

# UTAH RECREATION & TOURISM MATTERS



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## Community Nature-Based Tourism Development

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### Introduction

Nature-based tourism is a general term for recreational travel that depends on the natural landscape or natural resources either as the setting for activities or where the land or resources are themselves the central component of the tourist activity. Such disparate activities as mountaineering, snorkeling, wildlife viewing and photography, fishing, downhill skiing, hunting, biking, paddling or rafting, and ecotourism—by no means an exhaustive list—all fit under the umbrella of this term.

### Conservation and Sustainability

Tourists interested in taking trips to experience nature or trips for activities that are dependent upon a natural setting or resources are often concerned about the quality of the environment and about the sustainability of their lifestyle. Creating sustainable, environmentally friendly tourism destinations is central to nature-based tourism. Moreover, tourism that damages or degrades the quality of the natural resources upon which it depends is not likely to be able to sustain its popularity with tourists.

### Definitions: Nature-Based Tourism and Ecotourism

While the terms nature-based tourism, nature tourism, and ecotourism are often used interchangeably (e.g., Glick, 1991; Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2003), ecotourism is perhaps better understood as a specific type of nature-based tourism—one specifically focused on environmental sustainability and positive social and environmental benefits of tourism (Honey, 2008).



*Nature tourists snorkel and sunbathe in Hawaii's Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve*

Fundamentally, nature-based tourism (sometimes simply called nature tourism) is dependent on the natural attractions offered by an area. While conservation may be important to nature-based tourism in the long run, and may even be an explicit component of nature tourism development, it is not as central to the tourist activity as it is in ecotourism. Clearly this represents a continuum without any clear demarcation between nature tourism and ecotourism.

### *Ecotourism*

Despite confusion over terminology, ecotourism specialist Martha Honey (2008) has established seven criteria for ecotourism; ecotourism operations should display several of these features:

### *Involves Travel to Natural Destinations*

These are generally environmentally protected areas, most often public lands in the U.S.

### *Minimizes Impact*

Tourism can cause resource impacts either through recreational use itself, or through development needed to support tourism and tourists (e.g., roads, buildings, etc.). Ecotourism development seeks to minimize any possible environmental impacts both through the use of sustainable, low-impact construction materials and by regulating the conduct of ecotourists.

### *Builds Environmental Awareness*

Education should be directed at both ecotourists and communities involved with the ecotourism project.

### *Provides Direct Financial Benefits for Conservation*

Ecotourism operations should actively put money towards further conservation efforts, be it research, protection, or resource management.

### *Provides Financial Benefits and Empowerment for Local People*

Successful ecotourism efforts require the support of local residents. Ecotourism efforts should involve substantial cooperation and collaboration with local residents (if the effort is not itself a project of locals). Moreover, locals should be empowered through leadership positions and employment.



*A high-quality fishery can draw anglers to remote locations*

### *Respects Local Culture*

Ecotourism projects should also strive to minimize the sort of power relationship often present between tourists and locals. Respect for the culture and values of local residents is an important component of ecotourism as well.

### *Supports Human Rights and Democratic Movements*

This final feature of ecotourism is perhaps more applicable when considering international travel, though it is not without relevance in certain situations in the U.S.

Based on Honey's interpretation, ecotourism is also properly seen as a reaction to the problems, inefficiencies and injustices of past forms of tourism development.

What follows is applicable to any type of nature-based tourism development, though those wishing to provide an ecotourism experience need to be especially mindful of minimizing environmental tourism impacts and focus on sustainability to a greater degree and being mindful of Honey's seven criteria.

### **The Downside to Tourism Development**

The potential downsides to tourism development have often been noted (e.g., Power, 1996; Rothman, 1998), and while ecotourism in particular may try to mitigate these potential negative side effects, nature-based tourism is nevertheless vulnerable to this. In particular, the tendency for tourism to create low-paying, often seasonal jobs, and the possibility of undesirable changes to the community, especially in terms of an



*Nature tourists visit Hardware Ranch Wildlife Management Area in northern Utah*

influx of new, more affluent residents leading to higher home prices and property taxes. These issues should not be ignored and should play a role in discussions of potential nature-based tourism development.

### **General Principles of Nature-Based Tourism Development**

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife developed the five-step process outlined below. They stress that nature-based tourism development is a long process and it may take several years to see results. More detailed discussion of these steps can be found on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife website (see References below).

#### *Step 1: Assess Your Raw Materials*

Any potential nature-based tourism project should begin with assessment of the presence of the attractions and services necessary for successful nature tourism development. First, inventory the natural attractions in your vicinity, the issues of private and public land ownership associated with these, and the relevant aspects of the management of the lands on which these occur (e.g., allowable recreational activities, specific management goals). Also, the adequacy of existing services and infrastructure to facilitate tourism should be assessed (e.g., lodging, roads, restaurants) and where found lacking, the ability to construct and finance necessary improvements should be assessed. Finally, existing tourist visitation and the beneficiaries of this tourism should be evaluated.

#### *Step 2: Envision your Finished Product*

It is important to formulate a coherent image of the desired outcomes of nature tourism development. This should apply both to the tourism industry in your community and to the sought-after benefits as well as potential changes to the community itself. This should take account both benefits and the negative side-effects of nature tourism development, as well as means of mitigating these. This process should directly involve all interested and potentially effected parties.

#### *Step 3: Draft a Plan*

Working collaboratively with all involved, it is necessary to write a tourism development plan and corresponding timetable and budget. This should detail specific objectives and means of reaching these, and who will be responsible for the work entailed in meeting these goals. Also, potential funding sources should be explored.



*City of the Rocks National Reserve in southern Idaho draws rock climbers from across the U.S.*

#### *Step 4: Implement! – Making it Happen*

The nature of actually implementing your plan will vary greatly depending on its scope. Regardless, regular meetings between those involved are important in order to quickly address problems and things that don't go according to plan. Make a point of facilitating regular communication between all your collaborators.

#### *Step 5: Evaluate your Success*

This step involves evaluating the degree to which your nature-based tourism development project has met the objectives you established earlier. By investigating the reasons for unmet objectives, you and your collaborators can adjust plans in order to accomplish your goals more effectively in the future. This five step process is best viewed as a continuous cycle, where Step 5 leads back into Step 1 in order to continuously adapt to changes in conditions and objectives.

We also feel it is important to note that successful tourism development is dependent on the ability to market nature-based attractions to tourists without much control over altering the presence of these tourism resources. Thus, some areas are ill suited for nature tourism development due to the lack of natural amenities capable of attracting sufficient numbers of tourists or the amounts of tourist spending necessary to support a tourism industry.

## Online Resources

### *Developing Naturally: An Exploratory Process for Nature-Based Community Tourism*

This manual, created by Clemson University, Cooperative Extension Services, provides an excellent guide for communities considering nature-based tourism development. The guide is available free online from <http://www.strom.clemson.edu/publications/Potts/index.html>. Also available from Clemson University is *Nature-Based Tourism Enterprises: Guidelines for Success*. This publication is aimed at entrepreneurs.

### *Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife website*

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife provides a wealth of online materials to guide nature-based tourism development, as well as many links of great potential interest to those considering nature-based tourism. Though specifically intended for the state of Washington, the materials presented will be extremely useful to communities across the country and elsewhere. Visit the website at <http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/tourism/index.htm>.

### *IORT: Nature-Based Tourism Development*

Additional online resources are listed on IORT's website at <http://extension.usu.edu/iort/html/resources/nature>.

### *Evaluating a Special Nature-Based Tourism Event*

This IORT publication by Mark W. Brunson provides a guide for assessing the success of nature-based tourism events, such as the bird watching festival from which the evaluation methods were developed. This is available at IORT's website at [http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/NR\\_RF\\_010.pdf](http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/NR_RF_010.pdf).

## References

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (2003). A community guide to nature tourism [online]. Available at <http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/tourism/index.htm>

Glick, D. (1991). Tourism in Greater Yellowstone: Maximizing the good, minimizing the bad, eliminating the ugly. In T. Whelan (Ed.), *Nature tourism: Managing the environment*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.



*Visitors to Yellowstone National Park in northwestern Wyoming*

Honey, M. (2008). *Ecotourism and sustainable development: Who owns paradise?* (2nd ed.). Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

Power, T.M. (1996). *Lost landscapes and failed economies: The search for a value of place*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

Rothman, H. K. (1998). *Devil's bargains: Tourism in the twentieth-century American west*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

## For More Information:

Copies of this and other publications are available through Utah State University's Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, or visit our website at <http://extension.usu.edu/iort/>

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