

Article

Bridging Worlds: Utilizing a Multi-Stakeholder Framework to Create Extension–Tourism Partnerships

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Abstract: Some counties in the United States are turning to visions of sustainable development in response to increasing environmental problems caused by land use expansion and intensification. Sustainable tourism is one industry capable of fostering this change because of its relationship to all facets of a destination, from transportation and culture to natural resource management. This paper addresses a study that examined what support tourism destinations in Florida need from the Cooperative Extension Service to better utilize natural areas as responsible tourism attractions to benefit the local community, economy, and biodiversity (i.e., ecotourism). A nominal group technique, questionnaires, and interviews with local tourism professionals were used to investigate needs and support for ecotourism development. Results show, when nature-based tourism products are present, growth in ecotourism market supply is desired by tourism providers. Results also indicate that this growth is possible with the help of Extension agents, who would serve as educators on responsible tourism topics and facilitate partnerships between government, businesses, local residents, and visitors. Integrating these results into the (2013) multi-stakeholder framework developed by Waligo et al. for sustainable tourism development, this paper outlines reasoning and process for the Cooperative Extension Service to provide important support for a prevalent natural resource use.

Keywords: Cooperative Extension Service; ecotourism; sustainable tourism; agency culture change; emerging governance structures; organizational capacity-building

1. Introduction

The rapid rise of global travel has led researchers to recognize the need to incorporate sustainable tourism development into destinations around the world, including the United States [1–4]. But what is sustainable tourism, and how do planners and managers actually achieve this status? Is sustainable tourism about sustaining tourism businesses, ensuring consistent availability of tourism products? Or is it about the benefit principles of sustainability and the goal of supporting current uses while maintaining natural resources for future generations [5]?

According to eco- and sustainable tourism researchers Moisey and McCool [6], “Tourism exists within, and in most cases is dependent upon, the environment in which it is located” (p. 344). They also clarify that tourism development does not always result in benign changes—“the tourism industry can either protect and maintain or exploit and deplete” [6] (p. 344). Tourism can contribute to deforestation, but it can also lead to reforestation efforts [7,8]. It can help protect wildlife species, but it can equally cause negative impacts to habitat and behavior [9–12]. Nature-based tourism is also a major vector for

invasive species [13]. To a large degree, the industry is a source of “invisible burdens” that must be monitored and managed effectively to ensure it benefits cultural and natural heritage [14].

To mitigate these negative externalities, sustainable tourism markets such as ecotourism are proposed as a way to shift the tourism sector towards practices that revitalize social and ecological communities rather than degrade them. Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism “where the authorities, the tourism industry, tourists and local people co-operate to make it possible for tourists to travel to genuine areas in order to admire, study and enjoy nature and culture in a way that does not exploit the resources, but contributes to sustainable development” [15] (p. 199). However, to achieve the goals of eco- and sustainable tourism is showing to be very complicated in practice. There is significant ambiguity in the idea of sustainable development, which implies a reduction of negative externalities while also promoting the notion of increased growth and consumption of finite resources [5]. Although many sustainable tourism destinations rely on the natural environment as an attraction and backdrop for tourist products and experiences, researchers are finding that the uptake of sustainability practices is lagging in the absence of leadership, regulation, and shared responsibility [16,17].

The State of Florida is a great example to highlight these challenges. Florida is one of the most popular destinations for travel in the United States. In 2018, Florida had more than 126 million out-of-state tourists, breaking record visitation numbers several consecutive years [18]. Although Florida is most famous for its theme parks, the state’s natural amenities attract many tourists. According to one study, 92% of visitors participate in at least one outdoor recreation activity, spending an estimated \$70 billion USD on outdoor recreation [19]. Florida hosts over 16,000 wildlife tourism-related businesses and sees more than 7.6 million wildlife tourists every year. Wildlife tourism alone generates over \$8 billion in annual spending [20]. But even with these positive economic benefits resulting from nature-based tourism, “this market doesn’t imply sustainability or other values” [21] (p. 156). The social and biological implications of the industry must also be considered. As the state faces increasing threats from climate change and sea level rise, red tide and the eutrophication of major water bodies, increases of invasive species, and major losses of habitat and biodiversity, the benefits and consequences of tourism in Florida requires greater scrutiny and management.

Investigating ways to improve the sustainability of tourism in the state, authors conducted a study in Pinellas County, Florida, to determine how tourism stakeholders and the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) can work together to implement successful visions of sustainable tourism through ecotourism markets. In our study, the first research objective was to understand tourism provider perspectives and participation in ecotourism and their needs for support. The second objective was to assess which program types and activities stakeholders believed could meet those needs. The final research objective was to determine how provider perspectives aligned with destination management organizations (DMOs) in the tourism sector, and what resources county officials might provide themselves, or with the help of the CES, to support local ecotourism interests.

Presented here, objectives and findings from our research are brought together and applied towards a multi-stakeholder implementation and management framework (MSIM) developed by Waligo et al. that has shown to offer an effective pathway for sustainable tourism development [22]. By applying stakeholder theory to ecotourism development [23–25], we believe it is possible to understand and coordinate the needs and interests of tourism stakeholders to increase sustainable outcomes for tourism in Florida.

2. Background

2.1. Cooperative Extension Service

The Cooperative Extension Service has long been a major player in helping incorporate best practices and innovations into agriculture and natural resource management techniques around the country. Since 1914, land-grant universities throughout the United States have worked jointly with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to transfer scientific information to the agriculture sector,

assisting in the production, management, and marketing of farms and related agricultural professions. Over time, the CES has evolved to provide similar support for forestry, fisheries, and other natural resource management activities with the goal of maximizing output while emphasizing responsible use. Although the USDA directs the efforts of extension professionals, universities and extension agents play a leading role in researching and identifying how the CES can best support sustainable natural resource practices.

Over the last century, most of these cooperative efforts have been focused on extractive natural resource industries. In the last few decades, as new trends in land and resource use have emerged, the CES has started to apply their best-practice efforts to even more natural resource sectors including agritourism, ecotourism, and nature-based tourism.

Although tourism remains a peripheral focus for the CES today, beginning in 1990, the Extension Service began working with tourism in three ways: (1) assisting businesses with tourism development, (2) improving tourism and recreation planning in communities, and (3) integrating tourism into natural resource management [26]. In 2018, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Sea Grant division developed a ten-year Coastal Tourism Vision Plan to provide Sea Grant Extension Agents priorities and instructions for assisting in tourism development in coastal areas throughout the country [27]. Nonetheless, because of the brief history between Extension and tourism, research is limited on how the CES can assist stakeholders with developing sustainable tourism in communities to achieve social, economic, and environmental goals. This research addresses that gap in knowledge.

2.2. Stakeholders in Sustainable Tourism

At many tourism destinations in the United States, multiple tourism authorities are involved in planning and development of the market including tourism development councils (TDCs), convention and visitor bureaus (CVBs), chambers of commerce, and parks and natural resource departments. Even though these stakeholders are all working to benefit their county or region, each has its own mission and approach to the tourism and recreation industry. TDCs work as oversight, steering tourism growth and development. CVBs are involved in tourism promotion to attract visitors from outside the region, and chambers of commerce and economic development agencies are involved in creating products that serve local residents, a local workforce, and a tourism base. Finally, the parks and conservation departments manage natural attractions that visitors and local residents use for tourism and recreation.

Although these tourism professionals have found areas of partnership, they often view nature tourism through different lenses, particularly natural resource managers [21]. The “tourism industry is based on sociological and business concepts that explain how and why people travel to certain areas. In contrast, land managers work with . . . systems that compose the park, preserve, or other natural areas tourists are coming to see” [21] (p. 158). As a result of diverging missions, the value of nature-based tourism varies across stakeholders in a county, with groups differentiated through perspectives of economics, resource management, and community development [21].

The differences that arise from these mixed perspectives poses major challenges for sustainable tourism development, as each stakeholder group and destination have their own unique set of problems and opportunities [28]. “The variety of agencies and organizations with competing, if not conflicting, goals makes the coordinated action needed for achieving sustainability difficult. One agency may promote protected areas as a tourism destination while another is responsible for managing the tourists and their impacts when they arrive. Such compartmentalized decision-making remains a great obstacle to integrated planning and development” [29] (pp. 6–7).

Because of the differences, understanding and connecting stakeholders and their interests across public and private sectors, as well as between natural resource agencies, businesses, political authorities, and communities, is a precondition for ecotourism development. Effective decision-making for ecotourism requires working relationships among all stakeholders and is ultimately dependent on the social infrastructure and natural ecology of the destination [30]. Collaboration is essential

to incorporating principles of sustainability into the tourism industry, and “participants that have traditionally acted in isolation from each other [now] need to learn how to cooperate” [24], (p. 27).

In order to establish these relationships, sustainable tourism requires dedicated stakeholder involvement. Waligo et al. [22] stress that “the issues that hamper the implementation of [sustainable tourism] are stakeholder-related and are associated with priorities, organization and resources” (p. 344). To overcome this, stakeholder engagement “represents a widely accepted approach to solving the problems associated with a lack of understanding and few shared common goals between the many stakeholders often involved in tourism development” [22] (p. 342).

Nonetheless, despite that the integration of stakeholders is integral to implementing sustainable tourism, Byrd [31] reveals, “some professionals would argue that due to limited resources, time and money, stakeholder involvement cannot be done by destination management organizations (DMOs) and other planning groups. The job of these groups is tourism marketing and product development. From their perspective . . . [this] does not include stakeholder involvement” (p. 12).

Yet, in reality, to establish any sustainable tourism market requires the cooperation of all stakeholders, including (and especially) DMOs. Multiple studies have found that DMOs are the most central and most interconnected actors within a tourism network and have the highest level of power in a municipality as tourism stakeholders depend on them for expertise, information, and clientele [32]. Their power, however, also highlights the need for “bridging stakeholders” to facilitate connections between other stakeholder groups in order to create networks of sustainability [32]. There are inherent relationships and interdependencies between stakeholders that must be understood and mediated through leadership *and* a comprehensive process to make sustainable tourism possible [28].

According to Drumm and Moore [33], “On the frontlines of management, protected area personnel are the first to notice natural resource changes such as environmental damage from tourism,” (pp. 23–24) and therefore are in the best position to lead the collaborative process. However, this responsibility is outside the physical and professional jurisdiction of protected area managers. Because protected area managers are required to oversee natural resource areas rather than business segments and community development, they cannot be the leaders of a multi-stakeholder planning and development process at a destination-wide scale. Instead, this research proposes that the CES, with a mission to support research, education, and programming to advance sustainable natural resource management at a municipal level, is in a much better position to facilitate stakeholder engagement and a collaborative process for eco- and sustainable tourism development.

2.3. Multi-Stakeholder Involvement Process

In absence of more detailed information about stakeholder engagement for sustainable tourism, other researchers designed a framework using case study evidence to support the implementation and management process for sustainable tourism [22]. This multi-stakeholder implementation management framework (MSIM) was created to “[respond] to calls for DMOs to involve stakeholders effectively in the implementation of [sustainable tourism] . . . ” [22] (p. 347) and offers “a means to address key stakeholder-related issues while systematically involving stakeholders . . . ” [22] (p. 343).

As shown in Figure 1, the MSIM brings together stakeholders in a process that works towards sustainable development. The approach is underpinned by assumptions that (a) stakeholders are a core component for the implementation of sustainable tourism, (b) their input is needed for effective involvement strategies, and (c) their involvement can lead to achieving sustainable tourism outcomes [22]. The framework is designed through strategic levels which includes two stages in each level that are associated with specific actions, purpose, and effects to achieve involvement and sustainable tourism outcomes. This framework aligns with models of collaboration for environmental management and tourism developed by Selin and Chavez [25] and further tested by Graci [24].

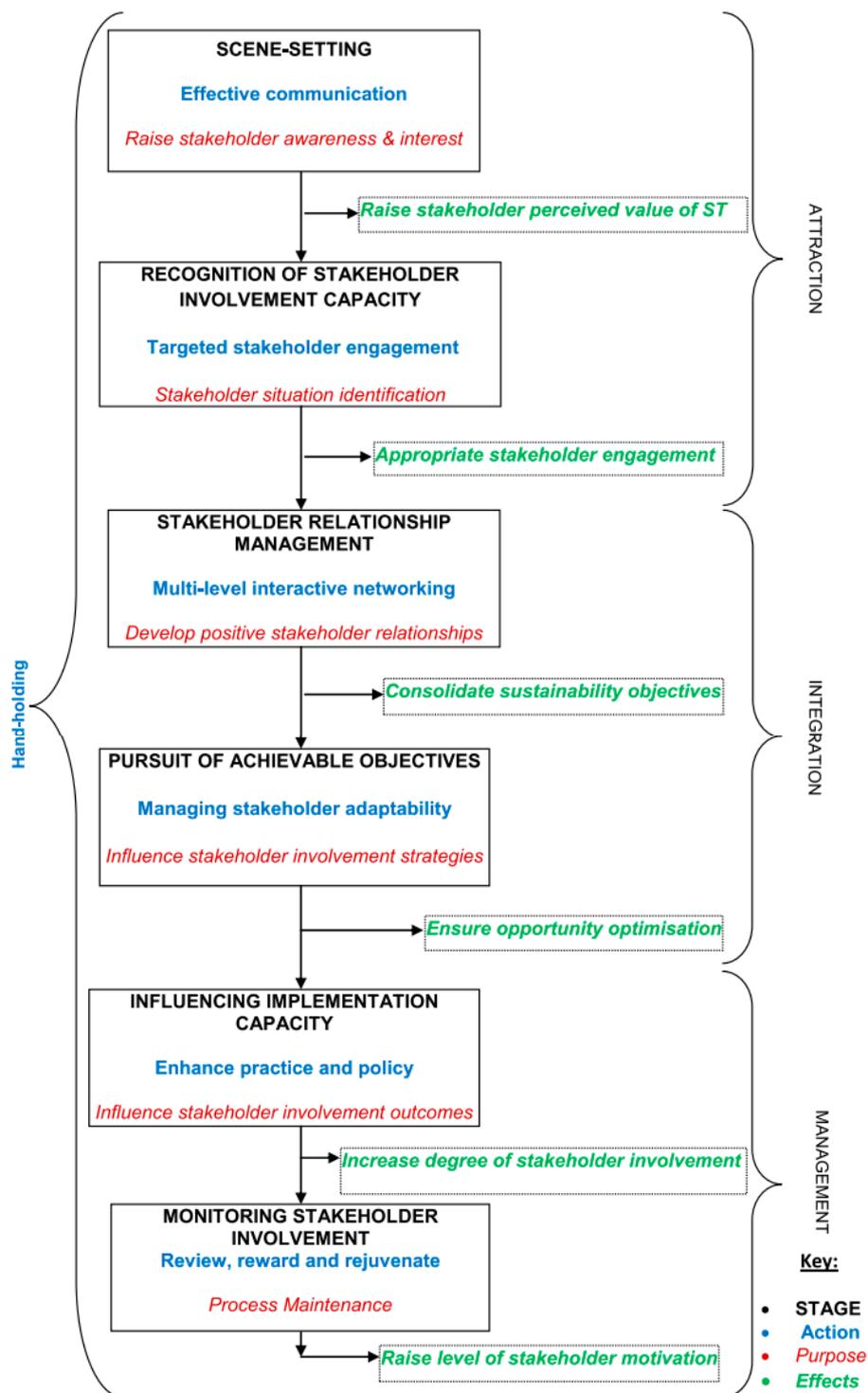


Figure 1. Multi-stakeholder implementation management framework. This process integrates multiple levels and stages that a leadership agent can follow to enable stakeholder involvement, planning, and development of sustainable tourism. Reproduced from Waligo et al. [22].

Utilizing this framework, researchers can assess and design actions for how stakeholders in a county can develop partnerships and a process to create more robust resources and programs to integrate sustainability into a tourism destination. Applying this model to the data collected in Pinellas County, the remainder of the paper will focus on methods, results, and discussion to inform partnership and collaboration, and outline what a leadership process might look like.

3. Materials and Methods

In order to determine opportunities for ecotourism and needs for support in Florida counties, researchers used an exploratory mixed-methods design. Through sequential stages of data collection, we investigated perspectives of tourism providers and administrators, their needs, and opportunities to fulfill them. The population of interest included nature-based tourism actors in Florida municipalities. Here, “actors” are defined as stakeholders representing local government and the tourism industry involved in development, operations, and administration.

Non-probability, purposeful sampling was used to obtain depth of understanding and to identify strategies to facilitate the implementation of sustainable tourism from individuals knowledgeable, experienced, or involved in nature-based tourism [34]. Although there was increased risk of sampling bias, as respondents most interested in sustainable tourism were presumably self-selecting [35], research included a substantial number of nature-based tourism actors in the county which matched the attributes of stakeholders highlighted in the initial stages of the MSIM framework [22] and were therefore determined to be representative of our population of interest.

Data collection methods included nominal groups and interviews, as well as a questionnaire that measured stakeholder preferences and supported triangulation of results. Interviewer error was minimized through a structured interview technique using a strict interview guide and maintaining consistency in questions across research phases [35]. With a predetermined list of questions and goals for the study, the exploratory data process allowed researchers to conduct deductive analysis throughout all phases of research.

3.1. Nominal Group Meetings

In accordance with these procedures, research began by identifying and recruiting samples of respondents who represented nature-based tourism stakeholders in Pinellas County, Florida. A sampling frame was created by identifying approximately 100 tourism businesses and organizations in the county including adventure and amusement providers; aquarium, zoos, and captive exhibit operators; community development groups; environmental education centers; outfitters; nature-based tourism providers; tourism development groups; tourism administration officials; and protected area managers. Participants were recruited through multiple outreach attempts via emails and follow-up phone calls.

Researchers used a nominal group technique to collect data in the first phase, which allowed participants to think critically and respond to the questions for the study. A meeting was held for each group of outdoor tourism stakeholders, including land and marine-based tourism providers and land managers. Overall, 27 people attended the meetings with no overlap in stakeholders across groups. The meetings allowed participants to think and respond to questions about (1) What ecotourism opportunities can be developed or expanded on in Pinellas County, and (2) What specific resources can Extension provide for ecotourism professionals to expand Pinellas County’s ecotourism industry.

During nominal group meetings, after a question was asked, responses were provided by participants individually. Answers were recorded onto flipcharts and displayed around the room. Once responses to the questions were collected and discussed, participants analyzed and ranked their top five preferred ecotourism support strategies. This resulted in an immediate list of priorities for municipal support, fulfilling the intended goal of the meetings.

3.2. Questionnaire

Using the highest ranked topics from the nominal groups, questions were created to compare results, rank preferences for information sharing and market development support, and gauge willingness to participate from a broader group. Answers to the questions were intended to help prioritize municipal service resources and programming.

Questions were reviewed and revised by project collaborators prior to distribution. The questionnaires were created using Qualtrics software and had 21 close-ended questions. A survey link was sent by email to the full list of nature-based tourism providers in Pinellas County who were owners or managers of nature-based tourism and recreation organizations and businesses. The sample included nominal group participants and municipal officials.

The questionnaire was available for one month. Reminders were sent to unfinished respondents in the first, third, and last week of the survey. In total, 26 respondents completed the entire questionnaire. Results of the questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Ordinal data was converted to percentages and then ranked from highest to lowest to establish priority tables. Data from the nominal group meetings and the questionnaires was used to develop and report stakeholder needs to project sponsors and participants.

3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

Combined results were used to design a standardized interview guide for one-on-one meetings with tourism managers and officials in Pinellas County. Meetings were arranged with tourism executives in the county, including directors of the tourism development council, the convention and visitor bureau, the economic development agency, and chambers of commerce that were geographically distributed throughout the county. In total, seven interviews were administered, each lasting one hour in length and consisted of eight structured questions with minor follow-up inquiries to add detail and explanation to responses.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded using a structural coding technique, in which data is lumped and categorized in order to examine responses to questions across interviews [36]. Responses were grouped and analyzed corresponding to the questions about ecotourism meaning, existing ecotourism operations, local ecotourism development opportunities, knowledge of extension service and support, and current initiatives that related to results of nominal groups and questionnaires. Afterwards, response groupings were reviewed and summarized into collective themes. Using In Vivo coding, quotes were extracted verbatim from interviews to support data interpretation, helping to directly communicate respondent perspectives [36]. Data was then compared to the findings of the nominal groups and questionnaire in order to understand similarities, differences, and alignments between providers and administrator stakeholder groups.

4. Results

4.1. Tourism Provider Perspectives of Ecotourism Growth and Support

Across all three groups ($n = 27$), stakeholders were in general agreement that there were ways to expand nature-based tourism in the county and incorporate elements of ecotourism into the market operations. Currently, beaches, trails, and non-motorized activities are available, as are opportunities for sport fishing and wildlife viewing. But stakeholders wondered, what does responsible use mean, and how much use can the natural areas and attractions of Pinellas County sustain without negative impact? They also wondered what adventure activities and natural attractions tourists want to see or do, and how the county can meet that demand. Who is visiting, what are they using, and what impact are they having socially, ecologically, and economically?

Mentioned throughout the nominal group meetings, opportunities for expanding ecotourism and support generally fit into three categories of create, combine, and engage (Table A1). Participants talked about communicating with other businesses and institutions, developing public-private partnerships, expanding commercial activities by scaling up marketing and promotion, and engaging locals with ways to improve the community while increasing education and recreation activities.

After all ideas for CES support for ecotourism were collected from respondents in the nominal group meetings, ideas and recommendations were then voted on by respondents to rank priorities. Findings indicate that stakeholders who had previous involvement with the CES, or who previously

attended a CES event, had some familiarity with the mission of extension, though most were not clear on the exact roles and responsibilities of the CES in a municipality. Nonetheless, participants believed that the Extension Service could support positive growth and management of ecotourism through a variety of techniques.

Meeting participants communicated some needs that fit under Extension's traditional role of education, including supplying information for tourists and providers about local biodiversity and ecosystems, and unique natural phenomenon, as well as training and information about the values/practices of ecotourism and sustainable tourism (Table A2). Non-traditional support was proposed through marketing and promotional materials to inform and expand ecotourism products for visitors. Recurring themes across meetings included facilitating connections and networking between all types of service-oriented businesses in the region to advise and direct travelers; establishing and maintaining public and private partnerships; and leading the development of a consistent region-wide brand, beyond beaches, that can be promoted to locals and visitors.

4.2. Ecotourism Support Participation

Based on the results of the nominal group meetings, a questionnaire was administered to corroborate and broaden exploratory findings related to the need and types of support for ecotourism programming and development. Responses were provided by a mix of stakeholders ($n = 26$) including businesses (27%), non-profit/non-governmental organizations (31%), government agencies (38%), and community representatives (4%). Respondents are involved in a range of services, including tours, sales, management, and information-oriented activities. The majority of respondents (65%) are involved in teaching about the environment formally or in the field. The next leading form of tourism activity was wildlife-based tours (39%), followed by marine-based activities (31%) and conservation area management (27%). Some respondents were involved in transportation, outfitting, captive exhibits and adventure activities. "Other" tourism services included freshwater tours, cultural tours, and fishing. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73%) served more than 1000 guests per year. Most respondents were residents of Pinellas (78%), though some resided outside of the county but maintain work or business in Pinellas.

Responses from the questionnaire about education and natural resource training activities offered a clear indication of priorities (Table 1). The top three most important activities were 1. Learning how to manage impacts on wildlife and natural environment, 2. Understanding environmental laws, and 3. Ensuring appropriate use of natural areas. Many respondents also believed it was "very important" or "extremely important" to learn how to improve the responsible behavior of visitors.

Apart from importance, respondents also selected a frequency, indicating the extent of their participation (Table 2). This question was asked because respondents might believe a topic is important, but may not be interested, or might not consider it their responsibility to participate in a formal program on that topic. There was some, but not exact overlap between level of participation and importance of activity.

The greatest number of respondents would "very often" or "always" participate in 1. Education and training for improving the responsible behavior of guests, 2. Managing impacts on wildlife and the natural environment, and 3. Understanding environmental laws. Many respondents also indicated they would participate in learning how to identify and measure their operation's impacts on wildlife and the natural environment. For educational topics, respondents were interested and motivated to participate in activities that reduce the industry's impact on the local natural resource. Managing impacts on wildlife and natural environment, as well as understanding environmental laws were two topics that the majority of respondents thought were "very" or "extremely important," and would attend training to learn about "always" or "very often."

Table 1. Importance of Natural Resource Education Topics for Ecotourism.

Ecotourism Education Topics	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
Managing impacts on wildlife/nature (n = 26)	81%	19%	0%	0%	0%
Understanding environmental laws (n = 25)	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Appropriate use of natural areas(n = 26)	77%	23%	0%	0%	0%
Improving responsible behavior of tourists/guests (n = 26)	77%	19%	4%	0%	0%
Identifying and measuring tourist impacts (including benefits) on wildlife/natural environment (n = 26)	54%	35%	12%	0%	0%
Identifying and measuring my operation's impacts (including benefits) on wildlife/natural environment (n = 26)	58%	31%	4%	0%	8%
Developing volunteer opportunities (n = 26)	42%	35%	23%	0%	0%
Developing and providing environmental interpretation programs (n = 26)	46%	27%	23%	0%	4%

Table 2. Frequency of Participation in Natural Resource Education Topics for Ecotourism.

Ecotourism Education Topics	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Improving responsible behavior of tourists/guests (n = 26)	58%	19%	19%	4%	0%
Managing impacts on wildlife/nature (n = 26)	46%	31%	23%	0%	0%
Understanding environmental laws (n = 26)	46%	38%	8%	8%	0%
Identifying and measuring my operation's impacts (including benefits) on wildlife/natural environment (n = 26)	46%	27%	23%	4%	0%
Appropriate use of natural areas (n = 26)	31%	35%	35%	0%	0%
Developing volunteer opportunities (n = 26)	31%	35%	35%	0%	0%
Developing and providing environmental interpretation programs (n = 26)	19%	50%	31%	0%	0%
Identifying and measuring tourist impacts (including benefits) on wildlife/natural environment (n = 26)	19%	42%	31%	4%	4%

The second part of the questionnaire asked respondents to rate the importance (Table 3) and frequency of participation (Table 4) in activities related to market support that were discussed in nominal group meetings. Results of participation were again more mixed than levels of importance.

The top three cooperative market activities respondents believed important were 1. Increasing awareness about nature and recreation among locals, 2. Collaborating with officials and government agencies, and 3. Creating partnerships with businesses across the county. The three highest activities that respondents would “always” or “very often” participate in were 1. Increasing awareness of nature and recreation areas among locals, 2. Outreach to local residents for events and activities, and 3. Creating partnerships with businesses in the community.

For development activities, respondents were both interested and motivated to participate in cooperative activities that engaged local residents and businesses. Increasing awareness of nature and recreation opportunities among locals and creating partnerships with businesses were two topics that the majority of respondents thought were “very” or “extremely important,” and would attend training to learn about “always” or “very often.”

Table 3. Importance of Cooperative Ecotourism Development Activities.

Development Activities	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
Increasing awareness of nature/recreation areas among locals (n = 25)	64%	32%	4%	0%	0%
Collaboration with municipal officials or government agencies (n = 25)	60%	32%	8%	0%	0%
Creating partnerships with businesses throughout the county (n = 25)	48%	44%	8%	0%	0%
Marketing and promotion of services (n = 24)	46%	33%	21%	0%	0%
Outreach to Pinellas County residents for events and activities (n = 24)	38%	42%	13%	8%	0%
Determining economic benefits (n = 25)	36%	36%	24%	4%	0%
Outreach to state residents (n = 25)	40%	24%	32%	4%	0%

Table 4. Frequency of Participation in Cooperative Ecotourism Development Activities.

Development Activities	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Increasing awareness of nature/recreation areas among locals (n = 25)	40%	32%	28%	0%	0%
Outreach to Pinellas County residents for events and activities (n = 25)	36%	28%	36%	0%	0%
Creating partnerships with businesses throughout the county (n = 25)	24%	48%	28%	0%	0%
Collaboration with municipal officials or government agencies (n = 25)	28%	24%	48%	0%	0%
Marketing and promotion of services (n = 25)	28%	28%	32%	12%	0%
Outreach to state residents (n = 25)	24%	28%	44%	4%	0%
Determining economic benefits (n = 25)	8%	36%	44%	12%	0%

4.3. Tourism Administrator Responses and Means of Support

4.3.1. Perceptions of Ecotourism and Market Growth

During the course of interviews, there was agreement that nature-based tourism exists in the county, that it has the potential for growth, and that there are opportunities for the Extension Service to help incorporate aspects of environmental responsibility, education, and community development into current activities and enterprises.

Most respondents framed ecotourism as “the experience of connecting with nature.” while some perceived it more as basic nature-based activities and engagement such as “... walking through different unfamiliar terrains or about vegetation and wildlife.” Even under this range of parameters, most respondents communicated that some elements of ecotourism are present in their county, whether through active or passive outdoor activities or indoor environmental education associated with tourism enterprises or during visits to the aquarium.

Since administrators recognize the opportunity for their natural features to serve as tourism attractions in the county, many seemed enthusiastic about strengthening the ecotourism market. One respondent provided a word of caution that if there is the opportunity for an ecotourism market, then the stakeholders interested in this should focus on its growth: “If Pinellas County wants some sort of definition that they have this to offer, first, do we? Do we really have it? And if we do, then [the convention and visitor bureau] need to be the ones creating the brand.”

The logic behind this was that expanding ecotourism development is possible but that it does not match the current tourism segment and fit within current planning strategies, and so it will require additional top-down education and branding and bottom-up growth. Another respondent agreed that it was possible, but that developing this segment needs to be authentic: “Ecotourism opportunities can be expanded by creating more awareness through marketing, but it must be authentic, it must offer organic connection. The worst thing to do would be inauthentic.”

Some respondents associated ecotourism as a means to help protect and reclaim greenspace that is geographically restricted because of build-out. One chamber’s motto is “the protector of beaches”, and they communicated that working with Extension to expand ecotourism would be valuable for their mission. Another chamber set an even higher bar and believes ecotourism initiatives would be a way to further advance social and environmental responsibility in the county: “We want to be the best place on earth to be. A simple mission that is hard to get to.” In any aspect of the ecotourism development though, it seemed the attitude among officials was that “Whatever you are doing, you have to make money out of it, or turn it into a government program, those are the only two options.”

4.3.2. Opportunities for Ecotourism Growth

Several respondents perceive ecotourism as a term that is no longer being used, or that is not mainstream, but all participants still communicated some value in supporting an ecotourism market. Although one respondent said that non-beach activities for ecotourism are limited, and another commented that most nature-based tourism opportunities are water-based, there are still ways to connect people with nature, culture, and environmental education through tourism in the county.

Considering the spatial limitations to expanding recreation areas, as one respondent put it, ecotourism will mostly be “expanded in people’s minds.” Not physically, but through increasing awareness about environmental restoration and value of greenspace in urban areas and by creating programs that support this.

Several respondents reiterated the fact that chambers, the CVB, TDCs, businesses, and visitors are all different, and they each have their own mandate which cannot include advocacy, or which might not align with advancing ecotourism efforts themselves. One respondent explained that their “chamber is becoming a convener and an educator. They can continue doing a better job at that. They have the right audience they can get in front of, they just need to share this message.”

The caveat, several respondents expressed, is that chambers are working for the businesses and are more focused on what members want. Admittedly, “increasing awareness of nature and recreation, building partnerships for ecotourism throughout the county... aren’t things that chamber is currently doing.” If businesses communicated that the CES convinced them to develop more ecotourism products and services, and they brought that to the chambers, then ecotourism would become a priority. But, “they decide. The members are where the direction comes from . . . [our] sole purpose is to support the business community.” Overall, these administrators are responsible for attracting visitors and helping businesses supply goods and services tourists demand.

Despite this barrier, administrators recognize, “the environment plays a big part in the economy. If you want people to get jobs and relocate to jobs in the county, you have to make the quality of life worth it.” And officials know that increasing ecotourism opportunities—through programming, education, and conservation work—will improve the quality of life throughout the county and attract more visitors and residents.

4.3.3. Cooperative Extension Service Support for Ecotourism

Respondents clarify that to support a responsible nature-based tourism segment does not require power, but rather, leadership. “Leadership and power are different things . . . Extension has a lot more leadership capabilities than chambers because they’re experts and they’ve asked to be the leaders in thinking about this—bringing people together to help understand how we should be thinking and acting in relation to nature tourism in the county.” Choosing to work with business and the tourism sector will also require positive incentives, not punitive efforts: “[the businesses] don’t want to do it through activism, they don’t want militant movement. They want to use education, not shame.”

Since the CES is focused on education and collaborative engagement as a way to improve natural resource use and management, respondents communicate that Extension is well positioned to be that type of leader. Still, chambers recognize the importance of participating in a partnership for business growth as well. Their mentality is, “If you want to go fast, go by yourself. If you want to go long, go with someone else.”

Altogether, respondents gave the impression of having a big picture perspective. Administrators want help, but if the CES intends to provide support, it must promote its mission better and improve its ability to market themselves more effectively—“they are the best kept secret in Pinellas County . . . a sleepy little giant.” This would require a shift in the way Extension engages “because it’s so curriculum based and it’s not that sexy topic when you go over to Extension. I think for tourism you [have] got to change that. Make an appetite for it.”

While a tourism initiative would require the CES to expand its natural resource focus, it also needs to shift its approach to engaging new stakeholders. For ecotourism, Extension would need to fit itself into the business-sector point of view: “Extension would have to provide a program that brings into consideration that Chambers are business-centric. This is something we think will be good for business and the county and for quality of life.” Once they do that, there will be chances to support the growth of an ecotourism sector.

Respondents believe that the CES can help educate locals and businesses simultaneously by attending meetings and building coalitions, by training businesses to guide the implementation of sustainable practices, by identifying ecologically valuable areas and helping with environmental restoration and remediation, informing tourists about ecology, conservation, and climate change, and by including the community in participatory management and citizen science programs.

Some chamber officials even think a task force among decision makers would be a great thing to create: “Having a task force that could be the go to, to bounce this off of and have feedback and go back to Extension and say, “okay, this is where we’re at today,” and you all continue to evolve with that core group of people, I think you would find great success in that.”

Most importantly, if the municipality and Extension decide to proceed with this effort, then officials stress that the community and businesses all have to be on the same page: “Most of the great

communities that do ecotourism give you a sense that everyone's in on it. It's not just tree-huggers, it's in the value system of that community . . . if we're going to be ecotourists, we have to be eco-residents. We can't have any ecotourists and a non-eco-resident sitting next to each other. That's not a believable experience."

Altogether, responses from interviews depict an opportunity for ecotourism support and moderate growth, but one that will require lasting collaboration, partnership, and leadership. "Ultimately, it's going to take cross-section of private, public, and government sectors coming together over this topic. . . . Each agency has a role to play. Extension will have the job of working across 24 municipalities with 24 forms of government and 17 chambers—it's splintered but finding the place you can reach will be challenging but important."

5. Discussion

5.1. Ecotourism Growth Opportunity

Research finds that ecotourism is possible, and desirable, in Pinellas County from manager and provider points of view. Although the urban environment might not fit traditional notions of ecotourism, expanding this market creates opportunities for people to connect with nature, have experiences they can learn from, and facilitates economic growth while promoting the values of sustainability [37–39]. As other research highlights, ecotourism growth can offer mutually beneficial outcomes for economic and ecological systems, helping with coastal resilience, flood control, and biodiversity protection [40]. Chambers of commerce would benefit by more entrepreneurial partnerships, business opportunities, and communication to serve members. The CVB will be satisfied with opportunities to put more heads in beds, and the parks and conservation departments will benefit by more environmental stewardship initiatives and visitors that contribute to conservation and citizen science.

Apart from the opportunity, research also finds that decision makers are willing to participate in these initiatives, but they do not want to take the lead. Most decision makers indicated that they will not be first adopters—that the market must be easy to establish in order to pursue this type of campaign. This outcome resembles findings of Byrd [31], that DMOs will not lead stakeholder involvement for sustainable tourism development, preferring low investment and low risk. However, this research also finds that DMOs would participate if outside leadership is provided and investment and risk was absorbed by tourism providers.

On the market-supply side, research found that there is a reason and interest to do this by the tourism providers. Similar comments were made across interviews that indicate providers perceive a market for ecotourism. With growing tourist interest in sustainable offerings [3], a positive entrepreneurial environment for green businesses growth, and willingness by local decision makers to support community and business stakeholders interested in ecotourism, many of the right conditions do exist for successful ecotourism development.

To make use of this opportunity and increase ecotourism development, success will require a collaborative effort as was predicted in the background literature and communicated in administrator interviews. According to Waligo et al. [22], "collaboration had the greatest positive impact on sustainability initiatives . . . and was the result of proactive leadership" (p. 351). Stein and others [22] remind readers the benefit in doing this: "strong collaboration and creative partnerships are likely to best provide the economic benefits to private businesses and reduce financial and environmental costs to public land management agencies" (p. 169).

Yet, again highlighted by Waligo et al. [22], "while there are increasing recommendations for the involvement of stakeholders in [sustainable tourism], there is no clear understanding of how best to achieve that goal" [22] (p. 346). In addition to stakeholder collaboration, successful sustainable tourism development requires decision-making *processes* that identify a plausible future and the pathways to them [6] (p. 349). In the last part of the discussion, stakeholder involvement and an engagement

process are brought together to demonstrate how a tourism partnership would form and how resulting collaboration can lead to enhancing an ecotourism market.

5.2. Defining Roles in an Extension–Tourism Partnership

Using the MSIM framework, it is possible to replicate the process that others have followed to facilitate stakeholder engagement that leads to sustainable tourism development. The original framework (see Figure 1) considers the complexity of sustainable tourism and the need for stakeholders to adapt. Central to the framework is the idea of a facilitator who leads the process of “handholding” to achieve desired effects, “which symbolizes the wide range of activities that encourage stakeholder involvement in the implementation of ST [sustainable tourism]” [22] (p. 347). Handholding represents “the reassurance, support, guidance or inspiration afforded [to] stakeholders as they engage in ST in order to overcome obstacles” [22] (p. 347) and is essential to the sustainable tourism development process: “The notion of hand-holding ensures that opportunities are optimized at every stage” [22] (p. 350).

Based on the findings of this study, we propose that Extension Service is the best stakeholder to facilitate handholding for sustainable tourism development because of its position as a regional intermediary—a “tunnel between operators,” and “a gathering area for opportunities” (Figure 2). Using the MSIM framework, we provide a clear and instructive path for how Extension could lead different stakeholders through a process that aligns visions, needs, and stakeholder groups together for sustainable tourism development through capacity building, education, and program support.

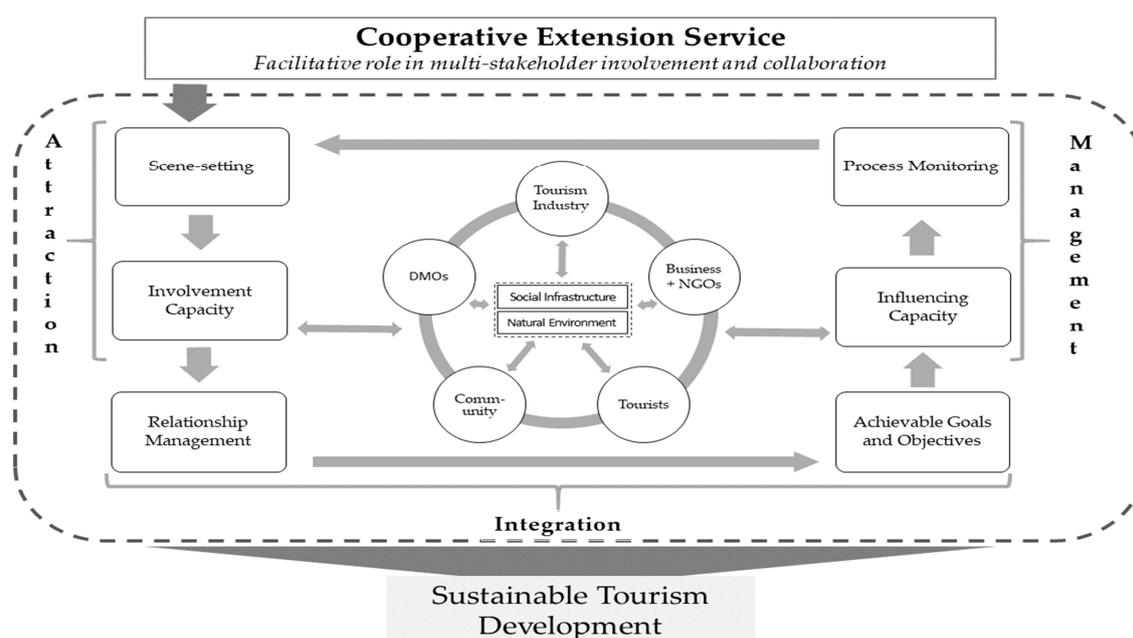


Figure 2. Integrated framework of sustainable tourism development depicting the cyclical MSIM process led by the Cooperative Extension Service. (1) The process begins with attraction—setting the scene for sustainability and involving current stakeholders. (2) The process continues through integration—building relationships among stakeholders and establishing and implementing a practical action plan. (3) The process reaches its culmination in management—during which more stakeholders are recruited (or join), and outcomes are measured and monitored before the adaptive process begins again. As depicted, this process involves tourism professionals, businesses, residents, and other destination stakeholders, which in turn influence, and are influenced by, social and natural systems. Composite diagram of figures in [22,30,33].

5.2.1. Attraction

The first level of the MSIM framework focuses on scene setting and stakeholder involvement capacity. Scene setting is the effort to build understanding and awareness of sustainable tourism through communication with stakeholder groups. Recognition of stakeholder capacity seeks to identify various stakeholders, and differing interests, to understand which stakeholders will work collectively on activities and initiatives, in what way, and to what extent. This includes in-depth interaction with residents, tourists, and tourism professionals.

Scene Setting

The need for scene setting was called for in all data collection phases. Setting the scene physically, respondents communicated need to increase awareness with visitors and locals about what natural areas are available throughout the county, how marine and terrestrial ecosystems are interlinked, and where these outdoor opportunities can be accessed.

There was also clear indication for need to set the scene culturally. From DMO points of view, businesses and the community are not actively thinking about ecotourism or the need to incorporate responsible tourism education and messaging into their practices or lifestyles (though there are initiatives underway for plastic waste and beach restoration). To create a responsible tourism environment, it will be necessary to disseminate more information about what eco- and sustainable tourism means, what principles and practices are related to these tourism forms, and how businesses, residents, and visitors impact local ecology.

Additionally, there is interest in understanding limits of acceptable change in an ecotourism-based destination, how impacts are prevented and mitigated, as well as the economic potential of this market and the ability for ecotourism to justify the reclamation of urban sites for greenspace. Learning and disseminating this information is not only important for informed sustainable development but will also increase ecotourism awareness.

CES can support scene setting by assisting with communicating the pillars of sustainability and the importance of responsible tourism outside of its normal operational areas. A local interactive map and database of available opportunities and potential recreation areas was suggested as helpful to increase awareness. Establishing a shared vision of what sustainability and ecotourism means in the county is necessary. A training program for ecotourism certification and standards would support developing this awareness and compliance.

DMOs will also play a role in scene setting by positively endorsing and promoting an effort to create a local ecotourism brand. This will require the CES to shift from being a source of information and support, to a participant in business and community meetings where this identity must be established.

Stakeholder Involvement Capacity

The questionnaire found that nearly all respondents would “very often” or “always” participate in CES programs for ecotourism with the exception of training or education in marketing and promotion, economic assessments, managing tourist impacts, and providing volunteer and interpretation opportunities. DMOs and the CES will need to assume these responsibilities.

Currently, ecotourism-branded activities are limited to environmental education centers and, reportedly, only one provider. “Friends of” park groups might be interested in this market, but there are few other formal groups involved and/or interested in local sustainability efforts. Most businesses do not want more regulations and are assumed to have low interest in sustainable tourism development. In an area like Pinellas County, there is limited involvement in ecotourism because there are limited natural areas and limited promotion of ecotourism tenets. However, the natural assets Pinellas does possess (e.g., 570 miles of shoreline, 24 parks, and 74 miles of trail) are well managed, biologically diverse, and offer a range of activities and experiences. Although they are not currently seen as

major tourist attractions, presumably, after effort is invested into scene setting, more stakeholders will participate in tailoring the destination around protection of cultural and natural heritage.

Working within the institutional frameworks of DMOs is also necessary. Chambers are focused on product development and the CVB is focused on marketing. Since ecotourism-branded products are not currently a visitor priority, these are not the products being developed, and so it is not the scene being marketed. Notwithstanding, tourism authorities are willing to support sustainable tourism providers given the opportunity to do so. They signaled that this support will increase as more stakeholders become involved in developing the market. A later stage of this framework will instruct on increasing stakeholder involvement.

5.2.2. Integration

The second level of MSIM is integration. This level includes stages of relationship management and pursuit of achievable objectives. Relationship management requires mediating stakeholder perspectives and building support for the implementation of sustainable tourism through networking and partnerships and working towards a shared vision established in scene setting. In regard to pursuing achievable objectives, handholding focuses on the design and implementation of practical initiatives with limited barriers in order to maximize participation and effective outcomes.

Relationship Management

Collaborating with interested stakeholders is essential to delivering on the needs and interests of current stakeholders. By itself, this support will help advance sustainable tourism involvement. Workshops and training programs identified from the nominal groups (Tables A1 and A2) and questionnaire (Tables 1–4) can be administered to build collaboration and create relationships across networks.

Although tourism often focuses on people outside of a region, these results highlight respondent desires to engage local people in sustainable nature-based tourism and recreation activities. Specifically, tourism professionals are interested in working with residents and creating partnerships with businesses. They also believe it is important to foster collaboration among county officials and other government agencies. In addition to attending meetings, the CES should convene talks, workshops, and other public events that bring tourism authorities, businesses, and residents together.

Including DMOs into these efforts in a supportive role, rather than asking for leadership and responsibility, will bring sustainable tourism businesses into their radar and lead to more representation and support. At this stage, there is need to begin shifting awareness and interest of ecotourism from siloed stakeholder frames to the shared perception of sustainability. It will be during programming that the CES and others are able to engage in information and value exchange that helps stakeholders perceive needs and opportunities outside of their original social, economic, or environmental missions. During this phase, it is important for the CES to engage non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-driven sustainability campaigns to strengthen its presence as a collaborative stakeholder within local nature conservation efforts related to tourism. In this capacity, the CES will be able to communicate its role as a “bridging stakeholder,” working across silos to advance business, community development, and conservation goals.

Pursuit of Achievable Objectives

Most data received from research supports scene setting, stakeholder involvement, and relationship management. Little information was obtained about specific objectives with measurable goals and targets of ecotourism advancement. Some general objectives included increasing access to recreation areas, providing more interpretive programming throughout the county, establishing citizen science programs, and developing conservation programs and adaptive management projects that the public can participate in across the destination.

Because achievable objectives are central to advancing sustainable tourism development, the CES must lead additional stakeholder dialog with DMOs and businesses to develop a practical plan with strategies and actions that can benefit stakeholders. These plans should not increase the costs or dilute the missions of tourism providers or businesses, but rather incorporate easy to achieve, yet highly visible steps that current sustainable tourism stakeholders can take to strengthen the industry.

5.2.3. Management

The third level of MSIM focusses on influencing implementation capacity and monitoring involvement at a management level. Influencing implementation is about increasing stakeholder involvement as well as informing the outcomes of stakeholder efforts. Finally, monitoring stakeholder involvement is meant to identify stakeholder motivations and further develop strategies and improvements to maintain their participation and ensure operations are aligned with the goals of sustainable development. This is the end and beginning of the adaptive process of attraction, integration, and management.

Influencing Implementation Capacity

To expand involvement and implementation capacity will require making ecotourism relevant to more stakeholders, including businesses, locals, DMOs, and the CES, while avoiding punitive policies and campaigns. Through outreach to schools, NGOs, and other businesses, it is possible for the CES to expand stakeholder involvement, so long as the CES clearly communicates and demonstrates relevance and benefits of this market to stakeholders in their language (i.e., learning, market value, conservation outcomes). Because knowledge of the CES is currently limited, efforts to increase involvement in CES programs must happen alongside efforts to expand ecotourism.

With the right community and business involvement, chambers are willing to support more products and services that members, residents, and visitors want. Once chambers are involved, the CVB will have motive to market ecotourism more broadly to conference groups and conventions and endorse an ecotourism brand for the destination.

As the local economic development agency is focused on expanding markets unrelated to natural resources, lobbying and evidence of ecotourism's profitability—by way of increased overnight activity—is needed to create more top-down support. After this brand is established and top-down support is received, more opportunities for partnerships and entrepreneurship can drive the increase in access and physical space dedicated to natural areas, recreation, and environmental learning.

Monitoring Stakeholder Involvement

The purpose of monitoring stakeholder involvement is to maintain collaboration and minimize conflict. By incorporating ecotourism into its objective, the CES will need to establish a permanent role in this natural resource industry. As the sustainable tourism market expands physically, culturally, and socially, advancing ecotourism and stakeholder involvement will increase in complexity. These environments will change, and so adaptation and ongoing communication and engagement across stakeholder groups will be crucial to providing support for the evolving needs of businesses, residents, and visitors.

In addition to programming, education, and hosting and attending meetings, a strategy to *intercept* residents and visitors with a message of social and ecological sustainability will help shape the destination around sustainability. It will also help to identify who is involved in what ways, and how the overall vision is progressing. Providing *front-line training* for volunteers and employees at chambers and other tourism information hubs will be essential to communicating this message at a destination-wide scale. As one respondent conveyed, doing this will instill an environmental ethic into the destination, so that after people visit, they leave more of an environmental constituent than when they arrived. Combined, this will attract new entrants to the industry on both the supply and demand side.

6. Conclusions

Previous research demonstrates empirically and theoretically that stakeholder involvement is essential for sustainable tourism development [22–25,28,31,41–43]. However, because of variation in missions and priorities between different DMO agents and other authorities, little guidance is in place to encourage stakeholder collaboration for ecotourism or guide the growth of a general sustainable tourism market in US municipalities. This paper has worked to highlight the needs of tourism stakeholders and illustrate an involvement process that the Extension Service or another leadership entity can use to support ecotourism and sustainable tourism development in destinations where outdoor tourism and recreation opportunities exist.

Research found a moderate number of stakeholders with a large customer base interested in ecotourism market involvement. Although not directly generalizable beyond Florida municipalities, our findings indicate that ecotourism can occur in unexpected locations (with the right natural resource assets), but the possibility for market growth requires collaboration between businesses, destination managers, researchers, and communities. Results also support the need for a mediating agent to play a substantive role in facilitating such a campaign, confirming Boyd and Butler [30] and Drumm and Moore's [33] ecotourism management research. Using the multi-stakeholder framework developed by Waligo et al. [22], this paper has detailed how an effective Extension–tourism partnership can be created for that purpose.

In places like Florida, where there is heavy mass tourism and high use of natural areas, our evidence suggests that the main limiting factor for ecotourism is a structured collaborative planning and implementation process. Accordingly, by increasing CES efforts to support DMOs and businesses, it is possible to effectively increase responsible tourism markets. By leading this type of effort, ecotourism growth can increase responsible nature-based tourism promotion and natural area use. Therein, even if the idea of sustainable tourism is about protecting the integrity of the market, the market being protected will be protecting right back.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Ecotourism Growth Opportunities Discussed during Nominal Group Meetings.

Ecotourism Growth	Create	Combine	Engage
Land-based tourism providers	<p>Define ecotourism at a destination level</p> <p>Develop ecotourism certification and standards</p> <p>Seek out and establish certified operators</p> <p>Host ecology-themed workshops that visitors can join, with tours to different protected areas in the county</p> <p>Provide hands-on/working opportunities in natural areas (expand voluntourism)</p> <p>Create a central provider/point for ecotourism opportunities</p> <p>Create an “outdoor city pass”</p> <p>Expand kayaking market and access for watercrafts</p> <p>Provide guided nature tours of unique natural features of Pinellas</p> <p>Provide more conservation education to the public</p> <p>Create a Bureau for ecotourism</p>	<p>Get help from county and state to endorse and promote explicit ecotourism market and brand</p> <p>Compile a priority list for adaptive management needs and projects</p> <p>Package cultural and urban tours with ecotours</p> <p>Facilitate increased networking and awareness across providers to help build partnerships</p> <p>Work directly with Chambers of Commerce</p>	<p>Focus on managing tourist behaviors</p> <p>Require quality/performance training of tourism professionals interested in being ecotourism providers</p> <p>Promote “stay” cations to locals</p> <p>Identify tourists and target market with ecotourism opportunities</p> <p>* Conceal environmental sustainability messaging in marketing and promotion</p> <p>Incentivize or simplify programs for environmental cleanup</p> <p>Focus on getting kids and families outdoors</p> <p>Work with schools, teachers, and underrepresented youth</p> <p>* A recommendation for how to frame communication during engagement tourist market and provider communications</p>
Marine-based tourism providers	<p>Underwater ecosystem education</p> <p>Marine Exploration Center (places that teach about other environmental science processes)</p> <p>Use beaches as education areas</p> <p>Develop more access to the water for sailboats and other vessels</p> <p>Add environmental education to sailing products and services</p> <p>Create fish tagging programs</p> <p>Increase access to Pinellas County nature trails and education</p>	<p>Cross-sector marketing with other environmental education providers, broadening opportunities for environmental awareness</p> <p>Establish more collaboration between land and water stakeholders and ecosystems: “what’s on land ends up in the water”</p>	<p>Citizen science programs</p> <p>Promote sustainable fishery programs and management</p> <p>Develop more education and awareness about local ecosystems</p> <p>Educate hotels on sustainable tourism activities and practices</p> <p>Inform local employees about responsible practices and impressions</p> <p>Work with local public schools to connect them with local nature and ecology</p> <p>Promote hands-on nature education</p> <p>Promote unique species, ecosystems, and natural phenomenon of the county</p>
Natural Resource Managers	<p>Coordinate and promote more charter fishing</p> <p>Develop and provide more interpretive programming activities for younger age</p> <p>Develop overnight accommodations for natural areas—coordinate with private sector</p> <p>Create more canoe and kayak launch areas and improve the markings of the water trail (incorporate w/Pinellas Trail)</p> <p>* Concern that there is no need for any more tourism infrastructure and programming in protected areas—chipping away at the conservation of spaces and replacing with human activities</p> <p>Create more interactive activities and adventure</p> <p>Expand paddling</p> <p>Design more places for off-road cycling</p> <p>Continue developing blue-way trail, bring to reality</p>	<p>Bring art opportunities into outdoor space</p> <p>Use ferry/shuttle system for ecotourism platform</p>	<p>Continue maintaining and protecting beaches</p> <p>Communicate the message better with shuttles, tour boats, and rental companies</p> <p>Marketing for voluntourism and “alternative spring breaks” in the area could draw in university students in the state and elsewhere</p>

Table A2. Ranking of Growth Opportunities Voted on during Nominal Group Meetings.

	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Land-based tourism providers	Dedicated ecotourism agent and responsibilities	Ecotourism certification and training coupled with ongoing communication with the Cooperative Extension Service (CES)	Support and participation of Convention and Visitor Bureau in endorsing an ecotourism market	Collaboration between all tourism industry stakeholders	Dedicated ecotourism events calendar
Marine-based tourism providers	Tie: Public database for ecotourism Tie: Maps and marketing of specific areas	Extension partnership with Chamber of Commerce to support ecotourism products and services	Tie: market Tampa Bay specifically (as a destination), “not just beaches” Tie: Professional networking across businesses, agencies, and organizations		
Natural Resource Managers	Assess “carrying capacity” for various areas and activities (specifically, to inform recreation access and balance with conservation goals)	Conduct an economic impact assessment to understand dollar expenditure per person per day on nature-based tourism activities (who is coming, where are they staying, what are they doing)	Tie: Certify and educate rental and charter boat companies and other users so they meet county requirements—and thereby create impetus for county endorsement Tie: Market ecotourism to conference groups and conventions, and attempt to recruit clients from the CVB sector	Learn from other state-wide examples for drawing, hosting, managing nature-based tourists—“we’re all dealing with the same ecosystem”	

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