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Titel der Arbeit: Assessing the Impact of the Certification Process with the Austrian Ecolabel on Tourism Destinations in Austria

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- ☒ SDG 17: **Umsetzungsmittel stärken** und die Globale Partnerschaft für nachhaltige Entwicklung mit neuem Leben erfüllen

Haupt-SDG der Arbeit: SDG 12 - Nachhaltige Konsum- und Produktionsmuster sicherstellen

3-5 Keywords: Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, Österreichische Tourismusdestinationen, Nachhaltigkeitszertifizierung, Destinations Management Organisation, Nachhaltigkeit

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ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE CERTIFICATION PROCESS WITH THE AUSTRIAN ECOLABEL ON TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN AUSTRIA

BACHELOR PAPER

submitted at the
IMC Fachhochschule Krems
(University of Applied Sciences)



Bachelor programme
Tourism and Leisure Management

by
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for the award of the academic degree
Bachelor of Arts in Business (BA)

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Christian Baumgartner

Submitted on: 05.05.2025

Declaration of honour

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- ChatGPT for simplifying complex sentences from the literature. The output was used as support for understanding comprehensive topics
- ChatGPT for organizing and structuring ideas. The output was used as an orientation
- Elicit and Semantic Scholar for finding research papers
- ChatPDF for faster location of relevant information in papers
- DeepL for translating German quotes from interviews to English and as support for refining the wording of sentences

I hereby confirm that this declaration is comprehensive to the best of my knowledge.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has supported me during the process of writing this bachelor thesis.

My special thanks goes to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Christian Baumgartner for his continuous support throughout the development of this study. With his great expertise in the areas of sustainability and research in general, he always had valuable advice and suggestions for me from which I was able to benefit very much.

I also wish to thank all experts from the destinations certified with the Austrian Eco-label who contributed to my research. By sharing their expertise and experience during the interviews I was able to gather valuable insights.

I am also grateful to my family and friends who have always supported and encouraged me with patience during the entire research process and the creation of this bachelor thesis.

Abstract

The tourism industry is confronted with the challenging topic of sustainability, which is an important subject in many destinations across the globe. The introduction of sustainable approaches, and thereby the optimization of a destination's sustainability efforts, are essential elements in the development and management of destinations nowadays. Austria has incorporated becoming a green destination in its strategy, the “Master Plan for Tourism” as well. Ecolabels can have a great impact on a destination's sustainability. The Austrian Ecolabel for tourism destinations, which assesses the sustainability of a destination, has been implemented in Austria in 2022. The aim of the presented study is to assess the impact of the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel on the tourism destination. It examines the ecological, social and economic impact as well as the effect on the management of the Destination management organization (DMO) and on governance in the destination. To answer the research questions, seven expert interviews were conducted and analyzed in spring 2025. The experts represent six Austrian destinations certified with the Austrian Ecolabel, and one destination being at the end of the certification process. The findings show the strongest impact in the social dimension and in governance, as networking in the destination and communication between the DMO and various stakeholders increased. The results also indicate an increase in the awareness of sustainability in the destination as well as in engagement and collaboration of stakeholders. Due to the certification process, sustainability was integrated within the DMO more deeply. It has become a topic in its own right and is considered more naturally in many areas in the destination. With these insights an important gap in the literature can be closed and destinations aiming for the Austrian Ecolabel might gain valuable insights about how the certification process effects the destination.

Keywords: Austrian Ecolabel, Austrian tourism destinations, sustainability certification, certification process, destination management organization, sustainability, governance

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List of Abbreviations

DMO – Destination management organization

GSTC - Global Sustainable Tourism Council

ÖZIV - Bundesverband für Menschen mit Behinderungen (Federal association for people with disabilities)

SDG – Sustainable Development Goal

UNWTO - World Tourism Organization

VKI - Verein für Konsumenteninformation (Association for Consumer Information)

1 Introduction

The introduction indicates the background of the study and outlines the current situation. It includes the problem definition, the research aim and research questions and an overview about the methodology. Finally, a chapter outline is presented.

1.1 Background of the Study

The topic of sustainability in tourism and its importance has been researched well in the past years (Tyagi, 2024). The travel industry is facing its main concern of sustainability (Kumar et al., 2024) and the importance of actions towards a more sustainable way of tourism has become clear (Chica et al., 2022). According to Hajmási (2024) “Sustainability is a prominent focus in numerous destinations worldwide, and it is also a key priority in Austrian tourism planning and development”. Furthermore, in Austria’s “Master Plan for Tourism” of 2019 it is also stated that Austria should become a green destination (The Austrian Ecolabel, 2022).

Sustainability has always been an important issue in Austria’s tourism and Austria was the first country to introduce national guidelines for sustainable tourism by further developing the Austrian Ecolabel in 1996 (Steharnig-Staudinger et al., 2024). The Austrian Ecolabel for tourism, gastronomy and cultural businesses has been in existence for many years (Tourismus Umweltzeichen, 2023) and in 2022, the Austrian Ecolabel guidelines for tourism destinations were published, enabling destinations to also obtain a certification (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023a). The first tourist destinations to be certified with the Austrian Ecolabel were Seefeld in Tyrol, Wagrain-Kleinarl and Saalfelden-Leogang in Salzburg in 2023 (Steharnig-Staudinger et al., 2024). Since then, until April 2025, the destinations of Kufsteinerland in Tyrol, the region Nassfeld-Pressegersee, Lesachtal and Weissensee in Carinthia and Montafon in Vorarlberg have also received the certificate (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023a) and several other destinations are in certification process. As the certification with the Austrian Ecolabel is relatively new, the impact of the process on the certified destinations has been researched little, which clearly indicates a research gap.

1.2 Problem Definition

Sustainability has emerged to a big concern of the travel industry (Kumar et al., 2024) and implementing sustainable practices and thus improving the sustainability of a destination are now key components of destination development and management (Bučar et al., 2019). In Austria, too, the certification of destinations, businesses and services in sustainability management has become a popular approach in recent years (Österreich Werbung, n.d.). Furthermore, ecolabels help businesses and destinations to obtain an overview that helps them to comply with sustainable standards and introduce additional practices (Wadmin, 2024). On the visitor side, ecolabels help to make sustainability more visible and understanding (Österreich Werbung, n.d.). Through that, it becomes easier for visitors to form sustainable decisions regarding holiday choices and thus vacations become characterized by sustainability (Costa et al., 2019). Moreover, ecolabels have a positive influence on destinations through their impact on both locals and the destination and visitors through compliance with sustainability requirements (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023c). By granting the Austrian Ecolabel to six tourism destinations in Austria, since 2023 until April 2025 (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023a) an important step towards positioning the country as a green destination, which is part of the Master Plan of Tourism, has been taken (The Austrian Ecolabel, 2022). Due to the increasing importance of ecolabels for destinations and the fact that the Austrian Ecolabel is based on a sustainable approach, the question arises as to how the certification process affects the destination, as the process is complex and requires a lot of preparation and possible adjustments or changes in the destination.

Recently, research on sustainability in tourism has increased (Kumar et al., 2024), however, not much research has been done on sustainable tourism's impact on local development (Tyagi, 2024). The literature also shows a gap in terms of certified destinations in Austria, which may be related to the fact that the first certification took place only in 2023.

Closing this gap is relevant because by April 2025 there are already six certified destinations in Austria and many other destinations are on their way to the certification. In particular, research on the Austrian Ecolabel for destinations is important as

the ecolabel is the only national guideline for sustainable tourism and holds an important role in Austria (WKO, 2024). Furthermore, the criteria of the Austrian Ecolabel for destinations are strongly linked to the national goals for sustainable tourism in Austria (The Austrian Ecolabel, 2022), which makes the research of great interest.

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

Currently, by April 2025, six destinations are certified with the Austrian Ecolabel (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023a). The bachelor thesis therefore focuses on these destinations but includes also one that is at the end of the process and will receive the Austrian Ecolabel soon. The paper aims at evaluating the social, economic and environmental impacts as of the Austrian Ecolabel certification process on tourism destinations in Austria, as well as the impacts on management of the DMO and governance in the destination.

The following two research questions need to be answered:

1. What social, economic and environmental impact does the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel have on tourism destinations in Austria?
2. What impact does the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel have on the management of the DMO and the governance in tourism destinations in Austria?

The questions focus on both “hard” and “soft” impacts and the main topics addressed focus on the destination's internal processes, the organizational structure, stakeholder engagement, brand and marketing strategy, investment and costs, environmental improvements and communication in the destination.

By answering the research questions, valuable insights into the impact on destinations will be gathered, aiming to close the research gap and also to contribute to the literature. Furthermore, a foundation to derive recommendation for the certification process is established.

1.4 Methodology

The bachelor thesis is based on a literature review (secondary data) and a qualitative approach for data collection (primary data). The aim of the literature review is to identify and analyze already published literature that is relevant for the topic in question (Veal, 2018). It is a significant step in research and has several functions as it can serve as the entire foundation of a study, include theoretical approaches or be a resource of knowledge about the extent of previous work done by others. The literature review in this work sets the foundation and explains the main topics of the bachelor thesis.

The qualitative research method of expert interviews was chosen in order to obtain information of high quality and detailed insights from a professional perspective. Expert interviews are characterized by the specific knowledge that is gained by interviewing experts in certain fields (Helfferich, 2019). They are considered experts because they fulfill certain criteria that prove their expertise and experience in a specific field. For this bachelor thesis the interviews were conducted with experts from tourism destinations in Austria certified with the Austrian Ecolabel. After the data collection through 7 expert interviews, the primary data was analyzed on the basis of deductive and inductive codes.

1.5 Chapter Outline

The bachelor thesis comprises five main chapters. The first part sets the foundation of the thesis with an introduction including a background analysis, problem definition, research questions and research aim and an overview about the methodology. The second chapter covers the theoretical framework with a focus on the topic of sustainability in tourism, management and governance in a destination, certification for tourism destinations and the Austrian Ecolabel. In the third chapter the methodology is presented in detail with an explanation of the chosen research method, sampling process, interview guideline, data collection and data analysis. Also, an overview of the ethical standards in qualitative research is given. The fourth chapter includes all the findings and their analysis. Finally, the conclusions and limitations of the bachelor thesis are drawn in the fifth chapter.

2 Theoretical Framework

In the theoretical framework, a background based on literature will be given. In the first subchapter, a better understanding of sustainability in tourism and its relevance for destinations is given. The second subchapter focuses on the management of a destination management organisation (DMO) and the concept of governance will be explained. After that, sustainability certification in tourism will be discussed and finally, the Austrian Ecolabel will be introduced and explained.

2.1 Sustainability in Tourism

2.1.1 Definition and Importance of Sustainability in Tourism

Sustainability consists of the three dimensions “social”, “ecological” and “economic” need to be integrated in order for sustainability to take place (Costa et al., 2019).

The ecological dimension is about the earth's natural resources and their use by companies, society and communities (Costa et al., 2019). In sustainable tourism the environmental resources that are an important element in tourism development should be used optimally, preserve essential ecological processes and protect natural heritage and biodiversity (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-b). “Social” refers to people and their living conditions and, among other aspects, to culture, education, health and leisure (Costa et al., 2019). It is important in sustainable tourism to treat the host community's socio-cultural authenticity with respect, preserve its traditional values and cultural heritage and promote intercultural tolerance and understanding (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-b). The third dimension, “economic”, relates to the consumption, production and allocation of services and goods (Costa et al., 2019). Long-term economic operations should be ensured in sustainable tourism that provide fairly distributed socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-b). This includes secure employment and income possibilities, social services for communities and a contribution to poverty reduction.

Sustainability in the tourism industry refers to the efficient use of tourism resources and incorporates economic growth while also respecting the environment and cultural values of each area (Costa et al., 2019). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) sustainable tourism is "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-b). To ensure long-term sustainability, an appropriate balance between the three dimensions of sustainability must be created. In sustainable tourism, all stakeholders must contribute in order to successfully implement sustainable tourism concepts (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-b; Weaver, 2007). Furthermore, tourism can even serve as an educational tool and increase the general awareness of sustainability among the local population (Holloway & Humphreys, 2016).

The importance of a sustainable type of tourism is shown in various forms. It has been addressed already in the 1980s by international organizations like the UN (Holloway & Humphreys, 2016). A milestone for the recognition of sustainable tourism practices was reached when the importance of sustainability in tourism was taken into consideration during a World Summit on Sustainable Development in the year 2002 in Johannesburg and the year of 2002 was declared the year of ecotourism. The importance of sustainable tourism is also shown, since it is reflected in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, as tourism itself is mentioned several times (Coghlan, 2023). One aspect of SDG8 refers to the promotion of sustainable tourism, which should create jobs and promote local culture and products. SDG12 which stands for responsible consumption, explicitly mentions sustainable tourism. Furthermore, a strong initiative for promoting sustainable tourism is that the year 2017 has been named the International Year of Sustainable Tourism (Coghlan, 2023).

2.1.2 Relevance to Tourism Destinations

Tourism has changed over time, and phenomena like overtourism and environmental degradation have highlighted the need for sustainable solutions and a sustainable form of tourism, as many countries and communities are dependent on it (Chica

et al., 2022). It has even come to the point where sustainability is one of the main worries of the tourism sector (Kumar et al., 2024). In fact, sustainable tourism should be seen as a norm, not an obligation (Tyagi, 2024). Destinations can contribute by implementing more sustainable practices, minimizing harmful impacts and preserving natural and cultural heritage (Kumar et al., 2024). An important aspect for sustainable tourism and its development is also the concept of carrying capacity of a region (Boniface & Cooper, 2016). Here, the goal is to steer tourism flows in a way that the environment and infrastructure are not overloaded.

Even though tourism is important for the economic development of a destination, it is also leading to ecological and social problems (Costa et al., 2019). A sustainable strategy secures competitiveness in the sector and quality of life in the regions in the long-term (Díaz & Rodríguez, 2016). Boniface & Cooper (2016) further emphasize that “The destination of the future will use sustainability and product differentiation – based on a unique selling proposition (USP) – to remain competitive”. In addition, a study has also shown that the quality of life of residents in a particular area is affected by the level of the destination’s sustainability (Mathew & Sreejesh, 2016). The sustainability of destinations also has an economic dimension, since Europe owes a large part of its tourism demand to heritage. If the destination fails to protect it, the cultural heritage becomes a sustainability issue and affects the profitability of the destination (Holloway & Humphreys, 2016).

2.2 Tourism Destination Management and Governance

As sustainability is not only highly important for tourism in general, but of particular relevance for tourism destinations, emphasis must be placed on destination management. Therefore, destination management and the concept of governance are discussed in this chapter.

2.2.1 Destination Management and Sustainability

First of all, the terms “destination” and “destination management” must be defined. According to the World Tourism Organization (2019) a tourism destination is “a physical space with or without administrative or analytical boundaries in which a

visitor can spend an overnight". Furthermore, the destination is a bundle of products, services activities and experiences along the tourism value chain (World Tourism Organization, 2019), which is offered to the guests as a product (Rein & Strasdas, 2017). Rein & Strasdas (2017) point out that destinations also need a non-hierarchical institutional level, that is responsible for active design and development and that creates a competitive unit in the long term. This is facilitated in destination management, by focusing on the planning and management of development and the organization and marketing of a region's tourism offering. Shaping the relationship between tourism and its stakeholders by taking the different interests into consideration, is a central task (Rein & Strasdas, 2017). In the context of destination management, it is also important to introduce the destination management organization (DMO). According to the World Tourism Organization (2019) it is the leading organization that helps to bring the destination towards its vision through partnerships in the tourism sector. The areas of a DMO's responsibility include touristic management and marketing, networking and cooperation, representing interests, the integration of local people and the preservation of the landscape and environment (Steincke & Herntrei, 2017).

As pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, the management of a destination has a strong impact on sustainability, as the strategic management of the destination by the DMO is an important prerequisite for implementing sustainable tourism practices (Rein & Strasdas, 2017). In sustainable destination management the sole marketing and sales orientation of a destination loses its importance. Instead, destination management becomes a self-organized, efficient and flexible communication, cooperation and control instrument in the destination (Rein & Strasdas, 2017).

2.2.2 Governance in Tourism Destinations

Governance is of special importance for the implementation of sustainable development in a tourism destination (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-a). Therefore, this section gives an introduction to the topic.

According to Acharya (2024), governance is a vague term that covers structures, mechanisms, processes and strategies of governing. It is an effective approach that

strengthens democratic processes and gives orientation that helps to achieve progress (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Governance is the way a society sets and manages rules and controls processes (Acharya, 2024). It is about using power to manage resources with the purpose of promoting the growth and development of regions and communities. Furthermore, in the tourism context it is important to mention that the term governance also includes the concepts of destination management, policy-making and political planning (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). In addition, Acharya (2024) also states that governance is not only about perception of power in the management of economic and social resources, but also about the interaction with society to ensure its participation in the planning, implementation and monitoring of policy measures. Therefore, governance is seen as the sum of many ways of private and public people and institutions to organize their joint affairs, bring together different interests, enable shared solutions and solve conflicts of interests (Acharya, 2024).

In the tourism context the effectiveness of governance is highly connected to the collaboration between stakeholders that are connected through collaborative processes to shape political decisions (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-a). Especially the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in decision-making processes is essential. Finally, it is noticeable that especially the DMO is dependent on cooperation with different stakeholders, especially with public authorities (Rein & Strasdas, 2017).

2.3 Sustainability Certification in Tourism

Certifications are a great method of showing sustainability efforts (Costa et al., 2019). This chapter puts a focus on the importance of certifications, on certification criteria and on different certification labels for destinations.

2.3.1 Importance of Sustainability Certifications in Tourism

In recent years, tourism certification has been growing with more than 250 certification programs all over the world (Mic, 2021). Society has put a stronger focus on sustainability in tourism and many different ecolabels have been implemented (Costa et al., 2019). This is also supported by Hajmásy (2024) who states that “Sustainability has emerged as a conscious priority across various sectors worldwide,

including tourism” (p.19). The fact that the United Nations have named 2017 the Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, has brought the industry to recognize its role for future generations and the need for action to redefine tourism (Costa et al., 2019). This realization was also brought through tourists, whose concern about environmental issues while traveling increased, pushing the tourism sector to incorporate sustainable practices into its planning strategies and management (Bučar et al., 2019).

Certification with ecolabels help to highlight sustainable tourism practices and to distinguish products on the market and therefore becomes an important public relations tool (Costa et al., 2019). For the customers such labels should be a decision-making guide when choosing their vacation (Bučar et al., 2019), ensure quality (Mic, 2021) and help with choosing environmentally friendlier services and products (Costa et al., 2019). For the businesses and destinations, ecolabels can be used to make sustainability “visible”, which is an important factor (Österreich Werbung, n.d.), as travellers are looking for transparency in the confusing market of tourist offers (Steinecke & Herntrei, 2017). Through that, a new kind of tourists who highly consider sustainability factors when choosing their destination for vacation can be attracted (Costa et al., 2019). With regards to the actual state of sustainability certifications, Rein & Strasdas (2017) claim that manageable sustainability certifications for destinations are necessary. The authors also state that sustainability certifications for destinations are becoming more common on regional and international level.

2.3.2 Sustainability Certification Criteria

The basis for all certification processes are specific criteria which, ideally, include all three dimensions of sustainability (Österreich Werbung, n.d.). Furthermore, in order to obtain a sustainability certificate, those criteria, which are regularly evaluated and updated, must be met (Costa et al., 2019). Regular audits are required to ensure conformity with the certification standards over time (Mic, 2021). The significant increase in certified destinations is primarily due to the incorporation of norms and guidelines developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (Costa et al.,

2019). Those GSTC criteria are standards for sustainable tourism and travel (Wadmin, 2024). They are a product of global engagement to create a shared language for sustainability in tourism for travellers, accommodations, destinations, business travels, governments and tour operators. The criteria consist of four sections, which are sustainable management, and cultural, socio-economic and environmental impact. They are structured in a way that they can be adjusted to local conditions, as each destination has its own laws, culture, customs and environment. Furthermore, it is important to note that the management of a sustainable destination demands constant dedication and continuous cooperation between the various stakeholders in day-to-day decisions (Rariel, 2023).

2.3.3 Sustainability Certifications for Destinations

Many different ecolabels shaped by different criteria exist. The Blue Flag label was the first ecolabel implemented and was introduced in France in 1985 (Bučar et al., 2019). It developed to an international ecolabel that assists travellers to make an informed choice about their desired destination. Certifications that are accredited by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council are, for example, Green Destinations, EarthCheck or Vireo Srl (Rariel, 2023). In this context, it is noted that the Global Sustainable Tourism Council does not certify destinations, but offers an approval for certifications (Wadmin, 2024). Rariel (2023) describes Earth Check as a global certification process for sustainable tourism and is used in over 70 countries. The Green Destinations certificate is a non-profit organization that certifies sustainable destinations worldwide with three certification levels. Vireo Srl is based in Italy and certifies destinations, hotels and tourism organizations by international sustainability standards.

In Austria, the Austrian Ecolabel is increasing in popularity (Hajmásy, 2024). In 2022 a new label for tourism destinations was introduced under the umbrella of the Austrian Ecolabel, called “Austrian Ecolabel for Tourism Destinations”. This label is discussed in the following chapter in detail.

2.4 The Austrian Ecolabel

2.4.1 Introduction of the Austrian Ecolabel

The Austrian Ecolabel was established in the mid-1990s and represents the most important state-certified environmental label in Austria (Steharnig-Staudinger et al., 2024). Moreover, it is the only state certified environmental label in Austria (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2025) which can be considered as an advantage over other labels, since 53% of Austrian inhabitants have more trust in a state-owned label than in a private one (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2024). According to the study of the Gallup-institute the Austrian ecolabel was known by 58% of the surveyed persons in 2024 (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2024).

The label shows the consciousness about a high environmental quality of its products and services, sustainable management and social responsibility of organizations and businesses in Austria (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2025). It is granted to services and products that comply with specific environmental criteria, which include factors such as waste management, energy efficiency, emissions and resource conservation (Steharnig-Staudinger et al., 2024). In addition, organizations and businesses with a focus on the categories of schools & educational institutions, tourism & gastronomy art & culture and green meetings & events can apply for the Austrian ecolabel (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2025). The guidelines with binding criteria are developed in sector-specific expert committees led by the Association for Consumer Information (VKI) and are then reviewed by the “Advisory Board for Ecolabels”, an advising body of the Ministry of the Environment Austria (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2025). Finally, after a thorough review, the label is granted for four years.

2.4.2 Certification for Tourism Destinations

Since 2022, tourism destinations can also achieve an environmental certification with the Austrian Ecolabel (Hajmásy, 2024). This implementation for tourism destination is also supported by the Austrian government, since it is embedded in Aus-

tria's "Master Plan for Tourism" that Austria should be positioned as a green destination (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023b). With a sustainability certification for tourism destinations as an extension, a previously missing link in the certification chain for tourism offers was closed.

The Austrian Ecolabel should not only rate a destination but actively lead them to a sustainability process and define, reach and document goals (Tourismus Umweltzeichen, 2023). A joint process, that not only includes municipalities and companies, but also the local population is the focus (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023c). Furthermore, according to Österreichisches Umweltzeichen (2023c) consistently sustainable offers can only be developed through a cooperative approach. Through the certification with the Austrian Ecolabel, the destinations offer a sustainable vacation experience, ranging from local transportation and mobility to a wide offer of eco-friendly accommodation, restaurants and leisure activities. Destinations that have been awarded the Austrian Ecolabel promote tourism that meets the needs of tourists, the local population and the environment in equal measure in the long term, which creates a balance between economic development and environmental protection. With the certification of destinations in Austria existing ecolabel programs for companies and travel offers are complemented and networking with sustainable partners beyond the tourism industry is promoted (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023a).

2.4.3 Requirements and Certification Process for Destinations

In order to be entitled the Austrian Ecolabel, the destination needs to meet certain environmental, social, economic and managerial criteria (Hajmási, 2024). The criteria for the certification were developed based on the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) and the criteria of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) during a comprehensive discussion with experts from the tourism industry and 19 pilot destinations (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023b).

If a destination aims for certification, it must market itself visibly to tourists and have a minimum size of a regional tourist region (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023b). Every destination will be rated based on its structure and its offerings, for

the evaluation a close collaboration between the destination management, local communities and tourism partners is needed (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023b). For a regional destination to apply for the Austrian Ecolabel, it has to be a contractual partner of the Ministry of the Environment and a legal entity, responsible for the marketing or management of the tourist destination and have a central organizational and administrative responsibility for the verification of the criteria (Bundesministerium für Klimaschutz, Umwelt, Energie, Mobilität, Innovation und Technologie et al., 2022). Furthermore, the destination needs to comply with the relevant EU, national and local laws and regulations and at the time of the application no criminal proceedings under environmental or nature conservation law may be pending. A fundamental requirement is the close cooperation of the tourism management with tourism businesses in the region and those politically responsible in the municipalities (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023b). The detailed guideline with all requirements is described in “Guideline UZ 82 Tourism Destinations” (Bundesministerium für Klimaschutz, Umwelt, Energie, Mobilität, Innovation und Technologie et al., 2022). In this guideline it is specified that a point system is used to determine the compliance of destinations with the regulations. All points related to the mandatory criteria, the so-called “must criteria”, and at least 30 points from the optional criteria category (“should criteria”) must be achieved. Requirements that can’t be reached due to the characteristics of the destination are excused from the “must” criteria.

The following paragraph gives an overview with examples about the criteria included in the Guideline UZ 82: The “must” and “should” criteria range from management, that is about sustainability strategy, responsibilities and monitoring, to socioeconomics including the contribution of tourism to the regional economy, career opportunities and support for local businesses. The Guideline UZ 82 is also about environment and climate protection with topics like goals against climate protection, energy strategy, waste management and measures to reduce greenhouse gases. Furthermore, it includes the topic of biodiversity, nature and landscape conservation with a focus on upholding nature conservation laws, cooperating with nature conservation authorities and stakeholders, identifying protected areas and endangered species. Moreover, there is focus on mobility, that is about a mobility concept, accessibility

and transportation infrastructure and information and promotion of sustainable mobility offers. Lastly, the guideline covers also culture, addressing aspects such as the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, preservation of cultural assets and the handling of cultural artifacts.

The application process for the Austrian Ecolabel starts with the submission of the application for certification on the website of the Austrian Ecolabel (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023b). As a next step, an audit is held, which is divided into three sections. First, a review of the submitted documents takes place (1-2 days). Then there may be reworking for which there is a follow-up deadline of approximately 1 - 2 months. Finally, an on-site audit takes place (approx. 2 days), in which everything relevant is checked on site, with a given follow-up period of 1-2 weeks for submissions or longer-term requirements. On top, an internal interim audit must be carried out 2 years after receiving certification, and a full audit is required after four years in order to keep the certificate.

3 Methodology

In the methodology chapter, the chosen research method for primary data collection is both explained in detail and justified. In addition, the sampling approach as well as the components of the interview guideline are explained. The process of the analysis is described and the ethical considerations regarding the study are outlined.

3.1 Description and Justification of the Research Method

For this bachelor thesis, expert interviews were chosen as the qualitative method for primary data collection. Qualitative research methods depend on words and at times pictures as the basis for analysis (Veal, 2018). As the aim of the bachelor thesis is to evaluate the social, economic and environmental aspects as well as managerial and governance impacts of the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel, the use of a qualitative research approach allows a more detailed understanding of these aspects.

According to Helfferich (2019), the purpose of an expert interview is to gather specific knowledge and insights from people who are considered experts in a particular field due to their expertise and experience. Since the goal of the study is to understand the broader impact of the certification process rather than just the individual certification steps, it is essential that experts from the certified destinations contribute with their specific expertise in the subject and share their in-depth knowledge.

The research method of expert interviews was chosen because of their structured but flexible nature. They are held in the form of a semi-structured interview and use a guideline of topics instead of a strict questionnaire in order to collect information from attendees (Helfferich, 2019). In addition, they enable the researcher to adapt to the interviewee and newly arising aspects (Veal, 2018). Expert interviews are ideal for asking open ended questions that provide expertise from the selected participants (Von Dem Berge, 2020). This allows that predetermined topics as well as newly arising insights can be investigated in detail. Moreover, the interviews are usually recorded acoustically, which enables the interviewer to fully focus on the participant and content of the interview (Von Dem Berge, 2020).

A key feature of qualitative research, and expert interviews in particular, is that they provide space for experts for sharing expertise, insights and perspectives (Helfferich, 2019). The form of interview is defined by the special selection and status of the interviewees and by the particular research interest in expert knowledge as a special type of knowledge. As the Austrian Ecolabel covers diverse themes such as management, socio-economics and ecology (Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, 2023b), this form of data collection is an important tool for obtaining the necessary information to answering the research questions. Experts from certified destinations can share valuable insights and perspectives into what impact the certification process has on sustainability, tourism management and governance structures in the destination.

Furthermore, the review of the literature has shown that the impact of the certification process is not well researched yet. This suggests that expert interviews are a suitable research method for this bachelor thesis, as this method is considered the right approach when the research questions can only be answered by involving experts due to a lack of other available data (Von Dem Berge, 2020). Expert interviews are characterized by their discovery-oriented nature and therefore lead to new insights and information (Kiesler, 2023) and can help to fill gaps in the literature.

3.2 Population and Sampling

For a better understanding of the sampling process the terms population and sample must be explained. According to Veal (2018) a population refers to the total number of subjects of interest in a research project and the sample is a selected number of items from this population. Furthermore, qualitative research methods typically use non-probability sampling (Taherdoost, 2016) by purposively selecting participants who contribute to answering the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

For the bachelor thesis, the population consists of people who were involved or who are currently contributing to the certification process in the respective destinations and have in-depth knowledge of the various aspects, which makes them experts in this field. A purposive sampling approach was used to determine the sample where participants are selected based on a number of key criteria, such as expertise in a

particular field (Veal, 2018). The specific criteria that participants must fulfill to qualify for expert interviews of this paper are as follows: (1) possess relevant knowledge and experience in the field of sustainability and destination management (2) are or were actively involved in the certification process or possess the relevant information about it (3) have an active role in the management the DMO.

Sustainability managers or managing directors of the certified destinations in Austria from Tyrol, Carinthia, Vorarlberg, Salzburg and Burgenland were interviewed for the purpose of this bachelor thesis. The goal to interview all certified destinations that were certified at the time of data collection and one destination at the end of the certification process, was reached. In particular, interviews were carried out with the destinations Seefeld, Nordburgenland, Montafon, Wagrain-Kleinarl, Nassfeld-Pressegger See-Lesachtal-Weißensee, Salfelden-Leogang and Kufsteinerland. This enables a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the certification process and as well as comparisons between recently and longer certified destinations and a variety of different perspectives due to the different characteristics of the destinations.

Table 1 gives an overview about the pseudonym, age, gender, destination and role of the interviewed experts. It is important to mention that the labeling of the experts and destinations for the anonymization is not linked to the order of interviews

Table 1: Sampling

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Destination	Role
Expert 1 (E1)	40-50	Male	Destination 1	Sustainability manager during certification process
Expert 2 (E2)	30-40	Female	Destination 2	Current sustainability manager
Expert 3 (E3)	40-50	Male	Destination 3	Managing Director of the destination
Expert 4 (E4)	25-35	Female	Destination 4	Project leader sustainability team
Expert 5 (E5)	40-50	Female	Destination 5	Sustainability manager during certification process
Expert 6 (E6)	25-35	Female	Destination 6	Sustainability manager during certification process
Expert 7 (E7)	25-35	Female	Destination 7	Sustainability manager during certification process

Source: by the Author

3.3 Interview Guideline

As mentioned above, expert interviews were used as the primary source of data collection. A semi-structure format was applied for these interviews, where the key questions are planned but follow up questions to previous responses are possible, giving the interview the flexibility to adapt to certain topics (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011).

In order to ensure that all research questions can be answered, an interview guideline containing the key questions to be addressed during the data collection, was created beforehand. Due to the fact that both the interviewees and the interviewer are German speaking, a German version was used. The interview guideline was then translated into English for the consistency of the bachelor thesis (Annex 1 English, Annex 2 German).

The interview guideline is based on the research questions, follows a logical structure and is divided into five main categories. The interview starts with an introduction by the interviewer including the formal background of the study. As a warm-up the interview partners introduced themselves and explained their role in the destination and during the certification process. This was followed by a question about the main motivation of the destination to apply for the Austrian Ecolabel. The first main category focused on the environmental impacts with three questions on new environmental projects, the biggest environmental changes and possible challenges while implementing them. After this, the social impacts were discussed. For this section, questions about the stakeholder engagement, communication and the subject accessibility in the destination were discussed. The third main category referred to the economic impacts of the certification process and focused on questions regarding finance, marketing and branding, the tourism offers and potential economic benefits through the certification process. The impact on the management of the DMO was discussed afterwards and included questions about changes in the structure, communication and the main learnings from the certification process of the DMO. The fourth topic addressed governance structures and decision-making processes in the destination. Finally, additional new projects and initiatives in the destination were

discussed. The interviewees were given the possibility to provide any additional information they considered relevant and finished off by an outlook into the future. During the whole interview, follow up questions were asked to ensure that all questions thoroughly answered.

3.4 Data Collection

A thorough online search was carried out to find a suitable expert for each destination. The candidates were then contacted by telephone, with all relevant information about the scope of the interview being provided and the dates for the interview being set. The first interview was conducted mid March and the last one in the beginning of April. All interviews were carried out through a meeting via the online video platform MS Teams and were held in German, the participants mother language. For this reason, the quotes from all experts will be translated into English in the findings chapter. In order to assure accuracy of the collected data, the online interviews were recorded through an audiotape. Interviewee and interviewer had their camera on to also pick up nonverbal signal, gestures and mimics.

Table 2 gives an overview about all interviews, including the destination and its province and the location, date and duration of the interview.

Table 2: Breakdown of interviews

Number	Tourism Destination	Province	Location	Date	Duration
1	Montafon	Vorarlberg	Online	18.03.2025	1h 3min
2	Saalfelden-Leogang	Salzburg	Online	18.03.2025	39 min
3	Seefeld	Tyrol	Online	21.03.2025	42 min
4	Nassfeld-Pressegger See-Lesachtal-Weißensee	Carinthia	Online	24.03.2025	1h 8min
5	Kufsteinerland	Tyrol	Online	24.03.2025	43 min
6	Wagrain-Kleinarl	Salzburg	Online	31.03.2025	32 min
7	Nordburgenland	Burgenland	Online	04.04.2025	42 min

Source: by the Author

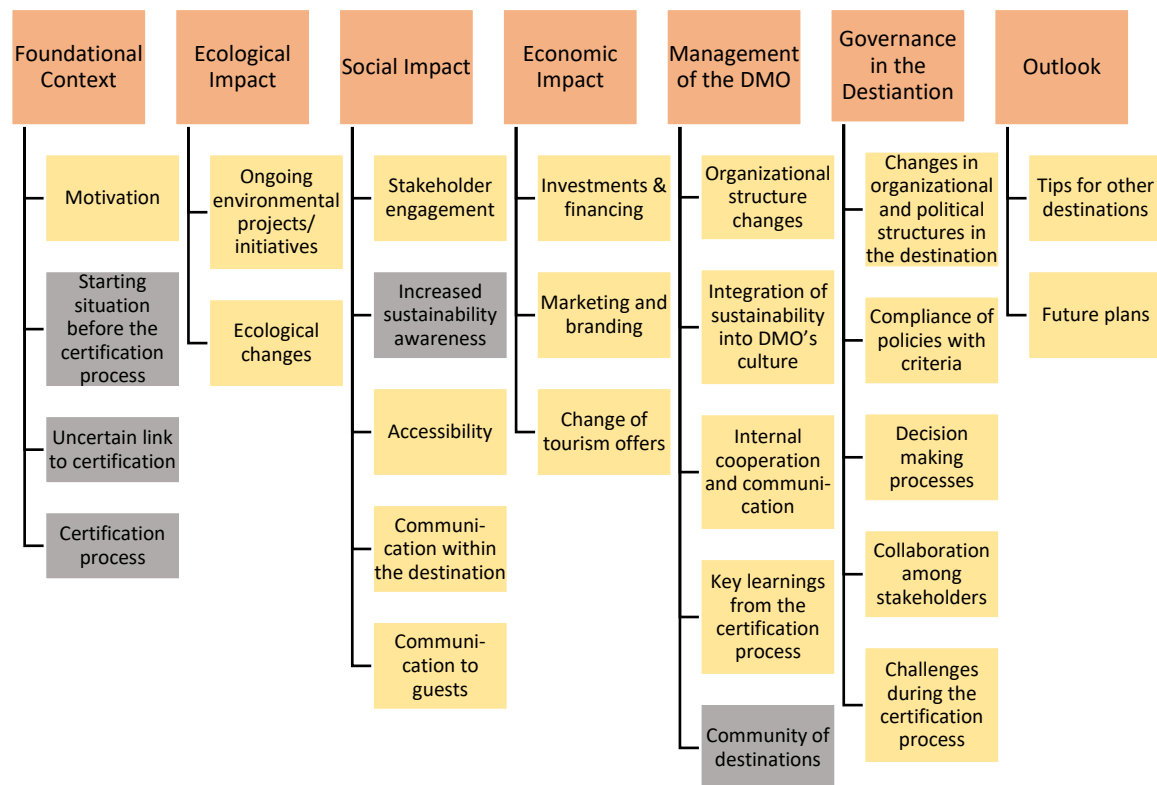
3.5 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis aims to understand the data. It involves breaking down and segmenting the information and using it to answer the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An inductive approach was used to analyse the data collected from the expert interviews, in which the hypotheses, explanations and theories are built up by examining the data generated during the research process instead of formulating them before the data collection (Veal, 2018).

First, the interviews were transcribed by creating a verbatim transcript. This means, everything said in words during the interview is written down (Veal, 2018). The second step is to read through the transcripts to get a general overview of the data and then the data will be coded (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is also known as “flagging” and describes the process of identifying emerging themes and patterns and thereby categorizing the data accordingly (Veal, 2018). These themes are then compared to the literature and interpreted and represent the main findings of the qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the bachelor thesis, these steps were carried out. Inductive and deductive codes and subcodes were developed and the transcripts were marked with them. The data analysis was done with the help of the computer software MAXQDA. This has become a popular approach over the recent years, as it has many advantages (Veal, 2018).

Figure 1 shows an overview about the different codes used in the analysis. Red shows the main codes (deductive), yellow stands for deductive and grey for inductive subcodes.

Figure 1 Coding Tree



Source: By the Author

3.6 Ethical Standards

It is important to consider ethical standards during the research processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), especially if people are involved, as is the case with research in tourism (Veal, 2018). The key principles are that participation has to be voluntary, that the anonymity of participants must be guaranteed, that researchers need to assure that participants are not harmed or put at risk, and that consent is essential (Mirza et al., 2023). According to Veal (2018) the collected information needs to be analysed, interpreted and presented honestly and accurately. In addition, it is important that the researcher's independence is ensured (Mirza et al., 2023) and that ethical considerations should be taken into account at every phase of the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, in qualitative research in particular, the focus must be on trustworthiness and a good basis of understanding between the researcher and the participants (Mirza et al., 2023). During the research process for the bachelor thesis, these standards were followed strictly.

4 Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to present the main findings of the qualitative research. The the outcome of the interviews is compared to the literature, interpreted and discussed. First, a foundational context is given, dealing with the destination's motivations and starting situations before the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel. The second subchapter focuses on ecological changes, projects and initiatives. This is followed by the social impact of the certification process, where topics like stakeholder engagement, communication within the destination and with guests, increased sustainability awareness and accessibility are analysed. After this, the economic dimension is discussed including aspects such as financing, marketing and tourism offers. The fifth subchapter covers the impact the certification process had on the management of the DMO with a focus on organizational structure changes, the integration of sustainability into DMO's culture and internal cooperation. The next subchapter highlights the impact on the governance in the destination with a strong focus on changes in organizational structures, stakeholder collaboration and decision-making processes. Finally, a reflection of the certification process and an outlook on future projects in the destinations are given.

4.1 Foundational Context

4.1.1 Motivation

In the beginning of the interview the experts were asked to explain their main motivation for applying for the Austrian Ecolabel and for undergoing the certification process. The strongest motivation, mentioned by four experts (E2, E4, E5, E7,) was the structure and organizational framework provided through the Austrian Ecolabel, which helps destinations to better navigate the topic of sustainability. For destination 2 and 5 it serves as a monitoring tool for progress and provides insights into the destination's strengths and weaknesses (E2, E5). In addition, it was mentioned that the ecolabel also puts a certain pressure on the destination to increase development (E2). Furthermore, it was highlighted that creating transparency and credibility for the public through the independent audit from the VKI was one of the motivations

(E2, E3, E7). Transparency and credibility can be used as proof of quality and help prevent greenwashing. Steinecke & Herntrei (2017) strengthen this argument by claiming that tourists are seeking transparency. For two destinations applying for the Austrian Ecolabel was stated as a logical step in terms of sustainable development. Sustainability had already been important for a long time in destination 1 and was also incorporated in the DMO's strategy (E1) and destination 3 was certified with a different sustainability label before (E3). Finally, in destination 6 the political context was important too, as it was even stated in the program of the provincial level, that all destinations have to apply for the Austrian Ecolabel (E6). These motivations illustrate that destinations aim at putting importance on sustainability.

4.1.2 Starting Situation before the Certification Process

It is important to mention that the seven researched destinations did not only differ in size, structure, topography and tourism offer, as they are located in areas ranging from the west to the east of Austria, but also in their starting situation with regards to sustainability. The sustainability measures that were already implemented before the certification process varied significantly between the destinations. For example, destination 3 already had a strong foundation, as it had already undergone another certification process with similar criteria a few years ago (E3). Through that they did not need to introduce as many new practices as other destinations. Destination 1 was already highly developed in terms of sustainability as well, while other destinations first had to build up the base with more effort (E1).

In order to illustrate the different starting points in the different areas, the number of certified beds with the Austrian Ecolabel can be used. Expert 4 explained that the destination did not have a basis for that before the certification process, while destination 1 stated that 30% of their overnight stays are in certified beds already. Destination 4 also started with a strong base in the ecological area and therefore had no need to initiate new ecological projects or measures through the certification process (E4). In general, it can be said that several destinations had a strong basis in the ecological area already though partnerships with nature parks, energy and water use or nature protection measures. Three destinations mentioned that their tourism guest card includes the free use of public transportation. In addition, it was also

mentioned that the awareness about sustainability was already strong in one of the DMOs. In Tyrol it is even a legal requirement for a destination to have a sustainability coordinator (E2, E7). Furthermore, the importance of a strong basis was highlighted by two experts (E2, E7) who mentioned that a solid base is required for a successful certification process. The GCDG Council is also aware of these different starting situations. Wadmin (2024) therefore mentions that the criteria, on which the Austrian Ecolabel is partly based on, are developed in such a way that they can be modified to suit each destination's individual characteristics.

It is of specific importance to highlight that there was an uncertainty expressed by three destinations in particular, of attributing an impact to the certification process (E2, E3, E7). In their opinion it is often difficult to assess whether a project, initiative or impact has resulted directly from the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel or whether it was caused by something different or would have emerged anyway. Expert 3, for example, stated that in his opinion it is difficult to say whether certain measures and initiatives were implemented because of the Austrian Ecolabel, as good destination management should do this independently of the label. Furthermore, Expert 4 noted that the certification is still too young in order to assess a change of people's mindsets. Finally, Expert 2 and 7 pointed out, that some funding is only granted if the destinations fulfil certain sustainability criteria and holding an Austrian Ecolabel certification is not one of them. Nonetheless, it helps with argumentation and proof of sustainability measures. These findings could point out the difference between actual development dynamics and formal sustainability instruments like certifications. Furthermore, it also shows that the Austrian Ecolabel is not always seen as the direct trigger for change.

4.2 Ecological Impacts

As stated in the previous chapter, many destinations had already a good basis for the ecological criteria before the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel. Especially expert 4 mentioned that the destination did not implement any new projects or initiatives through the certification process, but the adaptation to climate change and climate protection is still a big topic that needs special attention. It is

also required from the Austrian Ecolabel to focus on the adaptation to climate change and climate protection (Bundesministerium für Klimaschutz, Umwelt, Energie, Mobilität, Innovation und Technologie et al., 2022). All other experts also did not report bigger ecological changes but mentioned several smaller scale projects and initiatives that were started through the certification process.

Especially initiatives for awareness-raising were highlighted by experts 1, 3, 5, 6 and 7. Destination 1 launched the first touristic project for knowledge transfer about the climate crisis in Austria (E1) and destinations 5 and 7 implemented workshops and collaborations with companies about waste reduction and the use of resources (E5, E7). Furthermore, guides for hiking tours in destinations 3 and 7 now have to undergo specific training and a certification (destination 3) (E3, E7). Destination 6 has adapted and further improved rules of conduct in nature (E6). Moreover, of special importance in the ecological aspect is the following statement of expert 7: “one of the greatest leverage effects of the tourism organization is to simply pass on information”. This aspect of tourism is also emphasized by Holloway and Humphreys (2016), who point out that specific tourism offers can also serve as tools for education and awareness-raising for sustainability.

Another topic that was emphasized was mobility. Expert 7 referred to an e-carsharing project for guests. Expert 5 explained the adjustment of buses to train schedules and expert 1 spoke about the adjustment of train schedules to tourism offers. Expert 2 referred to transferring all regional bus lines in the destination to electronic power by 2026, a change that has started. In this context, Tyagi (2024) mentions an interesting aspect of establishing a sustainable and accessible eco-transport network. In his opinion, it is of great importance to implement such a network, also because it can help with the challenge of seasonality in a destination. Moreover, small projects in the area of renewable energy were mentioned by experts 2, 5 and 6. Finally, regarding nature protection, experts 2 and 5 mentioned initiatives for reforestation and regeneration.

Expert 2 stated that many ideas that can be implemented in the future emerged though the certification process and expert 7 emphasized that it is often about small things that need to be adapted. According to expert 2, the certification process led

to a higher priority of already existing ecological collaborations and a stronger focus on closer collaboration with the partners. To conclude on the ecological impact, it can be said that in comparison to other types of impact of the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel, the ecological impact seems rather small. This may be explained by the strong ecological foundation some of the destinations already had before the certification process.

4.3 Social Impacts

The social dimension of sustainability is highly relevant when assessing the impact of the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel on destinations. In this section the social impacts are describes.

4.3.1 Stakeholder Engagement and Communication

This subchapter presents the findings on how the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel shaped the engagement of stakeholders and the overall communication in the destination.

The data shows that various initiatives were implemented in the destinations, leading to higher integration and support for stakeholders. For example, two destinations created online platforms with information for businesses on sustainability topics and the certification process for accommodation providers (E4, E6). Moreover destination 6 has hired a new company coach for supporting information distribution, and destination 4 established a sustainability check for businesses to learn about their current sustainability status (E4). In addition, information workshops were held on different sustainability topics (E2, E4, E5, E7). That fact that 14 businesses were certified within one year shows the success of the information offers and the increase of engagement (E4). The implementation of these initiatives can be seen as an important tool for stakeholders and businesses involved in the certification process. Accessible information and guidance are essential for the realization of the complex requirements of the certification. By facilitating access to information and thus enabling stakeholders to work more effectively, their motivation and long-term commitment can be strengthened.

Furthermore, the research has shown that conversations between the different stakeholders were important. Expert 1 highlighted that connecting different stakeholders with each other is an important part of the certification process. The other six experts mentioned that several different formats were created for regular meetings for certain stakeholders to connect with each other, for example in the form of a climate council (E2), as a green team (E3) or as a round table for sustainability (E5). Expert 4 even mentioned that the destination received positive feedback about the benefits of these conversations between stakeholders. Furthermore, destination 2 supported the exchange between hotels for sharing information with each other (E2). The significance of this finding is supported through the statement of Steinecke & Herntrei (2017) which highlights the importance of interactive communication possibilities for stakeholders for increasing the awareness for and understanding of tourism.

Another important aspect to mention is that the involvement of stakeholders and including the local population intensified through initiatives in which stakeholders were stronger involved in decisions-making (E2, E5, E6). Finally, expert 3 pointed out that the commitment of all stakeholders is very important for a successful certification process. Expert 5 stated that stakeholder engagement got more intense and expert 7 said that the certification process did not change the engagement of stakeholders.

Based on these findings it becomes clear, that the engagement of stakeholders changed. Through networking more conversations emerged and strengthened the communication in the destination. While only expert 2 and 7 mentioned that it was difficult to get in touch with and include all stakeholders, experts 1 and 6 highlighted that communication was already very good and worked well during the certification process. Expert 7 stated that the communication improved overall during the certification process. Finally, expert 5 mentioned that an open communication and communication with stakeholders is important, but the DMO is not perfect just because it aims for the Austrian Ecolabel. The results from this study suggest that the engagement of all stakeholders is an essential factor for a sustainable development of a destination. This is also reflected in the literature, for example Rariel (2023) says

“Sustainable destination management requires continuing commitment and ongoing collaboration among wide-ranging stakeholders in everyday decision-making”.

4.3.2 Communication to Guests

An important question is also what the impact of the certification process was on the way destinations communicate with guests and especially the topic of sustainability.

Expert 2 said: “As a tourism organization, we have a responsibility to ensure that our associations, our stakeholders and the entire range of events are also communicated in terms of social sustainability”. In destinations 2, 3, 5 and 6 this is done also through new landing page on sustainability on their websites (E2, E3, E5, E6). Österreich Werbung (n.d.) highlights the importance of making sustainability visible for potential guests too. Expert 5 stressed that for communication the certification itself should not be in focus too much, and expert 4 stated that the certification is not part of the communication. This was also supported by expert 7, who stated that the certification is not used for advertising. Expert 3 mentioned that sustainability is not the main motivation to book a certain destination for vacation. Therefore, the topic of sustainability is not in the forefront of the destination’s communication (E3). Nevertheless, according to expert 3, this is in contrast to a T-Mona study by Österreich Werbung. The expert states that the study showed that for this specific destination 21% of the interviewees mentioned sustainable development as a decisive factor for their choice of vacation destination (E3). This is an interesting fact, as it is in contrast to the expert’s point of view in this study.

Overall, information about sustainability is passed on to guests more intensely (E5, E6, E7). This happened through the above-mentioned landing pages and by incorporating sustainability in every communication media (E5, E6). Expert 3 underlined this with the fact that the topic of sustainability is integrated in the tours in the destination by storytelling. Also, in destination 2 the topic is incorporated in touristic programs (E2). Storytelling can be used as a tool to communicate sustainability by using emotions and a storyline without it being the prominent topic of a service. A main aspect, supported by experts 2, 4 and 5 is that the arrival to the destination with public transportation is highlighted more nowadays. The authors Steinecke &

Herntrei (2017) consider the avoidance of traffic on the journey to and from the destination as an important way for a DMO to take action in the transportation sector by working with authorities and service providers. Expert 1 says that the ecological aspects hold a larger part in their communication now, and with every booking confirmation, seven tips for a sustainable vacation in the destination are sent to the guests automatically.

4.3.3 Increased Sustainability Awareness

The previous chapter on communication to guests shows a shift in awareness of sustainability due to the change in communication. As sustainability is now communicated more intensely to guests, it might also strengthen the awareness. By adapting touristic programs and storytelling, the topic of sustainability is not only mentioned, but actively integrated into tourism activities. This is done for the intention to create a deeper understanding of the topic. The chapter also showed that sustainability is now naturally considered in many areas. Hints about an increased sustainability-awareness can also be found in the chapter 4.3.1 about stakeholder engagement and communication within the destination. As sustainability is the core topic of the new exchange formats, the awareness of sustainability themes increased. The increased willingness to get a certification from accommodation provider also supports this.

In addition, expert 1 is of the opinion, that every destination in Austria has sustainable offers available, but often is not aware of their sustainable nature. He thinks that the certification helped to get a better understanding of it and thus, improve awareness of sustainability.

4.3.4 Accessibility

Accessibility needs to be addressed as it is an important aspect of the social aspect of sustainability. The research has shown that most destinations still need to make improvements for accessibility. Experts 2, 4, 5 and 7 stated that a lot is still necessary to do in terms of accessibility. Expert 1 emphasized that the certification process triggered a more thorough consideration of the topic and lead to the set-up of

a section on the website specifically for this topic, where all relevant information is provided. According to experts 2, 5 and 7 the certification process has caused the realisation that even though barrier-free offers exist in the destination, the information about these offers is not provided clearly. This can be compared to a statement from the literature. According to Rein & Strasdas (2017), even though there are accessible tourism offers and thus the equal participation of this group of people has been improved, there is still much unawareness and prejudices of tourism providers about this topic. The results show that there is already a good understanding of this issue in the destinations and that it has been taken into consideration. It is planned by the destinations to revise everything in the near future and some projects are already planned for that (E2, E4, E5, E7). For example, destination 2 is currently in the process of assessing the destination on accessibility and plans to certify hiking trails and cross-country ski trails with the federal association for people with disabilities (Bundesverband für Menschen mit Behinderungen, ÖZIV) (E2). Destination 3 is currently certifying the public swimming pool with ÖZIV and adjusts one of the cable cars to a barrier free version (E3). Finally, the certification process did not have a large impact on destination 3 either, but because it had a good foundation regarding accessibility already (E3). This was due to a project of the federal state regarding accessibility.

4.4 Economic Impacts

As the economic dimension is a key element of sustainability, the impact of the certification process on the economic dimension needs to be addressed. Therefore, this chapter has a focus on investments and financing, marketing and branding and a change of tourism offers.

4.4.1 Investments and Financing

Generally speaking, it can be said that the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel was not a large financial burden to the destinations. The certification costs were small (E1, E4) and mainly payments for consulting, workshops (E4, E6), employee resources (E1, E6) and the sustainability coordinator (E5, E7) needed to be

paid. Besides, many experts talked about funding options. Experts 4, 5 and 6 mentioned a funding they received specifically for the certification process and expert 1 referred to a funding for the sustainability coordinator, that covered even the certification costs. However, three destinations also stated that they are not receiving fundings just because they have the Austrian Ecolabel now (E1, E5, E7). Fundings are awarded for other sustainability efforts or projects. This shows that even though the financial impact was not large, a financial support can be an important asset as it can help with the implementation of the criteria. Two initiatives are important to highlight. Destination 6 implemented a funding for businesses wanting to get certified with the Austrian Ecolabel (E6) and destination 4 is in the planning process for the implementation of a culture and landscape fund for maintaining cultural aspects in the city (E4). Another interesting aspect was mentioned by expert 3, who explained that one economic benefit of the certification process is that more new projects take sustainability into account from an economic point of view and open up new possibilities to receive funding from sources that address sustainability projects specifically. This suggests that the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel has triggered a shift in the mindset of some stakeholders as the economic benefit of sustainable practices is taken into consideration more frequently.

Based on the analysis above, a larger economic impact of the certification process in terms of higher revenue or increase in demand cannot be seen. According to experts 2 and 4, it is still too early to see whether or not the number of overnight stays of guests changed.

4.4.2 Marketing and Branding

For the impact on marketing and branding of a destination, it is important to mention that two destinations integrated sustainability into their branding guideline (E4, E7). The importance of such a guiding principle is also highlighted in the literature. Stei-neck & Herntrei (2017) mention the importance of one for the DMO and its employees which should be created together and one touristic guideline for the destination which should be created with representatives from stakeholders. Four experts mentioned that they do not use the term “sustainability” too strikingly in their marketing communication (E2, E4, E6, E7). They highlighted that sustainability is a difficult

topic in communication. On the one hand it is important for customers to see that sustainability is considered (E6) and mentioned (E7), on the other hand the term also leads to negative associations and shouldn't be mentioned everywhere (E3, E2). Greenwashing is a large issue in sustainable tourism and the approach from some destinations to avoid the term can be seen. Another aspect that arose from the certification process is the change of visual language in the marketing efforts in two destinations (E4, E7). Destination 7 is now not using pictures that suggest a winter with a lot of snow if that wasn't the case in the destination in the according year (E7), and destination 4 stopped using pictures of bikers in untouched nature (E4). In addition, more diverse pictures should be used (E7). In contrast, experts 1 and 5 stated that nothing changed in their marketing and branding due to the certification process. For destination 1 the certification with the Austrian Ecolabel makes it easier to prove that sustainability measures are taken, the label also helps in sponsors and partner communication (E1). The literature also highlights that certificates in tourism have a central role in terms of clear communication by showing sustainable practices (Österreich Werbung n.d.). Finally, two experts highlighted that sustainability is being considered more consciously and frequently in marketing, as an impact of the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel (E2, E6).

Moreover, in destination 4 and 7 sustainable (E7) and certified (E4) businesses are highlighted more for the public (E4, E7). Expert 4 also emphasized, that due to the certification process, more businesses got interested in getting certified with the Austrian Ecolabel themselves. It can be assumed that the destination led by good examples which can motivate businesses that are interested in sustainability matters to seek a certification themselves.

4.4.3 Change of Tourism Offers

With regard to the impact of the certification process the question emerges whether or not changes in the tourism offers might be necessary. For example, helicopter-skiing would not comply with the criteria and the destination would need to eliminate the offer. According to the findings, the answer is clear. All experts, except one, stated that no tourism offers needed to be abolished. Only expert 3 mentioned one case, that tours with quad-vehicles are not offered anymore. Two experts stated that

the destination's tourism offers are already rather sustainable due to the characteristics of destination (E6, E7). This shows that the tourism portfolio has already a sustainable approach and aligns largely with the criteria from the Austrian Ecolabel. Nevertheless, there has been a small impact on the implementation of new tourism offers. Expert 3 highlighted, that due the certification process, stakeholders bring more ideas on how to implement the topic sustainability in their touristic programs. This fact shows an increase in sustainability awareness and commitment from the stakeholders. Sustainability is now seen as more than an obligation. Furthermore, destination 7 offers more green events (certified events by the Austrian Ecolabel) and in destination 4 the cable cars offer a green ticket. Finally, sustainability is incorporated in the development of new tourism offers (E2). These findings show that sustainability has become a part of planning and is not only considered as an add-on that needs to be considered once the offer is created.

4.5 Impact on Management of the DMO

4.5.1 Changes in the DMO's Organisational Structure

The data shows that every interviewed DMO has now a sustainability coordinator. The implementation of this position can be seen as the main change of the DMO's organisational structure. While expert 1 highlighted that this hiring emerged directly from the certification process and a whole sustainability team was formed, expert 4 stated that it was not directly linked to the process, even though they have even hired two new employees for this area. For two destinations it was also not specifically linked to the certification process, as the sustainability coordination is required by the federal state law since 2022 (E2, E7). In addition to the sustainability coordinator, destination 6 also hired, the previously mentioned, company consultant for businesses (E6). This can be seen as an important change in the DMO's organizational culture. Rein & Strasdas (2017) point out that sustainability management in a destination needs a high amount of coordination. A sustainability coordinator can take over and manage this task. In addition to the personnel changes, destination 1

and 4 integrated a more structured workflow by creating guidelines, policies and structures for processes (E4) and sustainability (E1).

4.5.2 Integration of Sustainability and Internal Collaboration

Overall, three experts (E4, E5, E7) said that sustainability became part of the DMO's culture and another three experts (E2, E3, E6) stated that sustainability already played a role in the DMO's culture, but that the certification process made it stronger. In addition, four experts highlighted that sustainability is now being considered in every aspect and even more strongly (E1, E2, E5, E6, E7). Expert 2 said: "The topic of sustainability was simply dealt with much more prominently and also taken into account in every area". This is done for example, in the planning of events (E2, E4) and for products used in the organization (E3, E5, E7). Two experts in particular highlighted that every employee is assigned an area in the organization for which he/she is responsible for sustainability (E1, E7). Moreover, at destination 7 all employees were involved in the development process of the sustainability strategy (E7) and destinations 1, 4, 6 and 7 focused intensely on informing the team about sustainability through workshops and trainings (E1, E4, E6, E7). This increased focus on sustainability can be considered as an important factor in implementing sustainable development in a destination. The authors Steinecke & Herntrei (2017) as well as Rein & Strasdas (2017) highlight the importance of DMOs setting an example by integrating sustainability into their own structures.

In addition to these cultural changes, some changes in internal cooperation and communication were also identified. While experts 2, 3 and 7 said that the certification did not have an influence on how employees work together and communicate in the DMO, experts 4, 5 and 6 mentioned that they are now actively promoting exchange between departments, which is considered very important. However, expert 4 argued that the DMO still needs a strategy for internal communication, but that forming new interpersonal relationships takes time. According to expert 5 it is important that every department is taken into consideration in internal collaboration. This is also an observation from expert 4 who stated that integrating all departments could have been handled better right from the start during the certification process.

This suggests that a stronger focus could be placed on cross-departmental cooperation in the future. In addition, two destinations integrated sustainable mobility more into their sustainability efforts by motivating their employees to behave in a more environmentally friendly way (E3, E7).

4.5.3 Community of Destinations

Another very important impact of the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel is the formation of a community of certified destinations in Austria (E3, E5, E6).

Several experts highlighted that the contact with other DMOs has become closer as a result of the certification process (E3, E4, E5, E6, E7). According to them, being in contact with and getting hints from other destinations is very helpful and important for managing the implementation of the requirements of the Austrian Ecolabel for destinations. Expert 7 even stated that learning from other destinations is essential in order to successfully manage the certification process. According to expert 3, personal interaction in the certification process is a helpful aspect. The results in this subchapter indicate that connectivity across destinations is essential, as they also show that sustainability challenges are often systematic and not bound to a certain destination. This could suggest a shift in the perception of other destinations from competitors to collaboration. In the long run, this could lead to a stronger sustainability strategy on the national level.

4.6 Impact on Governance in the Destination

It is also important to discuss how the certification process influenced the governance in the destinations, as this is important for implementing sustainable development in destinations (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-a). In particular the impact on the organisational and political structure, on decision making processes, a change of policies, stakeholder collaboration and challenges is examined in this subchapter.

4.6.1 Governance Structures and Decision-Making

As discussed in an earlier chapter, formats were created to support networking and cooperation between different stakeholders and to discuss sustainability issues (E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7). The formation of these new teams, committees and round tables illustrates that the certification process has also had an impact on the organizational structures in the destinations. It reflects a shift to a more inclusive governance and a structural change in cooperation and the work of the various stakeholders. For example, cooperations of the DMO with political players, like the municipality, have now a dedicated platform (E7), the municipalities and many different stakeholders are involved more (E1, E3, E4, E5, E6) and the topic of sustainability has been given a new platform in which it is considered with particular importance (E1). This matches the description of the World Tourism Organization (n.d.-a) which highlights the importance of participatory processes where all relevant stakeholders are included in an effective governance in sustainable tourism.

Furthermore, this structural change allows certain stakeholders to be more involved in decision-making processes. In general, more attention is now being devoted to listening to more opinions and involving more people, including decision-making (E1). This happens also, for example, through the boards described above, which led to more and different people having a say in decisions (E2, E5, E6). It was also emphasized that the certification process or the certification itself can be used as leverage to enforce practices and obtain proof of compliance with the criteria (E4) or, for example, as a tool for the mayor to forbid or promote new projects (E1). In addition, expert 7 noted that sustainability is now always automatically taken into account when making decisions. The importance of stakeholder involvement in all stages at the destination, including decision-making processes, is also emphasized by Acharya (2024).

The data also shows that the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel did not have an impact on policies and laws in the destination. The experts agreed that no policy or law got changed as a result and that all requirements were in compliance with them (E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7). In addition, they said that setting up policies is not in their power and would be done on a higher level such as the municipality or

province (E2, E4). Expert 7 is also of the opinion that the Austrian Ecolabel does not have such a deep impact and that the municipalities would not change their policies as a result. This is also supported by Rein & Strasdas (2017) who state that the DMO is only functioning as a representative of tourism and has a limited scope for action. Therefore, the DMO is dependent on a close collaboration with the relevant stakeholders - especially the public sector, particularly in the area of sustainable development.

4.6.2 Collaboration among Stakeholders

The findings show that the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel had a significant impact on stakeholder collaboration. A new form of collaboration between stakeholders emerged through the creation of networks, an intensified communication and shared projects between different interest groups.

Overall, the results indicate that cooperation was actively promoted through initiatives such as the introduction of the committees already mentioned in a previous chapter. They bring together different stakeholders and provide a space for networking and communication where new collaborations can form where active cooperation takes place (E3, E4, E5, E6, E7). This aligns with the explanation of governance from Acharya (2024) where she describes that governance should encourage people's participation. As expert 7 highlighted, the regular meetings strengthened trust, which is important in her opinion. For her, a successful collaboration is only possible if the level of trust is high, something that is achieved through interpersonal relationships. This was supported by expert 1 who emphasized that dialogue is important as many projects arise from talking to each other. Furthermore, expert 4 pointed out that collaboration between the DMO and political actors got closer, for example for the purpose of data collection. Expert 1 and 3 also noted a tighter collaboration and for Expert 3, maintaining this close collaboration is essential, as sustainability affects not only aspects linked to the Austrian Ecolabel, but the entire destination. These findings comply with the literature on governance, as Bramwell and Lane (2011) argue that governance must always be seen in connection with society.

According to expert 1 the DMO played a key role in connecting stakeholders with each other. This was also supported by expert 6 who stated that the network has brought together many individual parties and that strategic partnerships were built. Also the World Tourism Organization (2019) states that DMOs acts in an actively networking role between stakeholders. Nevertheless, experts 6 and 7 stated that it is difficult to say whether new cooperations between different stakeholders have really emerged as a result of the certification process. At the same time, they highlight the overall good collaboration within the destination. Finally, all experts have highlighted the importance of collaboration between the different stakeholders like the municipality, DMO, businesses and the local community. Expert 3 even stated that collaboration is the key for a successful certification process. The expert even stressed that without cooperation a certification process would not lead to a satisfying outcome. Therefore, it can be suggested to hold regular meetings with important stakeholders from the destination to ensure continuous dialogue and collaboration.

4.7 Reflection of the Certification Process and Future Outlook

Although the certification process had many positive effects on the destination, the experts also pointed out some challenges that they had to overcome during the process. Expert 5, 6 and 7 stressed that it was difficult to find the person responsible for certain documents of proof and the required data themselves. Moreover, it was challenging to reach and motivate all stakeholders for destination 7 (E7). In destination 4 the motivation of stakeholders was an issue, as it was difficult at the start to find accommodation providers willing to participate in the initiative of certifying overnight beds. This was described as a challenge of many destinations (E4). Furthermore, expert 4 described difficulties in convincing municipalities representatives to support the aim for the Austrian Ecolabel, especially as a young woman with a vision for the future. This was described more of a societal problem rather than a certification issue, as a destination can be conservative, traditional and resistant to change, especially regarding topics related to nature, future and sustainability (E4). These challenges highlight the social complexity of sustainable development in destinations.

By looking back on the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel, experts not only identified challenges, but also defined key learnings. All experts have summarized that building strong connections and networks within the destination and the dialogue was essential. In addition, a better sense of community was developed. After reviewing the last years undergoing the certification process, experts identified tips for destinations for a successful certification process. First of all, it is important to set up a good team (E1) and get financial and personnel resources (E1, E2). Expert 6 also recommends hiring a good external consultant and connecting with other destinations (E5, E6). Finally, being patient and setting small goals is also important (E1, E5).

During the interview, the experts were asked to give an outlook into the future and to identify key projects. First of all, the re-certification with the Austrian Ecolabel was highlighted by experts 1, 2 and 4. In the provinces of destination 3 and 6 it is the goal to certify every tourism destination. In addition, as already mentioned above, projects in the area of accessibility are planned in almost every destination (E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7). There will be also a focus on ecological projects (E1, E4, E7) like workshops on climate change, water or light pollution and adaptation to climate change. Furthermore, also stakeholders outside the classical tourism domain should be included more, such as farmers (E2) and guests should be sensitized regarding sustainability matters more (E3, E6). On top of that, single enterprises and companies should develop a stronger focus on sustainability in destinations 3 and 6 (E3, E6). Finally, in destination 6 it is planned to shift the focus back to seeing vacation as an instrument for regeneration and a time-out during rather than permanent entertainment (E5). This illustrates the success of the certification through the interest in re-certification and the numerous projects being planned, but also that there is still the need for improvement in certain areas in some destinations.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

By analyzing the data received from the qualitative research, a comprehensive understanding of the topic is provided and the two research questions are answered. The purpose of this last chapter is to give an overview about the findings from the expert interviews carried out with sustainability coordinators and a general manager from tourism destinations certified with the Austrian Ecolabel. Moreover, limitations from the study and recommendations for future research finalize the bachelor thesis. This study aimed at evaluating the social, economic and environmental impacts of the Austrian Ecolabel certification process on tourism destinations in Austria, as well as the impacts on management of the DMO and governance in the destination. Based on the qualitative analysis of expert interviews the following conclusions can be drawn.

The first research question focused on the ecological, social and economic impact.

Regarding the ecological aspect, the findings revealed that most destinations have had a good ecological foundation to build on and, therefore, only smaller scale projects needed to be implemented in response to the certification process. A focus was put mainly on initiatives for providing information and awareness-raising projects, workshops and trainings. Furthermore, the mobility in some destinations was also impacted, as there is a stronger focus on using electronically powered means of transportation now. It became visible that in general, the consciousness about ecological needs in the destination got stronger.

The findings also revealed that the certification process had a stronger impact on the second part of the research question, the social dimension. Overall, almost all destinations created new formats for regular meetings with stakeholders that enable networking and exchanging opinions. This changed the nature of communication within the destination, as well as stakeholder engagement. The engagement and involvement of stakeholders was intensified through the implementation of initiatives to increase stakeholder integration and support, such as online platforms and informative workshops. Those new networking opportunities led to more conversations among stakeholders which also boosted communication in the destination.

While the certification process had an impact on the communication within the destination, it also influenced the way destinations communicate sustainability topics to their guests. It became clear that destinations are cautious with integrating sustainability into their communication strategies. However, providing detailed information about sustainability in the destination to guests and incorporating sustainability into programs is considered important. Due to the certification process, destinations provide more detailed information about sustainability, for example through explicit landing pages on their websites. Furthermore, sustainability has become a more prominent part of tourism offers. The study has also shown that the overall sustainability awareness in the destinations got stronger through the certification process. The new communication networks show a higher focus on sustainability topics and provide space to discuss views and knowledge about certain topics. Regarding accessibility in the destination, only a small, but relevant impact can be seen from the certification process, which is the awareness that accessibility is important. Services in the destination exist, nevertheless, the information about them is not communicated sufficiently yet. It represents an area of improvement and projects are already planned.

Moving on to the economic impact, it can be said that the effect from the certification process was rather small in this dimension as well. The destinations did not face big expenses through the certification process, and some received funding as a support for the certification process or sustainability measures. However, in one destination, some service providers take the economic potential of sustainability more into consideration now and became more aware of green financing options and fundings. With regard to the marketing aspect, it became clear that communicating sustainability is challenging. The term “sustainability” is not used by every destination’s marketing. Overall, the marketing did not change substantially through the certification process. However, some destinations became more aware of the need to avoid the use of pictures on the website that promote activities which do not comply with sustainability standards or create unrealistic expectations. In addition, sustainability plays now a more prominent role in both the marketing and planning of new tourism offers. Besides this, the certification process did not have an influence on tourism

offers, as no offers had to be abolished. Also in this regard, the destinations had a good sustainable base already.

The second research question focused on the impact on the DMO's management and the governance in the destination.

Concerning the management of the DMO, the research has shown that every destination employs now a sustainability coordinator. In some destinations this position is required by law, in others the position was established specifically for the certification process. In addition, more structured workflows within the DMOs emerged. This is a noteworthy aspect, as the main motivations to apply for the Austrian Ecolabel were to develop structures, to gain better orientation and to have a framework available for the DMOs for sustainable development. The interviews also revealed that the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel helped to integrate sustainability more deeply into the culture of the DMOs. Sustainability is generally given greater consideration. In some destinations, employees have clear responsibilities in certain areas related to sustainability and are also trained in these areas. It was also mentioned that cooperation and communication between the various departments and employees has improved in some DMOs, while this is still a field to be developed in other destinations. Another important effect of the certification process is the building of a network of certified destinations. This is seen as important for exchanging relevant information between destinations.

Regarding the second part of this research question, the governance in the destination, a strong impact of the certification process can be seen. The creation of the new networking formats as a result of the certification process shows a change in governance structures. Moreover, various stakeholders are included to a higher degree and are integrated in decision making. However, the results have shown that the certification process did not have an impact on policies and laws in the destinations. The strong impact of the certification process on governance becomes visible by increased collaboration among stakeholders. This increase resulted from active promotion of initiatives. Moreover, new projects with different stakeholders were started. In addition, DMOs became more aware of both the importance of mutual dialogue and the significance of close relationships with various stakeholders. This

was even described by DMOs as the key learning from the certification process. Furthermore, the connection between the DMO and political actors got closer in some destinations.

In conclusion, this study shows that the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel has had an impact on the destinations going through the process. In general, it can be said that the social dimension of sustainability and governance in the destination were influenced most strongly. Above all, the collaboration with a strong sense of community and the realization that a strong network with other destinations and the connection with many stakeholders in the own destination were an important effect of the process. In addition, sustainability is now considered in more areas and is positioned stronger in destinations.

However, this research also has limitations that must be recognized. First of all, the inaccuracy of clearly attributing the impact of sustainability measures, projects or initiatives to the certification process addressed by some experts has to be considered. The quality and the results of the interviews rely both on the interviewer's ability to motivate the experts to communicate actively and to ask appropriate follow-up questions and the expert's willingness to speak openly. Moreover, the researcher has to trust the experts in the sense that everything they said truly relates to the certification process with the Austrian Ecolabel and not to other projects, initiatives or impacts.

Furthermore, it is difficult to compare the impacts of the certification processes of all destinations with each other, as each destination is characterized by a different starting situation. It has to be mentioned that only qualitative data was collected. Quantitative information, such as visitor numbers or improvements of environmental indicators, were not taken into consideration in this study.

In order to account for the duration needed for impacts to unfold and actually be measurable, further research could be conducted in a few years time. This may result in an even better understanding of the Austrian Ecolabel certification process on tourism destinations in Austria. For this study, all destinations certified with the Austrian Ecolabel were included in the interviews. However, as other destinations are currently in the process of getting certified and as it can be assumed that more

will follow, it could be interesting to investigate them as well and possibly gain more insights. Furthermore, interviewing the destinations again once they have undergone the re-certification process could add important insights. Finally, it could be interesting to examine the certification process from a different point of view with a different research approach, for example as a quantitative study by means of a questionnaire. Practical recommendations for destinations and DMOs based on this study are to further expand the network with different destinations and to maintain good contact with all stakeholders in their own destination.

Since not much research has been conducted on the impact of sustainable tourism on local development and a gap has been identified in the literature regarding destinations in Austria certified with the Austrian Ecolabel, this bachelor thesis contributes to closing this gap. In addition, this study can serve as a helpful tool for non-certified destinations planning to apply for the Austrian Ecolabel.

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Annex

Annex 1 [Interview Guideline Englisch]

Interview Guideline “Impacts of the Certification Process with the Austrian Ecolabel on the destination”

0. Introduction

- Self-introduction + explaining research topic
- Explain confidentiality and ask about anonymity preferences
- Get informed consent for recording

1. Warm up

- Can you briefly introduce yourself and tell me about your role at the destination, especially during the certification process?
- What was the main motivation from the destination to apply for the Austrian Ecolabel?

2. Main questions (Environmental effects)

- What new environmental projects and initiatives has the certification process led to?
- What have been the most important environmental changes at the destination since the certification process started?
- What kind of challenges did occur when implementing sustainable practices?

3. Main questions (Social effects)

- What impact has the certification process had on stakeholder engagement and local community involvement within the destination, especially on hotels, local businesses, residents, etc.?
- How has the certification process affected the destination's commitment to accessibility?
- In what way did the certification process shape communication within the destination?
- How has the certification process influenced the destination's communication with guests?

4. Main questions (Economic effects)

- What financial influence did the certification process have on the destination? For example, on necessary investments and a change on the pricing strategy.
- How did the certification influence the destinations marketing strategy and branding?
- In what way has the certification process influenced tourism offerings?
- What economic benefits like increased funding, government support or partnerships is the destination experiencing due to the certification?

5. Main questions (Effects on management of the DMO)

- How did the certification process influence the overall structure of the DMO?
- In what ways has sustainability become a part of the DMOs culture and identity since the certification process started?

- How has the form of communication and collaboration in the DMO changed since the start of the certification process?
- What are the main lessons the DMO learned from the certification process?

6. Main questions (Effects on governance in the destination)

- How has the certification process affected the governance structures and policies in the destination?
- How has the certification affected decision-making processes in destinations governance?
- What is the impact of the certification process on stakeholder roles and collaboration in the destination, especially on local governments, businesses, public authorities?
- How has the certification process affected the initialization of new initiatives and projects?

7. End and final thoughts

- What lessons have been learned from the process that might be helpful for future destinations that enter the process?
- Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the certification's impact or something important that hasn't been discussed yet?
- Looking into the future, are there plans for further developments that will further emphasize the role of sustainability in the destination?

Annex 2 [Interview Guideline German]

Interview Leitfaden “Auswirkungen des Zertifizierungsprozesses mit dem Österreichischen Umweltzeichen auf die Destination ”

0. Einleitung

- Vorstellung + Erklärung des Forschungsthemas
- Einverständniserklärung für die Aufzeichnung
- Vertrauliche Behandlung der Daten, Anonymisierung erklären

1. Warm up

- Können Sie sich kurz vorstellen und mir etwas über Ihre Rolle in der Destination erzählen, insbesondere während des Zertifizierungsprozesses?
- Was war die Hauptmotivation der Destination, das österreichische Umweltzeichen zu beantragen?

2. Themenbereich 1 (Ökologische Auswirkungen)

- Zu welchen neuen Umweltprojekten und -initiativen hat der Zertifizierungsprozess geführt?
- Was waren die wichtigsten ökologischen Veränderungen in der Destination seit Beginn des Zertifizierungsprozesses?
- Welche Herausforderungen gab es bei der Umsetzung nachhaltiger Praktiken?

3. Themenbereich 2 (Soziale Auswirkungen)

- Welche Auswirkungen hatte der Zertifizierungsprozess auf das Engagement der Stakeholder und die Einbindung der lokalen Gemeinschaft in der Destination, insbesondere auf Hotels, lokale Unternehmen, Anwohner usw.?
- Wie hat sich der Zertifizierungsprozess auf das Engagement der Destination bezüglich Barrierefreiheit ausgewirkt?
- Inwiefern hat der Zertifizierungsprozess die Kommunikation innerhalb der Destination beeinflusst?
- Wie hat der Zertifizierungsprozess die Kommunikation der Destination mit den Gästen beeinflusst?

4. Themenbereich 3 (Ökonomische Auswirkungen)

- Welchen finanziellen Einfluss hatte der Zertifizierungsprozess auf die Destination? Zum Beispiel auf notwendige Investitionen und eine Änderung der Preisstrategie.
- Wie hat die Zertifizierung die Marketingstrategie und das Branding der Destination beeinflusst?
- Inwiefern hat der Zertifizierungsprozess das touristische Angebot beeinflusst?
- Welchen wirtschaftlichen Nutzen, wie z.B. mehr finanzielle Mittel, staatliche Unterstützung oder Partnerschaften, erfährt die Destination durch die Zertifizierung?

5. Themenbereich 4 (Auswirkungen auf Management der DMO)

- Wie hat sich der Zertifizierungsprozess auf die Struktur der DMO ausgewirkt?
- Inwiefern ist Nachhaltigkeit seit Beginn des Zertifizierungsprozesses zu einem Teil der Kultur und Identität der DMO geworden?
- Wie hat sich die Form der Kommunikation und Zusammenarbeit in der DMO seit dem Beginn des Zertifizierungsprozesses verändert?
- Was sind die wichtigsten Lehren, die die DMO aus dem Zertifizierungsprozess gezogen hat?

6. Themenbereich 5 (Auswirkungen auf die Steuerung und Zusammenarbeit (Governance) innerhalb der Destination))

- Wie hat sich der Zertifizierungsprozess auf die politischen und organisatorischen Strukturen des Destinationsmanagements und Richtlinien in der Destination (Governance-Strukturen) ausgewirkt?
- Wie hat sich die Zertifizierung auf die Entscheidungsprozesse in der Leitung und Verwaltung der Destination ausgewirkt?
- Wie wirkt sich der Zertifizierungsprozess auf die Rollen und Zusammenarbeit der Stakeholder (z.b. Behörden, Ämter, Verbände, Unternehmen, Vereine) in der Destination aus?
- Wie hat sich der Zertifizierungsprozess auf die Initiierung neuer Initiativen und Projekte ausgewirkt?

7. Abschließende Gedanken

- Welche Erkenntnisse haben Sie aus dem Prozess gezogen, die für künftige Destinationen, die den Weg der Zertifizierung gehen wollen, hilfreich sein könnten?
- Gibt es noch etwas, das Sie in Bezug auf die Auswirkungen der Zertifizierung erwähnen möchten, oder etwas Wichtiges, das noch nicht besprochen wurde?
- Gibt es mit Blick auf die Zukunft Pläne für weitere Entwicklungen, die die Rolle der Nachhaltigkeit in der Destination noch stärker betonen werden?