

National Extension Tourism

Strategic Plan

2025-2030



Image: Meredith, New Hampshire Conference (Oct. 2025)

NATIONAL EXTENSION TOURISM

Strategic Plan 2025-2030

Sustainable tourism research, education and outreach within
Cooperative Extension and Sea Grant in collaboration with
Land Grant Universities, federal agencies and other partners

Updated from 2020 Plan by:
National Extension Tourism Design Team
2025

Background

Extension's Role in Tourism

For more than 50 years the Cooperative Extension Service has been engaged in research, educational programming and outreach to support communities engaged in tourism efforts. At the National Workshop on Cooperative Extension's Role in Outdoor Recreation in 1967, R.P. Davison, Director of the Vermont Extension Service, explicitly identified a need for "recreation and tourism programming...to become an integral part of Extension programs." This call for sound programming that could assist local leaders and governing officials in making informed decisions about recreation and tourism as a component of total community development was reiterated a decade later in the CES Recreation and Tourism Task Force report, RECREATION AND TOURISM, Challenges and Opportunities for Cooperative Extension (1978).

In 1993, the National Extension Travel and Tourism Advisory Committee (NETTAC) drafted a document entitled *Tourism Development: A Suggested Approach for the Cooperative Extension Service*, outlining the need for Extension education in tourism and actions for "Cooperative Extension Service (CES) to change its program priorities, organizational structure and external relationships to meet the shifting needs and priorities of society."

The document set out a plan with five action items.

Action 1. Articulate the education and research roles of CES and tourism to external and internal stakeholders; Establish tourism and travel as a recognized, supported program with the Cooperative Extension System; Develop partnerships for programming in tourism and travel.

Action 2. Establish educational initiatives in tourism and travel for clientele and for Extension faculty and staff.

Action 3. Establish a nationwide library of tourism and travel information, data and reports. Suggested name: Tourism Information Resource System (TIRS)

Action 4. Build a national research base and a comprehensive research agenda for travel and tourism. If the CES is to become more effective in its traditional role of disseminating research findings to communities and to individual needs, it is especially important that CES assign a higher priority to tourism development research.

Action 5. Hold another National Cooperative Extension Workshop on tourism and travel within the next two years.

Subsequent efforts to move the plan forward by the original volunteer task force led to the creation of the National Extension Tourism Design Team (NETDT). Established to provide leadership to National Extension Tourism (NET) work collectively across the U.S., the design team is a loosely structured group geographically aligned with the four Regional Rural Development Centers, funded by the USDA. Historically, two tourism-focused Extension or Sea

Grant representatives from each region, plus a representative from USDA in Washington served on the Design Team to provide leadership toward the five stated actions. These individuals are volunteers and the Design Team has operated without a budget. Over the years, NET has received financial and administrative support from the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDC). Land Grant Universities and federal partners have also supported this work.

Over the years, NET has succeeded in addressing each of the five actions. However, without a mandate, funding and formal structure, the Design Team has struggled to maintain consistent positioning of tourism as a recognized and supported program area within the Cooperative Extension System nationally. NET has achieved a number of successes including tourism and outdoor recreation programming and research regionally.

NET provides strategies to collaborate and share including a website, regular meetings, and joint programming around topics such as agritourism, community or rural tourism development, and coastal tourism. An example of successfully shared programming is the Northeast Regional Center supported multi-state training on the First Impressions program that led to three additional states adopting the program and adapting it to local needs. NET members also collaborate on research and scholarship as evidenced by the published online volume of case studies entitled *Innovative and Promising Practices in Sustainable Tourism: Case Studies* ([link](#)).

The NETDT also coordinates a national conference approximately every two years as a primary vehicle for sharing and networking. NET has hosted 15 conferences. (See Appendix A)

The most recent conference was hosted October 2025 in Meredith, New Hampshire, with a theme of “Connecting through Tourism.” Attendees included Extension and Sea Grant professionals from more than 25 states and a variety of tourism stakeholders due to a hosting partnership with the Northeast Chapter of the Travel and Tourism Association. Throughout the conference, participants discussed expanding work in tourism and outdoor recreation and supported the re-establishment of NET as the preeminent CES network for sustainable tourism research and education. Additionally, the two established Working Groups, Agritourism and Outdoor Recreation, hosted sessions focused on future initiatives and providing thematic areas for NET to build momentum.

This current strategic plan is built on work from March 2020, when a previous NETDT, with support from the Regional Rural Development Centers and USDA, met to draft an updated strategic plan highlighting the important role CES and Sea Grant can, and do, play in assisting communities across the U.S. to realize the benefits of tourism and outdoor recreation. Attending the March 1 and 2 meeting in Savannah: Doug Arbogast, West Virginia University Extension; Lisa Chase, University of Vermont Extension; Cynthia Messer, University of Minnesota Tourism Center; Andy Northrop, Michigan State University Extension; Stacy Tomas, Oklahoma State University; April Turner, South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium; and Bryan Fluech, University of Georgia Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant. Design Team members not present but who provided input via survey and review include Miles Phillips, Oregon State University Sea Grant and Extension; Diane Van Wyngarden, Iowa State University Extension; Penny Whitman,

University of New Hampshire Extension; and international collaborators Suzanne Ainsley and Nicole Vaugeois.

Cooperative Extension Service and Sea Grant tourism efforts, historically, thanks to the foresight of early leaders in these organizations to create this national network, have positioned National Extension Tourism to be seen as experts in tourism research, research-based programming, and outreach now and into the future.

Travel and Tourism 2025

The tourism industry is both dynamic and diverse. Tourism affects almost every aspect of a community. It includes businesses directly involved in visitor services – lodging (including hotels, motels, resorts, B&Bs and campgrounds; and, more recently, short-term rentals such as Airbnb), attractions, dining, events and transportation; and other sectors, as well. Retail businesses, gas stations and convenience stores, and even public sector services, such as parks, hospitals, government offices and local infrastructure, are involved in meeting the needs and expectations of visitors. Visitors frequent these services, but are rarely differentiated from local users. In fact, travel and tourism is part of a larger service sector in local economies, and the cumulative economic impacts from visitor spending affect businesses, government and residents.

Globally, travel and tourism is one of the world's largest economic sectors, supporting one in 10 jobs (371 million) worldwide, and generating 10.3% (US \$11.7 trillion) of global GDP. This growth is expected to continue with experts predicting one in three net new jobs will be created by the industry over the next 10 years (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025).

In the United States, one in 10 jobs (15 million) depend on travel and tourism, including 8 million direct jobs. Tourism ranks #7 nationally compared to other major private industry sectors and among the top ten industries in 49 states in terms of employment (U.S. Travel, 2025).

U.S. domestic and international traveler spending of \$1.35 trillion generates a total of \$2.9 trillion in economic output that benefits communities across the country. Tourism also generates \$89 billion in tax revenue for local and state governments (U.S. Travel, 2025).

Communities and Tourism

Tourism in the United States occurs in communities large and small, urban and rural. The growth and continued role of travel and tourism in local and regional economies across the United States is clear.

Over the past twenty-five years, many communities embraced tourism as an economic development strategy. Educators and faculty in Extension conducting tourism related research and programming have assisted communities to apply the key values identified in the early 90s to build sustainable tourism efforts. Increasingly, however, communities are recognizing that

tourism is not only an economic development strategy but can also support the social fabric and environmental resources of the destination.

Travelers today seek experiences that reflect the authenticity of the destination. According to U.S. Travel research (2020), the top leisure activities are:

US Domestic Travelers

1. Visiting relatives
2. shopping
3. visiting friends
4. fine dining
5. rural sightseeing

Overseas Travelers

1. Shopping
2. Sightseeing
3. Fine dining
4. National parks/monument
5. Amusement/theme parks

Recently, the tourism industry has also recognized the importance of tourism as a core community value. U.S. Travel's ["Made in America" report \(link\)](#) and [Destinations International's New Tourism Lexicon \(link\)](#) both cite the need for, and benefit of, encouraging tourism in communities using an asset-based approach.

The industry has largely recovered from the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as it greatly impacted all sectors of the tourism industry globally, nationally, and locally. The pandemic demonstrated the significant role of tourism and recreation on regional and local economies, along with the social and environmental impacts of mass tourism. It also renewed the importance of leisure travel as a priority. Currently, communities face new threats to tourism sectors as economic uncertainty grows and international travel continues to face risks due to increased visa restrictions and fees (U.S. Travel, 2025). Additionally, an overall reduction in the federal workforce in agencies such as the National Park Service, the United States Forest Service, and USDA Rural Development poses additional challenges for many rural communities with significant tourism and recreation-based economies. As communities dependent on tourism and the industry navigate these new uncertainties, NET is well-positioned to provide the expertise, research, and education to help this process be more sustainable and resilient.

This strategic plan outlines structure, goals and strategies to generate measurable outcomes that strengthen the NETDT and National Extension Tourism moving forward. This plan is a roadmap for the collective work and collaborative opportunities for CES, Sea Grant and key partners to build regional capacity and support local economies through sustainable tourism and outdoor recreation.

About Our Work

National Extension Tourism supports the continued development of sustainable tourism research, education and outreach within Cooperative Extension and Sea Grant in collaboration with Land Grant Universities, federal agencies and other partners.

NET works from the United Nations World Tourism Organization definition of sustainable tourism*:

"Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities."

*Sustainable tourism is a comprehensive term that includes many types of tourism and niche activities such as: recreation, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, historic tourism, agritourism and others.

Mission and Vision

National Extension Tourism integrates research, education and outreach within Cooperative Extension and Sea Grant to support sustainable tourism, thus contributing to the long-term economic development, environmental stewardship, and socio-cultural wellbeing of communities and regions.

The NET Design Team reaffirms the core values first laid out in the 1993 document as central to our collective work with communities to support sustainable tourism efforts.

- Basing tourism development on authenticity and a sense of place
- Assessing the true benefits and costs of tourism
- Using tourism as a diversification strategy rather than a substitution strategy
- Developing and delivering quality services and experiences
- Sharing the benefits of tourism and developing local management

Core Competencies

The unique strengths of NET are:

- High quality research
- Research-based education
- Community engagement and outreach
- Ability to leverage public and private funding support
- Ability to engage with a wide range of faculty and students at land and sea grant universities to deliver applied scholarship to community stakeholders

Structure

National Extension Tourism is a loosely organized network of educators, researchers and technical experts interested in tourism and recreation, primarily but not exclusively from U.S. land grant institutions. There are no membership requirements as of 2026.

Regional representative positions are open to any Land Grant University and Sea Grant staff engaged in Extension and/or Tourism work. The Executive leadership team is appointed to serve until 2027 (conference), then two-year rotating terms will be selected from regional representation.

Design Team 2025-2026

The Design Team provides leadership and guidance for running and maintaining the network collaboration. It includes representatives from each of the four regions represented by the Rural Development Centers (Northeast, North Central, Western, Southern) and an executive committee selected from the regional representatives.

NET Design Team: an Executive Committee, plus 12 regional representatives and ex-officio members:

Executive Committee (4)

- Chair
- Vice chair
- Secretary
- Past chair

Regional Representatives (3 per region, 12 total)

- Two Extension/Land Grant University representatives from each region
- One Sea Grant representative from each region

Working Group Leadership (1 per Working Group)

- Agritourism
- Outdoor Recreation

Ex-Officio members

- One Regional Rural Development Center representative
- One USDA representative
- One National Sea Grant representative
- Additional Working Group Leads

Communications support provided by the Regional Rural Development Centers

REGIONAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT CENTERS



Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development

Southern Rural Development Center

Western Rural Development Center

NETDT regional representatives' duties:

- Support the development of the National Extension Tourism network by:
 - o Attending design team meetings
 - o Attending the bi-annual conference
 - o Participating in at least one committee
 - o Promoting the bi-annual conference and webinar series
 - o Striving to connect, strengthen, and expand Extension tourism programs to state and local constituents/stakeholders where and when feasible
 - o Engaging with their respective Regional Rural Development Center Directors.

Nomination Process: Design team members transitioning to new roles or completing their terms are asked to nominate a replacement. Those involved in committees and working groups are also considered for open Design Team positions.

Details of the Design Team structure, responsibilities and meetings are found in the National Extension Tourism Design Team Guidelines document on the NETDT Google Drive housed at NERCRD/Penn State.

The DT will establish committees, either Standing or Ad Hoc to assist as needed.

2025-2026 Committee Chairs:

- Conference: Taylor Kruger, University of Wyoming
- Webinars: Lisa Chase, University of Vermont
- Agritourism Working Group: Rachael Callahan, Garrett Ziegler
- Outdoor Recreation Working Group: Jake Powell, Hailey Sorg
- Communications: Mercedes Fraser, Kristen Devlin

Stakeholders

NET Stakeholders are both internal and external to land-grant and Sea Grant institutions. A stakeholder is “any group of individuals who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman et al., 2010). Internally, key stakeholders are the Deans, Directors, and Program Leaders whose work supports tourism and outdoor recreation work and faculty conducting research and educational programming or outreach to Extension and Sea Grant audiences.

The Regional Rural Development Centers continue to be vital partners. Due to their ongoing involvement with NET, staff at the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development can serve as the liaison between NET and the other RRDCs and federal partners as needed. That said, individual Design Team representatives will also build relationships with their respective RRDCs to exchange information and explore opportunities for regional collaboration.

Key external stakeholders for NET are federal agency partners such as USDA, U.S. Forest Service, Environmental Protection Agency, National Park Service, NOAA/National Sea Grant Program, National Travel & Tourism Office, and U.S. Department of Commerce/ International Trade Association, as they most align with Extension and tourism (either via direct reports,

funding, research and/or programs). Additional stakeholders may include collaborating academic institutions and faculty; non-profit agencies, such as the Extension Foundation, The Conservation Fund, The Trust for Public Land, the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, and the Global Agritourism Network; and tourism industry organizations, such as the U.S. Travel and the Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA), TTRA regional chapters and state tourism offices. Other external stakeholders are the communities, organizations (e.g. Destination Marketing Organizations, Chambers of Commerce and Economic Development Authorities), and tourism-related businesses we serve.

Goals 2025 - 2030

Goal 1.

Champion tourism as a recognized, supported program within the Cooperative Extension System and Sea Grant Network to meet emerging trends and the shifting needs of society.

Objectives:

1. Inventory existing formal Extension and Sea Grant tourism programs.

Action 1.1: Regional Reps identify their regions' personnel, with the support of RRDCs, and create and update a baseline inventory in the tourism sector.

2. Define and communicate the importance of NET to the broader Land and Sea Grant Network and Administrations.

Action 1.2: Create and publish a video that communicates NET's core value proposition, including impact data and testimonials. Publish on NET site and distribute broadly.

Goal 2.

Provide professional development and networking opportunities for Extension and Sea Grant staff, and other key stakeholders (e.g., local and state destination marketing organizations, travel and trade associations, state and federal agencies).

Objectives:

1. Sustain and grow the biennial conference.

Action 2.1: Organize a biennial 3-4 day national conference that convenes Land and Sea Grant tourism Extension professionals and relevant partners focused on networking, sharing scholarly work, and offering professional development opportunities to advance the mission of NET.

2. Sustain quarterly webinars.

Action 2.2: Build NET's existing membership by organizing a quarterly NET webinar series that is engaging and focused on timely and relevant subject matter delivered by a variety of experts representing academia, industry, government, and other relevant tourism-related organizations; track engagement and feedback to refine future webinar topics and formats based on participant interests and needs.

3. Sustain NET newsletters.

Action 2.3: Increase the visibility and profile of NET's contributions by publishing an online newsletter that highlights current programmatic efforts, celebrates member achievements, and informs readers about NET's impacts locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

4. Foster opportunities for collaboration among Extension and Sea Grant tourism programs and personnel.

Action 2.4: Include a question in the annual DT survey to assess any new collaborations started due to NET events, working groups, or networking.

Goal 3.

Sustain NET's capacity by establishing strategic partnerships to facilitate sharing of applied research, special programs, or other tourism development and outdoor recreation technical expertise with key stakeholders and audiences.

Objectives:

1. Explore potential alignments and host collaborative sessions with national and regional organizations and leaders.

Action 3.1: Document meetings, discussions, etc., and any important outcomes of these discussions.

References

Destinations International. (2018). The New Tourism Lexicon. [Destinations International website](#)

Freeman, R. E., Harrison, J. S., Wicks, A. C., Parmar, B. L., & De Colle, S. (2010). Stakeholder theory: The state of the art.

[U.N. World Tourism Organization](#). (2020). UNWTO website accessed 3.16.20

U.S. Travel. (2018). Made in America: Travel's Essential Contribution to Economic Development. [U.S. Travel website](#).

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World Travel & Tourism Council. (2025). [WTTC website](#) accessed 12.10.25

Appendix A: National Extension Tourism conferences

Details and program links are available on the NET website ([link](#)):

1995	New Orleans, LA	First NET Conference
1998	Hershey, PA	
2000	Kailua-Kona, HI	
2002	Traverse City, MI	
2004	Kissimmee, FL	(cancelled due to hurricane)
2006	Burlington, VT	
2009	Park City, UT	
2011	Charleston, SC	
2013	Detroit, MI	
2015	Galveston, TX	
2017	Princeton, NJ	
2019	Astoria, OR	
2021	Savannah, GA	
2023	Milwaukee, WI	
2025	Meredith, NH	
2027	Wyoming	