

Tourism and the Environment

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?

by Edward T. McMahon

So what did you do on your summer vacation? Was it rewarding and satisfying? Did the destination meet your expectations? Would you recommend it to a friend? Or were you disappointed? Did dirty air, traffic congestion, crowded beaches, slipshod service, or towns awash in tourist schlock leave you feeling frustrated and cheated?

Americans spend almost \$400 billion a year on travel and recreation away from home. Travel and tourism account for 11.4 percent of employment — or one out of every nine jobs in the United States. It is the leading industry in 37 states.

We are all familiar with the colorful ads that American cities and towns use to promote their charms. They are always filled with attractive scenes: sunsets, azaleas in bloom, historic house-museums, all beautifully photographed. But the reality is often not so lovely. Back away from the columned house and you'll find, as likely as not, a fast food restaurant with a screaming red roof to one side, and to the other a parking lot that is barren except for a flashing portable sign or a towering billboard. The advertisement is handsome; the city is not.

Tourism involves much more than marketing. It also involves making destinations more appealing. This means conserving and enhancing a destination's natural tourism assets. In other words, protecting the environment. It is, after all, the unique heritage, culture, wildlife, or natural beauty of a community or region that attracts tourists in the first place.

Competition for tourism dollars is fierce. If the destination is too crowded, too commercial, or too much like everywhere else, then why go? This is the reason local planning, zoning, and urban

design standards are so important to communities with tourism resources. Communities know they are in trouble when new development shapes the character of the community, instead of the character of the community shaping the development.

THE NATURE OF TOURISM

Studies reveal significant differences

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between tourist and resident perceptions of a community. Tourists are open and receptive to everything they see, while residents tend to tune out the familiar environment along the roads they travel day in and day out. This suggests that local tourism officials need to become much more aware of the overall character of their community.

If the character of the destination is at odds with its description in advertising and promotional literature, the tourist will feel cheated. Creation of a false image can spoil a vacation. What's more, it can reduce repeat visitation: tourists may come once but they won't come back. Alternatively, happy memories and word of mouth are the best public relations a destination can have.

Tourism is a voluntary activity, which means that tourists have a choice among competing destinations. Given a choice, where will they go? Virtually every study of traveler motivations has shown that,

along with rest and recreation, visiting scenic areas and historic sites are the top reasons why people travel. Travel writer Arthur Frommer notes that, "Among cities with no particular recreational appeal, those that have preserved their past continue to enjoy tourism. Those that haven't, receive almost no tourism at all. Tourism simply doesn't go to a city that has lost its soul."

So how can a community attract tourists and their dollars without losing its soul? First, we need to recognize that sustainable tourism is a long-term strategy, not a quick fix. Second, understand that people are tourists in order to visit a *place*. As economic development expert Don Rypkema says, "Nobody goes anywhere to go down a waterslide or buy a

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tee-shirt. They may do both these things, but that isn't the reason they went there." People travel to see places, especially places that are special, unusual, and unique. Put another way, anyplace can create a tourist attraction, but it is those places that are attractions in and of themselves that people most want to visit.

Preservation-minded cities like Annapolis, Maryland; Savannah, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Victoria, British Columbia; and Guanajuato, Mexico are among North America's leading tourism destinations precisely because they have protected their unique architectural heritage. By contrast, cities that have obliterated their past attract hardly any tourists at all, except for the highly competitive and notoriously fickle convention business.

Not every community is blessed with a great natural wonder or a rich legacy of historic buildings, but most communities have tourism potential. Realizing this potential begins by inventorying your assets — both existing and potential. What natural, cultural, or historic resources does your community have to offer? What features give your community its special character and identity? This is how Lowell, Massachusetts began its transformation from a gritty, blue-collar industrial city, with an unemployment

rate of 23 percent to a city that now receives over 900,000 visitors a year, has restored 250 historic buildings, and seen over \$1 billion in new investments. It all began by recognizing the potential that existed in the abandoned mill buildings that characterized the city and then planning and organizing to realize that potential.

KEYS TO SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Sustainable tourism means preserving and protecting resources. The truth is, the more a community does to conserve its unique resources, whether natural, architectural, or cultural, the more tourists it will attract. On the other hand, the more a community comes to resemble "Anyplace, U.S.A.," the less reason there will be to visit. Make a destination more appealing and people will stay longer and spend more.

Here are some recommendations your community might want to consider:

1. Focus on the authentic. Make every effort to preserve the authentic aspects of local heritage and culture including handicrafts, art, music, language, architecture, landscape, traditions, and history. Sustainable tourism emphasizes the real over the artificial. It recognizes that the true story of an area is worth telling even if it's painful or disturbing.

In Birmingham, Alabama the Civil Rights Museum and Historic District tells the story of Birmingham's turbulent



"I Ain't Afraid of Your Jail" announces this Birmingham, Alabama dedication to the Civil Rights struggle.

history during the Civil Rights Era. The authentic representation of the city's past adds value and appeal to Birmingham as a destination and the museum and adjacent historic district have proved enormously popular with visitors from all the world.

By contrast, many tourist attractions near the Smoky Mountains National Park portray Cherokee Indians as using teepees and totem poles, and wearing feather war bonnets, even though this was never part of their culture. This commercialization of a stereotype Indian has caused anger towards the tourism industry and devalued the area as a destination.

2. Recognize that tourism has limits. Savvy communities always ask how many tourists are too many? Tourism development that exceeds the carrying capacity of the ecosystem or fails to respect a community's sense of place will result in resentment and the eventual destruction of the very attributes that tourists come to enjoy. Too many cars, boats, tour buses, condominiums, or people can overwhelm a community and harm fragile resources.

Sanibel Island, Florida, is one community that has found ways to balance nature and commerce. A popular Gulf Coast resort, Sanibel is one of the world's



Tourism is divorced from the environment in Cherokee, North Carolina.

premier places to collect seashells and see sub-tropical birds. To protect its abundant wildlife, white sand beaches, and quiet charm, Sanibel built an extensive network of off-road bike paths and developed a master plan based on an analysis of what was needed to protect the island's natural systems. The plan set a limit on the island population consistent with its drinking water supply, the habitat needs of wildlife, the need to evacuate the island before hurricanes and other considerations.

By establishing development standards based on ecological constants, Sanibel has managed to preserve one of America's most exceptional sub-tropical environments while also accommodating a high level of visitation.

3. Ensure that tourism support facilities — hotels, motels, restaurants and shops — are architecturally and environmentally compatible with their surroundings. Tourists need places to eat and sleep. They also appreciate the dependable levels of service and accommodation one usually finds in American hotels and motels. But people crave integrity of place wherever they go, and homogenous, "off-the-shelf" corporate chain and franchise architecture work against integrity of place. I'll never forget how charmed I was on my first visit to Lexington, Virginia — a Norman Rockwell sort of town in the Shenandoah Valley north of Roanoke. Nor will I forget how offended I was on a later visit when I found a row of gaudy, cookie-cutter fast food joints, cheek by jowl with the town's historic architecture.

Every development should have a harmonious relationship with its setting. Tourism support facilities should reflect the broader environmental context of the community and should respect the specific size, character, and functional factors of their site within the surrounding landscape. A community's food and lodging establishments are part of the total tourism package. Shouldn't hotels in Maine be different in style than those in Maryland, Montana, or Morocco? It is this search for something different that has given rise to the booming bed and



Bird watchers flock to Sannibel Island, Florida, enjoying and respecting the natural environment.

breakfast, adventure travel, and heritage tourism industries.

4. Interpret the Resource. Education and interpretation are another key to sustainable tourism. Visitors want information about what they are seeing. Interpretation can also be a powerful storytelling tool which can make an attraction, even an entire community, come alive. It can also result in better managed resources by explaining why the resources are important. Interpretation instills respect and fosters stewardship in both visitors and residents. Education about natural and cultural resources can instill community pride and strengthen sense of place.

5. Consider Aesthetics and Ecology. Clean air, clean water, and healthy natural systems are fundamentally important to sustainable tourism, but as Mark Twain once said, "We take stock of a city like we take stock of a man. The clothes or appearance are the externals by which we judge." In other words, aesthetics is also important.

Many cities have gotten used to ugliness, accepting it as inevitable to progress. However, other more enlightened communities recognize that the way a community looks affects its image and its economic well-being. Protecting scenic views and vistas, planting trees, landscaping parking lots, and controlling signs are all fundamentally important to the economic health of a community.

6. Enhance the journey as well as the destination. Tourism is the sum total of the travel experience. It is not just what happens at the destination. It involves everything that people see and do from the time they leave home until the vacation is over. Getting there can be half the fun, but frequently it is not.

There are many great destinations in America, but unfortunately, there are very few great journeys left, which is why

it is in the interest of the tourism industry to encourage the development of heritage corridors, bike paths, hiking trails, and other forms of alternate transportation. As author Louis L'Amour once wrote, "the trail is the thing, not the end of the trail. Travel too fast and you'll miss all you are traveling for." This is also why local and state governments should designate scenic byways and protect roads with unique scenic or historic character.

SUMMING UP:

In recent years American tourism has had steadily less to do with America, and more to do with tourism. As open land decreases, marketing dollars increase. As historic buildings disappear, theme parks proliferate.

Citizen planners can take a leadership role in promoting — through community discussion and comprehensive plan policies — a "sustainable tourism" agenda that strengthens the local economy by protecting and enhancing the community's natural, cultural, and scenic resources. ♦



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PCJ readers might be interested to learn that Edward McMahon has co-authored (with Jim Howe and Luther Propst) a recently released book, "Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities." The book provides advice and examples of effective land use planning strategies for the growing number of "gateway" communities near national and state parks, wildlife refuges, historic sites, and other publiclands.

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