



## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

### 1. What is Adventure Green Alaska (AGA)?

Adventure Green Alaska (AGA) is a voluntary certification program for tourism businesses operating in Alaska that meet standards of economic, environmental, and social sustainability. AGA encourages tourism businesses to evaluate their operations and determine whether they use — or could be using — best management practices. Qualifying at one of the three stepped levels of certification earns businesses the right to use the AGA label and participate in AGA promotional opportunities. AGA also assists non-qualifying tourism businesses to improve their operations so they may become eligible for the sustainable tourism label.

### 2. Why certify “sustainable” tourism businesses?

Tourism is becoming one of the world's largest industries, and Alaska is in a unique position to benefit. Alaska will see tourism play an increasingly dominant role in economic growth and development. As tourism continues to become an even more important part of the state economy, so too will the need to protect the very things those tourists come to see: mountains, glaciers, forests, oceans, wildlife, and authentic communities. The challenge, then, will be to manage tourism development and growth so that tourism continues to provide benefits to both urban and remote communities while conserving Alaska's great resources.

In other tourism destinations, particularly outside the United States, concerned tourism businesses and travelers have addressed this challenge by promoting the concept of sustainable tourism, or "ecotourism." Sustainable tourism may be defined as *travel to natural areas that is beneficial to local economies, respectful of the environment, and sensitive to indigenous cultures.*

Sustainable tourism has enjoyed a healthy increase in public awareness and popularity. However, in practice it has sometimes become lost among other forms of tourism and has been unable to carve out more than a small share of the global tourism market. Without a marketing edge, or significant marketing resources, sustainable businesses, often smaller-sized businesses, do not always get public recognition for their actions. AGA encourages travelers to patronize sustainable businesses and provides an economic incentive for other businesses to improve their operations.

### 3. What are the benefits of AGA certification?

The business benefits of AGA certification include use of the AGA logo, inclusion in AGA promotional materials and events, recognition on the Alaska Wilderness Recreation & Tourism Association website, media exposure and enhanced marketing opportunities, technical assistance and training, and connections to existing national and international groups and certification models.

In addition, AGA-certified businesses have the satisfaction of operating responsibly and helping preserve Alaska's quality of life, natural environment, and culture for future generations while promoting a tourism

industry that supports local businesses and communities, a strong conservation ethic, and preservation of Alaska's history and culture.

#### **4. What is the program fee?**

The certification fee pays for the administration and marketing costs of certification. It is based on the business's number of full time equivalent (FTE) employees. (A permanent employee working full time is 1 FTE. Employees working half time or for only half the year should be counted as .5 FTEs.) Please contact AGA for more information.

1 to 2 FTEs	\$100
3 to 5 FTEs	\$150
6 to 10 FTEs	\$300
11 to 20 FTEs	\$400
21 to 50 FTEs	\$500
Over 50 FTEs	\$1,000

Businesses that are not approved for the certification will be given a refund equal to 50 percent of their application fee.

#### **5. How does a business renew certification?**

To renew certification, a business must submit a new application and application fee. In addition, a business must complete an annual report showing what sustainable practices it has adopted since the previous application period. The annual report must also state future goals in order for the business to demonstrate continuous improvement.

#### **6. Who administers the program?**

AGA is administered by an Alaska nonprofit corporation, Adventure Green Alaska, Inc. The corporation is organized exclusively for charitable, educational, and scientific purposes including the development, administration, support, and marketing of a certification program to encourage tourism businesses operating in Alaska to become more environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. The day-to-day activities of the organization, including the AGA certification program, are conducted by the AGA program administrator with oversight by the board of directors.

#### **7. Who is on the AGA board of directors?**

The initial directors are Sarah Leonard, marketing director for The Nature Conservancy in Alaska, Dan Oberlatz, co-founder of Alaska Alpine Adventures, and Tony Turrini, a senior attorney with National Wildlife Federation's Alaska Natural Resource Center. Additional directors will be recruited to enhance organizational expertise, credibility, and effectiveness.

#### **8. What does the application process involve?**

AGA involves an easy five-step process.

- First, an applicant completes a general information section.
- Second, the applicant checks to ensure that it meets AGA's three basic criteria of compliance with U.S. environmental, consumer, and labor laws, a two-year operating history, and membership in a tourism/community trade association.

- Third, the applicant provides the names and contact information for two references who can verify the quality, stability, and sustainability of the business.
- Fourth, the applicant submits the application fee.
- And fifth, the applicant completes the sustainability application.

## **9. Who evaluates applications?**

The AGA program administrator assists businesses with the application process, reviews completed applications, and makes recommendations to the AGA board of directors at regularly scheduled meetings. The board of directors makes the final evaluation and approves certifications.

## **10. Is there a right of appeal?**

Businesses may submit a written request for reconsideration to the AGA board of directors within 10 days of a final decision.

## **11. Why are there three levels of certification?**

Providing three levels of certification allows AGA to work with and reward a greater segment of the Alaska tourism industry. At the same time, it recognizes that tourism businesses operate at different levels of sustainability and creates an incentive for businesses to continually assess and improve their operations.

## **12. Why are the three “Basic Criteria” so important?**

AGA is intended to encourage and reward economic, environmental, and social sustainability. At the very basic level, AGA-certified businesses should adhere to all existing regulatory practices, licenses, and laws. Businesses that fail to meet these threshold criteria will not be considered for AGA certification.

## **13. Why are Alaska history and culture emphasized?**

One of the guiding principles of AGA is that tourism in Alaska should both respect and be inspired by local history and culture. Educating visitors about local history and culture helps avoid tourism-related conflicts and encourages cultural sensitivity. Businesses that provide knowledgeable guides and highlight cultural events and traditions help preserve community identity while enhancing the experience of their clients.

## **14. Why is climate change emphasized?**

Alaska, sometimes referred to as the “canary in the coal mine,” is already experiencing the effects of a changing climate. Thawing permafrost, increased storm activity, coastal erosion, and the spread of invasive species, among other impacts, threaten Alaska’s natural resources and basic transportation infrastructure. The same resources that have helped Alaska become a leading tourism destination are being impacted today by dramatic changes to our climate. Wildlife migration patterns are changing, affecting fishing and hunting seasons; transportation systems like roads and bridges are shifting under thawing permafrost; and increased flooding in communities has already created drastic impacts to our salmon-bearing rivers and streams. While these changes have a direct impact on Alaska’s visitor industry, tourism businesses can play an important role in adapting to climate change and educating the public about the impacts of climate change. One way businesses can help mitigate their own impact is by adopting sustainable business practices. The AGA program encourages these practices by promoting more eco-friendly vacation opportunities to travelers visiting Alaska.

## **15. What is a climate change audit?**

Climate change poses a significant threat to Alaska's environment, wildlife, and tourism industry. To remain viable, tourism businesses must be able to anticipate the impacts of climate change in the areas in which they operate and adjust their practices accordingly. Because sustainable tourism businesses have an intimate relationship with specific areas of Alaska, they are also in a unique position to educate customers and staff about the on-the-ground impacts of climate change. For purposes of AGA, the climate change audit is any process that helps tourism businesses develop a reasonable level of local expertise on climate change.

## **16. How do I obtain a climate change audit?**

For any audit process, you should first identify the area or areas in which you operate. For instance, if you offer sea life viewing cruises near Seward, you might focus on Resurrection Bay and Kenai Fjords National Park. You would begin by contacting three to five local "authorities" on the regional effects of global warming.

Using the Seward example, you might start by contacting the area sport fisheries and wildlife biologists from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. You could also contact the Kenai Fjords National Park's public information officer to learn about receding glaciers and other environmental impacts as well as the Alaska SeaLife Center to learn about likely impacts to marine mammal populations. In addition, the municipality or local governing body in your region might have planning or engineering staff available with information about climate change impacts to public infrastructure and/or cultural and historical sites.

Remember to take notes as you talk with these experts and summarize your findings in a short (two to four pages will generally be sufficient) "climate change audit." These findings should be incorporated into your discussions with staff and customers and may be posted on the AGA website.

## **17. Can I get help conducting the climate change audit?**

Yes. AGA staff will help you plan and obtain the audit. You may also work with other tourism businesses, land managers, or government agencies in your area to develop a joint climate change audit. In some cases, you may find that an equivalent type of climate change audit has already been prepared for your area. It is acceptable to adopt a pre-existing audit, although AGA encourages tourism businesses to look for opportunities to improve or expand upon these documents.

## **18. Why not award different certifications for different kinds of tourism businesses?**

AGA is an initial step and first-ever tourism certification program for Alaska. One of the objectives of AGA is to develop a sustainable program that is relatively easy to administer in the program's first years. We envision a program that will continue to evolve and include updated criteria for specific tourism segments over the long term.

## **19. Shouldn't certification be limited to small- and medium-sized tourism businesses?**

One of the goals of AGA is to encourage more sustainable practices throughout the Alaska tourism industry. The application is designed so that size alone does not determine eligibility. Any business or company that meets AGA standards of sustainability is eligible to receive the certification and program benefits.

## **20. How does AGA monitor compliance with program standards?**

Adventure Green Alaska is a voluntary program. It is the responsibility of the business to ensure that all program requirements are met. AGA staff or board volunteers will monitor program compliance through random spot checks and customer comments. A condition of the certification program is a company's agreement to allow site visits from AGA staff or board of directors. Additionally, AGA will solicit customer comments throughout the certification period. Application materials may be posted on the AGA website. If deficiencies are reported, AGA will offer follow-up assistance to correct them. Consistent failure to make any changes will result in the removal of the business from the program. All AGA promotional materials must be returned and the business will refrain from linking any information to the AGA website.