



Ecotourism in Florida

Letting Nature Work For You



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Ecotourism in Florida: Letting Nature Work for You¹

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Introduction

Florida contains a diversity of natural and cultural wonders. Although national and state parks and forests abound throughout the state, many of Florida's private landowners also have the potential to show off some of Florida's unique natural and cultural attractions. Nature-based tourism is a comparatively new industry in Florida, and it is rich with potential benefits for Florida's landowners and business operators. Relatively few businesses have taken advantage of nature as a tourism opportunity and opened their lands to visitors, but they offer valuable lessons for other businesses potentially interested in sharing their resources with visitors.

This catalog provides case studies of ten private nature-based tourism businesses throughout Florida. Each case study provides a brief description of the site, presents the start-up and operational challenges encountered, and highlights the *lessons learned* by the various owners/operators. Finally the benefits to the owner/manager and the reasons why they "stick with it" are provided.

In compiling these case studies, considerable effort was made to select sites from across the length and breadth of Florida and to include sites that reflected the spectrum of natural resource-based tourism offerings in the state. In spite of this variety, several common threads became apparent by the end of the site visits and interviews.

- Operating a nature-based tourism site requires a great deal of dedication and flexibility.
- Many owner/operators were unaware of resource persons or agencies that could assist them in both getting their businesses off the ground and dealing with ongoing operational

challenges. This was particularly the case for farmlands which were being partially or fully converted to recreational purposes.

- Visitation to these privately owned or operated natural areas is dominated by residents of Florida with some visitation from nearby Georgia and Alabama.
- The Internet has become a tremendous marketing tool for small and larger businesses alike, while word-of-mouth advertising remains a very cost effective, yet significant one.

It is impossible to tell the full story of all these sites in just a few short pages. Every owner and manager has an important and valuable story to tell. All information in this catalog came from the owners themselves, and we did our best to use their wording to describe their challenges, benefits, and lessons, where possible. We hope that the insights shared by our participants will at least encourage landowners or managers to see that using natural resources for tourism has many benefits and that hurdles can be overcome with a lot of determination and some creativity.

Acknowledgements

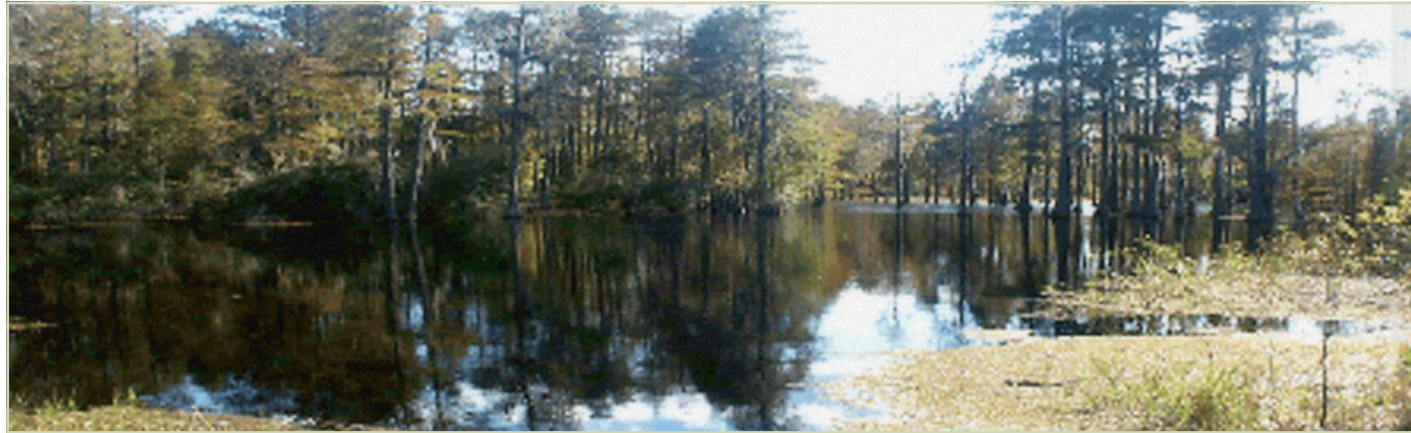
Some special words of thanks are in order. There are ten sites featured in this catalog, which entailed ten site visits and ten interviews. This required coordination and a willingness on the part of the site managers or owners to take some time out to participate in these interviews and site tours. They were all gracious hosts and very enthusiastic about what they have been able to accomplish in spite of the many challenges faced. We are very grateful to them, not only for agreeing to participate in this project, but also for their openness and willingness to share information.

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DP Nature Tours

White Springs, FL

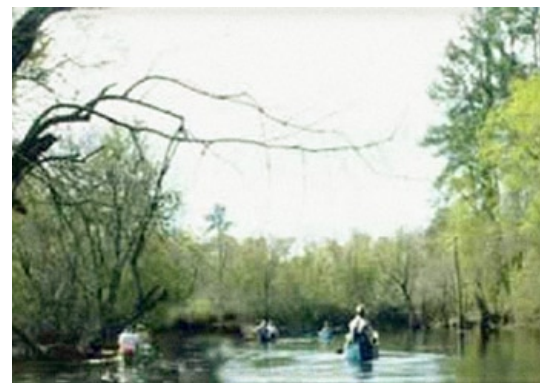


Site Description

DP Nature Tours is owned and operated by Dennis and Dorothy Price. Now in its third year of operation, DP Nature offers a selection of walking, hiking, and canoe tours in the Suwannee River Valley and Okefenokee Swamp ecosystem of North Florida.

Customized tours are guided by Dennis Price, a geologist by profession. Dennis started the company out of a desire to help others explore and appreciate north Florida's natural resources, recognizing that these resources are not yet a major attraction in Florida's tourism industry.

DP's clients have been older out-of-state visitors who tend to book in small groups. They are interested in moving at an unhurried pace and finding out about the natural ecosystems around them. Although DP is interested in clients who want to sightsee, take photos, and keep things at a slower pace, Dennis is not averse to developing tours for any kind of client, as long as they enjoy the resources responsibly.



As is typical with most businesses, DP has business cards and brochures, but most of its marketing is done through its Web site. DP also benefits from marketing on the Hamilton County Tourism Development Council Web site. Tours are done by reservation only, since the operation is still a small one.

Challenges

- Accessing a market segment interested in the specific aspect of Florida's natural resources i.e., not the sun, sand, and sea.
- Positioning the company and simply getting information circulated about the company has been difficult in the absence of prior tourism knowledge and limited access to existing tourism networks.
- Growing the business: increasing the number of customers.
- Hosting a company Web site has proven to be the most useful marketing tool, but keeping the Web site updated has not been easy.
- Developing tourism has been somewhat limited since people who live in the county tend not to see the natural and cultural resources in their county as potential tourism attractions or themselves as county ambassadors.

Benefits

- Being able to showcase north Florida's beautiful natural resources and educate others about these resources.
- Being able to supplement your income through your love of nature and the outdoors.
- Building a business from which you will eventually be able to make a living.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Being able to manage individuals and groups is a necessary skill.
- Engaging guests and holding their attention is critical, so the personality of the tour operator is important; that person has to "like people".
- Embarking on such a business may be difficult initially because of limited revenue. It may be wise to start on a part-time basis and keep your regular job if possible to have income while the business grows.
- Setting up the business may require a lot of research up front. You have to be self-reliant.
- Being flexible is important.
- Having your Web site's link on other companies' or agencies' Web sites is very useful in helping potential clients to find you.
- Keeping the Web site updated with current information is important.
- Having appropriate knowledge or being willing to improve your knowledge about the natural resources is essential to a successful nature-based tourism business.



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Farmer Brown's Bed & Breakfast

Brooksville, FL



Site Description

Farmer Brown's is a small Bed & Breakfast (B & B) set on a working farm in west central Florida. It is located in relative proximity to both Orlando and Tampa. Owned by Fred and Marcia Brown, the B & B and farm are the realization of both owners' lifelong dreams.

The B & B has been open to visitors for approximately four years and its guests are mainly families with young children. Opening their home to the public allows the Browns to share the experience of living and working on a farm with people who would not otherwise have such an opportunity. Most guests originate within the state of Florida, with a very small percentage coming from outside of the state. The peak season tends to be from January until the beginning of May.

Though designed to look like a traditional farmhouse, the B & B is a relatively new building, which has three guestrooms within the farmhouse. The 45-acre farm also has pine trees, hayfields, an orange grove, a protected wetlands, and opportunities to see wildlife which

are all available to guests. In addition, visitors to the farm are able to participate in some typical farming activities under the guidance of the owners.

The Internet has been Farmer Brown's primary marketing strategy. Brochures have also been used to advertise, but are only used to a limited extent because they are expensive to produce.

Benefits

- Having flexibility in your day to day operations.
- Having the freedom as a small B & B to accept bookings or not. Your time can be your own if you want.
- Interacting with guests can be quite enjoyable.
- Running a B & B is easier than some other businesses.
- Supplementing the farm's revenues.
- Operating a B & B may have tax advantages.
- Being able to keep farmlands under production.

Challenges

- Not knowing which agency or resource person to turn to for guidance on starting a B & B.
- Operating the B & B on agricultural acreage required special exemption from agricultural zoning.
- Being able to construct a limited number of guest rooms because the residents of the area were strongly opposed to having a B & B nearby.
- Modifying the building after construction because of additional requirements from the fire department resulted in some financial hardship for the owners.
- Advertising is costly.
- Displaying promotional material in Visit Florida's welcome center on I-75 is costly.
- Finding the B & B is a bit difficult given its location. This makes it less attractive to potential customers. Adequate directional signage may increase visits to your site.
- Keeping your site insured can really impact your business because the cost of liability insurance can be prohibitive.
- Claiming against your insurance after a disaster may be difficult or sometimes impossible, as the Browns discovered after a series of hurricanes in 2004 and 2005 which severely affected the B & B and farm.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Projecting customer volume is an important part of deciding on the number of rooms to build; otherwise, you may end up regretting that you did not build more.
- Understanding the market for the B & B is important. Try to determine the kind of people who would be likely to spend money to stay in your rooms. You can then plan for that group and avoid surprises.
- Seeking out information on your own may be the only way to get the business operational. Owners must be diligent and be prepared to take such steps.
- Operating a B & B on a similar scale to Farmer Brown's is unlikely to be a major source of revenue.
- Being tenacious is a useful characteristic.
- Participating in the University of Florida's periodic workshops (such as the one on operating B & Bs) and interacting with county extension agents can be very helpful.
- Networking with similar businesses can be very useful.

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Florida Eco-Safaris

St. Cloud, FL



Site Description

Florida Eco-Safaris is based at Forever Florida and the Crescent J Ranch, the former of which is a wildlife preserve. William and Margaret Broussard purchased the land in honor of their son Allen, a wildlife ecologist, who died in 1990 of complications from Hodgkin's Disease.

The two adjoining sites combined are 4,700 acres of pristine Florida wilderness and a working cattle ranch, which is home to the last remaining "cracker" cattle and horses in the state. The Great Florida Birding Trail also runs through Forever Florida.

Florida Eco-Safaris offers its guests a variety of ways to get to understand and appreciate the natural resources on site. Activities include horseback safaris, motorized safaris, a petting zoo, and nature trails, among others. During the summer months several camps are offered for children and teenagers.

Florida Eco-Safaris has been in operation for six to seven years and was set up in part to provide financial support for Forever Florida's conservation strategy. Customers are mainly



from surrounding counties, though Europe and the United Kingdom in particular are seen as markets with high potential. Florida Eco-Safaris clients tend to be small family groups or larger community groups.

Since the UK has emerged as a potentially strong market, a concentrated effort has been made to attract visitors from this area. In general, marketing for Florida Eco-Safaris has consisted of brochures, rack cards, advertising in local publications and newspapers, familiarization (FAM) trips, and through the company's Web site. The Internet has proven to be the most effective tool.

Challenges

- Financing Florida Eco-Safaris was difficult in the initial stages, with funding coming primarily from the founder's personal finances.
- Generating sufficient funds for ongoing operations continues to be a concern for the company.
- Having experience in marketing and general tourism operations needed to manage visitors services and perform other management functions efficiently was a challenge in the early stages of the company. Limited expertise continues to impact current operations.
- Finding and retaining employees who are appropriately skilled have also been cause for concern, particularly because busy periods fluctuate.

Benefits

- Fulfilling the dream of Allen Broussard who recognised the human impact on biodiversity extinction and dedicated his life to trying to effect change against this trend.
- Contributing to the understanding and preservation of Florida's natural resources.
- Helping to expand the natural areas in the county that are maintained in a close to natural state.
- Protecting an area that is important to the wider community which may be the last remaining expanse of continuous area in its natural state within that community.
- Offering the opportunity to increase awareness and understanding of natural resources.
- Offering children and teenagers the opportunity to enjoy and learn more about Florida's natural resources through a variety of stayover camps.
- Achieving one of the main objectives of Florida Eco-Safaris by generating funds to support the conservation efforts of Forever Florida.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Constructing a large building is not necessary to achieve a company's objectives. A permanent building with all of its operational costs may not be necessary at all.
- Starting an operation at a manageable scale may be a wise choice. The business can expand as opportunities arise.
- Having an achievable vision supported by clear and realistic goals and objectives is important.
- Developing a solid business plan developed prior to the start-up of the company is also important. That plan should be reviewed as often as necessary.
- Planning never ends and if you think you've planned enough you probably haven't.
- Understanding the role of the business – whether supplemental or complete source of income – is critical to the entrepreneur.
- Becoming a member of the visitor and convention bureau and similar agencies is valuable.

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Ginnie Springs Outdoors, LLC

High Springs, FL



Site Description

Ginnie Springs comprises over 200 wooded acres along the banks of the Santa Fe River. In addition to being bordered by the Santa Fe River, Ginnie Springs boasts seven fresh water springs for snorkelling and scuba diving.

The site offers a wide variety of activities including campsites, cottages, a boat ramp, volleyball courts, picnic pavilions, and a store, among others. Due to its proximity to the University of Florida's almost 50,000 students and the company's willingness to allow alcohol, Ginnie Springs provides people in their 20's with a unique opportunity to experience nature in a social context.

Originally owned by the husband and wife team of Barbara Wray-Suggs and Robert Wray, Ginnie Springs is now solely owned by Wray-Suggs and managed by her son Mark Wray. The company celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2006 and the business has grown substantially from its opening in 1976.

Ginnie Springs averages 150,000 visitors yearly, most of whom are divers and/or cavers visiting in small groups. However, during the summer in particular, larger groups (including some business groups) tend to visit. Most visitors



originate within the state of Florida, but there are a number of out-of-state and international visitors. The springs tend to be more popular with international visitors during the winter months.

Word-of-mouth advertising has proven to be the most effective marketing tool for Ginnie Springs over the years, though in recent years, the Internet has become a very useful tool as well. Through word-of-mouth, Ginnie Springs has a significant amount of repeat business and has benefited from a number of referrals. For instance, there is one group that has been visiting every year for 17 years and another that has been visiting for 29 years. Brochures and other promotional materials are used and advertisements are run in *Dive* and other magazines. The company also has representation at trade shows.

Challenges

- Overcoming resistance from members of the surrounding community who were opposed to ending open or free access to an area that had for some time been a popular recreation site.
- Surmounting resistance from members of the local community because the Wrays were outsiders to the area.
- Being forced to give the area a facelift as it suffered from intense environmental impact due to no prior management.

Benefits

- Preserving some of Florida's natural resources, by taking care of the river and springs and making them available to the public.
- Working with natural resources is an enjoyable way to make a living.
- Interacting with a range of customers.
- Expanding the business over the years in accordance with the company's master plan, from a site with very basic facilities initially to a site with a wide range of facilities.
- Running a site that is financially successful.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- A privately managed recreation spring provides unique opportunities in the region since most publicly accessible springs in Florida are managed by local or state agencies.
- Depending on the type of services/activities being offered, liability may be a significant issue.
- Being full-time and hands-on in the business is necessary to get the business started and keep it operational.
- Creating and using a business plan is key.
- Interacting with customers is very important.
- Regulating the use of natural areas is necessary, but operators/ managers should try not to overburden users with extensive rules.
- Offering a variety of activities is better than offering one activity only.
- Opening your property to the public is a major undertaking and much consideration needs to be given to understanding what this will entail (site modifications, insurance, having visitors around constantly) before the changes are made.

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Ichetucknee Family Canoe and Cabins

Fort White, FL



Site Description

As its name implies, Ichetucknee Family Canoe and Cabins (IFCC) is family owned and operated by Vernis Wray and family. A campground which offers primitive camping and cabins as well as RV hookups, IFCC has been operating for over eight years under its current ownership, but existed for some time prior to the Wrays' takeover.

IFCC is strategically located close to the northern entrance of the Ichetucknee River State Park. In addition to the lodging facilities, IFCC has a laundry room, a general store, and rental of kayak, canoes, rafts, and tubes. Floating is offered on the Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers.

Visitation to IFCC is seasonal and most customers originate within Florida. On average 10-15% of visitors come from outside of the state, mainly from Georgia. Prior to the events of September 11, 2001, Europeans comprised a significant portion of IFCC's customers, but this is no longer the case.

Most visitors travel in groups: families, youth groups and church groups. Repeat business is relatively high, but visitation tends to be



seasonal. Holiday weekends, particularly Memorial Day and Labor Day, are when IFCC has the most customers. In addition to their overnight guests, they entertain many day visitors who rent tubes or canoes to float on the rivers.

Marketing of IFCC is done through their Web site for the most part, but the Web site needs to have regular updates. Sales promotions are also done online, and a discount coupon is sometimes available on the Web site. Additionally, IFCC mails out flyers, uses brochures in a few different designs, and hosts familiarization (FAM) trips.

Challenges

- Understanding and satisfying customer needs.
- Advertising the business is costly.
- Insuring against liability is costly.
- Having adequate directional signs along the public roadways to direct customers to the site.
- Declining visitation to the state park threatens the survival of the business.
- Adapting to the policy changes at the state park such as having a single outfitter operating within the park boundaries.

Benefits

- Being your own boss is rewarding.
- Interacting with different people and sharing in their experiences.
- Impacting the wider community by contracting with other small businesses.
- Being able to survive and earn income from the business in spite of serious challenges.
- Building a business that can generate enough revenue to take care of your family.
- Building a business that can be passed on to your children.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Understanding your market is important because it helps you to offer customers the activities, services, and facilities in which they are interested.
- Succeeding in the business demands long hours, hard physical labor (transporting canoes), and dedication. Therefore, having a strong work ethic is critical.
- Having a diverse operation is useful because money is coming in from different revenue sources.
- Satisfying customer needs is paramount and you need to be able to respond immediately if anything arises.
- Getting timely customer feedback is important to maintain high customer satisfaction levels.
- Working with guests and staff requires good communication skills.



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Kayak Amelia

Jacksonville, FL



Site Description

Kayak Amelia, owned and operated by Ray and Jody Hetchka, is the official service provider for Big Talbot Island and Little Talbot Island State Parks. In operation for ten years, Kayak Amelia won the State Parks' bid to become the official outfitter four years ago.

Kayak Amelia offers a selection of guided tours and canoe and kayak rental. Guided tours are usually conducted by Ray who regards a tour as an opportunity for his clients to relax and enjoy nature, hear about the history of the Timucuas and other inhabitants of the area, understand the ecology of the salt marshes, and receive some tidbits of environmental education.

Kayak Amelia for the Hetchkas is a labor of love: a chance to use their hobby as the basis of their business and generate income, to educate locals and tourists alike about the importance of natural resource protection, and to work with others in the community to safeguard these resources.

Ray and Jody estimate that their customers are roughly balanced: 50% locals and 50% tourists. These figures represent a change over their years of operation from a customer base that used to be about 70% tourists. Amelia Island, a well-



known tourist area, is the source of most of their domestic and international tourists.

Kayak Amelia's customers are mainly adult, with less than 25% being children. Most tourists who use their services come from nearby Georgia, but they also entertain visitors from other US states and many countries around the world.

Marketing for Kayak Amelia is primarily done through its Web site. About 60% of their customers find out about them in this way. The company has also benefited from being featured in promotional material for Amelia Island and some of its hotels, features in well known regional magazines, and membership in VISIT FLORIDA™. Word-of-mouth advertising has also been important.

Challenges

- Starting a business without having a business background means operating by trial and error.
- Not knowing which agency in the county would be helpful in getting business start-up information; particularly because of the eco-tourism focus.
- Having the business understood enough by the visitor and convention bureau to be marketed as a tourism business instead of being dismissed as recreation for locals.
- Managing the finances well so that whatever funds are available are spent in the best way to improve the business.
- Not knowing the most effective means of advertising at times meant spending on advertising with limited or no return on the expenditure.
- Maintaining liability and other insurance uses up a sizeable chunk of revenue.
- Surviving those periods (winter) when visitor numbers are low, given the seasonality of the business.

Benefits

- Making a living from spending time in the outdoors.
- Making enough from the business so that it has grown over the years from operating out of a van at the boat ramp to being the sole on-site outfitter for the Talbot State Parks.
- Helping to protect a much loved natural resource.
- Developing a stronger bond with the natural world.
- Sharing information with customers about the importance of natural resources.
- Encouraging locals and tourists to participate in natural resource protection.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Sticking with the business through the rough times puts you in a better position to be included in publications, familiarization (FAM) trips, and other promotional events. Longevity pays off.
- Underestimating what your staff can contribute to the business may result in lost opportunities to increase customer satisfaction.
- Expecting the unexpected at all times and being prepared accordingly.
- Starting off small and "keeping the day job" initially may help to keep the business afloat.
- Earning a salary may not be possible in the early stages because of limited revenue. Personal savings may be important.
- Operating the business will cost more than the business plan estimates.
- Joining agencies like VISITFLORIDA™ and trade associations may prove beneficial in terms of marketing and information gathering.



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Long & Scott Farms and Corn Maze Adventure

Mount Dora, FL



Site Description

The Long and Scott families have owned and operated Long & Scott Farms in Mount Dora since 1963. Today the children of Frank Scott, Jr., one of the original owners, continue the tradition. Hank Scott and his wife manage the farm's daily operations; his sister Rebecca Scott Ryan is responsible for managing the maze and its complementary activities. Frank Jr., though semi-retired, still assists with daily operations.

Long & Scott Farm's first corn maze was opened to the public in 2003 in an attempt to attract more customers to the farm. The maze is set on about seven acres of the only remaining farm in central Florida still growing the famous Zellwood sweet corn. Long & Scott has the advantage of also being the only corn maze in central Florida.

Most visitors to the maze come from surrounding counties, but the farm has hosted international visitors as well. Visitors to the maze tend to be in groups which range from



small families to big community groups. In addition to the main corn maze, the farm also offers hay rides and farm tours, a rock maze, a mist maze, picnic area, and play area.

Word-of-mouth advertising, tv ads, the Internet, and promotions at various festivals have been the main strategies used to market the maze.

Challenges

- Joining tourism agencies like the visitor and convention bureau can be expensive without a visible return to the company.
- Maintaining liability insurance is a major challenge because of its extremely high cost.
- Managing natural disasters, like hurricanes, not only threaten infrastructure but deter people from visiting the farm. Since the maze is only open in October and November, impacts from hurricanes could potentially close the maze for an entire season, resulting in loss of investment.
- The maze is seasonal, open for only two months of the year, and hiring people to work for that short amount of time has been difficult. High staff turnover means that new hires always have to be trained.
- Depending on how you embark on such a project, start-up costs can be high.

Benefits

- Doing something good for the community. The maze and accompanying activities are a source of recreation for community groups and families.
- Attracting people of all ages to the farm and educating them about how farms operate.
- Meeting and interacting with a lot of nice people.
- Diversifying helps to keep farmlands in production, though the maze may not yet contribute as much to the farm's earnings as traditional farm products.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Keeping farms productive is possible if you look for opportunities and take advantage of them.
- Being persistent is necessary to see such projects through.
- Changing your thinking is critical to making the move from a wholesale-based farm to a farm offering retail services and recreation activities. A lot of attention needs to be paid to this process.
- Making the change to include recreation will require additional insurance. Exactly what insurance is needed and how much it is likely to cost should be investigated before any changes are made.
- Networking with trade associations like North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association (NAFDMA) can be very helpful.
- Taking advantage of free publicity, such as local newsletters and engaging in simple tasks like writing press releases might result in free or low cost publicity.



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Ocala Carriage & Tours

Ocala, FL



Site Description

Ocala has the distinction of being known as the horse capital of the world. For over ten years, Ocala Carriage & Tours has offered tours of this horse country. The company was created because Mary Garland, the owner, saw and capitalized on an opportunity to showcase Florida in a way that few visitors had experienced. Although Mary guides many of the tours and manages the operation, her son also plays an active role in the business.

Ocala Carriage and Tours offers a few different tours and a variety of carriages are available to suit varying tastes. Each tour is narrated and highlights the many prize winning horses, which have been bred and/or trained at farms along the tour. Ocala Carriage also rents a range of wagons, sleighs, and carriages for special occasions. Additionally, the company sells and distributes these and other horse-related equipment.

Most of Ocala Carriage's customers come from Florida, but a significant number of visitors originate outside of the state. Small to very large



groups book tours. Large groups are usually part of organized, out-of-state bus tours. The peak period for business falls during the cooler fall and winter months. Tours are offered on a reservation only basis.

The company's Web site has been its primary and most effective marketing tool, with over 3 million "hits" per month, an estimated 150,000 visitors to the site. Brochures and other promotional materials - such as a company sponsored map of Ocala - are distributed as well.

Challenges

- Starting up such a business could be in the range of \$20,000.
- Accessing funding from traditional sources to finance such a business is difficult.
- Transitioning to a tourism enterprise could be quite daunting in the absence of a state or county agency that could guide you through the process.
- Getting exposure through the visitor and convention bureau does not come easily because not all employees categorize Ocala Carriage as a tourism business.

Benefits

- Working with horses and making a living from something you love.
- Running your own business and being your own boss.
- Seeing the business grow over time from owning two horses, to owning seventeen horses.
- Being able to help others who are getting started in any type of horse and carriage business.
- Sharing the history of the horse farms in Ocala with locals and visitors.
- Generating business for local historic areas because of the tours.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Purchasing horses that are already broken and trained is helpful if you are going to add a horse and carriage to your operation or start a new business.
- Offering diverse recreation opportunities and services is important because they allow for different revenue sources.
- Marketing should be strategic so that you are getting the most out of your marketing dollars.
- Working hard, long hours, and every day may be necessary depending on your resources because the horses will always need care.
- Opening your home to outsiders on a regular basis may be one potential problem with starting such a business. Careful thought should be given to this before proceeding.
- Modifying your site to add public restroom facilities might be necessary.
- Interacting with customers on a regular basis is unavoidable in this business. The entrepreneur should have an outgoing personality. If this is not the case, he/she should reconsider the business or hire a more appropriate person.

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O'Toole's Herb Farm

Madison, FL



Site Description

Jim and Betty 'B' O'Toole own and operate O'Toole's Herb Farm in Madison County. The Herb Farm is part of a larger farm which has been in B's family since the 1840s.

O'Toole's started sixteen years ago as a wholesale farm, selling fresh cut organically grown herbs. The farm soon began to attract individuals who were interested in seeing the operation, and making their own purchases. Consequently, four years after the farm opened, Jim and 'B' scaled back their wholesale business and started to concentrate on the retail side of the business.

While Jim and 'B' tend to refer to their operation as a retail business, the herb farm has become so much more in the last twelve years. In addition to purchasing organically grown plants and herbs, visitors to O'Toole's can take a leisurely stroll through "the patch" the main herb garden, the Anniversary Garden, the Butterfly-Hummingbird Garden or the greenhouses. They can enjoy wildlife such as turkeys, deer, rabbits, and birds. Visitors can also make purchases of pottery, soaps, sachets, and other locally produced items in the two shops on the property, housed in two beautiful old "cracker" houses, salvaged for this purpose. Otherwise, you can

simply relax in a rocker on the porch and enjoy the peace and serenity of your surroundings.

Individuals interested in purchasing plants and herbs comprise part of O'Toole's market. However, most visitors to O'Toole's are part of a group. The main groups coming through the herb farm and the bulk of their visitors are garden clubs from north Florida and Georgia.

In response to market demand, Jim & 'B' now open their gardens to be rented for select events such as weddings and garden parties. The organic and other workshops, yoga classes, Christmas open house, and the "Just Because Herbal Festival", have also been implemented in large part to satisfy customer demand.

A combination of marketing activities is used to get information out about the farm and the activities. Word-of-mouth advertising is the main source. The farm has also benefited from being included as a stop on familiarization (FAM) trips organized by The Original Florida Tourism Task Force and VISITFLORIDA™. As a result, the farm has been showcased in several magazine articles. Jim and 'B' also produce a few newsletters a year which they send to their mailing list. An estimated 5% of visitors to the farm are generated by the farm's website.

Challenges

- Not knowing exactly the necessary process to becoming a retail operation and opening the site to the public. Uncertainty as to which agencies or persons to work with.
- Having to modify facilities to make the farm visitor friendly (e.g., setting up bathrooms and building a road to accommodate buses).
- Maintaining liability insurance and workmen's compensation which are both costly.
- Meeting the payroll in the low season continues to be a challenge, but the labor is necessary to keep the farm operational.

Benefits

- Maintaining the family farm in a relatively intact and natural state and being able to earn a living from it at the same time.
- Enjoying a good quality of life by living and working in the natural environment.
- Sharing Florida's natural resources with others is rewarding.
- Meeting and interacting with people from various walks of life is fun.
- Realizing a dream. For 'B', farming was not the "done thing" for women when she was growing up, so she ended up following a different career path. For Jim, farming was also something he had wanted to do for many years.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Planning activities to encourage business during the slower periods is vital to keep revenue flowing.
- Tapping the range of resources yourself to get the information needed to start and maintain the business.
- Offering a diversity of products is important because it is better to have more than one revenue stream.
- Getting involved with organizations that can promote your site, such as VISITFLORIDA™ and participating in familiarization trips where possible will be beneficial.
- Taking advantage of resources such as the University of Florida's Institute for Food and Agricultural Science (IFAS), proved to be a definite asset.
- Being prepared to stick with it for the long-term will help the business to survive the inevitable rough patches. Having an open mind and a positive mental outlook also help.
- Being able to adapt to changing situations is critical.
- Modifying your property may be required to accommodate visitors, especially in tour buses.

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Shoal Sanctuary

Mossy Head, FL



Site Description

Shoal Sanctuary is a private nature preserve in Walton County, in operation since the year 2000. Owned by Chris and Robert Larson, the Sanctuary represents their commitment to peace on earth and the protection of its natural resources.

Shoal Sanctuary comprises 50 acres, a total of 8 different parcels of land accumulated over the years. Chris and Robert have embarked on a project to reforest some parts of the site with native longleaf pine. The Sanctuary also boasts red cedars, magnolia, and cypress trees. These along with fruit and nut trees, and a wide range of flowering plants and shrubs, provide habitat and food for a range of wildlife. Black bear, deer, turkey, quail, and gopher tortoise are just a few of the species that roam the property.

One of the many pleasant quirks about Shoal Sanctuary is that several of its trees, streams, and unique areas have been named and each name has a special story to tell. "Oh Deer", "United We Stand", "The Audience", and "Ode to Joy" are just a few of the names.

Other special aspects of the Sanctuary are the various sculptures that the Larsons installed throughout the site. These sculptures are works

of art by Robert primarily, though there are some pieces that have been created by Robert and Chris together. These sculptures, many made from metals recycled from waste found on site when the last parcel was purchased, reflect a way of life in which peace, understanding, and respect for each other are critical. "Citizens Column", "Creation Totem", "We Come in Peace", and "Balance of Life" are a few of the many sculptures scattered around.

To experience the Sanctuary a visitor can make a day trip or stay overnight. While there, you can hike, stroll, camp, take a tour in the site van, relax in a hammock, sleep in the farmhouse, perform various chores on the farm, kayak, or canoe on the Shoal River.

To date, the Sanctuary has hosted visitors from Florida, various US states, Europe and South America. However most of their visitors originate in Florida (including winter residents) and mainly visit in small-to-medium-sized groups.

Marketing for the Sanctuary is mainly done through their Web site, but word-of-mouth advertising has also helped. Additionally, Chris and Robert have spoken at local group meetings and churches and the Sanctuary is one of four sites featured in Walton County's agri-tourism brochure.

Challenges

- Deciding how best to share the wealth of beautiful land with others: finding the best way to allow access to delicate ecosystems and minimize impact.
- Finding reliable farmlands.
- Figuring out how to update the site map with current information on an ongoing basis.
- Operating such a venture without being personally liable.
- Accessing funding to implement the site's projects: donations vs. user fees vs. grants.

Benefits

- Sharing the wealth of nature with a range of people.
- Reacquainting guests with nature.
- Being able to protect the earth's natural resources and reintroduce species that are native to Florida.
- Getting to attend interesting seminars hosted at the Sanctuary.
- Making new friends and exchanging ideas.
- Using the natural environment to promote peace.



Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

- Knowing and focusing on the strengths of your site is important; in the case of the "Sanctuary": trees, wildlife, sculptures, and education. Being creative and building on your own, unique strengths will help to improve the business.
- Trying to implement programs beyond your expertise (e.g., crops – if you are not a farmer, bed and breakfast – if you are not properly equipped) may hinder your success.
- Developing a welcoming procedure to orient guests to your site will improve their experience.
- Designating an area on-site for parking will prevent congestion and restrict parking to specific areas.
- Creating a souvenir shelf could be another source of revenue generation.
- Being prepared for emergencies is important in maintaining guest safety and security.
- Inviting guests to help with routine chores enriches their experience.
- Encouraging guests to return and to spread the word will help generate free publicity.

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Resources

The B & B Country Inn Marketplace

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Tel.: (828) 324-7291
Toll free: (800) 871-8977
Email: clauddeg@charter.net or innsales@charter.net
Website: <http://innmarketing.com/state.php>

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- *Managing the Liability and Risks of Farm Direct Marketing and Agritourism* (http://www.communityagcenter.org/Risk_Liability/Binder_contents.htm)

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- *Direct Farm Marketing and Tourism Handbook* (<http://ag.arizona.edu/arec/pubs/dmkt/dmkt.html>)

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Publications available online (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>):

- *Agritainment: A Viable Option for Florida Producers* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/RM008>)
- *Florida Master Naturalist Program* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW172>; www.MasterNaturalist.org)
- *Value Added Agriculture: Is It Right for Me?* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FE638>)

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Florida Bed & Breakfast Inns

Toll free: (800) 524-1880
Email: info@florida-inns.com and info@fbbi.org
Website: www.florida-inns.com/sell.shtml

Florida Resource Directory

Your one-stop source for learning about the latest state and many federal programs and resources to help rural communities.
Governor's Office of Tourism,
Trade and Economic Development
The Capitol, Suite 2001
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0001
Tel.: (850) 487-2568
Email: diane.scholz@myflorida.com
Website: www.floridaresourcedirectory.org

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Website: www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/altenterprise/
Publications available online:

- *'Agritainment,' Weddings, Reunions, and Organic Dairy Products*
- *Alternative Enterprises: For Higher Profits and Healthier Land*
- *Family Education and Entertainment on the Farm*
- *Family Fun and Education, Pick-Your-Own, and Community Supported Agriculture*
- *Farming for Profit and Sustainability Resource Manual*
- *Recreation & Tourism Policy*
- *Taking the First Step: Farm and Ranch Alternative Enterprise and Agritourism Resource Evaluation Guide*

Natural Resource Enterprises

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Publications available online (<http://www.naturalresources.msstate.edu/pubs/list.html>):

- *Business Considerations For Private Landowners*
- *A Checklist of Considerations for Landowners*
- *Financing Your Natural Resource-Based Enterprise*

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Publications available online:

- *Considerations for Agritourism Development* (www.nysgextension.org/tourism/tourism/wwwagrifs.pdf)

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Website: www.ncagr.com/agritourism/home.htm
Publications available online:

- *Starting Your Agritourism Venture*
- *Suggestions for Helping Start an Agritourism Venture*
- *Business Resources for Agritourism Farmers*

The Original Florida Tourism Task Force

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Publications available online:

- *Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California*
- *Agritourism Benefits Agriculture in San Diego County*
- *A Primer on Agritourism and Ecotourism Startups and Management*
- *Consumer Demand for Agricultural and On-Farm Nature Tourism*
- *Fact Sheets: Managing Agri- and Nature-Tourism Operations*
- *Food Safety at Farmers Markets and Agritourism Venues*
- *Planning and Managing Agritourism and Nature Tourism Enterprises – A Handbook*

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Website: www.sare.org
Publications available online (http://www.sare.org/publications/all_pub.htm):

- *Building a Sustainable Business: A Guide to Developing a Business Plan for Farms and Rural Businesses*
- *Marketing Strategies for Farmers and Ranchers*

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Publications available online (<http://tcebookstore.org/pubbrowse.cfm?catid=88>):

- *Establishing a Birding-Related Business*
- *Nature Tourism: A Guidebook for Evaluating Enterprise Opportunities*
- *Nature Tourism: A Natural Choice for Community Development (video - <http://www.rptsextension.com/Home/Nature+Tourism/Videos>)*
- *Nature Tourism Tool Kit (CD)*
- *Nature Tourism: Ranch Opportunities for Today (video)*

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All contact information and web links were accessible at the time of publication.

Additional publications are available upon request.



DP Nature Tours
White Springs, FL



Farmer Brown's Bed
& Breakfast
Brooksville, FL



Florida Eco-Safaris
St. Cloud, FL



Ginnie Springs Outdoors, LLC
High Springs, FL



Ichetucknee Family Canoe
and Cabins
Fort White, FL



Kayak Amelia
Jacksonville, FL



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Corn Maze Adventure
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