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

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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

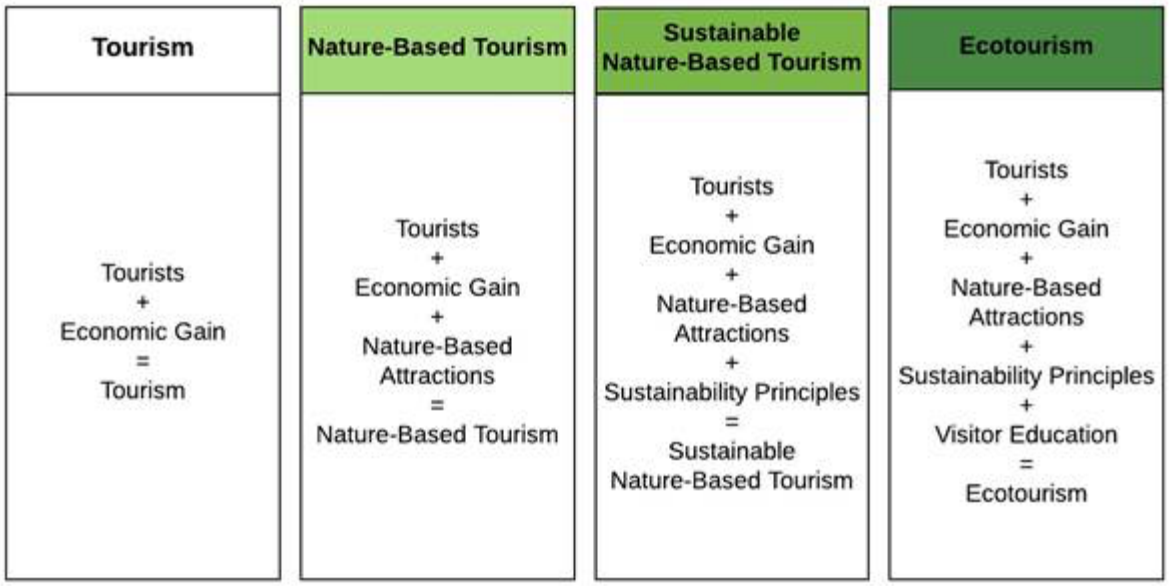
facilitate strategic coordination among businesses. The three-phase tourism assessment and planning process outlined in this article is based on the principles of ecotourism and can be used by Extension professionals to facilitate adoption of sustainable tourism practices at the community level. This tool supplements existing tools available to Extension professionals working in the area of tourism throughout the United States (Burkhart-Kriesel & Francis, 2007; Ohnoutka & Hughes, 2002).

Enhancing Community Tourism Through Community Learning and Strategic Planning

A literature review provided the conceptual background for the development of our tourism profiles framework (Figure 1). The framework identifies four general approaches practiced by tourism enterprises and basic criteria for differentiation. We used these categories and general criteria as the basis for creating a process of tourism-related community learning and strategic planning.

Figure 1.

Tourism Profiles



The process of using community learning and strategic planning to guide tourism entrepreneurs and facilitate coordination among tourism-related businesses in a community involves three phases:

- assessment of the products and services tourism operators currently offer,
- alignment of the tourism products operators currently offer with best practices for improving the ecological and social sustainability of their businesses, and
- coordination of the different approaches of tourism operators interested in sustainable tourism or ecotourism.

Assessment

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We created a self-guided tourism assessment using the four tourism profiles presented in Figure 1. The flow of questions in the assessment tool (Figure 2) reflects a progression from tourism to ecotourism via demonstrable indicators. An entrepreneur self-assesses according to the current characteristics of his or her business and "lands" in a particular profile on the basis of the responses given. The landing pad features detailed information about the profile the entrepreneur matches, why he or she is there, and how that profile looks in different industries.

Figure 2.

Assessment Tool Flowchart

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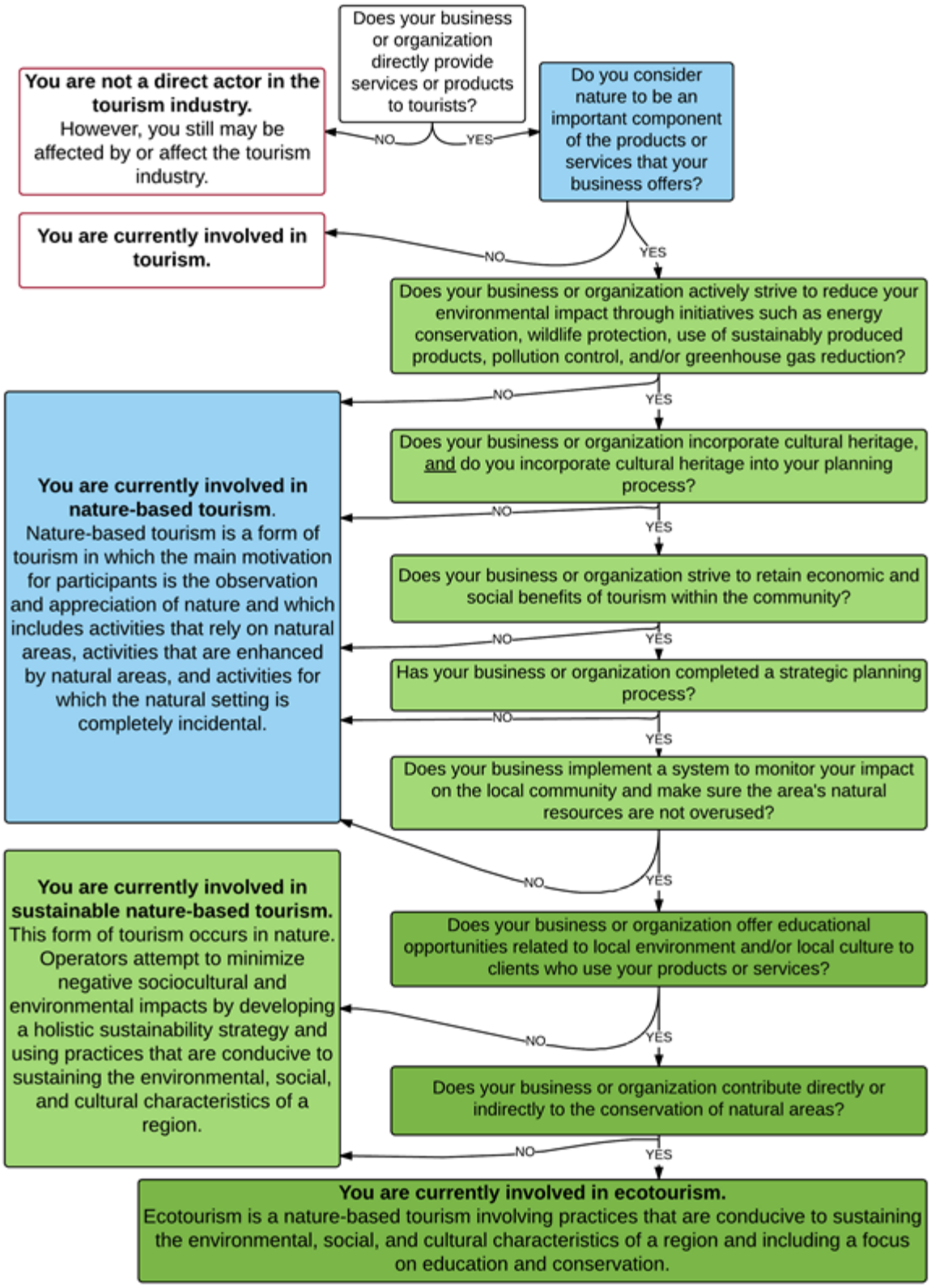

On completing the self-assessment, an entrepreneur receives a detailed explanation of the form of tourism he or she is currently practicing, along with examples in the form of case studies. This result allows the tourism operator to ensure that the tourism product being offered adheres to uniform standards for reaching the target audience. The tool also includes information indicating how an entrepreneur might change to a different profile (e.g., move from nature-based tourism toward ecotourism). In this way, the assessment is both a diagnostic tool and a teaching tool.

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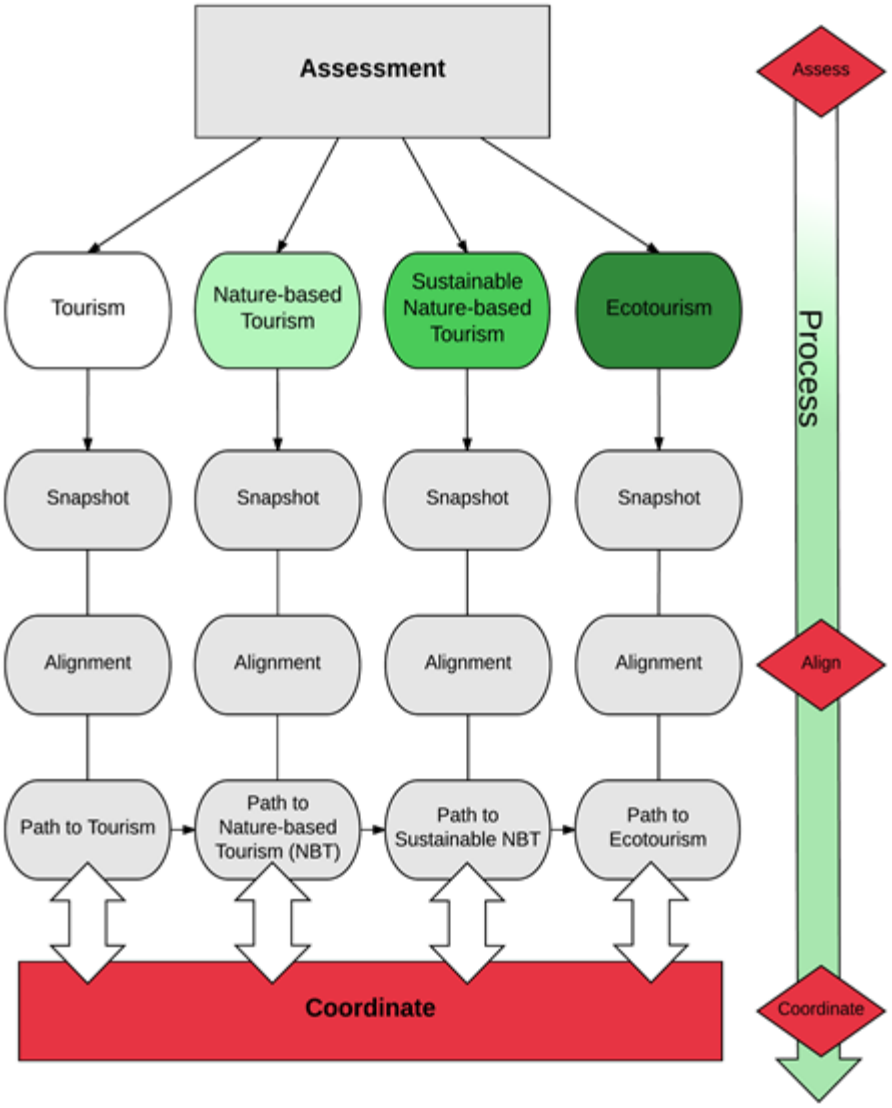
The assessment tool addresses the first phase in the larger process of community learning and strategic planning. A participant can then progress through the alignment and coordination phases, with assistance, on the basis of the tourism profile identified during the assessment phase and the goals the participant has for his or her operation (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
Process Diagram



Alignment

During the alignment phase of the process, participants receive guidance as to how they can incorporate more sustainable practices into their tourism operations. Interested participants can review supplemental information developed through a review of commonly accepted ecotourism certification programs in North America so that they can self-identify what more they need to do to convert their current practices. Extension professionals can play an important facilitation role during this phase by helping establish groups of tourism entrepreneurs interested in adopting sustainable practices.

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Coordination

Each tourism entrepreneur's actions can positively, or negatively, affect the success of the local tourism industry. At the same time, natural resource degradation is often not the fault of a single tourism operator. It is caused by the collective actions of multiple businesses. For a community to harness the full benefits of sustainable nature-based tourism or ecotourism, it is necessary for stakeholders to engage in a coordinated, strategic, and cooperative effort and have a venue for dialogue and sharing of experiences and ideas. Extension professionals can play the important role of facilitating this process.

We recommend the four steps outlined in Table 1 for coordinating ecotourism stakeholders. Extension professionals can use these steps as guidelines while working with stakeholders who fall into any of the tourism profiles from the assessment tool to develop a shared vision and coordinate their actions (University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development, n.d.).

Table 1.
Coordination Steps

Step number	Step name	Description
Step 1	Networking	Networking is accomplished through formal and nonformal channels, such as • seminars, • conferences, • focus group sessions, • small community meetings, • lunch meetings, • membership in the same email network, and • contributions to the same blog or social forum.
Step 2	Collective vision	Stakeholders develop a shared vision for tourism with long-term objectives for • protecting local ecological assets and ecological capacity and • preserving culture and history.
Step 3	Strategy	Tourism entrepreneurs combine the collective vision with

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	modification	their current business practices to honestly understand • where their starting points are and • what opportunities they have to change their businesses and organizational strategies to meet the agreed on objectives.
Step 4	Continued collaboration	Collaboration and regular meetings are required for stakeholders to • sustain the collective vision, • create and foster partnerships, • help each other enhance individual capacities and attain collective goals, and • maintain accountability in preserving natural and social assets.

Conclusion

The full tourism assessment and planning process tool is available at http://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/187963. We hope that through this collaborative process—assessment, alignment, and coordination—stakeholders gain both tools and knowledge to have a rich dialogue about sustainable tourism and its role in the community. We do not intend to impose a rigid definition of ecotourism or to indicate that ecotourism is something all tourism operators should strive to achieve. Rather we aim to give local tourism entrepreneurs a clear understanding of the tourism products they currently offer and how they might incorporate more sustainable practices into their businesses.

Acknowledgments

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