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Certification work in the Swedish Ecotourism Sector
-A study of Nature's Best certified companies

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Abstract

Ecotourism is said to be one of the major innovations to ever have occurred within tourism and is expected to grow in the following years. In comparison to ordinary tourism, ecotourism has a focus both on what the traveller does and what impact the tourism activities have on the environment and the surrounding society. Ecotourism is indeed a beautiful concept but the fact is that these principles and practices are often corrupted and watered down. If ecotourism should overcome those problems and be able to fulfil its potential there is a need for clear and measurable standards and this is where certification programs have their role. In our study, we analyse what it means to tourism operators in Sweden to be an ecotourism certified organisation and understand why they chose to engage in such practices. The exploratory study is based on nine companies certified by Nature's Best and includes deep interviews and observations. The findings from the interviews help us to create a collective identity concerning what it is to be an ecotourism company as well as the meanings of ecotourism as a whole and companies who share this identity are more likely to engage in ecotourism certification practices. The perceptions of Nature's Best as well as the causes behind certification work are also important aspects when gaining an understanding for why Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecocertification practices.

Keywords: Ecotourism, certification, identity construction, collective identity, Nature's Best

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to explore the meanings Swedish tourism organisations associate with ecocertification systems and why they chose to engage in such practices. In the following chapter the reader is introduced to the chosen area of research, the research problem is presented and the significance of the study is explained. In the end, the research question and objectives are clarified.

1.1 Background

Today, ecotourism is said to be “the most profound intellectual innovation ever to have occurred within tourism” (Honey, 2002, p. 1) and while traditional tourism is said to have reached its saturation point, ecotourism is expected to have continuous growth in the following years (Honey, 2008b, p. 7). Ecotourism is defined as: “Responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” (The International Ecotourism Society, 2011). In comparison to ordinary tourism, which is basically travel undertaken for pleasure, ecotourism has a focus both on what the traveller does and what impact the tourism activities have on the environment and the society in which it takes place. This impact is expected to be positive (Medina, 2005).

Ecotourism is indeed a beautiful concept, but the fact is that these principles and practices are often corrupted and watered down. “Greenwashing” and “ecotourism lite” are phenomena which are today undermining the credibility of the ecotourism concept. In greenwashing, organizations use green language in their marketing in order to give an impression of being ecotourism organizations and “ecotourism lite” is a similar phenomenon where organizations take minimum measures which rather benefit their own business instead of the community in which they operate (Honey, 2002, p. 6). Tepelus state that a reliable and trustworthy image constitutes an important competitive advantage for companies. Since the consumer demand for status and quality increases more and more, the information that a company is involved in sustainable practices can be a valuable differentiator, creating uniqueness of the company (Tepelus, 2005). “Green tourism” has therefore come to be perceived as a marketing tool for competing with the traditional tourism which today dissatisfy many tourists, and win the

growing customer segment of environmentally and socially conscious customers (Honey, 2008b, p. 25). Within tourism, easy solutions are though often chosen because of short-term financial reasons but in the long run this might work against them (Haaland & Aas, 2010). If ecotourism should overcome the above mentioned problems and be able to fulfil its potential there is a need for clear and measurable standards and this is where certification programs have their role (Medina, 2005).

Up until now, the focus on ecotourism certification in Scandinavia has been relatively limited (Gösling & Hultman, 2006, p.5), but today the situation is changing and the attention for ecocertification of touristic products is increasing (Haaland & Aas, 2010). Scandinavian countries are generally seen as strongly committed to sustainable practices and in recent years the interest in ecotourism in Scandinavia has even increased, both from the public, scientific and governmental bodies (Gösling & Hultman, 2006, p.4). In fact, consumer demand for responsible tourism is growing in the whole world (CESD/TIES, 2005) and consumer pressure is one of the drivers behind the changes in attitude toward dealing with corporate environmental issues (Henriques & Sardosky, 1996). What is interesting to know though is that the demand comes from people who are generally not activists in the issue. The convenience of responsible tourism products is therefore of vital importance for these people to consume it. Ecocertifications are important since it makes it easier for the customers to evaluate the quality of the product. The certificate will help the customers in the way that it provides a description of the product's quality concerning environmental and social effects (Honey, 2008a).

The problem is that today, there are about 100 certification programmes in ecotourism and sustainable tourism (Honey, 2008a) and Scandinavia and Sweden constitute no exception. There is a large amount of certifications connected to sustainable tourism in Scandinavia and Sweden is one of the most successful countries, hosting exclusively no less than five certification programs in the field (Gösling & Hultman, 2006, p. 72). Sweden is also the only country in Scandinavia that has developed a national certificate devoted fully to tourism: Natures Best (Gösling & Hultman, 2006, p. 2).

This wide array of certification programs lead to difficulties for tourists in determining what the certifications stand for (Haaland & Aas, 2010). The quality and success of the certification programmes vary considerably. For example the number of members and certified businesses

of Swedish certification systems range from 12 to several hundreds of members. There are also great differences in certification processes where some programmes demand assessment by a third party while others are satisfied with self assessment and this constitute yet a difficulty for consumers to judge whether or not a product is sustainable from an absolute point of view (Gösling & Hultman, 2006, p. 72). As a consequence, the resulting process of quality evaluation gained from ecocertification as mentioned above is aggravated (CESD/TIES, 2005).

Another problem is that even if previous research state that sustainable tourism has increased in recognition during the last years and consumer surveys indicate that they expect environmental and social friendly behaviour from the organisers, the tourists do not ensure themselves that the environmental criteria for sustainable tourism are met and very few are willing to pay extra for it (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). Since many certification initiatives do not lead to the wished marketing benefits and consumer awareness they are intended to, there is a lack of incentive to continue being a part of such a program (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). A problem for many certification programs is therefore the difficulty of gaining members and to keep them (Font, 2002).

1.2 Purpose and significance of the study

Most books and articles about certification in tourism have a general and international perspective. There are only a few focusing on specific programmes and very little written about tourism certifications in Sweden. Some scientific articles discuss benefits as well as challenges with certifications. However, these studies take place internationally, and not in Sweden. In order to see how certifications in tourism works on a national level and to get an understanding about why tourism organisation engage in ecotourism certification practices, we want to look at companies certified by Nature's Best which is the only certification system in Sweden fully devoted to tourism. Even if the organisation has many members, far from all tourism businesses in Sweden are certified.

We see it as an important matter to investigate and analyse why Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecotourism certification practices. The hope is that this should lead to a better knowledge in the area which will in turn benefit many different actors. By increasing

the knowledge about why companies choose to engage in ecocertification practices, Nature's Best as well as other ecocertification actors will get valuable information in how to increase their member numbers. Members of ecocertification programs will also benefit since the publishing of their comments and viewpoints will hopefully lead to future adoptions of ecotourism programs to better accommodate their needs. Increased numbers of certified companies will create a better selection of ecocertified products to choose from which will benefit ecotourism consumers as well as the Swedish tourism industry as a whole since its attractiveness will increase.

1.3 Research question and objectives

Depending on the previous discussion, our research question is as follows:

Why do Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecotourism certification practices?

Through this research our objectives are:

- *To explore the meanings of being an ecotourism certified organisation.*
- *To understand the perception of Nature's Best certification system by certified ecotourism organizations.*
- *To analyse the causes behind certification work in the Swedish ecotourism sector.*

1.4 Chapter outline

In the first chapter the research topic is presented and the research question and objectives related to the problem. The second chapter introduces the existing literature and theories on the topic. Previous research, findings and concepts regarding causes behind certification work, identity creation and perceptions of ecotourism are described. The third chapter presents the methodology we used in order to collect and analyse the empirical data. The explorative case study and the cases are introduced. In the fourth chapter we present and analyse our empirical results from the fieldwork, categorized by the three objectives and we also interconnect the three objectives and explain how they affect each other. Narrative and

content analysis are used to discuss the findings and the relationships between research objectives, theoretical framework and the empirical study is clarified. The chapter is ended with a list of recommendations to Nature's Best from our respondents. In the fifth chapter the main findings will be concluded and their practical applicability discussed. We will also present our recommendations to Nature's Best, based on our findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter previous literature and theories are presented. Initially the concepts of ecotourism and certification are explained, followed by previous research on consumer demand, motivation and challenges concerning ecotourism certification. Finally, our theoretical framework for analysis of certification systems is presented.

2.1 Ecotourism and Sustainability

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as follows: “Responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” (TIES, 1990). Ecotourism is intimately connected with the concept of sustainable development which in 1987 was defined by the Bruntland Commission as a development where we are “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN, 1987). This definition makes a clear distinction between ecotourism and ordinary tourism which is basically travel undertaken for pleasure. Nature tourism is a form of tourism related to ecotourism and is often mistaken for being the same. The truth is though that there is a distinct difference between these two categories. Nature tourism is defined as “travel to unspoiled places to experience and enjoy nature” and is hence focusing on what the traveller is doing and what activities he/she is taking part in. Ecotourism on the other hand has a focus both on what the traveller does and what impact the tourism activities have on the environment and the society in which it takes place. This impact is expected to be positive. Ecotourism strives to contribute to the education of travellers, the conservation of the environment and the improvement of the community in which it takes place and the fostering of respect for the local culture of the destination. Therefore, ecotourism is not just another niche of the tourism industry, such as nature tourism, but a set of principles and practices for how to do tourism (M. Honey, 2002, p. 1-2).

There is a multitude of more or less recognized definitions of ecotourism. For example, Buckley (1994) developed a framework of ecotourism based on four main dimensions: ecotourism being nature based; conservation supporting; sustainably managed; and environmentally educating. In other research done by Pedersen (1991), ecotourism is

explained as fulfilling five main criteria: protection of natural areas, production of revenue, education and local participation and involvement. Finally, Wallace and Pierce (1996) provide their view on ecotourism as something that minimises impacts, increases awareness, contributes to conservation, allows local people to make their own decisions, directs economic benefits to local people and provides opportunities for local people to enjoy natural areas.

In a content analysis conducted by Sirakaya et al. (1999), based on studies of US based ecotourism operators, a ‘supply- side’ view of ecotourism is presented. The definitions from this study are presented in the table below, starting with the most common definition.

Table 1: Definitions of ecotourism

Major Themes	Description of the Theme
Environmental-friendly tourism	Tourism that is environmentally safe, minimizes impact on nature and wildlife and contributes to environmental protection and dynamic conservation.
Responsible travel	Responsible tourism that respects the cultures, societies, ecology, and the Natural environment.
Educational travel	Tourism that generates environmental awareness and imparts natural and cultural education to tour operators, tourists/guests/clients, and local inhabitants.
Low-impact travel	Nonimpact or low-impact tourism. Tread lightly, only photos, no collection, leave only footprints. Nonintrusive exploitation of natural resources.
Recreational and romantic trips to natural sites	Outdoor tour experience including the presentation and appreciation of natural wonders in areas of immense beauty such as visiting U.S. parks, that is, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Sonoma desert; or visiting international diving areas such as Red Sea, Brazil, Belize.
Contribution to local welfare	Tourism that produces economic (monetary profits and job opportunities) and social benefits to local people.
Ecocultural travel	Touring areas of cultural and historical importance (seeing other cultures in natural areas) focusing on natural history and local culture.
Sustainable/nonconsumptive tourism	Tourism that includes sustained conservation of resources in a non-consumptive manner for future generations through the controlled use and management of cultural and environmental resources.
Responsible-business approach to travel	New tourism involving companies that are sensitive to environmental concerns and take stand on issues; companies that try to operate in an ecological sense; companies that promote ecologically correct awareness; travel companies that support the use of the target country’s operators’ lodging, guides, and so on.

Community involvement	New form of tourism that encourages active involvement of the local Population
Tourist involvement in preservation	Tourism that promotes interaction with the natural environment while encouraging tourists to actively preserve.
Buzzword	Politically loaded buzzword, being politically correct, a marketing ploy.
Contribution to conservation	Tourism that contributes to nonprofit conservation organizations.

(Sirakaya et al 1999, p. 171)

2.2 Certification in ecotourism

As previously mentioned, ecocertifications are important since it makes it easier for the consumers to evaluate the quality of a product or service. The certificate will help the consumers in the way that it provides a description of the product's quality concerning environmental and social effects (Honey, 2008a). According to Buckley (2002), standards of a certification initiative that distinguish the approved products and organizations from the not approved, is one of the most important components when it comes to satisfying consumers. Toth (2002, p. 92) emphasize the importance of the users to be convinced of the credibility of the certificate and its process and further states that credibility can be achieved through accreditation and recognition. The importance of third part involvement is also emphasized by Honey (2008a).

Today, many certification initiatives lack third part involvement and this harms their credibility and exposes them to accusation of greenwashing. Certification initiatives in other industries have had great success, much because of effective third part assessment and this is something the tourism industry must learn from. Within tourism, easy solutions are often chosen because of short-term financial reasons but in the long run this might work against them (Haaland & Aas, 2010).

Buckley (2002) means that the response of consumers and other stakeholders to an ecocertificate among other things depend on to what degree the stakeholders agree on the importance and meaning of the terms used by the certificate. Further he states that there is a difficulty of setting standards with the right level of detail and depth. On the one hand a too complicated system will cause confusion among consumers, leading to ignorance of the

certification system, but on the other hand a certificate with less explicit criteria might gain little attention from some consumers. The need to do this trade of between simplicity and complexity is something that even Haaland & Aas (2010) have observed and they also emphasize the importance of balancing realism and ambitions. The standards used should be operationalised and failures in this area have often been criticised (Buckley, 2001, p. 203).

2.3 Consumer demand and awareness

Henriques and Sardosky (1996) have written an article about incentives that motivate companies to deal with corporate environmental issues. They elaborate on something they call pressure group incentives and state that consumer pressure is one of the drivers behind the changes in attitude toward these issues. They further state that even other stakeholders, such as employees, neighbour groups and trade associations, are affecting the attitudes of corporations and they mean that each of these stakeholders pinpoint environmental threats that needs to be avoided by the corporations.

It is generally agreed in the tourism industry that the awareness regarding sustainability and environmental concern is growing and that this will increase the demand for more sustainable tourism products (Dodds and Joppe, 2005). In studies done by Tearfund, a Christian British relief and development agency, it is reported that consumers want responsible tourism and that the interest is increasing. A report from the organisation from 2002 states that more than half (52%) of the British public going on holiday "...would be more likely to book a holiday with a company that had a written code to guarantee good working conditions, protect the environment and support local charities in the tourist destination" (Tearfund, 2002, p. 7).

Although consumers are increasingly demanding sustainable behaviour, very few are willing to pay more for sustainable tourism products. From surveys done in previous research it is ascertained that there is a contradiction between consumers' intentions and actions (Dodds and Joppe, 2005; Font, 2003b; Miller, 2001). Font (2003b) says that there is a clear difference between consumer environmental purchasing claims and their actual purchasing behaviour. Several tourists say that they would select an environmental friendly alternative and are willing to pay more to ensure that it is sustainable. However, the reality shows that

consumers' decisions are usually based on other criteria, such as price, reputation of the destination, safety and security, logistics, political and social conditions etc. (Honey, 2002, p. 363). Even though consumers say that they care about environmental and social issues on their holidays, they do not feel responsible for making sure that these criteria are met. Instead, ensuring responsible behaviour becomes the tourism operator's responsibility (Dodds and Joppe, 2005). In a report from Tearfund from 2002 it is declared that 55% of consumers think that travel agents has the responsibility to provide the tourists with information and 48% believe that it is the responsibility of tour operators and tour guides.

Another problem concerning consumers' demand for certification is awareness. Most tourists are unaware of the existing certification systems in the tourism industry. In a survey it is estimated that the number of aware tourists is as low as 1 % (Honey, 2002, p. 364). Furthermore, the large number of different certificates confuses the consumers. In many countries the certification systems overlap each other, making it very difficult for consumers to distinguish among the programmes (Honey, 2002, p. 366). The tourists have problems in determining what the certifications stand for and therefore it is problematic for the industry to gain credibility for their certification programmes (Haaland & Aas, 2010). The level of knowledge and concern on the topic of sustainability and certification among the consumers plays a major role for the response to ecocertifications (Buckley, 2002). Buckley (2002) states that consumer acceptance as a reliable, meaningful and useful tool in their evaluation of a product constitutes the most basic test of tourism ecocertifications. Font follows this argument and states that since tourism certification is not market-led but resource-based it will have little impact (Font, 2003a).

2.4 Motivators and challenges for engaging in sustainable practices and certification systems

Based on previous literature, this section describes different motivators and challenges concerning companies engaging in sustainable practices and certification programmes. The motivators of ethical concern, lifestyle and business size, competitiveness and cost savings, legitimation and recognition as well as marketing are explained.

2.4.1 Ethical concern

The decision to be ecologically responsible is in many companies based on the values of powerful individuals who have emphasised the importance of being environmentally responsible in the firm. In a study by Bansal and Roth (2000) it is claimed that businesses motivated by ecological responsibility chose to be this based on ethical criteria, not because it is financially optimal. In their research it is clear that these people felt responsibility for the environment and were genuinely concerned for the environment. Further, it is stated by Bansal and Roth (2000) that companies want to be responsible because “it is the right thing to do” and that the initiatives create “feel good factors” in the business. This is also argued in a study by Tzschentke et al (2004), done on businesses who are members of an environmental scheme. Here it was found that one of the prime reasons for companies to be sustainable is ethics. Firms were environmentally committed because of moral obligation or they had a desire to contribute to the preservation of the environment. As in Bansal and Roth’s (2000) article, the respondents in the study made by Tzschntke et al (2004) mention that “it is the right thing to do”, from both an individual and a business perspective. Many had serious concerns and firmly held moral values for the environment. The researchers also noted that these small firms that where studied where closely connected with its owners, and for this reason the responsible actions of the owners were mirrored in the businesses. Many respondents had inherited the “environmental thinking” from their parents and they had been environmentally active long before joining a scheme. Furthermore they where thinking about their children and future generation when taking responsible actions. The respondents also felt their responsibility to extend to the business and viewed their actions as fulfilling their duty within the community.

Honey (2002, p. 93) states that many people working in the tourism industry feel the need to be responsible for the environment and the community. For this reason, certification can help them to contribute and by doing so, they gain satisfaction. Tepelus (2005) also emphasise the sense of involvement and responsibility as a derived benefit of sustainable practices within the company. This could be in the form of demonstration to the employees of the top management’s commitment in the issue as well as active promotion of improved performance and motivation of the employees.

2.4.2 Lifestyle and business size

Previous research also recognises that there is a difference between large firms and small businesses concerning ethical concern. Tzschentke et al (2004) conclude that the personal values in small owner-managed firms are affecting the business more than in large companies. In a study by Spence and Rutheford (2000) it is said that small businesses go beyond normal business motivations of being profit driven. Instead, social values and actions are integrated in the business and take priority over profit maximisation and work becomes more of a long-term choice of lifestyle.

Roberts and Tribe (2008) state that, by being small and locally owned, some businesses automatically contribute to sustainable tourism development. The sense of commitment to the area in which the business operates and the future of that area is according to Dewhurst and Thomas (2003) connected to these small businesses. This has to do with the fact that they may be more concerned to pursue a certain lifestyle rather than a strategy of profit maximisation. Dewhurst and Thomas mean that it is widely recognised that smaller enterprises have a pivotal role for initiatives of more environmentally sensitive business. As mentioned, these businesses are concerned with pursuing a certain lifestyle. Conservation and lifestyle goals are according to Dewhurst and Thomas (2003) closely related. In his work about “Life politics”, Butcher (2008) refers to individual actors’ attempts to make a difference to the environment in which they live by repositioning themselves culturally in the context of their own lives. Ecotourism is a clear case of this with its close associations with ethical lifestyle. The connection between conservation and lifestyle goals is confirmed by Carlsen et al. (2001) in their work about rural tourism and hospitality sectors.

Ateljevic and Doorne (2000) mean that lifestyle entrepreneurs often reject economic growth opportunities and that this is an expression of their socio-political ideology. This choice often results in the opportunity to engage with “niche” market consumers with values common to themselves. New innovative products are created by these entrepreneurs, which among other things articulate values of sustainability. Dewhurst and Thomas (2003) state that businesses that are committed to sustainable practices were most likely to have non-economic motives. Personal values in small businesses are said to be affecting the business more than in large businesses. These businesses might go beyond normal profit motivations and instead let social

values and take priority. This makes work become more of a long-term choice of lifestyle (Sirakaya et al, 1999).

Findings conclude that businesses committed to sustainable practices are in general more concerned to make active choices when purchasing. This included for example purchasing environmentally responsible products and using local suppliers. These businesses are also most committed to supporting local suppliers (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003). Ateljevic and Doorne (2000) also describe how lifestyle entrepreneurs create products that show on values of sustainability but also how these products stimulate regional development. Carlsen et al (2001) suggests that the local orientation of family firms makes them more likely to engage in environmentally friendly actions.

2.4.3 Competitiveness and cost savings

A way to get competitive in the market is through differentiation. By entering early into a “green” market the company differentiate themselves and has the possibility to become more attractive and thus, more competitive (Honey, 2002, p.199). A certification distinguishes companies further in the market, making certified businesses more attractive and competitive (Honey, 2002, p. 93). An additional benefit of engaging in sustainable practices is that it, according to Tepelus (2005), can lead to increased investor attractiveness.

As a company takes initiatives such as resource savings, energy and waste management and recycling, it can lower the company’s costs (Bansal, 2000). In addition, savings can be made from shortening the value chain when taking ecological responsibility. Many fair trade products, for example coffee, have very few intermediaries, which generate economical benefits for both the producers and the retailers (Honey, 2002, p.118). Furthermore, if a company wants to achieve certification, the company is required to use practices that save resources which in turn reduce costs (Dodds and Joppe, 2005). Tzschentke et al (2004), argue that reducing costs by increasing operational efficiency is one of the prime motives for business to adopt environmental measures. High running costs from for example water, energy and waste disposal charges as well as taxes, become catalysts for looking for alternative, cost-efficient practices. Introduction of environmental measures improves the business’s efficiency and can hence lower the company’s costs.

Working with ecological issues can also enhance a company's competitiveness in the way that it attracts more competent co-workers. By taking responsible initiatives a company's reputation has the ability to improve. A better reputation can in turn simplify attracting quality employees (Bansal, 2000). In certified businesses the personnel receive training, equipment and motivation. This makes the workers more proud and efficient, which also translates into competitiveness. Increased learning could also be seen as a cost savings (Honey, 2002, p. 93). Videras and Alberini (2000) mean that the attractiveness of voluntary programs partly come from the possibilities of technology transfer and learning from others. By joining the same program as other more successful players, they hope to learn from their practises how to perform better in sustainability issues.

Another aspect of costs is that businesses usually need to pay to obtain a certification. Many companies in the tourism industry are very small and have limited financial resources and therefore the costs can be too high for the company to apply for certification (Dodds and Joppe, 2005). Miller (2001) argues that we cannot expect businesses to take responsible initiatives unless it becomes economically beneficial. And that this will depend on the demand and supply of the companies' products. He means that firms' negative behaviour will not stop until the costs for being environmentally responsible are lower than the costs to be irresponsible.

2.4.4 Legitimation and recognition

Legitimation means that a company's values are complying with the values and norms that exist in the surrounding world (Ljungdahl, 1999, p. 45). Legitimacy is important as the company is dependent on the stakeholders' trust to be able to operate and be competitive in the market (Karlsson, 1991). A motive of legitimation is that the company wants to improve its actions within the established set of regulations, norms, values and beliefs. Companies want to comply with regulations because they are afraid to lose their business or get fines and penalties if they do not. An approach to gain legitimacy is, according to the respondents in Bansal's et al (2000) study, to imitate other companies. By doing like other "good" companies do, it is possible to get recognition and a better image among consumers (Honey, 2002, p. 93).

In an article by Priego (2011) et al it is said that one of the main reasons for businesses to implement social corporate responsibility programmes is to improve the company's image.

Honey (2002, p. 93) claims that certification improves the image among tourists, suppliers, governments and the general public, which result in enhanced reputation and status. This is also argued by Tzschentke et al (2004), who mention that an environmental award can show a firm's commitment, as well as complement the image of the business. Tepelus (2005) state that a reliable and trustworthy image constitutes an important competitive advantage for companies. Since the consumer demand for status and quality increases more and more, the information that a company is involved in sustainable practices can be a valuable differentiator, creating uniqueness of the company.

Dodds and Joppe (2005) state that a certification improves the recognition among the peers. Thus, certification gives attention and showcasing the best practice. Tzschentke et al (2004) conclude that a key decision factor in joining a scheme is to set the example and encourage best practice among other operators.

2.4.5 Marketing

According to Tzschentke et al (2004), the prospect of getting marketing benefits is a key factor when deciding to join an environmental scheme. In their study it is stated that it is very appealing to use environmental credentials to attract business, not only in the domestic market, but also internationally. Honey (2008b, p. 104) mean that many small tourism suppliers lack the knowledge, business skills and resources needed in order to effectively market their products. She further lifts up the importance of the government and other intermediaries as a support and help in marketing.

Tzschentke et al (2004) says that recognition is an important motive for businesses to be environmentally committed. Further, it is stated that the underlying motivation for seeking recognition lies in the possibilities to get good publicity and reach out to customers. According to Buckley (2002), global brand recognition is one of the main components for maximum market response. He also states that for maximum effectiveness the certificate must be recognized in the marketplace for the products or companies who use it.

Honey (2008b, p. 362) emphasizes the fact that it is not the certification system in itself that attracts the consumers but that a sound market strategy is needed to make the certificate successful. For organisations to apply they need to be confident that the certificate will benefit them with possibilities to improve both performance and market advantage. Marketing is important since organisations tend to be unlikely to engage in certifications which are not known and valued on the marketplace. The lack of applicants will further result in lack of recognition (Buckley, 2002). Toth states that one of the main motivators, not at least in tourism certification programs, for companies to apply for certification is the marketing effort. Marketing shall be used to create interest, promote participation and illuminate the resulting. (Toth, 2002, p. 92)

Dodds and Joppe (2005) mean that since many certification initiatives do not lead to the wished marketing benefits and consumer awareness, there is a lack of incentive to continue being a part of such a program. They further state that B2B marketing might be a better tool than marketing directly to end consumers since this awareness is so low.

The success that Sweden has had in ecotourism can, according to Gössling and Hultman (2006, p.3), be explained by the way that it is marketed. Instead of lifting up the sustainability aspect and benefits for the environment, the ecotourism activities are marketed as extraordinary experiences. Hence, there is a semantic shift from the marketing of sustainability characteristics to marketing of the experience character of the journey that offers benefits to the individual traveller. This helps in overcoming the problem of justifying the higher price that comes with most “green” products.

2.5 Theoretical framework to analyse certification systems

Below is the theoretical framework used to analyse the chosen cases presented. Different theories on how identity is constructed and used are discussed and later on used in our analysis of why companies chose to engage in ecotourism certification practices. The theories include identity, collective identity, framing and boundary work as well as identity and alterity. The section ends with a summary of how the parts of the framework relate to each other and how they are used in the study.

2.5.1 Identity

Tjårnemo (2001, p. 57) describes corporate identity as “the self-presentation of an organisation; it consists in the cues which an organisation offers about itself via the behaviour, communication, and symbolism which are its forms of expression”. Melucci (1996, p.71) emphasize the notion of unity that distinguishes a subject from others and establishes the limits of it.

2.5.2 Collective identity

Johnston et al (1994, p. 15) describes the construction of collective identities as group activities, membership and boundaries. The social self of a movement can be described as the sum of the social identities it is made up of and how these identities are acted out (Johnston et al, 1994, p. 12). Through the interaction of these individual identities (or the identities of several groups) and the definitions of the individual members’ situations in relationship to the actions and the field in which the actions take place, a shared definition of the collective identity is created and constantly evolving. By interacting and negotiating over these individual definitions, in connection to the movements reference frame, a collective “We” can be constructed (Melucci, 1996, p. 67). Ergas (2010) emphasize how new meanings all the time are created and recreated as the interactions take place and new experiences add depth to the meanings.

Ergas (2010) states in her work about identity creation within ecovillages that collective identity is created through a process where common values and goals are converted into action. She further shows how this identity is built up by several individuals, pursuing their own separate businesses, but with the same goal, which is sustainability. In this way, the members of the ecovillage aim to be “a model of sustainable living,” using the collective identity, beyond each member, to have an effect on the surrounding community.

Johnston et al (1994, p.16-17) elaborate on two different perspectives of collective identity: One side is that it is cognitively real, which means it is based on real experiences. The other side is that it is idealized, which means it tells us how to behave. Therefore, the partaking in a collective identity is both about being part of constructing it and obeying the norms it has given rise to. The norms and values of the collective identity will affect the behaviour of the individual and how this individual thinks of him/herself. The more the individual identifies with the collective, the more the norms of the group will affect his/her behaviour.

2.5.3 Framing and boundary work

Boundary work is a concept used in interactionist social analysis to study socially constructed realities. It refers to the practices where people order social reality in cultural categories. (Andersson Cederholm, 2010). In the case presented by Andersson Cederholm, hosts of Bed & Breakfasts create categories by the rhetoric they use where the commercial business of multinational hotel corporations are visualised as non-personal and their own business is visualised as familiar and home-like. In this example the respondents hence create two separate categories; the economic/public versus the non-economic/private sphere.

Snow et al (1986) discuss the same concept but call it framing. They refer to the linkage between the interpretive orientations of Social Movement Organizations, such as a set of individual interests or values, and their activities, goals, and ideology and they mean these are congruent and complementary. These frames, or interpretations, help individuals to identify, perceive, and label occurrences in their own social sphere and the world at large. Hunt et al (1994, p. 185) elaborates on the connection between framing and identity construction in collective action situations. They mean that the construction of identity is always inherent in framing, in the way that it creates identities of either collaboration or conflict. Melucci (1996, p. 348) support this statement when describing framing as a relational process in which the actor has a position in the social field which carries partiality and tensions with it. Snow et al (1986) mean that framing is a necessary condition for participation in any movement. Based on research made by Hunt et al (1994, p. 186) on social movements, there are three different categories of identity fields for actors: protagonists, antagonists and audiences. Protagonists who sympathize with the values and goals of the movement, antagonists which are the

opposites of the protagonists and audiences which are neutral observers. These different categories overlap and change over time.

Protagonists' identity fields consist of identity constellations for the advocates of the movement. These contain collective identity attributes for the whole movement as well as its allied organizations. Through these framing processes, an organisation can position themselves within a collective action context and create distinctions of who is with them or not, thereby assigning other organisations to a different ideology (Hunt et al, 1994, p. 193; Melucci, 1996, p. 349). This way of framing the own organisation from others can be called boundary framing (Hunt et al, 1994, p. 194).

Antagonist identity fields consist of identity constellations for the opponent to the movement's causes and are seen as the obstacle preventing goals from being attained and needs to be filled (Melucci, 1996, p. 350). These consist of for example claims about counter movements and inimical publics and could be socially constructed identities such as villains. Antagonists such as "big businesses" and "closet bigots" are attributed with collective and individual identities. A variety of framing processes can be used to make claims about antagonists' identities and the most obvious way of doing this is by identifying collectives, individuals or practices as being opposed to the protagonists' identities. Hence, these framing processes both attribute blame to certain actors, at the same time as they support the construction of protagonist and antagonist identity fields (Hunt et al, 1994, p. 197-198).

2.5.4 Identity and alterity

The construction of self is not only about identity but just as much about alterity, the "other" (Czarniawska, 2006). Van Alphen (1991, p. 2-15) even states that the "other" and the "self" can only be defined in relation to each other. He further describes alterity as the code which helps us to understand identity and therefore the analysis of identity and alterity goes hand in hand. Identity and alterity are each others' opposites and while identity tells us that we are the same as others, alterity tells us that we are unique (Czarniawska, 2002, p. 130). There are two ways of seeing these terms of identity and alterity, which both focus on the construction of the "other". In the first way identity is formed by excluding the "other" (Corbey & Leerssen, 1991, p. xii). In the second way the interplay between identity and alterity can be seen as

harmonization of otherness by expanding identity (Corby & Leerssen, 1991, p. xi). In this way sameness can be maintained through alterity (Taussig, 1993, p. 129). Czarniawska describes alterity as “creating a distance and a difference as a way of self-description” (Czarniawska, 2002, p. 33). Taussig (1993, p. 144) suggests that alterity is not only about distinction between two or more different actors but also has a hierarchy inherited.

2.5.5 The relationship between collective identity, framing and alterity

The concepts of identity, alterity and framing are closely related and interconnected. Identity construction is dependent on alterity construction since alterity helps us to understand our identity. Further, the construction of identity affects framing constructions, in the way that it creates identities of either conflict or collaboration, giving us identities of antagonists or protagonists.

In our analysis we look for common identity cues that together build up a collective identity that ecotourism companies share. We also use constructions of alterity and framing in order to analyse how ecotourism organisations identify with and take distance from other actors, thereby creating a process of collective identity construction

3. METHODOLOGY

In the following chapter our methodology will be presented. Our study adopts a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews and observations. First, we will explain our approach followed by methods used collecting and analysing the data. The validity and reliability of our study will also be discussed. The section includes a description of Nature's Best and our cases.

3.1 A qualitative study with an exploratory approach

In contrast to quantitative studies, which focus on numbers and figures, qualitative studies rely on qualitative information, such as words, sentences and narratives (Blumberg et al, 2008, p. 191-192). Qualitative studies are about understanding the behaviours and situations of a few individuals, (Veal, 2006, p. 40), which usually involves gathering a large amount of information from a few numbers of people (Veal, 2006, p. 99). In this thesis our aim is to get an understanding for why Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecotourism certification practices, therefore a qualitative approach is suitable. When doing a qualitative study we are able to gain more knowledge about what it means to the nine selected companies to be an ecotourism certified organisations, how they perceive Nature's Best, as well as understanding causes behind their certification work.

Since we did not have a clear idea of what problems we would meet during the study we chose to use an exploratory approach, which is common when using a qualitative method (Blumberg et al, 2008, p. 201). An exploratory study "... seeks to discover, describe or map patterns of behaviour in areas or activities which have not previously been studied" (Veal, 2006, p. 3). Previous research about certification in tourism has a general and international perspective. Very few studies have been conducted on ecocertifications in the tourism industry in Sweden. There is no research to be found about why Swedish tourism companies engage in ecotourism certification practices. For this reason, we want to discover this phenomenon through exploration.

3.2 Case studies

In order to answer or research question and objectives we have chosen to make nine case studies, including interviews and observations, on companies certified with Nature's Best. Instead of using a laboratory setting and isolating the phenomenon from its natural context, a case study investigates the phenomenon within its real-life context (Blumberg et al, 2008, p. 375).

There are many certifications for ecotourism worldwide. In Sweden there are also a number of systems that certifies ecoproducts, such as Svanen and KRAV. However, these programmes do not have their main focus on tourism. Therefore, Nature's Best is quite unique with its system in Sweden. For that reason Nature's Best was chosen for this study. Our hope is that this study will not exclusively be for Nature's Best, but that it also can be useful for other practitioners in the tourism industry as well as for others working with different kinds of ecoproducts. Our study can give an indication on why organisations engage in ecopractices both in the tourism industry as well as in other industries and we hope that the study of Nature's Best, one of the leading certification systems of its kind in Scandinavia, can be an inspiration also for other countries in northern Europe.

3.2.1 Nature's Best

Nature's Best is a certificate for tourism operators and activities that offer nature experiences in Sweden (The Swedish Ecotourism Society, 2005). The certification programme Nature's Best started in the beginning of 2002. The system was the first one to certify ecotourism in Sweden and was developed in cooperation with around 20 Swedish organisations and authorities. Today Nature's Best consists of over 250 certified nature products from around 80 operators. The organisation behind Nature's Best is The Swedish Ecotourism Society, in cooperation with VisitSweden (The Swedish Ecotourism Society, 2010). The Swedish Ecotourism Society is a non-profit organisation that started in 1996. The organisation consists of more than 400 member companies and organisations as well as around 400 private individuals. Their goal is to promote ecotourism in Sweden and internationally. Visit Sweden is a joint organisation for the state- and the travel industry, which is working to promote Sweden as a destination internationally (The Swedish Ecotourism Society, 2004a; The

Swedish Ecotourism Society 2004b). Nature's Best's goal is to create more and better ecotourism in Sweden (The Swedish Ecotourism Society 2010).

3.2.1.1 Certificate, certification process and criteria

Nature's Best is built on six fundamental principles (Table 2). These principles are the base for approximately 30 requirements for each applying company, together with 60 bonus requirements for every activity (The Swedish Ecotourism Society 2004c). To get the certification, both the operator and every single activity must fulfill all base criteria, as well as 25 percent of the bonus criteria. For some activities, such as horse riding, fishing, hunting etcetera, there are some extra requirements that have to be fulfilled (The Swedish Ecotourism Society 2005).

To apply for the certification, the tourism operator or activity must buy a "start package" from The Swedish Ecotourism Society. In the package information is collected about provisions, application forms and checklists. The Swedish Ecotourism Society assesses the applications and if the operator or activity can fulfill the requirements they make a visit to the operator. After the visit it is decided whether the activity receives the certification or not. Operators and activities already certified with Nature's Best can also be reviewed with cluster sampling or if there are suspicions about lack in the quality. When the arrangement has been certified the company has, amongst other, the right to use the certification in its marketing of the activity, to describe the activity at Nature's Best's website together with a link etcetera. (The Swedish Ecotourism Society 2005). The application for Nature's Best, including the company visit, costs between 4 500 and 15 000 Swedish kronor, depending on the company's turnover. In addition, there is a yearly fee for certified companies of 4 000 to 20 000 Swedish kronor, depending on the company's turnover (The Swedish Ecotourism Society, 2004d).

Table 2: Nature's Best six basic principles

1. Respect the limitations of the destination – minimise the negative impacts on local nature and culture

Ecotourism is about preserving what the visitor has come to experience. The ecological and cultural capacity of each area must be respected. This means tour operators must have a solid knowledge of the destination, a local presence and work closely with others present in the area.

2. Support the local economy

Ecotourism is about community development. Conservation can easily fail if local people object to it. Tangible benefits from tourism are a positive force. Each visitor contributes economically to the well being of the destination by renting rooms, hiring local guides and purchasing goods and services. The more the better.

3. Make all the operators' activities environmentally sustainable

Ecotour operators must set a good example of sound environmental practice. Approved operators have policies to minimise environmental impact by prioritising e.g. collective transport, sustainable lodging, waste management etc...

4. Contribute actively to nature and cultural conservation

Ecotourism assumes responsibility for the protection of biodiversity and special cultural values. This means supporting nature preservation in various ways. Our operators cooperate to find 'win-win' ways of doing business.

5. Promote knowledge and respect and the joy of discovery

Ecotourism is about travelling with curiosity and a respectful mindset. Approved operators are competent hosts providing visitors with a good introduction to the area. Good advice and guidance are often the key to a memorable trip.

6. Quality and safety all the way

Ecotourism is quality tourism. Approved tours must meet and even exceed our customers' high expectations. Safety issues are taken very seriously, and we have many satisfied customers. An approved tour operator is a trusted supplier and partner.

(The Swedish Ecotourism Society, 2004e)

3.2.2 Sample selection

We selected eight case studies on companies certified with Nature's Best and one on a previously certified company. Because of time and money constraints we chose to do a convenience sampling and conducted all interviews and observations with companies in south-western Sweden. In a convenience sampling the researchers have the freedom to choose whoever they can find for their research and it is a useful approach when conducting an exploratory study (Blumberg et al, 2008, p. 252). When using a qualitative method, the researcher is not concerned with a random selection or a specific number, but is instead trying to get a picture of the social structure, which is observed (Veal, 2006, p. 294). In our study we aim to get an understanding for why the respondents engage in ecotourism certification practices and therefore using a convenience sample can help us to gain more knowledge about this.

For this study we started with contacting Nature's Best and they sent an e-mail to all certified (and previously certified) companies in Halland, Bohuslän and Västergötland, telling them about our study and that it was going to be part of an evaluation of Nature's Best that started in the spring 2011. Thereafter, we contacted all companies by telephone or e-mail and all but one were willing to participate, which meant we had nine cases for our study. During the interview process we were able to visit the premises of all the certified companies, except one. This was a conscious decision, since we wanted to see and observe the companies in their real-life context. All of the respondents that we contacted and later on interviewed were owners of the businesses.

We want to make the reader alert on the fact that the chosen companies all operate in south-western Sweden, and therefore represents this part in particular, but that the aim is that most of the answers and the resulting analysis can be transferred to ecotourism in the whole of Sweden and Scandinavia.

3.2.3 The cases

This study is conducted on nine companies that are, or have been, certified with Nature's Best. These are shortly presented below. We have renamed the companies in order to increase their anonymity.

“The countryside company” was certified with Nature's Best in 2003 and is situated in Västergötland. The business is run as a sheep farm, but also includes a small farm shop and accommodation. They have courses in sheep farming, metal crafts, handicrafts, history and culture. Furthermore, hiking- and biking packages with picnic are provided (The countryside company, 2004).

“The ecological hostel company” is a hostel located in Västergötland. “The ecological hostel company” ended their relationship with Nature's Best in early 2011. Besides environmentally friendly accommodation, the hostel provides bicycles, boats and kayaks for rent (The ecological hostel company, 2011).

“The food tourism company” is situated by the coast in Bohuslän. The company provides fishing adventures such as lobster safaris, oyster eating courses and crab fishing. The business has been certified since 2007 (The food tourism company, 2011).

“The home-style hotel company” is a small hotel in Bohuslän, which was certified with Nature's Best in 2009. Besides accommodation the hotel can provide conference and wedding facilities. They also offer lobster safaris together with local fishermen (The home-style hotel company, 2004).

“The local fisherman company” is located in Bohuslän and has been certified since 2009. The business mainly focuses on different kinds of boat trips, such as lobster fishing (The local fisherman company, 2011).

“The dedicated fisherman company” was certified in 2009 and is located in Bohuslän. The company has different kinds of fishing trips and has a couple of boats for fishing- and charter

activities. Also, they have boathouse facilities for lobster and seafood dinners (The dedicated fisherman company, 2011).

“The experience company” has its base in Bohuslän and focuses on activities such as kayaking, cycling and climbing. The company has been certified with Nature’s Best since 2005 (The experience company, 2011).

“The simple life company” is a hostel and wilderness camp in Bohuslän. The business offers activities such as canoeing, angling and hiking, as well as accommodation in cottages and cabins. The business was certified in 2008 (The simple life company, 2007).

“The wildlife company” is located in the countryside of Halland. The business offers hunting, fishing and canoeing as well as cottages for rent. The company has been certified with Nature’s Best since 2002 (The wildlife company, 2011).

3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews in qualitative research usually include a small number of interviews, but the amount of information collected from each respondent is very large (Veal, 2006, p. 99). To collect our empirical material we conducted semi-structured interviews. In this kind of interview, the researcher has an interview guide with a few specific topics to be covered. A semi-structured interview is flexible and the interviewer does not have to follow the questions exactly (Bryman, 2004, p. 321). When conducting the interviews for our study we formulated an interview guide (which can be found in Appendix 1) with a loose structure based on our research question and the different objectives. In contrast to a questionnaire-based survey, the respondents had much more freedom to be actively involved in the interview process and to direct the interview in their own direction, which ended up in very interesting conversations with the respondents. In qualitative research the interview is about learning respondents’ viewpoints regarding the investigated phenomenon (Blumberg et al, 2008, p. 387). By using this method, we got a lot of knowledge about the organisations’ relations to ecocertifications.

During the interviews both of us were present. This simplified the interview processes for us and resulted in that many questions were asked. Many times we asked the respondents to

further explain their answers and why they thought and performed in a certain way. This helped us to dig deeper and to get a better understanding for the respondents' thoughts about ecocertifications, Nature's Best and their businesses. All interviews were recorded and later on transcribed, which was very helpful during the analysis process. The interviews lasted around one and a half hour.

3.4 Observations

As a good complement to the interviews we also made observations, which can be seen as an alternative source of evidence during a research (Veal, 2006, p. 39). The first observations we did was to look at the companies' web pages. Here we focused on how they presented themselves and if and how they were writing about ecotourism and Nature's Best. We also looked at pictures and studied texts and layouts to get an understanding for the companies and the role of Nature's Best in the different businesses.

The other part of the observations was on site observations. When we conducted the interviews we had the ability to visit the premises of all companies except one, and we took pictures and notes of what we saw. These observations were a great help during the analysis process. Some of the respondents also gave us brochures about their companies and Nature's Best, which was a good complement to the other observation material.

3.5 Analysis and interpretation

For this study we have chosen to conduct a content analysis as well as a narrative analysis. Content analysis means that categories within a text are established. The researcher then counts the number of instances when material from a text fall into each category (Silverman, 2008, p. 159). In a narrative analysis the researcher wants to analyse "...the stories that people employ to understand their lives and the world around them" (Bryman, 2004, p. 412). A narrative analysis gives the researcher an insight into the respondents' perspectives and is very useful in exploratory research (Blumberg et al, 2008, p. 364).

Most of the material for our analysis consisted of the transcriptions from the interviews. As a first step of the analysis, both of us carefully read through all the transcriptions a number of times. We analysed the content of the transcriptions, one objective at the time, and organised our findings in a number of themes for each objective. The themes were put together and analysed together with the literature and previous research.

During the interviews many of our respondents expressed themselves by telling stories about their way of life, their companies and Nature's Best. This is why we also wanted to compliment the content analysis with narrative analysis. In comparison to content analysis, where the researcher often focus on smaller parts of a text or story, the narrative analysis makes the researcher emphasise on understanding the narrative as a whole (Blumberg et al, 2008, p. 364). When we conducted the analysis, we also searched for different stories that the respondents had used to explain their experiences, one objective at the time. As a part of the narrative analysis, we tried to understand what the stories meant and divided the material into different themes for each objective before we started to compare our findings with theory and literature.

In addition to the interviews with Nature's Best certified companies, we also used material from observations of the companies' web sites, printed materials and their premises for our analysis. This material was put into themes and became a very good complement to the interviews and strengthened our analysis.

3.6 Validity and reliability

To evaluate our study we used the criteria validity and reliability. Validity means "the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers" (Hammersley, 1990, cited in Silverman, 2008, p. 289). Internal validity refers to whether there is a match between the observation and the theoretical ideas (Bryman, 2004, p. 273). In this study it was important that we had enough empirical material to get a good picture of the companies' realities so that we could draw the right conclusions with the help of the theory. Therefore, we tried to make the interviews as deep and thorough as possible and find similarities in these, from which we drew the conclusions. In addition, the observation helped to increase the internal validity further.

External validity is whether the results of a study can be generalized across other social settings. This can be a problem because qualitative research usually includes case studies and small samples (Bryman, 2004, p. 273). In our study we looked at nine companies, which can be problematic in terms of gaining high external validity. However, our main goal with this thesis is not to generalise our findings on the whole tourism industry, but instead we are striving to understand why Swedish ecotourism companies engage in ecotourism certification practices and to come up with recommendations for Nature's Best. Further, one has to consider that our study is only made on companies in south-west Sweden. The result could hence have been different if companies from all Sweden would have been participating in the study.

Reliability is to what extent the results would be the same if the study was to be repeated (Veal, 2006, p. 117). This criterion is difficult to meet in qualitative research, since it is complicated to exactly replicate the social setting that is being studied (Bryman, 2004, p. 273). For that reason the researcher must be very cautious when making statements on the basis of the empirical research (Veal, 2006, p. 41). However, there are strategies that can be used in order to ensure reliability. For example, if there is more than one observer, the researchers can agree on what they see and hear (Bryman, 2004, p. 273). When we collected the empirical material from the interviews both of us were present. Since we were two persons interviewing we had the ability to discuss what we actually heard and saw during the interviews and whether our understandings were alike. Moreover, we recorded all interviews to make sure that no information was forgotten for the interpretation and analysis of the data. Also, the material we collected from the observations was reviewed by both of us. We discussed our findings to make sure that we had drawn the same conclusions from the observations. The reliability of this study will increase since both of us agree that the conclusions we have drawn comport with our findings.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter our findings from the interviews and observations are analysed. This is done according to our three research objectives. Quotations from the interviews, written in italics, and observations are combined with our own interpretations of the empirical data, based on previous research and literature. The objectives are also interconnected with each other so that the relationships between them can be analysed. The chapter ends with a number of recommendations from our respondents to Nature's Best.

4.1 Objective 1: Exploring the meanings of being an ecotourism certified organisation.

The first step for us in order to understand our research question “Why do Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecotourism certification practices?” is to explore what ecotourism mean for our respondents and how they perceived the meanings of being an ecotourism certified organisation. During the interviews we tried to get an understanding for how they formed their own identity in relation to ecotourism and in relation to other companies who did not see ecotourism as their main business.

While processing our findings we have discerned a number of themes that describe how the respondents perceive ecotourism and their own identity in relation to the phenomenon. Below we will explain these themes and how they help to explain the meanings that an ecotourism organisation connects with themselves.

4.1.1 Ecotourism is a lifestyle

“I think it corresponds with who I am. It would be weird if I wasn't, when I am who I am”

(The dedicated fisherman company).

Most of our respondents talked about ecotourism as a whole lifestyle. It is simply who they are and it represents the way they carry out their job and their everyday life. This is something

discussed by Dewenhurst and Thomas (2003). They mean that conservation and lifestyle goals are closely related and this is confirmed by Carlsen et al (2001) in their work about rural tourism and hospitality sectors. Also Butcher (2008) emphasises the connection between ecotourism and an ethical lifestyle. When we asked how Natures Best came into the picture, many companies told us of how they have worked with a similar concept a long time before they even heard of the certificate. One of the respondents said *“We were thinking environmentally from the start. We were interested, both me and my wife, and we thought it was exciting”* (The simple life company). Concerning the process of being certified, many respondents said that they did not need to change much. They were already working sustainably. As one of the respondents expressed it *“We didn’t change because we joined Nature’s Best. We were the same before we joined. You can say it’s our image”* (The ecological hostel company).

The interest in nature we also see as a part of the respondents’ lifestyle. One respondent said *“It’s much more fun to mediate something to the customer that interests you and that is nature and outdoor life”* (The simple life company). Another expressed that *“It should be fun to do this. You don’t do this to get rich but because of the memories it brings and the way of life”* (The ecological hostel company). Many of these respondents see their business as part of their lifestyle. It is not only a job but something they do because they love it. It is *“all about enthusiasm and joy”* as one of our respondents said (The experience company). There is a tension though between the business as an interest and the need to be seen as a professional. One of our respondents said *“It is not just a hobby”* (The experience company) and expressed thereby a need for both himself as a businessman and for ecotourism as a whole to be taken seriously by the tourism industry.

Most of the respondents are not only engaged in Natures Best but also have other engagements and participate in cooperations and associations of different kinds: *“We are pretty involved in the development organisation of this destination”* (The food tourism company). These businesses are owned by people who care for their neighbourhood and who engage in it and want to participate in the development of the local community. The dedicated fisherman company told us of several commissions of trust and other engagements he has had at different instances and it is obvious that he is very engaged in his business and in environmental work.

The picture below shows us a diploma that we found at one of our respondent's premises. It tells us "*We support Nordens Ark*" (The experience company). We could also find similar diplomas displayed both at the premises of this respondent and others. What we have found out is that these companies are engaged in many different things and that this is a part of their identity.



Photo taken at the premises of one of the respondents (The experience company).

When talking to the respondents we understood that many of them are very busy people. They are entrepreneurs and operate small businesses where they do most things themselves. They expressed it as "*All of us, who are small businesses, have very much to do*" (The experience company) and "*Everything else takes so much time*" (The ecological hostel company). An other respondents said "*We are people who never stand still, no matter if we are getting older*" and continued "*We have enough to do, establishing our business here*" (The countryside company).

From our findings we can conclude that the hostesship is both a part of the respondents' lifestyles as well as the image of their companies: "*It is fun to talk to the guests. I guess that is also a part of the image*" (The ecological hostel company). Since their businesses takes a big part of their life, the hostesship is also a natural part of their everyday life and it could be hard to separate the role of the private person and the host, especially since many of the respondents manage their business in connection to their own personal home.

Many of the respondents were talking about the hostesship as something very important in their business and we conclude that they see this as a great competitive advantage: "*I think*

that, as persons, we are recognized hosts. That is the most important resource, isn't it?" (The countryside company). The personal welcome and attention to the guests is indeed something that takes a big part of their identity as ecotourism businesses. One of our respondents spent a long time telling us about how important he found it was to give a warm and personal welcome to the guests. He told us about how he liked to prepare for the guests so that it felt like if they had been waiting the whole day for their arrival: *"The flowers in the window... the consideration, they know that we know they are coming. They feel welcome"* (The ecological hostel company). One respondent was very clear on the fact that hostesship is something that must come naturally. One of the first things she mentioned, before the interview had not even started was *"Some people take courses in hostesship and that is something I just can't understand! I guess that is something you just have"* (The home-style hotel company). From our interviews we can see that the personal hostesship is something those small companies are proud of and that they use as an advantage for their businesses.

4.1.2 Ecotourism is tourism pursued in nature

"For me, it means being in this kind of environment, just as much as it means you work ecologically and have that way of thinking" (The food tourism company).

It is very clear that the respondents connect ecotourism with nature. They talked about how their business is located in nature: *"What we have here is as close to wilderness you can get in southern Sweden"* (The countryside company) and how they want customers to connect what they do with nature: *"This is the picture I want people to connect us with, the simple fishing and the beautiful nature"* (The food tourism company). This focus on nature is supported both by the existing definitions of ecotourism as well as research on the suppliers view of ecotourism. Among others the definition by Buckley (1994) mentions ecotourism as "nature based" and Wallace and Pierce (1996, p. 861) explain how ecotourism "provides opportunities for local people to enjoy natural areas".

Many respondents have descriptions of the surrounding nature on their webpages and in printed material and they use both texts and pictures to mediate the attractiveness of the beautiful surroundings. Sirakaya et al (1999, p 171) state that one of the most common themes when actors from the supply side explain ecotourism is "presentation and appreciation of

natural wonders in areas of immense beauty”. Pictures like the ones below are common on the businesses’ web pages and printed material. Both The countryside company and The simple life company mentioned that those pictures were what represented their business. The simple life company describes their business on their webpage as “*Close to nature and with the wilderness around the corner*” and another respondent writes on their webpage “*a pearl on the west coast where the cliffs meet the ocean*” (The home-style hotel company).



*Picture from facebook page.
(The countryside company).*



*Picture from brochure front page
(The simple life company).*

4.1.3 Ecotourism is innovative

“You should always be in the forefront. Isn’t it like that? You should not be behind...”

(The countryside company).

Something that many of our respondents were talking about was that they were the first to be certified in their area. This is something they are proud of. They see themselves as pioneers who are leading the way for others and who explore new ground: “*It has always been ‘no no, that is never going to work’ and then everyone else must catch up with us*” (The countryside company).

One of our respondents told us *“When we started, there were not many like us”* (The experience company) and another said *“There were twelve companies that were certified the first year. My company was one of these twelve”* (The wildlife company). Similar testimonies were heard from many of the others. As in the first quotation we can see that there is a need to be first. To be first is not always easy but our respondents see it in a positive way. This is something that makes them special and that they can use as a competitive advantage.

4.1.4 Ecotourism is locally embedded

“What I think is most important is that you try to support the neighbourhood where the tourism takes place” (The wildlife company).

Support of the local neighbourhood is something that many of the respondents see as an important part of their business and something that they intimately connect with ecotourism. They express it as *“It’s a question about keeping the money you earn in the neighbourhood. /.../ I think that is right”* (The countryside company). This is what Sirakaya et al (1999) are talking about when they state that “contribution to local welfare” is one of the main themes when the supply side discusses ecotourism. Many of the respondents talked about how they buy both materials and labour locally and we find this is something they are proud of: *“We have /.../ developed a local food production and craftsmanship. /.../ we have participated in putting the locally produced on the Westsweden gastronomic map”* (The countryside company). The following quotation shows how the respondent gave us the picture of a company that was striving to be as local as possible and use local resources whenever they could: *“We use very much material from the neighbourhood, we work through taking care of what we have. And we use local entrepreneurs. We use local workers. We try to... we buy almost everything we use for development and extensions from local companies. So we work locally when we can. We are very local up here /.../ we start on a local level”* (The simple life company). This is a common picture when the respondents describe how they work locally.

This focus on the support of the local community is supported in existing literature. The locality is emphasized both when defining ecotourism as well as identifying the companies working in this sustainable way. Pedersen (1991) lifts up the local participation and involvement as an important component of ecotourism and Wallace and Pierce (1996) state

that ecotourism directs economic benefits to local people. Dewenhurst and Thomas (2003) conclude that businesses committed to sustainable practices are in general more concerned to use and support local suppliers, which comport with our findings when interviewing the respondents.

Below is a picture that we took at the premises of one of our respondents (The ecological hostel company). It shows how products made by local entrepreneurs are sold.



Selling of local products and crafts
(The ecological hostel company).

One of the respondents told us *“You want to support the local economy”* (The food tourism company) and thereafter added *“The local is our strength”*. So the support of the local is not only a way of carrying out charity work but a mutual advantage. This is something that these companies do both because they have an honest interest in helping the local economy but also because it makes them special and attractive to customers and gives them a competitive advantage.

4.1.5 Ecotourism is tradition and culture

“The grounds around here are of no value for food production if you don’t have grazing animals. Then, forest production is the only alternative. And in that case, this cultural heritage would disappear. So, already here there are lots of aspects of sustainability” (The countryside company).

For some of the respondents, the cultural aspect is very important and they lifted up the cultural heritage and traditional methods as something that distinguishes their business from others. The respondent giving us the previous quotation was very concerned to lift up the historical and cultural aspects of the business both during the interview but also on the webpage. This goes well with the findings of Buckley (1994) as well as Wallace and Pierce (1996), who define ecotourism as conservation supporting.

Some of the respondents see the use of traditions and heritage as a competitive advantage. One of them said in the interview *“Our business idea is that we have renovated the boat house so that it looks like if it was old”* (The food tourism company) and another writes on their webpage *“the premises are decorated with tools and objects inherited from 1700”* (The local fisherman company). We understand that this is something the respondents are proud of since they emphasize it when they talk about their company. The ecological hostel company talked very much about the history and the people of his neighbourhood and this is obviously something that is important for the image of his business. Having the historical and cultural perspective is also mentioned by Sirakaya et al (1999, p. 171) who defines ecotourism in the view of the suppliers as *“touring areas of cultural and historical importance /.../ focusing on natural history and local culture.”* and also emphasis the *“controlled use and management of cultural and environmental resources”*.

The picture below is from the front page of a brochure from one of the respondents. It says *“Genuine Archipelago Experiences”* and the picture of an old tree boat adds to the sense of tradition.



*Picture from brochure front page
(The food tourism company).*

4.1.6 Ecotourism is professionalism and knowledge

“We have existed for quite a long time. We know what we are doing, we are pretty good at what we are doing. We are well educated and as a matter of fact we are ecotourism certified” (The experience company).

Our findings show that knowledge about the local area, the culture, history and natural environment is one of the things that characterise ecotourism in the eyes of our respondents. They talked about how they started learning about their local area and about the nature and history when they engaged in ecotourism and they see this as something very positive: *“We have made a destination description that reaches 40-50 kilometres around the premises”* (The countryside company).

We also see a connection between knowledge and service quality. The respondents think it is important that they can offer the right knowledge to the customers. This is also mentioned in previous literature, where the definition of ecotourism is integrated with the environmentally educating aspect (Buckley, 1994; Pedersen, 1991) Sirakaya et al (1999) describes ecotourism as “educational travel” and put this theme as the third most important when describing ecotourism. In one of the webpages we can read *“The knowledge gathered during many years, about the nature of the archipelago, as well as the professional knowledge about fishing and the marine environment, will guarantee a full experience of the Bohuslän nature and culture”* (The local fisherman company). On another webpage the respondent writes *“Our experience of recreation and outdoor life, with respect for the nature is large – and it’s at your disposal”* (The wildlife company). The same respondent also emphasised his knowledge of languages on the webpage.

4.1.7 Ecotourism is to provide high quality experiences that lasts

“We do not sell a comfortable accommodation but an experience” (The simple life company).

Some of our respondents emphasized the importance of the uniqueness of the experience. It could be something as simple as having an environmentally friendly toilet: *“This is something*

people think is extremely exciting” (The simple life company). Another respondent express the importance of the experience and writes on their webpage “... *Discover the magnificent surroundings of /.../ and feel a wonderful interaction between yourself, your soul and the nature*” (The home-style hotel company). This goes well with the findings made by Gössling and Hultman (2006) that marketing of ecotourism in Sweden emphasize the experiences rather than the sustainability aspect and benefits for the environment.

One of the respondents talked very much about how his goal was to give the customers experiences that stayed with them and changed them: “*We want to mediate some kind of positive experiences in a beautiful environment that lasts and changes you*” (The experience company). Our findings show that this is something that applies to many of the respondents even if not all of them say it in words. When asked to describe ecotourism, one respondent told us “*Ultimately, I think it is all about creating some kind of durability in the customer’s experience*” (The experience company). These nature tourism entrepreneurs want to give to people what they themselves have found very valuable.

Some of the respondents lifted up the role of ecotourism as a quality assurance. As actors in the ecotourism business they feel they are obliged to provide quality services to the customers. When describing ecotourism one of our respondents said “*I think it means you are able to combine sustainability with quality in a good way*” (The experience company). Later on he continued “*We don’t just say ‘sure’ if the group is too big for kayaking because it’s not going to be good. It won’t be a good experience for the guest*”. Another respondent said about his ecotourism business: “*You must provide good food and accommodation*” (The ecological hostel company) which also signals that quality must reach a certain level. Another of the respondents stated that “*It should be simple, but still quality*” (The simple life company). The food tourism company talked a lot about the quality of his products and it would be hard to miss the pride that is inherent in this. He showed us several articles in famous magazines where his products are celebrated for their outstanding quality and he told us of how he travels to many of the capitals in Europe to sell and market his product.

4.1.8 Ecotourism is about trust

"Then they will know that this is something they can trust" (The countryside company)

After talking to the respondents we can conclude that in many cases there is a confidence that as an ecotourism company you are a company that the customers will trust. The respondents express it as *"There is a quality label. The customers can trust that this is ok"* (The food tourism company). By being an ecotourism company, these companies want to signal that they are trustworthy and reliable. This tells us that ecotourism as a concept is signalling just this to the respondents. They see ecotourism as something trustworthy that suggests credence and reliability: *"It means that there is some kind of orderliness in the company"* (The local fisherman company).

4.1.9 Ecotourism is a different way of thinking and making active choices

"We have gained a different way of thinking" (The local fisherman company).

The respondents connect ecotourism with a different way of thinking and many said that this is what distinguishes them from other companies: *"You have to think a little. Not just take it day by day"* (The food tourism company). When running an ecotourism business you can not just do things however you want but you must reflect on your choices and consider whether or not they comply with ecotourism guidelines. In some way it is like if the companies audit themselves. For our respondents it is important to first reflect on the sustainability of activities and then make their choice after that: *"You have to start reflecting because you can't just say 'let's do this'. You reflect and think 'is this good?'"* (The wildlife company). Some of the respondents see it the other way around. They aim to do smart and economic choices and then the best way to go seem to be the sustainable way. One of the respondents expressed this as *"There is a gain in not building advanced technical facilities. We do something smart instead. And smart in some way turned into environmentally friendly"* (The simple life company). These smart choices are something that these companies identify with and which also helps them to distinguish themselves from others: *"You reflect and make smart choices, which*

might not be about economy but it doesn't have to be more expensive because you have to think it through an extra time and find smart solutions which are better for the environment but also for the wallet. I believe this is what you do, while people who might not have this awareness and do not reflect as much, they don't think as much and don't do these smart choices. They chose the cheapest and most comfortable solution” (The simple life company).

The respondents put the concept of sustainability at the centre of what they do and this is something that affects their way of thinking. They talked about continuity in nature and in society and that their activities must not disrupt that continuity and that they must work with *”Long-term sustainability no matter what you do”* (The dedicated fisherman company). Buckley (1994) mentions sustainability as one of the qualities of ecotourism and Wallace and Pierce (1996) discuss how ecotourism should minimize impact. Sirakaya et al (1999, p. 171) state that the “low-impact travel” aspect and “sustainable/nonconsumptive tourism” have a central role in how suppliers view ecotourism.

An interesting aspect that one of our respondents gave rise to is the importance of knowledge in connection with sustainability: *“A sustainable society, that is something that has a beginning but no end. And then you must learn it from the beginning as well”* (The countryside company). As an ecotourism company, the respondent means it is important that you have the knowledge about the environment and society in which you operate and it should not be just a simple understanding of how things are today but the whole history and development must be integrated so that you can use, and not abuse, the resources around you wisely.

4.1.10 Ecotourism is about practicalities and common sense

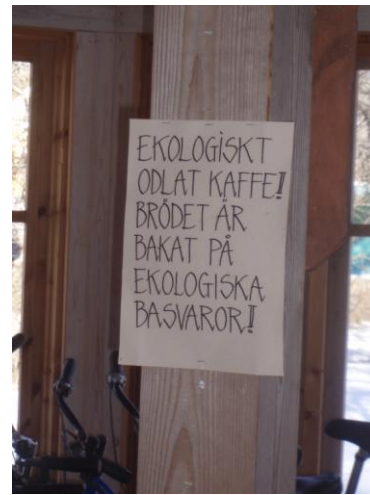
”We have been thinking environmentally, the heating of the house... We use this environmental thinking when it comes to materials and the food we serve” (The ecological hostel company).

Something that came back all the time when we talked to the respondents was the practicalities of ecotourism. When asking what ecotourism means to them, many of the respondents quickly accounted for the many practical things they do, like for example

recycling, using sustainable fuels for their machines and using glass cups instead of paper cups. One respondent said *"We only use ecofriendly washing detergent"* (The home-style hotel company). Sirakaya et al explain that one of the themes lifted up by suppliers as a description of ecotourism is the low-impact travel which "leave only footprints", and the non-consumptive manner is also lifted up in their analysis (Sirakaya et al, 1999, p. 171). These statements can be related to what our respondents say.



Observation of recycling
(The simple life company)



Observation of ecological products
(The ecological hotel company)

There is though an evident conflict of how much importance the practical aspects should have. Some of the respondents raised the question of the need to see behind these trivial changes and to aim for more complex and revolutionising changes: *"Is this only about recycling and low energy bulbs or does it actually mean that we must choose what services we offer and what subcontractors we cooperate with?"* (The experience company)

One of our respondents talked a lot about ecotourism as common sense. He meant that certification brings a lot of unnecessary hassle for companies: *"You don't think about it. I mean, it means that you won't just throw out rubbish when you are out driving in the car. It is natural. It's common sense"* (The local fisherman company). Another of our respondents said *"All this fuss, it's a natural thing that you leave a place like you found it and that you recycle and try to consume as little energy as possible. Of course you can get better and better at all those things but... but I think that if you do these kind of stuff... these things are pretty obvious"* (The experience company).

4.1.11 Ecotourism is about pursuing small scale business that is not driven by money

"I believe that, by making these choices, you chose a direction which is better for the environment than what another company, which is not certified, would have done. For them I think it's all about money" (The simple life company).

All the businesses we have visited are small businesses and this is also a part of their identity. According to earlier research, small and locally owned companies contribute to sustainable tourism development which goes well with our findings (Roberts and Tribe, 2008; Dewenhurst and Thomas, 2003). This could be because personal values in small owner-managed businesses affect the business more than in large firms (Tzschentke et al, 2004). The small scale can also have an effect on the profitability. As one of our respondent expressed it *"Everyone are chandlers. Noone earns any money"* (The experience company). This goes well with earlier research concluding that small businesses go beyond normal business motivations of being profit driven and instead integrate social values and actions in the business as more prioritized than profit maximisation (Spence & Rutherford, 2000).

These findings also match the ideas by Dewenhurst and Thomas (2003) who state that businesses committed to sustainable practices often have non-economic motives. Sirakaya et al (1999) support this when stating that small businesses might go beyond normal profit motivations and instead let social values take priority. These lifestyle entrepreneurs often reject economic growth opportunities and this choice often results in the opportunity to engage with "niche" market consumers with values common to themselves. New innovative products are created by these entrepreneurs, which among other things articulate values of sustainability (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000). We can hence see a connection between being a small-scale lifestyle entrepreneur (as many of the respondents identify themselves as) and a drive from other sources than money.

4.1.12 Ecotourism creates a collective identity and alterity construction

Previously discussed themes are part of a collective identity, constructed by the interviewed companies. This collective identity is built on how the respondents see themselves as ecotourism actors and ecotourism as a whole. This is related to Johnson et al's (1994, p. 15) work on how collective identity is defined by the activities performed by the individual members of a group.

Johnston et al (1994, p. 16-17) mean that there are two perspectives of the collective identity. The actions of the individuals are part of both constructing and obeying norms and the norms and values of the collective identity will in turn affect the behaviour of the individual. To work in a special way, connected to the themes described above, is part of the respondents' identity and values and something that for them is intimately connected with ecotourism. Their values tell them to work in a certain way and their actions in turn strengthen the creation of these values. As one of the respondents express it *"You reflect and make smart choices , which might not be about economy, but it doesn't have to be more expensive because you have to think it through an extra time and find smart solutions which are better for the environment but also for the wallet"* (The simple life company). The respondent's values affects his actions in the way that he makes different choices and those choices and their results in turn affect his values and his identity as an ecotourism company. Another example of this is how the respondents see the support of the local community as part of their values and something for them intimately connected with ecotourism. Their values tell them to support the local community and their actions strengthen the creation of these norms. The values these actors have in common, that affect their behaviour, creates a sense of collective identity as ecotourism companies (Ergas, 2010).

During the interviews we got many examples of how the respondent create alterity constructions (Czarniawska, 2006) in order to frame themselves and their activities (Andersson Cederholm, 2010; Hunt et al, 1994, p. 185; Melucci, 1996, p. 348) from other actors. This is also a part of the identity construction for ecotourism companies. When it comes to being innovative, one of our respondents say *"It has always been 'no no no, that is never going to work' and then everyone else must catch up with us"* (The countryside

company) and thereby frame themselves from the “others” who says no and resist change, representing the antagonists (Melucci, 1996, p. 350). Our respondents see themselves as the pioneers who dare to try new things and are in the forefront of tourism innovation, representing the protagonists (Hunt et al, 1994, p. 193; Melucci, 1996, p. 349).

Another alterity construction is built when our respondents position themselves as protagonists, providing high quality and unique experiences while the “others” do not provide as good a product and therefore represent the antagonists. *“I can understand that it is fun to go rib-boating, but that is fun to do one time, in a way, at least for me and I believe it’s the same for pretty many people. But to go kayaking, that is something you can do for the rest of your life. And to go climbing, that is not just something you need to tick of the list and then you are done. /.../ for me there’s a damn difference in what we offer to our customers. It should be something that you can develop and that contains some kind of lasting change”* (The experience company).

To have a different way of thinking and making active choices is something else that these companies identify with and which also helps them to distinguish themselves from others who, according to them, make not as wise choices since they chose to go the easy way: *“You reflect and make smart choices /.../ I believe this is what you do, while people who might not have this awareness and do not reflect as much, they don’t think as much and don’t do these smart choices. They chose the cheapest and most comfortable solution”* (The simple life company).

Some of the respondents mentioned practical aspects as extra important and they expressed an evident discontent with actors who does not comply with their standards: *“When I go to the recycle station, I get so angry when I see that some people don’t sort their waste. Me myself, I sort pretty much everything”* (The home-style hotel company). Our respondents see themselves as the protagonists, working for example with recycling in comparison to “others”, the antagonists, who do not engage as much in such practices: *“Trivial things like recycling, maybe you don’t put so much time and effort on that /.../ for many people everything must be comfortable and then they will skip things like composting, recycling, choice of materials and such”* (The simple life company).

When talking about companies that are not ecotourism-companies, many of our respondents said things like *"Most people want to earn money"* (The wildlife company) and *"To be crass, it's all about money"* (The experience company). They talked about this as something that distinguishes themselves from other companies and it is evident that they frame themselves from other actors.

4.1.13 Summary: Objective 1

With our first objective we aim to explore the meanings of being an ecotourism certified organisation. When conducting the interviews, we wanted to get an understanding for the respondents' perceptions of ecotourism and meanings of being an ecocertified organisation.

Most of the respondents talked about ecotourism as a lifestyle. It is something that represents who they are and their actions. The interest in nature was also usually a part of this lifestyle. Many of the respondents expressed that they live a busy life and that they are entrepreneurs running small businesses and that they are not mainly driven by money.

It became clear during the interviews that the respondents connect ecotourism with nature. Some of the respondents pointed out the cultural aspect and the importance of having knowledge about the local area, the history, culture and natural environment, when being characterised as an ecotourism company. Also, to support the local community was something that many of the respondents saw as important and they told us how they used both local materials and employed local labour.

Some respondents said that ecotourism is about providing trustworthy quality experiences that last and that this distinguish them from many other companies. The respondents also connected ecotourism with a different way of thinking and many said that when running an ecotourism business, you must reflect on what you do and have a sustainable mindset, think about practicalities and use your common sense.

We can see that ecotourism creates a collective identity and alterity construction. The respondents have similar values and work in similar ways, which can be related to a collective identity. Also, we have seen how the respondents have differentiated themselves from others

when describing their businesses and activities. This shows that alterity constructions are created.

4.2 Objective 2: Understand the perception of Nature's Best certification system by certified ecotourism organizations.

With our second objective we aim to get an understanding for the perceptions of Nature's Best by the certified companies. During the interviews we asked the respondents what Nature's Best means to them and we asked them to describe Nature's Best from their perspective. Each company expressed several different perceptions, both positive and negative, about Nature's Best. Next, we present their answers divided into different themes that we discovered during the work with our findings. In addition to the respondents' answers the material from the observations helped us to understand the perceptions of Nature's Best even further. In order to make it possible for the respondents to freely share their point of view of Nature's Best, we have chosen to let them be anonymous in some cases.

4.2.1 Nature's Best invites to reflection

“What is damn good with Nature's Best, is that you got another type of mindset” (The local fisherman company).

During the interviews most of the respondents talked about how becoming certified with Nature's Best made them start thinking and reflecting on their own business and actions. Two respondents expressed it as follows *“But it's pretty good when you do a business analysis. Or you examine yourself and make a business plan. So you get to think a bit”* (The food tourism company). *“When you think it through a bit. And put it into print. It has not been done before. We've only talked about it”* (The ecological hostel company). One also mentioned that Nature's Best taught them how to think and said *“They have taught us how to be and not be. So we have the right mindset”* (The local fisherman company). A couple expressed that being a certified company mean that demands are made on you and that you can not behave in any way you want: *“When you join Nature's Best, you get demands on yourself that you should*

think” (The simple life company). Another said *“They keep an eye on you. That you think before you do anything. So that is great”*(The wildlife company).

What we see here is a very positive attitude towards Nature’s Best, in the way that they are seen as an organization that affects not only the actions of the members but also their mindsets. The certified companies see Nature’s Best as a way for them to get both a better strategic business thinking and a thinking that is good for the environment and the society around them.

4.2.2 Nature’s Best is unknown by the consumers but useful for B2B marketing and networking

“There are not many people who know about it. It was a bit surprising, actually” (The simple life company).

When talking to the respondents about customers and whether they know about Nature’s Best or not, everyone agrees that it is very unknown. Here is what some said: *“When you ask the guests, they do not really know what it is. You show the certificate on the wall and ask if they know this brand ... No”* (The ecological hostel company). *“No, not many know about Nature’s Best”* (The local fisherman company). Previous research supports our findings that certification systems are perceived as unknown by consumer (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). According to Honey (2002, p. 364) most tourists are unaware of the existing certification systems in the tourism industry and the number of aware tourists could actually be as low as 1 percent. Haaland and Aas (2010) also state that tourists have problems in determining what the certifications stand for and this is problematic for the industry because it makes it hard for them to gain credibility for their certification programmes. One respondent suggested that Nature’s Best should work on becoming more known: *“Nature’s Best is so unknown. /.../ Very few, even today, know what it is. That is a problem. So they should have more marketing materials themselves”* (anonymous).

According to Buckley (2002), consumer acceptance is a reliable, meaningful and useful tool in their evaluation of a product and constitutes the most basic test for tourism ecocertifications. During the interviews we discussed how important the tourists think it is

that the company is ecocertified. One respondent expressed it as follows: *“But for damn few I think it means damn little. It means a lot more that you have fresh cookies and serve good coffee for lunch”* (The experience company). When we asked one respondent how many customers that pick his company because of the certification, the answer was: *“It’s one in a hundred... People don’t care”* (The dedicated fisherman company). Almost everyone said that Nature’s Best did not work as a tool for attracting customers and some were very disappointed about this. One respondent said *“We were told that if you are in Nature’s Best it gives more money in the pocket. And that bothers me”* (anonymous). When we asked a respondent how many customers that had found him through Nature’s Best he said *“Not five in a year...”* (anonymous). Another expressed *“I can’t mention a single customer that I know has come from Nature’s Best”* (anonymous).

What our respondents have found out is that the certificate of Nature’s Best obviously does not serve as a tool for consumers to choose their company before others. Font (2003a) states that tourism certification must be more market-led in order to increase its impact. Maybe Nature’s Best need to listen more to the market and adapt to what the market wants.

However, even though Nature’s Best is unknown by the consumers, some of the respondents said that it is very known in the tourism industry. One expressed *“But professionals who work with tourism know about it. You hear that all the time”* (The food tourism company). This is supported by Dodds and Joppe (2005), who also suggest that B2B marketing might be a better tool than marketing directly to end consumers since this awareness is so low. During our interviews one also mentioned that his company would not have the same connections with partners if his company had not been certified: *“It was a good argument against the partners and in different types of relationships and things like that. So there, I think it matters! That has in turn made that we got jobs that we might not have got otherwise”* (The experience company). Furthermore, those companies that had tourists from abroad mentioned that it was an advantage when wanting to attract international customers. This is what one respondent said *“From the outside it is probably good that we are certified. In other countries, if they see it, they comprehend there is some quality in what we sell”* (The countryside company).

4.2.3 Nature's Best is a good initiative and has shared values

"I think it is a very nice initiative and I will stay no matter how much I sell. I'm staying because I think it's great that you can increase the interest. You have to be persistent. I could have used 6000 for something else, but I think it is important that they exist" (The wildlife company).

Even though the respondents' opinions about Nature's Best differed, it became clear from the interviews that the certification is a good initiative and that Nature's Best stand for something positive. One respondent expressed *"It is a nice initiative"* (The home-style hotel company). Another said *"It has a goodwill"* (The dedicated fisherman company) and continued *"...they educate people to be more careful about the nature resources. They have a good concept"* (The dedicated fisherman company). In one interview where it was clear that the interviewee was not very satisfied with Nature's Best, the respondent said *"If you look at my business, I see it as a good thing that the company is certified by Nature's Best. And I think that is positive. Definitely. It is very positive"* (anonymous). Although not everyone expressed positive feelings about Nature's Best, the experience we got after conducting the interviews was that Nature's Best is a very good initiative for the tourism industry and that the certificate is appreciated for its values and ideas.

Many of the respondents agree with the values that Nature's Best has. Buckley (2002) means that the response from consumers and other stakeholders to an ecocertification among other things depend on to what degree the stakeholders agree on the importance and meaning of the terms used by the certificate. During the interviews some expressed that their companies shared the same values as Nature's Best: *"We thought it seemed good. They do exactly what we do"* (The ecological hostel company). *"I had worked with this focus first. And when Nature's Best came, I read about it, and I thought, I want to be a member there"* (The wildlife company). Another respondent, who also talked about shared values, said *"It is more some kind of shared values, that I thought was important, that felt good"* (The experience company). He continued and expressed that with Nature's Best he finally found someone that understood what he wanted with his company: *"We had an eye on this quite early and it felt good. It felt like The Swedish Ecotourism Society was a good organisation even though they were small and had limited means. But good people/.../ and when we took the basic course, I thought that this was almost the first time that we felt that here is a bunch of people who know*

what we are doing, who actually understand what we are trying to convey. And it is the first time it happens, I think” (The experience company). The perception of Nature’s Best among the respondents is one of shared values and meanings and therefore they are positive even if the results from being certified are not always what they expected.

4.2.4 Nature’s Best has high status and is trustworthy

”Then you get a bit more status. The West Sweden Tourism Board knows that we are members in Nature’s Best. They think it’s very good” (The food tourism company).

As mentioned above many respondents say that Nature’s Best is very unknown. However, some respondents expressed that among people in the tourism industry it is known and highly respected. One respondent expressed *”They know it is tough rules and a fairly comprehensive regulation system. So they look very professionally on companies that are certified with Nature’s Best. They have fairly high status”* (The food tourism company). One respondent also talked about status and said *”We have got a bit higher status since we are members there and that feels great. To be a member there gives you a higher status than many other certifications”* (The simple life company). These statements support the claims by Honey (2002, p. 93) that certification improves the image among tourists, suppliers, governments and the general public, which result in enhanced reputation and status. Also other research (Tzschentke, 2004; Dodds & Joppe, 2005) say that businesses that are involved in environmental programmes have the ability to improve their image. From another interview it became clear that you get more recognition from people in the tourism industry if you are certified with Nature’s Best: *“You can say that it is good to have good connections with the tourist ladies./.../ And to be extraordinary in the eyes of the tourism team”* (The countryside company).

Many of our respondents express trust when they talk about Nature’s Best and they describe it as a very serious organization: *“You understood that it was very serious and comprehensive. It wasn’t just to fill in a form and then you were a member. It was serious all the way. From web pages to business plans. /.../ A quality label. The customers can trust that it’s okay”* (The food tourism company). *“We were taken more seriously. /.../ I like that, all the way from the beginning, they tried to have high standards. That has been the ambition. It’s kind of the*

‘National team of Ecotourism’” (The experience company). *“Then they know that this is something they could trust”* (The countryside company).

The respondents talked about how being certified with Nature’s Best made them feel proud. One respondent said *“I think you should feel some pride to be certified with Nature’s Best. And that’s good. And then, it’s a process to go through that makes you examine your business and your products”* (The experience company). The same respondent also state on their web site that *“Since January 2005 The experience company is an approved Nature’s Best company. And that is something we are proud of.”* Another respondent agrees and states on their web site *“We are proud to present our canoeing package labelled ‘Nature’s best’”* (The wildlife company). Since it is quite a demanding process to go through to be certified you belong to a small party of certified businesses, therefore we conclude that being certified can enhance a company’s self esteem. Also The experience company emphasised that when being certified, people looked more seriously at his business: *“Then it actually made that we have been taken seriously. Perhaps it is not just a hobby they are doing, those originals; they might actually try to run a business”* (The experience company).

4.2.5 Nature’s Best is unfair

“If you look here, I believe that we meet the basic criteria. I’m not entirely convinced that all others do that. It is wrong. /... / I’m not sure everyone follows the rules” (anonymous).

Some of the respondents feel that they are treated unfairly in comparison to other certified businesses. The quote above is from a respondent who was quite sure that some other certified businesses did not meet Nature’s Best requirements and that other companies had received the certification very easily whereas his company had to work very hard for it. Another respondent expressed that he was treated unfairly concerning the attention Nature’s Best is giving him in comparison to others, and that others get more attention and marketing: *“Yes, if we had appeared more. It is different if no one else had appeared. But when X is shown and Y and I and Z are not shown, and we are doing the same things... Then I start wondering: What is that? That is how it feels. But if they had not appeared either, than I wouldn’t have thought about it. That’s what I think”* (anonymous). Another company expressed that he is unhappy that Nature’s Best market others more than him and that his

company appears on the bottom of the search list on Nature's Best web site: *"I think it's a little strange that they benefit and sell X's lobsters safari and market them. They were on the top together with Y and we were three pages back, me and Z, who also offers lobster safaris"* (anonymous).

Some of the respondents expressed distrust towards Nature's Best. These were the respondents that we perceived as the most negative during the interviews. They seem to be disappointed with the result of their membership and they do not trust that Nature's Best are doing their job correctly. One expressed *"I think Nature's Best are amateurs. /.../ They approve my company. I'll take this as an example. And they approve three activities. And then when I check the web page, it's not like if I'm a controlling person... then it says I have one activity. And they present lobster safari, but I have seal safari and mackerel fishing tours as well. And it says nothing about that"* (anonymous). The same respondent also said *"I have no expectations at all. I think they are lazy"* (anonymous). Another respondent, who made it very clear that he doesn't think that Nature's Best know what they are doing expressed *"And then some fishermen had someone write about their boat and they were certified"* (anonymous). Another respondent said *"I think their acting is somewhat strange, because, I mean, they get a percentage of that... even if I don't get that customer from them. /.../ It doesn't feel right! I think it feels weird, it's a weird structure. I don't think it's a fair structure"* (anonymous). What all these respondents have in common is that they have experienced that they did not get as many customers from being certified as they had expected and they feel they have been treated unfairly. We conclude that this might have something to do with their apprehension of Nature's Best as not trustworthy.

4.2.6 Nature's Best has a complicated certification process with an interesting basic course

"It's actually very much. My husband began to read about it and it was plenty! /.../ So, it's not just simply to say 'I'm in Nature's Best, it's not a big deal'" (The countryside company).

During the interviews many of the respondents talked about the big workload they had to go through to become certified with Nature's Best. Synergy (2000) states that ecolabels in the tourism industry has been criticized because they are too time consuming for the members.

This is what some respondents said: *“It was pretty much I remember. Like papers. And to complete all questions. It was quite time consuming”* (The ecological hostel company). *Yes, the course was good but it was damn hard to complete all papers. Terribly heavy. Terribly heavy”* (The local fisherman company). *“It was a lot! It was a lot of work. My husband did a lot of work there”* (The home-style hotel company). Most of the respondents think that the process of applying for Nature’s Best certificate was very time consuming and that the pile of paper they got scared them. One of them even goes as far as stating that the extensive paperwork might scare away potential applicants. Some other respondents said that at the first sight it looked like a lot of work, but when they finally did it, it was quite easy. Here is what one said *“You felt that it was a lot and very difficult. This may take a month... but it turned out to be not more than maybe three days. You get the sense that it’s a major job and that it’s difficult”* (The simple life company). This respondent continued and meant that because of the workload the value for the certified companies increase: *“Since it is difficult, the value for the members increases. This, we think, is really important”* (The simple life company).

According to Buckley (2002), it is difficult to set standards with the right level of detail and depth. On the one hand a too complicated system will cause confusion among consumers, leading to ignorance of the certification system, but on the other hand a certificate with less explicit criteria might gain little attention from some consumers. We can see from our findings that many of the member companies have found the application process was hard and some might even have been scared away and ignored the system. On the other hand, the complicated process is appreciated since it adds value to the certificate. The need to do this trade of between simplicity and complexity is something that Haaland and Aas (2010) also have observed and they emphasize the importance of balancing realism with ambitions.

Even though many respondents said that it was a lot of work to become certified, most of them agrees that the basic course in the beginning was very interesting and useful. Two of the interviewees expressed it as follows: *“The basic course was very good. It was very informative. I was very happy with it”* (The dedicated fisherman company). *”Yes, it was really nice and I met many people with similar interests”* (The wildlife company).

4.2.7 Nature's Best has high fees

"It is too expensive" (anonymous).

During the interviews many respondents said that they are unhappy with the annual fees they pay to Nature's Best. One had even considered ending their membership because of the costs: *"We may be members for another year, and then we'll see. Because we will not stay and pay and pay..."* (anonymous). Another respondent had already taken the decision to end the relationship with Nature's Best because of the high fees: *"We ended the membership this year. The fee slipped up so much. The charge to STF provides a lot of cash back. We have paid 4000 to Nature's Best for many years. It is alright for the feeling. /.../ But then the fees almost doubled. Oh, it was too much. And so few packages are sold"* (The ecological hostel company). Another respondent also saw the fee as a problem for attracting new companies to Nature's Best and said *"I think it scares away some small companies. And that is not good"* (The wildlife company). From this we found out that the fees are a nuisance to many companies and that it both stops companies from applying for the certificate, annoys companies that are certified and in some cases even gives reason for ending the relationship with Nature's Best. This is supported by Synergy (2000) who states that the high cost is one of the big criticisms towards ecolabels. Dodds and Joppe (2005) also raise the question of the many small companies in the tourism industry and claim that with their limited resources the costs can be too high for the company to apply for certification.

A few interviewees were also unhappy that the fee was on the whole turnover. They said that since they are not making much money on the packages that are certified with Nature's Best, they do not want to use the money they earn from other parts of their business to pay to Nature's Best. Here is what two respondents said: *"The turnover that comes from the products certified by Nature's Best is very low, in comparison to the total turnover"* (anonymous). *"Since we are certified we are paying a fee to them. /.../ And it is based on what you earn. /.../ And I think it's a bit weird, because they have a percent on that even though I don't get a single customer from them"* (anonymous). In some of the interviews the respondents suggested that the fee should be on the turnover from the certified products. This is what one interviewee said: *"If you have a high turnover you pay a bit more. Then maybe it*

should be on the number of packages you sell. Then it directly comes from them” (anonymous).

4.2.8 Nature’s Best is a marketing channel

”So far I don’t think I’ve received a single customer from Nature’s Best. So as marketing, it’s probably not working” (anonymous).

One of the big critics towards ecocertifications is the lack of proven marketing benefits (Synergy, 2000; Dodds & Joppe 2005). During the interviews many of the respondents talked about marketing and Nature’s Best’s role in marketing the certified companies. It is clear that some of the interviewees are unhappy with how Nature’s Best is handling this. One respondent expressed his opinion and said *“I became a member of Nature’s Best because they were going to be a marketing place for me. I didn’t become a member because I was going to take care of their marketing place. Right? That’s what they were going to do.”* (anonymous) Another told us *“I had hoped that it would increase my sales. Of course with Konsum and the Med Mera magazine. It helped some during that season. But the year after, it was forgotten”* (The wildlife company).

Buckley (2002) means that marketing is important since organizations tend to be unlikely to engage in certifications which are not known and valued on the marketplace. Toth argues that the main motivator component for success is the marketing effort. Marketing shall be used to create interest, promote participation and illuminate the resulting (Toth, 2002, p. 92). One of the respondents said that he was considering ending the membership because it did not make any difference for his sales. Doods and Joppe (2005) mean that many certification initiatives do not lead to the wished marketing benefits and therefore there is a lack of incentive to continue being part of a certification programme.

Some of our respondents said that the certification made them attract more international customers, from countries such as Germany and England. This is also something that Tzschentke et al (2004) talked about. In their study they state that for many businesses it is very appealing to use certifications to attract domestic as well as international consumers.

Although we discovered that many respondents were disappointed with the marketing, another interviewee felt the opposite and mentioned that he had gained many new customers because of the certification: *“We saw a doubling of the number of packages that we sold”* (The simple life company). The same respondent also said that Nature’s Best logotype attracts attention and therefore it is a marketing tool: *“You can see Nature’s Best as a marketing organisation, like KRAV and Änglamark. You get a label. You are entitled to use a symbol. And that symbol awakes attention”* (The simple life company). Another respondent expressed *“Since we joined Nature’s Best, before we had almost exclusively worked with companies, after we became members we got just as many bookings from private persons. That happened immediately when we joined Nature’s Best. We got a lot of bookings from private persons”* (The food tourism company).

Almost all companies use the Nature’s Best logotype on their web sites. Some describe what Nature’s Best is and have links to Nature’s Best’s web site. One respondent writes on his web site *“Nature’s Best is a revolutionary quality label for responsible adventure tourism in the nature in Sweden. What is internationally called ecotourism”* (The simple life company).

When we visited the companies, almost everyone showed us the diploma from Nature’s Best. Some had the certificate well visible for customers while others had it more hidden.

The lack of marketing response that many of the certified companies express is one of the main negative aspects that we recognized during our interviews. We also found out that this is one of the reasons why so few have applied for Nature’s Best. Dodds and Joppe (2005) mean that since many certification initiatives do not lead to the wished marketing benefits and consumer awareness they are intended to, there is a lack of incentive to continue being a part of such a program, and this is what we see has happened with one of our respondents.

4.2.9 Nature’s Best has an unclear image

“But above all, they should have an image. How others perceive them. And today, Nature’s Best doesn’t have an image among ordinary people” (anonymous).

For some of the respondents Nature's Best's image is seen as very unclear. Especially The countryside company talked about the difficulties of combining the different companies' activities within one organisation. They thought they are being overlooked because of their calm activities and that all attention is given to the tough and wild activities in northern Sweden: *"But they should not do so much about the wild, only wild. But our activities, they are about the calm and the history and nature"* (anonymous). Many of the respondents talked about how the "wild" activity businesses takes too much place in Nature's Best and that the more calm activities does not get enough of attention.

4.2.10 Nature's Best is a stagnated organisation

"You get an automatic message that 'your product has expired' /.../ Well, that's what they do, it's easy pushing a button" (anonymous).

Some of the respondents talked about Nature's Best as something they joined and then nothing really happened. It is like if the organisation has stagnated after they joined and some of the respondents tell us that the view they had of Nature's Best before they joined do not compare with the real picture: *"It feels like if, after we were certified, they lost their energy. /.../ Because in the beginning... it is not the same now as when we did the course"* (anonymous). *"Nothing has happened here"* (anonymous). Many of the respondents also told us how they experience their membership as something they just do and that does not affect them very much. Since they got the certificate not much has happened. One respondent expressed *"Then... we haven't done very much. You are a certified member and so"* (anonymous). Another respondent told us *"It feels like if we have done a course... in Nature's Best... and then nothing more happens. That is how it feels. /.../ We keep paying. And nothing happens"* (anonymous). We found that the respondents want Nature's Best to be more active when it comes to contacting and making arrangements for the certified companies.

4.2.11 Nature's Best contact with the certified companies differs

When conducting the interviews we asked the respondents if they were satisfied with the contact with Nature's Best. Here the answers differed a lot. Some said that they are very

happy with the contact they have with the organisation and that the responsible people were easy to get hold of: *“It has been very good! /.../ It has always worked very well”* (The wildlife company). Others think that the contact has worked badly and that Nature’s Best should take more initiatives: *“I have so damn little contact with them. That is because nothing has happened. /.../ It would be enough if they sent an email to ask if I was interested in this and that. But I hear nothing like that and I couldn’t answer if I don’t know anything about it”* (anonymous).

4.2.12 Nature’s Best does not give rise to a feeling of collective identity

“I haven’t met that many. I’ve called someone once. We don’t have that much contact” (The ecological hostel company).

According to Johnston et al (1994, p. 15), membership can contribute to shape a collective identity. They further state that the social self of a movement can be described as the sum of the social identities it is made up of and how these identities are acted out (Johnston et al, 1994, p. 12) and Melucci (1996, p. 67) agrees with this statement when saying that by interacting and negotiating over the individual definitions, in connection to the movements reference frame, a collective “We” can be constructed. Ergas (2010) states in her work about identity creation within ecovillages that collective identity is created through a process where common values and goals are converted into action. This identity is built up by several individuals, pursuing their own separate businesses, but with the same goal and through using the collective identity, they can be a model for others and have an effect on the surrounding community. The companies certified by Nature’s Best indeed have a lot in common, for example shared values with Nature’s Best, and from the first sight we believed there would be a good ground for a collective identity to be created. What we have seen though is that the sense of collective identity among the interviewed companies is not very strong. We would argue that one reason for this is the fact that the companies does not interact that much and it could be hard for a collective identity, which might otherwise have contributed to the success of the certificate, to be formed. When we asked our respondents if they have contact with other Nature’s Best companies most answer that the contact is very shallow and not very frequent: *“Each time we, for some reason, meet, we say that we should meet again but then nothing happens”* (The countryside company). Some of the respondents did not even express

a need for networking with other Nature's Best companies: *"No, I think it's pretty good as it is. We have totally different focuses"* (The food tourism company). We conclude that this lack of interaction between the member companies is one of the main reasons for why the collective identity is not stronger than it is.

The question of different focuses could also be something that contributes to the missing "we-feeling". Some of the respondents mention that they feel there are two different groups of companies in Nature's Best. There are the "wild" companies in the north of Sweden, focusing on wildlife and there are the "calm" companies in the south of Sweden, focusing on more peaceful activities. They mean that the focuses are too different and this could be one of the reasons for why the feeling of collective identity is not stronger. According to Johnston et al (1994), the collective identity is constructed by the different contributing identities and since they, in this case, covers a very large range, there could be problems of fitting all these into a resulting, collective identity. Further, some of the "calmer" companies feel that the "wild" companies get more attention and this might also be a contributor to the lack of unity.

Another thing we see that contributes to this lack of networking is the comprehension of unfair treatment that some of the companies expressed, which was also discussed earlier in the analysis: *"But when X is shown and Y and I and Z are not shown, and we are doing the same things. Then I start wondering: What is that?"* (anonymous).

Johnson et al (1994, p.16-17) states that the more the individual identifies with the collective, the more the norms of the group will affect his/her behaviour. Since Nature's Best does not have a strong collective identity there is really not that much for the member companies to identify with. They all do their own thing and do not feel a strong sense of belonging. A stronger collective identity would help Nature's Best to impinge their values on the members and foster a stronger commitment.

4.2.13 Summary: Objective 2

In the second objective we aim to get an understanding for the perceptions of Nature's Best certification system by the certified ecotourism organisations. While processing our findings we have found both negative and positive aspects of Nature's Best.

Most of our respondents said that becoming certified made them reflect more on their businesses and actions. Also, many respondents expressed how Nature's Best is a good initiative, that they share the organisation's values and that they are proud to be members. However, some companies thought that Nature's Best is treating the certified businesses differently, which they feel is unfair. In addition, some are dissatisfied with how Nature's Best is doing their job, since they do not gain many customers from being certified.

The respondents clarified that Nature's Best is very unknown among consumers and that the organisation has an unclear image. However, they said that Nature's Best is known in the tourism industry, where it is seen as an organisation with high status. Some respondents said that the fees for being a member are too high and that the certification process is very complicated, which might scare away new applicants. At the same time we found out that the complicated process also adds value to the companies that are certified. Most of the respondents see Nature's Best as a marketing channel, but the opinions about how well it is working differed among the companies. A few were satisfied, but the lack of marketing response is one of the main negative aspects that we found concerning the perceptions of Nature's Best.

Finally, we found that the collective identity among the interviewed companies is not very strong concerning being a member in Nature's Best. This is, for example, due to lack of interaction between the companies, that the companies are very different and because of the unclear image of Nature's Best. Since Nature's Best does not give rise to a strong collective identity there is not that much for the certified businesses to identify with.

4.3 Objective 3: To analyse the causes behind certification work in the Swedish ecotourism sector.

In order to understand why tourism organisations engage in ecotourism practices, we analyse the causes behind certification work in the Swedish ecotourism sector, which is our third objective. When conducting the interviews, the respondents talked about reasons for why they applied for certification. These include ethical concern, the need for recognition and legitimisation, the need for marketing and selling as well as the need for business development.

4.3.1 Ethical concern causes certification work

"We had an environmental thinking already from the beginning. We were interested in it, both me and my wife, and thought it was exciting" (The simple life company).

During the interviews some of the respondents talked about their concern for the environment and that to be environmentally friendly is a part of their lifestyle. One respondent said *"It's definitely worth working with the environment. That's what we live for, that you should not destroy the nature"* (The ecological hostel company). The respondents expressed their concern for the environment as something that is very important for them and had been important long before they applied for certification. This is also something that is showed in previous studies (Tzschentke et al, 2004). It is clear that several of the certified companies had serious concerns for the environment and that this made it very easy to choose to apply for certification from Nature's Best. Furthermore, we saw that the owners' personal values were closely connected to the values of the firms (Tzschentke, 2004). They were practically almost the same. We found out that this is because of the size of the businesses and the fact that they are very small and owned and run by the same person or persons. In such small companies it is much easier to integrate the individual's values and opinions with the business's.

As described by Bansal and Roth (2000) and Tzschentke et al (2004), many of our respondents used the expression *"It feels good"* when they were asked why they had applied for certification. One respondent said *"Emotionally, it felt right."* (The experience company). We conclude that the feelings of being environmentally concerned can hence end up in satisfaction, both on the business's level and for the individuals. They feel happy and proud to have taken positive initiatives concerning how they run their businesses. One respondent mentioned that it is easier to stand up for what they do if they are working environmentally friendly: *"It's nice to work in that way. To be able to stand up for what you do"* (The food tourism company). The certification can then be a tool to show your concerns and to contribute to a better environment and community (Honey, 2002).

4.3.2 The need for recognition and legitimation causes certification work

“You can say that it is good to have good connections with the tourist ladies. So it’s hard to say no. We probably did it most to nurture that relationship. And to be extraordinary in the eyes of the tourism team” (The countryside company).

This is what one of the respondents said when we asked what it had meant for their business to be certified. The respondent talked about how the “tourism ladies” at the tourist office had talked them into applying for certification, and to be recognised by people in the tourism industry they had followed their suggestion. Some other respondents said *“It didn’t change anything but you got recognition”* (The ecological hostel company). *“We wanted to be recognized, we wanted to participate with the environment”* (The home-style hotel company). *“And it’s good that you are certified, that you’ve got it in your logotype and in your computer. It looks good as well”* (The local fisherman company). From our interviews it is clear that recognition is an important motive for applying for certification (Dodds & Joppe 2005; Bonilla Priego et al 2011; Tzschentke et al, 2004). We found out that by being recognised among different stakeholders, the companies hope to improve their image and competitiveness in the market, and hence get more business. In previous research it is stated that a certification can improve a company’s image among different stakeholders, which results in enhanced reputation (Honey, 2002).

One respondent talked about that it was important to have the certification, because others have it: *“When others do it, you also want to join”* (The home-style hotel company). For this company, following other businesses was a way to get recognition and stay competitive. According to Bansal and Roth (2000) and Honey (2002) one method to gain legitimacy and recognition is to imitate other “good” companies. That is exactly what this interviewee did. The respondent was also scared that if they did not have the certification people would choose another company instead: *“We think that if we are not certified, then everyone would automatically go to those who are certified”* (The home-style hotel company). When others take new steps to improve their businesses, we conclude that this will work as an incitement to follow others in order to stay competitive.

Buckley (2002) says that certification systems that distinguish approved products and organisations from the not approved, is very important concerning satisfying customers. When asked what it meant to be certified with Nature's Best some of the respondents talked about credibility and that stakeholders' confidence in the businesses increase when being certified: *"But both Nature's Best and that we got an ecotourism price, made that somehow, we were taken more seriously. It has been a good argument towards partners and in different types of relationships and so on"* (The experience company). Another respondent talked about the same thing but focused especially on the international market: *"From the outside, it's probably good that we are members. In other countries. If they see that, they think that there is some quality in the products /.../ Then they know a bit more, that it's something they can trust"* (The countryside company). By being certified, the credibility for the company or products has the ability to increase. But for the certification to be effective, the certification programme must be credible (Toth, 2002). From our interviews it is evident that being certified with Nature's Best makes them more trustworthy and hence, we conclude that the certifications system is seen as a credibility label among different stakeholders.

4.3.3 The need for marketing and selling causes certification work

"I became a member in Nature's Best because it was going to be a marketing place for me"
(The dedicated fisherman company).

Tzschentke et al (2004) said that the prospect of getting marketing benefits is an important factor when deciding to join an environmental programme. Almost all of our respondents talked about marketing as a reason for why they applied for certification: *"It's a marketing channel"* (The countryside company). *"It's nice to work in that way. That you can stand for what you do. Then, that you are on their web sites and marketing things is a great advantage. So it's both"* (The food tourism company).

As an effect of marketing some respondents also mentioned that they applied for certification to increase their sales: *"You hear that, when you are a member in Nature's Best, more money will end up in your pocket"* (The home-style hotel company). Another respondent added that businesses like his needed help with selling their products: *"Practically, for us small traders, something we need, is someone who sells our products. We are not able to sell our products"*

ourselves adequately. It's like that with all these small businesses. You need some kind of network with resellers” (The experience company). This is also something that is mentioned by Honey (2008b, p. 104), who argues that many small businesses lack knowledge and resources to effectively market their products.

4.3.4 The need for business development causes certification work

“There's some kind of company development aspect in it. So you actually think about what we are doing and how we are doing it and how we can improve it. So there is an element of company development that I think is damn important” (The experience company).

For a couple of our respondents, one reason for having certification is that it develops their businesses. This is what one respondent said: *“When we became members it felt like we took another step, and worked even more to be conscious about the environment and to have an environmental focus /.../ I felt, now we have to think more, even more, about this. And be even clearer. That, we felt, was very important”* (The simple life company).

One respondent express that they need knowledge about strategy and management and that this was one of the reasons that they joined Nature's Best: *“Based on their knowledge in marketing, they could help us with packaging. Because we, who are suppliers, are not good at that. We have lots of dreams but no contact with the market in that way”* (The countryside company).

4.3.5 Summary: Objective 3

In the third objective we aim to analyse causes behind certification work in the Swedish tourism sector. During our interviews the respondents mentioned a number of reasons for why they had applied for certification by Nature's Best.

Many of the respondents talked about their concern for the environment and that it feels good to work environmentally friendly. Therefore, applying for certification was a natural step for them. Some respondents mentioned recognition and legitimation as reasons for why they

wanted to be certified. The companies said that being certified increased their recognition, especially among people in the tourism industry, and it also made them more credible, compared to businesses not certified. Almost all of the respondents emphasised marketing as a reason for applying for certification and that, as an effect of marketing they would increase their sales. Finally, some respondents meant that becoming certified is part of a development process for their businesses, which is important.

4.4 Objective 1 versus 2 – Does the respondents' perceptions of Nature's Best correspond to their perceptions of what ecotourism is?

In the following text we connect objective 1 and 2:

- To explore the meanings of being an ecotourism certified organisation.
- To understand the perceptions of Nature's Best certification system by certified ecotourism organizations.

Based on our findings of how the respondents see ecotourism and their role as ecotourism companies (objective 1), we analyse how the respondents perceive Nature's Best (objective 2) and how these perceptions correspond to each other.

4.4.1 Ecotourism is a lifestyle

In our analysis we concluded that our respondents see ecotourism as a lifestyle. Being an ecotourism company is for them to live in a special way and it affects their whole life, not just their work. One of the things the respondents mentioned when describing Nature's Best was that they shared their values and this is something we connect with their way of living. Their values affect their way of living and therefore you can say that the values shared by those companies and Nature's Best can be connected to a certain lifestyle.

4.4.2 Ecotourism is tourism pursued in nature

Our respondents view ecotourism as something that is pursued in nature and clearly want to connect their own businesses with the naturalistic experiences. When we asked them about their perceptions of Nature's Best we did not find a clear pattern of references to nature but our understanding after listening to the respondents is that when they talk about activities certified by Nature's Best, they talk about activities pursued in nature. There is a conflict though on what kind of naturalistic activities should be perceived as activities suited for the Nature's Best certificate. Our respondents mean that there is such a large span of different nature activities included in Nature's Best that it is hard to have something in common and some of them mean that Nature's Best need to have a clearer focus and not include all activities pursued in nature.

4.4.3 Ecotourism is innovative

The respondents talk a lot about how they as ecotourism companies are innovative and do things before others. When speaking about Nature's Best though, they mean that it is a stagnated organisation and that not much happens. Their perceptions of Nature's Best therefore do not correspond to what they think it is to be an ecotourism company.

4.4.4 Ecotourism is locally embedded

Many of the respondents mention the local aspect when talking about ecotourism and their role as ecotourism companies. This is not something though that they connect to Nature's Best in particular. They say though that they share values with Nature's Best and since one of their values is to care for the local neighbourhood, this could be a connection to their perception of Nature's Best.

4.4.5 Ecotourism is tradition and culture

Some of the respondents describe ecotourism and their role as ecotourism companies to conserve and value traditions and culture. When describing Nature's Best though, this is not anything that is lifted up in particular. Some of the respondents mention that they think Nature's Best focus too much on the "wild" activities and forget about the values there is to be found in the more "calm" activities such as the experience of the Swedish rural community and traditions. We therefore conclude that the perceptions the respondents have of Nature's Best connected to traditions and culture is a negative one that does not correspond to what they think ecotourism is about.

4.4.6 Ecotourism is professionalism and knowledge

Ecotourism is according to our respondents about being knowledgeable and professional. When describing Nature's Best many talk about the certification process and the basic course that all certified companies must go through and this seem to be very appreciated by the applicants. They tell us that they have learnt very much during the process and the basic course is mentioned by most of them as filled with lots of important and interesting knowledge. They also mention that the certification process contributed a lot to their learning about the nature, history and culture of their local neighbourhood. We therefore conclude that the perception they have of Nature's Best corresponds well to their view of ecotourism as something that increases knowledge for the involved companies.

4.4.7 Ecotourism is to provide high quality experiences that lasts

Our respondents emphasized the importance of the uniqueness and quality of the experience and that they want to give to people what they themselves have found very valuable. When describing Nature's Best many of the respondents showed that they are proud because Nature's Best gives them a higher status as providing trustworthy services. One of the respondents also mentioned how, when he met people from Nature's Best, it was the first time

he met someone who actually understood what kind of experiences he tried to convey to the customers. Many of the respondents said that they share values with Nature's Best and therefore they are positive even if the results are not always what they expected.

4.4.8 Ecotourism is about trust

The respondents see ecotourism as something trustworthy that suggests credence and reliability of a company. When describing Nature's Best they mean that the certificate has high status and is seen as respected and trusted within the tourism industry. This shows us that the respondents' perceptions of Nature's Best correspond with what they think characterise ecotourism. However, some of the respondents show a mistrust towards Nature's Best. They describe an organisation that treats its members unfairly and that does not really know what they are doing. This shows us a different picture where the respondents' perceptions of Nature's Best do not correspond with what they think is ecotourism. Hence, there are two different directions here. This is a result of the personal relationships between Nature's Best and the different companies. It could be as simple as the fact that these differ.

4.4.9 Ecotourism is a different way of thinking and making active choices

The respondents say that being an ecotourism company, they need to reflect on their actions and make active choices more than other companies. Nature's Best, they say, invites to reflection and helps them to think differently and to reflect on their own business. We can therefore conclude that Nature's Best on this point corresponds well with what ecotourism is about in the eyes of the respondents. During the interviews the respondents talked about the importance of working sustainably when being an ecotourism company. This is also something that Nature's Best emphasise and the certified companies agree with Nature's Best on this point. Therefore, this part of the respondents' perception of ecotourism can be connected to Nature's Best.

4.4.10 Ecotourism is about practicalities and common sense

When asking what ecotourism mean to them, many of the respondents talked about practical things they do, such as recycling. Also the expression “common sense” was used when talking about ecotourism. This is something that the respondents also connect to Nature’s Best. Many times the interviewees mentioned what practical behaviours are expected of them when being certified. Also it was clear that these practicalities as well as the values of Nature’s Best are shared with the certified businesses. Therefore, we conclude that the perception of Nature’s Best goes in line with the companies’ meanings of ecotourism concerning these matters.

4.4.11 Ecotourism is about pursuing small scale business that is not driven by money

All the companies that we visited are small businesses, which also are a part of their identity. The companies connect ecotourism with small scale business. However, this was never mentioned when talking about Nature’s Best and for that reason the perception of Nature’s Best dose not correspond to the respondents’ picture of ecotourism on this point. Our respondents also talked about how they, opposed to other companies, are not driven by money. Ecotourism for them is something driven by other, more noble things, such as care for the environment. When they talk about Nature’s Best though, we see two different sides, often from the same respondents. At the same time as they are talking about Nature’s Best as something with important values, they also describe the certificate in terms of marketing value and something that should bring extra income to the members. Many of them mention that they think Nature’s Best has too high fees and this is in many cases a very important question for the respondents.

4.4.12 Ecotourism creates a collective identity and alterity construction

In our analysis we concluded that the respondents have a collective identity concerning how they see themselves as ecotourism businesses and what meanings they give to ecotourism. During the interviews we also found that there are examples of alterity constructions, where the companies frame themselves and their activities from others. However, when we analysed the collective identity in the sense of being Nature's Best certified it is not very strong. The certified companies do have shared values with Nature's Best, but things such as lack of interaction between the companies, their different focuses and Nature's Best's unclear image makes the collective identity weak. Therefore, we conclude that the meanings of ecotourism and the companies' identities create to a larger extent a collective identity than being a member in Nature's Best.

4.4.13 Summary: The interconnection between the meanings of ecotourism and the perceptions of Nature's Best

When comparing the meanings that the respondents connect to ecotourism with the perceptions they had of Nature's Best, we can see both similarities and differences. When the respondents talk about Nature's Best, they talk about it as influencing their lifestyle and values in the same way as they talk about ecotourism as a whole. There are also similarities to be found concerning the importance that the nature, professionalism and knowledge, the quality of the experience as well as the practical aspects have for the activities. The respondents also connect Nature's Best with a different way of thinking in the same way as they do with ecotourism as a whole.

However, when it comes to being innovative, the respondents talk about ecotourism companies as being in the forefront of innovation while the perceptions of Nature's Best is that it is a stagnated organisation and their perceptions of Nature's Best therefore do not correspond to what they think it is to be an ecotourism company. The same concerns the perception that ecotourism involves a concern for traditions and culture, since the perceptions the respondents have of Nature's Best connected to this is negative. The local and small scale

aspect is not either as evident for Nature's Best as it is for ecotourism as a whole. Neither do the certified companies feel that they have a collective identity as Nature's Best certified companies in the same way they have as ecotourism companies. This could be caused by for example lack of interaction between the companies, different focuses and Nature's Best unclear image.

When it comes to trust, which is one of the meanings that the respondents connect with ecotourism, the perceptions of Nature's Best differ. The certification is seen as respected and trusted within the tourism industry but at the same time some of the respondents show mistrust towards the organisation. Also when it comes to the "not driven by money" aspect, the meanings differ. At the same time as the respondents talk about Nature's Best as something with important values, they also describe the certificate as something that should bring extra income to the members.

4.5 Objective 2 versus 3 – Does the respondents' perceptions of Nature's Best correspond to the expectations they had when they applied for the certificate?

In the following text we will connect objective 2 and 3:

- To understand the perception of Nature's Best certification system by certified ecotourism organizations.
- To analyse the causes behind certification work in the Swedish ecotourism sector.

Here we will compare our findings of what caused the respondents to apply for certification with how they perceive Nature's Best and what they get out of being a member.

4.5.1 Ethical concern

During the interviews some respondents expressed their concern for the environment and that this made them apply for certification. In addition many of the respondents said that it felt good to be an environmentally friendly company. These feelings and interests are hence reasons why they applied for Nature's Best. The values that Nature's Best stand for are in

many ways the same as the respondents'. Because of the shared values we conclude that the perception of Nature's Best comport with the respondents' ethical concern.

4.5.2 The need for recognition and legitimation causes certification work

During the interviews it became clear that recognition and legitimation are important motives for applying for certification. Certifications like Nature's Best awake attention and make the companies more credible, and for that reason the certified businesses hope to gain more customers and improve their competitiveness. From the interviews we found out that Nature's Best do make the companies more recognised and credible among individual consumers but only among people in the tourism industry. Regular customers have very little knowledge about the certification system. This is something that many certified companies are disappointed with. In addition the companies perceive Nature's Best's image as very unclear, which also makes it more difficult to be recognised and legitimated. We conclude that the motives recognition and legitimation only partly correspond to the perception the certified businesses have of Nature's Best.

4.5.3 The need for marketing and selling causes certification work

To get help with marketing and selling is one of the reasons the respondents mentioned for why they chose to apply for Nature's Best certificate. A few of the respondents think that Nature's Best has helped them with the marketing but most of them are disappointed with what they have gained in marketing benefits. They mean that Nature's Best certificate is not known by the customers and therefore does not work as a marketing tool for them. On the other hand they say that Nature's Best is known by the tourism industry and therefore can serve as a tool for marketing when doing businesses with other companies. Some of the respondents mention that they think Nature's Best is treating the member companies unfairly when it comes to marketing so that some of them get more marketing than others. They also mention that the high fees they pay to Nature's Best are not fair compared to what they gain in marketing benefits.

4.5.4 The need for business development causes certification work

The companies applying for certification by Nature's Best are expecting the certificate to be a reason for them to develop and review themselves and also that the organisation behind Nature's Best should help them with strategic issues such as packaging. When it comes to the possibilities to review the own business the companies think they have been provided with many opportunities to do this, for example through the application process. When it comes to the support and mentoring they are expecting from Nature's Best though, they are disappointed. Many of them perceive Nature's Best as a stagnated organisation that does not contribute much with advice and support to the members.

4.5.5 Summary: The interconnections between the expectations behind certification work and perceptions of Nature's Best.

The last part of our analysis was to compare what caused the respondents to apply for certification with how they perceive Nature's Best and what they get out of being a member. During the interviews with our respondents we found that the most important reasons behind the decision to apply for certification by Nature's Best are ethical concern, recognition and legitimation, marketing and selling as well as need for development.

Many of the respondents felt that Nature's Best shared their values regarding concern for the environment, which they were satisfied with. They were also happy with the development aspect in terms of possibilities to review their own business. However, some respondents said that they wanted more support and mentoring in order to develop further.

Marketing and selling were very important reasons for applying for certification. However, many of our respondent are disappointed about the marketing benefits they have gained from being members in Nature's Best. They mean that Nature's Best is very unknown and for that reason the certificate is not working as a marketing tool for them. The fact that Nature's Best is most known in the tourism industry and not much by consumers also limits the recognition and legitimation of the certified companies. Many of the respondents hoped that by being

certified with Nature's Best they would stand out more and gain more credibility, but this is almost only in the industry.

4.6 Recommendations from respondents

This section describes recommendations that our respondents mentioned during the interviews. We asked the respondents directly how Nature's Best could improve to better meet their needs and get more satisfied members. Below is a list of what we have concluded from our interviews. All quotations are anonymous.

4.6.1 Make the application process easier

“Would it be possible to use the internet in the application process? You could have some shorter segments and you could take one segment per month or every second week, so that you can sit at home and look through it and then do an exam on the internet. /.../ This pile of paper... it is not good. A person who is used to running around in the woods, fishing and hunting... you don't sit down to read all those papers... It is hard for the one who isn't used to studying and then you have mental blocks. It is too much. That's how it was for me.”

As mentioned in the chapter about the perceptions of Nature's Best, the application process is perceived as very heavy and it was even suggested that this could be hindering potential applicants from actually applying. The heavy procedure and the large quantity of paperwork are put in relation to the fact that many of the applicants are not used to this kind of work. Views on whether or not it is good to have such a profound application process differ. Some say it adds value to the certificate and makes it more serious while others think it is only a nuisance. One of our respondents suggests that the internet could be used in order to make the process more manageable. He means that the application procedure could be divided into separate blocks so that the applicants get a longer time frame for the procedure.

4.6.2 Change the cost structure

“If you have a high turnover you pay a bit more. Then maybe it should be on the number of package you sell. Then it directly comes from them.”

Many of the respondents have mentioned unfair cost structure as one of the most negative aspects of Nature’s Best certificate. They mean that it is not fair that they pay a percentage of the total turnover when the packages sold through Nature’s Best stands for a very small part of their incomes. They mean that a more fair solution would be that they paid a percentage of the turnover earned from Nature’s Best certified products instead. This perception of unfair costs is something that can hurt Nature’s Best and their credibility and a discussion with the certified companies concerning this should be initiated.

4.6.3 Use actors like municipalities, travel agencies and tourist offices as a marketing platform

“I think it would be good if they could reach out to the municipalities and tell them about ecotourism. /.../ Because most municipalities have a strategy for long-term and sustainable tourism. /.../ it is on the municipality level that you can reach people.”

“You don’t find the customers on the countryside, nor on the Internet. You find them at the travel agencies and maybe the tourist offices.”

As previously mentioned in the analysis of objective 2, many of the respondents are not satisfied with the marketing effort made by Nature’s Best. Some of them believe that new channels can be used. The municipalities, travel agencies and tourist offices are lifted up as examples. They mean that Nature’s Best should cooperate with these organizations and strive to have good relations with those in order to further the organization and its possibilities to reach out to more people.

4.6.4 Create a better sense of community between the certified companies

”Then, they have discussed the possibility of creating more of a we-feeling between the companies certified by Nature’s Best, but there is no forum for us to exchange ideas and that would be a responsibility for the organisation what I think.”

As mentioned in the analysis of objective 2, the collective identity of the certified companies is not very strong and the networking between the companies we have interviewed is almost non-existent. Some of them seem to be satisfied as it is while others would appreciate a more vivid organization where networking between the companies takes a natural part. They talk about other organisations where they are members like for example STF (The Swedish Tourist Association) where they have meetings and other activities for the members. One of the respondents mention how more networking would be valuable for the certified companies and say *”We think it would be interesting to cooperate because... being two certified companies contributes with extra value”*.

One of the respondents told us about how STF has a function where the member companies can visit each other and test each others’ products in order to inspire each other. Also another company said it would be good with some kind of study-visits to other companies to get ideas from others.

One of the respondents thinks it would be a good idea, when having the base-course in a certain area, to also invite the certified companies as an opportunity for them to network, exchange ideas and learn from each other. To have more meetings for the certified companies are mentioned by many of the respondents. One interviewee said *“That might not be such a bad idea! To have some kind of yearly conference. Ha ha! So that you can go there and meet the others”*. Some other respondents raised the question of having more local gatherings, where certified companies from the same region can meet.

4.6.5 More personal contact, follow ups and mentoring

”Those who are successful (authors comment: about other certification systems), they integrate it in the system, yearly company visits. With some kind of consultation and counselling. This is something I believe is totally necessary for any kind of success. And I think this is one of the reasons for why Nature’s Best hasn’t come further than what they have.”

Some of the respondents talked about how they want Nature’s Best to work as a mentor for them. They want more frequent and continuous company visits and more continuity in the contact with Nature’s Best. Some of the respondents said *“I believe that one of the weaknesses in the system is that there is no continuous follow-ups or company visits or so. This is a major failing and I think it has to do with money. To maintain and increase the quality for the member companies I believe this would be completely necessary”*. *”Come and visit and do spot checks. That would not be bad. Make sure that those being certified do what they should. So that they don’t just get the certificate and go their own way”*. Follow ups and spot checks seem to be something the certified companies want more of.

The personal meeting seems to be something that is important for the member companies. The ones who feel they get this personal contact seem to be very satisfied with that and the ones who lack it seem to be unhappy about it. One of the respondents mean that the contact with Nature’s Best can give the certified companies extra energy boosts but they need this more continuous.

Some of the respondents say that they wish Nature’s Best more would take the role of a mentor. *“When we were going through this, they would be like a mentor for us and work for us and promote us”*. What they need is knowledge about strategy and management and this is something they hope that Nature’s Best can contribute with. *“Based on their knowledge in marketing, they could help us with packaging. Because we who are suppliers are not good at that. We have lots of dreams but no contact with the market in that way”*.

4.6.6 Work as a selling agent and help with contacts

“Practically, that is exactly what we small businesses need, someone selling our things. We don’t manage to sell our own things in as large quantities as we need. That’s how it is with all those small businesses. You need some kind of network of resellers.”

The respondents express a need for someone helping them to sell their products on the market. The respondent above told us this is something Nature’s Best could really help him with and he trusts them to be the best sales channel for this. He thinks Nature’s Best is trustworthy and would be a perfect platform for selling ecotourism products even on an international market. One of the other respondents is thinking the same, *“It would have been great if they could sell our products”*.

Another idea is that Nature’s Best would connect the certified companies with selling agents that could help them selling their products. Some of them talked about an agent called Nature Travels who sell ecocertified products and they think that Nature’s Best should help them to get in contact with more agents like that. *“It would be great /.../ if they could tell us about it (authors comment: selling agents of ecotourism products) so that we could contact them and cooperate. /.../ It would be good if Nature’s Best could be the spider in the web to find these in Europe”*. Some of the respondents even mean that Nature’s Best should help them to create partnerships with these agencies.

Some of the respondents said that it would be good if Nature’s Best could help them with other contacts like for example contact with suppliers of materials *“You could have coordinated purchase agreements for Nature’s Best”*. Others mentioned educational resources as something that would contribute to the value of being certified. *“You could have courses and so... in environmental thinking”*. *“The members would be happy if there were benefits of some kind. Let me participate in subsidized courses/.../ so that I can learn and get better”*.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Next, we draw conclusions from our analysis in the previous chapter. The three objectives are linked together and discussed in connection to each other in order to answer our research question. We also give recommendations for further research. Finally, we give recommendations to Nature's Best.

5.1 Why do Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecotourism certification practices?

During our study, including interviews as well as observations and exploration of previous research, we have found that there are many aspects of why Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecocertification practices.

We have found that a collective identity has been constructed concerning what it is to be an ecotourism company as well as the meanings of ecotourism as a whole. We have discerned a number of themes representing this identity construction and we conclude that companies who share this identity are more likely to engage in ecotourism certification practices. The picture that the respondents have given us of an ecotourism company is as follows:

An ecotourism company is driven by an innovative entrepreneur, pursuing small scale business as a lifestyle. The businesses are not driven primarily by money but use a different way of thinking, with a focus on sustainability. Both the small practical things such as recycling and the use of environmentally friendly fuels, as well as more extensive aspects concerning the product they offer, are taken into consideration. Their activities involve the local resources, the nature, traditions and culture in the surrounding area. Professionalism, knowledge and a good hostesship are important in order to offer a high quality experience to the customer and be seen as a trustworthy service provider.

The identification with ecotourism qualities, as well as the need to distance themselves from characteristics that does not comply with their view of ecotourism is something that draws these companies closer to a decision of applying for ecotourism certification.

The companies that are certified with Nature's Best perceive the organisation in certain ways. From our interviews we understand that there are both positive and negative sides of the certification. This can in turn result in that a company decides to apply for certification or not. The perceptions of Nature's Best are that it is a good initiative with good values which inspires the members to reflect more on their businesses and actions. The certificate is known in the tourism industry and is trusted as a serious program. However, some members are dissatisfied with the marketing benefits and they think that Nature's Best is unfair. They perceive Nature's Best as lacking a clear image and recognition among the consumers. High fees and a complicated application process are also negative aspects mentioned by the respondents. We conclude that the perception of Nature's Best must correspond to how the companies perceive ecotourism and that the values of Nature's Best and the companies must be shared to gain satisfied members.

Finally, we asked the companies what caused them to apply for certification. Our findings tell us the reasons are ethical concern, recognition and legitimation, marketing and selling and development. In our analysis, we compare our findings of how the respondents perceive Nature's Best with what caused them to apply for the certification. The perceptions of Nature's Best should go hand in hand with what caused the companies to apply for the certification. Otherwise their expectations will not be fulfilled. We can conclude from this analysis that there are a number of things that has made the respondents disappointed, for example the help in marketing and selling received from Nature's Best.

Our three objectives have helped us to understand why Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecocertification practices and what is important for them in order to continue their engagement in the matter.

5.2 Transferability and recommendations for further research

There is not much previous research about ecocertifications in Sweden and therefore our study fills a gap in the academic research and contributes to research in the field of ecotourism certifications. Previous studies have been conducted internationally while this study focuses on how certifications in tourism work on a national level. The study contributes with new knowledge about how Swedish tourism organisations engage in ecotourism certification practices and we hope that this study will inspire researchers to continue studies in this area that is still very unexploited and to give raise to the importance of these relevant issues. Research on similar programs in Scandinavia and Europe would contribute to a deeper understanding of the identity as ecotourism organisations as well as the meanings connected to certification. Research on the system and certification process of Nature's Best and other certification programs would also be helpful in order to develop member satisfaction in such programs.

The study is not exclusively for the benefit of Nature's Best, but can also be useful for other practitioners in the tourism industry as well as others working with different kinds of ecoproducts in giving indications on why organisations engage in ecocertification practices. The knowledge gained for Nature's Best as well as similar organisations provides valuable information on what they should consider and how they can improve to increase their member numbers.

5.3 Our recommendations to Nature's Best

Based on our study, we want to lift up some recommendations to Nature's Best that will help them to develop their product and become a more successful certification organisation.

Help the certified companies with selling their products: Since many of the certified companies struggle to sell their products we recommend that Nature's Best should take a bigger part in supporting the certified companies' selling of their products. We suggest that this would be done by making the companies get in touch with partners and agents. One agent

that is already cooperating with some of the certified companies is Nature Travels. There must certainly be other similar organisations that would fit the certified businesses. Nature's Best can therefore help the certified companies to get in contact with these agents and partners.

Increase the personal contact with the certified companies: We agree with some of the respondents and suggest that Nature's Best should have more personal contact with the certified companies. This is difficult because of the small resources of Nature's Best, but contact is something that the businesses appreciate. When having contact the companies feel that they are important and are more likely to be satisfied.

Strengthen the collective identity: During our study we have seen that there is not a strong "we-feeling" among the certified companies. We suggest that Nature's Best should take this into consideration and support networking for those companies who are interested. In this way the companies can help support each other and might put less pressure on the already understaffed Nature's Best. A stronger collective identity will also enhance the companies' commitment and they are more likely to stay as satisfied members. Our suggestion is that the shared values the certified companies have can be used to strengthen this collective identity. Our impression is that those shared values are of great importance and that they give the members a positive perception of Nature's Best even if they are discontent about other aspects of the certification. These values should therefore be focused on and spread around the organisation.

Strengthen the image and communicate it: Nature's Best should strive to have a clear image. From our study we have found that the role of Nature's Best is somewhat unambiguous and unclear. They need to find out what their role really is and communicate this to both members and future applicants. Today, many of the members perceive Nature's Best as a stagnated organisation. They have joined as members because they wanted help with business development, mentoring, marketing etcetera but then nothing happened. Nature's Best need to decide what their role really is and they need to be active in that role, whether it is as a marketing organisation, a mentor for small companies or something else. They need to communicate this role to strengthen their own image.

Work with several marketing channels: Nature's Best should continue working with marketing channels such as Coop and Smartbox and try to find new ones. These have been

appreciated by the certified companies and are seen as a good marketing opportunity. What Nature's Best need to do though is to inform the certified companies about the possibilities for marketing through these channels, because not everyone knows about them.

Discuss the cost structure: The cost structure is a source of discontent and nuisance for the certified companies. They think it is unfair and that the costs are too high for small companies. The respondents say that they think the cost should be based on the turnover from the packages sold through Nature's Best instead of the total turnover. This might not be financially possible for Nature's Best but our suggestion is that a discussion is started with the certified companies and that the cost structure is re-evaluated.

Change the application process: The application process is seen as a very heavy and time consuming process by many of the respondents. At the same time it is appreciated that it is very thorough and that it gives seriousness to the certification. We suggest that the application is kept serious and thorough but that the process of doing it is developed so that it is not as heavy. The paperwork could for example be divided into smaller sections and parts of it could be done online.

Market the brand of Nature's Best better: Nature's Best need to market themselves better so that the awareness of the organisation is raised. We suggest that they, except the forums they already use, go through the municipalities, travel agencies, tourist offices etcetera.

Treat all certified members fairly: Some of the respondents mentioned that they are unhappy with Nature's Best and said that they are unfair. This is because they do not know what to expect from them. Nature's Best need to make sure that the certified companies know what to expect from them and what is their own responsibilities. They also need to give all the certified companies the same opportunities and provide them with the same information.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – Interview guide:

1. Berätta historien om ditt företag.

Berätta om hur NB kommer in i bilden

(Varför bestämde ni er för att ansöka om att bli certifierade med NB?)

Hur var det att bli certifierade? (process, ev. problem, uppmärksamhet)

2. Vad är ekoturism för dig?

Vad betyder det att vara ett ekoturismföretag?

(Skillnad att vara certifierad/icke certifierad?)

(Hur ser du på dig och ditt certifierade turismföretag?)

(Förhållande till företag utan certifiering?)

(Hur önska du att andra ska se på ditt företag?)

3. Hur skulle du beskriva NB?

4. Vad har det betytt och vad betyder det för dig att vara certifierad med Naturens Bästa?

(fördelar, nackdelar, önskningar)

5. Övriga frågor och kommentarer