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Sum up the following text in 150 words

Are you being green washed?

Tom Robbins, *The Gaurdian*; Sunday, July 6, 2008

Suddenly, it seems that every hotel, tour operator and even airline is bending over backwards to do its bit for the planet. Adverts and websites are full of claims about the good that choosing a particular holiday will do for the environment and local communities. And amid such a profusion of green claims, it's becoming increasingly hard to tell who is genuinely concerned about the planet and who is just cashing in on our eco-guilt.

'Already the word "eco" has lost all power and meaning,' says Guyonne James, senior projects manager at Tourism Concern, a UK charity which campaigns against exploitation. 'In Brazil, if a bed-and-breakfast has a back garden, they'll call it an eco-lodge. There has been such a proliferation of claims and green labels that as a tourist you really have no idea what's going on.' Sometimes 'greenwashing' - dressing something up to appear more ethical, sustainable and hence saleable - is a cynical ploy¹; in other cases, it's simply the result of a well-meaning organization getting slightly carried away.

In Britain, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is reporting a boom in the number of complaints about environmental claims - up from 117 in 2006 to 561 last year. 'What we are seeing is claims about being carbon-neutral, zero-carbon emissions and use of words such as "sustainable", "organic",' says Lord Smith, chairman of the ASA. 'Many are exaggerated or misleading.'

'**Greenwash is the** spanner in the works that could sabotage the whole environmental movement within business,' says Solitaire Townsend, chief executive of Futerra, a consultancy that publishes a report called *The Greenwash Guide*. 'Greenwash means that confidence in green advertising is at an all-time low, and if consumers can't believe the claims they won't buy the products and the good will lose² along with the bad.'

In some cases greenwashing can result from the travel industry's long 'supply chains'. A British operator will often subcontract to a 'ground handler'³ in the destination country, which will use a variety of accommodation suppliers, guides and excursion providers, all from separate companies. For the British tour operator, finding out detailed environmental information about the end suppliers is a daunting task.

In reality, there is a sliding scale of green, from hotels that do little more than ask you to reuse towels, to those that provide renewable energy for heating and electricity, recycle religiously, grow their own food and offer discounts if you arrive by public transport. 'We have to give credit

¹ An action calculated to frustrate an opponent or gain an advantage indirectly or deviously; a manoeuvre.

² fail, be defeated

³ A kind of superintendent or « supervisor » of suppliers

where it's due, but at the same time, you have to look at the bigger picture, and one responsible policy should not be used as a fig leaf to hide behind,' says Rachel Noble, Tourism Concern's campaigns officer.

So how do you go about working out what is or isn't a responsible trip? In the UK alone, there are more than 20 accommodation eco-labels - including Green Leaf (New Forest), Green Acorn (Cornwall), Green Island (Isle of Wight) - all designed to tell tourists at a glance that they're dealing with a green business. Worldwide, there are more than 100 independent labels, a bewildering⁴ mixture of regional, national and international schemes, some of which are commercial while others are run by not-for-profit organisations. Yet there is no international body responsible for regulating them.

However, we are now beginning to see the first moves towards a more transparent system of external auditing. So far the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) is the only UK eco-label scheme to have successfully completed the vetting⁵ procedure. It sends a trained auditor out to each business to check more than 150 criteria, from energy and water conservation to how food and supplies are sourced. Most of its accredited businesses are small firms, but now the big package companies are also making moves in the right direction. The Federation of Tour Operators, whose members carry around 18 million UK travellers annually, has developed a common environmental standard for its members' hotels, known as the Travelife Sustainability System. First Choice, Virgin Holidays and Thomas Cook have already introduced the Travelife logos in their brochures to flag up green hotels, all of which will have been visited by a trained sustainability auditor.

'Ironically, it could be the big tour operators rather than the small specialists who end up taking the lead in this,' says John Swarbrooke, head of the Centre for International Tourism Research at Sheffield Hallam University. 'They are coming under great pressure from shareholders to make sure they are seen to take this seriously, and in turn they have the power to make sure all their suppliers on the ground take action.'

But perhaps the biggest step towards common standards could come later this year. Fairtrade Labelling International (FLI), the umbrella body behind the Fairtrade label for food products, is carrying out a feasibility study into a global Fairtrade label for tourism, and expects to reach a decision by the end of the year. Concerns have been raised about the complexity of the tourism industry, but others point out that global food supply chains can be equally convoluted⁶. 'Fairtrade is one of the few labels that people around the world trust,' says Guyonne James at Tourism Concern, which is working with FLI on its study.

Until then, the only real solution is to ask lots of questions of your tour operator, travel agent or hotelier and carry out your own research rather than trusting that a labelling scheme or a particular company will do it for you. How many people will take the trouble to do this is another matter. Lots of people want to do the right thing, but without any guidance they might just throw their hands in the air and stop bothering about responsible travel altogether.

⁴ confusing

⁵ test, inspection

⁶ complex