

Ecotourism as Economic Stimulus in Orange Beach

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For many years, I have assured people that it is easy to be an expert on Orange Beach because there are really only two answers to any question you could ever be asked about it: "I don't know" and "It depends." While glib, this point is strikingly accurate. The public face of Orange Beach's council system is highly transparent with meetings and work sessions in a public forum. Its inner workings and decision-making processes are shrouded in mystery, wondering about who is really making the decisions, rarely conforming to what any outsider might predict. Perhaps ecotourism's economic value to this community is the galvanizing exception, making it priceless.

"Ecotourism is considered the fastest growing market in the tourism industry," according to the World Tourism Organization with an annual growth rate of 5% worldwide and representing 6% of the world's gross domestic product, 11.4% of all consumer spending, bolstering local economies.

Behavioral economists combine economics with insights from psychology to show how heavily economic decisions like ecotourism are influenced by cognitive biases, according to the Economist Magazine's summary of Richard Thaler's work. He is the winner of this year's Nobel Prize in Economics. According to him our economic decisions are influenced by cognitive biases like ecotourism, influencing our decision to choose vacation cities that are eco-friendly.

Environmental tourism began in Orange Beach after the Great Depression of 2008, being an inadvertently disguised format for economic stimulus, injecting government funds into the economy, bolstering the recovery, as John Maynard Keynes espoused.

The City wrote grants to build the Backcountry Trail System, continually encouraging investment in offshore fisheries with artificial reefs and scuba diving, having ships demolished as underwater attractions, extending the red-snapper fishing season, using cognitive biases, ensuring vacationers understood we are pro-environment, promoting growth in the local economy.

A Beach Ambassador Initiative was started. "Leave Only Footprints," affects all aspects of beach life, erasing tents, chairs and paraphernalia from the beach at night, presenting a fresh canvas each morning for our visitors to enjoy, creating jobs in the economy.

These emissaries had a busy season in 2016: Public Interactions: 51,124; Promotional Items Distributed: 20,439; Glass Warnings Issued: 3322; Tent Warnings Issued: 3285; Tents Tagged: 886; Hole Warnings: 1378; Holes Filled: 2170; Trash Warnings: 485; Trash Bags Distributed: 5689; Law Enforcement (Backup) Requests: 46; Fire/EMS/Rescue Requests: 14; Dog Issues/Encounters: 157; Wildlife Related Incidents:

Ecotourism as Economic Stimulus in Orange Beach

88; Metal Shovel Warnings: 71, according to a representative from Orange Beach Coastal Resources in an email.

Investing in ecotourism as a form of economic stimulus has strengthened economic growth in Orange Beach through active participation by our tourism partners: Alabama Department of Environmental Management, The Citizen and Visitors Bureau, The Orange Beach Chamber-of-Commerce, The Backcountry Trail Foundation, The Islands of Perdido Foundation, The Alabama Coastal Foundation and the Fishing Association, providing sustainable-business examples to build on.

Perhaps economic stimulus was not the root concept of the initial plan, supporting ecotourism from the beach initiative to turtle nesting, but economic stimulus was certainly the end result.

The trails network, beach ambassadorship, turtle nesting, trash pickups on the islands, dredging the pass for offshore-fishing access, increasing the red-snapper season require complex management skills and grant-writing abilities, rewarded when driven from the perspective that infrastructure stimulus creates jobs in the local economy.

Businesses profit from ecotourism. Being seen to be caring for and taking care of the environment is behavioral economics, supporting initiatives for Beach Mouse habitat; tag-and-release fishing; rental of bicycles, pontoon boats, and jet skis; or going on Segway tours, is making an environmental statement to our visitors, underlining the council's commitment to Orange Beach's eco-friendly image.

Finding the funds for these projects is key; writing grants is not a funding source one can depend on year-in-and-year-out. The City of Orange Beach recently increased the Lodging Tax by 2% from 11% to 13%, generating \$5 Million per year in additional revenue, according to Finance Director Ford Handley. One assumes some of these funds will be allocated to stabilize ecotourism's infrastructure budget.

The Backcountry-Trail Tours yielded: 408 tours and 1869 visitors, divided by the number of years since inception is 208 visitors per year. On tour, visitors learn the interdependency between flora and fauna indigenous to the Gulf Coast. This educational approach diversifies the offerings available to visitors in Orange Beach.

Turtle nesting is also an important component, watching the beach during the summer months, patrolling at night with teams of volunteers, looking for females coming ashore, burying their eggs in the sand. Volunteers protect the nesting sites with markers, patiently waiting for the hatchlings to surface, escorting them to the sea, ensuring the survival of another generation.

Environmental projects like these require funding to continue. The City of Orange Beach has shown no sign of curbing its appetite for allocating resources, presenting a unified face with everyone in step, assuring council remains proud of the city's eco-friendly image.

Some holdouts still exist, citing "disputable findings about climate change", quoting the new Director of the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt. "I would not agree that carbon dioxide is a primary contributor to the global warming that we see," he told CNBC's "Squawk Box."

President Trump's position on environmental protection "has been consistent," Environmental Defense Fund President Fred Krupp notes in an [essay](#) published in the July-August issue of *Foreign Affairs*, a subscribers-only magazine. "He wants far less of it," according to their blog.

Ecotourism as Economic Stimulus in Orange Beach

Therefore, the constituents of Orange Beach must follow their own compass, because Federal Grants for environmental projects are diminishing.

Orange Beach's 5,000 residents are a tiny microcosm in the greater scope of the nation, manning their own tiller, implementing their own style of environmental ethics, riding the wave of ecotourism to stimulate the local economy, gladly pulling together with all-hands-on-deck towards a common-ecological goal, because ecotourism's economic value to this community is priceless.

ENDS.