

Program to offer certification for nature-tourism professionals

Today's wildlife enthusiasts are traveling the Gulf Coast and experiencing the natural history and culture of coastal and ocean environments. Wildlife viewing activities hold tremendous potential for stimulating local economies while celebrating natural wonders and cultural heritage. To be successful, nature-tourism experiences should provide quality opportunities to engage the public with natural resources in ways that lead to greater understanding and appreciation, while protecting and preserving the wildlife populations they are viewing.

The Coastal Nature Guide Certification Program has been developed for a new generation of nature-tourism professionals in the Gulf of Mexico region. The goal of this dynamic program is to help nature-tourism professionals build and enhance the skills needed to adopt and promote sustainable wildlife viewing practices that help preserve healthy and resilient coasts along the Gulf of Mexico.

A diverse group of local scientists with expertise in biology, ornithology, marine mammals, aquaculture, botany and resource-protection laws and regulations will conduct a one-day training session for nature-tourism professionals beginning at 8 a.m. on Feb. 22 at the Weeks Bay Reserve Educational Interpretive Center in Fairhope. Participants will gain a vast knowledge of local ecosystems; learn to promote good stewardship through an established code of ethics; and learn how to conduct an educational briefing at the start of a tour. After implementing these practices, nature-tour operators will request evaluations of their businesses. Once the program director finds their business to be in compliance with the program's standards and practices, nature-tour operators will receive certification and decals of the program logo to display on tours and in advertising.

The cost of the certification program is \$70. Annual recertification includes submitting a coastal nature guide reporting form, completing a training course and evaluation.

For further information or to register, contact Joanne McDonough at 251-974-4634

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