



An eco-friendly rating system for hotels. Photo by Cathy Hsu

The term eco has been adopted and abused so widely that a new term has been coined to apply to tour operators who make dubious ecological claims—greenwashers. There are seven sins of greenwashing when a business will mislead a customer to believe they have a commitment to the environment when it is false. The seven sins are:³⁵

1. Sin of the hidden trade-off: A claim suggesting that a product is “green” based on a narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues.
2. Sin of no proof: An environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification.
3. Sin of vagueness: A claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer.
4. Sin of worshipping false labels: A product that, through either words or images, gives the impression of third-party endorsement where no such endorsement exists.
5. Sin of irrelevance: An environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.
6. Sin of lesser of two evils: Claim that may be true within the product category, but that risks distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole.
7. Sin of fibbing: Environmental claims that are simply false.

While a global standard does not exist, recently, several governments have created national certification programs to verify the ecoworthiness of tour operators, hotels, and other tourism suppliers. In October 2003, Kenya was the first African nation to introduce such ratings. The private, nonprofit Ecotourism Society of Kenya sends independent inspectors out, armed with a list of criteria that range from environmental measures (water recycling) to economic benefits (purchasing locally grown produce).³⁶

Another example is the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) in Costa Rica. The CST’s mission is to make sustainability a reality within tourism in Costa Rica and they award 1 to 5 leaves based on the operation’s physical and biological relationship, internal process and practices, management services, encouragement of the client, and socio-economic realm.³⁷