

Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program Framework

I Mission of the Program

The mission of the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program is to promote the sustainable use of our natural resources to benefit the environment and the economy.

The purpose for developing this program is to:

1. Create a well-trained Nature Tourism staff to educate customers using the services of these businesses.
2. Educate people of all ages about the Gulf of Mexico coastal and ocean environments and the need for stewardship of healthy ecosystems
3. Provide local communities with information and techniques to enhance waterfront related economic activities and protect the health of the natural Gulf Coast environment
4. Ensure that Gulf Coast communities and industries have healthy economies that include an abundance of recreation and tourism opportunities.

The Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program is designed for a new generation of nature tourism professionals in the Gulf of Mexico region. Today's wildlife enthusiasts are traveling and spending money to experience the natural history and culture of the coastal and ocean environments of the Gulf Coast. Wildlife viewing activities hold tremendous potential for stimulating local economies while celebrating natural wonders and cultural heritage. To be successful, nature tourism experiences should provide quality opportunities to engage the public with natural resources in ways that lead to greater understanding and appreciation, while protecting and preserving the wildlife populations they are viewing.

The founding program sponsors of the program are the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium (MASGC), Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (WBNERR) and the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau (AGCCVB). This vision is shared not only by the program sponsors, but is supported by local partners who assist the program sponsors in the regional growth and implementation of the program.

II Program Goal and Objectives

The goal of the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program is to build and enhance the skills needed for nature tourism professionals to adopt and promote sustainable wildlife viewing practices that preserve healthy and resilient coasts of the Gulf of Mexico, while stimulating local economies. Objectives in support of this goal are:

1. Provide hands-on environmental education and awareness to nature tourism professionals that encourage behaviors which contribute to the sustainability of the Gulf Coast region's natural ecosystems and resources.
2. Establish and maintain a code of ethics that assists nature tourism professionals in promoting an awareness and stewardship of the Gulf Coast's natural heritage, customer safety, and best practices aimed at operating in an economically, ethically and environmentally sustainable manner.
3. Mobilize scientific information and resources by creating theme-based destinations that are integrated with local scientific research concerning the relevance of the oceans, coasts, and watersheds to our everyday lives.
4. Publish a nature tour guidebook to address commonly asked questions about species and habitats of the Gulf Coast region and upstream watershed communities.
5. Promote professionalism and integrity within the nature tourism industry by providing and maintaining a certification program for nature tourism operators.
6. Determine the program's effectiveness by developing an evaluation component to measure compliance to the program code of ethics.

III Criteria for Coastal Nature Guide Certification Participants

Note 1: Participation in this program does not ensure that the nature tour operator complies with applicable safety and insurance requirements. Patrons should be encouraged to ask businesses if they maintain current inspection, license, and insurance documentation.

1. Participate in Training

Participate in training provided by the program sponsors and partners to attain a program standard of knowledge on environmental education and behaviors that contribute to the sustainability of the Gulf Coast region's natural ecosystems and resources.

2. Comply with Applicable Laws and Report Potential Violations

- a. Comply with all applicable resource protection laws and regulations (e.g. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service regulations, Marine Mammal Protection Act, Endangered Species Act, United States Coast Guard regulations).
- b. Report suspected violations or wildlife strandings to the hotline phone numbers.

3. *Follow Established Coastal Nature Guide Code of Ethics*
 - a. Promote leadership and assistance to all citizens for the wise use, conservation and development of our natural resources
 - b. Do not feed, pursue or harass wildlife
 - c. Never attempt to swim with dolphins and manatees. Keep a safe distance of 50 yards from dolphin and 100 yards from manatee
 - d. Avoid surprising wildlife
 - e. Turn off or shield all lights that can be seen from the beach during turtle nesting season May-October
 - f. Use designated trails
 - g. Dispose of all trash properly
 - h. Leave natural, historic, and cultural objects and artifacts where you find them
 - i. Do not pick flowers & plants
 - j. Return all live shells to the water
 - k. Respect areas closed for nesting birds and turtles
 - l. Watch your boat wake while maneuvering around other vessels
 - m. Avoid prop dredging in shallow waters
 - n. Practice “catch and release” fishing to protect and conserve fisheries
 - o. Avoid making loud or sudden noises
 - p. Use marketing and promotion campaigns that are accurate and lead to realistic expectations
 - q. Attend annual certification training sessions

4. *Voluntarily Exceed Standards Specified by Law and Guidelines to Prevent Wildlife Harassment and Promote Stewardship*
 - a. Participate in marine debris and beach clean-ups
 - b. Recycle
 - c. Reduce waste
 - d. Conserve water
 - e. Volunteer for natural resource restoration projects

5. *Engage in Responsible Advertising*
 - a. Avoid depicting people touching, pursuing, closely interacting, feeding or attempting to feed wildlife or reaching out to wildlife.
 - b. Avoid using wording that conveys physical or intentional contact with wildlife. Additionally avoid using words or phrases that may raise the public’s expectation to closely interact with wildlife.
 - c. Promote the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program by including the certification logo and motto about good stewardship practices on marketing and promotional materials.
 - d. Display current year program decal at all times.

6. *Conduct An Educational Briefing*

- a. Prior to conducting your nature tour, conduct an educational briefing about the Coastal Nature Guide Certification program. The briefing should include what it means to be certified, why it is important, and the code of ethics participants agree to adhere to, as well as where additional information may be obtained. Certified Coastal Nature Guides will be provided with a “script” to guide the pre nature tour briefing.

IV. Process for Program Certification

A. Initial Training Workshop

1. Program partners provide hands-on training of environmental education and awareness
2. Training will be conducted at least once per year and twice per year as needed to ensure availability of training for new participants.
3. Outreach and educational materials are provided to participants, including a certification handbook.

B. Initial Evaluation for nature tour operators

1. When prepared, nature tour operator contacts the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program director to request an evaluation to ensure their nature tour is following the code of ethics.
 - a. Evaluation occurs within four weeks of request
 - b. A trained representative of the certification program observes a complete nature tour to ensure the briefing includes educational information and the nature tour guide is following the code of ethics.
 - c. Nature tour operator submits copies of their business license, nature tour brochures and other advertising materials to certification program director.
 - d. Evaluation results are provided within four weeks of the nature tour and review of the information.

2. Following successful completion of the evaluation, the nature tour operator becomes a Certified Coastal Nature Guide by signing the Statement of Commitment to Sustainable Nature Tourism Development for the calendar year in which the nature tour operator was initially evaluated.
3. If the nature tour operator does not meet all certification program code of ethics following the evaluation, a certification program official provides a letter describing the manner in which the nature tour operator is not following the certification program code of ethics and how best to alter their practices to conform. After reviewing the evaluation, the nature tour operator contacts a program official for a re-evaluation to be scheduled within four weeks.

C. Recognition

Upon successful completion of training, evaluation, and signing the Statement of Commitment to Sustainable Nature Tourism Development, applicant is included on the list of certified participants and receives all program materials, as well as a decal with the Certified Coastal Nature Guide logo and the current calendar year to display while conducting guided tours.

D. Annual Recertification and Evaluation for Coastal Nature Guides

Evaluation of Certified Coastal Nature Guides annually is essential to gauge the program's effectiveness and success.

1. Coastal Nature Guides must complete and submit the Coastal Nature Guide reporting form for the previous certification year.
2. Participants successfully complete a training course.
3. A trained representative of the certification program conducts the annual evaluation. Evaluation techniques may include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Customer evaluation
 - b. Prearranged nature tour by a program official, trained representative, or third party, with feedback provided to the operator following the close of the tour.
4. The certification representative evaluates the nature tour for adherence to the certification program code of ethics using a standard reporting form, noting any areas of concern and offer recommendations on how to address concerns. The tour operator will have the opportunity on the form to note any areas of disagreement regarding the evaluation.
5. If there are any areas of deviation from the certification program code of ethics, the participant has 30 days to revise their practices. A certification representative will be available for technical assistance as necessary. The participant is re-evaluated through an unannounced spot check, or pre-arranged tour booking by a certification representative or third party. The participant will not receive decals for the new program year until they are determined to have revised their practices to meet the certification program code of ethics.

6. Coastal Nature Guides will receive current year training materials and decals that publicize participation in the program. Only a current year decal indicates active participation in the Coastal Nature guide Certification Program.

V Complaints Procedure

The following procedure establishes a process to address complaints received by the program sponsors and partners about the certified Coastal Nature Guide participants who may not be adhering to the program code of ethics.

A. Telephone/verbal complaints

A record of the conversation is made and the complainant asked to put their concerns in writing.

B. Written complaints

1. Complaints are date stamped and copied to the Coastal Nature Guide program director.
2. The program director assesses whether the complaint relates to the program's code of ethics not being adhered to. If the complaint does not relate to the program code of ethics, no further action will be taken.
3. The program director forwards a copy of the complaint to the participant involved; outlining the main points of the complaint and requests a response.
4. The program director reviews the participant's response and considers whether or not the points have been adequately addressed. This may involve the need for a meeting with the participant to clarify any points.
5. If the program director determines that the participant has deviated from the program code of ethics, they are given 30 days to address areas of concern. The participant is then reevaluated through an unannounced spot check or a pre-arrange tour booking.
6. If more than two complaints are received and upheld within one year, the participant will be ineligible for the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program for one year.
7. The participant may request reevaluation and renewed certification after one full year of non certification.

Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program Director

Joanne McDonough

900 Commerce Loop

Gulf Shores, AL 36547

251-974-1510 Fax: 251-968-6095

ADDENDA

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Program local partners include:

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Coastal Section

Dauphin Island Sea Lab

U.S. Weather Service

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Auburn Marine Extension and Research Center

Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge

Baldwin County Soil & Water Conservation District VI

Alabama Department of Archives & History

Alabama Department of Marine Resources

Alabama Department of Freshwater Fisheries and Wildlife

Violation Hotline Numbers: TBA

Statement of Commitment to Sustainable Nature Tourism Development

(This Statement of Commitment is adapted from the United Nations Environment Program, Tour Operators Initiative)

1. Commitment to sustainable development and management of Nature Tourism

- A. I define Sustainable Nature Tourism Development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- B. I am committed to developing, operating and marketing nature tourism in a sustainable manner that makes a positive contribution to the natural and cultural environment, which generate benefits for coastal communities, and which do not put at risk the future livelihood of local people.
- C. As a Certified Coastal Nature Guide I believe that I can contribute to Sustainable Nature Tourism Development. I will strive to anticipate and prevent economic, environmental, social and cultural degradation. I will work towards integrating these considerations into my operations and activities.
- D. I am participating in the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program to improve my performance in order to achieve sustainable nature tourism development and management of nature tourism.

2. Principles of sustainable development and management of tourism

- A. I recognize that nature tourism can contribute to the viability of local economies. I also recognize that tourism can have negative impacts on the economy, environment, nature, and local cultures. In the long-term interest of coastal communities and of the nature tourism industry, as a Certified Coastal Nature Guide I will endeavor to prevent or minimize these impacts.
- B. I am committed to complying with Federal, State and local laws and regulations applicable to my business activities.
- C. I oppose and actively discourage illegal, abusive or exploitative forms of nature tourism.
- D. I will manage and monitor the environmental, cultural and social impacts of my activities by completing the Nature Tour Guide reporting form annually.

E. I will strive to pursue the best practices in all my activities - internally and when forming business relationships with partners, suppliers and sub-contractors - especially with regard to:

1. responsible use of natural resources (e.g. land, soil, energy, water)
2. reducing, minimizing and preventing pollution and waste (e.g. solid and liquid waste, emissions to air)
3. conserving plants, animals, ecosystems and protected areas (biodiversity)
4. conserving landscapes, cultural and natural heritage
5. involving, and co-operating with, local communities and people

3. Public awareness and communication

A. I commit to create awareness and active involvement among my customers towards the natural, social and cultural environment of the places we visit.

B. I will endeavor in my public communication and advertising to promote behavior and activities compatible with the principles of sustainable nature tourism development and management of nature tourism.

C. I will encourage other nature tour operators to support this Statement and adhere to the code of ethics.

Signed _____ [name]

on behalf of _____ [company]

Date _____

Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program

Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium (MASGC)
Attention: Joanne McDonough
900 Commerce Loop
Gulf Shores, AL 36547
251-974-1510
Fax: 251-968-6095

The application deadline is January 20, 2010. Please type or print clearly and return your **application and program fee of \$70** to the above address, make check payable to Auburn University.

Name: _____

Mailing address:

Street _____

City _____ County _____ Zip Code _____

Telephone: Day () _____ Night () _____

E-mail address: _____

Occupation: _____

Company or Organization name: _____

If retired, what was your former occupation? _____

1) Describe why you are interested in the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program.

_____ YES I understand that I am required to attend the scheduled classes and field trips, in order to become a Certified Coastal Nature Guide.

Signature _____ Date _____