Encouraging sustainability in coastal communities, the QualityCoast Award – Europe

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Balancing economic, social, cultural development whilst enhancing environment
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Improving competitiveness

2. Key Approaches

- Integration
- Knowledge-based
- Ecosystems based approach

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

Participation by cities, towns and islands in a voluntary scheme designed to improve the sustainability of coastal communities at the level of municipalities and island councils. The performance of the communities in the fields of nature, environment, cultural heritage and socio-economics can be connected to an international award called QualityCoast which has been shown to be a powerful marketing tool, especially for tourism destinations.

4. Overview of the case

This case describes a set of sustainability criteria collectively called QualityCoast which can be used by coastal communities to assess the degree of their holistic sustainable development. The criteria integrate natural, landscape, environmental, cultural and socio-economic values. QualityCoast is applicable in every European coastal state. It has been further developed into an Award scheme with four Jury assessments per year.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

Sustainability is now a cornerstone of EU policy and is to be found in many policy instruments which are being implemented in all Member States. Equally, tourism accounts directly for over 4% of the European Union's GDP. When links to other sectors are included, this has risen to over 11%, providing 24.3 million jobs – the equivalent of one in eight employed Europeans. By 2016, its share of GDP is expected to increase to 12% and of employment to 13%. However, sustainability and tourism have not always shown themselves to be compatible. Tourism growth has often been accompanied by an increasing loss of natural values and landscapes and of the identity and social structure of the coastal communities themselves. One of our main challenges is reconciling the demands of leisure time at the coast with the maintenance of the coastal environment and local identi

Although there are a number of destination labels in use, many of them are targeted at one sector e.g. the Blue Flag is aimed at beaches and marinas through strict criteria dealing with water quality whilst the Green Key is a graduated rating system designed to recognise hotels and camping sites that are committed to improving their environmental performance. There can be no doubt that these have helped towards ensuring that Europe's recreational destinations have responded to consumer demands for increased quality. Nonetheless, there has so far been no international incentive available for coastal communities to move voluntarily towards increased overall sustainability.

b) Objectives

To establish a Europe-wide network of coastal communities (towns, municipalities and/or islands) that share the same values and practices on sustainable development through integration of their natural, cultural and social values.

6. Implementation of the ICZM Approach (i.e. management, tools, resources)

a) Management

The programme is run by the Coastal & Marine Union (EUCC). The European QualityCoast Jury is appointed by the board of EUCC, chaired by Prof. Dr. Johan Vande Lanotte, former deputy Prime minister of Belgium and Minister for the North Sea. The Jury is working anonymously and therefore cannot be influenced by applicants.

b) ICZM tools

A set of sustainability criteria has been developed for coastal communities called 'QualityCoast criteria'. Twenty criteria in the categories of Nature, Environment and Socio-economics have been defined by a broad stakeholder group. This was done as part of an Interreg IIIC project by local and regional municipalities, research institutes and NGOs. The criteria cover not only policy adoption and implementation but incorporate different areas of Community policy implementation. All criteria cover important aspects of 'State', 'Pressure' and 'Response".

The criteria are:
Nature viz.: 1. Natural Values, 2. Nature Information, 3. Contact with Nature, 4. Green Policies, 5. Open Landscapes, and 6. Quiet Places,
Environment viz: 7. Tourism Pressure, 8. Business Involvement, 9. Blue Flags and Beaches, 10. Water Management, 11. Sustainable Transportation, 12. Waste and Recycling, and 13. Climate and Energy,
Socio-Economics viz: 14. Cultural Heritage, 15. Territory & Tradition, 16. Local Identity, 17. Leisure and Recreation, 18. Community Participation, 19. Satisfaction, and 20. Safety.

An award can be granted to coastal communities that are making and presenting a good overall sustainable performance. This QualityCoast Award is an independent certification of the performance of the coastal community which makes use of these 20 criteria. Information about the criteria is provided by the community on its entire territory. The Award is attributed on the basis of an assessment of the applicant community that is reviewed by an international Jury. Scores for each of the 20 criteria are given, ranging from 0 (indicating very poor quality, or absence of information) to 5 points (indicating excellence). The average of points assigned for each category and the sum of all points scored for the complete set of 20 criteria is calculated and represents the final score in 2009. Communities that collected at least 56 points were granted a QualityCoast Award. This threshold will be raised with one point every year. In addition to the Award, communities can receive specific recognition, symbolised by a star, in one of the three categories: Nature, Environment and Socio-Economics. Communities that have received an Award have the status of QualityCoast Community (or Destination) which is reviewed every two years.

Furthermore, the information provided must be publicly displayed on the local community website so that there is full transparency, even in cases where poor scores have been awarded. QualityCoast is the first such European quality label for coastal communities that is providing transparent information on aspects of sustainability to visitors and on their plans for future improvements.

7. Cost and resources

For each participating community, annual costs amount to ca. €1500 plus ca. ten person days for completing the application.

8. Effectiveness (i.e. were the foreseen goals/objectives of the work reached?)

In 2009, twelve European destinations from five countries were granted an award. In 2007, twelve awards were also granted.

The number is expected to grow. It may still be considered too early to determine if the Award is actually leading to a demonstrably improved performance by the destinations as determined by an increase of points being awarded. Nonetheless, remarkable progress has been observed in Noordwijk (NL) between 2007-09. The publicity aroused by the award, especially in those countries with a QualityCoast destination, would indicate that the demand for the award will encourage coastal communities to move towards sustainability. QualityCoast is already particularly stimulating coastal tourism communities to base their sustainable tourism product upon the inherent values of their own town or villages, their local products and their surroundings. It is helping to make natural and cultural heritage and identity become essential elements of their local policies.

9. Success and Fail factors

The award can act as a powerful marketing tool for promoting sustainable tourism destinations. The unique value of QualityCoast is that it enables everybody to see, for 20 important aspects, where the community is strong and less strong. Furthermore, the award also covers the entire coastal community, which means a municipality, county or island. Other community or destination labels tend not to have such a broad focus. Visitors can take this information into account in choosing their holiday destination. QualityCoast is supporting both the Blue Flag and the Green Key Programme and is, therefore, complementary to them.

From a tourism point of view, the Award has the advantage that mass tourism destinations can also be granted QualityCoast status. Previously, sustainable tourism has been defined in terms of small-scale, specialist, nature-oriented destinations and excluded already heavily built-up areas despite their councils making efforts towards sustainability. Participating communities effectively join a European network of coastal communities that share the same values and practices on sustainable development and are willing to exchange their experiences and best practices in order to improve sustainability.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

None so far.

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13. Sources

- QualityCoast Awards 2009-'10 (2009) Coastline, EUCC (downloadable from www.qualitycoast.net)
- www.qualitycoast.info
- www.qualitycoast.net