



**Travel Green Wisconsin
Wisconsin Department of Tourism**

CONTACT

Will Christianson
Outreach Coordinator
P.O. Box 8690
Madison, WI 53708-8690
608-266-7621
wchristianson@travelwisconsin.com

1. Overview

Here in Wisconsin, we have a long history of spreading the gospel of preservation and progressive thinking. In the same breath, we're also proud to say we're known for nurturing originality in all its intriguing forms (think stem cell research, America's Dairyland, tailgating at Green Bay Packer football games, Trek bicycles, the Birkebeiner cross country ski marathon, to name a few).

Which leads us to one big statement and it is this: While every state has its beauty, we believe our beautiful outdoors inspires us to think differently.

And so it goes that Travel Green Wisconsin was founded -- the first travel green program to be developed by a state Department of Tourism and one that is already helping to turn the tide toward environmental sustainability in our corner of the world.

Our work draws from the legacies of those who came before us and who called Wisconsin home - Aldo Leopold, environmentalist and author of *A Sand County Almanac*, a book which still today serves as a cornerstone for modern conservation policy and ethics; Sierra Club founder John Muir; Earth Day founder Senator Gaylord Nelson; and renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright, whose masterpieces are recognizable the world over for their connection to the land. We have modern day leaders too, like the Menominee Indian Tribe, admired for their sustainable forest practices; and our current Governor Jim Doyle, who has grown the state's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, helping to preserve some 200,000 acres of pristine Wisconsin land.

Today we add to that legacy the more than 200 tourism businesses and organizations that have already been voluntarily certified by Travel Green Wisconsin since the program's inception in 2007, adding new stamina to our mission to ensure a sustainable and pure tourism experience for generations to come.

By the way, in a wonderful bit of serendipity, the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center in Wisconsin was to be the 100th tourism organization certified by Travel Green Wisconsin.

2. Program Establishment

It was during the spring of 2004 that we at the Wisconsin Department of Tourism took note of the West Virginia Environmental Protection Agency's Memorandum of Agreement with Green Globe 21 (since renamed "Green Globe") to certify tourism businesses that met their sustainable benchmarks. We decided then and there it would be the good and right thing to do for our state, our industry and our visitors to be the first statewide tourism agency to develop an original sustainable tourism certification program.

An ad-hoc committee on Sustainable Tourism -- an offshoot of the Governor's Council on Tourism, a group that advises the Department of Tourism on strategic marketing and legislative issues -- was then formed, with participants enlisted from both the public and private sectors. Notable among the group were representatives of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; established environmental groups like Focus on Energy and the Wisconsin Environmental Initiative; our statewide associations representing tourism attractions and lodging; and the Wisconsin Bed & Breakfast Association, a group soon-to-be a shining example of our program at work, but more on that later.

While our committee recognized there were well-designed programs in other parts of the country that could be mimicked, we believed our program needed to pay tribute to our own unique culture and work ethic. So we created a partnership with the Wisconsin Environmental Initiative, a group with a great track record for bringing together businesses, government and citizen groups to tackle environmental causes, with the hope of putting their know-how to work for us.

The Wisconsin Environmental Initiative made quick work of laying out these parameters for our own travel green program:

- Make it entirely voluntary.
- Make it simple and affordable so tourism businesses would be motivated to participate.
- Make it adaptable and available to the full variety of businesses and organizations that serve travelers.
- Give those considering certification an idea of the cost savings they could expect to reap.

- Use the program to introduce new environmentally sustainable business practices to participants.
- Have the program structured in a way that would provide a marketing advantage for program participants as well as the state.
- Above all else, make certain this legacy-level work would lead to measurable environmental, social and economic improvements.

By the end of 2005, our Department became the country's first state tourism agency to approve a sustainable tourism business certification program - Travel Green Wisconsin. We piloted the program in 2006 using a cross-section of businesses from all corners of the state, all of whom had a demonstrated commitment to reducing their carbon footprint. After some minor adjustments, we opened up the program to statewide participation on January 1, 2007. The Wisconsin Environmental Initiative continues its involvement, serving as our third-party evaluator of the application materials.

Here's how Travel Green Wisconsin works: Businesses grade themselves on a checklist of more than 100 sustainable practices in nine different categories ranging from recycling to wildlife conservation to buying local. A business must score a minimum of 30 points, with some scoring well over 100. The only requirement is that participants earn five or more points in the "Communication and Education" section as a way to build on the success of the program by having participants explain to their guests, employees, vendors and the general public the sustainable practices they've committed to. There's a nominal annual fee based on the business' number of employees, with participants re-certified each year. In turn, the program allows the Wisconsin Department of Tourism to collect environmental information from the tourism industry at large.

3. Goals and Benchmarking

Quite simply, our two goals with Travel Green Wisconsin were these: Get businesses to participate. Get visitors interested in travel options that would have them treading gently on our environment.

Let's start with the first goal. With two years under our belt, Travel Green Wisconsin has posted very healthy numbers. The 60 participants in the pilot program signed on, and by the end of 2007 our numbers had grown to more than 100. In 2008, that number more than doubled, with the list of certified business now including accommodations, attractions, restaurants, shops, spas, resorts, convention centers, golf courses, campgrounds, state parks, marinas, tour operators, events, festivals, Chambers of Commerce, and Convention & Visitor Bureaus. Those businesses told us that by improving their environmental practices they've enjoyed lower operational costs and greater recognition with travelers.

Not to say that we've been free of challenges. Because we are not a large state department, we rely on the "kindness" of Convention & Visitor Bureaus and Chambers of Commerce to spread the good word. We have lots of Bureau and Chamber

supporters and we're always working to convert more to the fold. As for the business owners themselves, they have to sandwich in the certification and expansion of their eco-friendly practices during brief off-peak periods of tourism, which is why we consider it important to keep the program free of undo paperwork and certification angst. We call it being "ecopreneurial," with businesses adopting the practices that make the most sense for their operation.

Now, as for second goal, the visitor response has verified for us that sustainability is the new reality and not simply a passing trend. We conducted research over the last two years to gauge the interest in sustainable programs including ours. Last year's research in the Twin Cities and Chicago found that nearly half of all respondents felt that environmentally friendly and green-certified attractions and lodging were important to making a state an eco-friendly destination. In 2008, we surveyed 500 people in each of the two markets, and nearly half said Travel Green Wisconsin would have a positive impact on their view of our state as a vacation destination. Not bad! Interestingly enough, those findings were as true for Baby Boomers (apparently their reputation as the "Me Generation" isn't always as it seems) as they were for Gen X and Gen Y travelers. We went on to ask them which topics would most influence their decision to travel to an environmentally friendly state and the top three vote-getters, in order of importance, were:

- Clean air and water
- Birding, nature walks and wildlife watching trails
- County, state and federal lands open to the public for recreation.

Here's the research clincher: We asked the follow-up question "Would receiving information about environmentally friendly activities and green sites strongly motivate you to take a Wisconsin getaway?" Nearly two-thirds answered "Yes."

Knowing what we know, we're working hard to create as much name recognition for the program and participants as possible. Reporters have been great allies on that front, to the tune of \$3.7 million in publicity based on equivalent advertising value. With coverage in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Indianapolis Star*, *Fresno Bee* and on *CNN*, among many others, Travel Green Wisconsin has fast become a fine showcase for Wisconsin's original people and places.

4. Outcomes and Environmental Benefit

To measure outcomes of Travel Green Wisconsin, we loop right back to the parameters set for the program at its inception: Protect the beauty and vitality of Wisconsin's landscape. Preserve our natural resources, wildlife, cultural diversity and one-of-a-kind destinations for our grandchildren and their children. Educate travelers on how to reduce their environmental footprint. Help businesses reduce their operational costs. Put smart business practices into practice. Give the state and program participants a marketing edge.

While our program is just two years old, we've seen progress on all those fronts.

Make no mistake, there is still work ahead. Next on our to-do list is to require participants to update their baseline assessment during their annual recertification, which will allow us to assess the affect of our program with even greater certainty.

5. Relevance to Traveler or Travel Industry

With Travel Green Wisconsin, we learned that sustainability and profitability need not be mutually exclusive. To be clear, our #1 objective above all others in launching the program was to protect the natural resources that define us a people, and that will never change. Yet our program has also opened up new vistas for educating consumers on how to lead an eco-friendly way of life when traveling and perhaps even when they're back home, and certified businesses have put themselves in a position to responsibly serve this burgeoning market segment and generate new revenue in the process.

In other words, we've landed on a stewardship program that proves the old adage true - you can "do well by doing good."

6. Real-World Example

Earlier in this document we mentioned that the Wisconsin Bed & Breakfast Association was tapped to take part in early planning for Travel Green Wisconsin. A good number of B&B owners were already employing green practices at their inns, so it was a natural that we would solicit their input. Now, they're leaders in our green travel movement. Innkeepers encourage each other to live up to the tenets of eco-friendly vacationing. They promote our program on their individual web sites and they talk to their guests about their green practices, whether that's conserving energy or buying local ingredients for the homemade breakfast. Those guests, in turn, appreciate even more their stay at that property and they feel even better about having chosen Wisconsin for their getaway. They talk to their friends and family about their eco-friendly B&B experience and word spreads. The Wisconsin B& B Association added a search function to their web site giving travelers the option to search by Travel Green Wisconsin-certified properties. At their annual meeting in fall 2008, they even held a recipe contest built around the theme of Wisconsin ingredients, with the featured ingredient (à la the *Iron Chef* program on the Food Network) the Wisconsin cranberry. The winner will be featured on their next recipe book, and the story of the contest ran in newspapers around the region.

Our advice is to seek out a group that can help you make an instant statement with your program, remembering there is strength in numbers and privately owned businesses can often act more quickly than large public institutions. The Wisconsin Bed & Breakfast Association was that group for us.

One final note and it regards money saved and money earned. While Travel Green Wisconsin participants can spend the revenue they see from being a certified business in any number of ways, we encourage them to reinvest in even more sustainable practices. In that way, the circle of eco-tourism remains strong and we all stay true to the Wisconsin legacy of stewardship.