

Ecotourism In the Yellow Dog Community Forest

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According to the International Ecotourism Society, Ecotourism is now defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES). The local people of a destination location often depend on tourism for their economy. Respectful visitors that spend money allow these tourism based economies to thrive. Often though, the locals get shoved aside by larger "chain" resorts which pull money away from the community and contain the visitors in a bubble of their own culture. Ecotourism encourages visitors to get involved in local projects and immerse themselves in the culture of the area for a richer vacation experience and to funnel the tourist spending directly back into the community. Interacting with local peoples also give the visitors a new perspective on the resource they are visiting and through interpretive programs, the tourists make connections and begin to care for a resource that they may only be immersed in for a few days. The trend in ecotourism has evolved to support societies desire to travel worldwide by making it sustainable for the masses to do so. The ever increasing technology and development has made many ecologically significant areas readily accessible for people to explore, and while it is a positive movement to care about these natural wonders, overuse of the area and unsustainable energy use for travel can lead to humanity loving that resource to death. Responsible travel is necessary for the world to continue its increasing tendencies towards tourism and Ecotourism is the answer.

In the Upper Peninsula, "The wealth of natural resources is crucial to the local economy, supplying both raw materials for industry and scenic beauty and recreational opportunities for local residents and tourists." (UP Economics). Activities such as mountain biking, snowmobiling, skiing, and kayaking bring in visitors from around the globe to significant locations throughout the UP including Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Mackinac Island, State Parks, National Forests, The Keweenaw Peninsula and more. As the tourism industry in the UP grows, so does the need for sustainable lodging, travel and use of the natural resources. The proposed Yellowdog River Community Forest is a good place to start the trend of ecotourism sites in the UP. This beautiful tract of land encompasses the beauty of the UP's forests and recreational opportunities along the river as well as scenic value in the Yellow Dog Waterfalls that can be accessed by hiking trail. It also contains many sensitive ecological sites that can be conserved and used as educational tools in programming held in the area. Not only would the immediate forest attract visitors, but the local communities would benefit from travel expenses. Local businesses such as restaurants, transportation (gas stations, car rentals, taxis, etc.), and culture centers would benefit immensely.

Ecotourism focuses not only on the resource, but the surrounding communities wellbeing. It encourages visitors to spend at locally owned businesses and even get involved with local projects. Looking at the area surrounding the Yellowdog River Community Forest, the closest

town is Big Bay, MI and the next largest city is Marquette, MI. Several small restaurants in the Big Bay area would benefit greatly from the increased tourism; including but not limited to: The Lumberjack Tavern, The Thunder Bay Inn, Hungry Hollow Cafe, and Big Bass Cafe. Other tourist based, locally owned businesses include; The Juniper Shop, North Shore Treasures, Keehole Gallery and Gifts, Big Bay Outfitters, and Cram's General Store. Locally owned lodging in the Big Bay area includes the Big Bay Depot, Little Tree Cabins, and the Big Bay Lighthouse B&B. The Bay Cliff Health Camp may also benefit from the increased economic activity in the area and tourists may check it out and decide to attend or volunteer. All of these locally owned businesses would benefit from increased tourism in the area, especially tourism which encouraged local spending and involvement.

While ecotourism would obviously help bring in tourists to the area, we need to look at the logistics of the practice before deciding what type of tourism would best fit the Yellowdog River Community Forest. According to the Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, there are three main aspects of sustainability that should be considered; Environmental, Social/Cultural, and Economic. If a business practices sustainability in all three of these areas, it can still be profitable *while* benefitting the surrounding natural areas and communities. When all three aspects are met, it is known as reaching the "triple bottom line". This is critical for rural towns that depend on tourism. Take Munising, MI for example; without the massive influx of tourists visiting pictured rocks during the summer, the town's economy would suffer. "The principles of sustainability can be applied to any type of tourism – mass or specialty; city, beach, or wilderness; large or small. They also can be applied to all sectors of the tourist industry: lodging, tours, agencies, ground operators, guiding, and transport." (Center for Ecotourism) This leaves limitless opportunities for integrating ecotourism into our local areas in the Upper Peninsula, specifically the Yellow Dog River Community Forest. Elaborating on the three aspects of sustainability, there are twelve fundamental concepts which lead to sustainable tourism. The operation must be *economically viable* so that it continues to prosper and remains competitive in the market. It also must maximize *local prosperity* by concentrating on contributing to local economies and retaining visitor spending within the host location. The *employment quality* must be high to strengthen the number and good working conditions of local jobs. The operation must strive for *social equity* by fairly distributing the local community benefits including improving opportunities offered to the poor. There must be a non discriminatory, safe, and satisfying experience for visitors to achieve a high level of *visitor fulfillment*. Management and future development of the tourist industry must involve *local control* by empowering local people in the decision making processes and consultation opportunities with the rest of the stakeholders. Operations must aid in *community wellbeing* by providing access to resources, life support systems and improving social structures. Host

communities' historic heritage, cultural distinctions and authentic traditions must also be respected to preserve the *cultural richness* of the area. *Physical integrity* of the land must be maintained and the degradation of physical and visual environments must be combated. Natural areas, habitats and wildlife must be conserved to maintain the *biological diversity* of the area. *Resource efficiency* must be practiced by minimizing the use of nonrenewable resources in the development and current use of tourism operations. Finally, operations must minimize the pollution of air, water, and land and the generation of waste by tourism enterprises and visitors to achieve *environmental purity*. (Amos)

The second step of establishing ecotourism in the proposed Yellowdog River Community Forest is identifying some practical steps for funding. As sustainable tourism gains popularity, a

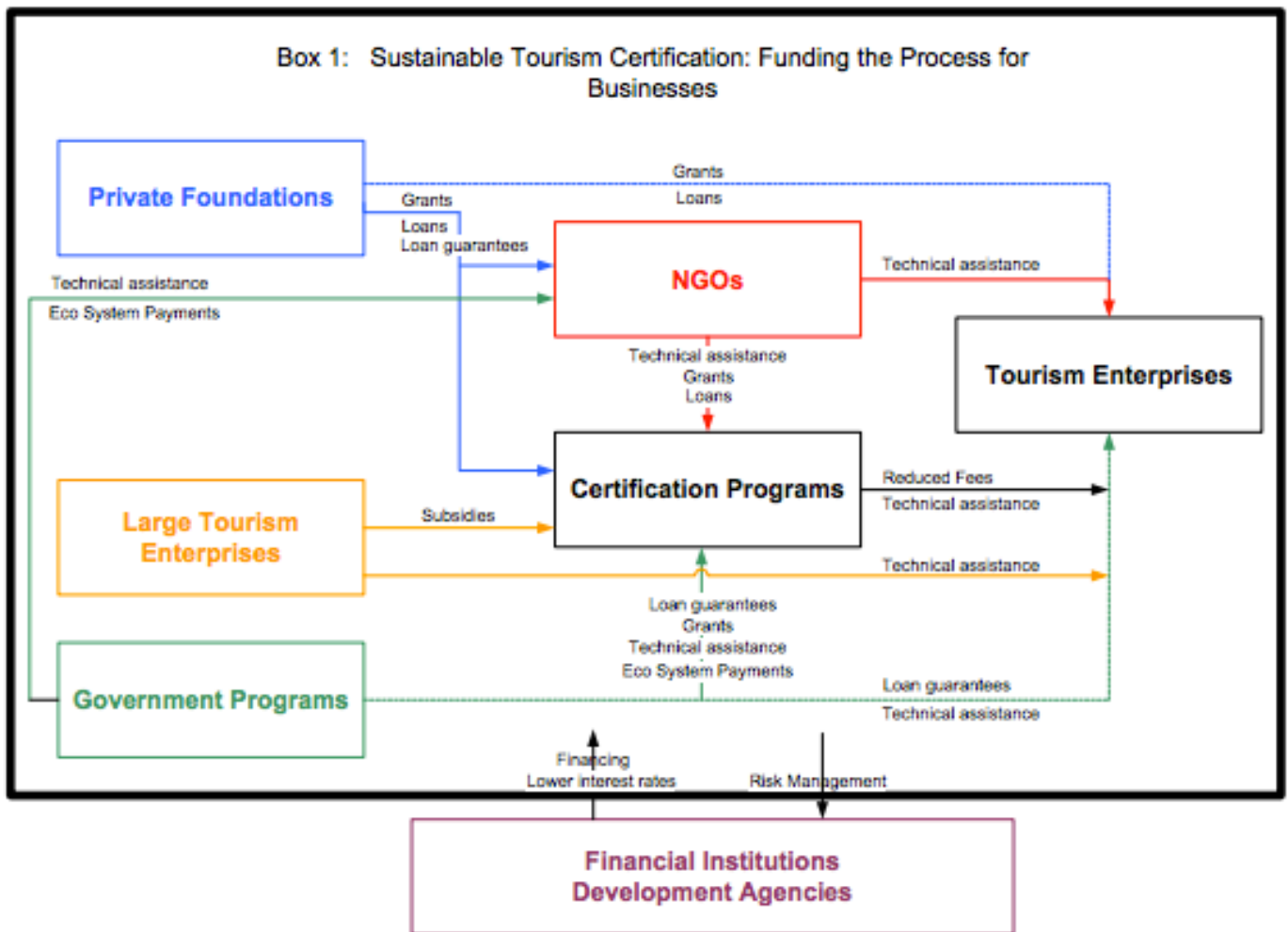


Diagram A: Various funding vehicles for businesses seeking sustainable tourism certification. (Russillo et al.)

increasing number of tourists are seeking certified and genuinely responsible operations. Until

Table 1 The Funding Mechanisms				
Stakeholder	Types of funding offered	Pros	Cons	Best access for small businesses
Tourism Certification Programs	Grants, in-kind support, sliding fees	High interest to include small businesses in portfolio	Have their own financial struggles	Direct Contact
NGOs	Grants, loans, in-kind support, conservation finance	Soft money; Interest in supporting small businesses	Project oriented and short term	Direct contact, Internet research
Government and Aid Agencies	Grants, loans, ecosystem payments, loan guarantees	Large amounts, multi year, broad development goals	Bureaucratic and costly administration requirements; Difficult to access	Through local government programs, NGOs and technical assistance providers
Private foundations	Grants, loans, loan guarantees	Soft money; often no repayment; relatively easy administrative requirements	Project or short term orientation; one time	Directly or through NGOs and certification programs
Tourism Industry	In-kind support, technical assistance, loans	Business oriented, understand issues and problems	Bottom line or short term orientation; repayment requirements	Directly or through NGOs and certification programs

Diagram B: Funding Mechanisms. (Russillo et al.)

that trend becomes the majority however, certifications and eco-friendly changes will be looked at as a luxury that most small businesses cannot afford. However, the potential benefits can outweigh the costs in the long run and costs can be reduced or partially funded by outside entities. There are significant costs in “upgrading” an entire system to becoming sustainable, but these sustainable practices could also be more efficient and higher quality, saving the business money in the long run. Incurring all of these direct and indirect costs of sustainability certification alone is extremely daunting, if not disastrous for small businesses, especially start-ups. These businesses shouldn’t face these funding challenges alone though; partnerships with other sustainable tourism stakeholders can alleviate the financial pressure and open doors to get other community based organizations and the public involved. Stakeholders such as government agencies, local councils, larger companies, non-governmental organizations, and private donors all have an interest in assuring that tourism operations implement high standards and remain successful so that the local community’s economy is strengthened and its curb appeal is bolstered. A sustainable tourist industry can reap major economic, social and environmental

Facilities	Campground	Camp with Climate Controlled Shelter	Cabins with Climate Controlled Shelter
Campsite Construction	\$500	\$500	
Compostable Toilets	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$3,000
Water Well	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$2,000
Climate controlled shelter		\$3,000	\$3,000
Cabins (3)			\$6,000
Total Costs*	\$5,500	\$8,500	\$14,000

Diagram C: Ec lodge Facilities Cost Chart.

*All costs are approximated from various websites estimations on building materials and labor costs.

benefits for the surrounding area. Some examples of these positive externalities include the creation of new jobs, protected watersheds and natural areas, preserved cultural heritage, increased local spending, boosted poverty alleviation, involvement in community projects and reduced demands on public infrastructure (water, power, waste removal, etc.). Through these outside stakeholders, grants can be written, taxes incentivized, loans supported, technical assistance provided and donations given all to help with the cost of strengthening the local tourism by making it a sustainable practice (*See Diagram A*). There are pros and cons for each funding source and none will be given for free. The business seeking certification will have to put a lot of time and effort into seeking out these funding sources, competing with other applicants, climbing administrative ladders, putting together proposals and presentations, tracking their longterm benefits of the funding provided and how it was properly allocated, and more (See Diagram B for more specifics regarding each funding source). Looking at all of these funding options, the best route for the Yellow Dog River Community Forest would probably be to seek grants from either NGO or Private Foundations. While this is labor intensive, it is the best chance of getting the start up money needed to build environmentally friendly facilities and implement interpretive programs.

Looking closer at the budget, we must identify the costs of potential facilities built on the Yellow Dog Community Forest property. The structure must be environmentally friendly which

implies using the least amount of nonrenewable resources possible in its construction and upkeep. There are a few routes that could be taken when creating an ecolodge. The cheapest method would be a camping style. This is essentially turning a part of the forest into an ecofriendly campground. This would merely be setting up a few composting toilets and digging a well for water as well as establishing a few campsites. The estimated cost of this is around \$5,500 (details found in Diagram C). To enhance this “ecolodge” we could add a climate controlled shelter that could be used for events and interpretive programming. It could also double as office space. This would add approximately \$3,000 to the costs, but would be a real benefit to any programming or activities to have a climate controlled space, especially in the wintertime. Finally, to really make this an ecolodge, 400 square foot cabins with a solar system and wind system could be added for about \$2,000 a piece. They could each sleep 6 people and would be self sustaining and off the grid.

A timeline to implement all of these changes would depend on the amount of work being put into the ecolodge. Realistically, a few campsites could be laid out and constructed in a few weeks. The toilets and well would also require a few weeks to install. A campground could easily be set up over the summer season, that is just the labor though. A lot of time will be required to raise the funds for this project. At least a year of applying for grants and designing curriculums for the interpretive programs as well as contracting with local businesses for the labor and materials of building. Before any of that could even be done though, the public would have to approve the ecolodge in the first place. As it is a “community forest”, there are several various groups of people represented by a board of members speaking in favor or not of developments on the property. All of these people must vote in favor of building an ecolodge on the property. So, including the planning and fund allocation, we are looking at at least 2 years before construction could begin, and that is if all meetings are productive, no compromises must be hashed out, and the grant money is acquired quickly and with ease. Despite all of this, ecotourism should be on the table of possible long term projects when considering the land use of this area.

Through this project I have come to appreciate all that goes into ensuring the quality of an environmental standard of care. Within all aspects of protected area management, limitations or qualifications must be placed on human activity in order to help conserve and preserve the natural resources which we use every day. In looking at the qualifications of what it takes for a business to be considered a part of ecotourism, I learned that there are a lot of components which must be clearly laid out and standards must be set so that all businesses claiming to provide ecotourism can easily be assessed by a standardizing entity. This seems like it just adds another hoop for people to jump through to become officially eco-friendly, but it is a necessary level to the certifying process. Despite this necessary standardizing and certification process which all protected area management organizations are subjected to, there are also larger concepts that can act as a guiding agent even for organizations that aren't quite up to standards for an official

certification. Just like tourism businesses can offer some interpretive based programs or employ more locals without the official certification, land owners could begin to take care of their property by getting it inventoried or promoting green space without having it officially declared a “protected area”. I have learned that while Protected Area Management has many levels and complex systems intertwining throughout our lives, the basic principles (such as habitat conservation, sustainability, and appreciation for the natural world) can be practiced on a much smaller scale by businesses, organizations and even the individual. Saving the world seems like an impossible task, but if we all take one step towards that in our own lives, perhaps together we can make the earth a healthier place.

The fact that this project was a service learning project gave it weight and meaning that most papers or school projects don't carry. I have been blessed with most of my classes this year incorporating service learning into their curriculum and because of this, I am beginning to feel like what we are learning in class really matters. It's not just interesting, abstract knowledge anymore. What we are learning in classes and during lectures is actually being applied to real world projects that are born right in our own community. We get the chance to see the outcome of our hardwork and watch it be appreciated by others beyond our classmates and instructors. I chose to work with the Yellow Dog Community Forest and though my project is a bit farfetched given that the project is still in its infancy, I hope that my paper encourages them to at least consider incorporating aspects of ecotourism into the forest as it matures into a public recreation area. Despite this, I still feel like I have contributed to society and made a difference in this community through the several service learning projects I have done this past semester. It continues my education while giving me real world experience and considering reality rather than the hypothetical.

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