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Note: This month's Environments newsletter is co-authored by Carolyn Chen and Zach Walker, summer policy interns at the Institute for Emerging Issues through a North Carolina Community Development Initiative program. Carolyn is a rising senior at Cary's Panther Creek High School; Zach is a rising senior at Leesville High School in Raleigh.

Ecotourism in North Carolina

Ecotourism, which emerged in the 1970s along with the environmental movement, has blossomed into one of the world’s fastest growing travel industry sectors. This is true in North Carolina, where ecotourism aims to promote and conserve our abundant natural resources from the Outer Banks to the magnificent Appalachian mountains.

Ecotourism is driven by three major principles: conservation; community; and interpretation, which concerns how individuals relate to a place or resource. In addition to focusing attention on conserving natural environments and wildlife, ecotourism also emphasizes local economic development to benefit community residents. A rising trend is to integrate the principles of environmentalism within tourism’s traditional business model, which includes hotel chains and all types of tourist attractions. Although tourism and ecotourism

Featured Video

Check out NC's Mountain to Sea Trail as an ecotourism experience. Watch a video here.

Featured Article

Read more about the growing ecotourism industry.

Featured Data

Adding up ecotourism's economic benefits.
both aim to foster visitor enjoyment of a specific destination, ecotourism is much more concerned with an “earth-friendly” focus.

How do entrepreneurs and environmental educators turn land and resources into a successful ecotourism business opportunity? Until recently, ecotourism often seemed the concern of wealthy citizens with lots of private capital, but now it is becoming more commonplace. Examples in North Carolina of businesses profitably combining appreciation for the environment with fun and adventure include Navitat’s zip lines and Nantahala Outdoor Center’s whitewater rafting trips. Another example is Tyrrell County’s Red Wolf Coalition, a not-for-profit enterprise that uses proceeds from guided hiking, biking, bird watching, and paddling activities to generate funds that the Coalition then devotes to the preservation of the red wolf population. By offering a broad mix of outdoor ecotourism activities, the Red Wolf Coalition engages an audience of recreation-oriented individuals to build support for and awareness of their core wildlife preservation mission.

Running an ecotourism business can be a challenging endeavor, and North Carolina universities and community colleges have begun offering ecotourism classes to prepare students for success in the sector. North Carolina State University offers undergraduate and master’s level research programs focused on equitable and sustainable tourism; East Carolina University now offers a master’s degree in sustainable tourism; Appalachian State offers classes on environmental tourism; and Central Carolina Community College provides a ecotourism certificate program.
Should North Carolina continue to broaden its focus on ecotourism? Absolutely. Ecotourism contributes millions of dollars annually to the state’s economy. Beyond that, it reminds us of the value of natural landscapes and resources, encouraging their preservation for future generations. In North Carolina, ecotourism helps preserve the natural beauty of our abundant beaches, mountains, national and state parks, and forests. As the ecotourism industry expands, it will further stimulate the economy while helping North Carolina become an even greener state.

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What interests you about the natural and built environments in our state? Let us know, and it could be a topic for a future IEI Environments newsletter.