

HI-USA Multi-Site Third Party Eco-Certification Project – USA

SUMMARY

Project Description: Sustainable Travel Education Program (STEP)

Project Type: Education in Sustainability

National Association: Hostelling International USA

Project Location: HI Austin, HI Boston, HI Houston, HI LA; Santa Monica, HI Monterey, HI Pigeon Point Lighthouse, HI Point Montara Lighthouse, HI Point Reyes, HI Sacramento, HI Washington DC

Estimation of number of reduced tonnes of CO₂: 10 HIUSA Hostels Advancing to GOLD STEP Certification - 15% Reduction or 194.11 metric tons

Total Funds Requested: £ 21,610

Total Project Cost: £ 29,110

Annual £ saves and ROI (return of investment): See explanation under detailed information

Why should this project be funded ahead of others?

It's not enough for us to say we're green; we want STEP – one of the most reputable eco-certification companies – to prove it. HI-USA is seeking grant money to certify 10 hostels so that guests can be confident in their socially-responsible decision to stay with us. We'll start with 10, but ultimately we hope to reach our full network of more than 50 hostels.

Thirty-five per cent of the critically important solo, free and independent traveller (FIT) segment is comprised of young, socially, and environmentally passionate individuals who seek out service providers that address these concerns. Yet coupled by their desire for responsible travel is a general scepticism of its implementation. Eco-certification therefore emerges as a natural choice to verify our sustainability credentials and engage the youth travel segment.

HI-USA's sustainability commitments have taken a giant leap forward with the completion of our innovative pilot program designed to inform the organization's national sustainability strategy while implementing best practices across a number of hostels. The success of the pilot is a key indicator that HI-USA is an organization providing leadership in terms of sustainability management. As business leaders we are committed to implementing policies and procedures that reflect an on-going commitment to environmental, socio-cultural, and economic responsibility. Now that a baseline has been established, clear objectives and goals can be set, targets achieved, and transparent results disclosed.

We seek the highest level of external verification of our sustainability management systems and are therefore requesting funding to support our pilot hostels in undergoing STEP 3 and receive a third party on-site assessment. Funding this project will directly benefit 10 hostels across the United States of America, while further supporting HI-USA's effort in creating organizational and property-level resource reduction plans, and the development of internal standards further aligned with the GSTC and HI's Sustainability Charter. Once achieved, all hostels in the HI-USA network will have access to a hostel-centric template providing an incremental approach to onsite implementation of baseline, intermediate,

and advanced sustainability management practices that can evolve over time and be verified by external assessors

DETAILED PROJECT INFORMATION

Objective of the project

To complete the STEP program at the pilot hostels:

The 10 hostels that have shown their commitment to third-party certification by completing STEP 2 – Sustainable Tourism International’s (STI) Bronze Eco-certification - will be supported and receive financial assistance to advance to STEP 3 - STI Silver/Gold/Platinum Eco-certification - via an on-site assessment by a qualified auditor.

Background

Hostelling International USA (HI-USA) has a mission “to help all, especially the young, gain a greater understanding of the world and its people through hostelling.” Integrating environmental sustainability principles into the operation of HI-USA’s hostels meets the mission and vision of the organization, and expands the scope of world citizenship, cultural exchange, and stewardship of the earth.

HI-USA has an outstanding track record of community engagement, quality assurance, and customer satisfaction. HI-USA’s commitment to low-impact travel and environmental stewardship dates back to its origins in the 1930’s and continues today with such offerings as hostel-to-hostel bike tours and public commitments to water conservation and recycling. By its very nature, hostelling encourages guests to leave a smaller footprint by sharing rooms and communal spaces, which helps to reduce resource consumption. Over the past decade the number of HI-USA hostels voluntarily participating in city and state green-business programs has grown and many have won awards for their efforts. At the National Operators Meeting in 2006, hostel operators raised the need for HI-USA to adopt a sustainability initiative for hostel properties.

In 2007, HI-USA convened a sustainability task force of hostel operators and national staff to create a mandatory, yet incremental, environmentally responsible program that all hostels could participate in. In 2008, HI-USA revised its internal operating standards to include the task force’s recommended set of environmental standards, which were phased into all network hostels between 2009 and 2012. Environmental practices addressing energy and water conservation, air quality, waste, materials, and education were included. Additionally, the Sustainability Task Force, with the help of the Delta Institute, developed HI-USA’s sustainability statement, which acts as a guiding principal of sustainable operations for its network of hostels:

We will constantly strive to operate our hostels in an environmentally responsible manner, working towards sustainability. We will measure our impacts and communicate our progress and practices to the hostel community and the community as a whole.



In early 2012, HI-USA re-evaluated its environmental standards using a triple bottom line approach as defined by the Hostelling International Sustainability Charter, which is based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Conference's (GSTC) criteria. The triple bottom line measures the environmental, social, and economic impact of the organization.

HI-USA also adopted a new vision for the organization - Vision 2020 - which is supported by strategies and initiatives. One of the initiatives to fulfil the strategy to enrich the Hostel Stay Experience is to expand environmental sustainability efforts. This is envisioned to be achieved through more environmentally efficient and responsible methods of operations. HI-USA committed to provide a system for all hostels to become third-party certified in meeting its triple bottom line objectives. With this in mind, HI-USA launched a national pilot program in 2012 to provide insight and give a snapshot into HI-USA's baseline level of compliance with the GSTC criteria. HI-USA commissioned Sustainable Travel International (STI), a credible, mission aligned, global non-profit organization that provides sustainability solutions and services for tourism businesses and destinations, to implement an integrated pilot which included Eco-certification and a greenhouse gas (GHG) management system recognized by the GSTC.

STI's Sustainable Tourism Educational Program™ (STEP) will better position HI-USA to re-evaluate and revise internal standards, develop targets and strategies for various indicators, and increase internal and external transparency and accountability.

At the completion of a 15-hostel Eco-certification and GHG management pilot program, eight hostels, or 15% of the HI-USA's hostels, earned STI's Bronze Eco-certification in February 2013. Six of the remaining seven hostels anticipate earning Bronze Eco-certification by the end of June 2013. One hostel has withdrawn from the pilot program. Four of the remaining 14 pilot hostels are currently preparing for their on-site assessments and are expected to earn Silver or Gold Eco-certification by the end of summer 2013. These four are therefore not included in this grant proposal. The remaining 10 pilot hostels included in this grant proposal are identified in the table below.

In addition to the Eco-certifications, the pilot was successful at collecting data to determine a baseline assessment of performance across key sustainable tourism indicators, including purchasing practices, guest education, waste and recycling, water consumption, energy use, business travel, and carbon emissions.

Methodology and Monitoring Plan

The Sustainable Tourism Education Program™ (STEP) is the flagship program of Sustainable Travel International (STI), and provides businesses and destinations with the tools they need to design and execute their own sustainability management plans. The STEP Eco-certification Standard is GSTC-Recognized and STI has formally applied for Stage Two of the GSTC-Accreditation process. The comprehensive standard is the backbone of the STEP Sustainability Framework, a suite of online management tools for assessment, planning, benchmarking, and reporting on sustainability best practices.

STEP helps participants verify and manage a wide range of sustainability components, including business planning, health and safety, employee engagement, environmental management, supply chain management, ecosystem and community impacts, and guest communications.

STEP provides a systematic approach to sustainability and eco-certification is achieved during a three-step process. This incremental process allows businesses to integrate systems into their operations that make sense for the long term.

- **STEP 1** involves a thorough self-assessment of nearly 200 criteria related to sector-specific business operations. This holistic view of sustainability allows businesses to identify where they are strong and where they can make improvements. Next, businesses are asked to focus on 21 Baseline criteria (see Appendix One) that collectively address the foundation of a strong sustainability management system.
- **STEP 2** requires submission of evidence documenting compliance with the 21 Baseline criteria. Known as a desk assessment, a second or third party will verify if the practices have been implemented. Upon approval, the business is awarded the STI Bronze Eco-certification. Throughout the process businesses can utilize the STEP standard to find a wide array of solutions that range from no cost tools to integrated systems that require an investment of human and financial resources and can help them ramp up efforts over time.
- **STEP 3** involves an on-site assessment from an independent STEP-Accredited Assessor who will verify that a defined set of criteria has been implemented and the business is compliant. Depending on the findings of the on-site assessment, businesses will be awarded the STI Silver, Gold, or Platinum Eco-certification.

Currently, STI Bronze Eco-certified hostels have completed a thorough self-assessment, drafted a sustainability policy, created a baseline measurement of critical sustainability indicators, and improved internal and external communications.

Having completed a self-assessment and desk assessment (STEPS 1 and 2), STEP 3 involves the implementation of intermediate best practices and an on-site assessment to verify documentation and monitoring systems are in place to effectively manage sustainability. Based on the requirements set forth by the GSTC, the accreditation body for tourism certification, this process has specific procedures and is summarized as follows:

STEP 3: On-Site Assessment. The Bronze Eco-certified hostels continue to work through the STEP standard, preparing documentation and evidence related to the higher criteria levels (Intermediate, Advanced, and Industry Leader.) Once a hostel has completed work in preparation for the on-site assessment, the hostel manager will contact STI and the following will occur:

- STI selects an Assessor (or Assessors) to conduct the on-site assessment and evaluation.

- The Assessor conducts a site visit to the hostel. The site visit includes: interviewing key personnel; obtaining documentary evidence; verifying physical evidence; and relevant observation of the premises where the tourism service is delivered.
- Based on scrutiny of the documentary and physical evidence, and information gathered during interviews and observations, the Assessor draws significant concerns about non-conformities to the attention of the hostel manager and may request further information. These non-conformities are referred to as Corrective Action Requests (CARs).
- At the end of the visit, the Assessor conducts an exit interview with the hostel manager to ensure that the audit process has covered all relevant matters accurately. The Assessor, at this stage, seeks clarification and comment from the hostel manager on any initially apparent issues of non-conformity with the standard. This interview is only an informal exchange of information, though, and it does not predetermine the outcome of the decision.

The STEP Assessor then prepares a written Findings Report of the assessment which:

- Describes the process of the audit, including dates, assessment analysis, documents scrutinized, and interviews conducted.
- May include comments and recommendations relevant to the decision on whether to grant certification.
- Identifies areas of major and minor non-conformity with the standard and includes all written Corrective Action Requests (CARs.)
- Provides sufficient detail to enable a well-informed certification decision to be made.
- Is submitted to STI and is made available to the hostel manager.

Upon submission of the Findings Report to STI, if the hostel manager wishes to proceed, they have 90 days to correct any areas of non-conformity. The hostel manager then informs STI or the assigned STEP-Accredited Assessor when this rectification has been completed. STI or the Assessor then verifies conformity in the corrected areas. To award an Eco-certification, STI proceeds as follows:

- The STEP Certification Evaluation Committee reviews all information and results from the site visit, and findings report, and makes a decision on whether or not to grant Eco-certification, and at what level.
- STI communicates the results of the decision of the STEP Certification Evaluation Committee to the hostel manager and delivers the appropriate STEP Eco-certification. This communication includes helpful observations and feedback to the client on the sustainability of its tourism services.
- The Eco-Certification is valid for three years and requires remote annual monitoring to ensure continued compliance with the standard. Follow up on-site visits can be scheduled at any time during the three-year period.

Internal policy templates, reference charts, and checklists have been developed by an HI-USA employee certified in the STEP standard to assist hostels undergoing STEP 2 and 3. HI-USA Central Office staff will

oversee the hostels preparing for their on-site assessment and will provide support when needed while ensuring each meets the expected deadline. Interns will be recruited at many of the participating hostels to further assist hostel staff in meeting property level goals.

Implementation Plan

HI-USA will contract with STI to Eco-certify 10 hostels under the STEP pilot program - see Appendix Two for a Memorandum of Understanding between HI-USA and STI. The cost of STI's third party assessments will be paid with the HISF grant. HI-USA will pay travel, accommodation, and per diem for the independent STI/STEP-Accredited Assessor.

Environmental Impacts and CO2 Emission Reductions

The hostels that successfully complete STEP 3 and receive third-party eco-certification through STI will have documented and measured not only environmental impact, but also economic and social impacts. The assessment will also have verified that the systems needed for sustainability are in place and that the staff are trained in policies and procedures.

Through the pilot program and STEP 2 certification process the following impacts have been measured and will be verified with third-party assessments:

- **Waste Management**
 - 41% of waste (or 23,300 pounds) was diverted from landfill
 - 29% was recycled
 - 12% was composted
 - Each hostel overnight produced a half of a pound of waste compared to the more usual two pounds produced per hotel overnight.
- **Water Management**
 - Each hostel overnight consumed 26.5 gallons of water, compared to 100-200 gallons per hotel room overnight.
- **Purchasing**
 - Paper products – 79% contains a minimum of 30% post-consumer recycled content
 - Cleaning supplies – 81% is non-toxic and 63% is biodegradable
- **Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Assessment**
 - CO2 Footprint – 935.88 metric tons (8 hostels)
 - 14% of electricity is from renewable resources
 - 95% of GHG is due to energy consumption
 - 5% of GHG is due to staff travel and employee commutes

In addition to these environmental impacts, additional social and economic indicators were also verified as part of completing STEP 2. Social indicators such as providing employees with vacation, sick days, and

medical insurance; providing guests opportunities to volunteer locally; showing preference for local suppliers when procuring goods; educating clients, guests, and staff on responsible travel; and a 'Do No Harm' Code of Conduct and 'Leave No Trace' principals will be verified during the STEP 3 on-site assessment. In terms of economic indicators, all environmental indicators are tied to monetary figures, and as on-site efficiency improvements occur and guest and staff compliance increases due to higher levels of transparency and education, we expect to see reductions in the amount we spend on our utility bills. These reductions will only be realized if we continue to monitor, track, report, and verify our progress. Our desire to continue is strong and we seek assistance in reaching our goals. Supporting this project will ensure that HI-USA meets its commitment to complete the STEP program and third-party certify 14 of the pilot hostels.

Return on Investment

Eco-certification is a rigorous undertaking and a return on investment (ROI) is an important consideration. Eco-certification has both economic and human costs. It takes time to design systems, to prepare for assessment, and host an auditor. And it takes money to have a professional third party inspect your property to verify claims of sustainability. Therefore, the return on investment is not only an important consideration, it is critical to the success of the endeavour. Many in the travel sector attribute the success of Eco-certification to marketing and public relations related to being a green accommodation. That is a half-truth. Tangible ROI from Eco-certification is found not only in increased bookings or brand position, but across all aspects of the triple bottom line.

Eco-certification is a process where a business must assess their operations, design and implement sustainability management systems, measure key sustainability indicators, and engage with employees, communities, and stakeholders on its commitment to sustainability. This holistic approach improves operations and ultimately the quality of the service provided to guests. HI-USA will strive for guests to understand our sustainability management system, and we know they will appreciate higher quality of service.

You can't manage what you don't measure and certification requires an internal assessment on key sustainability indicators like energy and water consumption, waste and recycling, and carbon emissions. By understanding our baseline, we can make logical management decisions to reduce consumption and improve efficiencies, both of which have implications across the triple bottom line.

For example, understanding our energy sources and the associated carbon emissions can help management make justified decisions to invest in renewable energy to help reduce our carbon footprint while impacting the economic bottom line. Finally, once our hostels are Eco-certified by a third party, they can use the experience to tell their sustainability story which helps to position them as industry leaders in sustainable tourism. The verification is an illustration they are walking the walk not just talking the talk. Examples like this are found throughout the Eco-certification experience due to the holistic approach and triple bottom line impacts.

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