

A Harmonized Accommodation-Grading System that Reduces CO2 Emissions Across Southern Africa

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Abstract

The development of a comprehensive, harmonized accommodation-grading system will be implemented by the 15 nations of RETOSA (Regional Tourism Organization of Southern Africa) by 2015. In 2011, a Framework Document including a four-year action plan from 2011 to 2015 was prepared. This was followed by preparation of approximately 1,850 standards for six basic categories of accommodation. The program is possibly the most comprehensive set of standards ever developed because it also integrates 60 responsible tourism and 40 universal-accessibility standards with the basic quality-assurance standards. This will provide southern Africa member states with a grading system that reflects the highest level of environmental and social responsibility while also providing facilities that are accessible to the disabled. Furthermore, the standards reflect the most rigorous international-level standards and will be mandatory when the program is launched. The responsible tourism standards are designed to produce a 20% reduction in CO₂, which will reduce emissions by approximately 1 billion kg/year by 2016.

Funding

- Preparation of Framework Document: Commonwealth Secretariat: Ms. Chanda Chellah, Advisor (Trade)
- Preparation of Harmonized Accommodation-Grading Standards: RETOSA
- Overall Project Management: RETOSA, Mr. Simba Mandinyenya, Planning and Development Director
- Project Consultant: James MacGregor, President, ecoplan:net sarl

1. Overview

Despite continued market demand for recognized and credible international tourist accommodation-grading systems, there continues to be substantial confusion about the merits of the various available systems. Furthermore, in many cases there is an obvious inconsistency from one national system to another. A three-star rating in one country may not reflect the same classification in another. As well, with an annual increase in online bookings, the travel consumers, more than ever, require a recognized accommodation-grading system that is reliable. Despite the increased use of user generated content on the Internet (TripAdvisor, Priceline.com, etc.) the time-tested star-rating system still has substantial value and, for many travelers, is more important than ever in their decision-making and choice of accommodation.

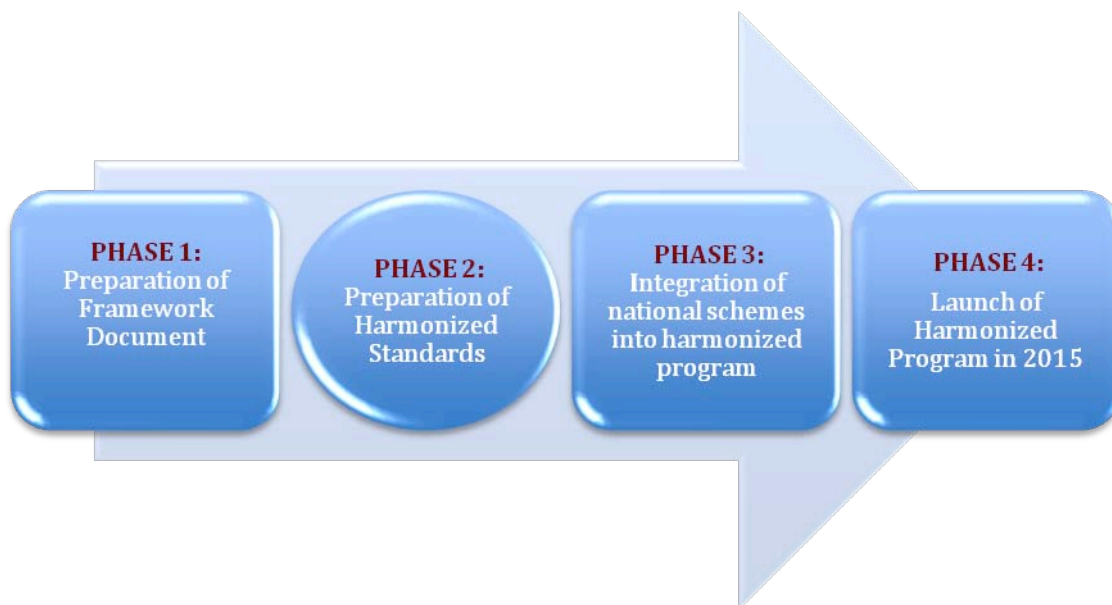
In 2010, RETOSA (Regional Tourism Organization of Southern Africa) recognized the importance of accommodation-grading systems and decided to create a completely

harmonized system across the 15 countries in southern Africa, and including Mauritius and Seychelles.

The overall goal of this ambitious project was to establish rigorous and comprehensive international-level grading standards in concert with credible and coordinated grading schemes within each member nation.

2. The Processes of Building the Harmonized Scheme

The preparation of the harmonized accommodation-grading scheme was developed using four phases including: **Phase 1:** the preparation of a framework for the scheme, incorporating the identification of major issues and the resulting recommendations; **Phase 2:** the preparation of the individual standards; **Phase 3:** the integration of the various member-nation grading systems into one harmonized grading scheme; and **Phase 4:** the launch of the overall program (2015). This article will address Phase 1 and 2.



2.1. Phase 1: The Preparation of a Framework Document

The framework document was launched with an October 2010 workshop where representatives from the 15 member states gathered in Johannesburg to present the status of their individual national schemes as well as identify the major issues associated with establishing a harmonized program across the region.

They included the need for recommendations to:

1. Select either a voluntary or mandatory harmonized grading scheme.
2. Identify the needs for auditors and supporting auditor/assessor training.
3. Create an overall management structure that would enable RETOSA to develop and administer the system.
4. Identify marketing channels and mechanisms to promote the system to consumers and travel trade.

5. Identify a feedback mechanism structure to ensure the continual improvement of the scheme.
6. Integrate responsible tourism and universal-accessibility standards with quality-assurance standards.
7. Identify funding sources to develop the program.

The Commonwealth Secretariat funded the preparation of the framework document. Following an international competition, James MacGregor from the firm ecoplan:net was hired to undertake the research and prepare the required framework. As a first step in the preparation of the framework, the consultant visited a number of member states, including Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, Swaziland, Mozambique and Mauritius. This enabled a better understanding of the status of national grading schemes as well as the obstacles to developing both the national and regional standards scheme. The status of the national schemes varied widely, from South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, which have mature and well-developed systems, to Tanzania, which is integrating its proposed scheme into that of the East African Community, to Swaziland, which is in the early stages of development.

The country visits as well as reviews of other international systems provided the basis for a “Recommendations Report” that offered a preliminary response and a direction to the above-mentioned issues. These recommendations were subsequently submitted at a two-day RETOSA Technical Committee Workshop in June 2011. A brief summary of the results of the discussions included:

A) There was overwhelming support for the development of a mandatory, rather than voluntary, harmonized systems across the member nations. There is currently a 50-50 split, and a three-phase process was proposed to have all systems mandatory by 2015.

B) Lack of qualified auditors is one of the more serious issues facing individual-member-nation grading systems. This will be addressed during the implementation of the program with the design and delivery of auditor training programs throughout the region.

C) RETOSA will be the organization tasked with coordinating the integration of various national grading systems into one harmonized grading program. However, it will require the complete support from all other stakeholders, including: ministries of tourism and national tourism authorities; national and regional tourism and accommodation associations; NGOs and individual accommodation providers. Collectively, these various stakeholders can offer a substantial contribution to the preparation of the harmonized accommodation-grading scheme.

D) The overall marketing and promotion of the harmonized program will be the responsibility of RETOSA; however, it will require substantial support from individual member countries as well as their associated accommodation associations and providers.

E) A feedback mechanism will be set up to enable the consumer and the travel trade (foreign and receptive tour operators and wholesalers) to evaluate the property within the

context of the prescribed rating. Feedback will be provided at the ministry/tourism authority, tourism accommodation association and accommodation-provider level. The results will be consolidated by RETOSA and contribute to the on-going upgrading of the accommodation standards.

F) Social and environmentally responsible standards, including fair-trade practices, as well as universal-accessibility standards will be integrated into the national and regional harmonized accommodation-grading program. Furthermore they will be given substantial influence in determining the overall rating of each property. With upwards of 20% to 25% of source markets having residents with disabilities, it is now considered mandatory to have at least basic universal-accessibility standards in place. The standards would be integrated into the overall system making it one of the first in the world to be comprehensive and inclusive.

The RETOSA Accommodation-Rating Harmonizing-Framework Diagram



G) Funding will come from several different sources. For instance, project support would be from donors for activities, such as training workshops and the preparation of technical manuals, development of marketing strategy and communication plans, etc.

Project-based funding could also be used to both promote the scheme to the regional and international markets as well enhance communication between member nations.

Following a complete review by the technical committee the consultant prepared the final framework document, which was presented to the representatives of the member nations in early September 2011. The presentation also included an outline of the action plan and cost estimates required to launch the program by early 2015. Activities were outlined on a quarter-by-quarter basis from late 2011 through the middle of 2015.

2.2. Phase 2: The Preparation of the Grading Standards

Ecoplan:net was also hired, by RETOSA, to prepare the individual standards for six selected categories. These categories included:

1. Urban hotels: Those located in urban or near urban locations with particular services for the business traveler. Typically full service.

2. Resorts (vacation hotel): Typically located within a tourism destination and adjacent to a feature of interest such as lakes, beaches, rivers or tourism attractions. Usually full service and include a variety of recreation activities.

3. Self-catering apartments: Including the required amenities for meal preparation but also including housekeeping services.

4. Nature lodges: Full-service accommodation facility located within or adjacent to natural areas. Sub categories could include game or safari lodges, eco-lodges and game reserves.

5. Guesthouses: A facility that offers more limited lodging services but includes a common area shared by guests and host and may or may not include housekeeping services. Breakfast provided.

6. Campgrounds: An area with campsites or pads designed for mobile accommodation (motor home or caravan) and/or tents, providing essential facilities and services and select recreational activities.

A number of well-known and respected accommodation-grading systems at the international level were also analyzed and consequently provided some direction for the harmonization scheme. They included, in part, the Qualmark system from New Zealand, the AA rating system in the United Kingdom, the new French hotel-rating scheme, as well as select standards from the Brazil, Irish and Scottish programs. At the regional level, South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia provided an excellent source of standards. Finally the East Africa Community (ECA) standards were considered as an important source, particularly with the possibility of integrating East Africa standards with the southern African in, say, 2016.

2.2.1. The Integration of Responsible Tourism and Universal-Accessibility Standards with the Quality-Assurance Standards

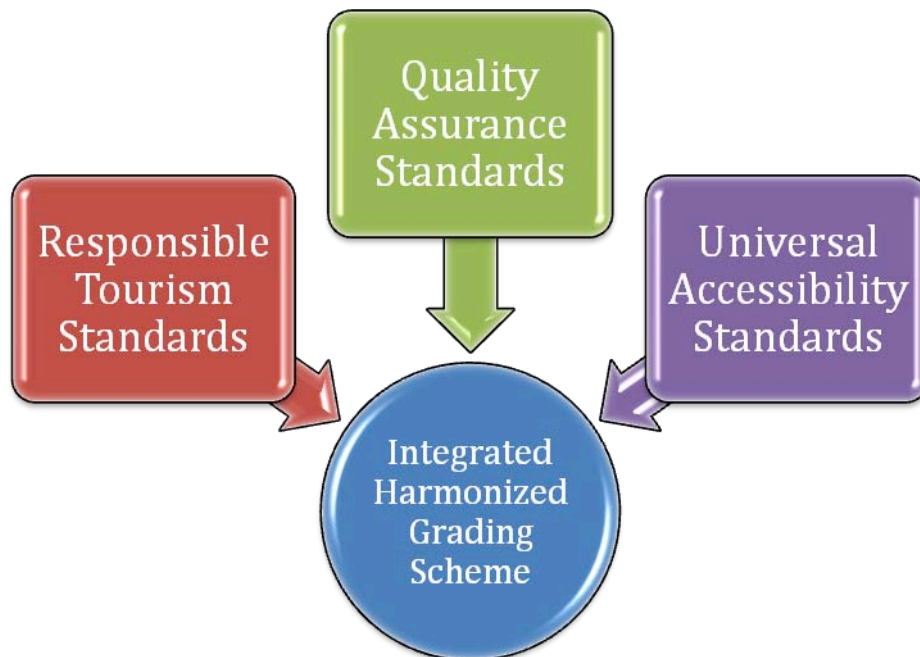
The complete incorporation of responsible tourism and universal-accessibility standards with quality assurance represents one of the first efforts, worldwide, to combine a comprehensive set of standards that embraces the entire accommodation product. Several countries have an independent ecotourism, sustainability or green-certification program;

however, these environmental programs are typically separate from the basic accommodation-rating system.

Of significance are the integration of approximately 60 responsible tourism and the 40 universal-accessibility standards for each category of accommodation. As well these standards represent approximately 30% of the total number of standards so their impact is significant. Several newer grading systems, developed within the past few years, have added a few environmental standards but they have relatively little influence on the final rating of the property. The responsible-tourism standards, within this RETOSA harmonized system, will however be specific and comprehensive. The universal-accessibility standards refer to actual dimensions and spatial requirements that need to be respected to achieve a grade.

This program identifies more than 1,850 standards across the six accommodation categories.

Collectively they will ensure a substantially level protection for the local environment, greater integration of the facility into the community and assured access to many more individuals with disabilities.



2.2.2. Reducing Carbon Emissions Across Southern Africa

The southern Africa tourist accommodation sector does not itself generate comparatively significant levels of CO₂. Nevertheless, a concentrated effort across the approximately 20,000 properties (by 2015) can still make a meaningful contribution to reducing CO₂. Few accommodation-grading systems take this issue into account; however, when designing the system within the context of growing concern for climate change it is possible to integrate particular standards that will contribute directly to reducing accommodation-related CO₂. The responsible tourism standards, in particular, have been

specifically designed to reduce carbon emissions. In fact the scheme should result in an overall reduction of CO₂ by approximately 20% by 2015. This would seem to be in keeping with UNWTO proposals to reduce accommodation-related greenhouse gases by 30% in 2020. Furthermore, the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) proposes a 50% reduction in accommodation greenhouse gases by 2035. The RETOSA projections, therefore, seem to be realistic and in keeping with other international agencies.

By using the average daily CO₂ production figures from the World Resource Institute it is possible to calculate the decrease in emissions. It appears that these standards, particularly because they are mandatory, would have the significant effect of reducing emissions from the accommodation sector. It is estimated that CO₂ emissions will be reduced by approximately 1 billion kg of CO₂ per year across southern Africa by 2016.

Furthermore, implementing the standards would not necessarily be onerous on the operations of even the smaller facilities such as guesthouses and self-catering apartments.

In most cases the standards will actually result in reduction of the overall operational costs. Specific standards that have been identified to reduce CO₂ include:

- Generating at least 50% of energy from alternative sources in four- and five-star properties.
- Extensive use of energy-saving appliances, compact-fluorescence or LED lighting and the use of equipment such as solar ovens where applicable, such as in the lodge operations.
- Substantial reduction in transportation-related fuel consumption through local purchases; this is a significant consideration in southern Africa where so many products used by the accommodation sector, throughout the region, come from Johannesburg, usually by transport truck.
- Use of carbon credits for administrative and marketing-related travel.
- Energy and water conservation-education programs in local communities.
- Concerted visitor-awareness programs to encourage reducing water and energy requirements.
- On-going climate change-related discussions with the local communities to ensure the residents are doing their best to reduce CO₂ emissions.
- The introduction of short-duration local tours using bicycles and low-impact water transport. These trips also encourage an extended length of stay thus requiring less travel.
- Preparation of manuals that demonstrate to employees and the adjacent communities the various techniques for reducing greenhouse gases (GHG).
- Annual audits to identify how targets can be met with respect to local purchasing, reduced travel, improved energy conservation, etc.
- The regular use of reusable rather than disposable materials and equipment.
- Working with distributors and suppliers to ensure as much recycling as possible.
- Energy reduction through decreasing demand for hot water and preference for natural ventilation and ceiling fans over air conditioning.

Many of the currently accepted standards, such as a towel and linen re-use programs, room sensors and the use of compact-fluorescent light bulbs have been integrated into the overall program.

3. Benefits to the Southern Africa Tourism Industry and the Accommodation Sector

Since this harmonization scheme is the first of its kind in the world, when fully developed, it should be able to solicit substantial media attention and exposure for southern Africa.

However, the greater benefits will come from those long-haul travel consumers who appreciate that the grading system is equivalent or more rigorous than those systems found in Europe and North America. This is particularly important to both the individual FIT traveler as well as the tour operator since much of the travel to the region is multi-destination and typically includes visits to several countries. The travel consumer wants to know that a three-star property in one southern African country is the equivalent to a three-star property in another location.

The notion of a harmonized grading system that blankets all of these nations reinforces the concept of southern Africa as a unified destination. This is particularly important for the long-haul traveler who prefers an extended stay (10 days or more) and a visit to several different countries.

Other benefits that will contribute substantially to the improvement of the southern Africa accommodation product and its competitiveness include:

- The new standards will stimulate significant upgrades across all accommodation categories. Facilities that wish to emulate international standards must make the effort to ensure that, say, their four-star property is equivalent to the same grade in the source markets.
- The development of the new harmonized system will include the delivery of training programs for auditors and grading officers. This information will then be distributed to the accommodation suppliers and will further contribute to product upgrades and improvements.
- With a harmonized system in place, southern Africa will become competitive with other multi-nation regional destinations where there may be a lack of consistency in product quality across each country.
- The pricing structure across the various nations will be more credible. Despite slight area conditions, the rates for a three-star guesthouse in one country should not be noticeably different from those in another.

4. Conclusion

The harmonization of accommodation-grading standards across this multi-nation destination region is an essential to position southern Africa in the international marketplace; however, the initiative requires a major effort on behalf of numerous stakeholders at both the regional and national level, but there is commitment at all levels. Under the direction of RETOSA, the various nations are moving quickly to adopt or integrate the new standards.

This effort demonstrates that southern Africa believes unequivocally that tourism will play a central role in the economic development of the region. As with any product, quality assurance and environmental responsibility are critical to the commercial and social success of the business. As tourism expands exponentially throughout the next two decades, particularly with travel from BRICS nations, southern Africa is clearly positioned to be a major destination for these emerging markets and maintain or strengthen their market share in their traditional markets.

Harmonization of the accommodation standards and the resulting product upgrades and improvements are a significant part of that process.