

TravelGreen.Org Environmental Case Study

**Center for Sustainable Tourism
East Carolina University**

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Center for Sustainable Tourism

Overview

The Center for Sustainable Tourism is an interdisciplinary, university-wide collaborative established in 2007 at East Carolina University to conduct research, enrich educational opportunities and provide comprehensive community resources in the field of sustainability and tourism. The Center for Sustainable Tourism (CST) is the only such Center in the United States and is designed to:

1. Advance academic research and analysis of sustainable practices in the travel and tourism industry;
2. Communicate these results to businesses, government planners, destinations, and communities, and promote responsive public policy decisions;
3. Prepare students for management, research, and teaching careers in sustainable tourism; provide the resources necessary to help students secure internships and jobs in the industry, and facilitate a broader understanding of sustainability issues challenging the travel and tourism industry,

CST emerged in response to the efforts of faculty from numerous departments and colleges at East Carolina University (ECU) committed to inquiry into sustainable tourism, the preparation of next generation managers and researchers, and the application of knowledge and techniques of sustainability within tourism businesses, public policy and individual traveler behaviors. This interest and effort was matched by a university administration led by a knowledgeable and experienced Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Studies, a Belfast, Ireland native, who understands the economic importance of tourism and the need to develop and manage tourism in a sustainable fashion. ECU's Institute for Tourism, housed within the College of Human Ecology's Hospitality Management Program evolved within the framework of environmental sustainability and economic development and ultimately became the

Center for Sustainable Tourism. The CST was placed under the auspices of the Division of Research and Graduate Studies, integrating institution-wide responsibility for research, teaching and public service in the area of sustainable tourism.

The vision of the CST seeks to embody innovation in graduate education, leadership development, community consultation, and collaborative research. The Center is devoted to implementing sustainable practices in business operations, public policies, and personal travel behaviors. CST also seeks solutions to the challenges facing the tourism industry and destination communities as they balance economic viability with socio-cultural and environmental enhancement, and equity. Activities of the CST are generally focused within five strategic areas, including 1) science and tourism connectedness, 2) tourism development and sustainability, 3) community outreach and consultation, 4) community sense of place and 5) a Master of Science in Sustainable Tourism. A unique partnership between ECU's Office of Engagement, Innovation and Economic Development and the CST along with the North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development, supports a full-time Coordinator for Sustainable Tourism Initiatives for the North Carolina tourism industry, believed to be the nation's first such arrangement.

Program Establishment

The Center for Sustainable Tourism at East Carolina University emerged from extensive faculty, staff and student leadership and input resulting in a draft strategic plan for its development. This plan was used to guide the justification to create such a center, decisions of where to administratively house the CST, how to organize center activities and personnel, and how the center would be evaluated. Some of the draft strategic plan was based upon the first such center established at the University of Colorado at Boulder; due to limited institutional support that center was ultimately disbanded and its functions moved to ECU. An important component of the establishment of the CST at ECU is the creation of a Masters Degree in Sustainable Tourism (MS-ST), the nation's first, guided by a Faculty Oversight Committee consisting of representation from the Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences (Geography, Economics, Biology and History) and the Colleges of Business (marketing and management), Human Ecology (Hospitality Management) and Health and Human Performance (Recreation and Leisure Studies). The establishment of the CST followed all ECU and University of North Carolina system-wide policies for such entities as has the MS-ST.

A search committee was created to seek the first director of the center and a national search conducted in 2007; this director began his duties on October 1, 2007. The Faculty Advisory Committee for the MS-ST was expanded and continued the development of the academic program during this time seeing it through the approval process. Discrete advisory committees representing the faculty and staff of ECU, the tourism industry, particularly those companies and businesses committed to sustainable practices, and federal, state and local governments were formed to advise and guide the center in its early stages of development. A set of activities designed to provide

constituent services, provide visibility for the Center, and establish a research agenda were immediately instituted.

The CST was designed within the parameters of the institutional mission which is stated as “ECU Tomorrow: A Vision for Leadership and Service”. This vision seeks to open doors, improve lives, transform the present and discover the future in order to serve the community, state, nation, and world. This is all in an effort to reach the university’s greatest potential. The goals of ECU include “preparing students to compete and succeed in the global economy, distinguishing itself by the ability to train and prepare leaders for the state and nation, creating a strong, sustainable future for North Carolina through education, innovation, investment, and outreach, saving lives, curing diseases, and positively transforming the quality of health care for the region and state, and providing world-class entertainment and powerful inspiration as the institution works collaboratively to sustain and improve the community’s quality of life.” The CST embraces and embodies both the letter and spirit of these statements.

Goals and Benchmarking

The Center for Sustainable Tourism emphasizes analyses of tourism’s net impact on economic, natural, and social issues. Research at the Center utilizes the concepts of financial, environmental, and social accounting to quantify the impacts, ascertain potential tradeoffs, and identify synergy among these dimensions of sustainable tourism. While many opportunities exist to promote economic, environmental, and social objectives simultaneously, it is often necessary to make choices between them, especially in the short term. As planning horizons lengthen, protecting and enhancing environmental and socio-cultural objectives become more important in sustaining economic growth. Over time these three dimensions of sustainability, often referred to as the “Triple Bottom Line”, reinforce each other by creating long-term approaches that simultaneously promote better jobs, higher profits, better natural environments, and stronger social/cultural dimensions.

All projects and programs of the Center should satisfy four inter-related criteria in order to increase the relevance of the Center’s research efforts:

1. They should contribute to developing, testing, and refining analytical models and research tools to better explain the benefits and costs of travel and tourism in terms of net financial, environmental, and social impacts;
2. They should add to a collection of local, national and international tourism data sources, case studies, best practices, and other information to ensure that academic and business research is based on solid and up-to-date information;
3. They should encourage collaboration within and outside the university to develop innovative means (electronic newsletters, on-line forums, simulation, and visualization technologies, etc.) to help students, businesses, decision-makers, and the general public better understand tourism’s sustainability issues; and
4. They should create interesting and meaningful learning opportunities for students.

Currently, the activities of the Center focus on the following five areas:

- 1. Science and Tourism Connectedness**
 - a. Renewable Energy in Tourism Initiative (partners include National Renewable Energy Lab, MilesMedia, Inc. and University of Colorado at Boulder)
 - b. Climate, Weather and Tourism Initiative (partners include National Climatic Data Center & North Carolina Sea Grant)

- 2. Tourism Development & Sustainability**
 - a. Inventory and analysis of sustainable tourism practices in North Carolina
 - b. Campus lecture series on sustainable tourism (to date—Editor, Journal of Sustainable Tourism and President, Sustainable Travel International)

- 3. Community Outreach and Consultation**
 - a. Provide assistance in sustainable tourism planning, tourism business development, and public policy development and implementation
 - b. Work in partnership with existing state agencies, non-profits and organizations who are contributing to sustainable practices (e.g. Department of Environment and Natural Resources; NC GreenPower; Asheville, NC Convention and Business Bureau)
 - c. Connect faculty experts with communities and businesses for sustainable tourism consultation (profile development to date includes faculty from over 20 disciplines with expertise appropriate to community needs)

- 4. Community Sense of Place Initiative**
 - a. Impacts of tourism on community life research initiative
 - b. Impacts of second home development research initiative
 - c. Sense of place research initiative

- 5. Masters of Science Degree in Sustainable Tourism**
 - a. Interdisciplinary degree focusing on sustainable tourism research, development, policy and management
 - b. Partners include Colleges of Business, Human Health and Performance, Human Ecology and Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Science.

The success of these activities will be initially measured by the extent and quality of external services provided, by the number and quality of the research conducted and publications completed, by the generation of external funding derived from both research activities and community services, by the quality of admissions, completion and placement regarding the MS-ST, and by the extent of involvement of faculty with Center initiatives and activities. The most formable challenge is to adequately inform businesses, public policy makers and individual travelers of the importance of lessening tourism's environmental and community "footprint" and to secure the necessary quality information to justify such actions. In addition, building the capacity of the CST to meet its many assignments must be addressed. Information regarding all of the Center's

activities is used to inform and promote the Center to its many and varied constituency groups.

Outcomes and Environmental Benefit

Although a new entity the CST seems to be well-received in the initial stages of development. East Carolina University considers sustainable tourism an important component of its mission. Financial allocations have been made to support a director, administrative assistant, research director, associate director of academic programs, coordinator of sustainable tourism initiatives (in partnership with ECU's Office of Economic Development and the NC Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development) and visiting research faculty. The Center also supports an Affiliate Faculty and Senior Scholars program and a joint office with Sustainable Travel International.

A robust research agenda is in place with an on-going invitation to faculty at ECU and within the UNC system for timely and innovative research proposals. The MS-ST has gone through a most extensive internal and external review process and will be implemented fall of 2009. A national Climate, Weather and Tourism workshop has been conducted featuring scientists, federal and state agency personnel, tourism business leaders and non-profit representatives and two week-long lecture series programs featuring internationally renowned people have been held. Center personnel also provided testimony regarding the proposed national tourism policy (Tourism Promotional Act of 2007) before a House subcommittee. Faculty and students from many and varied disciplines are drawn to the Center due to their respective interests in sustainability and tourism. Partnerships between campus personnel and community initiatives are emerging weekly and new strategies in sustainable tourism are being initiated. External funding is already being secured with a major focus on Federal Agency, and private foundation and company support. An alumni network is being established in an effort to both impact alumni travel and to seek on-going financial support.

There is not a sector of the tourism industry today that is not embracing sustainable practices in an effort to save money, increase profits, or simply because it is in the best interests of the local, national and global environment. Probably the three most powerful ways to affect change within tourism are through business operations, public policy and personal traveler behaviors. Tourism companies typically are motivated to adopt sustainable strategies in order to 1) decrease costs/improve profits; 2) create greater brand recognition; 3) enhance reputation; 4) increase market share; 5) increase employee loyalty and cost savings; 6) contribute to the well-being of the community; and, 7) improve relationships/meet regulatory requirements. The belief that sustainable tourism should contribute to a balanced and healthy economy by generating tourism-related jobs, revenues, and taxes while protecting and enhancing the destination's socio-cultural, historical, natural and built resources for the enjoyment and well-being of both residents and visitors is an important foundation of the Center.

Relevance to Traveler or Travel Industry

The Center is making every effort to infuse sustainable practices in tourism, through research, education and community consultation. At the very least the Center's activities serve to educate and inform; and hopefully they are serving as a catalyst for behavioral change. It is the belief that sustainable practices must be affordable, easily implemented, and provide brand recognition, in order to be embraced. Center personnel including ECU's excellent faculty and students are committed to inquiry, application and information dissemination and to partnering with entities that support common goals. The Masters of Science Degree in Sustainable Tourism will provide the opportunity to significantly and systematically affect change in a quality manner over time through leadership development; a distance learning program consisting of modules of sustainable tourism practices and elements of the MS-ST degree is in the planning stages. Through feedback from the three (campus, industry and policy) advisory/advocacy groups the Center makes every effort to be relevant and timely in its initiatives.

Real-World Examples

First, in partnership with the Asheville, North Carolina, Chamber of Commerce, the Center is establishing an on-line system for 1) identifying baseline data regarding sustainable practices in tourism businesses including energy, water, and waste management, among others, and 2) measuring the actual progress over time which these businesses are making collectively. This information will ensure a more accurate assessment of sustainable actions and allow for more credible data to support investment in sustainability and marketing efforts to the traveling public.

Second, the CST, with funding from the ECU Office of Engagement, Innovation and Economic Development, has partnered with the North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development to support a Coordinator for Sustainable Tourism Initiatives for the Division. This person provides educational activities and technical assistance to the North Carolina tourism industry and appropriate state agencies on sustainability and serves to coordinate the existing resources of these agencies and others to better serve tourism businesses. This effort is believed to be the only one of its kind in the country.

Third, an initiative to examine the impacts of tourism has been established in order to provide quality information to developers, elected officials, community planners, public managers and residents in high-amenity tourist-based communities striving to estimate, understand and manage the changes they are facing and, through effective decision-making, contribute to the long-term economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability of their communities. Working with residents and second home owners, business operators and public officials The Center currently is evaluating residual economic and environmental impacts of tourism. A CST research report on the effects of second home development on resort communities will be issued later this year.

Finally, in fall 2008, approximately 100 scientists, academics, governmental leaders,

non-profit groups, business owners and students met on the campus of East Carolina University (ECU) for a Climate, Weather and Tourism workshop. Sponsored by ECU's Center for Sustainable Tourism in partnership with the National Climatic Data Center, North Carolina Sea Grant, ECU's Institute for Coastal Science and Policy and a host of ECU colleges and departments, the purpose of the gathering was to address the short and long-term impacts of weather and climate fluctuations on the economic vitality of the tourism industry. The workshop also explored the frameworks and dimensions necessary to connect scientific information with short and long-term decision-making needs of tourism businesses. Goals addressed at the workshop were to provide a forum to explore the interchange of scientific information with short-term decision-making needs of tourism businesses; identify the questions that need to be answered in order to make this interchange effective; and create an organizational structure that serves as the policy-making framework for the long-term management of a climate, weather and tourism initiative.