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**THESIS COMMITTEE**

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the opportunities and risks of establishing an ecotourism certification program in Hawai'i. Tourism is Hawaii's number one industry and ecotourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of that industry. As both depend heavily on the health of the unique, limited, and vulnerable natural and cultural resources that exist here, there is an imminent need to install some sort of mechanism that will help to ensure that Hawaii's visitor industry improves their stewardship of these resources. In many parts of the world, ecotourism certification programs have been developed to serve this purpose through a voluntary, market-based process. Could a program like one of these succeed in achieving these goals in Hawai'i despite the islands' unique needs? If an existing program could be used as a general template, what changes would be required to consider those unique needs, or is certification the wrong approach altogether? These questions were posed to members of the Hawai'i Ecotourism Association to understand the issues from an industry perspective. The results demonstrate that many of those involved with the ecotourism industry in Hawai'i generally support the idea of establishing an ecotourism certification program in the islands. Furthermore, they seem to believe that a program based on a combination of structural elements found in other existing programs, along with a few Hawaii-specific additions would produce the desired goals of perpetuating the vitality of Hawaiian ecosystems, communities and cultures, while improving the islands' economic sustainability.

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