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# Sustainable Tour Operators: The Case of Seascope Kayak Tours Inc. in Costa Rica

## Seascope Kayak Tours Inc. en Costa Rica: Creyendo en la Sostenibilidad

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### Abstract

Seascope Kayak Tours Inc. is a small adventure tour company started by a Canadian entrepreneur. The company offers kayaking tours in Deer Island, New Brunswick, Canada and in Playa Tambor, Costa Rica. Data for the case was collected from public sources, interview with the owner, as well as from ethnographic observation and participation. The case research focuses on the issue of sustainable tour operators and uses Seascope to highlight the importance of sustainable beliefs and philosophy.

**Keywords:** reproducible research, higher education, programming languages

### Resumen

Seascope Kayak Tours Inc. es una pequeña empresa de turismo de aventura iniciada por un empresario canadiense. La compañía ofrece tours de kayak en Deer Island, New Brunswick, Canadá y en Playa Tambor, Costa Rica. Los datos del caso fueron recolectados de fuentes públicas, entrevista con el propietario, así como de observación y participación etnográfica. La investigación de caso se centra en la cuestión de los operadores turísticos sostenibles y utiliza esta compañía para resaltar la importancia de las creencias y la filosofía sostenibles.

**Palabras clave:** investigación reproducible, educación superior, lenguajes de programación

## Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The world tourism industry is worth US\$7.6 trillion, represents about 10% of world GDP, and accounts for 277 million jobs worldwide (Turner, 2015). Tourism in Costa Rica is the most important industry for the country. In 2015, the tourism industry grew by 9%, thanks to a record number of visitors- 2.66 million (Dyer, 2016). Tourism Minister Mauricio Ventura considers the tourism industry, which represents 5.3% of the country's GDP, \$2.8 billion in revenue, as well as 23.4% of exports, as the de-

velopment engine of the national economy (Dyer, 2016; Ventura, 2015). In 2014, the tourism industry created 98,000 direct jobs and 247,500 total jobs, which accounted for 12% of total national employment (Turner, 2015).

By 2025, the World Travel & Tourism Council forecast approximately 4.1 million visitors to Costa Rica (Turner, 2015). According to the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT), visitors to Costa Rica stay an average of 11 days in the country and spend about \$1,340 per visitor; however, with a total population of about 4.8 million, the country will face new challenges to continue developing its industry in a sustainable way (Dyer, 2015).

Multinational tourism operators that invest in large projects have played an influential role in the supply and demand characteristics of the tourism industry in Costa Rica. However, the benefits of these large multinational tourism projects are not always positive. Cavlek (2005) analyzed the effect of European tour operators and noted that the concept of mass tourism may also lead to economic, socio-cultural, and ecological problems. Furthermore, large tourism operators are often vertically integrated; and motivated by profit objectives, as well as economies of scale (Cavlek, 2005). Álvarez-Albelo and Hernández-Martín (2012) also point out the problems arising from congestion and coordination between foreign tour operators and local service operators, often resulting in logistic failures.

In contrast to large tourism operators, Ateljevic and Doorne (2004) argued that small, entrepreneurial firms in the tourism sector provide better economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits to local communities by offering more innovative products. For example, entrepreneurial tour operators have more flexibility to design new innovative tourist destinations that target niche markets. Trunfio, Petruzzellis, and Nigro (2006) analyzed different types of tourism products focused on niche markets in Southern Italy and found that international tourists were interested in cultural and natural resources, but also that these tourism destinations provided a competitive advantage to the tour operators. However, this competitive advantage may only be temporal if there is a lack of a vision for sustainable development. The case of Machu Pichu is an example that illustrates how the Inca Trail started as a simple hiking destination and became a major tourism destination whose success started to affect and threaten the cultural and ecological resources of the local area (Maxwell, 2012; Larson and Poudyal, 2012).

Larson and Poudyal (2012) recommended an integrative management strategy to deal with the complex positions and differences that may arise amongst various stakeholders, such as government, conservation organizations, communities, tour operators, and foreign tourists. In addition, these scholars suggest that policies promoting sustainability could use the UN World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) sustainable tourism framework as a base to address political, socio-cultural, and environmental challenges (Larson and Poudyal, 2012). According to Jones, Hillier, and Comfort (2016), in the hospitality industry there are three challenges: (1) definition of sustainability not well defined; (2) lack of standard external assurance; and (3) little understanding between the concept of sustainable consumption and economic growth.

In Costa Rica, the ICT is the government's official tourism board that promotes and regulates the tourism industry

in the country. Among its functions, the ICT offers tour operators a certification for sustainable tourism (Certificación para la Sostenibilidad Turística, CST). In addition, it also offers tour operators research, as well as training on sustainable tourism practices (<http://www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/>). The CST certification process can be lengthy and costly; however according to the ICT, the benefits of CST certification include participation in green trade fairs, use of the CST logo in the company's advertisement and publicity, listing in specialized publications, directories, and social media, as well as option to use the Costa Rican brand "ESENCIAL COSTA RICA." The sustainable tourism label is based on a scale of 0-5 green leaves that ranks tourist operators according to how well they have incorporated, implemented, and achieved sustainable practices in their operations. Nonetheless, the main advantage of the CST certification is that it differentiates tour operators who have a sustainability focus from tour operators that claim to be sustainable, but are not. In a recent review of the ecotourism industry in Costa Rica, Jones and Spadafora (2017) argued that in addition to the government and non-government organizations, small entrepreneurs were also key players in the ecotourism industry, by building the tourist destinations that attracted the "Western Eco tourists." An alternate model would be the bottom-up multi-stakeholder entrepreneurial approach discussed by Ateljevic (2009), where public-private collaboration is essential to building a sustainable tourism industry. Irrespective of the model, ultimately the entrepreneur is the main actor who decides whether his/her tourism business follows sustainable principles. Swan and Morgan (2016) found that eco-entrepreneurs are able to balance business goals with lifestyle philosophy, and sustainable environmental practices. They also suggested that the entrepreneur's social and sustainability philosophies override financial benefits and growth; and as result, eco-entrepreneurs keep their operations small.

The CST certification also works as a mechanism against greenwashing. The concept of greenwashing refers to companies that deceive consumers by falsely claiming to be supportive of the environment and/or green practices (Kewalramani and Sobelsohn, 2012; Delmas and Burbano, 2011). As an example, Jones and Spadafora (2017) noted that the success of the Costa Rican ecotourism industry also brought negative consequences of cases where entrepreneurs took advantage of the ecotourism trend, without being supportive of the environment.

## Methodology

The Seascape Kayak Tours Inc. case research was selected because it highlights a situation of a Canadian entrepreneur with a strong sustainability philosophy who set

up kayaking tour operations in Costa Rica. In their study, Villalobos-Céspedes, Galdeano-Gómez, and Tolón-Becerra (2010) analyzed international tourist demand for adventure tourism in Costa Rica and concluded that local operators were not meeting the demand. As an eco-entrepreneur with years of experience offering kayaking tours in his native Deer Island, New Brunswick, Canada, Bruce Smith had already seen this opportunity and started to offer existing clients Playa Tambor, Costa Rica as a new destination.

This case research followed guidelines suggested by Gerring (2007) and Yin (1994). Data was collected and triangulated from multiple public sources. In addition, the methods involved ethnographic research through observation, participation, and interviews conducted with the entrepreneur in his environment (Anderson, 2009). A narrative format is used to highlight critical events of the entrepreneur and the company to provide insight into the characteristics of the case (Siggelkow, 2007).

### Seascope Kayak Tours Inc.

Bruce Smith, owner of Seascope Kayak Tours Inc. (Seascope), was saying “See you next year!” to the group of kayakers who had just finished the last kayaking tour of the 2017 season in the Gulf of Nicoya, Costa Rica. His sunset kayaking tours were always a hit with novice and experienced kayakers, and to hear the sighs of amazement from them always brought a sense of satisfaction to Bruce. Bruce headed to his office to review Seascope’s 2017 operations in Costa Rica. He was scheduled to fly out of Costa Rica and head to his home in Deer Island, New Brunswick, Canada on April 30, 2017. He did not have much free time, as the first group of kayakers were expected to arrive for a kayak tour of Deer Island the coming weekend.

Seascope has been offering unique, small-group sea kayaking experiences since 1994. The company built its reputation on exceptional quality, extensive experience, high safety standards, personalized, friendly service, and a strong commitment to the culture, history and natural



Figure 1. Kayaking in Playa Tambor, Costa Rica. Source: Seascope Kayak Tours website



Figure 2. Kayaking in Deer Island, Canada. Source: Seascope Kayak Tours website

environment of each of its areas of operation (See Figures 1 and 2). According to Bruce, “We specialize in small group travel, which minimizes environmental impact, increases safety standards and allows for personalized, enriching and authentic experiences.” In 2016, the Expedia site named Seascope one of the top 15 eco-adventures in Canada (Expedia, 2016).

The company offers fully guided expeditions – from day trips to weeklong adventures – with a focus on education, wildlife observation and sound environmental practices. In addition to guiding tours from its base in the Bay of Fundy, one of the world’s richest marine ecosystems, the company offers kayak expeditions to two other special ocean environments, the dramatic coastline of Newfoundland and the warm tropical waters of Costa Rica.

### The Entrepreneur and Founder

Bruce Smith has always enjoyed the outdoors. As a child, he used to go camping and hiking with family and friends. Those outings helped develop in him an appreciation for nature that became an integral part of his personal philosophy. He went on to study sports science, physical education, outdoor recreation and secondary education. With this strong background in physical education and outdoor recreation, Bruce became a certified wilderness emergency medical technician, a wilderness first aid instructor, and holds degrees in sport science and secondary education. Bruce was also a physical education teacher and later an instructor at the New Brunswick Community College in Adventure Tourism. He is also fluent in French, English and Spanish.

As Seascope’s founder and the lead guide for most of the company’s adventures, Bruce has over 25 years of outdoor leadership experience. Through his work and volunteerism, he was awarded a 2010 Lifetime Achievement Award by the New Brunswick Department of Environment. In addition to creating the pioneering Seascope Company, Bruce has spearheaded an alternati-

ve education program for at-risk Cree youth in northern Quebec involving traditional Cree land-based activities, academic upgrading and life skill development. He worked for the Mexican government to assist in the development and delivery of the Mexican Sea Kayak Guide Certification Program. He has also developed outdoor courses and adventure training for Forsgren and Associates, the Federal Government of Canada, Imperial Oil, New Brunswick Provincial Government, the University of New Brunswick, New Brunswick Special Olympics, Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Province of Ontario, and various other learning institutions and outdoor centers.

Bruce became interested in kayaking from an early age. "My family was a very active family and very interested in outdoor pursuits. When I was 4 -5 years of age my grandfather built a canvas kayak for me ...45 years later the passion remains strong." In addition, Bruce's childhood experiences helped shaped his beliefs and philosophy on ecotourism and sustainability. "Once again I was very fortunate to have parents who instilled within me a deep appreciation for nature and all living things... this environmental focus and commitment has only deepened with personal travel experiences, outdoor education and work. I have always felt that ecotourism is a wonderful way to develop understanding and awareness of special areas and to encourage protection and conservation."

Bruce decided to use his outdoor experience to customers interested in a unique experience that combined nature, education, and adventure. In 1994, Seascope opened its doors in the historic seaside resort town of St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada. From 1994 – 2000 Seascope enjoyed an ideal location adjacent to the public wharf in St. Andrews. The location provided easy access to the waterfront and excellent visibility. In 2000, the town of St. Andrews created a by-law, which prevented Seascope from using a nearby green space as a staging area for instructional purposes. This unfortunate decision resulted in the company relocating all operations to a newly purchased waterfront property on Deer Island.

During the 2001 operating season, Seascope experienced a substantial decrease in visitation due to the remoteness of the new location. In an effort to restore the connection with the St. Andrews tourism traffic, a small waterfront shop was created for the business in 2002 / 2003. The shop was located adjacent to a popular local restaurant. Due to limited visibility and difficulties with the landlords the kayak shop was closed at the end of the 2003 tourism season.

A prime location became available at the St. Andrews

Day Adventure Center in 2004, and with the towns permission to use the formerly off-limits green space, Seascope opened an office in St. Andrews. The return to the St. Andrew's Day Adventure Center increased the overall exposure of the company. A decision was made to consolidate business activities on Deer Island in 2006. This was primarily an attempt to reduce overhead expenses (rent, staffing, equipment, travel, etc.). The decision to move the company's main base of operations to Deer Island was an excellent one as the site proved to be an ideal location to explore the West Isles Archipelago and observe incredible marine life.

## Sustainability

Even though it is a small, locally owned and operated company, Seascope is an industry leader in sustainable tourism, for which it has received international recognition. Through his work with Seascope, Bruce Smith has created awareness of environmental issues and helped to protect the lands and waters on which the company operates. Seascope's philosophy is "We specialize in small group travel, which minimizes environmental impact, increases safety standards and allows for personalized, enriching and authentic experiences." In its operation, Seascope follows these Sustainable Tourism Guidelines:

**Small group travel to minimize environmental impact on fragile coastal ecosystems and to allow for a more authentic and enriching personal connection to the biodiversity of the places visited.**

**Environmental approach to travel and waste management, including recycling, reusing and composting, purchasing items with limited packaging and using recycled paper in all promotional materials.**

**Assisting local conservation efforts and environmental education initiatives such as school groups participating in annual coastal cleanups, as well as collaborating with numerous conservation organizations.**

**Sensitive wildlife observation practices that include keeping a respectful distance to minimize noise and stress and leaving habitats pristine by hauling out any items carried in, as well as any trash left by others.**

**Contact between visitors and native coastal people as a means of involving local communities in both the cultural and economic benefits of tourism, a critical component of ecotourism.**

**Advocating protection of marine as well as terrestrial ecosystems through an emphasis on interpretation of the natural and cultural history of the regions.**

Purchasing locally grown food, certified organic products, and items such as coffee, tea and chocolate through fair trade wholesalers to ensure that money is returned to the local communities.

Environmental approach to energy consumption and natural resources through the use of products such as energy efficient light bulbs and biodegradable cleaning agents made with natural ingredients.

### Setting up operations in Costa Rica

In order to provide a year round product, Bruce worked as a guide and educator in Baja, Mexico and conducted scouting missions in Central American countries to locate a potential operation site for his company. Following a scouting expedition along the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, Bruce set up a permanent base in 1996 for winter expeditions on the Nicoya Peninsula of Costa Rica. Based at a small eco-resort, Bruce ran sea kayaking day trips and multi-tours for visitors staying at the resort, local visitors in the region, and guests that had already been clients at his Deer Island operation in Canada. The company now offers kayaking experiences on the Caribbean coast - Tortuguero National Park and the Golfo Dulce in the South Pacific region of Costa Rica. Since 1998, Seascope has operated day and multi-day sea kayak expeditions tours in the Bay of Fundy (Deer Island), Golfo de Nicoya (Playa Tambor, Costa Rica), and in the Bay of Exploits region of Newfoundland, Canada.

### Discussion and Conclusions

By co-marketing both summer and winter kayak adventures, Bruce could build clientele from both directions; that is, selling tours in Canada to his Costa Rican clients, and selling tours in Costa Rica to his Canadian clients. Expanding the two season operation to a four season operation provides economic sustainability for kayak tours in June-October (New Brunswick, Canada), and November-May (Playa Tambor, Costa Rica). Maintaining a small footprint as a company has resulted in economic and personal advantages such as low overhead and low human resource costs. Continuous development of new paddling destinations and thematic trips helps maintain a loyal base of repeat guests in both destinations. The destinations in Costa Rica and Deer Island are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

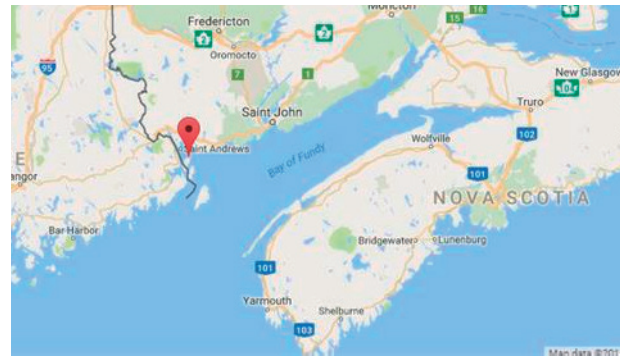


Figure 4. Deer Island, New Brunswick, Canada. Source: Google Maps.



Figure 3. Bruce Smith (first from left-middle row) and staff members. Source: Seascope Kayak Tours website.

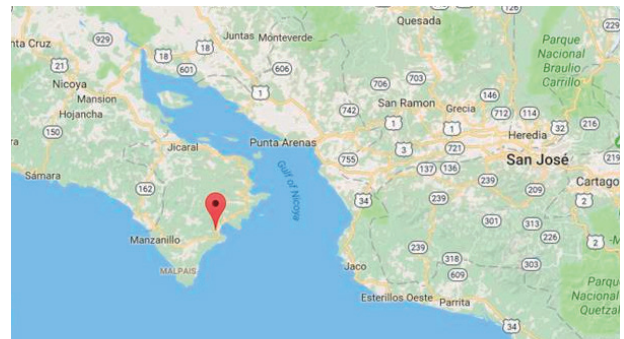


Figure 5. Playa Tambor, Costa Rica. Source: Google Maps.

Seascope has grown over the years an image of a company that well rooted in its sustainable principles. Bruce continues to explore new kayaking locations in Costa Rica and elsewhere in Central America. However, Bruce also acknowledges that one of the key to success is to surround himself with employees and tour guides that believe in the same sustainability philosophy that he does (Figure 3).

	CST Certification	Philosophy
I	√	√
II	X	√
III	√	X
IV	X	X

Table 1. Types of Tour Operators.

Through its founder Bruce Smith, Seascope illustrates a case where an entrepreneur from Canada set up a successful tour operation in Costa Rica. The company's success is predicated on the beliefs and philosophy that the entrepreneur holds on sustainability and ecotourism. While CST certification may be the ultimate goal of sustainable tour operators, the process to achieve full certification takes time. In Table 1, we have outlined four types of tourism operators and their sustainability goals. Type I tour operators have engaged in the CST certification process. It may be assumed that these operators also have a philosophy that supports sustainability. On the other hand, Type II tour operators have not formally engaged in the CST certification process; however, the company and/or the management of the company have incorporated into their operations a sustainability philosophy that guides its operations. It may be argued that a type III tour operator would not exist because engaging in the CST certification means that the tour operator has adopted or is in the process of adopting sustainability principles. However, it may also be plausible that a tour operator might be greenwashing its image. Type IV tour operators are neither interested in developing a sustainability philosophy nor in becoming certified.

In conclusion, the success of Seascope as a sustainable tourism business is based on the strong beliefs and philosophy of its founder and owner, Bruce Smith, who has been able to balance the economic success of the company with his personal lifestyle, and his interests in conservation and protection of the environment. The Seascope case also illustrates an example of tour operators that have not engaged in the CST certification process, but which nevertheless, demonstrates a sustainability philosophy through the company's operations and actions.

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