

State urges tourism industry to be green

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ANNAPOLIS - Maryland's parks, trails and estuarine allure are often what sell the state to tourists.

This month, the state unfolded an effort to encourage the tourism industry to more actively safeguard these natural resources.

Launched on the heels of the Maryland Green Registry, Maryland Green Travel is a free and voluntary self-certification program that urges businesses in the tourism industry, starting with the lodging sector, to adhere to eco-friendly practices, from waste reduction to energy efficiency.

The program takes advantage of what one tourism official called a turning point in public opinion on environmental stewardship and sustainable behavior.

"I think (consumers) now expect to have options of being able to be green," said Margot Amelia, executive director of the Maryland Office of Tourism Development.

"The businesses are recognizing it, so I know the consumers must be asking for it," Amelia said.

Tourism is the fourth largest industry in the state and "one of the bright spots in our economy," said Amelia, as it generates jobs, business income and tax revenue.

In 2007, tourism produced an estimated \$13.6 billion in both in- and out-of-state visitor spending, and \$1.7 billion in state and local tax revenue.

Amelia hopes Maryland Green Travel will help businesses attract even more visitors.

To join the program, businesses must provide the state's tourism office with an environmental policy statement and prove their participation in an activity that benefits the environment, such as conserving water and energy or recycling and reducing waste.

Although no businesses have become certified Green Travel Partners yet, Amelia hopes the tourism department will have "a robust database of eco-friendly businesses" online by the start of the state's spring tourism season.

The Green Registry, a database of green Maryland organizations launched earlier this year, currently has more than 100 members.

Once the green travel program is extended beyond the lodging sector, the owners of Black Ankle Vineyards plan on signing right up.

The 145-acre Mt. Airy vineyard this month received Gov. Martin O'Malley's green tourism award, and were assured that they would soon qualify for Maryland Green Travel, said Sarah O'Herron, who owns the vineyard with Ed Boyce.

O'Herron and Boyce's green philosophy is apparent to vineyard visitors, in the sustainably grown grapes that are used to make the vineyard's wines and in the energy efficient tasting room that was built with materials from the property -- lumber milled from on-site trees and plaster created with clay pulled from the farm's subsoil.

O'Herron and Boyce hoped that the tasting room would "reflect ... the major components of our farming philosophy," O'Herron said.

This philosophy centers around sustainable growing, which enhances wine quality and "allows the grapes to connect more directly to their soil and express themselves in a more interesting way," said O'Herron.

O'Herron and Boyce have "a tremendous respect for the land," O'Herron said, and treat their vineyard "as one big organism, an entity."

This biodynamic world view "just kind of sat well with us," said O'Herron.

As a voluntary program rather than a regulatory requirement, Maryland Green Travel echoes tourism certification elsewhere, said Donald Hawkins, Eisenhower Professor of tourism policy at George Washington University.

What drives businesses to participate in these programs is "their concern for the environment, and seeing this as a way of reducing costs and ... creating a strong appeal to a customer base that's committed to environmental sustainability," Hawkins said.

"There is some evidence that tourists -- up to 20 or 25 percent -- are selecting those hotels or those attractions or those activities that have made commitments and taken actual steps to protect and conserve the environment," said Hawkins.

"The key is to get the customer engaged and making decisions based upon the commitments by the business to be greener," Hawkins said.

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