

Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary

Orange Region – Orange County Micro Tourism

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1 Assets

Think about the natural assets — public lands, parks, trails, or other features — and the community assets — community facilities, airports, train stations, unique areas, and/or cultural events — that draw visitors to the region, and how the project connects to them. Then consider what kinds of investments, whether in staff capacity, coordination, or regional information sharing, the project would most benefit from to move forward.

Consider:

- *What natural assets attract people to the region, and how does the project connect to them?*
- *What community assets attract and bring people to the region, and how does the project connect to them?*
- *What investments would most help the project advance?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- Natural Assets
 - OC Coastkeeper created **kelp forests and oyster beds** for climate protection
- Community Assets and Regional Access
 - Four **pilot microtourism projects** are oriented toward local Indigenous and Latino communities in Anaheim and Santa Ana, designed to complement major attractions like Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm rather than compete with them
 - Projects target the growing millennial market seeking **authentic, participatory cultural experiences** (cooking classes, visiting YouTube influencer locations, and community-based activities) rather than traditional theme park visits
 - All four projects were **shovel-ready** and are designed to be **self-sustaining** through earned income streams, potentially accessing entrepreneurship funding rather than ongoing tourism grants
 - One project is run by Rev Hub, focusing on a **tech-tourism crossover**; others center on local entrepreneurship and cultural practices
 - Orange County's **cultural diversity** represents significant untapped tourism potential
 - Microtourism and major attractions are **currently complementary**, with cultural tourism extending visitor stays beyond the theme park experience

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Challenges:

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2 Policy & Regulations

Reflect on the policies or regulations the project has encountered, and whether they have opened doors or created roadblocks. Consider also where the policy landscape simply does not match conditions on the ground, and whether a governance structure — like a joint powers authority or special district — could help bridge that gap.

Consider:

- *Which policies or regulations have helped or hindered the project?*
- *Where does the policy landscape not match reality on the ground, and what structures might help?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- Post-COVID **cottage food legislation** has been helpful, allowing home-based food businesses to sell at farmers markets and lowering barriers for micro-entrepreneurs

Challenges:

- City policies **restricting Airbnb** create challenges in a region already facing hotel room shortages
- Airbnb restrictions stem from **legitimate housing shortage concerns**, but they also foreclose a meaningful income opportunity for small entrepreneurs such as empty nesters with spare rooms

3 Funding

Consider what funding opportunities have identified and pursued, and what challenges have arisen if none are available. Think about how well current funding aligns with the actual needs and timeline — including reimbursement structures, long-term maintenance, and the ability to braid multiple sources together — and whether a capacity gap exists between the project and the funding it requires.

Consider:

- *What funding opportunities have been found, and what gaps or challenges remain?*
- *How well does available funding match the project's real needs, and can multiple funding sources be leveraged?*

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Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- Projects designed around **earned income streams** may qualify for entrepreneurship and small business funding rather than traditional tourism grants, opening a broader funding landscape
- The **self-sustaining model** reduces long-term dependence on grant cycles

Challenges:

- No distinct funding challenges were identified

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Data

Think about what data resources exist in the region to support your project — things like visitation numbers, economic impact, or user behavior — and what is missing that should be measured. Consider who owns the data, what happens to it when the project ends, and whether data to demonstrate the project's value to the agencies and funders who need to act on it can be used.

Consider:

- *What data is available and what important data is still missing?*
- *Who owns the data, and can it be used to make the case to funders and decision-makers?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- Several tourism-heavy cities within Orange County maintain their own **detailed data**

Challenges:

- Orange County has **no county-wide tourism data** infrastructure; data is siloed within individual cities with no aggregation or shared metrics across the region
- The **fragmented data landscape** makes it difficult to tell a compelling regional story to funders or policymakers

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Climate Change

Reflect on whether climate change is a factor in the project — through shifting seasons, temperature fluctuations, or changing visitor behaviors — and how the project is responding or

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adapting. Consider whether the project is connected to climate resilience or mitigation funding, and what it would take to do so.

Consider:

- *How is climate change affecting the project, and how are the project sponsors responding?*
- *Is the project connected to climate resilience or mitigation funding opportunities?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- Environmental restoration projects for kelp and oysters are generating **new ecotourism opportunities** including kelp forest diving, oyster sales to restaurants, and bike and kayak rentals
- Environmental restoration and ecotourism are **developing in tandem**, offering a model for connecting climate resilience investment to visitor economy outcomes

Challenges:

- No specific climate challenges were identified for these projects

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Workforce

Think about the workforce gaps standing in the way of the project moving forward, and whether the project's proponents are finding the skills, contractors, and project managers they need locally. Consider also whether the project creates opportunities to build longer-term workforce pipelines through partnerships with community colleges, workforce boards, or local hire programs.

Consider:

- *What workforce gaps are slowing the project, and is the project finding the talent needed locally?*
- *Does the project create opportunities to build long-term workforce pipelines in the region?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- The **restaurant industry** offers a proven model for soft skills development through direct customer interaction and could serve as a template for workforce pipelines in the microtourism sector

Challenges:

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- **Soft skills** are the most significant workforce gap identified across all steering committee members
- **High turnover** is a persistent problem, with newly hired workers quickly departing for other opportunities
- **Generation Alpha** workers present new challenges, with reduced interpersonal skills attributed to digital-native behavior and constant phone use
- **Internship quality** has declined since COVID, with programs devolving into low-wage jobs rather than genuine pathways to management and career development

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Collaboratives

Reflect on the collaborative relationships your project depends on — across jurisdictions, land managers, or tribal partners — and where those relationships are accelerating progress or slowing things down. Consider whether there is a regional body or coordination structure your project needs but does not yet have access to.

Consider:

- *What collaborative relationships does your project depend on, and where are they helping or hindering?*
- *Is there a regional body or coordination structure you need but don't yet have?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- A tentative plan exists for Cal State Fullerton to assume **stewardship of the collaborative** beyond the grant period, providing an institutional home and long-term sustainability
- Research on 6,500 organizations across Orange County and the Inland Empire during the Great Recession found that all 29 organizations that succeeded during and after the recession cited **strategic partnerships and collaboration** as their top success factor, and all grew primarily on **earned income** rather than donated income
- Nationally, 73% of nonprofit revenue comes from earned income, yet organizations disproportionately focus fundraising efforts on donations, a **structural misalignment** this collaborative is positioned to address
- Strong committee membership enhances the **collaborative's credibility** and long-term sustainability prospects
- Stakeholder **motivations for participation** vary widely, reflecting the breadth of organizational interests the collaborative is able to engage

Challenges:

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- No specific collaborative challenges were identified beyond the DMO dynamics noted under Branding and Marketing

8 Branding & Marketing

Think about whether your project or region has a clear identity, and how effectively you are telling your story to your community, to funders, and to decision-makers at the state and federal level. Consider whether your project's brand or identity could go beyond marketing to become a tool for financing, advocacy, or building political will.

Consider:

- *Does your project or region have a clear identity, and how well are you telling that story?*
- *Could your project's brand become a financing or advocacy tool, not just a marketing one?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- Existing DMOs have indicated they **would support a county-level advocacy** organization (similar in model to CalTravel) as long as it does not function as a marketing organization competing with their city or district work
- A county-level advocacy body could provide a **unified voice for regional tourism** interests without threatening existing DMO contracts

Challenges:

- Orange County has nine city-level DMOs but **no county DMO**, leaving a significant gap in regional coordination and advocacy capacity
- Existing DMOs **strongly opposed the formation of a county DMO** during steering committee discussions, fearing it would threaten their city and business district contracts
- DMOs showed **limited interest in the collaborative overall**, viewing it as a potential interference with their existing work rather than a complement to it
- The **tourism industry's territorial nature** is a structural barrier to the regional collaboration this project requires