

# **Nature Tourism Action Plan Committee Final Report**

## **Introduction and Purpose**

**In April 2006, the National Audubon Society, in partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and a number of local sponsors, held a groundbreaking three day workshop in Vicksburg, Mississippi dedicated to informing and educating interested parties in the six state Lower Mississippi Valley Region, regarding nature tourism. The Lower Mississippi Valley Region is a place that is unique from a global perspective. Not only is the Mississippi River one of the world's largest rivers which contains a rich assemblage of fish and aquatic organisms but the forests and wetlands along its banks, and the river itself, are globally important as habitat for many wildlife species. The Region through which the river flows is also unique from a human cultural perspective. For tourists visiting the area, there is an almost endless list of places to visit and interesting things to see and do. Unfortunately, many key tourism promotion players, such as local and state tourism and development offices, state and federal land management agencies, non-governmental organizations, state universities, and others have not always approached the promotion task in a cooperative and coordinated fashion. Promotion efforts have tended to be localized and focused on towns or cities or individual states thus ignoring the "big picture". Moreover, promotion of nature tourism has not been widely pursued. This plan is dedicated to changing this approach so as to benefit not only tourists visiting the area but also the natural resources that form the basis for bringing tourists into the region as well as local communities that choose to take advantage of nature tourism as a means of improving their economic, environmental, and social well-being.**

**On the final day of the April 2006 Audubon Nature Tourism Workshop, a facilitated work session took place to begin developing a "Plan of Action" for promoting nature tourism in the Region. At that session, 12 potential action items that would help promote nature tourism were identified and are described in Appendix 1. Following the workshop, a decision was made to establish a working committee of interested individuals from the Region to further develop a Regional Action Plan. With the support of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Audubon formally established a "Nature Tourism Action Plan Committee" with membership from the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, the states who contributed most of the attendees at the April 2006 Nature Tourism Workshop discussed above. An initial one day meeting of the Committee was held in Helena, Arkansas on 15 November 2006 to begin work on the plan. A second meeting took place on 30 January 2007 in Cleveland, Mississippi to further develop the plan and a final meeting was held in Memphis, Tennessee on 13 June 2007 to complete most of the work on a final draft of the plan. This report contains the results of the Committee's work and constitutes a strategic approach that will be used by the Committee and others to begin a formal program of nature tourism**

**promotion within the Lower Mississippi Valley Region. Initially, promotional efforts will be focused on the larger “gateway” communities which already contain sufficient infrastructure to support increased visitation by the nature tourist. Towns and cities such as Memphis, Tennessee and nearby communities in Tunica County, Mississippi; Helena, Arkansas; Greenville, Vicksburg, and Natchez, Mississippi; and Vidalia, St. Francisville, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans, Louisiana fall into this category. The Committee hopes that interested parties from the states of Missouri and Kentucky will also become involved with future work of the Committee.**

**Committee Members**

**The following individuals, many of whom attended the April 2006 Nature Tourism Workshop in Vicksburg, have been involved in the Committee’s work, either by attending committee meetings, providing support for meetings, providing written input into plan development, or by other means. Without their considerable assistance, the plan could not have been developed.**

**Table 1. Nature Tourism Action Plan Committee Members**

<b>Alan Barton</b>	<b>Delta State University</b>
<b>Charlotte Brothers</b>	<b>Greenville Convention and Visitor’s Bureau</b>
<b>Luther Brown</b>	<b>Delta State University</b>
<b>Sharon Calcote</b>	<b>Louisiana Dept. of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism</b>
<b>Tim Carpenter</b>	<b>Eagle Lake Lodge and Outfitters</b>
<b>Nancy Clark</b>	<b>Arkansas Dept. of Parks and Tourism</b>
<b>Meg Cooper</b>	<b>Lower Delta Partnership</b>
<b>Ann Curry</b>	<b>Mississippi Tourism Division</b>
<b>Robert Delaney</b>	<b>U.S. Geological Survey</b>
<b>Connie Dickard</b>	<b>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service</b>
<b>Virginia DuBow</b>	<b>National Park Service</b>
<b>Terry Eastin</b>	<b>Mississippi River Trail, Inc.</b>
<b>Ellen Fennell</b>	<b>Audubon Arkansas</b>
<b>Kurt Foote</b>	<b>National Park Service Natchez Trace Parkway</b>
<b>Steve Grado</b>	<b>Department of Forestry, Mississippi State University</b>
<b>Katie Harrington</b>	<b>Delta Cultural Center</b>
<b>Ruth Hawkins</b>	<b>Arkansas State University</b>

Ray Herndon	The Conservation Fund
Dale Hollingsworth	Private Citizen
Mike Hutson	Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee
Kathy Jacobs	Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Mississippi State University
Daryl Jones	Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Mississippi State University
Mike Jones	Mississippi Tourism Division
Munnie Jordan	Delta Heritage Tours and Mississippi River Trail, Inc.
Ron Nassar	Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee
Elaine Nesmith	Audubon Arkansas
Alton Norris	Norris Outfitters
Cynthia Pilcher	Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
Ruth Pullen	Private Citizen and Volunteer for National Audubon Society
Tom Pullen	Oikos Enterprises LLC
Kathy Radomski	Phillips Community College University of Arkansas
Jeff Reece	Mississippi River Corridor
Bruce Reid	National Audubon Society
Tim Richardson	American Land Conservancy
Adam Rohnke	Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Mississippi State University
John Sheahan	Mississippi River Corridor
Karen Smith	Arkansas Heritage Program
Diana Threadgill	Mississippi River Corridor
Deborah Tootle	University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service
Tom Wear	Friends of Dahomey
Beth Wiedower	Rural Heritage Development Initiative of the National Trust for Historic Preservation

### **Definitions of nature and ecotourism**

The terms “nature tourism” and “eco-tourism” are sometimes used interchangeably and in various ways by different individuals and groups. To insure clarity in use of these terms, the Committee adopted the following definitions.

**Nature Tourism:** Experiences and travel involving natural areas and related natural history museums or similar sites which promote conservation of the environment and improvement in the welfare of local people, and which fosters

**engagement of people at the “grass roots” level in protection and improvement of the natural areas in and near their communities.**

**Eco-tourism: A subset of Nature Tourism focusing heavily on travel to natural areas which promotes the following:**

- **Conservation of biological and cultural diversity**
- **Sustainable use of natural resources**
- **Sharing of economic benefits with local communities**
- **An increase in environmental and cultural knowledge**
- **Minimization of the adverse environmental impacts of tourism**
- **Minimization of waste in the form of luxury at lodging sites and restaurants**
- **Local culture, flora, and fauna being the primary attraction for visitors**

### **Action Items Identified by the Committee**

**At the initial Committee meeting held in Helena, Arkansas, a facilitated work session took place wherein participants, building upon the April 2006 Nature Tourism Workshop in Vicksburg, Mississippi, identified 24 action items that would aid in promoting nature tourism in the Region. Participants then voted on the 24 items to identify which ones warranted the highest priority for action. Individuals volunteered to write up descriptions of each action item. This list became the basis for follow-up work at the second Committee meeting held in Cleveland, Mississippi and ultimately for the third meeting in Memphis, Tennessee. At the Memphis meeting, the subject of Action Item priority was revisited and the Committee decided that four items warranted equal and detailed treatment in the final plan. Each of these will be addressed below followed by an abbreviated treatment of other lower priority Action Items.**

### **Highest Priority Action Items of Equal Importance**

- 1. Conduct a nature tourism infrastructure and natural assets assessment and catalog needs.**

Many opportunities for nature tourism already exist throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley Region. Some are readily apparent but many are poorly known. There is a need to conduct an inventory and assessment of existing natural resource infrastructure and assets. The inventory and assessment will determine what resources can be taken advantage of immediately, and what opportunities remain to be developed.

Much of this data has likely already been collected by different entities possessing strategic plans, and it would be advantageous to access this information. Universities

with specific natural resource and tourism programs would be one source. Others could be the:

- Mississippi River Parkway Commission (each state in the commission has produced an Interpretive Plan which includes an inventory of natural, scenic, and recreational assets),
- proposed Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area,
- Mississippi River Trail project,
- State Natural Heritage Programs, or the
- National Park Service's Nile of the New World Web site.

Infrastructure most likely required will include: a Web site (adapted from an existing Audubon site), brochures, DVD's and other "high tech" devices, signage, contact stations, information kiosks, and access trails, boardwalks, and observation stations.

Delivery Lead: A university graduate student funded by the National Audubon Society and its partners.

Key Partners:

Mississippi River Parkway Commission  
State tourism agencies  
State natural resource agencies  
Federal agencies  
Timber companies  
Non-governmental organizations managing natural areas

Timeline:

Six months to no more than one year. Begin work by March 2008.

Quick Successes:

- Natural resource assessment of the Mississippi Delta by Alan Barton
- Tennessee Mississippi River Corridor natural resources assessment
- National Audubon Society's Great River Birding Trail
- National Park Service's Nile of the New World natural resource assessment

**2. Promote nature tourism and raise awareness of local residents and officials regarding the economic, environmental, and social aspects of nature tourism.**

Throughout the Region, there is a need to raise awareness and understanding regarding various aspects of nature tourism. The lists that follow highlight some of the more important needs directed towards improving promotional efforts.

Economic, Environmental, and Social Values

- Develop the infrastructure and communication resources needed to begin the asset identification between the various southern routes for Nature Tourism
- Contract for an Economic and Community Development Analysis/Study for the entire Lower Mississippi Valley Region
- Develop an approach to diversify involvement of all segments of society in nature tourism (e.g., racial, ethnic, young, old)
- Create a concise strategic plan summary among the participating agencies and states to present to various elected officials and at future public meetings.

### Economic Impact

- Marketing to local residents within each community will be critical to our success; develop format and schedule for public meetings
- Educational and work force development opportunities are a major factor in the marketing and implementation of the proposed plan
- Insuring that a diversity of participants and stakeholders become involved is an important component to an ongoing nature tourism initiative in the Lower Mississippi Valley Region
- Target local neighborhood associations, churches, and other citizen's groups to distribute materials and create programs
- Emphasize regional participation in tour packages for Convention and Visitor Bureaus and tour operators (e.g., Blues Trail - Mississippi)
- Develop case studies showing how nature tourism has benefited specific local communities within the Region

Delivery Lead: Nature Tourism Action Committee members

Key Partners: Existing local or regional tourism associations, Convention and Visitor Bureaus in key "gateway" communities, state tourism and economic development offices, state universities involved with promoting natural resources based tourism.

Timeline: 12 months; work to begin by March 2008

### Quick Successes:

Quickly develop or implement as many of the following as possible:

- Regional Web site
- Brochures
- DVD
- Audio-visual guides
- Driving Tour Maps
- Signage (on road and facilities)
- Tourism products; t-shirts, cups, and post cards

- Promotion and publicity for regional festivals
- Specialized promotions and maps; Agri-tourism or music

### **3. Identify funding sources to use in promoting nature tourism.**

This action item involves categorization and assessment of funding needs and funding sources, which might support various aspects of building a Nature Tourism network within the Lower Mississippi Valley Region. Potential needs might be for training programs, marketing/public relations/media, low interest investment capital, and development of various sorts of infrastructure of importance to visitors.

Delivery Lead: Nature Tourism Action Committee members

Key Partners: Various groups – could include the, National Scenic Byway Consortium interests, various regional entities with an interest in economic development/tourism, for profit interests, academia, and various key non-profit entities.

Timeline: 12 months. Work to begin by March 2008

Quick Successes: Initial National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Funding for Nature Tourism Action planning.

#### Other Potential Funding Sources:

- Grants: federal, state, and local
- USDA Rural Development
- Delta Regional Authority
- Mississippi River Parkway Commission
- State environmental, conservation, and development agencies
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- National Scenic Byways
- Individual Donors
- Corporate Sponsors

### **4. Develop a nature tourism toolbox.**

The toolbox will provide a full spectrum of information about, and resources for, nature tourism. It can be used by anyone, from those interested in learning the basics (see definition of nature tourism) or acquiring training, to those already involved with nature tourism that want more information or need assistance. Potential users include private entrepreneurs, businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), communities, and government agencies.

Largely Web-based initially, it will contain links to federal, state, and NGO sites where information and/or other links will be available. Below is a list of the types of information contained in the toolbox:

- Nature tourism – benefits, types
- Natural resources – evaluation, conservation, restoration
- Infrastructure – inventory, needs, assessment
- Monetary needs
- Funding sources
- Case studies – success stories and failures
- Problems and solutions
- Marketing and promotion
- Training available
- Training resources
- Contacts – specific agencies or individuals that will provide help and information.

See Appendix 2 for a more detailed, but by no means comprehensive outline of the toolbox contents.

Delivery Lead: Mississippi State University (Daryl Jones, Kathy Jacobs, Adam Rohnke)

Key Partners: Universities and members of the Nature Tourism Action Plan Committee

Timeline: 1 year. Begin work in January 2008.

Quick Successes: Restructure the Audubon Mississippi Web site to provide links to information in the toolbox

### **Other important Action Items**

**At the Memphis meeting, the Committee determined that considerable redundancy existed within the remaining Action Items and some items should be combined or eliminated. In the following list redundancies were eliminated to the extent possible. Items are not listed in priority order.**

- 1. Develop a training program for the nature tourism workforce (e.g., interpreters, naturalists) and for entrepreneurs.**

The concept is to offer potential nature tourism operators, guides, and business owners training to help them succeed in their endeavors. Potential courses include small business and financial planning, marketing and legal issues, as well as naturalist training (e.g., plant, bird, mammal, fish, reptile and amphibian and invertebrate identification; wildlife habitat management, ethics, customer service).

Delivery Lead: Kathy Radomski, Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas

Key Partners: National Audubon Society, state departments of economic development (small business offices), Mississippi State University and other institutions of higher education, Mississippi River Field Institute.

Timeline:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2008: Develop an initial training curriculum and seek funding for a pilot program
- 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarters 2008: Identify potential entrepreneurs and interpreters
- 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2008: Market training programs to potential tourism operators.

Quick Successes:

- During 2007, Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas and Audubon Arkansas piloted an adult education course designed to assist the target audience in expanding their hunting and farming businesses to include nature tourism. “The Business of Birding” course consisted of 10 classes and was held from March 2007 through August 2007. Classes covered small business development and marketing processes as well as nature interpretation and bird identification. Instructors included staff from Audubon Arkansas, the University of Arkansas Extension Service, Consulting firms, and Arkansas State Parks. The program attracted 21 students of varying backgrounds. Five students attended six or more classes and will receive a certificate endorsed by Phillips Community College, Audubon Arkansas, and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. Phillips Community College, Audubon Arkansas, and the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service are working using feedback from the pilot class to develop a Business of Birding Institute to be marked to the four-state area.
- Mississippi State University Extension Service, through its Natural Resources Enterprises Program, offers one day workshops for private landowners on establishing and operating natural resources based businesses.

**2. Develop a regional marketing/promotional effort aimed at nature tourism (may include formation of a formal regional marketing organization).**

Most ongoing efforts to promote and market the Lower Mississippi Valley Region for tourism purposes do not focus on nature tourism and have a single state emphasis. Likewise, regional tourism marketing organizations do not emphasize nature tourism. What is needed is promotion and marketing that targets nature tourism opportunities and promotes the entire Region as a destination filled with

promise from a nature tourism perspective. See Appendix 3 for an outline of a possible marketing approach.

Delivery Lead: State tourism offices

Key Partners: Federal, state, and local economic development and natural resources management agencies

Timeline: Get organized by the end of 2008.

Quick Successes: Incorporation of nature tourism into the mission of the recently formed Miss-Lou Rural Tourism Association.

### **3. Develop an approach to increase involvement of the business and agricultural communities in promoting nature tourism**

The goal is to outline a basic plan for the involvement of private industry in the development of a plan to increase nature tourism in the Lower Mississippi Valley Region and to secure monetary contributions and/or support efforts from industry to increase nature tourism in the Region.

#### **Key Activities/Items:**

- a. Using information from the nature tourism toolbox, develop a concise information package that describes goals, activities, features/benefits, location, and facts on nature tourism.
- b. Develop a concise statement of need
- c. Compile a list of local, state, and national prospects
- d. Develop an analysis process for industrial prospects – review nature of business prospects; determine actual and potential tourism use in area; determine corporations with visions, goals, values, strategies that are aligned with the effort; sell benefits of nature tourism
- e. Set target prospects –consider companies and/or industries that have a strong community affairs commitment; need for image improvement, high visibility, common ties to the area
- f. Collect data about people, needs, history of monetary support, and environmental awareness of companies. Look for potential relationships and common ground.
- g. Establish goals for involvement of critical target corporations – 2-3 action/options (what to ask for)
- h. Establish strategic plan for critical target corporations - activities, needs, timing, evaluation criteria, outline **benefits** to corporation, list assumptions made

- i. Create presentation for the top 3-5 critical target corporations
- j. Include Nature Tourism Action Plan in the presentation to show commitment activities, and successes
- k. Set objectives for written products and verbal presentation
- l. Identify and assign key people to implement the plan based on experience factors
- m. Execute and review results, modify activities/plan based on initial experiences
- n. Expand industrial target group when a working model is established and bring credibility to the process.
- o. Nothing breeds success like success - once major corporation(s) are brought into the process, others will follow

Delivery Lead: Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee

Key Partners: National Audubon Society and Audubon State Offices

Timeline: 12 Months; begin work in January 2008

Quick Successes: Initial monetary support for the Mississippi River Field Institute

#### **4. Develop an approach to involve institutes of higher learning in nature tourism promotion.**

Institutions of higher education can play a major role in nature tourism, particularly in terms of conducting economic and ecosystem research that can be translated into programs and information for the general public. Marketing and public relations classes can assist with marketing surveys and development of marketing and promotion plans. This work plan includes the following steps for involving higher education.

- a. Develop a database of all institutions of higher education in the targeted region, including contact information for all appropriate academic departments, (i.e., environmental science, biology, botany, zoology, recreation, marketing, public relations).
- b. Circulate a letter, basic information on nature tourism, and a draft work plan to all higher education contacts to: (a) determine interest in nature tourism projects, (b) identify any ongoing or recently completed research activities that have application for nature tourism, and (c) seek ideas for how higher education interests might be integrated with projects outlined in the work plan.

- c. Identify a marketing class interested in taking on a project to conduct an economic impact study on the actual and potential benefits of nature tourism, including a profile of nature tourism visitors, both inside and outside the region.
- d. Attempt to match up other nature tourism needs with university teaching, research and public service interests, (i.e., assistance through class projects, case studies, independent study, practicums, individual research projects).

Delivery Lead: A consortium of State Universities in Mississippi and Arkansas

Key Partners: State Universities in other Lower Mississippi Valley states

Timeline: One year. Develop plan by the end of 2008.

Quick Successes: Mississippi State University economic impacts of birding study results.

**5. Engage the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other state and federal agencies in nature tourism promotion.**

Many state and federal agencies within the Lower Mississippi Valley manage lands or other resources that hold much potential as sites to be visited by the nature tourist. Some of the best bird watching sites, for example, are often found on National Wildlife Refuges, state wildlife management areas, and state parks or on or around reservoirs managed by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. Agencies managing these areas, while often doing an excellent job of promotion for specific and localized sites, often do not engage in nature tourism promotion for the region. Action is needed to work with these agencies to develop new and innovative approaches for promoting nature tourism regionally using printed and Web-based media.

Delivery Lead: National Audubon Society and state tourism agencies

Key Partners: Audubon Chapters, state and local tourism agencies, state wildlife, fisheries, and parks agencies, USFWS

Timeline:

Present: Contact partners about need by June 2008

1 year: Form group to develop promotional approach by August 2008

1.5 Years: Complete development of approach by December 2008

Quick Successes: Provide regional information links on individual agency site Web sites

**6. Develop internal and external regional nature tourism websites.**

As a means for facilitating information sharing, the existing Audubon Nature Tourism Workshop Web site (<http://www.msaudubon.org/workshop>) will be converted to fulfill the role of a regional nature tourism Web site. Portions of the site could be made accessible only for the Nature Tourism Action Plan Committee. This new site should contain links to the Mississippi State University Natural Resources Enterprises program and to other pertinent Web sites in each of the states in the Region as well as to the soon to be developed Nature Tourism Toolbox.

### ***Intranet***

This intranet site will be a location where Nature Tourism Action Plan Committee members can share information and resources. Content for the external Web site can be developed prior to publishing it for external viewers. Items such as databases and information not to be published for public viewing can be shared and edited on this site.

### ***External Web site***

The external Web site will largely be a “jumping off” point for those seeking information specific to nature tourism. Two user groups may potentially visit this site: 1) those looking to develop nature tourism operations or who are currently running an operation and 2) those looking for nature tourism opportunities (i.e., recreationists).

For tourism operators, links to institutes of higher learning, non-profit organizations, and government agencies should be provided on this Web site for detailed information and recommendations. The Web site could highlight a few key nature tourism operations in the Region, including photos, an interview, and other information that would encourage other tourism operators and could provide links to access detailed case histories.

For user groups, the Web site could feature a database of opportunities in the Region or provide links to Web sites of nature tourism operations, focusing on the counties and parishes along the Mississippi River.

Delivery Lead: National Audubon Society

Key Partners: Local, state, and federal land management and tourism agencies and NGOs (e.g., Nature Conservancy) and academic institutions (e.g., Mississippi State University)

Timeline: Have initial intranet Web site up and running by September 2008 and external Web site fully functional by June 2009.

Quick Successes: Convert existing Nature Tourism Workshop Web site to the new Regional Nature Tourism site (with same content) by January 2008

## **7. Evaluate and describe factors impeding access to nature tourism sites within the region (e.g. restrictive fees for access to public lands or lack of infrastructure).**

Laws and regulations addressing access to, and use of, publicly owned nature tourism sites vary widely from state to state. For example, some states charge access fees for visiting wildlife management areas while others do not. An assessment of such laws and regulations is needed so that promotional and marketing efforts can address this issue and states can cater more effectively to the nature tourist by developing cooperative regional programs that deal with issues such as the need for access permits and fees.

Delivery Lead: Mississippi River Field Institute (to oversee work with funding from elsewhere?).

Key Partners: Local, state, and federal land management agencies

Timeline: Complete inventory by June 2008

Quick Successes: Place links on the regional Nature Tourism Web site to local, state, and federal public access sites and start an agency dialog between states.

## **8. Develop a customer feedback plan**

The goal is to establish a process for using customer (i.e., tourists) input information in the planning and development process for nature tourism products and packages. For example, perhaps some sort of simple survey instrument could be placed on various agency websites asking for needed feedback.

### **Key Components:**

- a. Process – on-going to allow for modifications to meet expected goals/outcomes
- b. Timing – collect/use input early in the process; maintain continuous data gathering; allow modification or redesign needs to meet desired goals/outcomes
- c. Preliminary inputs for initial design – needs, understanding and perceptions, analyze feedback, modify customer survey, repeat process
- d. Feedback information

- Targeted users – provide specific, key inputs
- Continuous feedback – on-site interviews of visitors during activities
- Follow-up communication – mail outs, e-mails

### e. Roll-Out Package

- Description of activity/product
- Features of activity/product
- List possible needs and how to meet needs
- Economics of activity – time spent recreating versus cost (i.e., high, medium, low); value received in relation to expense
- Personal benefits of the activity

- Questions designed to determine attitudes, perceptions, and needs – What do you need to make your decision to visit this place?

#### f. Action Items

- Develop list of tourism activities in the Region
- Select a small design group to create the customer package
- Make information package available for customers/tourists
- Questionnaire should be designed to evaluate customer needs/benefits
- Analyze information and modify according to survey results
- Match survey results with desired goals/outcomes
- Modify timetable and process to meet desired goals/outcomes

Delivery Lead: Not determined

Key Partners: Local, state, and federal agencies

Timeline: Have plan by end of 2008

Quick Successes: Mississippi State University Great River Birding Trail economic impact study.

### **9. Develop an approach to measure perceptions, needs, and trends of local communities.**

To successfully develop a regional tourism infrastructure in the Lower Mississippi Valley Region, more is needed than simply educating the local public about the importance of nature tourism, the economic benefits of tourism, and the need to conserve nature to sustain the tourism industry. Though this is vitally important, if local communities do not want to participate in, or have a negative perception of, nature tourism activities, education will be worthless. Time needs to be spent in local communities listening to ideas and perceptions of the local citizens. This can be achieved through town hall meetings, focus groups, or facilitator led meetings.

Delivery Lead: Tourism associations, both regional and local. In Arkansas, this would include entities such as Delta Byways, Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism, Delta Rivers Regional Tourism Council, (Lee and St. Francis Counties), and the Delta Bridge Project (Helena). In Mississippi and Louisiana this would include state tourism offices and groups such as the Miss-Lou Rural Tourism Association.

Key Partners: Tourism associations as described above, local city government, chambers of commerce, county government, advertising and promotion associations, local media, and local citizens.

### Timeline:

Present: Create a list of key communities central to the development of the regional nature tourism program by December 2007.

Present: Identify all tourism-associated organizations and agencies that can participate in focus group meetings and assign these to specific communities by December 2007.

6 months: Have organizations schedule focus group meetings with assigned community leaders by July 2008.

8 months: Track progress of meetings and prompt those that have not scheduled meetings by September 2008

1 year: All meetings should have been held and information gathered by December 2008

18 months: Have all information compiled from each community and begin addressing concerns, needs, and ideas with educational activities by June 2009.

Quick Successes: Several communities in Arkansas are already involved with tourism, and may already have done a similar exercise. At least five communities that already have this information to build on should be identified and this information could be posted on the Web site.

### **How the Action Plan will be used**

This plan is intended to be used as a strategic guide for promoting the Lower Mississippi Valley Region as a destination for nature tourism activities. It will be used and disseminated by the members of the Nature Tourism Action Plan Committee to a wide variety of audiences including but not restricted to local, state, and federal tourism and development agencies; private businesses wishing to promote nature tourism; corporations desiring to assist in promotion of nature tourism; non-governmental organizations involved with protection and restoration of natural areas; state universities involved with tourism promotion efforts; local, state, and federal legislators and administrators; and other interested parties. Periodic plan updates will be prepared. It is hoped the plan will facilitate improved interstate cooperation to promote the region as a major attraction from the perspective of the nature tourist.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many individuals and institutions supported the efforts that led to the development of this Plan. Of particular significance was the support provided by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and others that led to execution of the April 2006 Nature Tourism Workshop in Vicksburg, Mississippi. The Foundation has continued to support this effort and recently agreed to help fund implementation of the Plan. Also, of considerable assistance has been the Delta Cultural Center, Helena, Arkansas; Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi; and the Memphis Regional Chamber and Mississippi River

Corridor Project, Memphis, Tennessee who provided support for the three working meetings of the Committee.

## **Appendix 1. April 2006 Nature Tourism Workshop Results**

### **Initial List of Potential Actions for Promoting Nature Tourism Regionally**

1. Organize a governmental, NGO, and private sector supported Lower Mississippi River Valley Regional Nature Tourism promotional organization with representation from all six Lower Mississippi River States to finalize and carry out a plan of action.
2. Establish dedicated nature tourism staff positions within each state's tourism offices with the responsibility for promoting their state and the region as a whole.
3. Develop and share an inventory of nature tourism sites within the six state region.
4. Work to foster better communication and cooperation between agencies and groups who promote consumptive and non-consumptive forms of nature tourism.
5. Provide increased support for grass roots organizations that have been formed to promote nature tourism (e.g., Lower Delta Partnership).
6. Develop a Lower Mississippi Valley Region Web site containing links to nature tourism attractions and resources within the six state region.
7. Find ways to fund needed economic studies to demonstrate the economic and community impacts of nature tourism.
8. Expand existing state Extension service efforts to educate and inform private landowners and others regarding opportunities for development of nature tourism based enterprises.
9. Work with existing local, state, and federal agencies and private sector interests who manage lands frequented by tourists to expand opportunities for integration of various forms of tourism.
10. Explore new and innovative marketing approaches for the Region.
11. Explore new and innovative means of organizing efforts to integrate economic, social, and environmental efforts aimed at promotion of nature tourism and community development (e.g., Palmetto-Pear Tree Preserve effort in South Carolina)
12. Explore and inventory public and private sector infrastructure needs to enhance existing nature tourism opportunities.

## Appendix 2. Nature Tourism Toolbox Contents

- General Information:
  - Definition of nature tourism
  - Benefits of nature tourism:
    - To the community
    - To businesses
    - To families that want to preserve their land and way of life
  - Different types of nature tourism
  - Examples of and Internet links to what other communities have done
  - Linking nature tourism to other types of tourism
  - Developing long-term goals
- General information/considerations for implementing nature tourism including:
  - Evaluating resources (identify the product)
  - Starting a nature tourism business
  - Possible problems that could be encountered
  - Solutions to those problems
  - General infrastructure needs
  - Accommodations
  - Effects on the community
    - Cultural
    - Social
    - Financial
  - Financial needs
  - How to get funding
  - List/links for possible funding and information sources
    - State
    - Federal
    - Regional
    - Private
    - Partnerships
    - Extension Services
  - Protecting and managing resources- sustainability
  - Marketing and promotion
    - Internet:
      - Creating a Web site
      - Linking with other Web sites that promote nature tourism
    - Federal tourism contacts
    - State tourism contacts
    - Media
    - Brochures
    - Signage
- Specific information:

- Requirements for implementing specific types of nature tourism.
- What are tourists looking for with this type of nature tourism?
- Contacts/mentors to help develop the specific business
- Specific infrastructure requirements (e.g., nature trails, boardwalks, rest rooms, roads)
- Specific funding sources and contacts
- Problems/solutions
- Marketing and promotion
  - References
  - Contacts
- Protecting and managing specific resources - sustainability
- Linking with others in the same business
- Creating tours
- Case studies of successful and problem nature tourism enterprises
- Training for specific issues(for example):
  - Legal
  - Cost analysis
  - Hospitality
  - Wildlife/plant identification
  - Marketing
  - Festivals
    - American Birding Association
    - Mississippi Arts Commission
- Training Resources
  - Mississippi State University's Natural Resource Enterprises, other state Extension Services
  - Mississippi River Field Institute
  - Delta State University and other universities and colleges
  - Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas and other community colleges
  - Junior colleges
  - Audubon Society offices from each State
  - Government agencies
  - Private organizations
  - Others

**State Toolbox:**

- Contacts in states that have successfully implemented nature tourism programs
- Resource evaluation/development
- Funding sources
- Partnerships for funding and resource development
- Regional successes and contacts
- Marketing and promotion
- Resource management/restoration
- State Extension Service contacts and Web site links

Suggestion: compile a list of possible mentors or consultants that individuals and communities could refer to for help.

## **Appendix 3. Lower Mississippi Valley Nature Tourism Marketing Plans Overview**

### **Defining Your Product:**

Nature-based tourists can be thought of as belonging to one of several groups:

- 1. Active/consumptive** — e.g. fishing, hunting, and crabbing
- 2. consumptive/passive** —e.g. beachcombing
- 3. non-consumptive/active** — e.g. hiking and canoeing
- 4. non-consumptive/passive** — e.g. guided birdwatching and photography tours

### **Market Research:**

#### **Methodology:**

An inventory of the product must be conducted and research must be undertaken to determine the composition of currently marketable products in the Region. Steps must be taken to obtain a profile of desired, targeted population segments by conducting mail out surveys, telephone surveys, possible Web site questionnaires, and utilizing other research tools. An analysis of an inventory should be conducted and much consideration given to determine this Region's unique assets as a whole, how the product can be enhanced with branding and logo, and development. Detailed determinations should be made regarding the image of this product and components of assets (i.e., natural, cultural, historic), activities, and services that can be combined and marketed as a region with such intrinsic value as to create international destination quality.

Assessment questions to answer are as follows:

- What environmental resources are present that will entice people to stop and visit?
- What services and facilities are available?
- What type of tourist is currently visiting your area?
- What additional types of adventure tourist markets can we target with this product?
- Are the proposed business sites adequate to provide nature tourism opportunities?
- Are they adequate for the customer?
- Is there space for proper equipment storage and maintenance?
- Is it in the proper location?
- What financial resources are available?
- What additional infrastructure, services, businesses, and attractions need to be added to elevate the area to the standard expected by tourists?

In defining your product remember to ask:

What will the customer really be buying? What are the benefits that they seek? Is it the convenience of a guided nature experience they are after? Skills? Knowledge? Assistance? Will the product inventory meet the potential customer needs and what image will be projected?

### **Product Design:**

The key is to define your product in a way that the customers, the environment, services, and resources will be optimally matched.

**Development of product to meet tourist expectations and standards of excellence is crucial before launching a marketing campaign.**

A product may be a physical object or a service. The product or service that you offer is the mixture of benefits the customer thinks he/she will receive. It is necessary to define what your customer is buying *from their point of view*.

Although the tourist may first recognize the product advertising and specific services, they are seeking benefits such as authentic experiences, adventure, friendship, excitement, and an understanding of their natural surroundings.

### **Marketing:**

Marketing consists of those activities that you undertake to make your business concept a reality. It is far more than promotion.

Marketing is:

- Defining what your customers desire.
- Directing your entire business toward meeting this need.
- Generating a profit.

The most important considerations in marketing are the product, market identification, price, partnerships, packaging, and promotion.

### **Targeted Media Advertising:**

There are many types of advertising media available, including television, radio, magazines, newspapers, billboards, and direct mail. Each type of media has different characteristics to consider. Advertising is costly, so it is important to carefully select the appropriate media. The best choice will depend on many factors: amount of money available, message, market, and market area. Contact local tourism organizations, chambers of commerce, state tourism offices, and other promotion organizations. Request information about media sources, technical assistance, and potential cooperative advertising opportunities.

## **Virtual Marketing-Utilizing the Internet:**

The increasing popularity of the Internet renders it to be an ideal vehicle for the marketing of tourism destinations. Already, the World Wide Web has become a major source for both information gathering and purchases of travel products. It is not only imperative, but also relatively inexpensive and easy to create a Web presence. By maintaining a Web site, it is possible to expand market awareness on a global level.

## **Public Relations and Partnership Building:**

Building good relations within the community will also help promote the Region. Many clients are commonly referred by people living in your own area. Local residents and businesses like to recommend places that are an asset or unique feature of the community. . Make local residents aware that you are offering a nature-based experience. Work with community, regional and state environmental agencies and groups. Help promote the development of nature-based tourism.

## **Travel Writers Familiarization Tours :**

Offer to assist your tourism agencies with familiarization tours that they may be planning for travel writers in your area. Providing a complimentary nature-based service to a travel writer in return for editorial print and possibly television coverage will be a good marketing investment.

## **News Releases:**

Send news releases to area newspapers and radio and television stations. Make them aware of environmental events that may be of human interest. Such events as the early arrival of a bird species or the catch of a record-breaking fish are often newsworthy.

## **Collateral Materials:**

Develop and print guides, brochures, posters, and flyers for mail outs and placement in strategic locations and visitor centers.

## **Festivals and Events:**

Festival and events are extremely important as marketing tools and serve to establish and highlight the “sense of place” features of a location.

## **National Trade Shows:**

Maintain a presence at appropriate national trade shows and present your advertising materials to participants. Pass out materials and sell the Region.

## **Networking:**

At each attended trade show and event seize every opportunity to make contacts and to network with others in the tourism industry that are in a position to promote the Region.

## **Organization:**

Organize infrastructure to support and expedite the marketing of the Region. This may be done through the funding of a staff position dedicated to the Lower Mississippi Valley Nature Tourism product or by organizing into a non-profit association or possibly a combination of both. It is extremely important to develop this infrastructure to serve as the “clearing house” for the development and promotion of the Region. This office should serve the important role of grant application and administration of grant funds for development and marketing.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation:**

Evaluation and decision-making, plan implementation, and monitoring are critical steps in the success of a tourism plan. A set of specific actions should be prescribed with clearly defined responsibilities and timetables. Monitor progress in implementing the plan and evaluate the success of the plan in meeting its goals and objectives on a regular basis. Plans generally need to be adjusted over time due to changing goals, changing market conditions, and unanticipated impacts. A good strategy would be to build monitoring and evaluation systems into your planning efforts.