



Voluntary Certification
for Nature-Based Tourism Enterprises
in the Atchafalaya Basin

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by

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Louisiana Sea Grant College Program



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Paula Ouder, Louisiana Sea Grant

Introduction

During 2002-2003, the Voluntary Certification Committee of the Atchafalaya Basin Foundation explored a variety of existing tourism voluntary certification programs from around the world, looking at the present and anticipated tourism attractions in the Basin that might benefit from such a program. The committee decided that nature-based tourism enterprises such as attractions, tour operators and related infrastructure businesses, which were already established and continue to develop in the Basin, would benefit. A voluntary certification program verifies practices among the membership in order to sustain the resources upon which their businesses, and therefore livelihoods, depend.

During 2002-2003, some of the nature-based entities in the Morgan City area volunteered to work together to explore the possibilities of a pilot program in the Basin. Although the focus was on Morgan City, people from the nature-based tourism enterprises in that area of the Atchafalaya Basin were joined by people from several parts of the Basin (Specific names are in the Appendix). This publication summarizes the accomplishments of that committee toward a program to date, and provides a guideline for the next step — formalization of a nature-based tourism voluntary certification program, including implementation through auditing and marketing.

Specifically, the membership must now elect a leader from their members, form an auditing committee and begin to learn enough to follow the requirements they have agreed upon. The leader must arrange for regular educational sessions so that members understand the science and history at the root of the requirements. The auditing committee must devise a formal auditing process and begin review and implementation according to an agreed-upon calendar. The organization is theirs to change as needs become apparent. Continued success depends upon the commitment, education and flexibility of all members.

The research and activities that brought the project to this point were partially funded by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources through a grant to Louisiana Sea Grant College Program at Louisiana State University. This document also serves as a final report on that grant project. The participating and involved committee members are listed in the Appendix.

What is a Voluntary Certification Program?

Every nature-based tourism enterprise depends upon the wildlife, water, terrain and air for business. In Louisiana, these enterprises also depend upon the culture because the state's unique cultural attractions are closely entwined with the environment. A voluntary certification program is one to verify practices among the membership designed to sustain those resources — culture, animals, plants, bayous, lakes, swamps, etc. — upon which their livelihoods depend. It includes procedures to assess, monitor and provide written assurance of conformity to specific requirements. A program can be started by any group at any time in the tourism development process; it is developed and implemented by stakeholders. The Voluntary Certification Committee focused on the Morgan City area as a demonstration, but the results of their efforts apply to the entire Atchafalaya Basin. They identified natural and business resources that are important to success and formulated specific requirements for caring for the resources that would sustain and protect them. (See page 9.) Most of the members from the Morgan City area are associated with established nature-based tourism enterprises in the area, but they anticipate the establishment of many more businesses in the near future. Although the Morgan City area of the Atchafalaya Basin is under intense development at this time (2002-2005), the entire Basin is attracting development interest.

In this environmentally conscious world, many tourists are aware of the fragility and vulnerability of natural resources, and they actively support sustaining and protecting resources while enjoying them now and in the future. Because such visitors often choose to frequent businesses that take care of

natural resources, they regard a voluntary certification program as a visible sign of those activities. The businesses, therefore, can use their program participation in marketing. The costs to support effective auditing and education are covered in a variety of ways devised by the membership. Among the methods are annual membership fees, partnerships with regulatory agencies that already have funds dedicated to these matters, voluntary fees based upon a percentage of admission fees and volume of business, grants, and state or local government appropriations. The Morgan City Voluntary Certification Committee will soon identify and agree upon its funding sources. Members will also approve expenditures for auditing, education, and marketing.



Louisiana Sea Grant

What are some examples of Voluntary Certification Programs?

- **CST (Certification for Sustainable Tourism in Costa Rica)**

This small country with beautiful but fragile resources wanted to encourage international tourism without stimulating pollution and natural destruction from rapid coastal development. Its voluntary certification program focuses on accommodation building, landscaping and operating requirements to conserve water and natural beaches, prevent erosion, and to control point and nonpoint-source pollution. CST is funded by the Costa Rican national government.

- **NEAP (National Ecotourism Accreditation Program in Australia)**

The natural areas of this large country with a comparatively small population were being overrun and degraded by tourists. Erosion, water pollution and wildlife destruction were all occurring because no controls existed on the numbers of tourists or the nature of their activities in any given area. Australia's voluntary certification program divided tourism activities into three levels and specific geographic areas to reduce these impacts and conserve their unique features for the future. Control also includes tourist and tourist professional education and government-sponsored restoration projects. NEAP is funded by a combination of government appropriation and certification fees. Each tourism product is individually certified.

- **BLUE FLAG (Worldwide)**

The world's beaches are constantly impacted by pollution and degradation from misuse and overuse. This voluntary certification program provides education for those using, operating and caring for beaches. It also sponsors informational signage, beach sweeps and specific care and maintenance requirements to protect and sustain these beaches. Member governments from 21 European countries, and a few Latin American, Caribbean, Southeast Asian and African countries contribute funds to Blue Flag.

- **GREEN GLOBE (Worldwide)**

All kinds of tourism service businesses from hotels to taxis can stress and pollute natural resources. The businesses self-monitor their use of water, roads, etc., and involve visitors in their efforts to reduce use. For example, many hotels ask guests to help with water conservation by accepting the same sheets and/or towels for more than one day of their stay. Taxis encourage people to share a ride to reduce air pollution from emissions. Some restaurants provide glasses of water only upon request to reduce waste of a scarce resource. Auditing is based upon verifiable reductions in resource use or pollution. Green Globe is funded by membership fee.

- **HORIZON (Canada)**

This is a trade association in which membership is predicated upon acceptance and practice of certain requirements. Failure to practice results in loss of association membership. The requirements include education for both operators and tourists. The trade association membership fee covers the auditing, education and marketing expenses.

- **CLEAN MARINAS (United States)**

Boaters and marina operators can degrade shorelines and inland waterways through construction practices, emissions, littering, sewage, oil and fuel leaks, and improper operating practices. This voluntary certification program helps marinas to educate boaters and their own staffs, implement requirements to sustain water, land, and wildlife. Grants, government agencies and marina and boatyard associations all contribute to these programs. Programs operate on a state-by-state basis.

- **STATE OF VIRGINIA**

Tour guides on the eastern shore of Virginia formed a voluntary certification program focusing on the need for knowledge to sustain the cultural and natural resources of their area. They implemented a formal education and testing program for guides and an educational program for

tourists. Passing the test at the end of the training week serves as the auditing process. All guides absorb their own expenses for the training, and the state's Department of Natural Resources develops the training program and administers tests. This program is new and has not yet been tested over time.

- **STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA**

Nature-based tourism personnel in this Atlantic state had a poor understanding of the state's natural history and watershed processes. As a consequence, they were inadvertently contaminating their own water resources and giving misinformation to tourists. The members of the voluntary certification program devised a week-long formal education and testing program about natural history and watersheds, which had to be repeated annually. This became difficult to sustain after several years because many of the members did not see a value in repeated education.

What do all of these programs have in common?

All of these voluntary certification programs are developed by stakeholders, enforced by peers or experts, and guided by established environmental standards and/or legislation. These programs protect the resources needed to sustain existing businesses and encourage growth of new businesses while providing a unique attribute for marketing. But they all depend upon the active participation of the membership for their effectiveness.

Who participates in a nature-based tourism voluntary certification program in the Atchafalaya Basin?

- **Stakeholders (Morgan City membership in the Appendix)**
 - Marinas, boatyards, houseboat centers
 - Hunting guides
 - Fishing guides
 - Birding guides
 - Hiking guides
 - Nature-based festival planners
 - Swamp tours
 - Boat rentals
 - Paddling tours
 - Parks and Reserves
 - Aquariums
 - Nature-based museums
 - Birding trails planners
 - Tourist commissions
 - Tourism consultants
 - Local governments
 - State natural resource agencies
 - Federal natural resource agencies (i.e.USFWS, COE, NRCS)



Louisiana Tourism Image Database, Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

- **Potential Auditors Among Peers**
 - Louisiana Travel Promotion Association
 - Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality
 - Louisiana Department of Natural Resources
 - Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
 - Nature-based clubs with environmentally active components such as Ducks Unlimited
 - Environmentally and educationally active advocacy groups such as Leave No Trace and Water Keepers.
 - Louisiana Sea Grant College Program
 - LSU Agricultural Center experts

- **Potential Educational Resources**
 - LSU Agricultural Center
 - LDWF biologists
 - LDEQ specialists
 - U.S. Coast Guard and Power Squadron
 - Ducks Unlimited
 - University-associated biologists, zoologists, economists, environmentalists, etc.
 - Environmentally and educationally active advocacy groups such as Leave No Trace or Water Keepers.
 - Louisiana Sea Grant College Program

What requirements were identified by nature-based tourism for the Morgan City area?

The requirements to certify a nature-based attraction or other tourism entity in the Morgan City area are based upon goals for clean water and air; healthy, reproducing plant and animal populations; and correctly informed, environment-respecting visitors. The Morgan City demonstration group set the following goals and identified the following supporting objectives for achieving those goals. An asterisk (*) in the text marks an objective that supports a goal in more than one category.

Goals to sustain business resources:

- **Maintain safety and emergency procedures on boats and in the water.**
- **Establish safe general operating procedures.**
- **Provide adequate emergency health care services.**
- **Conduct business as a Basin partner and stakeholder.**
- **Advertise truthfully.**

Goals to sustain cultural resources:

- **Educate all stakeholders on the factual heritage of the Basin.**
- **Share accurate cultural information with visitors.**

Supporting objectives to achieve goals to sustain business and cultural resources

1. Obey all business-related and vendor-related laws. Obtain/maintain all related state, parish, and federal marketing and vendor licenses.

2. Obtain/maintain boat registration and certification.
3. Obtain/maintain liability insurance that adequately covers clients or post notice of client responsibility.
4. Adjust tour schedules to protect clients during hunting season.*
5. Adjust tour routes to minimize impact to sensitive areas of habitat, especially during periods of reproduction.*
6. Require the highest level of professional conduct among operators and employees.
7. Develop and follow ethical business practices (a Code of Ethics).
8. Insist that visitors maintain ethical conduct (a Code of Conduct).
9. Provide training for all staff on safety, natural resources and cultural issues.
10. Post vessel and water safety procedures prominently for clients and staff.
11. Maintain safety requirements including proactive prevention of fire, drowning, boat capsizing, injury from firearms and injury from equipment.
12. Restrict operations to save lives, control noise and prevent erosion and other habitat damage.*
13. Respect privately owned land.

14. Tell only the truth in advertisements, signs and all other communications.*
15. Seek interested, conservation-minded tourists.
16. Share or distribute only accurate information on history, vegetation, wildlife and culture of the Basin. Supply resources such as Web sites, copies of articles or book titles that can provide information accurately.

Goals to sustain water and air resources:

- **Control contaminants, including litter.**
- **Maintain or control sediment accumulation.**
- **Install and maintain wastewater and storm water drainage systems.**

Supporting objectives to achieve clean water and clean air goals

17. Strive to restrict maintenance, construction and repair activities involving paint, oil, grease, chemicals, sanding and drilling to enclosed areas with drainage systems that carry contaminated water to a waste treatment plant. This will reduce runoff that carries pollutants from these activities into the waterbodies.
18. Dispose of maintenance, construction and repair materials from boats or land-based construction only at properly designated landfills or a hazardous waste facility.
19. Harvest trees following the timber harvest Best Management Practices posted on the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality Web site, <http://nonpoint.deq.state.la.us/forestry.html>.

20. Remove crawfish bait boxes, crab traps, trot lines and alligator hooks from the Basin after use. Remove abandoned equipment under conditions permitted by law. Leave traps open when storing. Secure such equipment to the boat or truck so that it does not accidentally fly off during transport.
21. Contain and direct runoff from washing vehicles, boats and buildings into wastewater systems or natural swales (areas planted with native grasses and wetland plants). The plants will trap the pollutants, naturally improving the waters quality.
22. Filter runoff by planting and maintaining grasses and native plants in ditches.
23. Clean and remove litter and debris from the Basin, access roads and parking areas regularly, disposing of it a designated landfills or waste facilities.
24. Provide dumpsters, trash barrels and recycling bins on site for client and staff use.
25. Collect and secure all types of litter during transport. Dispose of waste at landfills or recycling services.
26. To prevent pollution, grade landscapes, parking areas and attraction landscapes so that runoff flows away from the river or bayous and into planted areas or stormwater systems.
27. To reduce polluting runoff, substitute porous cement or gravel for a solid cement slab or other impervious surface when constructing or replacing access roads and parking areas.

28. To prevent flooding during large storms, grade slopes to capture large volumes of runoff in man-made ponds or lakes. Create a pond if necessary. Water will then drain naturally after a storm has passed.
29. In urban areas, property owners should maintain the city's sewerage pipes on private property or permit access for municipal maintenance.
30. Equip boat fuel stations and maintenance facilities with easily accessed petroleum-absorbent bilge pillows or sponges to soak up and contain spills. Teach employees and clients how to use them.
31. Provide barrels at boat docks, ramps, marinas and maintenance facilities to dispose of used oil, oil filters and oily materials.
32. Provide convenient, reliable sewage disposal facilities (pumpouts) at all boat ramps, boat docks and marinas.
33. Equip motorized boats and houseboats with restroom facilities. Vessels should have portable toilets, holding tanks, or U.S. Coast Guard-approved marine sanitation devices.
34. Equip shoreside camps and tourism business facilities with restrooms. Waste should be channeled into the municipal sewer system or an approved camp waste treatment plant.
35. Require those using canoes, kayaks, or any vessel without restroom facilities to use shoreside restroom facilities when practical in order to protect people and water from sewage. Runoff carries sewage waste from shores into the waterbody.

36. Provide visitors with litter bags to use while outdoors in the Atchafalaya Basin.
37. Report people who litter to 1-888-548-7284. (Department of Environmental Quality Litterbug Hotline) Provide the offender's license plate or boat number.
38. Follow "reduce, reuse and recycle" and everything associated with all activity in the Basin.
39. Restrict land vehicles within the levee system according to rules of local levee boards. Park vehicles at docks and travel by water or on foot.
40. Develop and adhere to a set of operating standards for boats/motors used in Basin for the safety of clients and wildlife and for the protection of the natural environment. Standards should include criteria for no wake zones and quiet operation zones, as well as recommended speed limits.*
41. Restrict use of airboats and jet skis to prevent erosion and/or disruption of habitat as well as popular angling and swimming sites.
42. Construct an open-air pavilion or specific area for crowds to gather for tours. Use gravel or porous concrete for the floor. Consider direction of runoff, if roofed.
43. Comply with all applicable laws and regulations pertaining to the protection of human health and the environment.

Goals to sustain wildlife and natural resources:

- **Maintain healthy habitat.**
- **Educate stakeholders on the natural history of the Basin area.**
- **Limit plant and animal harvests to legal levels.**
- **Limit unnatural items in the Basin.**

Supporting objectives to achieve wildlife and natural resources goals

44. Obey all hunting and fishing regulations. Secure appropriate hunting and fishing licenses for operators and take only licensed clients into the Basin.
45. Consider the safety of clients when scheduling tours during hunting season in major hunting areas. *
46. Post vulnerable habitat areas such as animal feeding and nesting places.
47. Educate staff and visitors about nesting places such as rookeries. Approach wisely in order to avoid disturbing wildlife.
48. Reduce and control tourism activities in nesting areas during reproduction periods. *
49. Learn to identify native plants and animals accurately. Learn to identify nonindigenous species as well as native species. Share information with clients and colleagues.
50. Learn about the natural history of the Basin, especially those areas used in business.

51. Make an effort to plant native plants and introduce native animals, fish, birds and insects in the Basin. They require less maintenance and they support the habitat.
52. Help control nonindigenous invasive species in the Basin. Do not cut through immersed or floating plants with outboard motors because cutting some plants reproduces them. Clean off boats, motors, live wells and trailers before putting into the water or leaving the area to be certain that no new species are “hitching a ride.”
53. Obey all bait laws.
54. Avoid feeding *any* wildlife, including birds, fish and other aquatic species. Their populations’ survival depends upon their natural hunting and foraging skills.
55. Recommend that those using canoes, kayaks or other vessels without toilet facilities use shoreside restrooms when practical in order to protect habitat from sewage.*
56. Clear trees for development or harvest by following the Best Management Practices for Timber Harvest on the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality Web site, <http://nonpoint.deq.state.la.us/forestry.html>.*
57. Build roads and parking areas with permeable surfaces and proper drainage to conserve habitat.* Design all structures to make the smallest footprint.
58. Avoid building in established habitat areas, especially near feeding grounds or reproduction areas for one or more species.*

59. Dispose of maintenance, construction and repair materials only at properly designated landfills or a hazardous waste facility.* Do not put them in the environment.
60. Provide litterbags for clients. Leave no evidence behind. Secure litter in boats and trucks when transporting.*
61. Preserve the natural sounds of the Basin. Control loud and unnatural noises.

Summary

The Morgan City Voluntary Certification Demonstration Project for Nature-Based Tourism has begun an ongoing process of caring for the resources that support members' businesses throughout the Atchafalaya Basin. It will require certain environment-sustaining practices by tourism operators, staff and their clients. This booklet describes the accomplishments towards environmentally-sustaining goals by the demonstration project's members and outlines their next steps. The demonstration project can provide an active example for all of the nature-based tourism entities in the Atchafalaya Basin and the State of Louisiana.

Appendix - Voluntary Certification Committee

Marilyn O’Leary, Chair Louisiana Sea Grant

Mark Allemond, Development Concepts

Scott Angelle, Secretary-DNR

Jim Antoon, Div. Of Envl. Services

Darl Ashley, Plaquemine

Stan Beaubouef, St. Mary School Board

Larry Bergeron, Cypress Manor

Jane Breaux, Iberia Parish Convention Bureau

Anthony Brown, Cajun Houseboats

Wilbert Carmouche, Avoyelles Parish Tourist Comm.

Kasey Couture, US Army Corps of Engineers

Lu Cutrera, LJC Planning and Design

Jim Delahoussaye, DEQ

Joe Faslund, Atchafalaya Basin Backwater Adventure

Bill Fontenot, Acadiana Park Nature Station

Jeanne Fritsche, GSE Associates

Donovan Garcia, Paddle Guide Bayou Teche

Grace Garrett, Morgan City Auditorium

Celeste D. Gomez, St. Landry Parish Tourist Comm.

Marshall Gray, Patterson

Emmett Hardaway, Mayor of Berwick

Larry & Daria Harding, Canoe & Kayak Rentals, Inc.

Norris Hebert, St. Martinville

Dolores Henderson, Storyteller

Sharon Howell, Councilwoman

Carl Jacob, GSE Associates

Stuart Johnson, Acting Assistant Secretary - CRT

Dwayne Jones, Boy Scouts of America

Vera Judycki, Morgan City

Jacques LaCour, Pointe Coupee Tourist Comm.

Myrna Looney, Chamber of Commerce

Bart Mancuso, City of Morgan City

Eric Martin, Mayor of St. Martinville

Kitty Schwartz Martin, Iberville Parish Tourism

Scott Melancon, Tourism Commission

L. L. “Larry” Mendoza, City of Patterson

Chip & Patsy Metz, Bayou Side Bed & Breakfast

Steve Morell, City of Morgan City

James Proctor, Lafayette Paddler’s

Betty Provost, Wildlife Gardens

Ken Rhyne, Cajun Houseboats

Donna Richard, St. Martin Tourism Commission

Earl Robicheaux, Atchafalaya Soundscapes

Barbara Roy, Lafayette

Carrol Russo, Tourism Director

Ivy St. Romain, Ivy’s Tackle Box

Carrie Stansbury, Cajun Coast Tourism

Flo Templet, Plaquemine Parish
Heather Theriot, Cajun House Boats & Rentals
R. Glenn Thomas, Inland Fisheries Division
Gary Tilyou, DWF
Fleming Trosclair, Accessibility Signs & Consulting
Shawn Vicknair, US Army Corps of Engineers
Julius Vining, Lake End Park
Kevin Voisin, St. Mary Parish Council
Coerte A. Voorhies, Jr., Bed and Breakfast
Bobby Wilkinson, Port Allen
Dean Wilson, The Last Wilderness
Bonnie Wood, Little Rock
Maura Wood, Sierra Club

*DNR = Department of Natural Resources
DEQ = Department of Environmental Quality
CRT = Culture, Recreation and Tourism
DWF = Department of Wildlife and Fisheries*



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