



Ecotourism¹

Center for Natural Resources²

Though the concept of nature-based tourism is not new, the term "ecotourism" is. Once referred to as "green travel", ecotourism is defined as a "recreational and educational experience that encourages greater understanding of the natural and cultural resources of an area".

Florida has always been a popular locale for bird-watching and trail-hiking, but planners have only just begun to tap into its potential in this growing industry. However, throughout the stages of development planners should take deliberate steps to prevent the destruction of the natural resources upon which ecotourism depends.



Figure 1. Ecotourism offers something for everyone
Credits:

A March 1996 article in *Florida Trend*, "Marketing the Real Florida," asserts that nature tourism is the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. market, increasing 30% a year. In 1996, 3.6 million Floridians 16 years and older participated in some wildlife-related activity; these residents, plus nonresidents, provided an economic output of \$5.5 billion for wildlife-associated recreation in Florida in 1996. This economic output is equal to 66% of Florida's \$7.6 billion citrus industry.

While Florida is economically tourist-dependent, too many "eco" tourists can damage the natural resources which attract them -- especially if tourists are unaware of the repercussions of their actions. (For example, boaters/jetskiers driving too close to rookeries and hikers/campers crushing vegetation, removing logs for firewood and blocking wildlife traffic.)

"Ecotourism," therefore, is shifting from a definition of a specialized form of tourism to a set of distinguishing criteria applied to any nature-related tourism. Stephen Holland, Associate Professor of The Center for Tourism, Research, and Development through the UF College of Health and Human

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2. Nancy Peterson, Program Coordinator

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Figure 2. Toursits, who enjoy water-related activities, are attracted to Key West Credits:

Performance, defines ecotourism as having the following criteria:

- Natural resource based -- Exposure to a relatively undeveloped, natural environment.
- Specific clientele -- Outdoor lovers/wildlife watchers: According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 77 million Americans over the age of 16 (40% of adult population) enjoyed some form of wildlife-related recreation in 1996.
- Resource-preserving -- educating ecotourists to be nature-sensitive and limiting the number of visitors to that which an area can handle.
- Economic advantages of appreciative use -- preserving nature by selling it. (for example, measuring the returnable ecotourism value of a lion vs. the one-time value of a lion's hide).
- Economic support of local economies -- money goes to local businesses, rewarding the choice of environmentally friendly land use vs. alternatives (e.g., commercial development).

Because ecotourism involves interdependent environmental, political, social and economic factors, such a topic directly or indirectly concerns UF researchers and extension agents from a wide variety of backgrounds.



Figure 3. The Florida panther (*Panthera floridanus*).

UF Contacts

Stephen Holland
Recreation, Parks and Tourism
(352) 392-4042 ext 313
sholland@hnp.ufl.edu

Taylor Stein
Forest Resources & Conservation Dept.
(352) 846-0860
tstein@ufl.edu

Gustavo Antonini
Geography Dept.
(352) 392-6233
creslag@nervm.nerdc.ufl.edu

Gerald Culen
Family Youth & Community Sciences Dept.
(352) 846-1001 ext 250
grculen@mail.ifas.ufl.edu

Eleanor Foerste
Florida Cooperative Extension Agent
Osceola County Specific
(407) 846-418
ecfoerste@mail.ifas.ufl.edu

Martin Main
Wildlife Ecology & Conservation Dept.
SW FL Research & Education Center
Immokalee
(941) 658-3400
mbma@icon.imok.ufl.edu

Frank Mazzotti
Associate Professor, University of Florida
(954) 614 2369
fjma@mail.ifas.ufl.edu

Other Agencies

Dennis David
Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation
Commission (FWCC)
(352) 955-2230
davidd@gfc.state.fl.us

John Waldron
Forest Recreation Coordinator
Florida Division of Forestry
(850) 414-9852
waldroj@doacs.state.fl.us

Department of Environmental Protection
Parks & Recreation Division
(850) 488-1554
[http://tlhwww.1.dep.state.fl.us/parks/info/
ecotourism.html](http://tlhwww.1.dep.state.fl.us/parks/info/ecotourism.html)

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