

Qualmark Certified, SDG Aligned?

Background

Tourism is New Zealand's largest export, with continual growth expected for the foreseeable future (Tourism New Zealand, 2023). The tourism industry, however, is struggling to preserve the natural and cultural resources it inherently degrades as visitor numbers and consumption increases (Williams & Ponsford, 2009). Sustainable tourism is often promoted as the solution, as it seeks to balance economic, social, and environmental goals (Buckley, 2012).

Tourism New Zealand's 100% Pure New Zealand marketing campaign has long promoted New Zealand as a sustainable destination. Tourism New Zealand audits and ranks the sustainability of tourism firms through its Qualmark Certification program. Firms are then listed by rank on Tourism New Zealand's website.

Research has yet to explore whether New Zealand's sustainable image accurately represents its tourism industry. This research, therefore, explores whether New Zealand's sustainably-certified tourism firms have incorporated sustainability within their business models and, if so, which sustainability dimensions are included. The insights from this study will shed light on sustainability initiatives within the tourism industry, providing valuable indications of how New Zealand's tourism firms are adapting for the future.

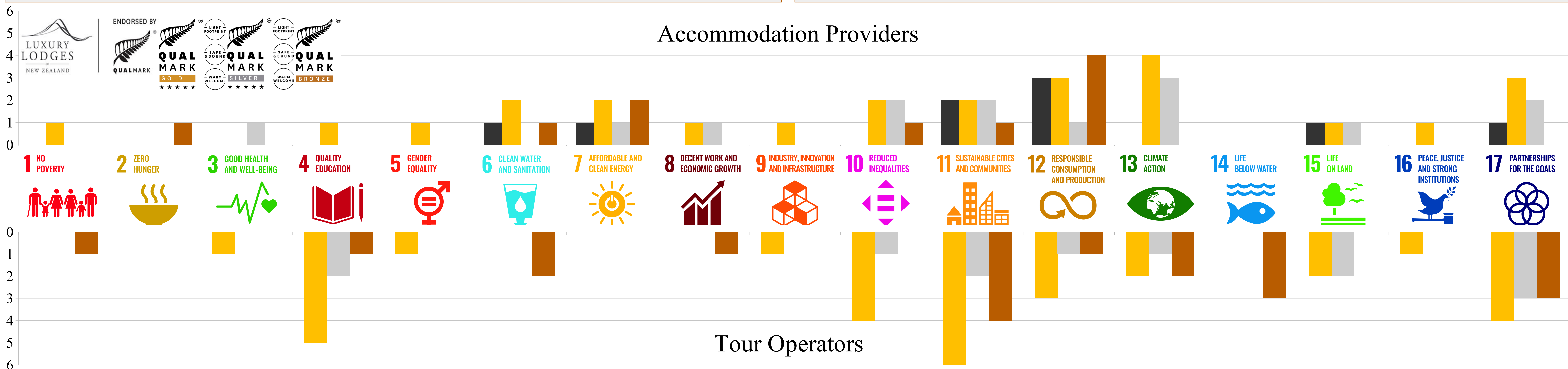
Methods

Tourism New Zealand's Qualmark certification divides the tourism industry into accommodation providers and tour operators. After an audit, firms are then assigned a rank based on their level of sustainability (bronze, silver, or gold). The accommodation category has an additional rank above gold, called Luxury Lodges.

Qualmark displays firms by sustainability rank but does not distinguish sustainability levels within ranks. Instead, the number of Trip Advisor reviews was used to identify the market leaders in each rank. Firms with more reviews were assumed to have a stronger web presence, making it easier to gather data.

A total of 68 firms were included in this sample. By category, 38 accommodation providers (Luxury Lodges did not have a full ten members) and 30 tour operators were selected.

Information from these firms' websites was coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A total of 125 reported sustainability initiatives, representing 36 themes, were then matched to the SDGs.



Results

With over 6,000 accommodation and tour options on the Qualmark website, only 34.5% have received a sustainability certification. Over half of the tour operator category has a sustainability certification, while only 18% of accommodation providers are sustainably certified. These results are mirrored in the sample used in this study, where 21 of the 30 tour operators published sustainability-related information on their websites, while only 18 out of the 36 accommodation providers published sustainability information.

As the highest rank in the accommodation category, Luxury Lodges were expected to have the best coverage of the SDGs. Surprisingly, they had the same coverage as the bronze-ranked firms in their category.

Overall, the SDGs with the highest representation focus on economic and environmental dimensions. The sustainability strategies identified in this research are dominated by resource-based approaches to increase efficiency. Interestingly, innovative strategies were less common than redistributive strategies.

Implications

By including firms from each sustainability ranking, these findings should be representative of New Zealand's wider tourism industry. Tour operators have placed a greater emphasis on incorporating sustainability into their business models than accommodation providers. Both categories, however, neglect the social dimensions of sustainability in favour of the economic and environmental SDGs. Further research is needed to confirm and explain these differences.

Reliance on public information hinders this study from determining more than a general alignment between these firms' sustainability initiatives and the SDGs. However, this research demonstrates significant differences between accommodation providers and tour operators, providing valuable insights into tourism firms' adoption of sustainability initiatives. The better-represented SDGs may indicate a directional shift within the industry, while less-represented SDGs may offer firms a chance to differentiate themselves.

