

# THE GREENING OF URBAN HOTELS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Jayne Rogerson  
University of Johannesburg,  
South Africa

## Introduction

- The World Tourism Organisation contends “climate change will become an increasingly pivotal issue affecting tourism development and management”.
- Although uncertainty exists about the long-term implications of climate change for tourism flows; only recently have such impacts been investigated in the African environment (Gössling and Schumacher 2010; Saarinen et al. 2012).
- Environmental management must be an integral component of tourism development and for greening of the tourism travel sector and accommodation sector (Prayag et al. 2010; Buckley 2012).
- In South Africa there is rising awareness of the risks that climate change and global warming potentially pose for the country’s expanding tourism economy.
- South Africa has a poor track record for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and local solutions are required.
- Against this backdrop the aim is to examine issues and responses relating to the ‘greening’ of the hotel sector in South Africa, a topic that has so far been overlooked in local tourism research.

## Key Argument

- In sub-Saharan Africa, issues around the green economy have attracted scant interest. Attention mainly centred upon protected rural areas rather than cities.
- Research debates around greening must be located as part of wider considerations about responsible tourism in South Africa.
- This literature is extended by looking specifically at the issue of the ‘greening’ of urban hotels. Two sections of material are presented.
- First, a review of international scholarship on debates on green hotels and confirms the minimal attention devoted to green hotels in the global South. Second, results of research investigating the greening of hotels in Gauteng.
- The key argument is that, in the absence of government regulatory measures, progress of greening initiatives in Gauteng hotels is fragmented and limited in scope, mainly driven by a mix of enterprise profit and corporate social responsibility considerations which are pursued amidst low local consumer interest in green hotels as tourism products.

## Greening the Hotel Sector – International Debates

- The interrelationships between climate change and the hospitality sector are garnering an expanding international scholarship (Bergin-Seers and Mair 2009; Walmsley 2011; Myung et al. 2012).
- For Rahman et al (2012) the “lodging industry is the most environmentally harmful hospitality sector”. As Sue et al. (2012) point out, hotels represent “one of the tourism businesses most vulnerable to climate change because of their fixed assets”. Wu and Teng (2011) assert the hospitality industry can no longer ignore its environmental responsibilities.
- It is suggested the emergence of so-termed ‘green hotels’ “has become one of the most important innovations in the tourism sector” (Wu and Teng 2011).
- “Green hotels may be distinguished from ordinary hotels in that they aim to use products and services that minimize the consumption of water and energy, and reduce the output of solid waste, in order to protect the environment from the further depletion of its natural resources” (Wu and Teng 2011).

## International Debates (2)

- Nevertheless, whilst the green hotel can be a marketing ploy to attract customers sympathetic to environmental causes, it is asserted a “growing number of hoteliers are sincerely instituting programs that save water and energy, reduce solid waste, use resources economically, protect the planet's ecosystem, and provide products and services that do no harm to human health” (Pizam 2009: 1).
- Research concerning the greening of hotels incorporates various strands of work. Considerable debate surrounds the reasons for the greening of the hotel accommodation sector.
- The three major drivers are competitiveness, legitimation and ecological responsibility.
- The driver of ecological responsibility suggests businesses choose to go green because it is simply “the right thing to do” (Pizam 2009: 1).
- Much work has been undertaken around consumer behavior, preferences and perceptions about tourism businesses going green.

## International Debates (3)

- Several certification programmes have been initiated - The US Green Building Council has established a standard for green building certification with the so-termed LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) system, which specifies standards for developing high performance sustainable buildings. At the international level Green Globe 21, Ecotel and GreenLeaf are non-governmental organisations that grant ‘green’ certification of several levels to those who meet their stated conditions.
- According to Nicholls and Kang (2012) the largest amount of research on greening of accommodation has occurred in Europe. Over the past 15 years green hotels have gained increased attention in the USA and Canada where specific rating systems have been produced to monitor green hotels.
- This South African research on the greening of hotels adds to a minimal scholarship relating to hotels in developing countries.

## The Greening of South African Hotels – Evidence from Gauteng

- The Gauteng urban region contains the largest cluster of hotel accommodation in South Africa.
- The Gauteng hotel sector is oriented to both domestic and international business tourists as well as international leisure travelers. The Gauteng tourism economy is increasingly geared to accommodate rising numbers of regional tourists arriving from sub-Saharan Africa.
- This exploratory study used two sets of interviews. First, in mapping the regulatory environment key interviews were undertaken with:
  - Members of the Green Building Council of South Africa, the national body that regulates the development of green construction or sustainable buildings.
  - The most important certification agency, Heritage Environmental Management, the South African partner of the Green Globe brand.
  - Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa, a non-governmental organization which awards trademark certification to tourism businesses that adhere to Fair Trade practices.

## Evidence from Gauteng (2)

- Issues relating to the greening of hotels was tracked through a second set of 10 semi-structured interviews undertaken with representatives of leading local and international brand hotels
- Interviews with representatives of South Africa's three most important hotel chains - Southern Sun (Tsogo Sun), Protea and City Lodge, as well as the international Sheraton group and a number of independent hotels – in the medium to high quality range of accommodation. The key markets domestic and international business tourists as well as international leisure tourists.
- Interviewees were mainly general managers, chief engineers or maintenance managers. At one Sandton hotel an interview with the head chef about innovative procurement practices relating to the hotel's local sourcing of food.
- Research also incorporates the core findings of a separate investigation of consumer attitudes towards greening and green hotels in South Africa, involving a survey of 110 Johannesburg respondents (Sims 2011).

## Green Buildings and Green Hotels: Regulation and Certification

- The South African regulatory environment is weak with the result that enterprise commitments to participate in responsible tourism practices are voluntary
- In a parallel to international building certification initiatives, the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA) was established in 2007. As compared to developments taking place in the USA, Australia, Japan or Europe, the movement towards green property development in South Africa is in its infancy.
- The GBCSA has established the Green Star SA environmental rating system for buildings. The evaluation is based on a number of criteria including energy and water efficiency, indoor environmental quality and resource conservation.
- Although the South African green property certification system has built from the Australian model, it has also incorporated elements from the British Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) and the US Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) system.

## Regulation and Certification (2)

- Whilst aspects of the US LEED programme can be applied to hotel developments, this programme has not been approved for the local hotel sector. There is currently no official programme which exists in South Africa to regulate green hotel property developments.
- the responsibility for verification of the environmental practices of tourism businesses has devolved to enterprises which offer independent third party recognition. The most notable initiative is the environmental management company, Heritage, which was established in 2002. This enterprise launched the Heritage Environmental Rating Programme for the tourism and hospitality sector in southern Africa
- Heritage incorporates the standards of seven international programmes in a three tiered approach to sustainability certification.



## Regulation and Certification (3)

- The "Green Globe seal provides independent recognition of sustainability efforts by businesses across the tourism and travel sector, while environmental and cultural levels as well as corporate social responsibilities are benchmarked against the highest worldwide principles. Its object is to introduce and strengthen sustainability and social practices at all levels of management" (Heritage SA 2012).
- Further, Seif (Fair Trade) argues "Government would like hotels to seek third party certification but will not make it mandatory". Quality assurance for sustainable tourism and environmental management practices in the South African hotel sector is achieved by voluntary certification. The most significant certification programme is that of Green Globe which is used by a number of South African hotels, including those in the Gauteng research.

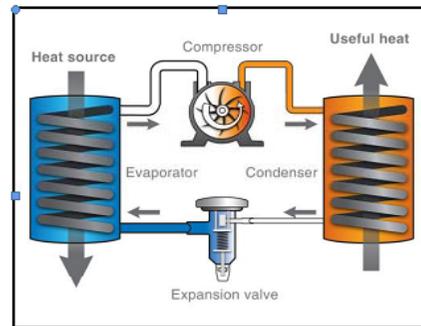
## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels

- The findings from the 10 hotel interviews reveal a 'spotty' or fragmented picture concerning the progress of greening in Gauteng hotels.
- Consensus that a green hotel involved measures for reduced energy and water consumption and minimization of the hotel's environmental footprint. Awareness of the need for eco-friendly service, optimization of waste management and use of 'green' suppliers were other issues highlighted by hotel managers.
- An important finding was that managers representing the franchise of the same local hotel chain (Southern Sun) often provided different responses. A hotel group may have a certain level of corporate 'green' standards the individual managers running the chain hotels have different means, agendas, or ideas about achieving these standards.
- In South Africa a hotel's response to be 'greener' is driven by the vision of top management and by individual hotel managers. Seif of Fair Trade noted that "in South Africa, managers of hotels have the 'say' and influence regarding 'green' initiatives".
- All ten interviewed establishments had implemented a range of 'green' initiatives. Of the 10 interviewed establishments eight had already achieved Green Globe/Heritage certification.



## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels (2)

- Cost considerations were vital in particular those concerning energy efficiency - if such initiatives coincided with 'green' initiatives then that was considered a bonus
- The most common initiatives related to the introduction of new technologies or systems which aimed at energy reduction and long term cost savings.
- All hotels have changed from use of high electrical demand appliances, such as stoves and ovens, to gas powered appliances.
- Another widespread innovation was heat pumps to reduce the energy costs of boilers.



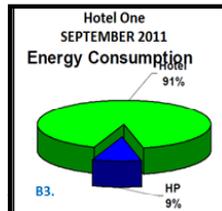
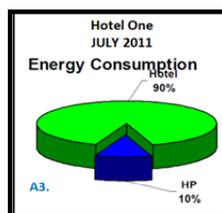
## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels (3)

- The introduction of Light-Emitting Diode (LED) lighting was common and given considerable impetus by a rebate scheme which was offered by Eskom.
- Renewable energy use in the form of solar panels is so far limited but has been successfully introduced in at least one Sandton hotel resulting in a considerable reduction in energy needs.



## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels (4)

- Several hotels used smart technologies to monitor all energy inputs, outputs and consumption.



## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels (5)

- Additional measures related to energy savings linked to the use of down lighters, the introduction of compact fluorescents in staff only areas, and smart technology motion sensor lighting in guest rooms.
- Towel re-use programmes, the outsourcing of hotel laundry work to independent service operators using state of the art large machines that can do bulk loads.
- Among water conservation measures - the installation of water saving shower heads and the use of grey water.
- Waste management systems were reordered in all establishments with multiple sorting, separating and recycling stations introduced in back of house areas in order to allow more efficient and effective waste management.
- In addition, final waste collection points were re-designed to make them more effective for sorting of hotel waste.



## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels (6)

- Green procurement was pursued by most of the interviewed hotel establishments. One respondent stated: "A green hotel must try and do business with other 'green' accredited clients and where possible buy environmentally friendly products and materials to be used in the hotel".



## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels (7)

- Awareness programmes were introduced for the education of hotel staff about energy reduction, water conservation and the wider significance of greening practices. Among the common initiatives of Gauteng hotels to increase sustainability by employees are the Switch-Off Something (SOS) campaigns, educational notices, and participation at 'green' training workshops



## Greening Initiatives in Gauteng Hotels (8)

- Limiting the impact of hotel greening - age and design of premises, managers of older hotel properties often battled to enact green initiatives given the constraints of existing hotel design, function, location or size.
- One significant limitation is low domestic consumer awareness and demand for green hotels in South Africa. Confirmed by a consumer survey undertaken of 110 Johannesburg residents adapted from the international annual green traveler study. The study findings reveal only 5 percent of South African respondents consider themselves as 'extremely eco-conscious' (Sims 2011: 23). Hotel choice was primarily determined by quality and cost considerations, location and hotel reputation.
- The minimal 'green' culture among domestic hotel customers was reiterated in the 10 hotel interviews. The business case for implementation of green initiatives exists only in terms of marketing to long haul international tourists from Europe or North America.

## Conclusion

- This represents a modest contribution to the limited existing research on environmental management practices and the greening of hotels in the global South.
- The results confirm earlier findings about the low level of support for responsible tourism initiatives in the hotel industry. In common with international experience the sample of urban hotels in Gauteng mainly adopted greening practices that improved profits or sought enhanced public relations.
- This analysis reflects the argument of Buckley's (2012) that whilst tourism enterprises often lead new approaches for improved sustainability in urban hotels "mainstreaming needs government legislation".
- The conclusions of this exploratory study need to be interrogated in wider South African research on greening of property developments. In particular, further large scale investigations are merited on the greening of the accommodation sector.