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GREEN CERTIFICATION ISSUES IN THE ACCOMMODATION SECTOR

Abstract. The article covers the possibility of accommodation establishments green certification as a tool for greening the tourist industry. The analysis is provided for available statistics of certified hotels in Russia and abroad and the conclusion is made on the low level of accommodation sector green certification. The major barriers hindering the widespread of green certification practice in the Russian accommodation sector were researched. It is concluded that the feasibility of green certification as a tool for tourism greening on the one hand is determined by the level of environmental culture and development of the knowledge-based system on the certification goals and procedures among consumers and by the position of certification in the company's external communications system. On the other hand, by the availability of this greening tool for the majority of tourist market participants. The need for more thorough research on the content and factors determining environmentally responsible behavior of Russian tourists is substantiated.

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Keywords: green economy, tourism industry, accommodation sector, ecologization, green certification.

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ПРОБЛЕМЫ «ЗЕЛЕНОЙ» СЕРТИФИКАЦИИ СЕКТОРА РАЗМЕЩЕНИЯ

В статье рассматривается возможность использования «зеленой» сертификации средств размещения как инструмента экологизации индустрии туризма. Анализируется доступная статистика сертифицированных отелей в России и за рубежом. Делается вывод о низком уровне «зеленой» сертификации сектора размещения. Исследуются основные барьеры, препятствующие широкому распространению практики «зеленой» сертификации российского сектора размещения. Делается вывод о том, что целесообразность использования «зеленой» сертификации в качестве инструмента экологизации туризма определяется, с одной стороны, уровнем экологической культуры и сформированности у потребителей системы знаний о целях и процедурах сертификации, местом сертификации в системе внешних коммуникаций компании. С другой, — доступностью данного инструмента экологизации для основной массы субъектов туристического рынка. Обосновывается необходимость углубления исследований содержания и факторов формирования экологически ответственного поведения российских туристов.

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Ключевые слова: «зеленая» экономика; индустрия туризма; сектор размещения; экологизация; «зеленая» сертификация

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Introduction

Proven by theory and practice positive influence of tourist companies' efforts in the sphere of sustainable development on their financial, as well as social, and environmental performance [12, 14, 20] leads to an increase in the number of companies interested in effective tools for greening their own business. One of such tools is the sustainability (green) certification of goods and services, which implies environmentally friendly activities of the company and independent expert evaluation of its performance by a third party. The main goals of *green* certification – to reduce the negative impact of businesses on the natural environment and to gain a competitive advantage in the growing *green* markets [12].

Despite the high level of *green* certification institutional environment development, expansion of global and national certification systems network designed to not only assess the tourist businesses environmental performance but also to provide methodological and methodical assistance to companies in the development of their effective systems for environmental management, obvious public benefits obtained, the scale of *green* certification is not satisfactory.

Low activity of tourist business in this area is explained by the peculiarities of the tourist industry, 90% of which are small and medium-sized businesses that face financial, human, information, time, and other resources constraints.

Many foreign authors analyzed motivation, incentives, and barriers for *green* certification, including large-scale cases on specific tourist destinations and countries [11; 14–17]. There is a limited number of articles covering this topic in Russia [3; 9]. Meanwhile, the tourist business greening converted from a trend into a mandatory requirement for successful operation in highly competitive tourist markets.

The article analyzes the processes of *green* certification in the Russian accommodation sector. The conclusion is made about the low level of this greening tool application. Incentives and barriers to certification are identified.

Environmentally sound accommodation concept

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The ideas of greening the hotel business first appeared in the 80s of the last century with no further development both due to the traditional perception of the hospitality industry as an environmentally friendly type of activity and the unwillingness of the tourist industry entities to change the development paradigm and to the lack of developed theory and institutional conditions for tourism greening, lack of available *green* technologies. Low *green* consumer demand from travelers also played an important role.

However, the idea is still alive, gradually attracting followers all over the world as environmental issues get worse. In 1995, the American company Green Suits International proposed the EcoRooms concept, which implies the arrangement of a market niche for environmentally friendly hotels, promoting services aimed at consumers consciously choosing environmentally friendly products and technologies. Further broadening of sustainable development concept, reassessment of tourism role in global economy greening by international institutions together with technological innovations, mainly in energy, construction, materials manufacture, waste disposal, etc. led to an expansion of green technologies, their adjustment to the tourist industry needs and the emergence of environmentally friendly hotels.

Currently, the science literature and tourist industry marketing activities apply a variety of terms to define environmentally friendly accommodation establishments:

sustainable hotel – the term is used mainly in documents of international tourist and environmental institutions, as well as foreign science literature, and means accommodation establishments aiming to achieve sustainable development goals, i.e. corresponding to the concept of the Triple Bottom Line or triple P: planet – people – profit;

green hotel – the term is used in official documents of international, governmental, and



non-governmental institutions, science articles, and accommodation sector marketing activities and means environmentally friendly properties whose managers are eager to institute programs that save energy, water, and other resources, reduce all types of waste to help protect our Earth while saving money (definition of the Green Hotels Association). These are accommodation establishments operating in compliance with the UN principle - profitable business is environmentally friendly business. Major focus is on environmental and economic aspects of the activity with less attention paid to social and cultural ones (ASEAN Tourism Standard 2007). Nevertheless, some authors, as well as many certification systems for green hotels, are more often included in the list of criteria for assessing the relationship with staff and local population;

eco-hotel or environmentally friendly hotel is a term often used as a synonym for a green hotel [2; 8] to define an environmentally sustainable accommodation establishment that made important environmental improvements to its operations to minimize its negative impact on the environment. In the most successful, in our opinion, definition, an eco-hotel is understood as an accommodation establishment functioning under the principle of environmental responsibility and application of environmentally friendly technologies. This definition allows using the term *eco-hotel* as a synonym for a *green* hotel. Still, it requires a description of the environmental responsibility concept.

In science literature and marketing often, and in our opinion for no good reason, eco-hotels are associated with eco-tourism only [2; 8]. Ecohotels are understood as wooden houses or other light structures located in unique natural complexes. However, they may not have any other environmental or sustainability characteristics (resource-saving, waste management, etc.). The location of accommodation establishments in protected areas in our opinion does not automatically make them environmentally safe and does not provide sufficient reason to consider them as such. Moreover, analysis of certified eco-hotels registers reveals that many of them are located in historic centers of large cities, i.e. are not related to nature tourism. In our opinion, the location doesn't matter. It is important how they interact with the environment. It should be also considered that the construction of hotels in protected areas or unique natural complexes is usually prohibited or limited by strict rules, therefore the hotel location in a protected area may indicate its noncompliance with eco-hotel criteria.

To ensure the reliability of accommodation establishments environmental characteristics, some authors consider it necessary to include in the definition the availability of environmental certification by an independent third party or the state of their location. In this case, the number of green hotels will be greatly reduced and limited only to certified hotels, and the definition will look as follows: "green accommodation establishments - accommodation establishments certified for compliance with the hotel business green standards and possessing relevant supporting documents", since obtaining a certificate assumes that the accommodation establishment complies with strict environmental criteria. At the same time, the availability of numerous international and national systems for voluntary certification (according to some estimates - more than 800), differing both in the set of assessment criteria and strictness of data verification procedures, immediately raises the question - which of the certificates allow considering accommodation establishments as green and which do not.

There is another aspect of this issue. Studies of guest satisfaction dependence on the hotel's environmentally responsible behavior indicate that there is no positive connection between the availability of the hotel's *green* certification and the level of guest satisfaction [23]. As a rule, guests are not aware enough of certification systems and differences thereof, they do not understand the variety of hotel eco-labels. At the same time, there is a variety of relatively inexpensive *green* practices, which become obvious to guests upon proper communication thus ensuring the increase of guests' satisfaction and loyalty [20].

Certification feasibility is questioned not only by representatives of small businesses in the hospitality industry (as evidenced by the low share of certified small hotels and other types of accommodation establishments) but also by some professional associations of hoteliers. For example, the Green Hotels Association operating since 1993 (USA, Canada), without denying the need for greening the hotel sector as well as the entire tourist industry, considers certification optional, since it is expensive, takes a lot of time and effort, requires regular confirmation and a certain level of hotel guests' awareness. Booking.com polls of 2019 showed that 72% of travelers around the world are unaware of special eco-labels for accommodation establishments¹. Therefore, it is considered more reasonable to spend money not on certification but real greening of the tourist product, although the benefits of free certification, offered for example by a destination or some certification systems, are not denied. If the greening goal is to reduce the negative impact on the natural environment by increasing effective resource use and competitiveness, no certification is needed to achieve it, since its function is to ensure the acknowledgment of stakeholders (primarily the tourists), which can be obtained in other more effective ways.

Under certain conditions, green certification can be used as a competition tool or protectionist practice to place barriers to enter the hotel market in a particular region.

Green certification systems for accommodation establishments

The methodological framework for almost all existing certification systems is the international environmental management standard ISO 14001 adopted by the International Certification Organization in 1991. Some countries developed and adopted their standards, for example, BS 7750 in the UK, CAN-CSA Z 750-94 in Canada, EMAS in the European Union, other countries adjusted international standards to national conditions. In Russia, there is a Russian version of the standard – the national standard GOST R ISO 14001-2016 Environmental Management Systems. Requirements and Application Guide.

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The purpose of the standard is to provide a systematic approach for business management to target a decrease of negative impact on the natural environment and response to changing environmental conditions for operation with account to social aspects². The standard applies to any field of business.

Adoption of this standard enabled industry certification systems development, including the tourist industry. In the accommodation sector, which assumes the presence of buildings, international green standards of eco-development are widely used at the design and construction stage: English BREEAM, American LEED, German DGNB, etc. In our country, about a dozen hotels are certified for compliance with these standards. Thereby, a *simplified* version of the certification adjusted to specific Russian conditions was usually applied. The procedure included compliance assessment not to all the standard criteria but only to a part of them, for example, ensuring accessibility for people with limited mobility. Such practice was applied to the Olympics 2014 facilities. The reason is in the standards not adjusted to Russian legislation and business conditions, as well as the high certification cost.

In Russia, there are currently three national certification systems for real estate assets adjusted to the Russian regulatory framework. The first one, the Russian system for voluntary certification of real estate assets *Green Standards* has been implemented since 2011. It emerged and developed mainly due to the implementation of major investment projects for sports and other facilities construction related to the 2014 Winter Olympics, the 2018 FIFA World Cup, and other similar international events held in Russia. The

¹ Refer to Booking.com Sustainable Report 2019. URL: https://global.news.booking.com/bookingcom-reveals-key-findingsfrom-its-2019-sustainable-travel-report (Accessed on 27.12.2020)

² GOST R ISO 14001-2016 "Environmental management systems. Requirements and application guide". URL: docs.cntd.ru>document/1200134681 (Accessed on 28.10.2019)



second is STO NOSTROY Green construction. Residential and public buildings. The rating system for the environment sustainability assessment. The third is the GREEN ZOOM system, established in 2014 with account to foreign experience (BREEAM and LEED) and assessment criteria relevant to Russia and Russian design and construction practice, and regulatory documents.

The most famous international systems for accommodation establishments *green* certification are Green Leaders, Green Key Global, Green Global International, Energy Star (for any business, but there is a department dealing with hotels, and since certification is free and special attention is paid to small business, it is popular with accommodation providers); Green Seal, Audubon Green Lodging Program, Green Tourism, Travelife (Sustainability in Tourism), Earth Check, Sustainable Tourism Eco - Certification Program, etc.

In addition to global environmental certification systems and programs, there are numerous national systems. The only internationally recognized system for green certification in Russia is the Life Leaf established by Ecological Union non-profit organization with headquarters in St. Petersburg. The Life Leaf standards are based on the assessment of the product life cycle and comply with ISO 14024. The system is registered with the Federal Agency for Technical Regulation and Metrology (number ROSS RU.U1082.044FO1). They developed the standard STO-56171713-007-2015 Accommodation Services. Environmental Safety Requirements and Assessment Methods. At the end of 2019, one Russian hotel located in the center of St. Petersburg - Garden Street (OOO Sadovaya 8) - was certified for compliance with the standard.

Some private consulting companies in Russia provide services for real estate greening, including accommodation establishments, such as OOO Green Office with BREEAM and LEED-certified staff specialists (certification of the Russian Seasons Hotel in Sochi). There appear non-profit public organizations offering certification services for accommodation establishments as well.

In general, it should be noted that there are very few certified *green* hotels in our country, and these are usually hotels operating under the brands of international hotel chains, such as Sokos, Cronwell, Radisson (including the Park Inn brand). Figure 1 represents the map showing the current location (as of April 2021) of *green* hotels certified for compliance with the Green Key standard. The system recorded only certified 25 hotels in Russia (in November 2019 there were 9)³. Of these, two are independent.

Barriers to Accommodation Establishments Green Certification

It should be noted that, despite the great interest in the issues of the hospitality industry greening, efforts made by international and national industry and environmental organizations, the share of certified green accommodation establishments remains low. Due to the abundance of certification systems, restrictions on access to up-to-date statistics, and dynamic data changes, it is difficult to estimate the total number of certified hotels, but it is possible to get a certain idea of their share by comparing the data of the most famous green certification systems with the UNWTO statistics on the number of accommodation establishments. Thus, the Green Key system official website, which operates mainly in Europe, gives the following figures: the total number of registered system participants is 3,200 (growth since 2019 – 3.2%) representing 65 countries (growth since 2019 – 14%), 3,447 establishments certified (growth since 2019 – 79.3%)³. Travelife: 17,000 registered accommodation establishments in 50 countries; 1,500 certified⁴. Green Tourism – 2,000 registered members⁵. The European Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) developed by the European Commission for companies and organizations to assess, report, and improve their environmental performance certified 3,838 organizations as of September 2020. At the

³ Green Key official web-site information. URL: greenkey.global (Accessed on 28.10.2019)

⁴ Traveleife official website data. URL: https://travelifesustainability.com/

⁵ Green Tourism official website data. URL: https://www.green-tourism.com



same time, the EMAS Register as of January 28, 2021, includes less than 80 hotels and similar accommodation establishments.⁶ Green Global provides a list of certified hotels for each country, not indicating the total number either by country or as a whole. Data analysis allows us to conclude that 221 accommodation establishments are certified under the scheme.

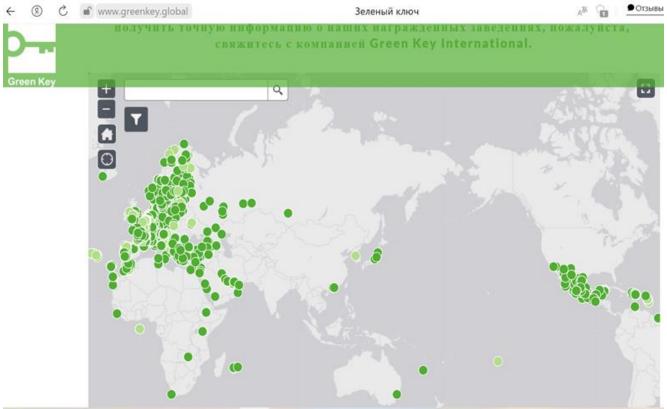


Fig. 1 – Location of hotels certified for compliance with the Green Key green standard⁷

Analysis of the above data allows us to conclude that the number of certified green hotels is not comparable to the total number of accommodation establishments registered in European countries - 212,408 (Eurostat data) and with the most optimistic estimates is no more than 5-10%. The figures of G.K. Abdramanova confirm this. According to her data for 2015 based on the Global Sustainable Travel Council information the average share of certified green accommodation establishments in Europe is 6.2%. The highest is in North America – 10.1% and the lowest – in South America – 2.7% [1]. According to the TRAN Committee - European tourism the share of small businesses in accommodation establishments certified for compliance with green standards is even lower – 1% [10; 22].

The main reasons have already been mentioned above. This is, first of all, high cost, time and labor efforts. So, the cost of LEED certification varies from \$300 to \$20,000, Green Seal starts from \$1950 and goes higher with the certification level and the number of rooms in the hotel. The cost of Green Global certification depends on the size and location of the accommodation establishment and starts from \$750 per year. Green Key – \$600. Travelife – from \$800 for a two-year membership. The requirement for a regular certificate verification makes expenses fixed and significant. Small accommodation establishments cannot afford such expenses, given that greening requires additional costs for *green*

⁶ EMAS and the tourism sector case study. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/emas/pdf/other/EMAS-casestudytourism-V3.pdf

⁷ Source: Green Key Global official website. URL: https://www.greenkey.global.com/



technologies introduction. For reference, the Energy Star program providing services to small businesses for free has over 25,000 members⁸.

Conducted in the past decade studies for the certification impact on economic performance, such as productivity growth, sales volume, tourist flows, and prices, do not allow for reasonable conclusions. Depending on the research methodology applied, the region, the business model chosen by the hotel, and other factors, the authors note both positive and negative impact or lack of correlation. The certificate itself does not provide an increase in prices, which to a certain extent explains the hotels low participation rate in certification programs. At the same time, researchers agree that green certification could turn into an effective tool for tourism greening if additional revenues generated by the growing demand of environmentally responsible travelers and increased loyalty of financial and governmental stakeholders will exceed the certification costs [12].

A significant driver in demand growth for environmentally friendly tourist goods and services (including those certified) is the traveler's awareness of environmentally friendly accommodation activities, regardless of the sources for such awareness. Information about the business corporate social responsibility obtained during the search and selection of accommodation establishments, awareness of certification, or previous experience of staying at a hotel play a significant role in the willingness to pay [13]. In these conditions, the development level and effectiveness of the company's existing communication system with travelers, aimed at informing them about the sustainable practices being implemented and involving them in activities to reduce the environmental footprint of tourism, is of particular importance.

The search to explain such a widespread of results lead to the need to study the motivation of travelers environmentally responsible behavior and their willingness to pay for the environmental safety of their own journeys. Sociological surveys regularly performed by the largest travel platforms such as Booking com, indicate an increase in the declared willingness to pay. At the same time, real consumer behavior may differ significantly from the declared one, which requires further in-depth research. The authors note that, despite a significant increase in theoretical studies and cases revealing the essence of socially responsible consumer behavior in the last decade, they remain discrete [21]. There are very few such studies, as well as case studies, in Russia. A series of research by N.I. Matova presenting the results of studies for environmental responsibility level of Russian tourists may be noted [4-6]. In the local environment, it is not always legitimate to refer to the conclusions of foreign researchers. Some results show that the behavior of the same travelers may differ, for example, depending on their location: in their own country, English and German tourists tend to show a greater commitment to sustainability than while on holiday in the Mediterranean [12]. In any case, the connection of the certification positive perception and the level of environmental consciousness can be deemed proved [19]. Domestic tourists show low awareness of the tourist industry impact on the natural environment, existing green practices, goals, and certification procedures, which does not promote activities to increase domestic hoteliers' sustainability.

A serious barrier to the widespread use of *green* certification processes is the lack of assurance among small and medium-sized businesses in the economic feasibility of greening and certification. According to the tourist enterprises survey results [18], the latest *green* technologies do not always and not immediately bring the expected benefits. Figure 2 shows the share of respondents who have implemented the relevant technologies and the share of those who consider the implemented technologies beneficial for the enterprise [18].

⁸ Energy Star official website data. URL: https://www.energystar.gov

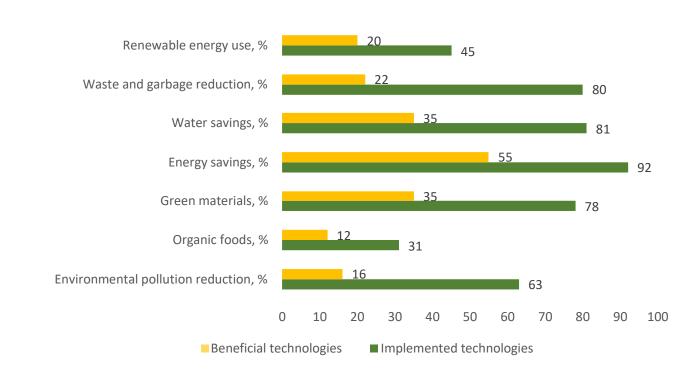


Fig. 2 – Profitability assessment for green technologies implementation by representatives of the tourist industry

Tangible economic results of *green* technologies introduction that ensure resources savings are usually obtained by large enterprises able to reach significant operating expenditures savings through economies of scale. For SMEs, these savings are not so significant.

With controversial benefits of certification, small businesses do not opt for the latter, understanding that significant environmental, economic, and social results of their business greening can be achieved without the costly assistance of certification systems. Many countries pay great attention to the information availability issues on opportunities for small businesses greening; they arrange knowledge-sharing platforms, issue online guides and memos. Retailers are actively involved in the processes of the hospitality industry greening, for example, Alibaba offers its customers a special section Products for Green Tourism, where you can find various products from toilet paper made from recycled raw materials to electric buses for tourists' destinations and hotels.

An important incentive for *green* certification against the backdrop of the growing *green* demand of travelers is the ability to register accommodation establishments on specialized green or eco-hotel booking sites. Such sites collaborating with certification systems appear in almost all European countries (Ecobnb > 2500 establishments in Europe and around the world; Green Pearls Unique Places; Eco Friendly Accommodation; Organic Holidays, etc.). Major Internet platforms, such as Tripadvisor, are implementing special Green Leaders programs to promote green hotels.

Against low hoteliers awareness of green trends in hospitality, low green consumer demand, and absence of green tourism development goals at the federal, regional and local levels, it is difficult to expect a radical increase in the number of green accommodation establishments in Russia (although a percentage of growth is significant: for example, as noted above, the number of Russian hotels certified under the Green Key standard increased from 9 in late 2019 to 25 in April 2021, i.e. by 178%)⁹.

The higher activity of large chain hotels is explained also by the fact that a variety of stake-



holders influence their businesses, and their number and requirements usually increase together with the enterprise growth. Small and medium-sized businesses with a smaller number of stakeholders are first of all guided by their owner's system of values, including environmental ones.

Analysis of programs and plans for tourism development, for example, in the Krasnodar Territory, reveals efforts for rural or agricultural tourism development, which is considered a type of eco-tourism. Obviously, the development of ecotourism is promoted due to the need for the Ecology national project implementation, although few people in the regional Ministry of Tourism fully understand its essence. There are no plans for the tourism industry greening in general and the accommodation sector in particular. Unfortunately, the green standards developed during the arrangements for the 2014 Winter Olympics are not widely used in the region, although considered the intangible legacy of the Olympics. Now the region is developing ecological tourism standards to cover the standards of eco-tourism.

Due to the introduction of a mandatory classification for collective accommodation establishments, there are ample opportunities for introducing sustainability criteria, including environmental sustainability, into the accommodation establishments assessment system. The development of national and territorial systems for green certification of enterprises in the tourist industry is highly potential [7]. However, given the low green demand of domestic travelers, as well as the lack of internal motivation among businesses, it can be assumed that the rapid greening of the Russian accommodation sector will not happen shortly. Tourist business retargeting towards the development of domestic tourism also does not contribute to its greening.

Among the factors promoting green initiatives in the hospitality sector, there could be the desire to attract foreign tourists and increase competitiveness in international markets, which in fact refers to the global hotel chains enabling them to stand out considerably in the Russian market in terms of services quality and environmental friendliness.

Currently, more strict requirements for the environmental outcome of business activities (similar to the requirements on energy efficiency) both at the state, regional and local levels, which requires a revision of the regulatory framework governing tourism business activities and further development of the green standard system, can be considered as effective tools for accommodation establishments greening. As well as a full set of organizational, institutional and economic tools to promote green technology's introduction, starting with replicating the successful experience that allows achieving significant savings in operating expenses and up to the tax incentives, grants and other benefits for small green accommodation facilities. In this regard, destinations can play an important role by developing and implementing strategies for their sustainable development and defining the economic conditions on their territory, promoting tourism sustainability through local green certification systems adjusted to local conditions and available to small businesses. Great opportunities are opening up by municipal economy digitalization and smart destinations arrangement. Ignoring the accommodation sector greening issues because of lack of significant incentives (consumer demand) among businesses undermines the ability to achieve sustainable development goals and determines the low competitive ability of domestic accommodation establishments in the domestic and world markets.

Tools to reduce the negative impact on the natural environment such as towel and bed linen reuse programs, energy-efficient light bulbs, etc. do contribute to the reduction of resource consumption and expenses but are no longer considered innovative and become a routine with no serious market advantages. The competition requires further innovation and improvement in

⁹ Green Key official website data. URL: greenkey.global (Accessed on 28.04.2021)

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heating and air conditioning technologies, information and communication technologies (ICT), and robotics, as well as eco-innovation in tourist spaces, buildings, and structures design. There should be new business models with goals of low carbon growth or zero energy consumption, local smart energy systems based on the use of renewable energy sources. The implementation of these goals largely depends on the availability of the engineering infrastructure in tourist destinations to solve such problems.

Conclusion

For all the advantages of certification (arranging environmental management system, achieving costs efficiency by reducing the use of resources, creating an image of an environmentally responsible business, increasing employee's loyalty, etc.) some disadvantages reduce the environmental and economic efficiency of certification. These include the lack of necessary knowledge among the company clients, allowing them to assess the certificate value. The role of innovative marketing strategies is increasing, including various forms of communication and promoting tourists' awareness of the environmental activities, attracting clients to participate in resource-saving and environmental campaigns of the company to reduce the environmental footprint of their travel.

The high cost of certification does not allow small businesses to take advantage of its benefits. Therefore, large hotel chains are usually certified in the accommodation sector, establishing corporate environmental management systems integrated with quality management systems. Spreading accumulated experience and successful practices to all hotels in the chain can reduce unit costs and improve management efficiency. But even under these conditions, certification is mainly used not as means of recognition by clients, local communities, and authorities, but as a tool for management greening and increasing the resources efficiency.

Low green tourist demand and lack of environmental responsibility among businesses, along with lack of confidence in the certification efficiency, do not encourage the domestic hospitality sector to participate in certification programs. Currently, about three dozen accommodation establishments are certified in Russia. The world share of certified green accommodation establishments varies from 2.7 to 10%.

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