

New standards for green tourism

2009/08/19

Tourism establishments wanting to earn the lucrative "green dollar" will soon have to meet stringent requirements if they wish to obtain an official stamp of approval.

South Africa's Department of Tourism is developing accreditation standards for environmental certification schemes, a number of which have emerged in recent years.

A draft document, The National Minimum Standards for Responsible Tourism (NMSRT), has already been circulated and is a response to the risk posed by a proliferation of certification schemes with no unified standard.

This has made it difficult to evaluate credibility and led to low barriers to entry, potentially damaging the reputation of South Africa in the field, says the document, a final version of which is set for release in November.

Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa certification manager, Lisa Scriven, said internationally there were over 100 systems, with the end result that tour operators and tourists did not have a clear idea of what these certification systems were about.

Scriven said South Africa's system had been benchmarked against standards set by the UN's Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, but that the final standards would take into account South Africa's own social and environmental requirements.

With the accommodation sector fingered as a major contributor to harmful carbon emissions ahead of the 2010 World Cup, the standards could be seen as playing a potential role in reducing emissions and thus "greening" the event.

But International Centre for Responsible Tourism South Africa director, Heidi Keyser, who was involved in the development of the guidelines, said the system was not about greening, but about sustainable development in all of its aspects.

"Our main problem is not only the environment but also economic and social. From that perspective the standards are a long-term approach focused on a sustainable and not only a green industry."

The NMSRT consists of 51 standards. Of interest for accommodation establishments is the application of green building guidelines for new, redeveloped or refurbished facilities.

Establishments wanting accreditation will have to comply with a "sense of place", take into account land acquisition and land rights and use sustainable construction and building practices.

One of the existing systems, GreenStaySA, offers accommodation establishments on-line tools to assess their environmental impact and guidelines on how to reduce their footprint through investments in energy efficiency, heating and water savings.

GreenStaySA project manager Lize Jennings said about 30 to 40 accommodation establishments had expressed interest. Those who went further would sign up and be assessed before being assigned one of four grading levels.

Keyser said differing certification schemes, like GreenStaySA, would have to apply for accreditation under the standards, to be administered by the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA).

She said certification schemes would have to prove that their criteria covered all of the standards, but individual schemes might have even more stringent measures that would have to be met. – Patrick Burnett, West Cape News