

Coastal Alabama Partnership | April 2024

# Ecotourism Development in the Black Belt Nature, Culture, and Community



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alabama tourism growth has been on a steady increase during much of the last decade, representing 8.6% of its overall 2022 GDP and supporting nearly 240,000 jobs (Alabama Tourism, 2022). This presents a unique opportunity to expand tourism's positive potential for economic development, particularly among rural and urban areas in need of job creation.

The Black Belt region of Alabama, known for its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and community diversity, holds significant potential for tourism development. The Black Belt Ecotourism Project Report, commissioned by the Coastal Alabama Partnership and the State of Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, outlines key strategies and priority recommendations to leverage the region's assets for economic growth.

The report provides an analysis and path forward to support tourism development in the Black Belt region based upon the three pillars of sustainable tourism – Nature, Culture, and Community - which encompass and grow out of ecotourism, officially defined as *“Responsible travel to natural areas that protects nature and sustains the wellbeing of local people”* (TIES, 1991).

Research has consistently shown that when local people are directly involved in decision-making on tourism development and planning in their communities, tourism can become a powerful force for uplifting economic and social well-being.

The philosophy of ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’ also served as a guiding light throughout this 12-month project, extending from April 2023 to April 2024. When neighboring communities, towns, and counties work in partnership toward shared development goals, leveraging their collective strengths and resources to attract a wider tourism demographic, this creates a stronger, more resilient, and more competitive tourism industry that benefits all involved. That sentiment also emerged as a key theme and takeaway from a series of community-to-community tourism collaboration workshops, activities, and discussions that gathered stakeholders from Mobile, Selma and the Black Belt. During these meetings, business partnerships were formed to help advance sustainable economic development through ecotourism, heritage travel, and civil rights history tours. The collective enthusiasm shared by participants to unite, learn from one another, and grow in tandem was a clear indicator that together they can go far in building tourism's positive economic impact in the Black Belt and beyond.

The market demand for ecotourism, rooted in authenticity and local community experiences, remains one of the fastest growing tourism sectors, especially as Millennials and Gen Z take the helm as the predominate travel demographic. Tourism trends continue to predict rising demand for outdoor recreation, culinary experiences, nature travel, wellness, and local community-led activities. This shift reflects the larger transformation in the national and international tourism industry, indicating those travel destinations that make sustainable tourism and ecotourism a priority today will become the new tourism leaders of tomorrow.

The Black Belt aims to capitalize on this trend. By emphasizing conservation efforts, protection of cultural heritage and historic sites, and community engagement, tourism can serve as a catalyst for economic development in this promising yet still largely underdeveloped tourism region of Alabama.

Selma, with global name recognition, is in a unique position as an urban destination and as a hub for exploring the Black Belt. Known for its civil rights history, Selma can also enhance and expand its tourism offerings with ecotourism activities, including walking and biking trails as well as guided tours on the Alabama River. These initiatives, along with improving tourism infrastructure and visitor services, can position Selma as a vibrant tourism capital in the Black Belt, benefiting both the city and the entire region.

Mobile and Montgomery are important tourism gateway cities to the Black Belt, with unique offerings for visitors interested in ecotourism and civil rights history. Fostering stronger collaboration and partnerships between the Black Belt, Mobile, and Montgomery, including driving corridors, will help unlock the region's full potential to become a nationally and internationally recognized travel destination.

Current challenges to tourism growth in the Black Belt are identified in the report, including a lack of infrastructure, limited visitor accommodation, particularly in rural areas, inconsistent wayfinding signage, and the need for improved interpretation among forts and historic sites. In addition to identifying these and other challenges impacting tourism development, the report provides tangible steps and strategies to mitigate these limitations, which will be crucial to enhancing the visitor experience and attracting a wider demographic of tourists to the Black Belt.

The project involved an extensive on-the-ground tourism product asset review, more than one hundred stakeholder meetings and consultations, and additional field and background research. It lays out a compelling case for the Black Belt to become a successful ecotourism, civil rights, and heritage travel destination based on the three pillars of Nature, Culture, and Community to achieve economic development success. Recognizing the challenges that remain to achieving tourism growth in the Black Belt, including in the city of Selma as a tourism hub for exploring the region, and better connecting the tourism gateway cities of Montgomery to the North and Mobile on the coast to the Black Belt's visitor attractions, **a number of important observations and recommendations are included throughout the report that warrant its full reading to understand the context and strategy for the way forward.**

### *Recommendations and Action Items*

A series of key recommendations requiring further investment and funding are presented as actionable items for implementation during the next 12-18 months to expand and upgrade tourism products and services and address infrastructure needs for the Black Belt to expand as a tourism destination that can deliver social and economic benefits for local people. By highlighting recommendations and strategies and identifying key implementable action items, the report serves as a road map to realize the full potential to establish the Black Belt as a rising tourism destination. Among other action items noted are the following:

### **Roland Cooper State Park**

**Action Item:** *Redevelop the adjacent golf course into additional accommodation, beyond the limited cabins and primitive camp sites that currently exist; establish guided kayak and canoe tours; add additional park interpretive and wayfaring signage; expand the park's two short nature trails along the shorefront and through the pine forest to appeal to more visitors; connect park ecotourism activities with cultural heritage and nature-based tourism experiences at nearby Gee's Bend and Camden.*

### **Gee's Bend**

**Action Item:** *Invest in creating kayak and canoe rentals, along with boat tours, at Gee's Bend Park in partnership with the Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy community-based tourism initiative for economic development; provide funding support for overnight visitor accommodation at Gee's Bend, including building guest cabins on the Freedom Quilting Bee Site; increase directional signage leading to Gee's Bend with design continuity between new wayfaring signage and existing Gee's Bend Heritage Trail signage; establish a year-round, reliable and consistent Ferry Service between Camden and Gee's Bend.*

### **Foot Soldiers Park and Education Center**

**Action Item:** *With tourism capacity building, guide training and small business development being crucial to attracting youth into the tourism job economy and establishing the Black Belt as a national and internationally renowned travel destination, funding support for the new Foot Soldiers Park Education Center in Selma represents an important opportunity to have a venue for tourism capacity building and guide training in the heart of the Black Belt.*

### **The Joe Farm**

**Action Item:** *Funding support for infrastructure and ecotourism activities should take place at The Joe Farm, with a priority being to establish a visitor information center, catering pavilion, wildlife blinds for observation, and guest accommodation. This will help rapidly expand the Black Belt ecotourism market by building on the nationally recognized Joe Family Farm as a top birding destination, and also provide opportunities for overnight stays in the Black Belt to help address the shortage of available accommodation for ecotourists, particularly in areas with abundant nature and outdoor recreation opportunities.*

### **Historic Tabernacle Baptist Church**

**Action Item:** *The Alabama Historical Commission has identified Historic Tabernacle Baptist Church as among the most important historic Black churches in the state. Funding is urgently needed to address building accessibility (ADA) to facilitate visitors that require wheelchair and other accessibility requirements among tour groups and self-drive tourists who also want to enter the building in order to learn about its architectural design and important civil rights legacy.*

### **Old Cahawba Archaeological Park**

**Action Item:** *Connecting Old Cahawba and Selma through the development of maintained biking and hiking trails, along with guided ecotourism experiences, will allow visitors to explore more of the region by bicycle, foot, boat, and even horseback; by improving the infrastructure of*

*the park's two canoe and kayak ramps at the confluence of the Cahaba and Alabama Rivers, Old Cahawba can also become an important launching and docking point for expanded river recreation through ecotours connected to Selma and the Black Belt; funding support to enhance visitor services, interpretation, infrastructure, and product development at Old Cahawba will help to further establish the Black Belt as a history, heritage, and ecotourism destination.*

### **Fort Mims**

**Action Item:** *Funding support is needed to address the lack of historical interpretation and staffing for visitors by implementing well-designed signage, supplemented, where possible, by other interpretation such as audio tours provided by OnCell. This has been used successfully for promoting tourism at Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, including engaging visitors in storytelling brought to life told from the perspectives of the opposing sides of the battle. In addition, a small one person staffed interpretive museum with exhibits and a short overview video about the role of Fort Mims in US history will enhance the visitor experience.*

### **MOWA Choctaw Ecotourism Park and Museum**

**Action Item:** *Funding support for implementing an existing masterplan remains a top priority for this emerging cultural heritage and ecotourism asset in the Mobile to Black Belt driving corridor. The plan includes enhancing the small museum as a tourism attraction; expanding nature trails, and other outdoor recreation opportunities including RV/camping areas; as well as a veterans' memorial sculpture and MOWA Choctaw heritage village. Implementing these enhancements will support economic development in this rural area and strengthen tourism visitor experiences connecting Mobile to the Black Belt.*

### **Black Belt Wayfinding Signage**

**Action Item:** *Support to expand wayfinding signage with a consistent visual "Black Belt" identity for visitors to become familiar with the region's directional information, serving to improve the current fragmented efforts in wayfaring signage to better assist self-drive tourists in locating the region's many ecotourism, historic, and cultural sites of interest, particularly given their locations in rural areas.*

### **Community-Based Tourism Collective**

**Action Item:** *Start-up funding and support should be provided to launch the Mobile, Selma, and Black Belt Community-Based Tourism Collective.*

### **Alabama Black Belt Adventures**

**Action Item:** *Skilled marketing and promotion are critical to taking the Black Belt to the next level as a growing travel destination offering nature, culture, and community tourism experiences. Having demonstrated its ability to respond to emerging tourism trends, including the rapidly expanding ecotourism market, make increased funding support to Alabama Black Belt Adventures to lead overall marketing of the Black Belt a high priority to further accelerate the region's successful branding and promotion.*

## Summary

In summary, the Black Belt region of Alabama represents a compelling opportunity for sustainable tourism development that embraces and showcases the region's diverse natural landscapes, significant cultural heritage, and resilient communities. The report provides strategies and initiatives aimed at fostering ecotourism, heritage travel, and civil rights tourism as key drivers for economic growth, social progress, and natural resources conservation across the region.

Through a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of nature, culture, and community, the Black Belt has the potential to position itself as a premier tourism destination that offers authentic, meaningful, and enriching experiences for visitors while also benefiting local residents and businesses. By building on the region's strengths, such as its historic sites, natural beauty, and unique cultural traditions, the Black Belt can attract a broad range of tourists and travelers, from civil rights history enthusiasts and outdoor adventurers to cultural explorers and nature lovers.

The report underscores the importance of strategic planning, capacity building, and collaborative partnerships among various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organizations, businesses, and community leaders. As the tourism industry continues to evolve and grow, the Black Belt stands poised to carve out a distinct identity as a destination that recognizes its past, embraces its present, and plans for a sustainable economic future. By harnessing the power of ecotourism, heritage travel, and civil rights tourism, the Black Belt can emerge as a model in Alabama for destination stewardship that balances economic prosperity with social equity and environmental resilience.

At its essence, the Black Belt's journey towards becoming a premier tourism destination is a collective endeavor that requires vision, commitment, and collaboration. By working together to leverage the region's unique assets, preserve its natural beauty, and celebrate its cultural heritage, the Black Belt can chart a path towards sustainable growth, increased prosperity, and enhanced well-being for all who call this region home.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project report was commissioned by the Coastal Alabama Partnership (CAP) in partnership with the State of Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR). The statements, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of CAP or ADCNR.

The project was led by Costas Christ and Associates, LLC (CC&A), founded by Costas Christ, a globally-recognized ecotourism expert, who served as the lead consultant, together with a team of specialists in sustainable tourism economic development, including Sally Smith Christ, Vice President of CC&A; Nina Boys, Vice President of Sustainability for Beyond Green Travel (BGT); Evan Tzeng, Director of Sustainability for BGT; and Candace Johnson, Director of Tourism and Community Development, University of Alabama Center for Economic Development (UACED).

The project encompasses a broad swath of the Alabama Black Belt, with an additional focus on the potential for tourism in the driving corridor extending from the city of Mobile, including the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and northern Mobile and Baldwin counties, to Selma and surrounding areas. Numerous tourism stakeholders, including individuals, community leaders, businesses, municipal and state officials, non-profit organizations, Convention and Visitor Bureaus, and Chambers of Commerce were among the many stakeholders who generously contributed their time, talent, and support, providing valuable insights and recommendations during the 12-month project extending from April 2023 to April 2024.

Special thanks goes to Wiley Blankenship, President and CEO of the Coastal Alabama Partnership, for continuing to shepherd sustainable tourism potential in the region as an economic development opportunity; Chris Blankenship, Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, for funding the project; David Clark and the team at Visit Mobile for their significant support and encouragement, including assisting with organizing business-to-business tourism familiarization (FAM) visits and collaboration between Mobile, Selma and the Black Belt; Karlos Finley, Executive Director of the Africatown Re-development Corporation (ARC), for his tireless efforts to advance project goals, including community-led tourism economic development; the Dora Franklin Finley African-American Heritage Trail (DFFAAHT) for their considerable assistance, support and collaboration; Joanne Bland, founder of Foot Soldiers Park and Education

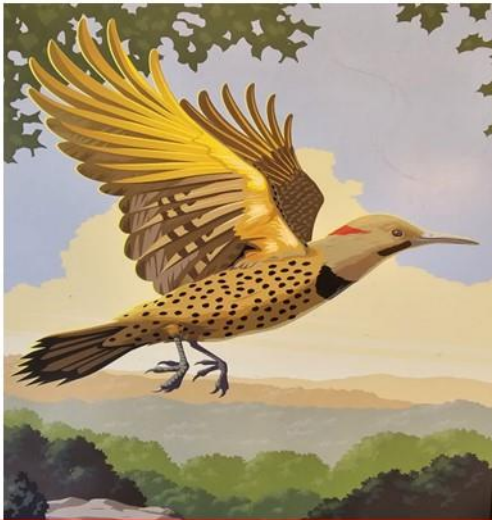
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It is with great appreciation that we wish to thank all the other people and organizations – of which there are too many to list here - who played an important role in supporting the project to strengthen tourism as an economic development opportunity in the Black Belt and beyond.

*Costas Christ and Associates, LLC*







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