

Economic Importance of Nature Tourism to the Gulf Coast Region

By

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Oversight hearing on

"Our Natural Resources at Risk: The Short and Long Term Impacts of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill"

I deeply appreciate your invitation to provide testimony before the Subcommittee concerning the economic impact of Nature Tourism in the Gulf of Mexico region. My name is Joanne McDonough, and let me first say on behalf of the Alabama and Mississippi coastal communities I represent: our heartfelt condolences are extended to the families of those 11 men who died in the Deepwater Horizon tragedy. They are foremost in everyone's mind, as well as those whose quality of life and livelihoods are affected by this unprecedented catastrophe spilling untold gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Even before this disaster, coastal natural resources have been under constant threat. Sixty percent of the United States river systems drain into the Gulf of Mexico. Gulf wetlands have been under constant assault by unsustainable development, violent weather and sea-level rise.

I serve as a Nature Tourism Specialist with the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau (AGCCVB) and the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium (MASGC). We are dedicated to promoting the sustainable use of our natural resources to benefit the environment, the economy and future generations. We work closely with nature tour operators to support, enhance and sustainably grow the nature tourism industry. In 2007, I began managing a Nature Tourism Initiative that was launched in Baldwin and Mobile counties in 2000, and the Initiative is currently expanding to the coastal counties of Mississippi. I serve as the director of the Certified Coastal Nature Guide Program that was launched in February of 2010 on Alabama's Gulf Coast; my office is located in Gulf Shores, Alabama. Before joining the Nature Tourism Initiative, I was the Chief Operations Officer of Caribiana Sea Skiffs, our family boat building company in Orange Beach, Alabama, and a U.S. Coast Guard licensed Captain conducting nature tours along the bays and bayous of Baldwin County.

Nature tourism, sometimes referred to as eco-tourism, may be simply defined as visiting natural landscapes to enjoy scenery and view wildlife at home and around the world. Some activities include bird watching, marine mammal viewing, kayaking, visiting protected areas, and in some cases specifically promoting conservation of nature. This industry relies profoundly on healthy ecosystems and biodiversity. Tourism is the world's largest industry and Nature Tourism its fastest growing sector.

According to the 2006 National Survey of Wildlife Related-Recreation, conducted every 5 years by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, expenditures for fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing in the Gulf Region topped \$22 billion. Wildlife viewing alone contributed over \$6 billion. Hundreds of thousands of jobs are sustained mainly by small businesses whose profits circulate through local coastal communities throughout the Gulf of Mexico.

Clearly, America's fascination with Mother Nature has moved beyond mere recreation to become an economic catalyst for Gulf Coast communities and offers enormous opportunities to engage people of all ages in the need for environmental ethics and stewardship of the Gulf of Mexico.

In Alabama and Mississippi, Perdido Bay, Mobile Bay and the Mississippi Sound are important estuaries representing a total surface area of 5,981km². Mobile Bay and the Pascagoula River drainage basin in the

Mississippi Sound are of special concern to MASGC. The 480 square mile Mobile Bay estuary contains a documented 337 species of fish, more species per area than any other region of North America. Of the 74 major river estuaries in North America, the Pascagoula River is the only one in the United States that remains unaffected by channel fragmentation and flow regulation along its entire length. As a result, the Pascagoula River is a vital center of biodiversity and essential fish habitats for numerous threatened and endangered species.

Alabama and Mississippi include 966 miles of estuarine shoreline with 98 miles of Gulf front beaches. According to the 2009 Economic Impact Reports, Alabama and Mississippi coastal beaches attracted more than 9.5 million tourists who contributed more than \$4 billion to the local economies. While everyone recognizes that natural resources are a primary reason those visitors come, effectively communicating with local businesses about the economic value of healthy ecosystems and educating them about the sustainable use of our natural resources is a challenging task.

In the field, well-planned and managed nature tourism businesses have proven to be one of the most powerful incentives to conserve and protect biodiversity. The Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau (AGCCVB) recognized the potential of nature tourism and formed a partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 2000 to create the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail. Since then, the Convention & Visitors Bureau has been conducting surveys of overnight guests to Baldwin County to measure the growth of the nature tourism industry. The surveys reveal that in 2000, nearly 100,000 visitors participated in wildlife viewing activities. In 2009, nearly 400,000 visitors participated in wildlife related activities.

When I joined the Alabama Nature Tourism Initiative in 2007, we began taking an inventory of nature tour operations in Baldwin and Mobile counties by conducting face-to-face interviews, using AGCCVB Industry Partner membership data and postings by company websites, at that time we determined at least 40 nature tour companies were operating in Baldwin and Mobile counties. On April 20, 2010 at least 64 businesses were identified in both counties, these numbers do not include the charter fishing companies. MASGC began a Mississippi Nature Tourism Initiative in 2009 and preliminary data estimates at least 10 nature tour companies are operating on the Mississippi Gulf Coast; we are in the process of meeting face-to-face with these existing tour operators.

The Convention & Visitors Bureau economic impact report of overnight guests to Baldwin County revealed that in 2009, Alabama's coastal beaches attracted over four million visitors who spent more than \$2 billion. \$1.7 billion of that was generated between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Before the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe, a fleet of more than 32 vessels in Orange Beach, Alabama, were capable of carrying hundreds of thousands of tourists to the fertile breeding grounds of wild bottlenose dolphin. Thirty one captains and deck hands are trained by the Dolphin SMART program that promotes the sustainable viewing of dolphin in their natural habitat. Today, many captains and their crew are idle at the dock, phones are silent.

Before oil began coating Louisiana wetlands, in Mississippi paddles were scheduled to dip into the cypress-tupelo swamps along the Pascagoula River, the last remaining free flowing river in our nation. Certified Coastal Nature Guides in Alabama were booking kayak tours through cypress-gum swamps emerging into the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, one of the largest intact wetland ecosystems in the United States, second only to the Mississippi River Delta. The Delta itself covers over 200,000 acres of swamps, marshes, and river bottomlands that are among the most impressive in the world, in fact Congress named the Delta a National Natural Landmark. Tidal freshwater marshes occur in the extreme lower portion of the Delta near the mouth of Mobile Bay. Sailing charters were ready to ply the nutrient rich waters of Mobile Bay, a national estuary and the second largest intact river delta system in the nation. Phones are ringing with cancellations.

Marsh meadows framed a perfect picture for bird watchers documenting spring migrations along the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail. Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge represents the best remaining stopover and staging habitat for Neotropical migratory songbirds during the spring and fall migration along the Alabama coastline. Our barrier islands are formed by crystal-white sand that tumbled from the Appalachian Mountains over eons and are a beachcomber's treasure chest, and the refuge of nesting sea turtles and horseshoe crabs continuing an ancient ritual of the cycle of life. The newly designated National Coastal Scenic Byway encourages new businesses to open their doors along a route that reveals the waters, ways and wildlife of Alabama's Gulf Coast.

The nature of our coasts along the Gulf of Mexico is critical to our nation's economy, our natural heritage, our cultural integrity. Our natural assets not only afford destinations for leisure, our barrier islands are the first line of defense for storm resilience. Our maritime forests play a vital role in providing clean air. Oyster reefs and sea grass beds provide clean water and safe food. Just as these habitats suffer untold losses due to this catastrophe, so will entire generations of people in the Gulf of Mexico.

I carry an urgent plea from tour operators and coastal residents. We need jobs. Out-of-state workers are being hired for BP oil response jobs the local workforce can perform. I bring the personal stories from nature tour operators with me, and Alabama Kayak Adventures' Captain Chris Nelson echoes their concerns, these are his words. "I have always been a realist, not a pessimist, but when it came to our beautiful natural wildlife, I was an optimist. Today I cannot claim that. I have lost hope."

With your help we can make sure wildlife will have clean homes, restore Nature Tourism, and bring back hope for coastal residents like Captain Chris.

Recommendations

Jobs

The most immediate need is jobs. Some tour operators who were hired for the Vessels of Opportunity Program have been deactivated, while out of state vessels are still on the payroll. All BP oil response jobs should be available first and foremost to local residents.

Claims Process

Many coastal residents who lost their livelihoods are frustrated by the claims process when attempting to recover lost revenue. Please exert your influence to insure they are truly compensated for their losses.

Habitats

Dolphin viewing tours are the largest sector of the nature tourism industry in Baldwin and Mobile counties. Perdido Bay and Wolf Bay are nursing, feeding and breeding grounds for Bottlenose Dolphin. In 2009 more than 100 sightings were reported of West Indian manatees in Alabama waters, they are a federally listed endangered species. Local research to answer key questions about what is "home" to these marine mammals is seriously underfunded.

Restoration and the creation of new habitats need funding.

We must protect as much clean habitat as possible, we can't afford more loss. The following programs have been implemented in Alabama. Your support will help promote the sustainable use of our natural resources to benefit the environment, the economy and future generations.

Certified Coastal Nature Guide Program (CNGP) <http://gulfshores.com/things-to-do/coastal-nature-guide/>

The CNGP is a partnership program developed by the AGGCVB, MASGC, Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (WBNERR), and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR). The goal of the program is to adopt and promote sustainable wildlife viewing practices that preserve healthy and resilient coasts of the Gulf of Mexico. The purpose for developing this program is to:

- Create a well-trained Nature Tourism staff to educate customers using the services of these businesses.
- Provide local communities with information and techniques to enhance waterfront related economic activities and protect the health of the natural Gulf Coast environment
- Ensure that Gulf Coast communities and industries have healthy economies that include an abundance of recreation and tourism opportunities.

All Coastal Nature Guides encourage responsible viewing of wildlife by following the program's code of ethics and statement of commitment, which are adapted from the United Nations Environment Program, Tour Operators Initiative. Some examples of the statement of commitment include:

- (1) I am committed to developing, operating and marketing nature tourism in a sustainable manner that makes a positive contribution to the natural and cultural environment, which generate benefits for coastal communities, and which do not put at risk the future livelihood of local people.
- (2) I commit to create awareness and active involvement among my customers towards the natural, social and cultural environment of the places we visit.
- (3) I will encourage other nature tour operators to follow the code of ethics.

Some examples of the code of ethics include:

- Promote conservation and wise use of valuable coastal natural resources to all citizens
- Do not feed, pursue or harass wildlife
- Turn off or shield all lights that can be seen from the beach during turtle nesting season
- Leave natural, historic, and cultural objects and artifacts where you find them
- Practice "catch and release" fishing to protect and conserve fisheries

Share the Beach Sea Turtle Volunteer Program

<http://www.alabamaseaturtles.com/>

Every year from May through October female sea turtles swim the world's oceans, migrating home toward the beaches where they were born, continuing an ancient ritual of reproduction. Of the seven species of sea turtles in the world, three types may be fortunate enough to reach coastal waters and emerge from the Gulf of Mexico to nest on Alabama's Gulf Coast: Loggerhead, Kemp's Ridley and Green, all three are listed as endangered species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

For the last eight years, a dedicated force of concerned citizens armed with trash bags, cell phones and GPS devices has been scouting Alabama's sandy shores in an effort to make our local beaches sea turtle friendly. The Share the Beach program brings hundreds of volunteers together, each nesting season, to search along the shoreline for sea turtle nests. In 2009 sixty-four loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) nests and two Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*) were identified from Dauphin Island (Mobile County) east to Alabama Point (Baldwin County) near the Florida state line. An estimated 4,513 hatchling safely made it into the Gulf of Mexico, with the overall survival of hatchlings (# to water/# of eggs) estimated to be 63.6%.

In April 2010 the Orange Beach Fishing Association reached out to the Nature Tourism Initiative to develop a sustainable fisheries certification program. We have drafted the framework for the CFISH program

Certified Fisher Invested in Sustainable Harvests Program (CFISH)

The mission of the CFISH Program is to work towards healthy, sustainable Gulf of Mexico marine resources and insure that fishing will not negatively impact on marine habitats and other marine species. To be successful, charter fishing experiences should provide quality opportunities to engage the public with natural resources in ways that lead to greater understanding and appreciation, while protecting, preserving and sustaining Gulf of Mexico marine resources.

The founding program sponsors of the program are the MASGC, Auburn University Marine Extension & Research Center (AUMERC), ADCNR/Marine Resources Division, the Orange Beach Fishing Association (OBFA) and the AGCCVB. This vision is shared not only by the program sponsors, but is supported by local partners who assist the program sponsors in the regional growth and implementation of the program.

Continued support and funding for Federal partnership programs

Dolphin SMART Program <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/dolphinmart/>

Dolphin SMART is a partnership program developed by NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and NMFS, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, and the Dolphin Ecology project. The purpose of the program is to:

- Minimize the potential of wild dolphin harassment caused by commercial viewing activities
- Reduce expectations of close interaction with wild dolphins in a manner that may cause harassment
- Eliminate advertising that creates expectations of engaging in activities that may cause harassment
- Promote stewardship of local coastal waterways

Dolphin SMART is a unique voluntary recognition program and education program. Program participation is for commercial businesses conducting and booking wild dolphin tours, or any commercial vessel that may opportunistically view wild dolphins. It offers incentives for businesses that follow the program criteria and educate their customers about the importance of minimizing wild dolphin harassment. It also includes an important research component that provides insight about the daily lives of the local, wild dolphin populations. This program is currently being implemented in Florida and Alabama. The ADCNR, Coastal Section is implementing the Alabama program and partners include the MASGC and AGCCVB.

Thank you Madame Chairwoman, Ranking member Brown and fellow committee members for your efforts in addressing this manmade disaster.

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