

IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CERTIFICATION: A STUDY OF ECST IN ITALIAN PROTECTED AREAS

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Abstract

The main objective of this preliminary research is to study how managers of Italian natural parks perceive the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) certification. A qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews was adopted, as nine managers from different Italian natural parks were interviewed for the study. The results show that the common perception of the certification is that the ECST helps demonstrate the authenticity of sustainable practices employed by the parks, promotes sustainable management and fosters collaboration between different stakeholders. However, the study also highlights the perceived challenges related to the communication and education strategies employed by the parks to maximize the certification's impact. The paper concludes that while the ECST is perceived as critical to promoting sustainability in natural parks, its effectiveness depends on a multifaceted approach that needs to address both the practical implementation and involve local stakeholders. The study provides relevant information to policymakers and certification bodies officials to refine the ECST obtainment process and its promotion. Future research should employ a more structured approach to validate these preliminary findings in order to sustain competitive advantage. Future research should replicate this study in other industries and explore additional moderating and mediating variables to provide more comprehensive insights.

Keywords: European Charter for Sustainable Tourism; Environmental Certifications; Natural Parks.

1. Introduction

Natural parks serve numerous functions for environmental preservation, such as preserving critical ecosystems and the habitats of endangered flora and fauna species (Hummel et al., 2019; Hussain, Iqbal & Shah, 2024), and provide essential ecosystem services such as clean water, air purification, and climate regulation (Vieira et al., 2018). They also offer spaces for recreation, education, and scientific research (Buckley, 2020; Pu et al., 2023; Buckley et al., 2023).

These fragile environments are increasingly threatened by human presence, mainly from tourism. According to Buckley (2011), over-tourism can be a potent cause of habitat degradation and environmental pollution, damaging the very ecological nature of the parks that attract visitors. New threats of natural parks land acquisition and exploitation by tourism entities are also being reported (Sauls & Devine, 2023; Buckley, 2024), with consequent danger and damage to the natural environment.

This has been the case for more than two decades, as mentioned by studies from Eagles et al. (2002), which highlighted how the influx of tourists can disturb wildlife, cause soil erosion, and increase waste and water usage, leading to significant environmental stress. It is thus crucial to balance conservation efforts and tourism practices to preserve the integrity of natural parks.

Environmental certifications have emerged as a critical tool in addressing these challenges by providing a standardised framework for sustainable management. Certifications such as the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST), the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), and ISO 14001 help organisations systematically manage their environmental impacts, ensuring that tourism operations are conducted ecologically responsibly. These certifications offer a method for validating and communicating the sustainability efforts of entities that welcome tourists, thus building trust with consumers and other stakeholders.

The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECTS) is a certification awarded by the Europarc Federation, the organisation that represents the European protected areas. Protected areas (PAs) include national parks, regional parks, nature parks, natural reserves and biosphere reserves (EUROPARC Federation). The ECTS represents a participatory governance method whose goal is to promote sustainable tourism in European protected areas, considering all aspects of environmental, social and economic impact. The ECST promotes partnership with all stakeholders, including local tourism operators, to elaborate a tourism offer compatible with the needs of biodiversity protection in protected areas (Ritchie, 2015).

In Italy, a country renowned for its rich natural heritage and numerous protected areas (Sabatini, 2023), the adoption of environmental certifications by natural parks has become increasingly common. Italian natural parks are crucial to the country's environmental conservation efforts and integral to its tourism industry (Voghera et al., 2021). As such, the managers of these parks face the complex task of implementing sustainable practices while meeting the expectations of a diverse range of stakeholders, including tourists, local communities and lawmakers.

While the role of certifications in sustainable tourism has been widely discussed in the literature over the years (Abeliotis, 2006; Bricker & Schultz, 2011; Moncada, 2024), and the perception of these certifications has also been studied worldwide (Zametter, Burlando & Bosco, 2022), there is a specific gap in how Italian natural parks upper management perceives the ECST certification.

The objective of this paper is thus to provide a preliminary study on how these managers perceive the ECST certification, as their perception influence the decision-making processes surrounding the adoption and implementation of certifications and ultimately determine the success of these initiatives in achieving long-term environmental goals. Specifically, the research aims to understand the perceived benefits and challenges associated with obtaining this certification.

By determining these perceptions, the study provides valuable insights for future research into the factors that could help the adoption of environmental certifications. To achieve this goals, nine semi-structured interviews with Italian natural parks managers were conducted.

The paper is structured in six sections: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, conclusions, and references. In the next section, the literature review is presented.

2. Literature Review

The academic literature considered for this study concerned two main concepts: (i) protected areas managers' motivations and perceptions regarding environmental certifications, (ii) the current state of the literature concerning the ECST.

The main considered work for the first concept was the systematic review conducted by García-Álvarez and de Junguitu (2023) of 73 studies that concerned environmental certifications (mainly EMAS and ISO 14001) published from 1998 to 2021 to provide the researchers with the basic notions regarding the motivations that made tourism entities managers decide to pursue the certifications mentioned above.

The study divided the motivations into two main categories: internal motivations (presented in Table 1) and external motivations (presented in Table 2).

Table 1 – Internal motivations

Internal Motivation	Authors
Environmental friendliness and performance	Miteva (2017), Murmura, Bravi & Santos (2021)
Better financial results by reducing costs	Emilsson & Hjelm (2002); Bracke, Verbeke & Dejonckheere (2008)
Regulatory compliance	Grolleau, Mzoughi & Thomas (2007); Murmura et al. (2018); Pedersen (2007)
Introduction of new environmental technologies	Miteva (2017)
Efficiency	Morrow & Rondinelli (2002)
Internal stakeholders pressure	Diez Martín et al. (2008); Neugebauer (2012)
Better corporate management and human resource management	Emilsson & Hjelm (2002); Grolleau, Mzoughi & Thomas (2007)

Source: García-Álvarez and de Junguitu (2023).

Table 2 – External motivations

External Motivation	Authors
External stakeholder pressure	Martín, García & de Castro (2008); Lannelongue & González-Benito (2012)
Customer demands	Grolleau, Mzoughi & Thomas (2007); Díaz de Junguitu & Allur (2019)
Improved image and reputation	Murmura et al. (2018); Ociepa-Kubicka, Deska & Ociepa (2021)
Market opportunities	Steger, Schindel & Krapf (2002); Miteva (2017)
Favourable institutional contexts	Emilsson & Hjelm (2002); Bracke, Verbeke & Dejonckheere (2008)
National culture	Steger, Schindel & Krapf (2002)

Source: García-Álvarez and de Junguitu (2023).

Overall, the review showed that in most of the analysed works, the interviewees showed a positive reception of the certifications (García-Álvarez & de Junguitu, 2023).

For the second concept mentioned, the studies directly involving the ECST were considered, to understand the current state of the literature on the matter. Most of the works were specific case studies concerning the implementation of the ECST in one particular natural area.

The study from Balandina et al. (2012) concerned the Lativan Natural Park of Kemerí. They analysed the ECST implementation, showing how one of the main innovations was the creation of the Kemerí Charter Forum, which put in contact with various local stakeholder groups, specifically areas management, municipalities, tourist businesses, residents, NGOs and tourist organisations (Balandina et al., 2012). As stated by the authors:

The key to success in Kemerí National Park has been to establish direct and personal contacts between park staff and tourism stakeholders, creating a basis for long-term relationships and cooperation. Strong personal relationships have led to a new approach to nature protection; it is now easier to focus on positive actions - what can be done - rather than restrictions - what cannot be done (Balandina et al., 2012, pp. 137-138).

Castellani and Sala (2010), in their work concerning the adoption of the ECST in the Italian protected areas of the Alpi Lepontine, also stated that the adoption of the ECST helped promote sustainable development not only in the natural park but in the whole region, involving many local stakeholders.

Capanna Piscé (2021) studied the role and effectiveness of the ECST participatory processes in the Torre del Cerrano (Italy) marine protected area. The study confirmed the importance of the certification participatory processes in involving the local stakeholders.

Murmura and Capanna Piscé (2022) also examined the governance model introduced through the ECST. They specifically analysed the case of the Sirente Velino natural park (Italy), highlighting the ECST impact on tourism management in the protected area. Through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and a survey of tourism actors, their study demonstrated that the collaborative framework of ECST fostered stronger cooperation between public institutions and private actors.

Torres-Delgado and Palomeque (2012) analysed another case study of the implementation of the ECST, specifically in the Spanish park of La Gomera, mainly focusing on a new methodology to evaluate the certification. Navaglio (2008) focused specifically on how to improve the efficiency in the certification implementation.

Considering the current literature on the matter and the years of publication, a clear gap emerged on how current park managers perceive the ECST, its impact, and the criticalities tied to the certification obtainment process.

3. Methodology

In order to support the adoption of the ECST certification and to provide preliminary research to serve as a foundation for more detailed studies, one research question has been considered:

RQ1. *How do Italian natural parks managers perceive the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) certification?*

To address this question, the study draws on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with nine key figures in the Italian natural park sector.

3.1 Nature of the research

The methodology adopted was a qualitative approach that involved data collected through in-depth interviews with nine management figures in the Italian natural park sector.

It employed semi-structured interviews, a method chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions while maintaining the flexibility to focus in specific areas of interest as they arose during the discussions. Many studies have deemed this technique particularly effective in capturing detailed insights and allowing for interactive exchanges (Niccolini, Cavallini, Giannini & Contini, 2018; Mose & Mehnen, 2020).

3.2 Population and sampling

The researcher, in charge of monitoring and implementing the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) between June 2022 and July 2023, conducted face-to-face interviews with selected Italian nature park managers with the help of Federparchi (Europarc Italia), which facilitated the identification of contacts. This approach enabled direct contact with key stakeholders, ensuring the data collected was relevant and comprehensive.

The participants in this study were selected based on their roles as managers of natural parks in Italy. Nine participants in total were interviewed, each holding a management position in their respective parks.

Their direct involvement in decision-making processes related to the implementation of the ECST ensured that the interviewees had substantial experience and insights into the role and impact of these certifications within their organizations. It should be noted that the parks and employing them also varied in size, geographic location and level of tourism activity, providing a diverse representation of the Italian natural park sector.

3.3 Field guidelines

The interviews were conducted in person, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Given the role of the interviewer at the time, to make the participant feel at ease, the decision was made not to record the interviews and only use written notes.

Specifically, the interviewer focused on writing down three main aspects: the main key points that emerged during the interviews, the implications for the sector, and lastly, his considerations. The interview was guided by ten main questions (Table 3):

Table 3 – Questions used during the interviews

N.	Interview Question
1	What is your opinion on the importance of the ECST certification (but also others such as EMAS and ISO 14001) for sustainable tourism in natural parks and protected areas?
2	How does the ECST certification influence sustainable management practices in natural parks and protected areas?
3	How does the ECST certification impact collaboration between organisations and stakeholders in the sustainable tourism sector?
4	How does the ECST certification contribute to communicating sustainable practices to tourists and other industry stakeholders?
5	What are the main benefits of adopting the ECST certification for natural parks?
6	Are there challenges or obstacles in implementing and maintaining the ECST certification? If so, what are they?
7	How does the ECST certification influence tourists' perception and behaviour in natural parks and protected areas?
8	How do you see the role of the ECST certification in promoting environmental, socio-economic, and cultural sustainability in natural parks?
9	What are the prospects for using environmental certifications in sustainable tourism, particularly for natural parks?
10	How does the ECST certification facilitate cooperation between the public and private sectors in the sustainable management of natural parks?

Source: Authors' elaboration.

4. Results

The data emerged from the interviews described in the methodology section, which involved nine managers of Italian natural parks, is showed in Table 4. From the analysis of this data, four key themes emerged regarding the perceptions of the ECST certification:

1. The legitimization and credibility given by certifications (Int. 1 and Int. 5).
2. The certification role in driving sustainable management practices and more organized management structures (Int. 3, Int. 4 and Int. 9).
3. The importance of certifications in fostering collaboration and networking among stakeholders (Int. 6, Int. 8 and int 9).
4. The educational and communication challenges associated with certifications (Int. 2, Int.4, Int 5 and Int. 7).

Table 4 – Interviews Results, including the key points that emerged during the interviews, the implications for the sector and the research considerations taken during the interviews

Int.	Key Points emerged	Implication for the sector	Researcher considerations
1	<p>Certifications like the ECST, EMAS, and ISO 14001 are essential to demonstrate the authenticity of sustainable practices, as they prove the actual implementation of sustainable practices.</p> <p>Many countries and organisations label themselves as "sustainable" or "eco-friendly" without concrete evidence, so there is a need to distinguish between genuinely sustainable tourism businesses and those that are sustainable in name only, and certifications serve as an independent and credible verification system to prove that natural parks follow sustainability rules and regulations.</p> <p>Certifications increase the transparency of business practices and help build trust between consumers and tourism organisations.</p>	<p>There may be increasing pressure on tourism organisations to obtain recognised certifications.</p> <p>The sector might move toward greater standardisation of sustainable practices.</p> <p>here may be a need to educate consumers and organisations about the importance and significance of various certifications.</p>	<p>The interviewee appears strongly convinced that certifications are the only reliable way to demonstrate commitment to sustainability.</p> <p>There is evident concern about greenwashing in the tourism sector.</p> <p>The interviewee views certifications as a tool to create a level playing field in the sustainable tourism sector.</p>
2	<p>There is a strong need for both individual and corporation awareness towards natural parks, as awareness is the first step toward sustainable practices.</p> <p>Emphasis on translating awareness into concrete actions and implementing sustainable practices after gaining awareness.</p> <p>I recommend working with recognised entities to obtain certifications.</p> <p>Recognition of an educational gap in the field of sustainable tourism.</p> <p>Emphasis on the "long road" still ahead.</p> <p>The critical role of Start-ups and Youth: Start-ups are more inclined to seek environmental certifications, and young people are considered the "prescribers" of sustainability.</p>	<p>There may be a need for targeted educational programs on sustainability in tourism.</p> <p>Start-ups could become leaders in the adoption of certified sustainable practices.</p> <p>The sector might see increased demand for expert consultancy to obtain certifications.</p> <p>There could be a greater focus on involving young people in sustainable tourism initiatives.</p>	<p>The interviewee emphasizes a gradual approach: awareness, action, and certification.</p> <p>There is a strong focus on the role of new generations and new businesses in driving change.</p> <p>It is acknowledged that the sector is still developing in terms of sustainability.</p> <p>Education is seen as a key element in promoting sustainable practices.</p>

3	<p>Certifications help natural parks achieve sustainability goals, as they are seen as a catalyst for implementing sustainable practices.</p> <p>After obtaining certification, we need to create detailed management systems, emphasising the importance of structured management to maintain sustainability standards.</p> <p>Many Italian parks would only adopt sustainability measures with the incentive of certifications. Such certifications serve as an external stimulus for implementing eco-friendly practices.</p>	<p>There may be an increased focus on developing sustainable management systems in natural parks.</p> <p>Certifications could become a de facto standard in the natural parks sector.</p> <p>There might be a rise in demand for consultancy services to implement sustainable management systems.</p> <p>The sector could evolve toward more structured and formalised management practices.</p>	<p>The interviewee views certifications as a necessary tool to drive change.</p> <p>There is a perception that many organisations would not be intrinsically motivated to adopt sustainable practices.</p> <p>The importance of formal management structures to ensure long-term sustainability is highlighted.</p>
4	<p>Certifications help align natural parks with sustainability goals, providing a framework for sustainable practices.</p> <p>Most natural parks either have certifications or seek to obtain them – this indicates a growing trend toward adopting sustainability standards.</p> <p>Potential imitation effect: other countries might follow Italy's example. Certifications as a tool for international leadership in sustainability.</p> <p>Certifications are crucial for spreading best practices.</p> <p>There is a need to improve communication within the sector to maximise impact.</p>	<p>There may be a greater focus on communication strategies for sustainable practices.</p> <p>The sector might see increased efforts in international collaboration based on common standards.</p> <p>A positive competition among countries could develop to demonstrate leadership in sustainable tourism.</p> <p>New opportunities may emerge for consultants and experts in sustainability communication.</p>	<p>The interviewee views certifications as a tool for standardising and spreading sustainable practices.</p> <p>There is a strong emphasis on the potential of certifications to influence practices beyond national borders.</p> <p>A communication gap is recognised, which could limit the impact of certifications.</p>
5	<p>Certifications serve as tangible proof of sustainable practices.</p> <p>Foreign tourists might be inspired by the sustainable practices they observe. Certifications can act as tools of soft power and cultural influence.</p> <p>There is a need to actively communicate sustainable practices to influence others,</p>	<p>The sector might see a rise in investment in international communication campaigns about sustainable practices.</p> <p>New metrics could be developed to measure the influence and impact</p>	<p>The interviewee sees certifications as a management tool and a means of influence and inspiration.</p> <p>There is a strong emphasis on the role of communication in maximising the impact</p>

	<p>as a lack of communication can make sustainability efforts invisible.</p> <p>The visibility of sustainable practices can encourage others to follow suit</p>	<p>of sustainable practices on international visitors.</p> <p>Collaboration between tourism entities and communication experts might increase to maximise the impact of certifications.</p>	<p>of sustainable practices.</p> <p>The Interviewee believes in the potential of certifications to create a ripple effect in the global tourism industry.</p>
6	<p>Certifications like ECST in Italian parks promote the sharing of values and ideals among different organisations and create a common foundation of sustainability principles.</p> <p>Certifications encourage a shared focus on environmental conservation issues, creating conservation goals across different organisations.</p> <p>Certifications stimulate coordinated efforts to minimise waste and promote a systematic approach to resource management.</p> <p>Certifications foster a network of organisations with similar goals, facilitating the exchange of best practices and knowledge.</p>	<p>There may be a greater focus on creating networks and platforms for sharing sustainability knowledge, as the sector might see increased collaborative initiatives between parks and certified organisations.</p> <p>New partnership models based on shared sustainability values and goals could develop.</p> <p>The demand for training and professional development focused on the sustainability principles promoted by certifications may increase.</p>	<p>The interviewee sees certifications as a tool to create cohesion and alignment in the sector.</p> <p>There is an emphasis on the role of certifications in promoting a shared culture of sustainability.</p> <p>The potential of certifications to stimulate collaborations and synergies among different organisations is recognised.</p>
7	<p>Tourists are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of parks. Certifications serve as a response to these rising expectations.</p> <p>The ECST certification facilitates communication among different parts of the tourism sector, creating a common language around sustainability.</p> <p>Certifications promote adopting common standards in the tourism sector, facilitating benchmarking and comparison among organisations.</p>	<p>There may be an increased focus on developing marketing strategies highlighting certifications and sustainable practices.</p> <p>The sector might see a rise in investment in staff training on sustainability communication.</p> <p>New tools and platforms could be developed to facilitate cross-sector communication and collaboration on sustainability.</p>	<p>The interviewee recognises a shift in consumer demand toward more sustainable practices.</p> <p>There is an emphasis on the role of certifications in improving communication and collaboration within the sector.</p> <p>The importance of a unified approach to sustainability in tourism is also highlighted.</p>

8	<p>Certifications in Italian natural parks promote cooperation among municipal stakeholders, creating a common ground for local-level collaboration.</p> <p>This cooperation wouldn't occur spontaneously without certifications – they serve as a stimulus for local stakeholder engagement.</p> <p>Certifications also help align sustainability goals among municipal actors, facilitating a shared vision for sustainable territorial development. They also provide a framework to overcome potential conflicts or divergences among local stakeholders, as they promote a collaborative approach to natural resource management.</p>	<p>There may be a greater focus on developing participatory governance models in natural parks.</p> <p>New mechanisms for coordination and collaboration between public and private entities at the local level could develop.</p> <p>There may be a growing demand for facilitators and mediators specialised in managing multi-stakeholder processes in the context of sustainable tourism.</p>	<p>The interviewee views certifications as a crucial tool for stimulating local-level cooperation.</p> <p>There is recognition of the potential for certifications to overcome existing inertia and barriers.</p> <p>The interview strongly emphasised the importance of a participatory approach to the sustainable management of natural parks.</p>
9	<p>Environmental certifications oversee the sustainable approach of the destination, providing a framework for the overall management of sustainability.</p> <p>Certifications also promote balanced involvement between the public and private sectors. Creating a platform for cross-sector collaboration.</p> <p>Focus on managing environmental, socio-economic, and cultural sustainability in natural parks.</p> <p>Promotion of an integrated approach to sustainability.</p> <p>Certifications support the development of the capacity to effectively implement sustainable practices by providing guidelines and standards for the concrete implementation of sustainability policies.</p>	<p>There may be an increased focus on developing collaborative governance models for managing natural parks.</p> <p>New professional roles specifically for sustainability management in natural parks could develop.</p> <p>There may be a growing demand for tools and methodologies to measure and monitor the impact of sustainable practices across all aspects (environmental, socio-economic, and cultural).</p>	<p>The interviewee views certifications as a tool for the overall governance of sustainability.</p> <p>There is a strong emphasis on the importance of a balanced and inclusive approach involving all sectors.</p> <p>The interviewee recognises the role of certifications in creating concrete operational structures for sustainable management</p>

Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.1 *Legitimize and improve the park credibility*

The perception that the ECST certification helps parks prove that they genuinely implement sustainable practices and methods in their management structure is among the most common themes emerged from the interviews.

Most prominently among Interviewees 1 and 5, the interviewees consistently emphasised that certifications provide a credible, third-party validation of their sustainability efforts. This helps distinguish genuinely sustainable parks from those claiming to be eco-friendly.

Interviewee 1 noted that in a context where many organizations may label themselves as sustainable without concrete evidence, the ECST offers reliable proof that increases transparency and builds trust with tourists, local citizens and stakeholders.

Interviewee 5 highlighted that the certification doesn't only confirm the implementation of sustainable practices but also acts as a tool of soft power, influencing both local and international perceptions through its certified authenticity.

This dual function, both as a mark of credibility and as a countermeasure against greenwashing, suggests that widespread adoption of ECST could drive a trend toward standardized sustainable practices across the sector.

This is supported by current literature, highlighting the importance of certifications in enhancing transparency and accountability in the tourism sector (Font & Harris, 2004; Murmura et al., 2018; Zametter, Burlando & Bosco, 2022), thus helping the overall credibility of natural parks as sustainable tourism destinations.

4.2 Drive sustainable management practices and organised management structures

The study highlights that the ECST certification is also perceived as an effective method for driving sustainable practices and structured management systems within natural parks. Interviewees 3, 4 and 9 emphasized how obtaining certifications often necessitates the development of comprehensive management systems that put sustainability at the core of park operations. According to Interviewee 3 and 4, the process of certification goes beyond simply meeting regulatory requirements, as it prompts park management to adopt a more systematic approach that formulates clear goals, structures, and benchmarks for maintaining high sustainability standards.

This structured management framework allows parks to set clear sustainability targets, prioritize resource management, and ensure continuous improvement. Interviewee 9 pointed out that certifications create incentives for parks to install appropriate tracking mechanisms for sustainability metrics such as waste reduction, energy savings, and biodiversity conservation. Through this process, parks establish formal governance structures and protocols to manage their sustainability efforts more effectively.

Furthermore, certifications like ECST create a structured pathway for parks to align their operations with international sustainability standards, thus fostering greater consistency and standardization across the sector.

This structured approach is recognized as essential, particularly in the context of growing pressures to demonstrate real environmental commitment.

These findings align with previous literature, (Grolleau, Mzoughi & Thomas 2007; Bracke, Verbeke & Dejonckheere 2008; Buckley, 2012; Murmura et al., 2018), which emphasized that environmental certifications play a key role in translating sustainability principles into actionable practices, providing clear guidelines and measurable standards for effective implementation.

4.3 Foster collaboration and networking among stakeholders

The perception of certifications having a role in fostering collaboration and networking among different stakeholders was also highlighted during the interviews, particularly among Interviewee 6, 8 and 9.

Interviewee 6 explained that certifications like ECST promote the sharing of core values and ideals, creating a common foundation that encourages the exchange of best practices and coordinated efforts in environmental conservation.

Interviewee 8 emphasized that the certification process serves as a stimulus for local stakeholder engagement, aligning the sustainability goals of municipal authorities, private entities, and natural parks, which in turn facilitate participatory governance and collaborative decision-making at the local level.

Interviewee 9 further noted that by providing a unified framework, certifications not only ensure balanced involvement between the public and private sectors but also create a platform for cross-sector collaboration to manage environmental, socio-economic, and cultural sustainability. These insights align with existing research (Eagles, 2002; Castellani & Sala, 2010; Balandina et al., 2012), which underscores that effective collaboration is crucial for achieving sustainable tourism goals.

4.4 Educational and communication challenges associated with certifications

The most significant problematics emerged concerned the challenge of education and awareness regarding certifications and sustainability. Interviewees 2 and 7 pointed out that park staff and the general public often needed a clearer understanding of the certification process and of what the certification itself represented.

This aligns with previous literature, identifying a need for more awareness and education as barriers to adopting sustainable practices among tourism-related entities (Font & Harris, 2004; Šimková, Kořínková & Obršálová, 2023).

The study also identified potential collaboration barriers, particularly concerning communication. Interviewees 2, 4, 5, and 7 pointed out that the lack of communication can limit the impact of certifications, as stakeholders may need to be fully aware of each other's efforts or how they can contribute to shared goals.

They argued that without visible and consistent communication efforts, the sustainability efforts of parks might go unnoticed, limiting their influence and impact. This finding is supported by current literature, which highlights the role of communication in raising awareness and encouraging responsible behaviour among tourists (Moscardo, 2008; Tölkes, 2020; León & Araña, 2020).

By effectively communicating their sustainability practices and achievements, parks can attract environmentally conscious visitors and set a benchmark for other parks and tourism entities to aspire to. The study suggests that communication should be considered an integral part of the certification process rather than an afterthought.

5. Conclusions

This study serves as preliminary research into the perception of the ECST certification among current managers of Italian natural parks. It is essential to emphasise the preliminary nature of the research conducted, focused on partially filling the gap in the current literature by bringing fresh and up-to-date data, laying the foundations for future more comprehensive and resource-intensive studies, as the insights obtained in many different fields highlight the need for further research to fully understand the complexity of environmental certification in the context of the management of natural parks.

The findings of this preliminary study suggest that certifications among natural parks managers are considered crucial instruments for promoting and validating sustainable practices, driving structured management and fostering collaboration across the sector. However, the study also reveals criticalities related to intrinsic motivations, education processes, and communication strategies, which warrant further in-depth exploration.

The critical insights that emerged from this initial research are (i) the perceived role of certifications in establishing the credibility of sustainability claims, (ii) the role of certifications in implementing and maintaining sustainable management practices, (iii) the potential role of certifications in fostering collaboration among the parks and various public and private entities and stakeholders, (iv) the need for targeted educational programs that not only inform park staff and the public about the importance of certifications but also inspire a more profound commitment to sustainable practices, (v) the need of effective communication strategies to ensure that the sustainability efforts of parks reach the wider public and are visible to both tourists, local lawmakers and public and private stakeholders.

The theoretical contributions of the study involve expanding the existing body of literature on environmental certifications used in the tourism sector by offering new insights into the perceptions of Italian natural parks upper management regarding the ECST certification. While previous research has examined the role of environmental certifications such as EMAS and ISO 14001 in tourism management, there has been limited focus specifically on the ECST. This study partially fills that gap by exploring how natural park managers perceive the certification, thereby advancing theoretical discussions on sustainable tourism governance.

Concerning the managerial implications of the study, the research provides relevant insights to policymakers and certification bodies officials. The park's managers perceived strengths and weaknesses associated with the ECST and the processes needed to obtain it can be used to refine the certification process and the way the certifications are promoted.

The limitations of the study lie in the number of participants and the methodology employed, as the researcher was alone during the interviews and chose not to record them to keep the interviewees at ease, so future research in this field could benefit from a second researcher in the room, to better gauge the answers of the interviewees, and from a complete recording, to be able to analyse the insights emerged comprehensively. While the role of the researcher at the time and the measures taken to make the participants agree to the interviews are one of the study's main limitations, it also allowed the study to happen in the first place. Future studies could include a larger sample size and a more structured approach to validate these preliminary findings and explore their implications. They could also include the intrinsic motivation of park managers to adopt sustainable practices beyond the requirements of certifications.

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