



Developing a Skills Development Strategy for the Tourism Industry in Belize



Background

The tourism industry in Belize, renowned for its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage, is a key driver of the economy. In 2022, it directly contributed 11.4% to GDP and 13.7% to employment. These figures are expected to grow at annual rates of 2.7% and 2.6%, respectively, with total employment (including wider impacts) projected to reach 100,669 jobs by 2033. As global trends shift towards sustainable and eco-friendly travel, Belize has a unique opportunity to leverage its natural assets and transition its tourism sector towards eco-tourism. This transition requires a comprehensive skills strategy to equip the workforce with the necessary competencies to support eco-tourism initiatives and ensure inclusive economic growth. In this context, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has commissioned People 1st International to develop a skills development strategy to facilitate this crucial transition.

Project aim

The primary objective of the project was to develop an actionable skills development strategy to support Belize's transition to eco-tourism. This strategy provides a 3–5-year roadmap to address the sector's evolving skills needs, establish a sustainable development framework and engage stakeholders to ensure the industry's successful transformation and inclusive economic growth.

Our approach

1. Research and analysis

We started the project by conducting comprehensive desk-based research on global and regional eco-tourism trends. This research included analysing successful eco-tourism models from countries such as Costa Rica, Barbados, Ecuador and Peru, identifying key success factors that could be adapted to Belize's context. Additionally, the current national tourism strategy of Belize was assessed to determine the existing readiness and potential for a shift towards eco-tourism.

2. Development of a transition strategy

Building on the research findings, we developed a strategy to facilitate the industry's transition from traditional tourism to eco-tourism. This strategy outlined clear definitions, goals and objectives for all stakeholders across the industry value chain. A comprehensive SWOT analysis was conducted to identify key opportunities, challenges and competitive advantages that could support Belize's ambition to become a leading eco-tourism destination.

3. Stakeholder engagement

A robust stakeholder engagement process was central to the strategy development. We conducted one-to-one interviews, focus groups and online surveys with key stakeholders. This engagement helped identify the specific skills gaps, training needs and barriers to transitioning to eco-tourism and encouraged a collaborative approach to implementing the strategy.

4. Labour market intelligence

To support ongoing skills development, a toolkit for gathering and disseminating Labour Market Information (LMI) was created. This toolkit provided a 10-step process for collecting, analysing and sharing industry skills data to ensure continuous alignment with market needs and promote a responsive skills ecosystem in Belize. The toolkit was designed to empower local stakeholders to independently manage and adapt their workforce strategies as the eco-tourism landscape evolves.

Outcomes and impact

The project delivered several key outcomes:

- **Market potential and subsector priorities identified:** The strategy identified seven key opportunities for Belize in eco-tourism, including protected areas, marine and coastal tourism, community-based initiatives, wildlife and bird-watching tours, adventure tourism, sustainable agro-tourism and eco-friendly accommodations. These priorities provide a clear focus for sustainable industry transformation and economic growth.
- **Skills needs and future competencies identified:** The analysis highlighted six key skills gaps including environmental conservation, sustainable tourism practices, digital marketing, community engagement, eco-friendly operations, customer service and business acumen. It also identified future competencies essential for the transition, such as advanced ecological training, cultural and ecological interpretation, technological adaptation, and community-focused skills development.
- **Occupational profiles defined:** Thirty occupational profiles for green jobs were identified, with a focus on key roles in eco-tourism, sustainable tourism management, conservation and community engagement. Of these, nine roles were highlighted for immediate development, with educational providers able to align their curricula with the outlined profiles and skills. These positions play a vital role in promoting sustainable practices, primarily by enhancing the skills of existing employees rather than introducing entirely new roles, effectively addressing the sector's evolving needs.
- **Identified short and long-term strategies for workforce development:** A detailed step-by-step roadmap was outlined, specifying the steps required to transition to eco-tourism, including infrastructure needs, skills development, stakeholder roles and timelines for implementation. The strategy identified the need to focus on upskilling the existing workforce in the short term to address skills gaps and fill key roles, supporting the first stage of the transition to eco-tourism. In the longer term, it emphasised the importance of preparing new professionals through higher education programmes, creating new jobs and promoting collaboration between industry and educational institutions to sustain growth and innovation in the sector.
- **Key recommendations to bridge skills gaps:** To address skills gaps and drive eco-tourism growth, seven strategic initiatives were recommended. These include establishing a Tourism Sector Skills Organisation, enhancing the capabilities of educators, implementing sustainable training for local communities and reviewing existing training programmes. The strategy also emphasises creating targeted educational materials for both tourists and locals and integrating environmental education into school curricula to promote long-term sustainability.