

Ecotourism in Kentucky

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Kentucky is located within a one-day drive of half of the American population. The Commonwealth's tourist potential is enormous and is enhanced by three factors: its natural features, its receptive population, and its cultural and historic artifacts. The Bluegrass State includes a host of unique natural features (mountains, forests, rivers and waterfalls, caves, rock formations, grasslands, and all sorts of flora and fauna); Kentuckians are known for their hospitality; the human touch has added many artifacts from residential structures to dams, from roadways to covered bridges, many of which are worthy of pride. Presently, tourism is the number three area of employment; with the right promotion and regulation tourism could rise to first place.

All proper tourism must be green in its goals, operation and its benign impact on the environment. The people serving these tourists should have meaningful employment; the natural features and cultural artifacts should be enjoyed but not harmed or destroyed. In 2007, during ex-Governor Ernie Fletcher's administration, a "Kentucky Unbridled Adventure Program" was launched by the Department of Travel; this was regarded as a new invitation for "thrill seekers" and was projected to bring 130,000 new visitors, create 1,500 jobs, and add \$150 million to the economy. However, the concept of thrill-making is like joy-riding; there is a risk involved and damage can result without regulation.

On the other hand, "ecotourism" includes the *ecos* or in its root meaning "the home." Our home place needs to be treated with respect and civic pride. Ecotourism involves enjoying the natural and cultural features through benign operations that also enhance the lives of the residents. Many sports and other activities are possible in this diversified Commonwealth. However, any listed thrill activity requires proper regulation lest environmental damage occurs.

Some question whether observing ecological damage is a valid form of "ecotourism." Kentucky has its share of coal strip mines and denuded forest areas; in recent years major coal extraction operations have involved mountaintop removal in order to get to mineable coal seams. Many regard mountaintop removal as an abusive practice, and it has captured the attention of many concerned outside groups and individuals; they want to observe such operations. However, many think that this rather negative approach to tourism ought to be paired

with visits to renewable energy or appropriate technology demonstration projects.

We have divided this ecotourist treatment into five parts: Natural and Ecological Resources; Human Resources for Hosting Tourists; Artifacts of Cultural Value; Safeguards for Enhancing Ecotourism; and Ways to Promote Ecotourism.

A. Natural and Ecological Resources

Ecotourism seeks to focus on scenic beauty that can be enjoyed either through physical activities or through sight-seeing, the major tourist "activity" as far as actual time spent by tourists. The following seven natural features are all present in various parts of Kentucky and make this a first-rate ecotourist state:

1, **Mountains** -- Nearly half the area of Kentucky is covered by the Appalachian mountains or hills. The wooded slopes and gentle mountaintops plus coves and creeks add to the topographical diversity of the Commonwealth. Although some mountains have been damaged by excessive land disturbance due to coal mining, over ninety percent of the Appalachian hill country remains undisturbed. Certainly, some hollows show the endemic poverty that afflicts Appalachia; still, with the help of anti-litter and cleanup efforts, the region would benefit. The results would be greater focus on spectacular mountain views and enchanting mist-covered valleys. For instance, Cumberland Gap National Park is a tri-state national area that combines scenery, culture and history to make a unique ecotourist experience.

2. **Forests** -- Over half of Kentucky is covered by temperate forests that support an immense variety of trees. In fact, in the eastern part of the Commonwealth there are over one hundred woody varieties as part of the *Mixed Mesophytic Forest* (noted ecologist Lucy Braun's designation), the oldest and most varied temperate hardwood forest in the world. Some sections of old-growth forest remain, and much of the second growth has a rich variety as well, that makes for interesting hiking, viewing and camping.

3. **Rivers and Waterfalls** -- Though fifteenth from the smallest state, Kentucky is blessed with the greatest length of navigable waterways of any of the lower forty-eight states. It is the only state bordered on three sides by rivers (the Ohio for five hundred miles as well as the Mississippi and the Big Sandy Rivers). The beautiful Kentucky River flows through a gorge in the heart of the central bluegrass region. Furthermore, the Cumberland River flows at some distance within the boundaries as does the Tennessee River, which

merges into the Ohio River in Kentucky; both rivers have dams that have created major lakes that make western Kentucky famous as a water resort area. Many of Kentucky's rivers offer opportunities for boating, canoeing, fishing, and white water rafting. Sightseeing has its place as well, especially around its waterfalls, the most spectacular being the Cumberland Falls with its moon-bow that appears under certain weather conditions.

4. **Caves** -- Kentucky includes karst country and is dotted with sinkholes and smaller and larger cavernous areas, some highly popular (e.g. Mammoth Cave, the longest known cave in America, Carter Caves, etc.) and some still unexplored. Since these delicate underground wonderlands are so fragile, many environmentally-concerned citizens prefer that the caves have barriers and are visited only with guides, or under proper regulatory supervision. Many caves contain bats and other occupants that are threatened or endangered. Still, spelunkers regard the entire region as a treasure worthy of further careful exploration and mapping.

5. **Rock Formations** -- Kentucky has a famous "Natural Bridge" right off the Mountain Parkway near Slade. Also at the same exit there is easy access to the Red River Gorge and the adjacent Clifty Wilderness Area; for decades, these areas have attracted rock climbers and outdoor viewers, hikers and campers from the eastern United States. In recent years national and state agencies have regulated visitor flow in these rugged areas. The Gladie Cultural-Environmental Learning Center and the Natural Bridge State Park tourist center both have resources at hand that assist newcomers to the region and allow them to depart with a better appreciation of these unique rock formations.

6. **Grasslands and Wetlands** -- Besides rugged terrain Kentucky is blessed with more gentle lying land. The western half of the Commonwealth has a variety of areas where grasslands have predominated. The far reaches of the Great Plains cross the Ohio River and support prairie grasses as well as native grasses also found in smaller upland meadows and plateau spaces. The "bluegrass," originally from Europe is now accepted as a signature form of vegetation that graces central Kentucky pasturelands, especially in horse farms. This contributes to Kentucky greenery, something hardly exceeded anywhere in our land.

7. **Flora and Fauna** -- Kentucky has always been known for its variety of plants and animals, a true heritage of the past worth passing on to future generations. Such wilderness areas as the Big South Fork and the Clifty Wilderness have been established to do just this. Kentucky was the Native American "commons" hunting ground, at

least acknowledged among some neighboring tribes. The area has always abounded in large and small game animals such as elk (largest free-ranging herd east of Montana), bison, bear, deer and turkey (highest U.S. per capita of the last two), rabbit, squirrel, beaver, and on and on. Kentucky has reptiles and buzzing insects that deserve respect and attention. Fish, mussels and amphibians abound in and near the multitude of streams; several hundred types of birds find this a permanent or temporary habitat, or a stopping place on traditional migratory flyways. Turkey, deer and wild geese verge have proliferated due to lack of carnivores (fox and wolf); however, the predator niche is now being filled by coyotes.

Various types of flora are as plentiful as animals. Wild flowers such as trillium and orchids abound in forested areas. Lichens, mushrooms, and other flora are found in obvious and hidden places. Kentucky has many native fruits and berries (blackberry, raspberry, elderberry, mulberry, persimmon, papaws, wild cherry and plum). The flora is a photographer's paradise throughout the growing season. Come and see flora, but leave it as you find it.

B. Human Resources for Hosting Tourists

Next to natural resources, any consideration of ecotourism focuses quickly on the resident population who receive, serve and interact with the tourists. The "Eco" indicates the native dwellers who feel that they belong to and identify with the land -- a place that is "home" to them. Without this sense of belonging, Kentucky would be just another piece of territory lacking cultural history and emotion. Rather, the people desire to cherish and promote this home and share it with others. We realize that certain commercial interests have sought to depreciate the natural treasures in efforts to reduce opposition to extraction of natural resources, but treasures are worth recognizing and defending. Kentuckians love the land and feel loved by it in return; we feel secure enough to share that feeling with visitors. We desire that others also feel at home and attend to visitors in special ways.

1. Accessibility and Accommodations: Major Interstate routes come through the state from north and south (I-75/71 and I-65) and from east and west (I-64 and I-24); furthermore there are a series of state parkways that can take visitors to most parts of the Commonwealth (Mountain, Bluegrass, Hal Rogers, Wendell Ford, William Natcher, Julian Carroll, Louie Nunn, and Edward Breathitt Parkways). Add to this network over two dozen well-furnished state parks as well as the Daniel Boone National Forest, Mammoth Cave National Park and Cumberland Gap National Historical Park. The host of existing lodging, camping areas and restaurant facilities make this an ideal

state for individual, family or group vacations.

2. Human Resources: Tourism takes a variety of forms throughout the world (agri-, heritage-, health-, and pilgrim-based). Kentucky's residents have been known for their hospitality and welcoming stance. Maybe the climate and long-standing traditions have much to do with this; in part the answer is that this is a welcoming land, the character of which affects the ones who live here. (Reference: *Mountain Moments*, publication information provided on this website). Hospitality and a sense of feeling at home contribute to the quality of the tourist experience, something that many remark upon while and after visiting the Bluegrass State.

3. Cultural Charm: Closely associated with hospitality is that of Kentucky pride, which is highlighted in products, beverages, local foods, and crafts that reflect the Commonwealth's lifestyle. The enchanting nature of Kentucky adds much to a host of haunted places with favorite ghosts, to the mystical atmosphere of misty river valleys and coves, and to the use of building materials and architectural creativity that survive from the pioneer times. Needless to say, the character of charm differs in different counties. During early times of isolation, each county, developed its own quaint expressions, mannerisms, and its distinct dialect. Many Kentuckians will identify their residence by county; in some ways we are similar, and yet in some ways we are different.

C. Artifacts of Cultural Value

An ecotourist experience goes beyond natural features and immediate personal relations; this experience involves seeing and enjoying scenic sites that are enhanced by human activity. Cultural artifacts tell stories in themselves of generations of respect and care. Several categories of these are worth noting:

1. Log Cabins and Houses -- The pioneer spirit that marked the character of this Commonwealth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is still exemplified by reconstructed forts at Harrodsburg and Boonesborough. Moreover, many small settlements and towns such as Danville still have log buildings preserved from those very early times, often made from chestnut and tulip poplar and protected in good condition. A later series of residences, churches, schools, and taverns made from brick and stone still dots the countryside and gives a special ambiance that tourists cannot help but notice. Old Washington and Augusta as well as urban parts of Louisville, Lexington and northern Kentucky recall the economic and cultural history of two centuries ago. Examples of the many Antebellum homes include "My Old Kentucky Home" in Bardstown and the William Whitley House near Crab

Orchard .

2. Old Towns and Festivals -- Kentucky is third of the fifty states in the number of counties (Only Texas and Georgia have more). Each county seat was meant to be within a half day's wagon trip from the most distant resident -- and so many quaint small towns exist that serve as centers of the small counties. Also each county has a unique festival or fair each year that attracts back old friends and neighbors and draws in musicians and craft folks.

3. Roads and Lanes -- Kentucky's early permanent settlers often built roads following the buffalo traces and warrior pathways of yesteryear. Many of these roads wind about and cross the numerous streams. Road travel was a nightmare prior to good building technique and proper surface materials. Times have changed and most roads today are of the all-weather variety, a pleasure for sightseers -- the number one tourist "activity." Older visitors are likely to be interested in slow drives along the maze of lanes and country roads, especially if they are equipped with a good map. Most of the country roads are suited for these leisurely tours. Travelers may prefer to stop to look about and shop; they may be drawn to read some of the hundreds of historic markers dotting the roadsides. Virtually every mile has a surprise.

4. Trails -- A budding trail system, including the rather undeveloped Sheltowee Trail that cuts some 282 miles from northeast Kentucky southward to the Tennessee border Pickett State Park (near the border). A rich variety of activities (equine, all-terrain vehicles, motorcycle, birdwatching, biking, hiking/camping and sightseeing) is encouraged on the Kentucky trails. By no means are all activities mutually inclusive. Horses and motorized vehicles must be segregated from foot-related activities. Only in recent years has the Kentucky trail system begun to be designated, integrated and publicized for general public enjoyment. A recent phenomenon has been limited access to trails generally constructed on former strip mined land for motorized vehicles. Problems are being addressed concerning motorized trail use.

5. Covered Bridges -- These unique artifacts were built in the age of horses so that the nervous animals would not be afraid of crossing bridges over the many creeks and streams. The covered bridge was regarded by the animals as safe enough to be trotted through without being led or blindfolded. After the horse age ended, many of these bridges were replaced by concrete or steel structures, and a certain charm was lost. About one dozen covered bridges still remain to grace the countryside in the Commonwealth.

6. Rock Walls -- Chiefly in the central part of the Commonwealth

one observes miles of rock fences. These are generally limestone-layered rock built without mortar so as to be a solid retaining structure to confine livestock. In fact, the gray stone barriers were constructed as the mark of artistic skill and prosperity. Many have been retained and rebuilt, and these give a special flavor to farmlands. Note: snakes like them also.

7. **Furnaces** -- In the early nineteenth century Kentucky was at the center of the American iron-making enterprise. The Fitchburg and Cottage Furnaces in iron ore-rich Estill County are examples of this early industry -- and stone structures remain; they tell a history prior to the industry's abandonment of charcoal (denuded adjacent forests) for coke as the preferred heat source.

8. **Crafts** -- Not all artifacts of note are exterior structures. Some are of a delicate nature and need to be preserved indoors with care. Less generous economic circumstances led many in Kentucky's past to gather discarded and worn-out clothing to be cut up and stitched together as "patchquilts" of amazingly creative designs. Other textile fabrications included clothing, dolls and other playthings, curtains and home furnishings. The people, mainly in rural areas, often occupied themselves during winter making crafts of amazing primitive design from vines, shrubs, and tree parts. Today a host of such creative artifacts is found at fairs and festivals as well as in shops and museums.

9. **Lakes** -- Dams are artifacts that help create most of the lakes of Kentucky for better or worse. These structures have some good effects improving year-round navigation, controlling floods and furnishing hydropower; they also result in a series of lakes that are quite popular with water sport enthusiasts. Motor boating, swimming, canoeing, house boating, fishing and water skiing are all popular, and the diversity of opportunities attracts many both from within and from outside the state. Lake Cumberland, Dale Hollow, Lake, Cave Run Lake, and Kentucky Lake and the associated Land Between the Lakes attract more than the water lovers; many visitors prefer horseback riding and golf as well as a host of other activities near these water bodies.

D. Safeguards to Enhance Ecotourism

People who are environmentally concerned seek to preserve the natural treasures that are all about. While no one wants to make life onerous for the visitor, still a certain respect calls for setting down requirements that protect, preserve and allow for sharing resources with human residents or visitors alike. The following regulations deserve enforcement:

1. **No litter** -- Kentucky posts a \$500 fine for littering, and yet one finds many discarded cans and bottles at roadsides and on river banks. The haphazard tossing of materials occurs with no concern about being caught on camera or by a lurking police watchdog. Litterers ought to do community clean up service.

2. **No alcoholic beverages in park areas** -- In the land of bourbon, moonshine and even exotic wines, this prohibition may seem too strict. However, existing governmental rules have their function in discouraging parties that can easily get out of hand in places where families are enjoying parks and recreation areas.

3. **No fuel gathering in certain places** -- We all know that wood-gathering has denuded vast areas of the planet. In congested parks and similar areas the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches and even gathering of fallen wood for use in outdoor fires can be ecologically damaging to the flora and to the forest floor itself.

4. **No! Use rest facilities** -- The lack of such facilities for years in the popular Red River Gorge just about ruined the local landscape. Now policing, along with sufficient toilet facilities, have improved these wilderness areas. No one wants to make hard and fast rules, especially in uncongested areas, but popular use requires basic sanitation practices and equipment.

5. **No spikes in rock formations** -- After decades of rock climbing, certain areas are heavily spiked. The U.S. Forest Service has strict rules on such practices today, but in some instances the rules have come too late.

6. **No motorized vehicles at certain times and places** -- These time and space restrictions by governmental agencies are meant to help preserve pristine wilderness and forested areas. Packing supplies into restricted areas is good physical exercise and counteracts such practices as delivering healthy students to a school's door to avoid exercise. ATV riders favor the mud-spattered, rough-rider appearance; their cross-country exploits can devastate the understory, erode fragile soils and disturb residents, wildlife and other sport enthusiasts.

7. **No signs in certain places** -- The clutter of advertisements has an ugly commercial effect on a viewscape that is meant to be scenic. Road signs are intended to give directional information on lodging, eating and fuel; however, this can be done through clustered signage rather than through signs scattered at random.

8. **No graffiti** -- Thank heavens some of the petroglyphs in the Appalachian portion of the state have been protected from folks who

want to leave their names in prominent places.

9. Learn before you come -- Knowing something about the area in which one travels is always better than complete ignorance. Maybe blank minds result in benefits, but any such benefits are hard to enumerate. Coming to Kentucky from a distance should be regarded as an investment, and part of this is to know something about the roadways, weather and destinations. In fact, much information is already out there, should one take the time to "google" the sites, obtain precise directions from *MapQuest*, and look for up-to-date weather and road conditions prior to coming. Some may want more and that includes reading travel brochures furnished by the Kentucky Department of Travel or library books on the history, geology, hydrology or natural resources of the Commonwealth. Equip yourself with atlases and field guides of trees, birds, mammals, flowers, fish and insects.

10. Take pictures and not specimens -- Taking a photograph of a flower or bird is better than picking or snaring it as a keepsake. And many ecotourists pride themselves in this art form.

All these travel aids could seem burdensome to those who prefer a certain spontaneous nature to the trip. I do not want to fault that attitude, for too much of life is planned down to the hour and minute. Give us a break on an ecotourist trip! No doubt, the overly planned could turn into the overly stressed. Take a little free time and let that be part of unexpected benefits. All too often, the unexpected becomes the most remembered happening.

Camera lovers may want to record familiar scenes (e.g., Lincoln's birthplace has been photographed countless times). Once when I was resting on Natural Bridge in Powell County, a camera-toting tourist asked me where he could get the best photo of this particular rock formation. I said most were taken from the air so rent a plane, or I suggested the person may want to jump off the arch and snap a photo on the way down. Then I got serious and told him to buy some professionally executed postcards at the park shop.

If you take photographs, note the time, place and people; one does not realize how valuable such information may be a few decades later. Other record-keeping is beneficial as well (journals, day books, video and audiotapes) when done on the trip or immediately afterwards. Such recorded memories are part of an expanding ecological consciousness.

Reference: Al Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen, *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains*, University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

E. Ways to Promote Ecotourism in Kentucky

The potential for ecotourism in Kentucky as a source of employment and enjoyment is immense. Certain focal points include:

1. **Publicity** -- Information outlets are the standard promotion route whether in the form of a website related to "Ecotourism" as such or through brochures containing materials that give locations, lodging and activity opportunities. The publicity should also include some of the safeguards just mentioned in Section D.

The informational brochures on the selected areas ought to be attractive but not overly costly. The goal is to assist visitors on why to come, where to go and what to do.

2. **Accompanying Activities** -- Quite often potential tourists want to be occupied in the evenings with other forms of entertainment such as music or playhouse performances. Such programs are often arranged and sponsored through state or national governmental agencies that have parks and forests within the ecotourist areas.

3. **Training Programs** -- Today the need for practical employment opportunities is causing technical schools, traditional colleges, and technical colleges to consider ecotourism. High school and college students ought to consider training to be maintenance and operational personnel, nature guides and security guards. Tours require persons with a broad range of nature experiences.

4. **Interest Groups** -- This aspect should include promotion in cooperation with the Kentucky Department of Travel.

5. **Camping Facilities** -- Adequacy of camping opportunities varies with the area. New facilities are needed in order to attract more tourists. Small business funds are available for such startup operations. Safe, accessible and clean camping facilities could be sources of small business and employment opportunities.

6. **Longer-term Promotion** -- Efforts ought to be made to enlist feature travel writers and TV stations to come to this area at scenic times and interview colorful people who are conversant about historical or cultural aspects of the region.

7. **Invitation to Others** -- Additional people in a vehicle reduce

the per capita carbon footprint. Often a trip can be coupled with performing services for others, obtaining additional information on a study subject, or visiting a shut-in friend or relative. This makes the "eco-" portion of the adventure all the more worthwhile.

8. **Word of Mouth** -- The best promotion is for satisfied tourists to tell their friends about their experiences in Kentucky.

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