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Hotelier Attitudes toward Sustainability in Virginia Beach

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Virginia Beach hoteliers' knowledge surrounding sustainable tourism, awareness of sustainable programs offered both on the local and national levels, and evaluation of the current sustainable programs available in Virginia Beach. The Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau distributed a sustainability-focused survey to the General Managers of all hotels in Virginia Beach city limits. With the various programs available and limited success to this point, it is imperative to get hoteliers involved in order to continue to work toward Virginia Beach's vision of being a sustainable destination. In order for Virginia Beach to continue to position itself as a premier sustainable destination, its leaders must educate their hoteliers of the programs available in order to increase engagement.

Keywords: tourism, sustainability, tourism study, attitudes toward sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is a growing trend across all industries in the U.S. and the world today. The hospitality and tourism industry in particular is under immense pressure to become more environmentally friendly from the following sources: consumer demand, increasing environmental regulation, managerial concern with ethics, customer satisfaction, maintenance issues related to the physical plant, and the need for aesthetics (Manaktola and Juahari, 2007). Many major hotel chains have implemented sustainability programs including Hilton, Marriott, and Wyndham, to name a few. But even within the tourism community there is dispute surrounding what makes a tourism business sustainable. This inter-industry disagreement of definition makes it difficult for industry practitioners to develop policies and implement changes to achieve sustainability.

Little research has been conducted in the United States in regards to what encourages hoteliers to become more sustainable. This study examined Virginia Beach hoteliers' knowledge surrounding sustainable tourism, awareness of sustainable programs offered both on the local and national levels, and evaluation of the current sustainable programs available in Virginia Beach. With the various programs available and limited success to this point, it is imperative to get hoteliers involved in order to continue to work toward Virginia Beach's vision of being a

sustainable destination. This discussion is also timely as it can provide insight for other destinations and an evaluation model for other sustainable tourism programs.

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

Unfortunately, there is no consensus on the definition of terms such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable tourism’ (Swarbrooke, 1999, Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003). The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) defines ‘sustainable development’ as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (43). When applied to tourism, this definition becomes “forms of tourism which meet the needs of tourists, the tourism industry, and host communities today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Swarbrooke, 1999, 13). Generally speaking, it is usually thought vital to any sustainable tourism definition to emphasize the environmental, social and economic elements of the tourism system (Swarbrooke, 1999).

Swarbrooke (1999) notes the following attributes to sustainable tourism development to meet the three legged (environmental, social, and economic) approach to sustainable tourism development: slow and controlled development, appropriate scale, long term, qualitative, local control, concept-led schemes, planning before developing, local developers, locals employed, vernacular architecture, repeat tourist visits, tourists must mentally prepare before visiting, tourists must be tactful and sensitive, and tourists must learn the local language. Beiolley (1995) identifies four features for tourism to be sustainable: tourism must respect the economic well-being and social and cultural concerns of host communities, tourism must respect the character of the local environment and operate within that environment’s capability to regenerate itself, tourism should reduce its impact on the wider global environment in terms of depletion of natural resources and pollution, and lastly tourism should provide a meaningful and satisfying experience for the individual. Ultimately, regardless of what academic scholars have defined as ‘sustainable tourism,’ the range of tourism businesses, diversity of environmental impacts, and the essentially commercial nature of the business have resulted in various interpretations of the term as well as many real and perceived barriers to adoption (Hobson and Essex, 2001). Although many of these definitions are related, without a clear consensus of what “sustainable tourism” is, both tourism businesses and travelers are left confused as to what is and what is not considered sustainable tourism.

ATTITUDES TOWARD SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

According to Horobin and Long (1996) the success of the tourism industry moving toward becoming more sustainable remains dependent on the willingness and ability of individuals in the tourism industry to act on such guidelines. If a hotelier is unwilling to act on the provided guidelines, should guidelines be provided, then the industry will never move toward becoming sustainable. To further complicate this predicament, being successful is subjective as there is no consensus as to what makes tourism “sustainable.”

The response of the tourism industry to the concept of sustainable development has been mixed (Hobson and Essex, 2001). Although successes are varied, it is apparent that the benefits of sustainable tourism are not solely in terms of environmental gains (Hobson and Essex, 2001).

There can also be benefits for tourism businesses in terms of reductions in the cost-base through savings, enhanced reputations, greater appeal to more affluent customers, favorable impressions to investors, improved job satisfaction for staff, an enjoyable experience for visitors, and benefits for the local community (Swarbrooke, 1994). On a large scale, many of the larger businesses have introduced initiatives to promote the principles of sustainability (Hobson and Essex, 2001, Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003). Unfortunately, just because a large hotel chain implements a sustainability policy does not mean that all properties with a chain flag (especially franchised properties) will comply with the policies. Further research has indicated that some large hotel groups believe some 'sustainable' practices, like water and energy conservation, are in conflict with the principle of luxury accommodation and might adversely affect the enjoyment of a guest's stay (Forsyth, 1995). Dewhurst and Thomas (2003) note there are virtually no examples from within the industry of concerted action. Hobson and Essex (2001) regard the main barriers to implementing sustainable changes appear to be a lack of understanding and awareness of environmental issues related to tourism, the fear of extra costs, and skepticism of what is perceived to be an impractical and overly theoretical concept. Hoteliers overall seem unwilling to invest in sustainable practices without a guaranteed tangible financial reward.

CASE STUDY

Virginia Beach was selected for this study because of the efforts by the destination to become a premier green meetings destination. The local convention center is LEED gold certified for existing buildings, the Visitors Center just earned the EPA Energy STAR certification for superior energy efficiency, the Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau was the first Platinum member of the International Green Meeting Industry Council, and the city is promoting a new tax benefit for energy savings (City of Virginia Beach, 2011). Virginia Beach even has a sustainability plan. In his vision statement, Mayor Will Sessoms, mentions "like many cities Virginia Beach has set a goal to become a sustainable city...to achieve this idea we need real ideas, real steps, real solutions" (City of Virginia Beach, 2011).

The Virginia Green program is run as a partnership between the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, the Virginia Tourism Corporation, and the Virginia Tourism & Hospitality Association (Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, 2012). The current requirements to achieve the Virginia Green lodging certification include: optional linen service, recycling, water conservation, energy conservation, and the ability to accommodate green meetings/conferences (Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, 2012). While in theory the Virginia Green certification is very beneficial to properties and their efforts to become sustainable, the application process is relatively lenient and the program does not currently monitor approved properties to ensure they are maintaining a certain standard. Although the City of Virginia Beach is working diligently to become a green destination, the local hoteliers have not enrolled in the local tax savings program nor achieved any major sustainable certification. Outside of the Virginia Green program, which is now required for all state government business, hotels have made little to no effort to become more sustainable. Further, while the City of Virginia Beach is working diligently to become a green destination, the local hoteliers have not enrolled in the local tax savings program nor achieved any major sustainable certification.

This study is meant to determine why hoteliers are resistant to becoming more sustainable and what would motivate them to make the necessary changes to achieve sustainability. This study also sought to examine Virginia Beach hoteliers' knowledge surrounding sustainable tourism, awareness of sustainable programs offered both on the local and national levels, and evaluation of the current sustainable programs available in Virginia Beach. With the various programs available and limited success to this point, it is imperative to get hoteliers involved in order to continue to work toward Virginia Beach's vision of being a sustainable destination.

METHODOLOGY

The Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau distributed a sustainability-focused survey to the General Managers of all hotels in Virginia Beach city limits. The Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors' Bureau current listing of hotels in Virginia Beach determined the sample. The survey was in an online format and sent via email with an Internet link. General Managers were instructed to click the link and complete the survey. A total of 47 hoteliers received the survey on December 9, 2011 and responses were collected until January 15, 2012. Of the 47 hotels that received the survey link, 20 hotels or 42.5% participated. Questions were a combination of multiple-choice, open-ended, and five point Likert-scale questions (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree). The survey obtained information related to the understanding of sustainable tourism, the adoption of sustainable practices, participation and awareness of current sustainable programs, and evaluation of said sustainable programs.

RESULTS

Understanding the Sample

All of the hoteliers surveyed are very experienced in the hotel industry and experienced in being a key decision maker for their property. Of the hoteliers surveyed, 95% of respondents hold the position of General Manager and 45% of respondents have been in the position of General Manager for five or more years. A large majority (95%) of respondents have been working in the hotel industry for more than ten years. Regarding the properties, 85% of respondents' properties are franchised, 75% operate under the guidance of a management company, and 85% of respondents' properties operate under a brand flag. The most popular brand flag represented in the survey was Hilton, with four other major flagged properties in Virginia Beach responding. The flags represented are displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Hotel Brand Flags Represented in the Sample

Brand Flag	# of Responses
Hilton	4
Choice Hotels	3
Ramada	1
Best Western	1
Starwood	1
Carlson	1
Marriott	1
IHG	1
Wyndham	1

Understanding of the Concept of Sustainability

Respondents were asked to give their personal definition of sustainability. Of the twelve definitional responses received, five responses were somewhat related to the “sustainable tourism” definitions discussed earlier in this report: “forms of tourism which meet the needs of tourists, the tourism industry, and host communities today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Swarbrooke, 1999, 13). Of these five definitions given, four definitions referred to protecting the environment in some manner and one very closely matched Brundtland Report’s definition of sustainable development. Refer to the appendix for a complete review of the definitions provided.

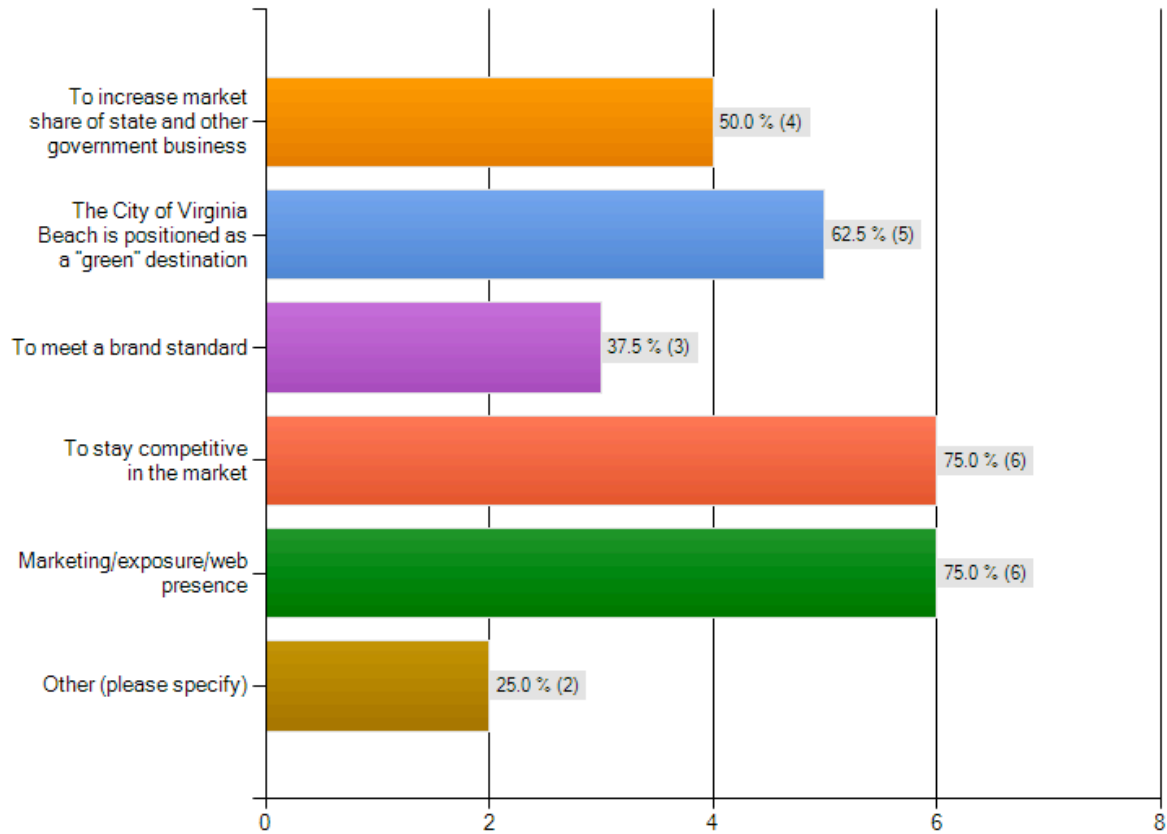
A majority (72.7%) of respondents say sustainability in some form is part of their organization’s mission and 50% of respondents say their organization (brand or management company) has a definition of sustainability. Of these six respondents who listed their organization’s definition, two refer to the environment and one is similar to the Brundtland Report’s definition. When asked to define the acronym LEED, only four respondents were able to correctly define LEED and four additional respondents knew the definition was related to sustainable development and practices.

Participation & Evaluation of Current Sustainable Programs

A majority (72.7%) of respondents are Virginia Green certified. When asked to identify their reason for achieving Virginia Green certification, *to stay competitive in the market and marketing/exposure/web presence* received the highest scores. Refer to Chart 1 below for a summary of the respondents’ reasons selected for achieving Virginia Green certification. Of the properties that are Virginia Green certified, 62.5% felt this certification made their property sustainable. The rating average for both the importance of Virginia Green certification to the property and the tourism industry was ranked 4 out of 5 on using an importance scale with 5 being very important.

Chart 1
Reasons for Virginia Green Certification

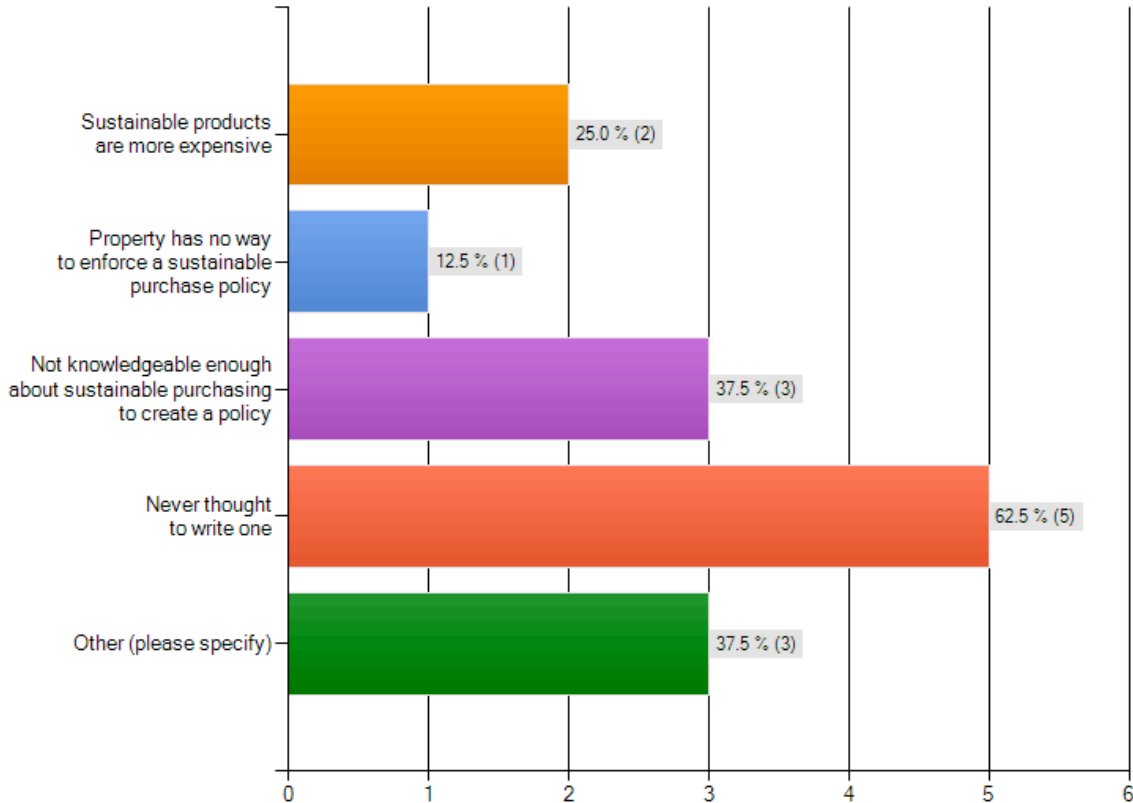
Why did you become VA Green certified? Select all that apply.



Only 27.3% of properties currently have a sustainable purchasing policy in place; of those properties the reasons for said policy include: long term cost savings, the purchasing policy is a brand requirement, and the purchasing policy is a management company policy. Chart 2 below describes the reasons hoteliers listed for not implementing a sustainable purchasing policy.

Chart 2
Reasons Hotels Have Not Implemented a Sustainable Purchasing Policy

Why do you NOT have a sustainable purchasing policy in place? Select all that apply.

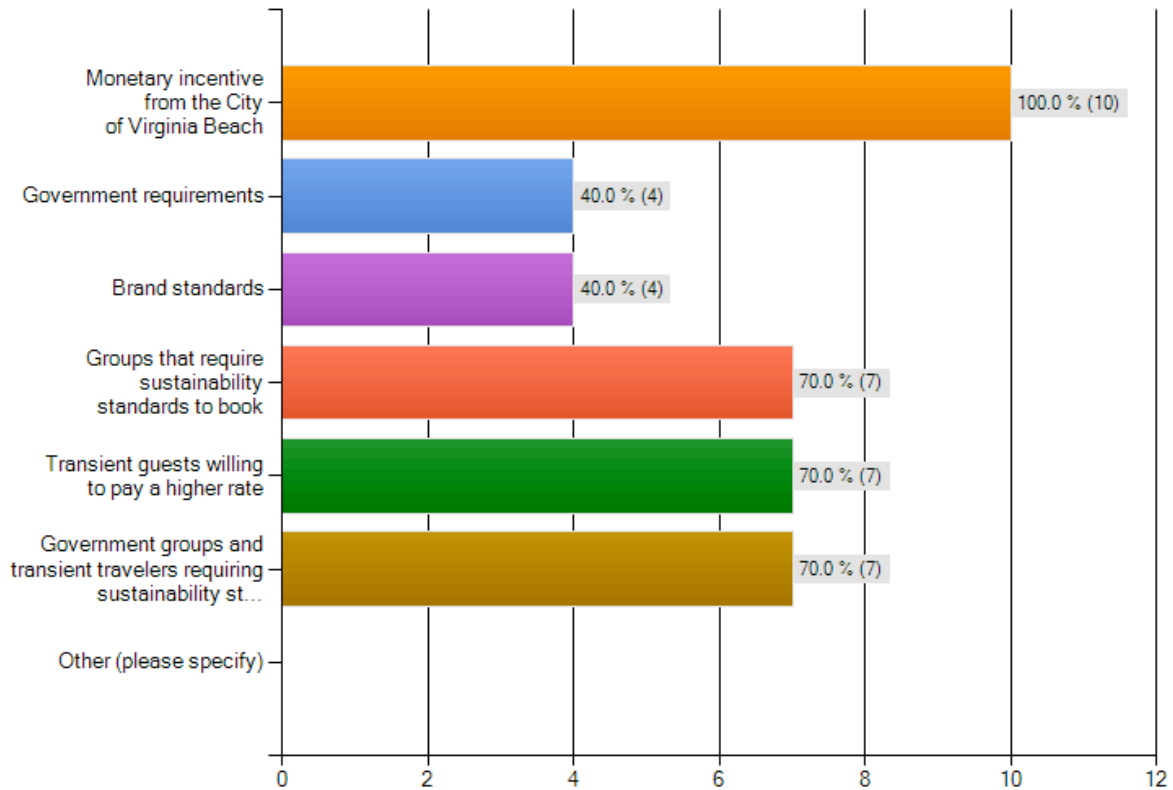


Only three properties are currently participating in the Virginia Beach energy tax credit program. 80% of respondents said the reason they are not participating in the tax credit is because they did not know the program existed; another 20% said that meeting the required 30% energy reduction is too expensive. Of the properties that completed recent renovations (five properties), 60% made sustainable purchases during their renovation. A large majority (81.8%) of respondents do not have a sustainability committee.

Attitude Toward Sustainability

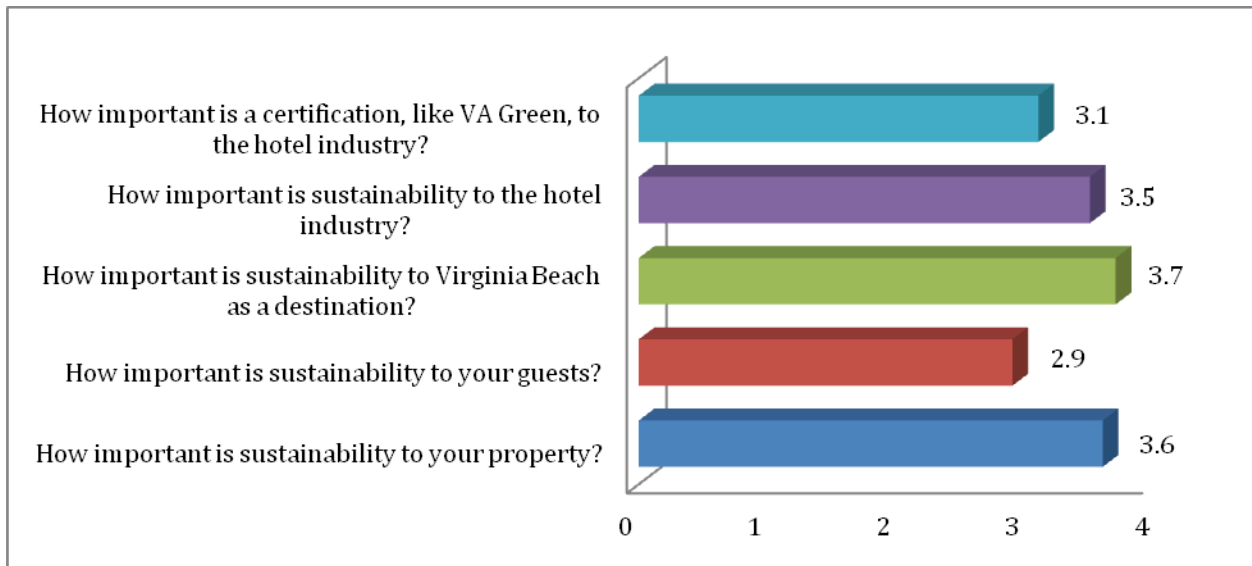
Chart 3 below describes reasons hoteliers would make sustainable changes to their properties; *receiving monetary incentive* was the top motivator chosen.

Chart 3
Reasons Hoteliers Would Become More Sustainable
 What would encourage you to make sustainable changes to you property? Select all that apply.



Using a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important), hoteliers were asked their opinion concerning the importance of sustainability from various stakeholder perspectives. As illustrated in Chart 4 below, sustainability was scored highest for Virginia Beach as a destination and lowest for hotel guests.

Chart 4
Hotelier Opinions Concerning the Importance of Sustainability from Various Stakeholder Perspectives



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From this research it is clear that most Virginia Beach hoteliers have a grasp of what sustainability is; however, hoteliers do not seem to understand how to move from defining sustainability to implementing it into their day-to-day operations. While Virginia Beach hoteliers agree that sustainability is important to the destination of Virginia Beach based on these results, Virginia Beach hoteliers are lacking the information they need to make good decisions regarding what sustainability programs to become involved in. This suggests Virginia Beach could do a better job communicating their vision of becoming a premier sustainable destination to its stakeholders and getting them on board with support. Over half of the respondents listed sustainability as part of their mission but programs must be developed to better reach the hoteliers in a realistic way and to help connect the city and hotel missions and visions of sustainability. It is clear that the hoteliers need more education and assistance in developing their own sustainable policies and help understanding the many benefits those policies can provide to both the properties and destination. Responses to the current programs are positive and the overall attitude toward sustainability is positive, but only within the restraints of improving the bottom line.

Sustainability is a trend that is here to stay. In order for Virginia Beach to continue to position itself as a premier sustainable destination, its leaders must educate their hoteliers of the programs available in order to increase engagement. Hoteliers will only participate in programs and changes that will make positive changes to their bottom line, regardless of brand missions and standards. Education and value are the clear keys to creating and maintaining a sustainable destination.

APPENDIX

Hotelier's Personal Definitions of Sustainability

A clean, well maintained, family environment.
Operations that minimize waste, recycle, and protect the environment.
Utilizing products that will give back or keep our environment from more damage.
continued growth and product
Making daily choices to recycle, use recycled or biodegradable products and reduce
water and energy usage whenever and wherever possible.
doing the best thing for the enviroment in our control
to endure
energy efficient, renewable resources, low carbon footprint
paying the bills all year along-follow up
To be able to support demand!
using and reusing the resources we have as to not deplete them for future generations

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