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ORGANIZACIÓH MANDAL SJTOURISME
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Sustainable Development of Ecotourism

A Compilation of Good Practices in SMEs



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1. Name of the business/ company/project	Proyecto Ecoalianza [Ecoalliance Project]
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4. Description	<p>This project has been undertaken by Angel-Eco Tours, Organización EcoChallenge, Ovetuda, Tuculven Tours & Travel, Inc., and Organización Cultural Mis Raíces Venezuela. The first stage of operations is planned for approximately five years. Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To promote the country as an important cultural, scientific, ecological, and adventure destination through the medium of a united front made up of different public and private sector institutions. • To set up strategic alliances with leading companies in the domestic market and thus help consolidate a new platform for tourism promotion abroad, initially in the United States and Canada with subsequent expansion to Europe and Asia. • To foment a spirit of cooperation and friendship between entities and communities in the venues where visits are undertaken. • To educate tourism industry workers so as to put in place top quality services in order to differentiate Venezuela from other destinations. • To undertake social commitments aimed at community and environmental projects. • To raise tourism sector awareness of the benefits to be derived from conserving ecosystems and indigenous cultures. • To implement electronic marketing tools through the use of modern technology (Internet, multimedia, etc.). <p>The role of associated interest groups: The primary aim is to position the specialized product so as to benefit conservation and cultural preservation projects, facilitate sporting, tourism and scientific events that will promote natural areas with minimum impact while making tangible opportunities available to neighbouring communities. The main product features are eco-tourism, bird watching, trekking, kayaking, rafting, scuba diving, and others.</p>

5. Business/company/
project initiation
and its author/s

Proyecto EcoAlianza arose from the idea of establishing a trading cooperative, promoted by Angel-Eco Tours, for the primary purpose of promoting Venezuela. A marketing strategy was defined in frequent meetings with the various entities involved. To date a number of presentations have been made to different state tourism bodies, and the institutional support of the Vice-Ministry for Tourism has been garnered. In addition, both companies and communities have displayed great interest in joining the project at the first Ecotourism Trade Fair (co-organized by Angel-Eco) held in Venezuela in September 2002.

6. Finance and funding

Investment costs to the present amount to some 250,000 dollars, provided in full by Angel-Eco Tours and EcoChallenge Organization. Nevertheless, additional support from the public sector is expected shortly. We have previously had the backing of such authorities as the Autoridad Única de los Roques [Los Roques National Park Authority], Dirección de Turismo del Estado Bolívar [Bolívar State Tourism Bureau], and Instituto Nacional de Turismo, Promoción y Capacitación-INATUR [National Institute for Tourism, Promotion, and Training]. Support for the project has also been received from such entities as Organización Cultural Mis Raíces Venezuela, Aloe Spa (resort), and others. The support of other specialized organizations that intend to join in the project is expected to be forthcoming momentarily.

7. Environmental
sustainability
of the ecotourism
project/business

a. Contribution to the conservation of natural areas

From its inception, EcoAlianza has been permanently committed to social development and conservation programmes. The different companies making up the Alliance develop, support, and promote a variety of programmes that provide support for endangered communities and species. For example, the Fundación Científica de Los Roques [Los Roques Science Foundation], a member of the EcoAlianza, carries out conservation programmes on the Los Roques Archipelago for the conservation and recovery of marine fauna (sharks, turtles, queen conch, lobsters, coral reefs), and these in turn are supported and promoted by the EcoAlianza. This not only helps to preserve ecosystems and their resources but also yields valuable information that helps reduce the impact of exploitation of those resources.

b. Educational and interpretation features

There have been a variety of instances in which educational programmes have been carried out, directed both to local populations and tourists. For example, the shark conservation project under the direction of biologist Rafael Tavares, and the turtle protection programme in the Los Roques National Park are good examples of programmes aimed at enhancing the knowledge and awareness of both the inhabitants and tourists on these natural resources. The tours organized by Angel-Eco in protected areas of Venezuela are led by specialized guides with interpretation skills.

c. Environmental practices in the development and operation of ecotourism facilities, establishments and services

Through the EcoAlianza, Angel-Eco is currently joining with certain camps and lodges that have already been practicing agrotourism, ecotourism, and the like (Hato el Cedral, Hato el Frío, Finca el Guamito). One of the projects being planned is to set up the Angel-Eco Lodge, which will include the creation and operation of ecotourism establishments and services in line with the recommendations resulted from World Ecotourism Summit (Quebec, Canada 2002). In this field of activity the objective is to assist host communities so that they can run camps and lodges, in which case Angel-Eco's main function is to act as a conduit for technical and financial support, for conservation and protection of the natural and cultural resources.

8. Social sustainability of the ecotourism project/business

Community involvement and benefits

Proyecto EcoAlianza intends to provide monetary support that will kindle the development of communities living nearby the ecotourism sites. This is the case of the Canaima National Park, where Angel-Eco earmarks 5% of annual earnings for social programmes in the indigenous Kamarata, Uruyén, and Kavac communities in the Park. The main purpose of this programme is to promote and strengthen the native culture (Pemon) to rescue it from the threat of oblivion and transculturation of its customs, myths, legends, dances, and dialects. The programme includes the promotion of sporting and educational activities and the building of schools and sport courts, as well as supplying trilingual dictionaries.

Through the ecotours local indigenous community members are employed directly or they partner by the provision of related services. This provides direct economic benefit for them.

There are also other projects, like refuse recycling, where the populace is oriented towards a daily activity that will avoid polluting the environment in which tourism takes place. It needs to be underscored that one of the priorities is to work directly with the communities, the primary hosts and the owners of these camps and operations.

9. Economic sustainability of the ecotourism project/business

a. Marketing and promotion

Participation in special events in 2001-2002.

- Miami – First Venezuelan Tourism Expo
- New York - Exotic Adventures (National Geographic)
- Chicago – IATOS (Expo and World Congress on Adventure and Ecotourism)
- Quebec, Canada, World Ecotourism Summit.

Presentations at consulates, for instance, the consulates in Chicago and New York.

Organization of ExpoEcoturismo 2002 in Caracas, Venezuela (the first specialized eco- and adventure tourism fair of the country, combined with a conference).

Advertising activity:

- Magazine advertising, e.g., in *New York Adventure Travel* magazine.
- Internet: A website, www.Angel-Ecotours.com, jointly with Mailpound.com (a specialized e-mail database for travel agents and tour operators reaching thousands of companies in the U.S. market).
- Market research on the web: Ecotravel.com in Chicago was commissioned to carry out a survey of potential associates and to make recommendations on positioning within the first 20 pages of this category.
- Database: a list developed by Angel-Eco that includes the e-mails and addresses of prospects, consulates, travel agents, and contacts made at meetings.
- Links to other organizations. The following organizations have inserted links to the company on their websites: TIES, CTO (Caribbean Tourism Organization), BIG 5, Milatours.com, Costamar, General Tours (Canada).
- Audiovisual, CD-ROM, video presentations. Available to potential clients, associates, and current clients.
- Public relations: We have a public relations agent to promote Venezuela in the U.S. press. We have also organized several trips for members of the press and television.

“Word of mouth” marketing is another important factor that resulted in visitations made by the clients’ friends and relatives.

b. Profitability of the ecotourism business

Tourism in Venezuela has undergone a decline in the past three years. We are currently undergoing the growth phase within the normal project cycle. Based on our years of experience in operations, the facts and forecasts suggest that we can be confident as to the success of our entrepreneurial activity. During the first year of the project we focused on completing market surveys that would yield reliable data on which to base an effort to secure a reasonable share of the international ecotourism market. Our visitors come mainly from the U.S., despite September 11. We hope that the current stage would be temporary and may offer Venezuela a good opportunity in the demand for new destinations worldwide.

In Venezuela part of our project team undertook to study the domestic tourism sector and mainly uncovered a lack of coherent plans for tourism promotion abroad and the small share of the U.S. market, a segment that has high purchasing power and is drawn to adventure and ecological tourism, the main attractions offered by our country.

**10. Cooperation
in ecotourism
business operation**

As already mentioned, EcoAlianza's main objective is to promote cooperation among private enterprises, the public authorities, and other organizations in carrying out joint activities in the areas of tourism marketing and promotion, conservation, and community development and training.

Angel-Eco and EcoAlianza also have the support of such international institutions as Provita, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), The Caribbean Tourism Organization, and others.

**11. Regulation of ecotourism
activities**

We have drawn up a code of conduct based wholly on the standards issued by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). Following the World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec, certain of the standards contained in the Summit's final declaration have also been incorporated, adapting them to our national conditions, bearing in mind that in Venezuela no specific legislation and regulations are in place and there are no quality certificates applied. We would like to put these features into practice in the future with the support of international experts.

**12. Problems
and their solution**

Problems:

The absence of a regulatory or certification system to promote activities in the form of responsible ecotourism, along with few incentives and/or financial support for the development of sustainable tourism.

The absence of unified or joint work by public and private entities, which poses obstacles for the action plans established.

The lack of coherence and continuity in tourism programmes by the Venezuelan Government.

Low awareness of Venezuela's ecotourism potential and its destinations.

13. Results achieved

The quantitative and qualitative results achieved so far are tangible, principally in what is known as positioning in international ratings, in that Angel-Eco has been successful in bringing Venezuela into the international ecotourism community through the use of technological advances. This goal has been accomplished partly by establishing links with worldwide organizations and carving out a niche for ourselves in cooperation with public and private entities.

ExpoEcoturismo 2002 (co-organized by Angel Eco Tours) has been held in Caracas to great success, for the first time bringing together tour operators, camps, lodges, national and state tourism authorities, NGOs, and other institutions in the ecotourism field and raising awareness of the enormous tourism potential existing in the provinces of Venezuela.

The creation of the Proyecto Ecoalianza holds out the promise of more efficient marketing and tourism operations. Thus, not only have jobs been created thanks to the inclusion of teams allied with the projects undertaken by Angel-Eco, but we have also succeeded in increasing the awareness of local and national populations.

14. Lessons learned

Since we are presently at the basic promotional stage, we do not yet have a specific measure of the effects stemming from this project. At the same time, our present work has met with a positive response both in indigenous communities and among companies and the authorities.

Past experience with other companies and similar operations enables us to avoid such mistakes as the lack of understanding with indigenous communities, caused by failing to identify their basic needs and by failing to appreciate and respect their customs and traditions, whereby no positive legacy is left to either party.

Personnel selection is one of the main challenges, but Venezuela has a wealth of young and promising professional quality human resources. Some of these are natural hosts par excellence, for instance the indigenous and Andean communities.

15. Monitoring activities

Service surveys are the main measuring tool used. The surveys are given to our visitors and to the communities where we carry out our programmes. Written experiences are the best way to uncover flaws in the process. Information brochures and public relations activities to raise awareness are some of the communications media that we use to reach the public abroad. At the same time, for the domestic public and for staff we promote a policy, based on training and on being part of the project, with mutual benefit as the end result.