



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: A Destination of Eco Advocates with Whales, Alpacas and
Wheels

Destination, Country: Central Coast, New South Wales, Australia

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In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

The NSW Central Coast is outstanding in the field of building an ecotourism community.



Summary:

In just three years, the Central Coast of New South Wales has undergone a strategic transformation in its approach to presenting tourism products to both locals and guests. Moving away from conventional coastal holidays, the region has ushered in a refreshing era of eco-conscious experiences that prioritise respect for nature, culture, place, and people, aiming to naturally restore a sense of wholeness. This positive shift at the destination management and marketing level is led by a small tourism team, Destination Central Coast, within the region’s local government organisation, and Central Coast Council. But the real heroes in this landscape are a cohort of “ECO Advocates” growing since 2020. These local tourism businesses joining the wider ECO Destination journey are championing sustainable tourism practices on their home turf. Now, in 2023, the Coast’s ecotourism portfolio has never been stronger, more diverse, or better placed to showcase the unfurling value in promoting sustainable tourism best practice. These are the dedicated entrepreneurs walking the talk every day, for a living.





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GOOD PRACTICE STORY



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

From dramatic east Australian coastal headlands to lush, mountainous hinterlands bursting with farmer's fayre, the Central Coast of New South Wales is a vibrant place to call home, to carve a career, or to explore any time of year as its curious guest. More than half of the Central Coast is made up of national parks, state forests, bushlands, open spaces, nature reserves, beaches, and waterways. As New South Wales' third-largest local government area at 1,681 km², it's naturally a diverse destination. This includes more than 40 beaches along 87 km of coastline as a proud part of the marine Humpback Highway, plus vast areas of untamed wilderness where native koalas and platypuses hide. This is also a region shaped by a network of valuable inland waterways that nourish its residents, connect waterfront communities, and support NSW's only pearl farm and sustainable oyster industry. The Coast boasts more than 200 km of safe cycleways and shared pathways. Significantly, it hosts one of the richest repositories of Aboriginal rock carvings in the world, with thousands of registered Aboriginal cultural sites—some even older than Egypt's Pyramids or England's Stonehenge—between 7,000-20,000 years old! Located just 90 minutes north of Sydney, the Central Coast is a growing creative East-Australian enclave that thrives on the accessibility of its natural beauty, which residents are inspired by, and visitors are constantly attracted to.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

From 2020, Central Coast Council committed to 'building back better' following the Black Summer 2019-20 Australian bushfires. A natural step to this was creating a sustainable business environment where ecotourism thrives, as one of the main goals on the ECO Destination Certification program with Ecotourism Australia. But how well did the local tourism industry understand what 'ecotourism' was, or its benefits? What did a 'sustainable business' even look like? This required a consistent, compassionate level of stakeholder engagement and education from Council outwards between 2020 and 2023, rallying support from the local tourism industry, starting with its nature-based tourism operators.

As most of the Central Coast's ecotourism identified businesses were small to medium in size, seasonal, and often family-run, it was a tall order to request they suddenly lead the charge for ecotourism for a region as large and diverse as the Central Coast (1,681km²). But this coastal destination recognised a time sensitive opportunity to redefine its tourism offering in line with global trends, and bring nature inspired adventure and experiences to the fore. Backed by funding from WWF-Australia, the Central Coast could see a path out of the pandemic where it could lead the way for sustainable, nature-based tourism marketing and management in New South Wales. Even the CEO of Booking.com, Glenn Fogel, called out that "eco-friendly, sustainable and responsible travel is much more than a trend. It must become the industry standard".

The Central Coast tourism landscape was analysed and audited in 2020-2021 to reveal several key ecotourism products with great potential. These included:

- immersive waterway oyster tours
- whale watching tours
- marine conservation education
- wildlife conservation parks
- Stand Up Paddle Boarding (SUP)
- kayaking national parks

- horse riding
- cycling in sustainable forests
- farmgate produce tours
- luxury national park stays
- farm to fork dining
- aerial obstacle courses
- luxury bush tours
- educational native bushcraft tours

The challenge was to transform and package these small, independent operators and their unique experiences into a symbolic cohort of what the region now fondly refers to as 'ECO Advocates' – but at the time there was simply no collective offering for eco-minded travellers to tap into.

Since 2021, the Central Coast has been working tirelessly with industry to grow aspiration and appetite for taking up the all-important mantle for ecotourism. Due to the climate of tourism over the last few years, it's been essential this path is carved by several dedicated Council offers. Capable of leveraging the opportunity to be one of Australia's first ECO Destinations, whose work has ultimately embedded the key 'Ecotourism' theme in the Central Coast Destination Management Plan 2022-25.

This is complemented by an associated Action Plan developed in line with Sustainable Development Goal-led ECO criteria to ensure accountability for both Council and stakeholders. As Council navigates an ongoing Administration, with its Councillors and Mayor suspended until 2024, there has been a climate of retrospection at this local government organisation, placing a lens on sustainable destination management from the inside out. Exciting foundations have been laid to enable ongoing support for tourism operators undergoing their ECO Certification journey, with confirmed membership funding and marketing support for 2023-24 in partnership with Ecotourism Australia.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

Between 2021 and 2023, the Central Coast has consistently invested Council resources, tourism marketing expertise, and supportive funding in founding a community of ECO Advocates.

In May 2021, a groundbreaking ecotourism industry event was held by Destination Central Coast, featuring a unique incentive made possible through funding from WWF-Australia's Wildlife & Nature Recovery Fund. During this event, 11 local nature-based operators achieved success by securing a one-year placement on Council's pioneering support program. Each participant received a \$500 incentive for their annual membership with Ecotourism Australia, coupled with quarterly bootcamp training sessions led by an ECO Certification expert.

The allure of this incentive was further enhanced by supportive marketing efforts from Destination Central Coast. The comprehensive ECO Operator package encompassed a digital ECO Destination Assets Toolkit, a personalised Business Listing with an ECO Certified badge on the destination website, a profile on LoveCentralCoast.com Ecotourism Hub, social media features in nature tourism campaigns reaching a 70k+ audience, the opportunity to submit a 'Good Practice Story' for marketing exposure, media and photoshoot opportunities centred around eco and sustainable travel themes, and, upon accreditation, an editorial 'News' feature on LoveCentralCoast.com. Additionally, participants were granted a profile in The Green Travel Guide's Central Coast page, speaking engagements at industry events, proactive pitching for Ecotourism Australia's social media platforms,

and inclusion in the monthly newsletter distributed to a 12k+ audience. The package also provided referral letters for award nominations from Council and/or Ecotourism Australia.

Since its inception in 2021, the ECO Operator Incentive Program has successfully identified a cohesive group of like-minded Central Coast sustainability-led tourism operators. This initiative has resulted in the certification of four new ECO Certified businesses, with an additional 10 participants actively pursuing accreditation. Notably, between 2021 and 2022, three new operators achieved and continue to maintain their ECO Certification with Ecotourism Australia.

Guided and supported by Council's commitment of resources and funding, these frontline advocates are instrumental in positioning the Central Coast as a leading ecotourism destination. The certified businesses contributing to this transformative effort include:

- Iris Lodge Alpacas: An interactive hinterland alpaca lodge that provides guests with the opportunity to experience real life on a working farm, home to 60+ alpacas, llamas, and sheep.
- Terrigal Ocean Tours: A tour operator offering a unique blend of marine adventure and conservation. Operating on a high-performance RIB eco-vessel, they explore the Humpback Highway, allowing guests to spot dolphins, seals, and little penguin colonies.
- Rocky Trail Entertainment: A prominent promoter of mountain bike events in Australia, based on the Central Coast. Their events inspire riders of all ages to explore forests, navigate technical trails, and connect with the local mountain biking community.

In April 2023, Council organised an ECO Networking Industry Event. The event featured guest presentations by Ecotourism Australia's CEO, Elissa Keenan. Additionally, Destination Central Coast lead project officers provided updates on the ECO Destination program progress. The Central Coast Council's Waste team discussed its Sustainability Future Festival during the event. The event concluded with a Site Visit to the ECO Certified alpaca farm experience. This industry event marked a significant turning point for the region, drawing over 80 engaged attendees from the local tourism landscape eager to contribute to ECO advocacy in the room (or field!). During the event, Council unveiled a new industry incentive aimed at supporting a sustainable visitor economy by encouraging more operators to pursue certification.

This support is now extended to non-nature-based businesses such as hotels, hospitality, and events. The smart split package offers either AU\$600 financial support off the certification fee for up to 10 participants or resource support with 1:1 mentoring from a professional tourism consultant, valued at \$600. In response to industry feedback, local tourism businesses were invited to pursue the new Strive 4 Sustainability Scorecard launched by Ecotourism Australia in collaboration with Tourism Australia. This serves as a pathway program to sustainable business. Council is offering \$275 in supportive funding for first-time participants, encouraging operators to embrace a more eco-friendly operation by providing a snapshot of their business benchmarked against globally recognized criteria for sustainable tourism!

The 2023 cohort is affectionately referred to as the Central Coast's 'ECO Advocates,' marking one of the largest groups of tourism operators on their ECO journey in the region. All participants in the 2023 ECO Advocate program are linked to a network that spans regional, national, and global sustainable tourism organisations and brands. This network includes entities such as Destination Central Coast, Central Coast Council, Destination Sydney Surrounds North, Destination NSW, NSW Parks & Wildlife Service, NSW State Forests, Ecotourism Australia, Green Travel Guide, WWF-Australia, Green Destinations, and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

Ecotourism stands out as a central strategic priority for the Central Coast, aspiring to position itself as a leading ecotourism destination in New South Wales. This commitment is explicitly outlined in both the Central Coast Destination Management Plan (2022-2025) and the Tourism Opportunity Plan (2019-24). Bolstering this commitment is the prestigious recognition as one of Australia's inaugural certified ECO Destinations since 2022.

Attaining the status of an "ECO Destination" underscores a dedicated pledge to the local industry and community, presenting tangible opportunities for tourism operators to instigate meaningful change. The reporting approach to destination management has evolved significantly since 2020, with Council's persistent dedication to maintaining ECO Destination status ensuring continuous backing for ECO Certified and ECO Applicant operators committed to their sustainability journey throughout 2023-24.

Facilitating the industry-facing incentives and ongoing support program is a collaborative partnership with Ecotourism Australia, the nation's preeminent authority on ecotourism for three decades. This alliance between an independent sustainable tourism not-for-profit and a local government organisation overseeing tourism fosters a consistent infusion of knowledge and passion for sustainability principles into this transformative journey. Stakeholders involved possess a profound appreciation for the value of supporting the region's business community to thrive and gradually altering resident perceptions of tourism to be positive. Ecotourism, in this context, is seen as a force that respects and safeguards the local greenery, promotes visitor dispersal, and contributes to the growth of the local economy.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

The engagement, onboarding, and consistent supportive rallying of the Central Coast's ecotourism community, who are pursuing certification as a business focus, have been among the most rewarding aspects of this journey. Simultaneously, it has posed significant challenges. Encouraging tourism operators to make an ongoing time and financial commitment to sustainable tourism best practices benefits both their business and the visitor economy. However, providing a short-term Return On Investment has been a recurring query. It is only after three years that Destination Central Coast can offer insights into this.

The process of engaging a tourism operator to audit their own management processes and realign with sustainability principles extends beyond the standard role of Destination Management; it entails seeking long-term buy-in. A collaborative relationship with ECO Advocates is best fostered by having Tourism Marketing bring nature experiences to the forefront of messaging. This involves telling the story and sentiment of the region through the demonstrated actions of its eco-cohort. For example, since 2021, Destination Central Coast marketing campaigns and media opportunities now incorporate ECO messaging as standard. This strategic approach places sustainable tourism principles at the core of our destination brand and destination marketing.

A grounding lesson emerged when annual renewals surfaced for ECO incentive program participants, requiring their businesses to fund the renewal. Two solo-run businesses opted out of the program due to financial and resource limitations. This situation underscores the need for an initial financial

buy-in from an ECO Advocate to confirm their commitment, as opposed to being welcomed free of cost onto the program. Additionally, it highlights the reality that time and staffing are significant limiting factors when applying and achieving Global Sustainable Tourism Council standards. This challenge is not only experienced at the individual business level but also at a destination level by the Council's tourism team, which is steering the region's ECO journey.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

Currently 23 local businesses are pursuing an ECO accreditation program, growing from just five in 2020! This attests to the impact of engaging industry directly with the benefits of sustainable practices. On one hand, we've formalised a behind-the-scenes sustainable tourism ground swell on the Central Coast. Engaged businesses are now looking closer at how they manage their operations, and seeking solutions to reduce their environmental impact, welcome visitors of all abilities, partner with similar minded entrepreneurs, and give back to their community.

The benefits of raising expectations for sustainable tourism best practice within industry as a first step are now being felt on a tourism marketing level too. Since 2022, Destination Central Coast has been gradually featuring more eco-friendly messaging across owned and earned tourism channels, educating the local community and their guests to have increased awareness and pride of the natural and cultural assets they are surrounded by, with inspiration for how to experience them respectfully.

To illustrate the impact of building a business environment where ecotourism thrives, there's fantastic results from the 2021-23 period produced by Destination Central Coast's "ECO" marketing:

Media Coverage

- 6x Central Coast Council media releases
- 4x Ecotourism Australia media releases

Destination PR & Media coverage

ECO program participants were considered in an annual PR Plan, with proactive pitching and paid sponsored content successfully elevating the region's ECO operators, for example:

- QANTAS Travel Insider – Dec 2022 – '7 of the Best Outdoor Experiences on the Central Coast'; 3,000,000 reach; \$75k Advertising Value Equivalent (AVE)
- The Urban List – Nov 2022 – '6 Nature-Filled And Eco-Friendly Ways To Explore The Central Coast'; 400,000 reach; \$35k AVE
- Sitchu Sydney – Nov 2022 – '20 Things to do on the Central Coast: NSW's Newest Eco Destination'; 200,000 reach; \$30k AVE
- Sydney Weekender – Sept 2022 – 'Eco-friendly Central Coast' 200,000 reach; \$70k AVE
- Australian Women's Weekly – August 2022 print edition – 'Travel News: Pride of Place, Central Coast Makes The Grade'; 1,471,000 reach; \$21k AVE
- Australian Traveller – 10x features in 2021-2022 - 350,000 reach; \$24k AVE per feature
- Sustainable Tourism World – June 2022

Destination Website Performance (2021-mid 23)

ECO hubs: +7,700 Unique Pageviews; excellent Avg. Time on Page: 2:36 minutes

ECO editorial articles: +5,000 Pageviews

ECO Program Business Listings: +52,000 Pageviews; ECO Certified badge; ECO Certified search tag

Destination Social Presence

- +73.3k Instagram & Facebook following

- Dedicated 'ECO' link in bio
- 'ECO-Certified' Instagram Highlight feature
- Regular @LoveCentralCoast content features

Ecotourism Social Ads Campaign

ECO Destination messages embedded in 'Always On' ads from July-August 2022. Investment: \$4k.

Likes Campaign results:

- 1.2K Reactions, 57 comments, 41 shares
- 4,582 Post Engagements
- 441,726 Impressions
- 96,175 unique viewers
- 3,771 Page Likes generated

Campaign Newsfeed results:

- Ad #1 - Beach view - 507 page likes
- Ad #2 - Hinterland image - 285 page likes
- Ad #3 – Bushwalk - 2,979 page likes

Central Coast Council's ongoing commitment to ECO criteria applies from the inside out, with several teams actively fulfilling ECO criteria and leading sustainable initiatives, such as:

- Tourism team curating new destination website hubs for visitors on Ecotourism, Agritourism, Aboriginal tourism and Waterways & Coastlines as part of a NSW Government grant.
- Staff sourcing local talent and suppliers first, as standard, to support local industry.
- Environmental Education team inspiring with their 'Love Our Waterways' campaign connecting locals and guests to eye-opening waterway experiences, incorporating local Aboriginal culture.
- Waste team creating the annual Central Coast Sustainable Future Festival promoting innovative ways to engage and get creative with waste as a healthy way to help the community grow 'Waste Warriors' and 'The Sustainables' superhero characters for children.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

Whether it's destination or local business certification, the benefits are felt across the entire visitor economy and community. This holds true whether an entity is taking the initial steps on the journey or has reached the certification milestone. Importantly, the journey doesn't end there—it's not a set-and-forget approach. The tool that can aid destinations in navigating the next phase of activating ECO Certification involves supporting local industries to take up the mantle and lead.

This approach not only feels more authentic to visitors but is also an effective way for small businesses to enhance their skills and refine their product marketing. It allows them to stay abreast of industry trends and leverage ecotourism as a unique selling proposition (USP). For destinations seeking to expand their ecotourism cohort, there's a natural affinity among nature-based operators. Placing them in the same space fosters networking and builds advocates who, over time, champion environmental stewardship at a business level. Ultimately, your advocates should offer a collection of diverse guest experiences that represent the best natural and cultural assets of your destination.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

The ECO Destination Certification journey for the NSW Central Coast has received multiple industry awards, recognition and accolades at both a State and National level:

- Winner: Special Project Initiative, Local Government Excellence Awards 2023, for entry titled 'Rewilding Destination Marketing from the Inside Out'
- Finalist: National Banksia Sustainability Awards 2023
- Silver Local Government Award for Tourism, NSW Tourism Awards 2022

The Central Coast Eco Experiences hub (consumer):

<https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/ecotourism>

The Central Coast Eco Business hub (industry):

<https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/industry-hub-ecotourism-for-business>

The Iris Lodge Alpaca ECO journey:

<https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/news/alpaca-lodge-joins-ecotourism-family>

The Terrigal Ocean Tours ECO journey:

<https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/news/marine-tour-guides-celebrate-eco-certified-status>

The Rocky Trail ECO journey:

<https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/news/eco-certified-adventure-cycling-in-nature>