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The Greenness of Southeastern United States Ecotourism Vendors

The term ecotourism has been thought of as a panacea for developing nations, but what about in the United States, specifically in the southeastern part of the U.S. This article attempts to show evidence of the occurrence of ecotourism in the southeastern U.S. and the 'greenness' of those ecotourism providers is also examined.

Key words: Greenness, ecotourism, southeastern United States, ecotourism vendors

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Introduction

There is much confusion as to what defines ecotourism and how to identify it. Additionally, where ecotourism occurs is generally thought of as happening in third world countries where ecotourism is heralded as a panacea for the salvation of natural resources for a developing nation. This article will attempt to shed light on the evidence of the occurrence of ecotourism in a not so distant land, that of the southeastern United States. In addition, the ‘greenness’ of those ecotourism providers is also examined.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the self reported environmental soundness of ecotourism vendors across the Southeastern United States, including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. A survey conducted in 2003 is the basis for the findings in this paper. Wearing and Neil, (2000) described ecotourism as, “as low key, minimal impact, interpretive tourism where conservation, understanding and appreciation of the environment and cultures visited is sought.”

Methods

Utilizing the standards for ecotourism developed by The International Ecotourism Society, the “green score” was developed. The “Green Score” is a sixteen question survey instrument used to measure the Ecotourism Vendors’ self-reported degree of environmental concern in their business practices. Fifteen of those items are Likert scaled items, and one is an activity analysis question, asking vendors which ecotourism activities they provide.

The questions (answered on a five point scale, where five is the greenest, or environmentally correct) on the survey were as follows...

- 1) Contributes to conservation of plants and animals.
- 2) Shows reverence and respect for wildlife. (e.g., does not feed animals, observes Wildlife from a distance, avoids wildlife during sensitive times: mating, etc.)
- 3) Includes an interpretation / learning experience.
- 4) Does not alter or remove cultural or natural objects.
- 5) Includes responsible environmental action as part of tour activities.
- 6) Programs are delivered primarily to small groups (up to 12 persons is a small group).
- 7) Requires lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources.
- 8) Makes a concerted effort to hire local people (i.e. those native to the area).
- 9) Provides comfortable rooms and common areas that reflect local designs and heritage.
- 10) Travels with minimal impact when guiding tours (e.g., Uses only existing trails, avoiding additional impact of natural resources).
- 11) Offers activities in a carefully managed natural setting that contain indigenous Landscaping.
- 12) Uses local, sustainably harvested and/or recycled building materials.
 - 13) Practices a “pack it in, pack it out” ethic (e.g., packs out all waste brought into a natural area).
- 14) Uses environmentally-sensitive, renewable energy, water and waste disposal systems.
- 15) Is respectful and courteous to other visitors encountered while on tours.
- 16) Ecotourism activities available. (check all that apply).

Ecotourism vendors were identified through various instruments, including: local and state tourism office publications, internet, phone books, and city directories. Those vendors that met the selection criteria (see ecotourism definition previously cited in this paper) were

asked to complete a survey. Consent forms and surveys were mailed to Two hundred and sixty (260) potential respondents in a self-addressed return postage paid envelope. Postcard reminders were mailed approximately ten days following the mailing of the initial survey. Vendors who didn't respond within ten days were sent a second survey.

Upon receipt of the surveys and consent forms, surveys were tabulated and recorded. Surveys were numbered with the corresponding number appearing on the consent form.

Results

The surveys that were analyzed were Alabama (8 sites), Florida (21 sites), Georgia (11 sites), Mississippi (15 sites), North Carolina (6 sites), South Carolina (12 sites), and Tennessee (5 sites), for a total of 78 sites offering ecotourism. This was a response rate of 30%. The list of vendors came from analyzing state tourism websites, state tourism literature, and internet searches for “ecotourism” and the selected states.

The average green score among all sites was 64.26, which is an 82.1068% rate of compliance with the ecotourism standards. The way this rate was calculated was by figuring a 100% compliance rate would be reflected by all respondents scoring all fives on all fifteen items in the green score, conversely if all respondents scored all ones on all fifteen items, the compliance rate would be a 0% compliance rate with the ecotourism standards. Every raw score point equates to 1.667% compliance rate. The following table shows some sample scores and how the compliance rate was figured.

TABLE 1 (Raw score and equivalent compliance rate with Ecotourism standards)

raw score	less fifteen	divided by 60	
75	60		100
74	59		98.333
73	58		96.666
70	55		94.4445

65	50	83.333
60	45	75
55	40	66.666
50	35	58.333
45	30	50
40	25	41.666
35	20	33.333
30	15	25
15	0	0

The average score of 64.26 is a good score. However, it is important to remember that these are self-reported scores, which may be inflated. Even if that is the case, the scores indicate that the ecotourism vendors throughout the southeast are aware of how to do the right thing with respect to the environment and their business offerings. The individual state green scores are below.

TABLE 2

State	Green Score μ
Alabama	65.38
Florida	66.86
Georgia	64.55
Mississippi	60.47
North Carolina	64.00
South Carolina	66.17
Tennessee	62.40
Lowest (60.47)	Mississippi
Highest (66.86)	Florida

The activities available in each of the states varied a great deal, as one might imagine, depending upon availability.

TABLE 3

State	Most frequently offered activities (#1 Most frequently offered, 2 nd most ,3 rd)
Alabama	Environmental Education, Birding, Walking
Florida	Birding, Environmental Education, Wildlife viewing
Georgia	Birding, Nature Trails, Environmental Education
Mississippi	Birding, Sightseeing, Environmental Education
North Carolina	Hiking, Environmental Education, Nature Trails
South Carolina	Hiking, Walking, Sightseeing
Tennessee	Birding, Environmental Education, Visiting wildlife preserves

These offerings are consistent with national trends in outdoor recreation participation, as measured by the National Survey for Recreation and the Environment (NSRE, 2000), which lists “viewing and photography activities” and “viewing and learning activities” among the top five in terms of number of people participating nationwide in the selected activities; and also lists “walking”, “viewing natural scenery” and visiting a Nature Center, Trail or Zoo” as among the five most popular individual activities and percent of the U.S. population participating. This seems to point to the fact that the ecotourism vendors surveyed in this study understood their clients desires in terms of activity choices.

Discussion

Why is this important? According the world Tourism Organization world tourism grew at a rate of 4.5% in 2006. “ making it a new record year for the industry. The latest UNWTO World Tourism Barometer figures suggest that 2007 will consolidate this performance and turn into the fourth year of sustained growth.” (World tourism Organization).

Further, Baba Dioum stated that to conserve a thing we must love it, to love we must understand, and to understand we must be taught. E.O.

Wilson has suggested that this is an important component of human

behavior in regards to conservation. He states that, "the better an ecosystem is known, the less likely it will be destroyed", thus the importance of ecotourism. National Health Museum. Tropical rainforest ecotourism (n.d.).

Finally, ecotourism is important because it can contribute to the slowing of global warming. How is this so? One of the top five "common sense solutions" to global warming supported by the Union of concerned scientists is protecting our threatened forests. Protecting our forests is important because forests are home to much of the CO₂ on our planet. When forests are cut and burned that CO₂ is released into the atmosphere which further exacerbates the thinning of the ozone. (Union of concerned scientists, 2007).

Forests are integral to ecotourism, as many ecotours utilize forests for a number of activities. It has been shown that people are more protective of nature when there is activity relevance to them. Tarrant and Green (1999) found that "involvement with appreciative outdoor recreation activities (day hiking, backpacking and nature viewing) ...are clearly more important in generating responsible environmental behaviors (such as recycling) than more passive and nonpersonal experiences" (p.28). If those ecotourists are made aware that there is a threat to their beloved forest, then there a good likelihood that they will take action to stop that threat through letter writing campaigns and other means of political pressure on politicians to stop deforestation.

Vendor Profiles

In the southeastern United States, much of the ecotourism activities are oriented toward environmental education, hiking/walking and birding. Below are profiles from several

vendors are provided with the intent of showing examples of how the ecotourism industry is represented in this study.

Profile #1- GAEA guides; Ft. Myers, Florida.

Specializing in Sea kayak tours highlighting the native plants and “critters” from two hours to a full day.

Profile #2 - Ogeechee River Canoe & Kayak Rentals; Pooler, Georgia

Specializing in self-guided canoe and kayak tours.

Profile #3 – Adams outdoors; Ft. Payne, Alabama

Specializing in rafting, rappelling instruction and nature outings.

Conclusion

Ecotourism is often thought of as happening and being of benefit to the aboriginal inhabitants in exotic locales far from the United States. Ecotourism should be recognized as being beneficial locally in the United States as well as globally. Stopping deforestation is but one benefit of ecotourism. The benefits of ecotourism can be categorized as physical (as in stopping deforestation), economic - through the addition of sustainable jobs, and sociocultural through the interpretation of the resources where ecotourism happens.

Interpreting these resources can educate the visitors about historical, cultural and ecological significance of the area and physical.

Kudos to the vendors of ecotourism in this study. It appears that they are doing what they need to do for a sustainable business operation. Even if there is some overstating of their ‘greenness’ the ecotourism operators in this study were at least willing to be called upon for being included as an ecotourism site, by the definition mentioned earlier in this paper. If you

are looking for an example of good ecotourism, the southeastern United States would according to this paper be a great place to go. Who is the best of the best?

GAEA guides in Fort Myers, Florida <http://www.gaeaguides.com/>

Sidenote

Of the ecotourism sites located on the Mississippi gulf coast within this study, seven are no longer in operation due to the decimation by Hurricane Katrina.

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