



CHANGE THE WAY  
YOU TRAVEL



## LETSGO Eco-E Project Proposal

Annie Combs (MESM 2023, [amcombs@ucsb.edu](mailto:amcombs@ucsb.edu))

Kat Orellana (MESM 2023, [kjorellana@ucsb.edu](mailto:kjorellana@ucsb.edu))

Industry Advisor: Gordon Seabury, CEO of Toad&Co. and  
Board Member of the Adventure Travel Conservation Fund



## Background and Significance

Overdevelopment of emerging tourism destinations and land grabbing are pressing global issues. Land grabbing is the process by which powerful, foreign investors acquire large areas of land through coercion or persuasion, giving them control over the management and regulatory mechanisms associated with the land[1]. The Adventure Travel Conservation Fund (ATCF) estimates that in the last 20 years, “1.2 million square miles of wild lands worldwide” have been lost to land grabbing[1], some due in part to rapid tourism-related development. The tourism sector attracts investment in airports, hotels, attractions, and cultural/natural heritage sites[8]. Although 186 million hectares of forest worldwide is allocated for social services such as recreation, tourism, and education research, 73% of the world’s forests remain under public ownership and at risk of development without effective management strategies. While most forests in Europe have management plans to combat overdevelopment and deforestation, biodiversity hotspots like Africa and South America only have management plans in place for 20-25% of their forests[3]. Poorly executed land management at tourism destinations has been linked to deforestation and habitat loss, contributing to an overall loss of biodiversity and species richness in both terrestrial and coastal environments. Today, ecologists “estimate that approximately 8,000 species of mammals, fish, amphibians, reptiles and birds are threatened, and current species extinction rates are predicted to be 100 to 1,000 times greater than pre-human rates”[6]<sup>1</sup>. Since the tourism industry is projected to grow exponentially in post-pandemic years, tourism operations will be at risk of destroying the environments and wildlife that attract travelers in the first place.

Several approaches to prevent overdevelopment and habitat loss have been attempted as governments around the world and the tourism industry itself recognize the importance of protecting wildlife and safeguarding the health of the environment in driving long-term economic benefits. In the Galápagos Islands, government regulations limit the number of travelers allowed in the national park, control the amount of development on the islands, and monitor species richness/population levels<sup>2</sup>. These policies can be effective in maintaining the health of an ecosystem, however they can also be difficult to enforce when communities in the surrounding areas are not involved in the decision making processes.

Non-profit organizations like The Adventure Travel Conservation Fund (ATCF) have turned to establishing community based tourism projects at emerging destinations to combat overdevelopment. Revenue generated through sustainable tourism is used to incentivize a community to protect its environment, linking the protection of wild lands and wildlife that make destinations attractive to travelers to a significant source of income. ATCF has launched several projects that use community tourism as a vehicle for environmental restoration. In Guatemala, locals are trained to lead birdwatching tours and other nature-based activities. The community uses tourist dollars to learn sustainable farming practices and aid habitat reforestation efforts. Local guides are rewarded with access to sustainable food options, increased biodiversity, and a boosted economy that allows them to invest in the environmental efforts upon which their tourism model relies. In Kenya, where deforestation is a common method of income generation, ATCF provides locals with alternative sources of income by training them as wildlife watching tour guides[1]. The success of these projects depends heavily on locals’ ability to make a steady source of income from ecotourism. Without economic incentives and the opportunities that accompany them, communities will resort to natural resource exploitation once again. Steering tourism dollars towards community based tourism is necessary if we want to prevent more communities and destinations from experiencing the “boom and bust” of overdevelopment that is often seen at tourism hotspots.

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Stuart Pimm

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with Marcela Fonseca, Maria Jose Beltran, Dries William Andrade



## Proposed Solution

Our proposed solution is an online platform that connects adventurous, nature-oriented travelers with local tour guides and locally-owned accommodations to provide economic power to communities that enforce conservation efforts. We will partner with community based tourism projects to identify trained local tour guides and other services in at-risk tourism destinations, making it safer and more convenient for travelers to book vetted, local ecotourism experiences.

A large number of travelers have expressed interest in sustainable tourism, but a lack of marketing efforts in this sector has resulted in little consumer knowledge about tourism cooperatives. After conducting a survey of 29,000 people across 30 countries, Booking.com's 2021 Sustainable Travel Report indicated that 72% of travelers think travel companies should offer more sustainable choices and 76% want to ensure that tourism's economic impacts are equally distributed. However, 41% of travelers report that they do not know how to find sustainable travel options, and 48% say they find it difficult to make sustainable choices while they are traveling. The survey also found that 73% of travelers want authentic travel experiences that are representative of the local culture[3]. Although a majority of travelers aspire to be more sustainable, lack of access poses a barrier to these efforts<sup>3</sup>.

## Objectives

LETSGO seeks to reduce the detrimental effects of overdevelopment and land grabbing to protect biodiversity at current and future tourism destinations using financial incentives generated through tourism dollars. The following research questions will direct our project's business model development and environmental impact analysis:

1. Where are the tourism destinations at most immediate risk of land grabbing, overdevelopment and habitat loss?
2. How much financial and/or other incentives are needed for locals to reject land sale propositions and seek conservation efforts?

## Pedagogical Opportunity

We plan to explore multiple customer segments, including the overarching "modern traveler," an adventurous individual looking for a culturally enriching experience<sup>4</sup>. There are promising market opportunities in multiple subcategories of nature-based tourism: birders, botanical tourists, wildlife watchers, marine adventurers, and hikers that would all greatly benefit from the ease of booking an authentic, eco-centric experience. According to the 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation from the US Fish and Wildlife Services, there are an estimated 45 million birders in the United States alone, 16 million of which say they travel beyond their home to bird watch[9]. We will assess which at-risk destinations and local services appeal to categories of travelers, like birders, and align that market segment with sustainable tourism projects at those destinations to amplify community conservation efforts and encourage sustainable tourism.

## Available Data

[\*Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Global Forest Resources Assessment \(FRA 2020\)\*](#) - This report presents a comprehensive picture of the world's forests and the ways that tourism destinations' resources are changing.

[\*IUCN RedList Spatial Data Download, Species Richness and Range Rarity Data\*](#) (Databases)- These databases will help us determine the species that are in the most immediate danger of habitat degradation and extinction.

[\*Center for Responsible Travel \(CREST\) Resource Library\*](#) (Text)- This collection of studies provides valuable data on the environmental impacts of tourism and problem-specific mitigation strategies that we can use to develop our model.

---

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with Necoh Mitchell, Gordon Seabury

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Necoh Mitchell

[“Economic Incentives and Global Fisheries Sustainability” \(2010\) \(Text\)](#)- This scientific study provides an example of successful incentive-based community conservation efforts.

[UNWTO Tourism Data Dashboard \(Database\)](#)- The UNWTO database provides information on tourism arrivals and departures, industry recovery, impacts of COVID-19, employment, demand, and tourist capacity by country.

*Community Tourism Case Studies and Reports (Text)*- Case studies and reports regarding the successes and failures of past community tourism projects will help us identify potential pitfalls and successful tactics to support our business model. Many of these studies can easily be accessed through the UCSB Library database and include data from heavily-toured countries like Costa Rica and South Africa.

### **Possible Approaches**

Land sales/prices, deforestation rates, and species richness indexes can be used to identify where biodiversity hotspots are and locate destinations most at-risk of land grabbing within that range. Case studies on community based tourism initiatives will help us identify which incentives have effectively persuaded locals to avoid resource exploitation. Partnerships with organizations like The Adventure Travel Conservation Fund, RARE, Saving Nature, and the Audubon Society that are already working in these areas will allow us to determine where our platform would have the most impact and launch a potential pilot project.

Further research in the form of literature reviews, expert interviews, and customer surveys are necessary to the development of our business model. Key stakeholders include ecotourism companies, travel agents, local guides, sustainable tourism certification organizations, NGOs working in community tourism, and local business owners. Surveys will help us understand customer needs and effective forms of marketing. Studies in resource economics, incentive-based behavioral studies, and successful tourism models are key to understanding the ways in which our business should be structured to ensure economic and environmental success and further develop our impact assessment criteria.

### **Equity**

Land grabbing practices have historically justified the removal and displacement of local and indigenous peoples. Attractive tourist sites drive up land prices until locals are unable to afford their own land and are pressured to sell [8]. Short-term economic benefits justify land grabbing as jobs are created for local people, but they are usually low-paying jobs with limited opportunities for upward mobility. In most cases, local access and autonomy is restricted or lost altogether with most of the incoming revenue distributed to local elites, foreign tourism companies, and government agencies [2].

Our venture identifies the potential for community based sustainable tourism to begin correcting the injustices of the past, and, more importantly, prevent future injustice. Revenue generated through tourism will support locally run operations to return decision making power to local people and prevent displacement. By increasing the visibility of established community-based conservation (CBC) programs, LETSGO hopes to make a stable long term income available to locals, raise local living standards, increase access to education, promote sustainable development, and enhance incentives for nature conservation. Community based ecotourism initiatives can bring lasting economic gains to locals, empowering them psychologically, socially, and politically to improve and protect their environment.

## Supplemental Materials

### 1. Potential Partnerships



### 2. Budget and Justification

With the allotted budget of \$1500.00 we will perform a series of experiments to validate our customer segment. Creating a landing page will allow us to collect sign-ups from interested users, leverage social media to drive traffic to our page, and analyze customer demographics based on followers.

For a potential pilot project, we will identify a non-profit organization with trained local guides and help a small group of travelers book tours with those guides. Traveler surveys will be conducted before and after the experience to get an understanding of customer needs and expectations.

### 3. Interviews

#### A. Industry/Scientific Experts:

1. Shayan Kaveh, Project Supervisor at Amigos de las Americas. In-person Interview, November 2, 2021.
2. Annie Lovell, Former Backroads Tour Guide, Intrepid Travel Intern. In-person Interview, November 2, 2021.
3. Marcela Fonseca, Galapagos Tour Guide. Audio Interview, November 4, 2021.
4. Thanwa Longprasert, Dive Master at AXT Scuba Diving. Phone Interview, November 8, 2021.
5. Anniick Dauphinas, CEO of Big Island Farms. Zoom Interview, November 8, 2021.
6. Necoh Mitchell, Travel Agent at LaVon Travel. Zoom Interview, November 24, 2021 and January, 1, 2022.
7. Wagner Quiros, BIOMA Travel Founder. In-person Interview, November 17, 2021.
8. Saveria Tilden, CEO of AdventurUs Women. Zoom Interview, December 2, 2021.
9. Dries William Andrade, Galapagos Tour Guide. Audio Interview, November 26, 2021.
10. Maria Jose Beltran, Galapagos Tour Guide. Audio Interview, November 26, 2021.
11. Ariana Agustines, VP of Lamave Travel. Zoom Interview, November 22, 2021.
12. Erin Moran, Adventures Rolling Cross Country (ARCC) Guide. Zoom Interview, November 26, 2021.
13. Alex Krowiak, Photographer/Naturalist, NGE. Zoom Interview, November 19, 2021.
14. Gordon Seabury, CEO of Toad and Co., Board Member of ATCF. Zoom Interview, January 26, 2022.
15. Elizabeth Washburn Surti, Director of Diligence Team at Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation. Zoom Interview, February 1, 2022.
16. Steven Gaines, Dean of UCSB Bren School of Environmental Science and Management. In-person Interview, February 1, 2022.
17. Stuart Pimm, Founder/President of Saving Nature. Zoom Interview, January 28, 2022.
18. Julia Lawson, Former Project Manager at CITES. In-person Interview, February 9, 2022.
19. Cristy Gomez MacFarland, CEO of Biztram, Professor at Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey. Zoom Interview, January 19, 2022.
20. Craig Kopulsky, MESM 2022 Student. Zoom Interview, January 13, 2022.

## **B. Customers:**

21. Melony Huber, Avid Luxury Traveler. Zoom Interview, November 2, 2022.
22. Jacob Bregman, Avid Mid-High Budget Traveler. Phone Interview, November 8, 2021.
23. Amanda Gisbert, Avid Traveler, Backpacker. Phone Interview, November 11, 2021.
24. Stephanie Stuhr, High Budget Traveler. Zoom Interview, November 30, 2021.
25. Ellen Kocins, High Budget Traveler. Zoom Interview, November 29, 2021.
26. Holly Pon, High Budget Traveler. Zoom Interview, November 28, 2021.
27. Christine Malloy, High Budget Traveler. Zoom Interview, November 30, 2021.
28. Taylor Medina, Low Budget Traveler. Zoom Interview, December 1, 2021.
29. Vicky True, Mid-Budget Traveler. Zoom Interview, November 29, 2021.
30. Jolanta Czarkowska, Mid-Budget Traveler. Phone Interview, November 30, 2021.
31. Stacy Holly, High Budget Traveler. In-person Interview, November 25, 2021.
32. Omar Rodas, Mid-Budget Traveler. Zoom Interview, November 29, 2021.
33. Teague Hamilton, Backpacker. Zoom Interview, November 27, 2021.

## **4. Citations**

- [1] Adventure Travel Conservation Fund. (2022). *Conservation in communities*. Adventure Travel Conservation Fund. Retrieved February 11, 2022, from <https://adventuretravelconservationfund.org/conservation-in-communities>
- [2] Akama, J. S., Lant, C. L., & Burnett, G. W. (1996). A political-ecology approach to wildlife conservation in Kenya. *Environmental Values*, 5(4), 335–347. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327196776679276>
- [3] Booking Global. (2021, June 3). *Booking.com's 2021 Sustainable Travel Report Affirms Potential Watershed Moment for Industry and Consumers*. Booking.com's 2021 Sustainable Travel Report affirms potential watershed moment for industry and consumers. Retrieved February 11, 2022, from <https://globalnews.booking.com/bookingcoms-2021-sustainable-travel-report-affirms-potential-watershed-moment-for-industry-and-consumers/>
- [4] Cooney, R., Roe, D., Dublin, H., Phelps, J., Wilkie, D., Keane, A., Travers, H., Skinner, D., Challender, D. W., Allan, J. R., & Biggs, D. (2016). From poachers to protectors: Engaging local communities in solutions to illegal wildlife trade. *Conservation Letters*, 10(3), 367–374. <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12294>
- [5] Costello, C., Lynham, J., Lester, S. E., & Gaines, S. D. (2010). Economic incentives and Global Fisheries Sustainability. *Annual Review of Resource Economics*, 2(1), 299–318. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.resource.012809.103923>
- [6] FAO. (2020). Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020. Retrieved February 11, 2022 from <https://www.fao.org/3/ca8753en/ca8753en.pdf>
- [7] Heller, K., & Green, K. (2021, December 1). *Changing behaviors to reduce U.S. emissions*. Rare. Retrieved February 11, 2022, from <https://rare.org/report/changing-behaviors-to-reduce-u-s-emissions/>
- [8] Mullis, B. (2017, August 10). *The growth paradox: Can tourism ever be sustainable?* World Economic Forum. Retrieved February 11, 2022, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/08/the-growth-paradox-can-tourism-ever-be-sustainable/>
- [9] U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation.