient**. Saying to facilities: you've managed, you've been there, you've understood how to practice it, now we make it a bit harder. The only challenge is that you need to **be careful not to lock out somebody** or decrease the interest by becoming too demanding. “

Mr. Fred Kaigua (KATO)

Similarly, for Dr. Munyiri of *GTRCMC-EA* it is essential for facilities to upgrade their systems implement responsible practices and join the *Eco-rating scheme*. As she puts it, “it will be some kind of a must or a requirement that all facilities work towards this direction.” There is a lot of interest and hype about ecotourism in Kenya at the moment. It is an excellent time to jump on board and prepare for what is coming.

For the UTALII’s researcher, the program has a lot of potential to grow in Kenya and involve more businesses and interest. However, a greater uptake requires EK to communicate more and better about their program, its functioning and its benefits. As the researcher explains, “**They have potential**. But they have to step up and talk about it more. They need to come out clear about what it is, because the biggest challenge they are facing is that people don't understand what it is.”

CONCLUSION

This research investigated if the eco-rating certification by Ecotourism Kenya can represent a strategic business opportunity for tourism accommodation facilities. The study adds value to the identified research problem and gap, as it provides a brand-new qualitative approach that unifies the perspectives of diverse tourism operators. Based on the qualitative analysis of interviews and an online survey with major stakeholders, and experts in the sector, it can be concluded that there are several profitable opportunities for facilities that approach the *Eco-rating scheme*. This study has developed starting from an academic gap of qualitative research on the topic of ecotourism certification, particularly related to business performances and the benefits of adopting sustainable tourism practices. Thanks to the in-depth data obtained through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and an online survey for *Travelife*-certified tour operators, it was possible to provide answers on the industry's perceptions on ecotourism uptake and present and future features in Kenya.

The results of this study have been analyzed following the six research questions, as illustrated in the *Introduction*. Generally, the certification is seen as a successful program in Kenya. Participants mentioned the operability of the scheme and the fact that facilities have applied and invested in it. Not many considerations have been made regarding the program's environmental or social impacts in this context as a measurable parameter for the scheme's success. Attention was raised to the lack of measurable parameters provided by Ecotourism Kenya to measure success other than with perceptions or numbers of eco-rated facilities.

The first objective of this study was to define factors that attract facilities to invest in the *Eco-rating scheme*. The study participants highlighted factors such as access to a niche market of sustainability-sensitive clients and a general market trend oriented towards responsible tourism. Therefore, the most widespread remarks on the attractiveness of the program regard the willingness of businesses to adapt to the ever-evolving global tourism market. Moreover, stakeholders also believe that facilities might want to pursue the Eco-rating certification to improve their operations, achieve better regulation compliance, gain a competitive advantage, be recognized for their sustainability efforts, and contribute to conserving the

environment. The collected information shows that the program represents an attractive investment for tourism accommodation facilities and that, with strategic adaptations, managers can offset the investment costs without difficulties and obtain a good return on investment.

The second objective of this research was to identify performance benefits for facilities that obtain the Eco-rating certification. The most prominent benefits perceived by the experts who participated in this study are an improved competitive advantage compared to non-eco-rated businesses, the possibility of improving marketing and communication campaigns, and more stable relationships with local communities. To achieve the certification award, businesses must comply with several guidelines and standards. By going through the process of adjusting their operations with the certification requirements, they improve their operations. For a business, it is fundamental to have higher visibility than other similar facilities, communicate correctly to the outside world and stabilize beneficial long-term relationships with local communities to guarantee a successful life for their businesses. From this research, it emerges that the *Eco-rating scheme* supports business managers achieve these results as a marketing and system improvement tool. Meanwhile, because there is a third-party evaluation, it helps fight greenwashing as it is a factual claim of an achieved level of sustainability good practices. Moreover, other significant benefits regard support with compliance and reporting procedures and return on investment. In the future, more requirements will come from the government in reporting resource use and business impacts related to climate change. The certification gives facilities an advantage. At the same time, it is perceived that the return on investment with the Eco-rating certification is high and not challenging to achieve.

The third objective of this work was to understand if the certification increases clients interested in staying in a facility because of the eco-rating certification. It was not possible to collect verified data from the stakeholders who participated in the study. Half of the participants believe that the certification increases the number of clients, particularly those sensitive to sustainable practices. Some perceive that such niche tourists are willing to pay higher prices to ensure their stay in an environmentally and socially friendly facility. However, the impression is that the impact on more clients is unclear. The lack of numerical data on this

theme, both from the institutions represented by the stakeholders and Ecotourism Kenya itself, does not provide sufficient information to confirm or deny this claim.

The fourth topic addressed in this research related to the possible challenges that might prevent facilities from participating or succeeding with the eco-rating certification. The perceptions collected reflect primarily concerns over the high costs of initial investments for the certification and for systemic adaptations in the facility operations. For example, some businesses might not perceive the long-term benefits of purchasing more efficient technologies to generate renewable energy or save water. This might create a barrier for them to invest in the scheme. Moreover, other prominent challenges might be a lack of awareness of the program's benefits and low levels of expertise in sustainable tourism. Not all tourism professionals might be aware of the Eco-rating scheme and its benefits, nor of the benefits that sustainability brings to a business in terms of financial and long-term performance other than environmental and social. Stakeholders have the impression that further challenges for a shift towards the Eco-rating certification might be a resistance from the business culture in a facility, unclear information on the return-on-investment parameters, and high compliance requirements. For now, the scheme is only available for natural reserve facilities. Therefore, all other types of facilities are excluded from the program. Local communities might prevent facilities from implementing the certification's regulations because of a lack of effective communication or trust.

The fifth objective of this study was to highlight which relationship connects eco-rated facilities and *Travelife*-certified tour operators. The author demarcated the common areas of both certifications related to sustainability and good practices for the long-term continuation of business activities in respect of natural resources and social aspects. Thanks to an online survey, it was possible to understand the practices of Kenyan tour operators who adhere to the *Travelife* certification. It was verified that only two of the six tour operators collaborate exclusively with eco-rated facilities. However, five have observed that sustainability-sensitive clients are willing to pay more for eco-rated facilities. From the results obtained in the survey, it is possible to conclude that eco-rated facilities have the opportunity to develop a strategy to collaborate with sustainability-oriented tour operators to shape the sustainable tourism destination and niche in Kenya. As previously highlighted, costs and return on investments

concern new facilities that wish to approach the *Eco-rating scheme*. A productive collaboration with *Travelife* tour operators can help them boost their competitive advantage, reach the sustainable travelers' niche more effectively and offset the costs of the initial investments with more success.

The sixth objective of this work was to report an overview of the perceptions related to the long-term sustainability of the *Eco-rating scheme*. The impressions were collected to gather predictions and opinions on Kenya's sustainable tourism sector and the *Eco-rating scheme* itself. It emerges that stakeholders see a larger uptake of the certification as a beneficial feature to further develop the branding of Kenya as a sustainable tourism destination. Moreover, it is relevant to highlight that the change is most likely to happen thanks to the external push from tourists and travelers interested in the destination's long-term survival. Stakeholders are asking for further attention and tools from the government to facilitate the uptake of sustainability good practices among all operators in the tourism sector. Regarding the certification, participants expressed the need for the program to continuously update and improve its regulations, standards, and features. The most prominent comments suggest that the program implement measurable success criteria and further transparency on financial returns of the program that will benefit the communication and awareness of the program's benefits. Generally, it is believed that the standards could progressively increase to push for more efficient systems and improved operations as the sector is going in the direction of sustainability, and they want Kenya to be a top performer in this area.

It is fundamental to raise awareness of the limitations of this study, as it involved highly engaged participants in the *Eco-rating scheme*. On the one side, it supports close insights into the functioning and impact on the program; however, it also constitutes a positive bias towards evaluating its development. The small sample of study participants constitutes a limitation of this study, which could be overcome with the involvement of representatives from eco-rated facilities and other institutions that operate in line with Ecotourism Kenya. Moreover, collecting data directly from the eco-rated facilities was impossible as initially planned. This difficulty implied design changes and adaptation for the goals and results of this study. Furthermore, for this study, it was not possible to incorporate numerical data on return on investment, the number of clients before and after the certification, and other economic

parameters that could support the quantitative analysis of the statements of the study participants.

Further research, based on the study limitations, might benefit from an approach to this thematic to directly involve and collect opinions, information, and data from representatives of the eco-rated facilities. It could contribute to enriching the perspectives of relevant stakeholders that were collected during this study. Moreover, as this research enabled a further communication and understanding of the several institutions involved, it would be highly beneficial for all stakeholders to commit to a continuous engagement and dialogue to support the uptake of ecotourism in Kenya. The author further recommends combining quantitative and qualitative research to evaluate the practical environmental and social impacts of the Eco-rating scheme to complete the sustainability-based analysis of the program. Does the eco-rating certification increase the well-being of the local communities that reside in the vicinities of the facility? Did the resources use to improve the eco-rated facilities by comparing usage data from before and after the certification? How long did it take for all eco-rated facilities to offset the initial investment costs to obtain the eco-rating certification? To improve awareness of return on investment, it would be helpful to provide transparent data on how much money a facility had to spend to comply with the *Eco-rating scheme* standards and requirements, purchase the application and certification fees, maintain the acquired practices and tools for the length of a cycle of the certification (2 years). As it emerges from the study results, numerical data are lacking to provide an unbiased and objective evaluation of the financial performance of the certification for a business. In order to improve awareness and communicate clearly how a business can benefit from implementing ecotourism practices, it is necessary to share and disseminate such data.

Tourism accommodation facilities cannot survive without the natural environment and local communities surrounding them. Ecotourism and the *Eco-rating scheme* certification can help improve relationships and open ways of collaboration among all involved parties. Ecotourism Kenya helps promote sustainable tourism in the country, and the government must play its part in providing tools to enable a further uptake of the scheme and engage more facilities. If Kenya becomes the next sustainable tourism destination, who will shape the new market that will be created?

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Annex I

Questionnaire for tourism sector representatives

Privacy Ethical Questions

1. Do you give your permission to record and transcript this interview?
2. Do you agree with this interview and allow me to use your complete answers?
3. Do you want your answers to be anonymous or can I use your name and/or title and/or affiliation in my research?

Questionnaire

4. What is the contribution of ecotourism to sustainable development in Kenya?
5. Are you aware of the *Eco-rating scheme* of Ecotourism Kenya?
6. Is Ecotourism Kenya's Eco-rating certification scheme a successful program in Kenya?
7. What are the characteristics that allowed ecotourism to develop in Kenya?
8. What are the performance benefits for a facility investing in the eco-rating certification?
9. What factors drive tourism accommodation facilities to invest in the eco-rating certification scheme?
10. Does the eco-rating label increase the number of clients interested in staying in a facility?
11. What are the possible challenges of a tourist accommodation facility to access the *Eco-rating scheme*?
12. How do you think the tourism sector will develop in Kenya? What will be the role of sustainable tourism in the following years?
13. What are the prospects of more tourist accommodation facilities joining the Ecotourism Kenya program? Will benefits increase in the future?
14. How will eco-rated facilities benefit long-term from their participation in the *Eco-rating scheme*?
15. Do you think this *Eco-rating scheme* is challenging enough and brings enough environmental, social, and economic benefits to prevail in the future, or is there some other certification that could be more efficient?

Annex II

Survey for tour operators

Section 1

Travelife certification

1. Has the Travelife certification attracted more customers than before?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

2. Why did you invest in the Travelife certification?
 - Niche access
 - Marketing tool
 - Access to the network of members
 - Higher visibility
 - Possibility to increase prices
 - Contribute to environmental conservation
 - Support sustainable travel
 - Better social impact on local communities
 - Learn good practices in sustainability

3. Have your business operations improved with the Travelife certification?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

4. Has your financial performance improved with the Travelife certification?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Section 2

Eco-rating certification by Ecotourism Kenya

5. In your view, is Ecotourism Kenya's Eco-rating certification scheme a successful program in Kenya?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

6. Are you working with facilities with the Eco-rating certification by Ecotourism Kenya?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

7. Do you work exclusively with Eco-rated facilities?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

8. How often are your clients requesting Eco-rated facilities?
(Never) 1 -2 - 3 - 4 - 5 (Always)

9. How relevant is it for your business the Eco-rating label when you collaborate with a facility?
(Not relevant at all) 1 -2 - 3 - 4 - 5 (Highly relevant)

10. In your view, are sustainability-sensitive tourists willing to pay more for an Eco-rated facility?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

11. Will sustainable tourism evolve further in Kenya? Who are the most relevant actors involved?
