

Round of applause

In a town where hotels are vital to the economy, any award garnered or positive press generated is welcome. But to me, even more important than what hotel made what top 10 list, or what entity named what guest-house best whatever, is news that some properties are taking steps to become more environmentally friendly and help conserve resources.

I don't say that to diminish any lodging owner who has worked hard enough to become a worldwide top-ranked hotel. It's just nice to see people stepping up and doing something they're not obligated to do in order to help more than just themselves.

On Thursday, two Key West hotels received certification in the Florida Green Lodging Program, an effort by the state Department of Environmental Protection to encourage the lodging industry to conserve and protect Florida's natural resources. The program acknowledges and promotes lodging facilities that demonstrate water and energy conservation, waste minimization, recycling, indoor air quality, environmentally preferable purchasing, program sustainability and pollution prevention.

The Banyan Resort and The Gardens Hotel, both in Key West, are the first lodging properties in the Florida Keys to earn this certification.

Their interest in becoming certified began in April after attending a Lodging Association luncheon that included a presentation on the program. The Banyan already has several conservation measures on site, including recycling, solar panels and compact fluorescent bulbs, said assistant general manager Julie Brown. So the Green Lodging certification was a natural next step.

"I think the biggest benefit of the program is not only the savings and the marketing, but the knowledge that you get," Brown said. "We already thought that we were doing quite a bit, and they taught us so much more."

Brown said program coordinators provided invaluable information and guidance along the way. Even better, there's no set time table or deadline for earning certification. So lodging properties can work toward certification as time allows.

"You move through the process as quickly or as slowly as you want," Brown said. "I don't want people to feel like it's such a scary process."

The program, while good for the environment, is also good for business. Certified properties are listed on www.floridagreenlodging.com with a link to their Web site. And the governor previously issued a directive requiring government employees to utilize certified Green Lodging in their business travel.

For other properties interested in more information about becoming Green Lodging certified, the Department of Environmental Protection's Web site lays out a detailed, step-by-step explanation of the program. Here is a very brief overview of how the implementation works:

1. Identify an environmental champion — someone with enthusiasm an good communication and organizational skills who can get everyone working as a team.

2. Obtain top management commitment and submit the admission application.

3. Create a Green Team, a formal or informal group responsible for ensuring that all environmental improvement practices in which the hotel is participating are being performed timely and correctly. Brown recommended including at least one employee from each department to help bring ideas to the table as well as help plan for implementation.

4. Conduct an environmental assessment.

5. Establish long- and short-term goals and identify environmental improvement projects.

6. Submit your environmental baseline data to the Green Lodging certification office.

7. Implement environmental improvement projects.

8. Evaluate and monitor the program.

9. Schedule on-site certifying visit.

10. Practice continual improvement.

Visit www.dep.state.fl.us and select "Green Lodging" from the "Programs" menu at the top of the page for more information.

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