

Responsible Tourism Conference



Tuesday, May 18, 2010
8:00-12:00 pm

Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory
175 Main St
Pawtucket, Rhode Island 02863 USA

Introduction

The Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory (The Lab), is an outgrowth of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Inc, a destination management organization founded in 1985. The Lab concept was formed in 2005. The Lab work in sustainability is to assist communities, regions and organizations in developing programs that apply sustainable tourism principles. In an effort to achieve these objectives, the Lab presents learning initiatives that prepare decisions makers and shapers to thoughtfully develop and regenerate their destinations. Since its inception, the Lab has continued to develop and host a series of robust conferences that run three times a year in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

Program Recap

Conference summary

On May 18, 2010 the Lab hosted a conference on Responsible Tourism, an event that brought together tourism practitioners, community planners/developers, educators, students of tourism and elected officials to learn and understand the concept of Ecotourism. Keith Stokes the Executive Director of Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation opened the conference by underscoring the importance of tourism and how it has become a major force to propel the state economy. He reminded the audience that Rhode Island had an authentic, original, unique and a compelling story to tell its visitors. He further pointed out that Rhode Island's goal going forward would focus on quality of visitors rather than quantity. He stated that destinations prefer visitors with small footprints that have big money as opposed to mass tourism. If this concept were to be embraced then Ecotourism would contribute to the bigger picture of Responsible Tourism.

Dr. Martha Honey, Executive Director of the Center for Responsible Tourism, our guest speaker based in Washington DC, presented the concept and benefits of Ecotourism. Dr. Honey stated that local communities could use Ecotourism as a tool for conservation and poverty reduction that affects the multiple bottom-line. She further elaborated on how ecotourism can benefit local cities and towns to enhance their culture and quality of life. Dr. Honey emphasized how community resources could be leveraged to create experiences that are educational and enjoyable for the visitors. She noted that Ecotourism is growing three times faster than mass tourism so policy-makers should integrate this practice into their communities to meet this emerging demand. Dr. Honey concluded her presentation by stating that consumer demand for responsible tourism is stronger than ever before. She further says that Ecotourism has played a big role in "greening" tourism's mainstream. This model emphasizes on keeping most of the money in the community as opposed to taking it back to the investors' country. Destinations have encouraged visitors/philanthropy to give host countries a hand up instead of a handout. In summary, ecotourism strives to conserve the environment as well as to improve the welfare of local people. The entire presentation of Dr. Honey can be accessed on www.sustainabletourismplanning.com.



Workshop session

Robert Leaver from New Commons led the workshop by applying the “café style”. The café learning style allows participants to interact and engage in a process that builds on ideas that would eventually shape a vision of a destination. Participants were divided into 6 to 8 working groups. Mr. Leaver assigned each table three pre-determined questions for working groups to address. The working group topics represented subjects on basic tourism elements. The topics ranged from Art & Culture, History & Preservation, Governance, Recreation, Transportation, and Hospitality Education. In addition to the questions, working groups were expected to come up with some deliverables by December 2010. At the end of the workshop session each group shared their “nuggets of information” and deliverables with the rest of the participants.

Conference goals (established prior to the conference)

- Identify new market trends for consumer demands on sustainable travel
- Discover the comparative advantages of sustainable tourism
- Learn about community-based ecotourism
- Enhance your knowledge on the effects of climate change and carbon offsets as it relates to tourism



Process

I. Hospitality Education/Training



Highlights of unedited Café style conversation

- Educate existing industry members-retrain
- Develop program that offer hands-on, experiential activities that educate visitors and residents
- Reach out to business communities – show financial benefits and demand from consumer
- Administration should tell the teachers/faculty/staff to enforce sustainable practices
- Advocating triple bottom

Outcomes

Using the lens of Responsible Tourism helps in furthering Sustainable Tourism in Rhode Island.

Educate and Train Tourism professionals

Nuggets

- Visitors will require tangible evidence (i.e. certification) of green business practices. Branding and advertising will not do it especially to those whose commitment to sustainability is only skin-deep.
- Buy Fresh, Buy Local, Slow Food.
- Develop programs giving hands-on experiences for tourists

Deliverables

- Start with administration's policies
- Faculty committees should integrate sustainable concepts into curriculum
- Make school buildings in and of themselves sustainable
- Practice it before you preach it
- Train and retrain the trainers / teachers by integrating sustainability practices into all courses and training.
- Educate consumer the benefits of green and sustainable practices (Triple Bottom Line)



II. Ecological/Environment/ Think Green

Highlights on the paper tablecloth

- Statewide, should educate local people about their natural assets: - The Blackstone Valley gets local people interested in tourism so they can be stewards and spokespeople for tourism.
- Layered multidimensional tourist experience: - Options could draw on the unique assets and sense of place, present it as a WHOLE PLACE, and provide a “choose your own adventure” experience.
- We should develop tools to help visitors learn about other aspects of this area, which involves web-based research and reaching people before they arrive.
- It's important to consider coastal development opportunities to partner with other coastal communities and emphasize and protect their unique assets.

Nuggets

- Layered – Multidimensional experience, hosts need to show tourist all the options available to them.

Deliverables

- Comprehensive website that reaches people before they arrive (linking & promoting local organizations to visit RI website)
- Integrate sustainability & community involvement in local politics. e.g. work with Army Corp. of Engineers to ensure negative effects (like using riprap to reinforce banks) don't happen.
- More partnerships between local conservation organizations & chambers of commerce to better promote identity experiences.



III. Character of Place/geography

Nuggets

- Does the Blackstone Valley have a future?
(We know it has a past)
- Find and define – live out it's future
Amplify the eras of history..... cultural, agricultural, colonial, modern history and industrial
- Character of place is a place of characters – make sure they get written up and get featured.

Deliverable

- Utilizing diverse cultures and learning from them. For instance, the Wednesday night culinariane.
- Learning not exploiting – this strengthens the community of place.
- Communities should not lose their weirdness, weirdness sells.



Highlights of the transcribed notes on the paper cloth

- Every place if not top 10 places of a "Must see".
- A manufactured attraction – take advantage of the small entrepreneur / artist in historically small context.
- History is varied not homogeneous e.g. Agriculture & industrial
- Civic Tourism "Place Matters"
- Form-based zoning will reinforce our New England Heritage



IV. History Preservation / Arts & Culture

What actions will be required?

- Develop hands-on workshops
- Creating events/galas that allow tourists to feel like they are attending event back in time
- Arts/theatre should have their staff accessible to the public so that visitors can learn from them
- Involving tourists in decision making process (surveys)
- Creating a multi-sensory experience



Highlights of the transcribed notes on the paper cloth

What Visitors Require?

- Authenticity
- Interpretation / story telling
- Commitment to Goal
- Relevant for variety of Ages
- Personal connection – continue experience, participatory Role in site/history

Nuggets

- Eliminate parochialism and embrace collaboration
- Monitor the social network buzz and join the conversation
- Review marketing strategy and adapt

Deliverables

- Move forward together “Keep it simple” partnership
- Use Hands-on programs to create an Authentic Experience
- Make sure your visitors can understand the site
- Creating Hands-on - Workshops / Multi-sensory
- Collaborating more with other organizations/cross-marketing
- Creating Protocol / Staff Training
- Build networks w/consumers “start + monitor the buzz” (Web / Social media).



Action plan

- Form working groups that will be assigned a topic of their interest to address.
- Create a timeline (short, medium and long-term) on when these groups should meet and avail the working space.
- Develop a system that is capable of monitoring and measuring regions that practice Responsible Tourism.
- Offer certificates to destinations whose tourism is based on good practices eg. Ecotourism, Geotourism.
- Produce a deliverable that will be implemented by December 2010.

