








# Green Sustainability Certifications, Challenges, options, and opportunities for Hospitality businesses in India and Sri Lanka

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## Abstract.

Sustainable tourism and hospitality are no longer just buzzwords; they have become integral components of the modern hospitality industry. Whether for small independent establishments or large hotel chains, adopting sustainable practices is essential for long-term success and global betterment. Green sustainability certifications play a crucial role in driving operational improvements, providing a competitive advantage, and enhancing the reputation of hotels, resorts, and hospitality businesses worldwide. India and Sri Lanka, two prominent tourism destinations in South Asia, are pursuing unique yet converging paths toward achieving green sustainability certifications in the hospitality sector. This qualitative study utilized a desk review to gather secondary data from academic and industry sources. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with academics, certification bodies, hoteliers, and tourism officials. The data was then analyzed using content analysis to identify key themes related to green certification adoption and its impact on the hospitality industry. This paper provides valuable insights into the green certification landscape of India and Sri Lanka, offering a comparative analysis that benefits academics, researchers, and hospitality practitioners. By understanding the dynamics of sustainability certifications and eco-labeling, stakeholders can navigate the complexities of implementing green initiatives and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the tourism and hospitality industries. The paper supports in providing what is to be done for the future, considering that, western nations are adopting and adhering to norms, and failing which the stakeholders will be the ones who will lose out in the hospitality business. This research paper explores the role of eco-labeling in promoting sustainable tourism and the opportunities it presents for the hospitality industry in both India and Sri Lanka. The study examines the current state of sustainability certification, the roles of governments, industry stakeholders, and certifying organizations, as well as the broader environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political impacts of green certifications. India's tourism and hospitality sector faces unique challenges due to its federal governance structure, where tourism policies are primarily determined at the state level. The involvement of multiple stakeholders results in varying levels of sustainability adoption across different regions. In contrast, Sri Lanka follows a more centralized approach to tourism governance, which may facilitate policy implementation but also poses challenges in ensuring compliance at the grassroots level. Despite these structural differences, both countries share a common objective - advancing sustainable hospitality practices to create a more responsible and environmentally conscious tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Eco-labeling, Environmental and Social Impacts, Green Certifications, Greenwashing, Sustainable Tourism.

## 1. Introduction

Rakesh Mathur, Founder and Honorary President of the Responsible Tourism Society of India (RTSOI) (<https://rtsoi.org>) (earlier known as Ecotourism Society of India) states, tourism and hospitality businesses, today are mandated to have sustainability certifications, which prove to be a stamp of credibility for the organization, and one which demonstrates a commitment to the ecology and environment, besides being responsible to the hospitality ecosystem. It is an attempt by the businesses to ensure preservation, protection, and conservation of the ecosystem that the business is a part of [17]. Rakesh Mathur, a veteran in the Indian Hospitality business having been the Former CEO, Bass (IHG) Hotels (<https://www.ihg.com>), South and West Asia; Former President, ITC Welcome Heritage Hotels (<https://www.welcomheritagehotels.in/>) and a votary of Green Certifications through the self-certification mechanism, adds to the discussion and states,

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“Self-certification, is a pertinent measure to ensure sustainable practices and a motivation for the Tourism players to imbibe quality practices in the tourism eco-system, where sustainability and its practices will be the rule.” He did not see the need for a ‘mandatory approach (of certification),’ which otherwise would become a ‘whitewash’, and in the words of Mr. Mathur, “the stakeholders would try to hide all the negativities of the business, all for the need of a coveted certification [26].”

[31] speak of the fact that, many consumers demand that the hospitality businesses develop a higher level of ‘green consciousness,’ leading to practices that are perceived as positive. [20] rake up the issues of how the hotel businesses are responsible for up to 21% of the carbon footprint generated in tourism through water and energy consumption, waste generation, and carbon dioxide discharge. [30] provide an answer and state that it is imperative that hotels apply more sustainable solutions to reduce pollution, increase customer satisfaction, and avoid reputational challenges. It is clear that, Sustainable certifications, become critical for the hospitality businesses, which need to adhere to the norms due to pressure from stakeholders, and furthering the cause of minimizing the adverse societal and environmental impacts [1]. [21] in a well-articulated research paper state that environment certification has three main objectives viz.,

- i) Promotes the implementation of sustainable environment practices,
- ii) Supports in enhancing the profitability of the hotel, and
- iii) Helps in attracting potential guests using environmental performance of the hotel during the online hotel booking process.

Dr. Palitha Gurusinghe, a pioneer in Sri Lanka tourism and ecotourism, has played a pivotal role in promoting conservation and advocating for green certification in the country. As the guiding force behind the Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation (SLEF), he has been instrumental in developing the National Sustainable Tourism Certification (NSTC) Program, a voluntary certification initiative offered free of charge to all tourism stakeholders in Sri Lanka. Dr. Gurusinghe firmly believes that mandatory certification would not be effective for the small and medium enterprise (SME) tourism sector. However, he has expressed concerns regarding the influence and acceptance of sustainability certifications among tourism and ecotourism stakeholders (Petropoulos, 2018). His efforts have set the groundwork for establishing a structured green certification framework in Sri Lanka, fostering sustainability as an integral part of the industry.

Sustainability has become a key priority in the global hospitality industry, with businesses striving to reduce their environmental footprint while maintaining high service standards. Green sustainability certifications provide a structured framework for implementing sustainable practices, ensuring resource efficiency, waste reduction, and overall environmental responsibility [7]. As Sri Lanka emerges as a prominent ecotourism destination, the adoption of such certifications is gaining momentum. However, their implementation comes with both challenges and opportunities, ranging from regulatory barriers and financial constraints to potential benefits such as increased marketability and improved environmental impact.

The Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation (SLEF) has actively promoted sustainability in tourism through the NSTC Program, which remains a voluntary initiative accessible to all tourism stakeholders. Petropoulos (2018) notes that while sustainability implementation is crucial, the challenge lies in ensuring broad acceptance and adherence to certification standards, particularly in the SME tourism sector. Unlike Sri Lanka, where certification remains voluntary, India has adopted a structured approach to sustainable tourism. The Government of India’s Ministry of Tourism (GoI, MoT) has successfully implemented a voluntary classification system for star-category hotels, which has been in place for over four decades. This structured classification framework serves as a model for Sri Lanka in developing an effective and widely accepted green certification system.

By fostering sustainable tourism certification, Sri Lanka has the potential to enhance its reputation as an ecotourism destination while ensuring that tourism development aligns with environmental conservation goals. However, balancing voluntary participation with incentives for compliance remains a crucial challenge that requires collaboration among stakeholders, policymakers, and industry leaders. However, the Sustainable, Green Certification initiative has kicked off though, there have been efforts by the Ministry to

ensure the same. The Ministry created the Central Nodal Agency for Sustainable Tourism (CNA-ST) in the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITTM), an autonomous body of the Ministry to provide for qualitative directions to the tourism and hospitality industry. However, over a period of few years, it has been seen that the mandates have not proliferated to any depth in the Industry, with only a handful approaching for certification. Muhammed Nayeef [19], formerly Tourism Manager with the Central Nodal Agency for Sustainable Tourism (CNA-ST), Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITTM), an autonomous Institution under Indian Tourism Ministry states, "the federal Ministry in India, created the Sustainable Tourism Criteria of India (STCI) modeled on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criterion. The STCI also mandated the nuances of biodiversity, water conservation, which ensured that larger hotels and resorts would be able to fulfil the parameters and the smaller stand alone would fail miserably. But as of today, the complications have been reduced, but we needed work on readymade management templates and plans to ensure an understanding. This has led to organizations like RTSOI speaking about self-certification, which the smaller entities can benefit." This is a clear case of a good intent going awry.

### **1.1 The Importance of Green Sustainability Certifications in Hospitality**

Spenceley (2025) highlights a new initiative for sustainable tourism, where ten major travel and tourism certification organizations have come together to establish the Tourism Sustainability Certifications Alliance (TSCA). This registered association aims to foster a global tourism industry rooted in sustainability. The founding members include Biosphere: Instituto de Turismo Responsable, Ecotourism Australia, the Foundation for Environmental Education (Blue Flag and Green Key), Good Travel Seal, Green Globe Certification, TourCert, Travelife for Accommodation, and Travelife for Tour Operators. Collectively, these organizations have certified over 19,000 tourism businesses, organizations, and destinations.

This initiative underscores the power of collaboration in ensuring that stakeholders across the travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors can effectively engage in sustainability certification. Whether for large global chains, SMEs, or micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), certification remains a unifying factor. However, challenges persist in bringing all stakeholders on board. The TourCert Journal (2025) quotes TSCA Chairperson Elissa Keenan, stating, "Our industry and travelers demand a transparent certification system that promotes the best in sustainable tourism and eliminates greenwashing. The TSCA has been established as a collaborative certification platform to help travelers make informed choices based on reliable sustainability standards."

[18], in a comprehensive chapter titled *Tourism Certification Audits: Reviewing Sustainable Certification Programs*, notes that approximately 250 sustainable tourism certification mechanisms exist globally for marketing and management benchmarking.

For regulatory benchmarks, the European Union (EU) offers a strong example with its adoption of new rules on green claims. According to a dossier by Ernst & Young (EY, n.d.), the EU introduced these rules on March 12, 2024, to combat false or misleading environmental claims, commonly referred to as "greenwashing." These measures aim to curb companies from falsely marketing their products and services as environmentally friendly. The EU Green Claims Directive (GCD) mandates that businesses conducting explicit environmental claims undergo rigorous assessments and provide supporting documentation. This directive seeks to prevent deceptive advertising from obstructing the green transition. Under the GCD, only businesses that can verify their environmental claims will benefit commercially from green labeling. With the rise of greenwashing regulations, there is growing speculation about their global impact. Many stakeholders now question how these new rules will shape the future of sustainability certification worldwide.

During the 2023 annual conference of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) in Turkey, one of the authors engaged in a discussion with a GSTC committee member regarding the necessity of sustainability certifications. The conversation highlighted key concerns, including whether certifications are essential or merely a means of compliance, especially in regions where they are not mandated, unlike in the European Union, where third-party certification is a requirement for hospitality businesses.

The discussion emphasized that sustainability certifications serve a dual purpose: ensuring compliance with regulatory frameworks (such as those in the EU) and enhancing the brand value of hospitality businesses. However, this also raises concerns about “greenwashing” and whether businesses genuinely adhere to sustainability principles beyond obtaining certifications. Large hospitality businesses that go beyond basic green certification can confidently claim sustainability compliance, but the issue remains, what happens in regions where certification is voluntary rather than mandatory? For example, in countries like India and Sri Lanka, where certification is not obligatory, many businesses may choose not to pursue it, even if they implement sustainability measures. This leads to an important consideration: can these countries create an environment where the cost of certification aligns with the return on investment (RoI)? If certification costs become a barrier, businesses may instead focus on integrating sustainability practices over the long term without formal accreditation.

The discussion also addressed how GSTC criteria could be effectively implemented in the industry. The GSTC framework is divided into four key sections:

**Section A:** Demonstrates effective sustainable management.

**Section B:** Maximizes social and economic benefits to local communities while minimizing negative impacts.

**Section C:** Maximizes benefits to cultural heritage while minimizing negative impacts.

**Section D:** Maximizes benefits to the environment while minimizing negative impacts.

These criteria are flexible, allowing businesses to prioritize sections based on their specific needs. For instance, a business may choose to focus on environmental sustainability (Section D) first if it is a critical concern. This adaptability ensures that sustainability initiatives align with the unique requirements of each business.

A significant takeaway from the discussion was that integrating marketing and communication strategies with sustainability certifications could enhance travelers' awareness of responsible tourism. By effectively promoting their sustainability credentials, businesses can educate guests about the importance of sustainable practices and influence consumer behavior.

The importance of sustainability certifications has been well-documented. A study commissioned by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 2002 identified over sixty environmental tourism certification programs worldwide. By 2007, this number had increased to eighty, and today, there are approximately two hundred certification programs, including both country-specific and regional eco-labels. However, the development and adoption of certifications have been inconsistent, with nearly two-thirds of these programs concentrated in Europe, leaving low-income countries with fewer options (Certification of Quality in Ecotourism, 2009).

Moreover, certification programs predominantly focus on accommodations, with approximately 63% of schemes accrediting hotels and lodges, while only 7% address travel agencies and tour operators [4]. This imbalance suggests a need for broader certification coverage across different sectors of the tourism industry to ensure comprehensive sustainability practices.

While sustainability certifications are essential for standardizing and promoting responsible tourism, their adoption varies significantly across regions. Moving forward, it is crucial to strike a balance between mandatory compliance and voluntary participation. This approach will enable businesses of all sizes and locations to seamlessly integrate sustainability into their operations while maximizing the associated benefits.

## 2. Green Certifications in India and Sri Lanka

Tourism and hospitality businesses in India and Sri Lanka have matured over the years and attracted inbound and domestic holiday makers in large numbers. Both the nations as on today, focus on sustainable tourism options considering the varieties of tourism products that exist viz., Heritage and Natural.

### 2.1 India and Green Certifications

The authors got to interact with an entrepreneur, who runs a sustainable resort which is situated near the Bandipur Tiger Reserve (BTR) (<https://bandipurtigerreserve.org>) and is part of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve (NBR) (<https://www.unesco.org/en/mab/nigiri>); Dholes Den (<https://dholesden.com/>) which has about six units of accommodation. Kartik Davey and his wife Ingrid Davey from Germany run Dholes Den, with the attribute of Sustainability and have always looked at getting certified to ensure that their understanding with nature and its ecosystem is well understood.

Karthik Davey (Davey, 2025) states, “the main reason for us to do a certification is to know how we fare and how we function. Dhole’s Den since inception prides itself in doing things the sustainable way and a certification is the best way for us to know on a regular basis and improve upon it each time.” He further adds, “the certification is also important for our staff to understand why we do things in a certain way, and it drives the point to them who have to maintain the place. Like say we have a purchase policy and a policy for waste management etc. We realize that our staff in the end don’t just do things but stop to think about the job they are going to do and its effects on the environment. Be it saving water or trying to use solar to the maximum. In time it does seep in. It also means and translates into clients who are enlightened about the fragile nature of eco-systems and a certification has helped to drive such clientele to us. There are a whole lot of people who take time to read and book accordingly.” With this in mind, Karthik and Ingrid went in for the Certification from the GSTC. After Karthik went through the grind for the GSTC certification and received the Certification in 2010; it was good business, considering the fact, that, conscious travelers visited the resort to understand Sustainability and how the certifications provided for a deeper meaning of Sustainability. Subsequently Karthik ensured that Dholes Den was re-certified four times in 2013, 2017, 2020 and in 2024; which clearly means, Green Certifications have helped the business to flourish and also contribute to the local ecosystem. Over a period of time, Dholes Den has added:

- i) Incinerator to burn the sanitary pads and baby diapers,
- ii) Built a new bio digester that takes the vegetable, citrus, and even meat for digesting. The practices followed by Dholes Den are a learning from Bioen (<https://www.bioen.in>).

A contrarian understanding on sustainability and certification comes from Narasimha Bhat of another Protected Area (PA), Kali Tiger Reserve (KTR) (<https://kalitigerreserve.org>), who runs a homestay and works with the Kali Tourism Association (KTA). “Being a small entrepreneur,” Bhat [26] mentions, “I want to scale up to the nuances of Sustainability, by adopting measures, which I have done based on my affordability. I am not in a position to get accreditation and certification, considering the cost; but I adopt the various measures that are provided for to ensure certification.” Bhat goes on to state, “I have seen visitors coming to my homestay and referring to others as well, on account of the measures of sustainability that I have adopted at the homestay.”

### 2.2 Hospitality certification players in India

Many of the global certification bodies have started their certification in India. These include GSTC accredited certifiers, GSTC recognized standard using certifiers, other certification bodies with a transparent third-party audit verification and others without a third-party verification. A few national level certification standards and players have also been active in the field. The list of these certifiers has been presented in the Table 1.

**Table 1: National level certification standards in India**

No.	Type of certification body	Certification bodies in India	
		Global	Indian
1	GSTC accredited	Earthcheck, Control Union	....
2	GSTC recognized	Green Globe	TOFT
3	Other certifiers & Ecolabels with impartial 3 <sup>rd</sup> party audit	Green Key, Good Travel Seal, Ecotel, Travelife	....
4	Certification without impartial 3 <sup>rd</sup> party audit	....	RTSOI, Travel for Life

Source: Created by the Authors.

The Indian Hotel Company (IHCL) which owns the renowned ‘Taj’ brand was the pioneer in introducing hotel sustainability certification in India by signing with GSTC accredited ‘Earthcheck’ (<https://earthcheck.org>) in 2008. As of now, the group has certified seventy-eight of its hotels which have generated significant savings by conserving water, energy and installing organic waste converters to reduce waste sent to landfill. Major international hotel chains like Hyatt and Marriott are certifying their properties in India through another global certifier ‘Green Globe’ that uses a GSTC recognized standard. Among ‘Ecolabels’, ‘Ecotel’ and ‘Green Key’ have certified properties in the country. ‘Ecotel’ had an early start while ‘Green Key’ entered the Indian market a couple of years ago. Sofitel in Mumbai was the first hotel in India to have been awarded Green Key Certification in 2024 followed by Novotel Guwahati. According to ‘Green Key’, international Hotel Brands like Accor, Radisson, IHG and Marriot have got into an agreement and are soon expected to implement this certification in India. The main limitation of ecolabels is that they focus more on environmental sustainability criteria and environmental management and are not accredited or recognized by GSTC which focus on all three pillars of sustainability. Among other players, the Dutch certifiers ‘Travelife’ and ‘Good Travel Seal by Green Destinations’ [12] have also started their certification focusing on travel and tourism service providers and MSME (Micro small medium enterprises) businesses respectively.

The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (MoT, GoI) has launched the ‘Travel for Life’ program and launched its certification for accommodation units, Tourism service providers and destinations on its *Nidhi Plus Portal*. It was initially focused to be implemented in the destinations being selected for Swadesh Darshan Scheme. The main drawback of the program was the absence of third-party verification by external auditors and with the change of the Ministry, the project has not moved much. The RTSOI had launched its certification even prior to the ‘Travel for Life’ but it focuses on self-assessment at initial level which is against the guiding principles of a transparent certification. Both these certifications make use of the ‘Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India’ (STCI) which has been prepared based on the GSTC criteria [9].

At present, TOFTigers (<https://www.toftigers.org>) is the only Indian based certifier that offer certification based on a GSTC recognized standard with a third part audit verification. TOFT offers Pug and Footprint certification program focused on environment and ecotourism based, for accommodation providers [27]. The Bureau of Indian Standards (<https://bis.gov.in>) is developing certain standards for the industry and the Quality Council of India (QCI) (<https://qcii.org>) is facilitating accreditation. Businesses can also choose ISO 21401:2018 for sustainable tourism management of accommodation establishments and ISO 21101 for adventure tourism providers.

LEED certification is also gaining popularity in the accommodation industry. Another major Indian hotel group, ITC has gone for LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) Zero Carbon certification for three of its hotels [13]. This certification recognizes buildings operating with net-zero carbon emission awarded by U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). ITC Hotels has become the world’s largest chain with the maximum number of LEED Platinum certified properties.

### 2.3 Sri Lanka and Green Certifications

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) holds the mandate to plan, develop, regulate, and implement policies related to tourism and its associated industries. In discussing sustainable tourism, SLTDA (n.d.) emphasizes that it is a long-term objective requiring consistent effort to achieve a positive balance across environmental, socio-cultural, economic, and experiential impacts for both tourists and local communities.

Globally recognized sustainability certifications such as GSTC, LEED, Green Globe, and EarthCheck serve as essential benchmarks for sustainable practices in the hospitality industry [10]. These certifications help businesses minimize their environmental footprint by promoting energy efficiency, water conservation, waste management, and responsible sourcing. In Sri Lanka, SLTDA and the Green Building Council of Sri Lanka (GBCSL) play significant roles in advancing sustainability initiatives [22]. Given that Sri Lanka's hospitality sector relies heavily on natural attractions, sustainability is crucial to its long-term success. Certification programs not only ensure compliance with best environmental management practices but also enhance the credibility and appeal of businesses among eco-conscious travelers [29]. Furthermore, these certifications align with the country's broader strategy to promote responsible tourism in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [28].

### 2.4 Hospitality Certification Players in Sri Lanka

SLTDA has prioritized green certification to mitigate the negative environmental impact of tourism, manage natural resources, and capitalize on the growing demand for sustainable travel experiences. A key milestone was the introduction of the National Sustainable Tourism Certification (NSTC) in 2018, developed in collaboration with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). Under this initiative, SLTDA certified 32 hotels across Sri Lanka.

The second phase of the NSTC, launched in 2023, was supported by the UNDP Biodiversity Finance Initiative [2]. This global program, implemented in 133 nations, focuses on sustainable finance solutions that address biodiversity conservation challenges. As part of this initiative, the Sigiriya World Heritage Site was selected for destination certification, while 200 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were chosen for business certification (SLTDA, 2025). In March 2025, Sigiriya was awarded a Bronze Award by Green Destinations, further recognizing Sri Lanka's efforts in sustainable tourism [12].

By 2024, a total of 100 SME tourism businesses had achieved certification under the NSTC program, with another 100 currently in progress [25]. However, an emerging trend in Sri Lanka's green certification landscape is the preference for globally recognized certification schemes over the NSTC. In particular, 28 accommodation providers have been certified by Travelife Accommodation, while 3 properties have obtained EarthCheck certification, and 2 have secured Green Globe certification. Beyond accommodations, sustainability efforts are also extending to tour operators, with 14 companies receiving certification from Travelife.

This growing engagement with sustainability certifications highlights the increasing trust and confidence of Sri Lanka's tourism stakeholders in green certification mechanisms. As demand for sustainable travel continues to rise, the adoption of these certifications presents a significant opportunity for the country to strengthen its position as a responsible tourism destination.

## 3. Methodology

This qualitative study employed multiple methods to collect and analyze data on green certification in the hospitality industry. The research was conducted in three key phases:

**Desk Review.** A comprehensive desk review was conducted to gather secondary data from academic literature, industry reports, policy documents, and sustainability certification guidelines. This provided a foundational understanding of green certification practices, challenges, and opportunities.

**Expert Interviews.** Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including academics, certification bodies, hoteliers, and officials from national tourism organizations in India and Sri Lanka. These interviews provided valuable insights into certification processes, industry perspectives, and policy implications.

**Data Analysis.** The collected data was analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. The analysis focused on factors influencing green certification adoption, its impact on business performance, associated challenges and strategies to overcome challenges and its role in sustainable tourism development. This structured approach ensured a well-rounded exploration of green certification in the hospitality industry, integrating both theoretical knowledge and practical experiences.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Challenges in Implementing Green Certifications

Despite the benefits of green certifications, several challenges hinder their widespread adoption in Sri Lanka's hospitality industry.

**High Implementation Costs.** Obtaining and maintaining sustainability certifications requires significant financial investment, which can be a burden for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) [15]. [19] rightly mentions, "cost and RoI will have an impact on the certification mechanisms anywhere in the world, unless it is legally mandated like the EU. Besides, the most important deterrent will be , the organizations will have to invest on the infrastructure which will mean, the breakeven will much longer and the organizations will start look at the veracity of the certifications, whether to apply or not." This applies both to Sri Lanka and India.

**Lack of Awareness and Expertise.** Many hotel operators are unaware of the benefits of sustainability certifications or lack the technical expertise to implement green practices effectively [16]. The larger groups and hotel chains have started their own sustainability programs after tying up and collaborating with world leaders. There is an element of awareness in the larger hotel conglomerates. In India and Sri Lanka, the TATA Group of Hotels (Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), has launched its own narrative in the form of *Paathya*, which is implemented across the hotel chain.[3], with a legacy of iconic brands from 'Luxury' to 'Lean Luxe,' and and with more than 28,000 keys across all brands of Taj (13,000), SeleQtions (2,043), Vivanta (5,000+), Ginger (7,500+) and even Ama Stays and Trails. IHCL stands out in regards to properties, locations, and destinations. The authors got an opportunity to speak with Delna Jassomoney, Vice President, IHCL, Travel Industry Sales, about Sustainability and Certifications, at a IHCL Group and individual Hotel level. The reply is something worth noting. IHCL launched *Paathyā* (Sanskrit word for 'path') in 2022 (IHCL, 2022), which ensured adoption of Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) norms, which are a trendsetter by themselves, and something worth emulating as best-practices by other hospitality stakeholder big or small [14]. This is the extreme in awareness, it is the smaller players, who need to be educated, or at least informed about the practices, protocols, and mandates of sustainability and certifications.

**Regulatory and Policy Barriers.** While Sri Lanka has made progress in sustainable tourism policies, inconsistencies and gaps in regulations can create obstacles for businesses seeking certification [23]. Whilst regulation in India, ushers in a constitutional validity, as the issues close to tourism are in State List, where the States have a supremacy, the federal government can be suggestive. The remains, the federal government provides an advice at the national level, which is adhered by the states in a variety of forms. A few states in India, Sustainability/Green Certifications have been mandated as voluntary in nature, with the Government support in part fee payment.

**Limited Consumer Demand.** Although global travelers increasingly prefer sustainable accommodations, local demand for eco-certified hotels remains relatively low, reducing the immediate financial incentives for certification [5]. Davey (2025) (see paragraph 2.1) speaks about the fact that, "guests come to my resort on

account of the fact, I have the certification, and adhere to global norms, and even implement them. One can see it, to believe.” Davey, goes on to add, “we are very transparent in our approach, and the guests realize the same.” Davey further iterates, “customer demand needs to be created in a big way, which will enable the proliferation of sustainable practices.”

**Operational Challenges.** Transitioning to sustainable operations often requires changes in supply chain management, staff training, and infrastructure upgrades, which can disrupt business activities in the short term [7]. The operational challenges also come about in the form of investments for ushering in changes in the resort/hotel that one has to do ensure sustainability. As has been discussed, the larger stakeholders will move ahead and ensure, it is the smaller ones, the stand-alone who will have issues.

#### **4.2 Opportunities for the Indian and Sri Lankan Hospitality Industry through Green Certifications**

Despite the challenges associated with obtaining and maintaining sustainability certifications, the Indian and Sri Lankan hospitality industries stand to gain significant advantages by embracing green certification initiatives. These benefits extend beyond environmental conservation and align with broader industry trends that enhance competitiveness, profitability, and long-term sustainability.

**Enhanced Market Competitiveness.** Sustainability certifications provide hotels and tourism businesses with a distinct competitive edge, particularly in international markets where eco-conscious travel is on the rise. Certified establishments appeal to environmentally responsible travelers who actively seek accommodations and services that align with their values [11]. As consumer awareness of climate change and environmental impact grows, hotels and resorts with green certifications can differentiate themselves by demonstrating their commitment to sustainability. This advantage extends to attracting corporate clients, tour operators, and travel agencies that prioritize partnerships with certified sustainable properties.

**Long-Term Cost Savings and Operational Efficiency.** Implementing sustainable practices as part of the certification process can lead to significant reductions in operational costs over time. For instance, energy-efficient lighting, solar power systems, water recycling technologies, and waste reduction strategies help businesses lower utility bills and improve resource efficiency [15]. Additionally, eco-friendly procurement practices, such as sourcing local and organic food, can reduce transportation costs while supporting the local economy. Although initial investments in sustainable infrastructure may be high, the long-term financial benefits often outweigh these costs, making sustainability a financially viable strategy for the hospitality sector.

**Government Incentives and Institutional Support.** Governments and international organizations increasingly recognize the role of sustainable tourism in economic development and environmental protection. The Sri Lankan government, through agencies such as the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), has introduced initiatives to encourage green certification among hospitality businesses (SLTDA, 2022). Financial incentives, grants, and tax breaks are being offered to businesses that adopt energy-efficient technologies, implement waste management systems, or obtain recognized green certifications. Similarly, global organizations such as the UNDP and World Bank provide funding and technical assistance to support sustainable tourism development, further reducing the financial burden on businesses seeking certification.

**Strengthened Brand Image and Customer Loyalty.** A strong commitment to sustainability enhances a hotel’s brand image and fosters long-term customer loyalty. Travelers are increasingly making booking decisions based on environmental and social responsibility factors, favoring hotels that demonstrate eco-friendly practices [29]. Positive word-of-mouth marketing, social media advocacy, and favorable online reviews contribute to building a trustworthy reputation. Additionally, sustainability certifications serve as credible third-party endorsements, reassuring customers that the hotel adheres to internationally recognized environmental standards. As corporate clients and event organizers prioritize sustainability in their venue selection, certified hotels can secure higher occupancy rates and premium pricing.

**Alignment with Global Sustainability Trends.** The tourism and hospitality industry is undergoing a paradigm shift toward carbon neutrality and responsible tourism. Global organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council [8] advocate for sustainable tourism practices, urging businesses to reduce their carbon footprint and improve their social and environmental impact [28]. Adopting sustainability certifications allows businesses to stay ahead of regulatory changes and consumer expectations while positioning themselves for long-term success in an increasingly eco-conscious market. Furthermore, green-certified hotels are more likely to be included in international travel platforms and corporate sustainability indexes, further enhancing their visibility and business prospects.

While sustainability certifications require effort, investment, and compliance with rigorous standards, the benefits for the Indian and Sri Lankan hospitality industries are substantial. Green certifications not only contribute to environmental conservation but also offer strategic advantages, including increased market appeal, cost savings, access to government support, enhanced brand reputation, and alignment with global sustainability trends. By embracing green certification programs, hospitality businesses in both countries can secure a more sustainable and prosperous future while meeting the evolving demands of travelers and industry stakeholders.

### 4.3 Pathways to Overcome Challenges in Green Sustainability Certifications

To fully leverage the benefits of green sustainability certifications, the hospitality businesses must adopt a strategic, multi-faceted approach that addresses financial, operational, and regulatory challenges. By integrating sustainability into their core business models, these establishments can ensure long-term success while contributing to environmental conservation and responsible tourism.

**Financial Support and Incentives.** Government agencies and private sector stakeholders should offer financial assistance to hotels seeking green certifications (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). In India, the Governments at the Federal and State levels have been very categorical, in regards to funding and put the ball in the court of the stakeholders. A few states have come forward to provide for subsidy (ranging from 25 to 50%) in the Certification fee. Beyond that there is no support of any kind.

**Awareness and Training Programs.** Conducting workshops and training programs on sustainable practices can help bridge knowledge gaps among hospitality operators [16]. In India, RTSOI, the Federal Ministry, and few other stakeholders have been conducting programs that will engage the stakeholders to ensure certification. Sri Lanka, in a way a step forward to ensure, academic institutions which cater to the needs of the tourism and hospitality business, are trained in certification, which will enable them to work with the organizations and usher in sustainable certifications as a mandate. The University of Colombo under the leadership of Dr. Suranga Silva have collaborated with GSTC and introduced the Advanced Certificate Course in Sustainable Tourism Destination Management (ACSTDM) combined with the GSTC Sustainable Tourism Course (GSTC, n.d.). Institutions across India, too should adopt the model presented by University of Colombo, as a best practice, and ensure trained human capital, which will augur well on the long run.

**Policy Strengthening and Enforcement.** Strengthening regulations and aligning them with international sustainability standards will facilitate smoother adoption of green practices [24]. Both Sri Lanka and India, in principle agree to have a policy on Sustainability and Sustainability certifications; the challenges come about when it comes to funding.

**Collaboration with International Organizations.** Partnering with global sustainability organizations can provide Sri Lankan hotels with technical expertise and access to best practices [5]. With a large number of Certification agencies and auditors making their presence felt it is pertinent that the next step would be to engage the stakeholders get to sustainability and certifications. Funding would be primary criterion as mentioned a Senior Member of RTSOI in India, who was helping the authors with an understanding of certifications for the ensuing research. The member mentioned, “the cost of certification and the investment

hitherto, will play a vital role in evolving what is the Return on Investment (RoI) for the stakeholders. If the RoI is insignificant, then certification is bound to fail.”

**Consumer Awareness Campaigns.** Promoting sustainable tourism among domestic and international travelers can increase demand for eco-certified accommodations [7]. If the visitors are made aware of the facets of sustainability and its impacts, the visitors themselves spread the information to others. With social media playing a dynamic role in proliferation of information, the role of visitors will add value to the awareness campaigns, which should also include feedback mechanism in the domain of sustainability.

## 5. Conclusion and the Way Forward

Green sustainability certifications play a crucial role in promoting responsible tourism and environmental conservation within Sri Lanka's hospitality industry. While challenges such as high certification costs, limited awareness, and regulatory hurdles persist, the long-term benefits including a competitive edge, cost savings, and enhanced brand reputation—far outweigh these difficulties. By adopting strategic measures such as financial incentives, capacity-building programs, and policy enhancements, Sri Lanka can further solidify its position as a leading destination for sustainable tourism. As the global tourism landscape continues to evolve, embracing green certifications will be essential for long-term success and environmental stewardship in the hospitality sector.

A similar scenario exists in India, where government inaction and the industry's primary focus on profit maximization and tourism expansion have often sidelined sustainability certifications. A hospitality professional who chose to remain anonymous but owns five hotels and three resorts expressed concerns about the financial burden of certification. They remarked, “The costs associated with certification, including auditor fees and the investment required for sustainable infrastructure, are substantial. Even if these investments are one-time expenses, they add significantly to operational costs. As a result, many investors deprioritize green certifications unless legally mandated.” Unlike in EU, where norms are followed to the minutest of one's ability, India and Sri Lanka, are seeing the initial response with stakeholders willing to adapt certifications as a norm. However, on account of the policy construct, and in a bigger way, the element of cost has become a non-starter

Beyond certification expenses, investors also evaluate return on investment (ROI) and break-even periods, further discouraging voluntary participation in green certification programs. Unless regulatory frameworks or consumer demand drive a shift in industry priorities, sustainability certifications may remain a secondary concern for many businesses. Moving forward, a collaborative approach where governments, industry stakeholders, and certification bodies' work together to provide financial incentives and policy support will be key to ensuring wider adoption of green certification in both Sri Lanka and India.

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