

Integrating Sustainability into Your Ecotourism Operation¹

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Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world, increasing in sales and volume 7% annually since the 1990s (The International Ecotourism Society 2006). In 2016, tourism was responsible for one out of eleven jobs and ten percent of the world's economic output (World Tourism Organization 2016). If this growth is not properly planned for, it can cause social, economic, and environmental impacts to tourist destinations. To address such tourism impacts, scholars and practitioners have turned to ecotourism, hoping it can mitigate negative impacts by ensuring visitors adhere to sustainability principles. Despite ecotourism's promotion of sustainable practices and principles, however, the potential for negative impacts are great when ecotourism occurs in sensitive, nature-based areas such as protected, conserved, and private lands. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight on sustainability practices that could be integrated into ecotourism operations to minimize negative impacts and ensure long-term protection of vital resources.

Ecotourism and Sustainability

As it is commonly understood, ecotourism means responsible travel to natural areas that ensures environmental conservation as well as fostering the well-being of local communities and includes education and interpretation (The International Ecotourism Society 2015). This form of tourism is intended to address the negative impacts associated with nature-based mass tourism through the implementation of sustainable practices. In terms of tourism, sustainability refers to tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities (World Tourism Organization 2020). To ensure sustainability, such practices must address economic, environmental, and sociocultural sustainability dimensions.

- **Economic.** Sustainable economic practices continue to provide economic returns for the long-term (e.g., financial or in-kind contributions to reduce visitor impacts, donation or sponsorship for conservation/community initiative, provision of training and employment for local residents). Such

financial profits benefit the owners of the operation as well as employees and community members.

- **Environmental.** Sustainable environmental practices reduce or eliminate damage to natural ecosystems (i.e., flora, fauna, air, water, soil) while also providing benefits to the natural environment (e.g., conservation, protection, enhancement of visible landscape) (Bien 2006). Such practices include conducting environmental impact assessments, minimizing visual impacts insite development, using grey water, using no pesticides, composting kitchen waste, using renewable energy, using a "carry-in carry-out" policy for litter and waste, and setting limits on group size (Charters et al. 2003).
- **Sociocultural.** Sustainable sociocultural practices do not harm the social structure of the local community or the cultural heritage of the destination. Practices such as using products/services purchased locally, tourists being informed of ways to minimize their negative impact on a local community/lifestyle prior to visiting, and not using locally sourced resources in short supply or sites with restricted access due to cultural sensitivity (Charters et al. 2003) provide multiple sociocultural benefits. Such benefits include provision of opportunities for access to resources, awareness of local culture and host community, and empowerment of local communities in decision-making.

These sustainability dimensions are relevant in ecotourism delivery since ecotourism seeks to foster environmental conservation and provide sociocultural and economic well-being in local communities. Applying practices in your ecotourism business to address these dimensions provides a diversity of valuable economic and non-economic benefits to you, as well as to your business, environment, and community.

Specifically, implementing sustainability practices in your ecotourism business will help:

- **Improve your business.** Critically examining your ecotourism operations will show you where to make improvements to enhance sustainability. Better

operating businesses are more efficient and tend to attract more clients.

- **Reduce operating costs.** Implementing sustainability practices in ecotourism businesses dramatically reduces the costs of water, electricity, and fossil fuels, without reducing the quality of service (Hagler Bailly 1999).
- **Provide a credible marketing advantage.** Ecotourism consumers are eco-conscious in their demands for tourism experiences (Bien 2006). Practicing sustainability provides a marketing advantage in meeting the demands of this target market.
- **Protect your product.** Ecotourism relies on a healthy and attractive natural environment for its product. Supporting conservation initiatives protects your product and ultimately your long-term profitability.

Putting Sustainability into Practice

Particular strategies exist for implementing sustainability dimensions in ecotourism delivery. Specifically, you may choose to follow a code of conduct for your ecotourism business or seek ecotourism certification.

Code of Conduct

A code of conduct is a set of criteria that gives guidance in performing sustainable practices. For example, The International Ecotourism Society (2016) has established a Code of Conduct to guide ecotourism operators in sustainable practices (i.e., "minimize impact, build environmental and cultural awareness and respect, provide positive experience for both visitors and hosts, provide direct financial benefits for conservation, provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people," and "raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental and social climate"). This code establishes a set of standards that all member operators must adhere to in their ecotourism businesses. The specific practices ecotourism operators choose to implement to achieve these standards are discretionary; however, operators must make a demonstrated effort to uphold the code. For instance, to uphold the code of minimizing impact, one nature tour operator might practice low-impact travel principles such as small group sizes to minimize environmental impacts while another might employ a carbon-offset program. Both operators are adhering to the code by practicing strategies to minimize environmental impacts through different means.

Following such a code can provide rewarding benefits to operators. Not only can this adherence assist you in practicing sustainable operations, but it may also provide operating standards on which employees can base their practices and principles. Following a code identifiable to the ecotourism market can make a business more appealing and can help direct marketing initiatives. The following list of options described in the code may suit

your ecotourism operation when integrating sustainability practices.

Minimize impact. In addition to low-impact travel (e.g., "Leave No Trace") and carbon-offset programs, potential strategies to minimize negative impacts might include considerations for waste disposal and wise use of water resources when building ecotourism infrastructure (e.g., lodging, attractions) as well as strictly following regulations and respecting customs if your business involves travelling to cultural areas such as cultural heritage tours to Native American reservations.

Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect. Practices that address this criterion might include providing education and interpretation of the local environment, hiring local guides or hosting pre-trip meetings (or providing information prior to trip departure) to share knowledge on the local environment and culture. For example, wildlife tour operators might show a short video to ecotourists before taking them to observe wildlife as a way of encouraging environmentally responsible behaviors during the tour.

Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts. Interpretation and educational programs have been shown to enhance customer enjoyment and satisfaction (Powell and Ham 2008). For instance, agritourism operators might provide visitor education programs on the natural environment of the farm and insight into farm culture as well as community programs including curriculum-based programs for school groups. Organizations such as the National Association for Interpretation (<https://www.nai-us.org/>) offer certification courses for guides that teach "best practices" for providing informal education.

Provide direct financial benefits for conservation. Potential strategies to meet this criterion may include philanthropy and volunteer programs for visitors and residents. For example, nature tour operators might offer ecotourists the opportunity to make financial donations to or volunteer in conservation projects within the protected areas they visit.

Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people. This may be achieved by promoting local resources. For instance, outdoor recreation operators can promote local resources by packaging travel services with locally owned businesses including restaurants, lodging, transportation, and artisans.

Raise sensitivity to the local region's political, environmental, and social climate. Efforts to meet this criterion might include opportunities for educational exchanges between ecotourists and residents. For example, agritourism operators might provide

opportunities for home stays, allowing visitors to experience life on the farm as a rural Florida farmer.

Following an established code of conduct might appeal to you and meet your needs as an ecotourism business operator seeking sustainability. However, you might also consider developing your own code of conduct, customized for your ecotourism business. To do so, you would need to develop a set of criteria based on the sustainability dimensions previously discussed, which would comprise your code of conduct, and then develop clear practices that support these criteria. For example, you might focus on current or future practices to minimize negative impacts and increase positive impacts of your operation for economic, environmental, and sociocultural sustainability (see Table 1).

Using this strategy will enable you to put sustainability into practice. More specifically, the impacts identified in Table 1 might serve as the criteria for your code of conduct and the individualized practices and indicators you create will guide you in meeting your established code. For example, a potential negative economic impact of all ecotourism businesses involves the inability to pay operational costs. One such method of addressing this impact (criterion) would be to develop a business plan (practice). Developing a business plan would enable you to strategically plan how to manage finances effectively for continued sustainability (Bustam and Stein 2010) and assess your ability to pay operational costs (indicator). As a counter example, a potential positive economic impact includes generation of revenue and employment. To ensure the continuation of financial benefits, you might identify new and innovative sales strategies as part of your sales plan and on-going skills-trainings as part of your management plan. This practice would ensure relevance of organizational staff in developing and delivering desired ecotourism experiences for sustained continuance.

Establishing your own code of conduct might prove useful in practicing sustainability. However, you might also consider obtaining ecotourism certification as a way of formally committing to these sustainability practices.

Ecotourism Certification

Ecotourism certification programs are steadily growing because they ensure ecotourism operators who use sustainable practices are recognized for their efforts. Ecotourism certification substantiates that operators are employing sustainability practices through a formal audit process. These certification programs provide a set of established criteria that encompass sociocultural, economic, and environmental sustainability dimensions. For each of these established criteria, a variety of indicators exist (e.g., use of a monitoring process to identify environmental impacts, use of recycled building materials, limited intrusion into natural areas to minimize disruptions to wildlife, sponsorship of a local conservation

group, and employment of local residents). Ecotourism operators must show proof of meeting the indicators in order to become certified.

Becoming certified can provide unique benefits to ecotourism operators. For instance, operators might find easier access to technical assistance and financing for new technology (Bien 2006) because such support is provided by the certification agency. Certified ecotourism operators also gain a tremendous marketing advantage because they are provided marketing opportunities and guidance from the certification program and granted use of the recognizable certification brand.

For ecotourism operators in Florida, two certification programs exist. These programs are offered by Sustainable Travel International (STI) and Green Seal (GS). However, at the time of writing, no ecotourism operators in Florida have been certified by these agencies. The non-profit organization STI is charged with fostering responsible travel and sustainable development by offering programs for individuals and businesses to achieve sustainability (<https://sustainabletravel.org>). Their Sustainable Tourism Eco-Certification Program (STEP) offers certification for ecotourism operators as well as sustainable accommodations, transportation, and attractions. Similarly, GS also offers certification, but only for ecotourism lodging operations. Green Seal is a non-profit organization intending to "green the production and purchasing chain" through certification (Green Seal 2017).

Conclusion

Using sustainable practices in your ecotourism business has the potential to lead to many positive outcomes for your business operations and the local environment and community. Developing a plan to practice sustainable ecotourism provides a strategy for achieving economic, environmental, and sociocultural sustainability, as well as positive outcomes for your business operation such as improving business operations, reducing operating costs, and providing a marketing advantage. Thus, granting consideration for sustainability in ecotourism operations is critical for the continued success and effectiveness of ecotourism as a tool to negate negative impacts of mass tourism as well as the longevity of your personal ecotourism business.

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Table 1. Negative and positive impacts of ecotourism as criteria for a code of conduct.

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| Economic (Negative) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to pay on-going organizational costs (e.g., infrastructure, wages) • Leakages (e.g., revenue generated to non-local organizations) |
| Economic (Positive) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generation of revenue and employment • Provision of economic opportunities for the local community and beyond • Multiplier effect (e.g., spin-off economic benefits that support ecotourism such as purchasing local supplies for development and maintenance) |
| Environmental (Negative) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent environmental change (e.g., vegetation removal, site leveling) • Creation of waste residuals (e.g., sewage, exhaust) |
| Environmental (Positive) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operator involvement in protection and rehabilitation (e.g., protected area designation and cultural resource conservation) • Management of natural areas • Programs for ecotourists, neighbors, community members to be involved in environmental protection, rehabilitation, or management (e.g., volunteer, education, or fundraising programs) |
| Sociocultural (Negative) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social and cultural intrusion (e.g., consumer demands for authenticity) • Erosion of local control (e.g., employment in-migration) • Local inequalities (e.g., disputes over partnerships) |
| Sociocultural (Positive) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering a sense of community and empowerment through local participation (e.g., packaging with local service providers) • Providing aesthetic/spiritual enjoyment for residents and tourists • Fostering sociocultural respect (e.g., education to raise awareness) • Providing access to resources (e.g., equal opportunity for tourists, employees, and community to access amenities and services) |

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