

Guiding Local Tourism Entrepreneurs Interested in Ecotourism: A Tool for Extension Facilitators

Abstract

Tourism can stimulate economies, promote cultural preservation, and incentivize environmental conservation. The tourism assessment and planning process described in this article is a tool for facilitating tourism development at the community level by helping entrepreneurs assess the products and services they currently offer, align their current tourism products with best practices for improving their businesses' sustainability, and coordinate efforts to harness the full benefits of sustainable nature-based tourism or ecotourism. Extension educators can use this tool to educate and coordinate tourism entrepreneurs and to encourage them to adopt practices that maximize the cultural, social, economic, and environmental benefits of local tourism by minimizing potential negative impacts.

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Introduction

Tourism fuels rural economies by creating jobs, fostering economic growth, and improving local living standards (Akin, Shaw, & Spatz, 2015; Schroeder, 2004; Smith, Davis, & Pike 2010). Often, unique natural and cultural assets of a region drive tourism. Examples discussed in *Journal of Extension* articles include Wisconsin's Kickapoo River Valley (Akin et al., 2015), Illinois's Shawnee Hills Wine Trail (Smith et al., 2010), the North Dakota plains (Schroeder, 2004), and North Carolina's farm-based tourism (Kline, Cardenas, Leung, & Sanders, 2007). It is important to preserve the landscapes and quality of life that make these communities attractive in the first place (Akin et al., 2015). As Schroeder (2004) highlighted, strong rural tourism economies are heavily reliant on the cultivation of local tourism entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs can adopt practices to maximize the cultural, social, and environmental benefits associated with the tourism industry while minimizing potential negative impacts on local social and ecological assets. Local tourism entrepreneurs also provide and maintain the link between visitors and the local landscape and culture.

As trusted educators, advisors, and facilitators, Extension professionals are uniquely positioned in the communities where they work to guide entrepreneurs interested in adopting sustainable practices and to

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