

Community Tourism

Description

The 1990s saw many smaller and rural communities embrace tourism and travel as a way of responding to downturns in the resource sectors. Others recognised the value of diversifying their economy and generating new jobs in the growing service industries. However, the desire for community tourism does not itself ensure success - least of all if it is viewed as a short-term solution to a chronic problem within a region's economic structure. Tourism is an industrial sector like any other. It is built on long-term commitment, good business practices, professionalism, adequate investment and ethics. And the basic feature of community tourism is that it involves local direction and local ownership.

Benefits

Tourism is labour intensive, and it provides opportunities for those who may not have the opportunity to participate in the traditional job market – including youth, unemployed women and minorities. (It is true, however, that in North America the salaries are not competitive with other industries - in contrast to those destinations where tourism is seen as a profession, e.g., France or the Bahamas.)

Tourism contributes to diversification of the local economy, and since it continues to outpace general economic growth in most nations, it has been extremely resilient to downturns and recessions. All indicators suggest that it will continue to expand at healthy 4% to 6% annually for the foreseeable future. Money brought into the community by the tourists is spread to virtually all corners of the local economy.

Well planned tourism has few of the environmentally destructive qualities of those resource extraction sectors it often replaces. Moreover, the rapid growth in ecotourism and cultural tourism has enabled communities to offer a variety of nature and heritage based tourism experience that actually contributes to protection and restoration. (See [Cultural/Heritage Tourism](#).)

A variety of other benefits include:

- opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs either to participate in or to provide support to the tourism sector;
- stimulating community beautification and heritage restoration;
- building community pride; and

- sustaining community facilities such as restaurants and recreation equipment with tourism revenues.

Major challenges

The major challenge to community tourism development is getting it right the first time! The tourism industry is a diverse and increasingly complex sector. While community tourism must be driven by local leadership and resident initiatives, the decisions that need to be made by those with relatively little experience in this industry may be onerous. There are many serious questions that need a thoughtful and knowledgeable response, such as: To what niche markets should we appeal, how many can we attract from those market segments, what are the best marketing mechanisms, how much should we spend, where will the money come from? However, most, if not all, of these questions can be adequately answered if the tourism business is properly and comprehensively planned, developed and operated.

Some practical steps

The most practical way of meeting the challenges of community tourism development is to undertake a tested and acknowledged planning process, such as the ten phase ECOPLAN:NAT (Economic Planning for NGO/Community Tourism Organizations) process. The ten phases are:

1. Establish a steering committee from select residents including; existing tourism operators, tourism council, economic development department, provincial/state tourism representatives, media, etc.
2. Prepare mission statement, goals, objectives.
3. Undertake resource inventory/analysis, including resident survey and carrying capacity determination. A critical and analytical assessment of all natural, cultural and built resources provides the planners and the steering committee with a perspective on the tourism potential of the community as a gateway and/or a destination..
4. Conduct market research and analysis.
5. Undertake product/market matching and develop a theme. Link the various community and surrounding area resources with the premium existing and potential markets. Determine an appropriate theme that responds to market demand.
6. Establish the overall development concept and select appropriate products. Identify priority development areas for visitor services and attractions and priority linkages between the various development areas. The development concept will suggest a variety of product development opportunities or tourism projects that will build on the theme and attract and hold the tourists.

Tools & Techniques

7. Develop products, that is, a portrait for each priority project which will include feasibility analysis, training requirements, etc.
8. Undertake marketing strategies.
9. Create implementation strategy including training, economic impact, cost estimates and time frame.
10. Launch products. Create a board that is directly responsible for meeting the activities/schedule outlined in the implementation strategy. As this is usually too demanding for a volunteer committee, consider hiring a community tourism co-ordinator or expanding the job description of the economic development officer.

Resource organizations & contacts

- Each provincial government has its own tourism department, for example, the British Columbia Ministry of Tourism, where the Management Services Division offers information on programs and services (see their website: www.tourism.bc.ca). And regional agencies of the federal government (such as Western Economic Diversification Canada) will have information on loan funds and other aids.
- The Canadian Tourism Research Institute, a centre of the Conference Board of Canada, provides interpretation and communication of travel research information. Website: www.conferenceboard.ca/ctri
- The Ecotourism Society provides market data, research papers, links and other resource information about applying the principles of sustainability to tourism. Website: www.ecotourism.org.
- The Sustainable Tourism Research Interest Group (STRING) is a website directory of internet resources: www.yorku.ca/dkproj/string

Publications

Norma Polovitz Nickerson and Paula Kerr, *Snapshots: An Introduction to Tourism* (Prentice-Hall Canada, 2000, 2nd ed.).