



June 21, 2009

Ecotourism economics

Brevard's natural attraction comes cheap, but it sure boosts the economy

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On a particularly sunny and steamy morning last week off Ramp Road in Cocoa Beach, colorful kayaks lining the Banana River Lagoon looked like they belonged in a Lifesavers wrapper.

A few feet away, mullet leapt from the dark green water, skimming the surface a few inches before splashing back underneath.

The Olsen family from Marion, Iowa, -- Andy and Sherri and their son Seth -- hoped the active mullet portended sightings of bigger and more exciting creatures as they prepared to depart on a kayaking excursion led by Adventure Kayak of Cocoa Beach Inc.

"We want to see dolphins, the birds and the manatees," Sherri Olsen said.

The Olsens and 20 or so other kayakers preparing for a tour of the Thousand Islands were ecotourists, people looking for adventures and experiences that give them a better sense of nature and the ecosystem and, these days, that don't break vacation budgets.

Tourism operators and travel groups say ecotourism, a multi-billion dollar industry worldwide and a growing part of Florida's tourism tapestry, is one of the few bright spots in the sluggish economy as more people search for cost-effective alternatives to theme parks, resorts and other vacation destinations.

The fiscal impact of ecotourism has nearly doubled in Florida, from \$1.6 billion in 2001 to \$3.1 billion in 2006, according to a study released last year by Rob Southwick, a Fernandina Beach economist hired by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The impact of ecotourism on Brevard County's \$3 billion annual tourism industry is harder to gauge because officials here don't calculate separately the 100 or so businesses and companies that have a hand in ecotourism, from tour operators to outdoor gear retailers.

What they and others do say is that Brevard stands out in the state and across the U.S. for its ecotourism appeal, anchored by well-known destinations such as the Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge and Canaveral National Seashore -- which together draw 1.5 million people annually -- and activities such as birdwatching, hiking and kayaking.

Tom Bartosek, marketing manager for Brevard's Tourism Development Council, said the council recently updated its outdoor adventure guide, highlighting 100 local hiking, birding, surfing and paddling opportunities for tourists. He said there is a considerable market yet to be tapped here for ecotourism.

"When you go on vacation you want to see things you can't see at home," he said. "In Europe and in Asia, we're finding that people love our area because of the wildlife."

Capitalizing on buzz

Two buzzwords in ecotourism travel these days are "authentic" and "experience."

So says David Krantz, spokesman at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Responsible Travel. The Sanford University-affiliated center tracks trends and collects data on ecotourism and supports what it calls good tourism practices.

"People are looking for authenticity," he said. "They want to see the real thing. They're not as satisfied as they used to be with a show, or a staged or contrived experience."

That would seem to put the Brevard County ecotourism sector in prime position to siphon off visitors that might otherwise venture to the attractions of Orlando.

The "animals" of Disney are a far cry from the sea turtles encountered on walks overseen by the Sea Turtle Preservation Society, which annually have long waiting lists.

Other authentic critters can be found at the Banana River Lagoon, home to one the highest numbers of animal species of any North American estuary. Manatees and dolphins are readily seen by people during kayak or pontoon boat tours.

"Whether it is to enjoy a lower cost time out of the house, or seeking a retreat from the daily stresses associated with the economy, we do see more people turning to the outdoors for their leisure time," Southwick, the economist who studied ecotourism's financial impact, said in an e-mail from Russia, where he is studying the market for American alligator meat and hides.

"We don't see people traveling as often to other states, but the increases seem to be (in people) traveling closer to home."

Wherever visitors are coming from, tour operators like Phil Kowalik, owner of Adventure Kayak, will take them.

"I'm doing real good," Kowalik said. "I'm a little surprised because of the way the economy is."

Adventure Kayak charges \$28 per adult and \$15 per child for 2 1/2 hours of kayaking.

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On any given day, it's likely one of Kowalik's customers will see dolphins or manatees, maybe even an alligator. Massive black stingrays might swim up to a kayak and then drift under the craft, an experience hard to find anywhere else.

That's the kind of thing Nathaniel Toler, and his cousin Austin, vacationing in Brevard from Gilbert, W.Va., were looking for as they prepared to leave on one of Kowalik's kayak tours. They also were looking at pinching pennies where they could.

"We were looking on the Internet for things to do and we saw this," Nathaniel Toler said.

"We're doing this for less than it cost for one ticket at Disney."

Rick Thrift, owner of Grasshopper Airboat Eco-Tours, which depart from west Brevard, said his \$45 per person, 90-minute airboat ride is one of the more cost-effective bargains out there. Thrift, in his 13th year as an ecotourism operator, provides customers not only an airboat ride but also history and ecology lessons. And then there's the cold drinks and smoked alligator tail.

"It's not just go out, look at an alligator and come back," Thrift said. "I go out and give folks a history lesson, identify plants and birds, give them background on the alligator. They have fun because they go out on an airboat but they also learn something. I think it's a pretty good deal."

Krantz at the Center for Responsible Travel said a positive spillover on the popularity of ecotourism is

that people become environmentally aware and often more concerned about threats to wildlife and natural resources.

"Just getting out there and seeing things first hand, we have seen that you get people converting from interest about environmental issues to become more passionate and active about them, he said."

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