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## COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN ECOTOURISM

Series of training resources for bird-related tourism

There are social, economic and environmental benefits to ecotourism, including fostering conservation and improving the quality of life at the tourist site. To fully achieve these ambitious ecotourism objectives, it is necessary to generate a diverse, informed and engaged support base.

Local communities, along with groups and stakeholders within the community and the region

(government agencies, businesses, hotels, nature conservancy organizations, etc.), are strategic partners for the success of an ecotourism initiative, especially when the activities are intended to generate tangible local benefits. Similarly, it is essential to have a good strategy to actively involve the community and local stakeholders, otherwise your initiative may face opposition or suffer from lack of local support.

### Map Stakeholders and Interest Groups

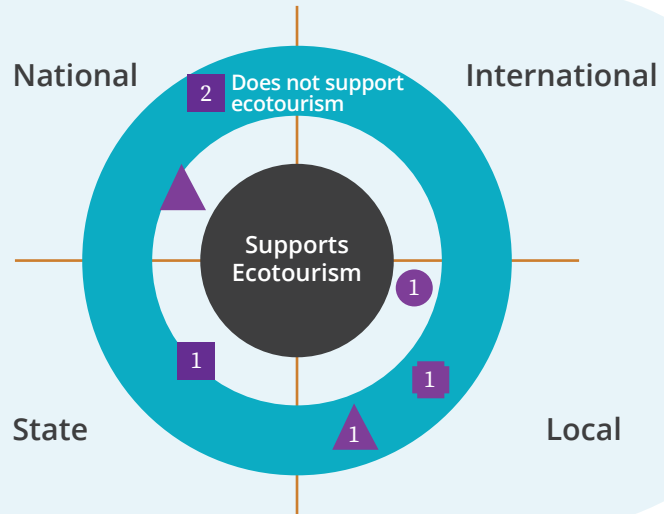
Mapping the level of interest among your potential stakeholders and local groups is a simple but useful exercise when devising a strategy to encourage local engagement in your ecotourism initiative. The first step is to create a simple list of local, state, and national stakeholders and sectors. The following is an example:

SECTOR	STAKEHOLDER	LEVEL OF INFLUENCE
Government	Ministry of Tourism	National
Private	Chamber of Commerce	Local or state
Private	Hotel association	Local, state, or national
Nonprofit	Environmental association	Local, national, or international
Producer	Oystermen and fishermen	Local
Private	Merchants	Local
Private	Landowners	Local, state, or national

Once the list of stakeholders is complete, represent them visually on a diagram like the one below, placing each in the quadrant related to their level of influence (a tip: a local organization can have international influence if its impact extends far beyond the local community). Place government institutions (local, state, and national) at the level where they have legal

(regulatory) duties. Place the groups whose mission and activities are most compatible with ecotourism in the center of the diagram, and those likely to oppose or have no interest in the initiative in the outer ring. This will allow you to better plan your engagement strategy, developing approaches messaging, and level of action accordingly.

-  Government
-  Private Sector
-  NGOs
-  Local Producers



## Understanding Stakeholder Positions

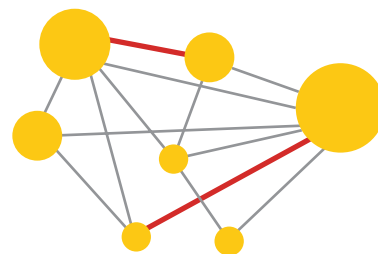
Rather than relying on assumptions, it is important to use facts as much as possible to support your analysis. Review statistics, reports, websites, newspaper articles, and other sources of information to best characterize stakeholders. This exercise will help you to identify both the potential partners in your ecotourism project and those groups and institutions that are either neutral or may oppose it. For example, the groups or sectors opposed to an ecotourism initiative could include investors interested in developing a site for other uses, community members and landowners who refuse to allow access to their property, or local producers who believe that ecotourism and conservation can limit their economic activity. After completing this first analysis, devise an engagement strategy that is adapted to each group of stakeholders to foster their involvement in your ecotourism initiative. The following is an example of the results of this exercise.



## Relationships and Conflict Analysis

Once you have a simple “map” of potential stakeholders and a strategy to engage them in your project, the next step is to assess the relationships among different groups and sectors, as well as the nature of these relationships, i.e., whether there are preexisting conflicts and collaboration processes or if the groups are likely to participate jointly in collective efforts or shared social spaces. It is useful to analyze the relationships among stakeholders, both to identify those groups with the most in common and to recognize the social networks they create. It will also enable you to identify the organizations that have the most influence according to the number of their connections. This will yield valuable information to help you create cross-sector committees and working groups. There are computer programs you can use to develop full stakeholder analyses. If using them, it is important to define the scope and use of the results.

This will help you to define how much effort is required to gather your data, the tools with which to obtain the information, and how often you will have to update it.



The flow diagram above is an example of a stakeholder relationship analysis. Each circle represents a stakeholder, while the lines represent their relationships. The use of different colors and relationship line widths help to illustrate whether the relationships are collaborations or conflicts and their degree of importance.

## Local Engagement Strategy

Once you have a good assessment of the social environment in which you will carry out your ecotourism initiative, you can develop an engagement strategy that systematically:

- Strengthens relationships with partners and encourages direct engagement;
- Shares the project to neutral organizations; and
- Informs and fosters collaboration with stakeholders who might oppose the project.



### Inform, Inform, Inform

For a project to succeed, remember the first rule: inform key stakeholders and the public. The best channels of communication include group chats, meetings, the media (newspapers, local tourism magazines and publications, brochures, radio, videos), good signage and even one-on-one encounters. Also, use your website to reinforce your messages and present additional, more in-depth information on the ecotourism initiative's vision, objectives and benefits.

Make sure the information is available to key stakeholders at all stages of the project, from conception to completion. The proper information reduces speculation, builds trust and promotes collaboration.

### Offer Services to Residents

Ecotourism activities often attract fewer visitors and cost more than mass tourism offerings. To share site benefits with the community, plan free or low-cost participatory activities and services for the local population, such as organized school visits to natural areas, bird festivals, and community fairs relating to the project.

### Create a Support Base

Any business needs a support group, made up of partners and investors directly responsible for its execution. Given their environmental and social benefits, ecotourism initiatives—particularly those relating to wildlife observation, such as bird watching—require a solid base of support that enables long-term sustainability. An essential feature of ecotourism is nature conservation, involving a range of stakeholders, often including government authorities, who necessarily share responsibilities.

Several different mechanisms can be used to create this support base, such as establishing boards of directors with members from the various sectors involved, or creating advisory committees or collaboration groups. Consider engaging landowners, governmental authorities, environmental organizations, private sector representatives, researchers, and any relevant sector.

Bear in mind that a board of directors will have greater influence on decision-making than an advisory committee or an informal collaborative group. Board members thus carry a greater responsibility, and it is important to identify people with the following characteristics:

- ✔ Are able to attend regular meetings;
- ✔ Are aligned with the initiative's objectives (according to the stakeholder map);
- ✔ Have a good reputation in the community or in the region;
- ✔ Do not represent opposing or competing sectors;
- ✔ Have complementary knowledge;
- ✔ Can give a qualified opinion about the project's direction to maintain the focus on ecotourism; and
- ✔ Represent beneficiaries and investors.

This support base is a very important asset and will help overcome barriers. For prospective candidates to understand their role, define the expectations of participation, time demands, and engagement of members of the board of directors, advisory committees and other groups. It is also advisable to change members with a certain regularity by adhering to term limits, to inject "new blood" into the initiative.

## Participatory Workshops

Participatory workshops are a very useful tool for generating social involvement. Workshops enable the fluid exchange of ideas on the initiative, in addition to identifying opportunities and risks, generating effective processes for collaboration, and fostering the appropriation of a common vision of success.

Make sure to hold periodic workshops for planning, design, and assessment, with the engagement of support groups and other local stakeholders.

## Public Consultation Mechanisms

Most ecotourism initiatives will need to engage with external stakeholders, such as private landowners, current site users, or agencies responsible for the site. The need for consultations, public comment, and other formal processes will depend on existing rules and regulations. Basic considerations for a consultative process to include:

- 1** Hold public consultations before the start of the project activities.
- 2** Define the topics to be addressed in the public consultations, based on the potential social, economic or environmental impacts of the project.  
**3** Determine which stakeholders should be consulted, based on rights or practices that could be affected by the project. For example, a decision to close access to a beach area for shorebird conservation could affect local beach users.
- 4** Identify who should conduct the consultation. For example, keep in mind that a formal public consultation can only be held by government agencies.
- 5** Tailor the information for participants. Avoid technical terms and make sure that relevant preliminary information has been distributed to stakeholders before the consultation.
- 6** Establish a deadline and procedure for the public consultation. Deadlines should provide sufficient time for stakeholders to reflect upon issues and provide an informed opinion.
- 7** Offer different ways to participate in public consultations, through several in-person sessions or via digital media.
- 8** Report the results of the public consultation and any decisions in the most appropriate form for the different interest groups.



## Win-Win Associations

Look out for opportunities to create commercial associations with local businesses and communities. Such relationships afford additional benefits and increase support for the ecotourism initiative. Examples include working with eco-friendly hotels to offer room and board packages, local merchants to provide discounts to customers, environment NGOs to train guides and interpreters, or local providers of transportation or other tourism-related services.

## Stakeholder Partnerships

The purpose of establishing stakeholder partnerships or coalitions is to drive the process of large-scale change. All partnerships, whether formal (agreements and associations) or informal (networking), require that stakeholders share liability. In the case of an ecotourism project, it is essential to form local, national, and even

international partnerships to achieve common objectives. The benefits of creating multi-stakeholder partnerships include developing suitable policies, securing financing, creating awareness, promoting markets, and driving service quality improvements, among others.

## Characteristics of an Effective Multi-Stakeholder Partnership



Efficient and effective communication among multiple stakeholders



Clear expectations among the parties



Limits of involvement defined and stated in writing



Respect for the autonomy of each member



Clearly defined costs of engagement



Shared responsibility for success and management



Transparency



Clear and fair distribution of roles



Style of governance accepted and known by members



Conflict resolution mechanisms

## Case Study



### Sharing the Beach with Georgia's Shorebirds<sup>1</sup>

With support from the CEC, a coalition of partners – ranging from local landowners to state and national agencies and non-profit organizations – worked together to launch a community wildlife conservation initiative across Georgia's barrier islands (USA) and support the nomination of the site as a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) Landscape of Hemispheric Importance.

Georgia's barrier islands are owned and managed by a diverse group of private and public entities, most of which are represented in the Georgia Shorebird Alliance (GSA). Membership includes the U.S. National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Manomet, the managers of St. Catherine's Island, as well as landowners of Little Cumberland Island, Little St. Simons Island, and

Cannon's Point Preserve and Musgrove Preserve on St. Simons Island.

Efforts to support coordinated management and community engagement among multiple partners focused on creating a website for the GSA; organizing evening walks and community events; creating signage, posters and brochures; giving presentations and trainings, and linking different stakeholders together to improve decision-making. The conservation initiative increased knowledge and awareness, contributing to behaviour change and reducing negative interactions between beach users and visiting shorebirds. Following the implementation of the initiative, the City of Tybee Island passed a resolution for its beach to support the WHSRN site designation.

**This initiative demonstrated that collaborative multi-stakeholder networks – involving private landowners, city officials, state and federal scientists and managers, as well as local and regional non-profit organizations – can be effectively engaged for the conservation of shorebirds and shorebird habitat.**

### References

1. WHSRN Executive Office. 2019. *WHSRN Nominations and Conservation Actions for Two Key Shorebird Sites: Willapa Bay and the Georgia Barrier Islands*. CEC, Unpublished report.

## Ecotourism series

1	Planning an Ecotourism Initiative	2	Marketing Ecotourism for Wildlife and Bird Watching	3	Community and Stakeholder Engagement in Ecotourism	4	Interpretation at Coastal Bird Sites
5	Cultural Values in Ecotourism	6	Birding Festivals as Ecotourism Experiences	7	Monitoring and Evaluation of Ecotourism Initiatives at Coastal Bird Sites	8	Bird-related Ecotourism Case Studies

### About this Work



The Commission for Environmental Cooperation's (CEC) project "Conserving Shorebirds through Community Engagement" aimed to build capacity in communities along North American migration routes to conserve habitat and develop ecotourism linked to bird migration cycles. Bird-related ecotourism can be a significant source of additional income for local economies, and can incentivize communities to sustain conservation efforts. To this end, the project supported the development of education and outreach materials and training to improve knowledge, increase local support and strengthen the capacity of communities to deliver bird-related ecotourism activities such as bird watching, habitat conservation, and celebratory events. For more information visit: [www.cec.org](http://www.cec.org).

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