

Ten Principles for Responsible Tourism

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Where did you go on your last vacation? Was it rewarding and satisfying? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did the destination meet your expectations, or were you disappointed? Did traffic congestion, dirty air, crowded beaches, slipshod service, or excessive commercialism leave you feeling frustrated and cheated?

Tourism is big business. Americans spend more than \$800 billion a year on travel and recreational pursuits away from home. Tourism is one of the three largest industries in every American state and a critical factor in the U.S. and world economies.

However, tourism is also 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,” says Michael Kelly, former chairman of the American Planning Association’s tourism planning division.

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. A classic example is Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Fort Lauderdale was the “spring break capital” of America. City officials thought it was a great idea to invite hundreds of thousands of college students to visit for a few weeks each year. What they did not count on was that the college kids would sleep six to eight to a room and that the only thing they would spend money on was beer. The city had to hire extra police and cleanup crews, and soon Fort Lauderdale had a reputation as an out-of-control town full of drunken college kids.

Today, Fort Lauderdale is no longer the spring break capital. It may not have as many tourists as it once did, but the tourists who do visit are older and more affluent. They sleep two to a room; they dine at fancy restaurants and shop in high-end stores; their presence does not require the city to hire extra police and cleanup crews. Sustainable tourism is lower volume and lower impact, but has a higher yield.

In order to understand mass-market tourism, think about mega-hotels, theme parks, chain stores, and the new generation of enormous (4,000- to 5,000-passenger) cruise ships. 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.

Local and state tourism agencies spend millions of dollars each year on tourism marketing and promotion. 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 truth is, 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. Travel writer Arthur Frommer put it this way: “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.”

Try to imagine, San Francisco without Alcatraz; Alexandria, Virginia, without its Old Town; New Orleans without the French Quarter; or Seattle without the Pike Place Market. These communities would be lesser places, but they would also be diminished as tourist destinations.

Preservation-minded communities like Santa Barbara, Charleston, Savannah, Santa Fe, Miami Beach, and Quebec City are among North America’s leading tourist destinations precisely because they have protected their unique architectural heritage. By contrast, 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.

For example, in Birmingham, Alabama, a civil rights district tell the story of the city’s turbulent history during the civil rights era. This authentic representation of the city’s past adds value and appeal to Birmingham as a destination, and the institute and surrounding historic district have proved popular with visitors from all over the world.

In Virginia, the Crooked Road heritage music trail is another great example of an authentic attraction rooted in local tradition. The drive along U.S. Route 58 connects major heritage music venues in southwest Virginia, showcasing the traditional gospel, bluegrass, and mountain music indigenous to the region. Annual festivals, weekly concerts, live radio shows, and informal jam sessions abound throughout the region and attract locals and tourists alike.

A third example is the Manzanar National Historic Site at the foot of the Sierra Nevada near Independence, California. It was established to preserve the stories of the nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans interned during World War II and to serve as a reminder to this and future generations of the fragility of American civil liberties.

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,” notes Henry Harteveldt, at the time a travel analyst for the research firm Hudson Crossing.

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. The Cotton Exchange Hotel in New Orleans is one example; the Chatwal Hotel in New York City, fashioned from the former Lamb’s Theatre, is another. A small-town example of a chain hotel that fits in with a historic community is the Hampton Inn in Lexington, Virginia. Instead of building a generic chain hotel out by the interstate, the owners of the Lexington Hampton Inn converted an 1827 manor house, the Col Alto Mansion, into the centerpiece of a 76-room hotel within walking distance of historic downtown Lexington.

In some cases, historic hotels can be the centerpiece of downtown revitalization efforts. The Mission Inn in Riverside, California; the Martha Washington Hotel in Abingdon, Virginia; and the Peabody Hotel in downtown Memphis are three examples.

Executives at Marriott estimated in 2014 that up to 20 percent of the company's new Courtyard hotels that year would be in repurposed older buildings, and the trend is not confined to hotels. "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 analyst. "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. Hotels in Mississippi, for example, should be different from those in Maine, Missouri, Montana, Morocco, and Malaysia.

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, even an entire community come 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.

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, developed a communitywide interpretation program that involves public art, wayside exhibits, and interpretive markers that tell the story of the town and its role in the Battle of Gettysburg. The city did this after it realized that most tourists were driving around the national park and then leaving town without realizing that the town itself was a big part of the story. Since the interpretative program was completed, the number of visitors spending time and money in downtown Gettysburg has measurably increased.

Richmond, Virginia, is another community that has done a great job of telling its story. The Richmond Slave Trail, for example, is a walking trail that chronicles the trade of enslaved Africans from Africa to Virginia until 1775 and away from Virginia until 1865. There are numerous historic markers along the route that explain the various sites and cast new light on a dark chapter of U.S. history.

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. Other 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.

For instance, a first visit to New Market, Virginia, in the 1970s revealed it to be a Norman Rockwell sort of town in the Shenandoah Valley. But a visit a decade later proved very disappointing: giant new fast-food and gas-station signs towered over the town's historic buildings, obliterating the scenery and diminishing the town's appeal as a tourist destination.

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. Arlington County, Virginia, for example, has used a form-based code to incentivize redevelopment along Columbia Pike. Unsightly automobile-oriented development is now being displaced by walkable, mixed-use development. Other communities like Cathedral City, California; Carmel, Indiana; and Charlotte, North Carolina, have used corridor overlay zoning to improve the character of new development along entry corridors.

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.

Though there are many great destinations in America, very few noteworthy journeys remain. Except for a few special roads like the Blue Ridge Parkway or the Natchez Trace Parkway, a drive along a typical American highway can be a profoundly depressing experience. Author and television commentator Charles Kuralt put it this way: “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. The Embarcadero in San Francisco, the Inner Harbor in Baltimore, Beale Street in Memphis, and the River Walk in San Antonio are all walkable destinations that demonstrate how walkability increases profitability.

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. The Blues Highway in Mississippi—a.k.a. U.S. Route 61—connects Memphis to New Orleans and passes through numerous small towns in the Mississippi Delta. Each of these small towns tells a part of the story of America’s musical history, but few of them would attract tourists on their own without being part of a bigger story.

Birding trails, wildlife trails, literary heritage trails, and Civil War heritage trails are all examples of this linkage concept. The Katy Trail in Missouri—running 240 miles (386 km) from Machens near St. Louis to Clinton in western Missouri—is considered one of the best rail trails in the country. This multipurpose trail has brought thousands of tourists and new life to an economically distressed part of the state. Similarly, the Journey through Hallowed Ground Heritage Area in Maryland and Virginia has provided a framework for promoting and interpreting nine presidential homes, numerous Civil War sites, more than 30 historic Main Street communities, and numerous other historic and natural attractions.

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. Annapolis, Maryland; Charleston, South Carolina; and Williamsburg, Virginia, are examples of communities with tourism management plans. Charleston, for example, bars large tour buses from the neighborhood south of Broad Street, known as the Battery. It also directs travelers to the city’s visitor center, which is located well away from historic residential neighborhoods that were being overrun by tourists. It has also built new attractions, like the South Carolina Aquarium, in underserved areas of the city instead of concentrating everything in one or two overcrowded neighborhoods

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.

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