

COMMON QUESTIONS:

# WETLANDS AND ECOTOURISM



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## PREFACE

This guide is designed for local government officials, land trust staff, birders, state and federal government officials, developers and others interested in ecotourism and the protection and restoration of wetlands. It addresses frequently asked questions concerning ecotourism and wetland conservation and provides recommendations for facilitating ecotourism while protecting and restoring wetlands. A selected bibliography and list of web sites provide the reader with more information concerning specific subjects. We also draw your attention, particularly, to other more specific guides in this series which deal with the roles of land trusts in wetland protection and restoration, the role of local governments, and the construction of boardwalks and trails.

This document was prepared for the Association of State Wetland Managers, Inc. (ASWM) by Jon Kusler with the assistance of Jeannie Christie and Sharon Weaver. It is based upon a series of workshops and symposia conducted, in part, by ASWM including a workshop in Merida, Mexico in cooperation with Pronatura, a national symposium concerning Ecotourism and Resource Conservation conducted by ASWM in Miami (see [Ecotourism and Resource Conservation: A Collection of Papers](#)) and a Wetland, Migratory Bird, and Ecotourism Workshop conducted by ASWM with many cooperating parties in Newburyport, Massachusetts. It is also based upon a research report, Jon Kusler et. al. [Wetland Interpretation and Ecotourism](#), Association of State Wetland Managers, Inc., Berne, New York.

We also thank Heidi Luquer for providing information and reviewing drafts of the document.

Funding for this publication has been provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 2, Division of Wetlands. However, the opinions expressed in the document are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the view of the sponsoring organizations and groups.

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<http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/habrest/r0022900.htm>.*

## COMMON QUESTIONS: WETLANDS AND ECOTOURISM

### What is ecotourism (“sustainable tourism”)?

A. Ecotourism is tourism based upon natural resource attractions or a combination of natural resource and cultural attractions and carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of these attractions. The natural resource attraction may be a wetland (e.g., Corkscrew Swamp), a complex of wetlands (e.g., the Everglades), a mountain range (e.g., Rocky Mountain National Park), a coastal resource (e.g. Cape Cod), a river (e.g. the Battenkill) or another natural feature or combination of features.

Ecotourism conducted in a manner consistent with the capacity of natural resources has also been referred to as “sustainable tourism”. Ecotourists have also been referred to as “ecotravellers”. Whatever terminology is used, the important point in this type of tourism is that visitors are drawn to an area by the natural resource/cultural attractions and the tourism and associated activities are carried out in a manner so that the natural resource/cultural attractions are protected.

Ecotourism is the fastest growing type of tourism in the world.

Bird watching has become a particularly important form of ecotourism and one that is particularly common for wetlands. Canoeing, kayaking, and fishing also takes place in wetlands. Large numbers of regional and statewide visitors are drawn to wetland areas like the Plum Island, Cape Cod Marshes, and Crex Meadows in the U.S. International visitors are drawn to major wetlands or wetland complexes in the U.S. like the Okefenokee, Everglades, and Big Cypress Swamp in other countries such as the Olgavanga Delta in Botswana Land, the Canarge in France, and the Pantanel in Brazil (or Argentina). Many tour companies now offer ecotours into major wetlands such as the Mississippi Delta, the Everglades, and Okefenokee Swamp.

### Who are ecotourists or ecotravellers?

A. Ecotourists or ecotravelers include birders, hikers, nature enthusiasts, canoers, kyackers, students, teachers, and members of the public. They include not only travelers from distant states, provinces or countries but regional and local day users.

### Are ecotourists drawn to a wetland because of a single attraction or a combination of attractions?

A. Local ecotourists may be drawn from dozens of miles to a single, relatively small wetland for bird watching or other nature watching. However, regional and international tourists are often drawn from



*Bird watching at Massachusetts Audubon Welfleet Preserve*

long distances only for large wetlands (e.g., Okefenokee Swamp), and complexes of wetlands (Kansas wetland complex near Great Bend, the Everglades, Big Cypress Swamp) or by a collection of natural resource and cultural attractions. For example, they may visit Rocky Mountain Park, Cape Cod National Seashore, or the Parker Wildlife Refuge to visit the combination of wetlands and mountains, beaches, dunes, forests, waterfalls, and cultural attractions. Ecotourism to meet regional and international tourist needs is, therefore, a regional planning issue requiring regional inventories and planning.

### What are the needs of wetland ecotourists?

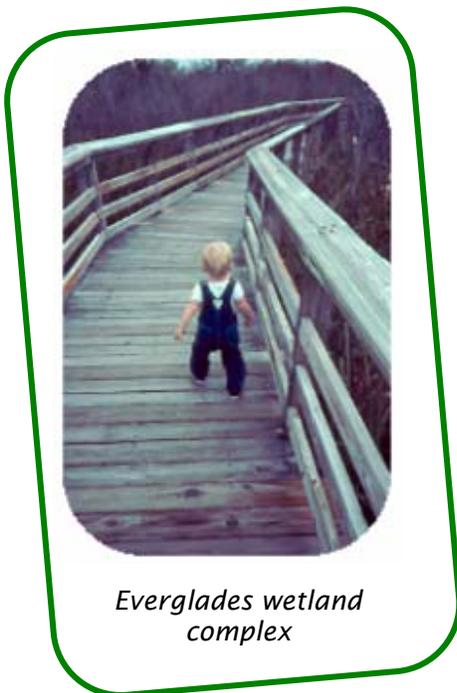
A. To have a satisfactory ecotourism experience, ecotourists need:

- transportation to the area (private auto, trains, airlines, buses, car rental),
- access to the wetlands (roads, walking trails, water access for kayaks, canoes),
- to be able to see a wide variety of birds, animals, plants, and other attractions,
- wetland interpretation and guide services (in some instances), and
- food and accommodations.

Local and regional ecotourists do not need lodging and usually provide their own transportation. They may bring their own canoes and rarely need guide services. Domestic long distance travelers and international ecotourists need a broader range of services.

### How can ecotourism help protect wetlands and related ecosystems?

A. Ecotourism can educate landowners and businesses with regard to the functions and values of wetlands. It can provide landowners, local governments, and local businesses with economic and cultural incentives for conservation of wetlands and other resources. More specifically:



- a. It can provide local economic benefits and incentives to local businesses and landowners for protection and restoration of wetlands through sales of gas, food, lodging, and gifts to ecotourists drawn to a wetland area.
- b. It can help develop local pride in community resources and a sense of uniqueness in the area when local landowners and local business find that “outsiders” value their area.
- c. If combined with education programs, it can help educate businesses, landowners, students, and the general public with regard to the functions/values of wetlands and techniques available to manage and protect such areas locally, regionally, and nationally. For example, more than a million people may walk the Anhinga Trail in the Everglades each year. As they walk, they learn about wetlands and the importance of protecting such areas. This helps develop support for not only protecting the Everglades but also other wetlands in other areas.

## Can ecotourists and ecotourism also destroy wetlands and related resources?

A. In some instances, yes. Tourists can directly damage wetland wildlife and plants in some instances by driving off-the-road vehicles and motorized boats into wetlands, by hunting (in some instances), and by collecting plant and animal species. Tour guides may operate motorboats too close to nesting birds and other wildlife.

However, physical threats to wetlands from ecotourism posed by ecotourists are often much less serious than threats posed by tourists to other natural resource areas because tourists rarely venture into wetlands except on trails or boardwalks due to the dense vegetation, surface water, deep organic soils, and a fear of snakes and other animals (e.g., alligators). Bird watchers and other visitors generally confine their activities to boardwalks or trails or venture into wetlands only in canoes.

In some instances, however, more serious threats to wetlands are posed by tourism-related development and alterations on adjacent lands. This includes threats to wetland hydrology and water quality due to drainage or fill activities on adjacent lands for construction of roads, buildings, and parking lots.

These threats are real. But, these threats are often less than those posed by alternative activities in wetlands or on adjacent lands such as drainage, land clearing, and filling for agriculture, forestry, mining and other development. With ecotourism, there is an economic incentive to protect wetlands and related resources. With many other types of activities, there is not.

## How can the benefits of ecotourism be returned to the local economy?

A. For ecotourism to provide local economic incentives for conservation, tourists need to spend money locally. Locally owned and run hotels, motels, gas stations, restaurants, and other services can insure that the benefits of ecotourism are returned to the local economy. To do this:

- Ecotourism and wetland planning needs to focus on local businesses and private landowners as well as not-for-profits and governmental entities,
- Ecotourism needs to involve merchants, restaurant operators, inn and hotel operators and other local businesses in conservation planning,
- Travel agencies need to use local facilities and local staff for guide services, and
- Local birding festivals, wetland fests, and similar activities need to be held which are highly visible and bring home to locals the link between the wetlands, tourism, and local economic benefits.



*Tourists need to spend locally*

## What sorts of wetland-related facilities can attract ecotourists and meet ecotourist needs while also protecting resources?

A. Wetland-related facilities can, if properly sited and designed, both meet the needs of ecotourists while protecting resources. These include wetland trails adjacent to wetlands, boardwalks, signs, and canoe launching areas. They also include interpretive centers, picnic facilities, parking lots, and food and lodging facilities on adjacent lands if properly sited and constructed. Even limited wetland-related facilities may play an important part in meeting regional needs. For example, a single boardwalk in a single wetland may help meet the wetland educational needs for local residents in a ten to twenty mile radius area.



## What sorts of wetland-related educational and interpretive materials and services may be offered to ecotravellers?

A. Some common types of educational and interpretive materials include:

- Trail guides at strategic points along a trail or boardwalk,
- Wetland maps,
- Interpretive signs,
- Bird lists,
- Fact sheets and interpretive pamphlets,
- Recorded and live lectures, and
- Guided walks, boat tours.

## What steps are needed in community land and water use planning to both protect wetlands and related ecosystems while meeting the needs of ecotourists?

A. Steps in such planning may include:

- Form a working group of local land trusts, local governments, state and federal agencies, and local businessmen.
- Define resource conservation and protection and economic development goals including the protection of wetlands.
- Inventory wetland resources and other attractions (see below) to both identify areas which may be attractive to ecotourists and areas which should be protected from ecotourists.
- Develop land and water use plans for the area which simultaneously avoid activities in wetlands or in adjacent areas which will damage or destroy wetlands and related natural resources but provide access to such areas. Plans should insure that the benefits of ecotourism are felt in the local economy by encouraging local ecotourism-related businesses (e.g., canoe and kayak rental).
- Develop boardwalks and other facilities for selected wetlands to allow visitors to enter wetlands and related resources without damaging them.
- Develop and implement educational programs for ecovisitors applying to the selected wetlands—trail guides, brochures, and interpretive facilities.

- Carry out broader, active educational programs for landowners and developers with regard to the economic benefits of tourism and management/protection needs.
- Design and carry out yearly Wetland Fests, Bird Festivals, etc.
- Train guides who will conduct trips into wetlands.

### How can the impacts of boardwalks and trails in wetland areas be reduced?

#### A. Impacts may be reduced impacts by:

- Constructing roads and interpretative facilities adjacent to but outside of wetlands. Establish buffers and set backs where possible.
- Providing bird watching trails adjacent to but not into wetlands. Use elevated platforms for viewing.
- If boardwalks are to be constructed, locating the boardwalks in less sensitive areas of a wetland.
- Maintaining wetland hydrology and successional cycles in construction of boardwalks by elevating all structures.
- Using natural materials (e.g., wood for boardwalks, woodchips for trails).
- Using designs and colors for boardwalks and other facilities which blend with natural scenery.
- Constructing roads, boardwalks, trails in the winter (non growing season) to reduce impact on plants and animals.
- Restoring or enhancing wetlands to compensate for any impacts.
- Limiting the months and hours of access for visitors.
- Limiting the number of visitors by limiting size of parking lots.
- Limiting areas where motorized vehicles such as cars, motor cycles, snowmobiles, and motorboats may go.
- Limiting the number of visitors by issuing permits.
- Providing guide training.



*Blinds for bird watching*

### What should be inventoried regionally in evaluating and planning wetlands and related lands for ecotourism purposes?

#### A. The following sorts of features should be inventoried regionally:

##### 1. Natural and culturally based resource attractions:

- Wetlands, streams, lakes, coastal areas,
- Parks and open spaces,
- Birding sites,
- Vegetation,
- Scenic vistas and sites of scenic beauty,
- Shell mounds, archaeological sites, historic sites,
- Other cultural features which may attract tourists (e.g. museums), and
- Other special features.

2. Existing land and water uses:

- Roads, trails, utilities (sewer water),
- Existing land and water uses,
- Restaurants, motels, hotels, gas stations,
- Car rentals, buses, airports other forms of transportation, and
- Shops.

3. Features which may/should limit development of areas such as:

- Endangered plant and animal species,
- Deep organic soils (limit soil, boardwalk development),
- Flooding including possible wave, ice action,
- Pollutants, and
- Anthropogenic distractions such as utility lines, roads, houses, litter.

**What can be done to help local governments, businessmen, and landowners appreciate the economic benefits of wetlands and ecotourism?**

A. Unfortunately local governments, businessmen, and landowners benefiting from wetland-related ecotourism often do not fully appreciate the importance of protecting wetlands and other natural resources unless connections are made for them between the resources and the economic benefits. Some techniques to helping them to appreciate these linkages include:

- Involve local leaders in ecotourism and resource conservation planning efforts which help them understand the linkages between tourism, resource protection, and economic benefits.
- Hold community migratory bird, wetland and similar festivals which bring clearly defined and highly visible economic benefits to the community.
- Collect economic data concerning the value of ecotourism locally; hold meetings with local government officials to present this economic data.



*Buffer to reduce impact*

- Give ecotourists cards at wetland sites to distribute to merchants in the area as they spend money (e.g., a card saying, “I am a bird watcher. Birds need wetlands. I am spending money in your community”).

**What role can birding festivals, wetland fests play?**

A. Birding festivals and wetland fests can attract large numbers of individuals to a community. They are highly visible. Particularly if done in off-season, they may be a real and visible boost to the local economy.

## Must wetland ecotourism sites be actively managed?

A. In some instances, yes. In others, no. Some measure of management is needed for most sites. Litter must be picked up. Limitations on hunting, use of off the road vehicles, and other regulations need to be enforced. Boardwalks and trails need to be maintained. But, little additional management is needed for many wetlands.

For others, fire control and controlled burns are needed to mimic natural conditions while protecting boardwalks and other facilities. Invasive plant and animal species may need to be controlled. Water levels may need to be manipulated if wetlands have been restored, created or enhanced through the construction of small dams.

## Can wetland restoration and enhancement play a role in efforts to protect and restore wetlands through ecotourism?

A. Uses for restoration include:

- Restoration can be used to compensate for prior impacts to wetlands due to filling, drainage, and pollution. Restoration and enhancement can restore the functions and beauty of wetlands. Restoration examples include Hackensack Meadowlands in New Jersey, Creux Meadows in Wisconsin, and Montezuma Refuge in New York. A massive restoration plan is now underway for the Everglades.
- Restoration can be used to help relocate existing activities from wetlands to uplands (e.g., relocation of houses from floodway areas to uplands).
- Restoration can be used to compensate for impacts caused by new ecotourism-related services such as development of trails, boardwalks.
- Restoration can be used to restore biodiversity.

## Where can I find more information on ecotourism and wetlands?

A. See other guides in this series. See also the publications and web sites listed below.



## SUGGESTED READINGS

Bartoldus, C. 1999. A Comprehensive Review of Wetland Assessment Procedures: A Guide for Wetland Practitioners. Environmental Concern, Inc. St. Michaels, MD.

Bosselman, F., C. Peterson and C. McCarthy. 1999. Managing Tourism Growth. Island Press.

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- Honey, M. 1999. Ecotourism and Sustainable Development. Island Press
- Howe, J., E. McMahon and L. Propst. 1997. Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities. Island Press.
- Lindberg, K., M. Wood and D. Engeldrum. 1993 and 1999. Ecotourism: A Guide for Planners and Managers. Vol. 1 and 2. International Ecotourism Society
- Mehta, H., A. Baez and P. O'Loughlin (eds.) 2002. International Ecotourism Guidelines. International Ecotourism Society
- Patterson, C. 2002. The Business of Ecotourism. Explorers Publishing. Wisconsin
- Slattery et al. 1995. Wow! The Wonders of Wetlands. Environmental Concern, Inc., St. Michaels, MD.

### **SUGGESTED WEB SITES**

<http://www.ecotourism.org/index2.php?home>

The International Ecotourism Society home page. Many useful links, statistics on ecotourism.

<http://www.zoo.co.uk/~z0007842/icrtlibrarylinks.htm>

International Center for Responsible Tourism. Many, many excellent links.

<http://www.cas.nercrd.psu.edu/tourism.html>

National Tourism Education Clearinghouse

<http://www.planeta.com/planeta/96/0596monarch.html>

David Barkin, Ecotourism: A Tool for Sustainable Development

<http://georgiawildlife.dnr.state.ga.us/content/displaycontent.asp?txtDocument=85>

Georgia's Colonial Coast Birding Trail

<http://www.birding.com/top200hotspots.htm>

Top 200 North American Birding Hot Spots

<http://www.grandmarais.com/birding/boreal/index.html>

Boreal Birding Festival

<http://www.horiconmarshbirdclub.com/birdfest/events.cfm>  
Horicon Marsh Bird Festival

[www.audubon.org/local/sanctuary/corkscrew/Visit/BoardwalkTour.html](http://www.audubon.org/local/sanctuary/corkscrew/Visit/BoardwalkTour.html)  
Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary - Boardwalk Tour. This site contains a boardwalk tour at  
Corkscrew Swamp (excellent).

[www.sackville.com/visit/waterfowl/index.html](http://www.sackville.com/visit/waterfowl/index.html)  
Sackville Waterfowl Park. Description of Sackville wetland site.

[http://www.rice.edu/wetlands/PR\\_Materials/pr02.html](http://www.rice.edu/wetlands/PR_Materials/pr02.html)  
West Eugene Wetlands Self Guided Tour. Rice University



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