

A more sane way to rate eco-resorts

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ECO-SCHMECO! → Just as anyone with access to hot running water and a massage bench can declare they have a spa, almost any resort that uses recycled toilet paper and serves shade grown, organic, fair trade coffee can call itself an eco-resort.

There is no reasonable rating system that exists for eco-resorts. Yes, there are various labels that you can request by filling out a form with your green qualities (scout's honor) and sending it to some NGO. But even assuming everyone is perfectly truthful, what's to stop you from jacking up the heat or air-conditioning with the doors open, or heating the outdoor pool to 90 degrees in winter once you have the rating safely ensconced on your website? Not much.

There is also little information that allows for accurate comparison between these resorts. How do we know if your eco-resort is better than my eco-resort? How would you feel if your eco-resort and mine had the same rating, but you used one-fifth the electricity I did for the same volume of guests?

**TODAY'S
REALITY VS.
YESTERDAY'S
RATING**

→ I recently visited a beautiful eco-resort in Costa Rica that attracts the likes of Al Gore and Sheryl Crow, where the owners clearly took the meaning of sustainability to heart and had constructed a resort that appeared to have low energy needs. As it turns out, his competition came for a visit and when they compared notes their energy bills differed by a factor of four! One resort has air-conditioning whereas the other has structures designed for great natural ventilation and light and used ceiling fans when it was too hot. Yet the consumer searching for a holiday in a resort that is eco-friendly would be hard-pressed to know the difference; they are rated as equally green by their eco-label. Two resorts can earn the same rating, even if one resort espouses a culture of wastefulness and the other a culture of conservation. The same issue arises with LEED certification on buildings; once you have it, it is yours to tout no matter the culture of energy use of occupants. Energy hogs, too, can be LEED certified.

Clearly, our rating systems reflect a static picture rather than a fluid reality. The problem is simple; we don't measure the operational footprint of these resorts on an on-going basis and, if they fall out of line, remove or change their rating. We don't even have norms for the on-going operation of an eco-resort after it's labeled. Based on what we have seen at Zerofootprint when we benchmark buildings, schools, or businesses, it is not infrequent

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that two buildings in close proximity can have vastly different environmental impact and differ, literally, by many orders of magnitude.

BENCHMARKS PAINT A BETTER PICTURE

→ So, what's the solution? To start, measure the ongoing, verifiable use of energy and water and benchmark resorts against each other in a normalized fashion.

This is easier than it sounds. These resorts pay utility bills so we have an objective, trusted source of data on which to base benchmarks. Moreover, this information is easily audited; just look at the bills. A very high proportion of operational footprint comes from the utilities a building consumes and so a ranking based on this consumption is likely to be very accurate. As more and more resorts do this, the benchmarks for what constitutes a "good" or "poor" performing resort will soon become apparent. The bar might shift from year to year, but that is good if the stakes for being wasteful get higher.

I suggest starting with the following:

- 1) Measure the footprint per guest-days; this is based on utilities actually consumed over the last year and the total number of guest-days billed;
- 2) Divide the distribution into terciles (equal groups each containing a third of the resorts) and award a rating of green to the third with the lowest footprint;
- 3) Redo the ranking every year. In this way, we would have an objective measure that is meaningful, easy to compute, easy to audit, and moreover, easy and cost-effective to apply on a large scale.

If we did this, not only to eco-resorts but to all hotels, we would almost surely find that some eco-resorts are actually not very eco-friendly at all, and that some unlabelled resorts are actually more green than eco-labeled ones. It would certainly be clearer for the consumer: a true eco-resort is one in the lowest third of the energy footprint scale in its peer group.

It is true that to get a holistic picture of an eco-resort we would have to look at more data, such as the food consumed and its sourcing, for example. But is important to start somewhere. To drive change, it is more important for a rating system to gain legitimacy and universal application than it is to be pedantic about the potentially infinite list of

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criteria. The more criteria needed to establish a rating, the more barriers there are to widespread acceptance and the more difficult the verification process; too many criteria can make it easier to game the system by increasing the difficulty of verification. To get this going, let's focus on utilities and set the true green eco-resorts apart from the rest.

ABOUT US → Zerofootprint is a socially responsible enterprise with a mission to apply technology, design, and risk management to the massive reduction of our environmental footprint. We operate both in the for-profit and charitable domains through two entities, Zerofootprint Software and Zerofootprint Foundation, using shared technology.

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