



Hawaii Ecotourism Association's Sustainable Tour Certification Program: Promoting Best Practices to Conserve A Unique Place

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- WTO: A well-designed and managed tourism sector could support the host's sustainability goals.
- Quality systems similar to Fodor's star rating system for hotels provide a number of potential benefits as a means of tracking tourism's sustainability performance (Kozak and Nield, 2004), assuming that meaningful best practices are promulgated.



HI's Tourism Sector

- Hosted 9.382 M visitors in 2017; will be 9.634 M by 2018. Spent nearly \$17 B in 2017. Growth expected through 2021.
- Challenged to provide visitors outdoor & host culture experiences without damaging these resources
- Hawaii Tourism Authority's strategic plan does not address sustainable tourism



Hawaii Ecotourism Association

- 501c3 non-profit formed in 1994 “to protect Hawaii’s unique environment & host culture through the promotion of responsible travel & educational programs, relating to sustainable tourism for residents, businesses and visitors.”
- HEA’s certification effort in 2001 failed due to lack of agreement.
- 9/11 turned interest to maintaining the existing mass market.



HEA's Timeline to a Certification Program

- Ecotour Review process, 2007
- Ecotour Certification Pilot Program, 2011
- Sustainable Tourism Certification Program, 2014
- HTA Contract to triple the number of certified operators, 2016
- Revised Sustainable Tourism Certification Program, 2018



HEA's Sustainable Certification Program

- One of only two in the US
- Provides third party assessment
- Educates operators & stakeholders on BMPs for natural & cultural resources
- Increases visibility of certified operators



Recent revisions

- Dropped minimum requirements.
- Introduced adequate, good and excellent scoring rather than yes or no scoring.
- Developed a re-certification strategy to reduce costs and introduced the “Pono Traveler” Program.
- Developed principles for various types of tours.
- Developed a protocol for addressing complaints.



Operating Categories & Weights

- Environmental Management (20%)
- Staff Management (20%)
- Interpretation Management (20%)
- Customers (10%)
- Marketing (5%)
- Community Engagement (15%)
- Section 7 (10%)



Specialized Best Practices

- Hiking tours
- Manta ray dive/snorkel tours
- Motorized snorkel tours
- Not motorized snorkel tours
- Van tours
- Zip line tours
- Surf/stand Up paddling lessons



Draft Best Practices

- Bike
- Helicopter
- Whale watching, motorized and not motorized
- SCUBA diving, shore- and boat-based
- Agricultural



Scoring

- Excellent = 32.50 pts
- Good = 19.5 pts
- Adequate = 6.5 pts
- Use Excel scoring sheet
- Highlight areas of excellence on HEA website for potential customers



Reducing Certification Costs

- Certification costs are large (up to \$1000).
 - Progressive Fee structure based on number of employees
 - Pono Traveler Program for annual recertification
 - Auditors on every island
- Certification Checklist is long and intimidating for operators.
 - Partnership with Hawaii Tourism Authority now funds a Certification Manager to assist operators



Pono Traveler Program

- HEA Ohana experience CTO's tours & provide valuable feedback
- Residents/Ohana become more engaged
- Pono Travelers:
 - Pay \$75 annual fee to join
 - Complete online training module
 - Participate in specific tour selected by the CTO
 - Submit final report to HEA and shared with CTO



Other HEA Core Programs

- Educational Program for Tour Operators
 - Seven YouTube videos
 - Partnership with the University of Hawaii Cooperative Extension Service
 - National Interpretation Association
 - Native Hawaii Hospitality Association
- Outreach Program
 - Pono Traveler Program
 - Local events
- Development Program
 - More engagement with partners



Looking ahead

- Social media results in self-guiding & encourages “bad” behaviors
- International recognition by GSTC & linking with HI’s Green Building Program, Ocean Friendly Restaurant Certification, & Native Hawaii Hospitality Association
- Training for guides
 - Host training to increase compensation
 - Interpretation training to ensure “sense of place” is authentic
- Adding new section 7 categories
- Funding/capacity challenges
- Name change to Sustainable Tourism Association of Hawaii

