

Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau



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Nature Tourism Initiative Brings Tools to Local Tour Operators

Gulf Shores/Orange Beach, AL—Tranquil nature scenes provide a common backdrop to the sugar white shores of the Alabama Gulf Coast. Guests to this area discover a healthy mixture of Southern hospitality and coastal influence. As metropolitan areas develop, people are seeking more experiences with nature, and thus the nature tourism industry has quickly emerged in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach.

“Once Perdido Bay had 6 nature guide boats in operation, and in 2007, that number had tripled to 18,” commented Joanne McDonough, a nature-based tourism specialist with the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). “Currently, there are 30 nature businesses in Baldwin and Mobile Counties.”

Recently, McDonough organized a workshop to provide these businesses with necessary skills and information to improve their operations and in turn enhance the visitors’ experience.

“Through my position in this nature tourism partnership (between [Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center](#), [Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Extension](#) and the [Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau](#)), I am charged with the mission of working with local businesses and communities to provide a quality nature experience for our guests while also encouraging good stewardship and sustainability of our natural resources.”

On February 25, the Sea, Sand and Stars Science and Nature Center in Orange Beach was the site of “The Business of Nature,” a workshop that included hands-on educational training and informative discussions from tourism and nature experts.

“This workshop is to my knowledge the first of this kind,” commented Herb Malone, president/CEO of the CVB. “Everyone sees this fascinating environment around us but from a market perspective, these businesses help us package nature experiences into marketable unit that increases the depth of activities offered during the peak and shoulder seasons.”

Malone also spoke to the crowd about the economic impact of the local tourism industry while Mike Foster, the CVB's Vice-President of Marketing, provided an overview of who visits the Gulf Shores/Orange Beach area and what these guests want.

“This economic summary and visitor profile helped the businesses gain a larger perspective about the tourism industry on the Alabama Gulf Coast,” McDonough said.

Continuing to arm these nature tourism businesses with skills, the workshop also included a discussion of best practices for wildlife watching that ensure quality visitor viewing experiences along with a safe and sustainable environment for the wildlife. Furthermore, audience members watched presentations from Dr. John Dindo of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab and from Margaret Sedlecky of the Weeks Bay Reserve.

“Our area offers such a diverse ecosystem,” McDonough said. “These presentations focused on the sometime overlooked parts of nature. A great blue heron is common to locals but for a guest from a land-locked state or big city, this bird is amazing.”

In addition to stressing stewardship and sustainability, the workshop featured with a brief safety reminder. Lt. Josh Rose from the United States Coast Guard explained the vessel inspection requirement updates.

“Essentially, I wanted this workshop to provide our local nature business operators with tools and resources to enhance their operations and build this \$45 billion nation-wide industry,” McDonough said. “Plans are to hold many more workshops in the future. My mission is to identify the business’ needs and then respond with the appropriate resources, and workshops – like this one – are a vital part of the program’s implementation.”

She added, “I would also like to thank the workshop sponsors for their generosity: [Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center](#), [Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Extension](#), [Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau](#), [Dauphin Island Sea Lab](#) and [Sea, Sand and Stars Science and Nature Center](#).”

Nature tourism business owners who would like more information or assistance may contact Joanne McDonough at 251-974-1510 or jmcdonough@gulfshores.com.

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Photo caption: Margaret Sedlecky of the Weeks Bay Reserve is showing the egg casings of Lighting Whelks that may be found on the Alabama Gulf Coast beaches during “The Business of Nature Workshop.” It was held February 25 at the Sea, Sand and Stars Science and Nature Center in Orange Beach.