

Ten Principles for Responsible Tourism

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By Edward T McMahon

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Tourism is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it provides communities with many benefits: new jobs, an expanded tax base, enhanced infrastructure, improved facilities, and an expanded market for local products, art, and handicrafts. In short, it can be an important tool for community revitalization. On the other hand, it can create problems and burdens for local communities such as crowding, traffic congestion, noise, increased crime, haphazard development, cost-of-living increases for residents, and degraded resources.

“The impacts of tourism on a community can be beneficial if planned and managed, or extremely damaging if left without controls,”

Mass-Market and Sustainable Tourism

How does a community maximize the benefits of tourism while minimizing the problems? First, communities need to recognize the differences between mass-market tourism and sustainable tourism. Mass-market tourism is all about “heads in beds.” It is a high-volume, high-impact but low-yield approach. Mass-market tourism is focused on *quantity*; it is also about environments that are artificial, homogenized, generic, and formulaic. In contrast, sustainable tourism is about high *quality*; its focus is places that are authentic, specialized, unique, and homegrown. To understand sustainable tourism, think about unspoiled scenery, locally owned businesses, historic small towns, and walkable urban neighborhoods.

Marketing is important because it promotes visitation and helps create demand. It identifies and segments potential visitors and provides information about a community and its attractions.

Yet, tourism involves a lot more than marketing. It also involves making destinations more appealing. This means identifying, preserving, enhancing, and/or restoring a community’s natural and cultural assets—in other words, protecting its heritage and environment. It is, after all, the unique architecture, culture, wildlife, or natural beauty of a community or region that attracts tourists in the first place.

In today’s global marketplace, competition for tourist dollars is fierce. If the destination is too crowded, too commercial, or too much like every other place, then why go? The best marketing a community can have is by word of mouth. This occurs when the reality of the place meets or exceeds the mental image that visitors have been sold through marketing and promotion. Creation of a false image can spoil a vacation. What’s more, it can reduce repeat visitation. Tourists may come once, but they will not come back.

The more a community comes to look and feel just like everyplace else, the less reason there is to visit. At the same time, the more a community does to enhance its uniqueness, the more people will want to visit. This is the reason why local land use planning, historic restoration, and urban design standards are so important.

To attract and retain tourists, local officials need to become much more aware of the overall character of their community. This is because studies reveal significant differences between resident and tourist perceptions of a community. Tourists are open and receptive to everything they see, while longtime residents tend to tune out the familiar environments along the roads they travel day in and day out.

Ten Recommendations on Tourism

How can a community attract tourists and their dollars without losing its soul? Ten recommendations follow.

1. Preserve and restore historic buildings, neighborhoods, and landscapes. A city without a past is like a person without a memory. Preservation of historic buildings is important because they are the physical manifestations of the past. They tell people who they are and where they came from. Saving the historic buildings and landscapes of a city is about saving the heart and soul of the community. It is also about economic competitiveness. “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 won’t go to a city or town that has lost its soul.” Cities that have obliterated their past attract few tourists or their dollars.

2. Focus on the authentic. Communities should make every effort to preserve the authentic aspects of local heritage and culture, including food, art, music, handicrafts, architecture, landscape, and traditions. Sustainable tourism emphasizes the real over the artificial. It recognizes that the true story of a place is worth telling, even if it is painful or disturbing.

3. Ensure that tourism support facilities are compatible with their surroundings. Tourists need places to eat and sleep and appreciate the dependable levels of service and accommodation usually found in American hotels and motels. But wherever they go, tourists also crave integrity of place—something not provided by homogeneous, “off-the-shelf” corporate chain and franchise architecture, which reduces a community’s appeal as a tourist destination. “Travelers don’t want consistency and reliability to come at the expense of authenticity,”

Today, reusing and recycling old buildings is becoming much more common in the hotel industry. Hotel chains are repurposing numerous existing buildings like warehouses, hospitals, and office buildings. In some cases, historic hotels can be the centerpiece of downtown revitalization efforts. “When a chain store or franchise comes to town, they generally have three designs (A, B, and C) ranging from Anywhere, USA, to unique (sensitive to local character),” says Bob Gibbs, a leading real estate market analysts. “Which one gets built depends heavily upon how much push back the company gets from local residents and officials about design and its importance.”

Design is critically important for communities trying to compete in the tourism marketplace. Tourism is the sum of the travel experience. It is not just what happens at a museum or a festival; it also involves the places that tourists eat and sleep, the roads they drive down, the main streets they shop on, and so forth.

Every new 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 function of their site within the surrounding landscape. A community’s food and lodging facilities are part of the total tourism package. Hotels and restaurants should reflect a city and not each other.

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

5. Protect community gateways. First impressions matter. Just as when meeting a person for the first time, a good first impression is important and a bad first impression is hard to change. Some communities pay attention to their gateways. Others do not. Many communities have gotten used to ugliness, accepting it as an inevitable side effect of progress. More enlightened communities recognize that community appearance is important. It affects a community’s image and its economic well-being.

Downtown is the heart of most communities, but the commercial corridors leading to downtown are the front door. Corridor enhancements are critical to making a good first impression. Commercial corridors also offer one of the best redevelopment opportunities.

6. Control outdoor signs. Protecting scenic views and vistas, planting street trees, and landscaping parking lots all make economic sense, but controlling outdoor signs is probably the most important step a tourism-oriented community can take to make an immediate, visible improvement in its physical environment. Almost nothing will destroy the distinctive character of a community faster than uncontrolled signs and billboards. Sign clutter is ugly, ineffective, and expensive. When the streetscape becomes overloaded with signs, the cumulative effect is negative: the viewer actually sees less, not more. Almost all of America’s premier tourist destinations have strong sign ordinances because they understand that attractive communities attract more business than ugly ones.

7. Enhance the journey as well as the destination. As noted, tourism is not just what happens at the destination; it involves everything that people see and do from the time they leave home until the trip is over. Getting there can be half the fun, but frequently it is not.

“Thanks to the interstate highway system, it is now possible to drive across the country from coast to coast without seeing anything.” Tourists want to see places that are different, unusual, or unique. This is why it is in the interest of state and local officials to encourage development of heritage corridors, bike paths, rail trails, greenways, and scenic byways.

8. Get tourists out of their cars. If you design a community or development around cars, you will get more cars. But if you design a community or development around people, you will get more pedestrians. Walkability is very good for business, especially tourism-oriented businesses. In fact, it is hard for people to spend money when they are in a car, so

getting tourists out of their cars is a key to sustainable tourism and increased business. The best way to get people out of their cars is to create places where people can safely walk and bike in attractive settings.

9. Link sites. Though very few rural communities or small towns can attract out-of-state or international visitors on their own, linked with other communities, they can become a coherent and powerful attraction.

10. Recognize that tourism has limits and must be managed. Savvy communities always ask how many tourists are too many. Tourism development that exceeds the carrying capacity of an ecosystem or that fails to respect a community's sense of place will result in resentment by local residents and the eventual destruction of the very attributes that attracted tourists in the first place. Too many cars, tour buses, condominiums, or people can overwhelm a community and harm fragile resources. Sustainable tourism requires planning and management.

More Than Marketing

In recent years, American tourism has had steadily less to do with America and more to do with mass marketing. As farmland, forests, and open lands decrease, advertising dollars increase. As historic buildings disappear, chain stores proliferate. As Main Streets come back to life, congested commercial corridors spread on the outskirts of towns. Unless the tourism industry thinks it can continue to sell trips to communities clogged with traffic, look-a-like motels, overcrowded beaches, and cluttered commercial strips, it needs to create a plan to preserve the natural, cultural, and scenic resources on which it relies.

Tourism is about more than marketing. It is also about protecting and enhancing the product communities are trying to promote. Citizens, elected officials and developers alike can take a leadership role in creating a sustainable tourism agenda that will strengthen the American economy and at the same time preserve the natural and cultural assets that make the United States unique.

Edward T. McMahon is a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute and the Charles Fraser Chair for Environmental Policy.