



# Nature Tourism Initiative

## Along Alabama's Gulf Coast

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### **Dynamic Program to Encourage Nature Guides to Lead by Example**

**GULF SHORES and ORANGE BEACH, Ala.** –“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 they are viewing,” said Joanne McDonough of the Nature Tourism Initiative, which is proud to announce the launch of its new Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program with a full-day workshop on February 22, 2010.

She added that “it is vital for the sake of our natural resources and coastal economies that tour operators lead by example and adopt and encourage behaviors that contribute to the sustainability of the Gulf Coast region’s natural ecosystems and resources. Certification will tell customers and potential customers that tour operators have received training in stewardship, ecosystems and natural resource laws.”

The certification process begins with a workshop, during which participants will:

- gain a vast knowledge of the local ecosystem
- discuss applicable local resource protection laws and regulations
- review and follow an established code of ethics for nature guides
- learn how to promote good stewardship (through recycling, beach clean-ups and other similar efforts)
- become familiar with responsible advertising and
- learn how to conduct an educational briefing at the start of a tour.

After implementing these practices in their businesses, the nature tour operator will request an evaluation of their business, which will include the observation of a tour and the review of Web sites, brochures, a current business license and other advertising materials. Once the program director finds the business to be in compliance with the program’s standards and rules, the nature tour operator will receive the certification and decal with the program’s logo and current calendar year to display on tours and in advertising.

The cost to participate in the certification program is \$70.

Annual recertification includes submitting a coastal nature guide reporting form, completing a training course and evaluation.

Founding Nature Tourism Initiative Program partners include the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve and the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Local partners in the Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program include the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources - Coastal Section, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Auburn Marine Extension and Research Center, Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, Baldwin County Soil & Water Conservation District VI, Alabama Department of Marine Resources and the Alabama Department of Freshwater Fisheries and Wildlife.

Nature tourism business owners who would like to register for this certification program or would like more information may contact Joanne McDonough at 251-974-4634 or [jmcdonough@gulfshores.com](mailto:jmcdonough@gulfshores.com). Additional online initiative resources may be found at [www.agccvb.org/business-of-nature](http://www.agccvb.org/business-of-nature).

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**About the Nature Tourism Initiative:**

*In 2007, the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium and the Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center joined forces to oversee the development of the Nature Tourism Initiative. This project is designed to evaluate the nature-based businesses in Baldwin and Mobile Counties (in Alabama) and provide resources to meet their needs. Charged with this mission, Joanne McDonough's task is two-fold: (1) to work with local businesses and communities to provide a quality nature experience for the guests (2) while also encouraging good stewardship and sustainability of the area's natural resources. Current partners include the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau and the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration. For more information, visit [www.agccvb.org/business-of-nature](http://www.agccvb.org/business-of-nature).*