CHARTING A COURSE FOR THE 1990s

Clare A. Gunn
Building Community Tourism
Conference
April 21, 1991
Whistler, British Columbia

It is always a pleasure for me to be invited to Canada. As I travel and work in other parts of the world, I know of no nation that believes in and practices a better land ethic. Recently, I learned a new word that aptly describes your respect for your land—topophilia, love of the landscape.

It is a special treat to be here in Whistler. Back in the early '80s, Bernie Campbell, then with the Tourism Development Office in Ottawa, brought me in to study destination zone development throughout Canada. This region was then identified as having potential. In 1985, Bernie sent me this copy of WHISTLER: DEVELOPMENT OF A RESORT with a note attached: "finally we are getting a real destination zone." Through many consulting opportunities throughout Canada, I have had the privilege of learning how seriously you consider tourism development in your country.

When I was asked to talk on the topic of CHARTING A COURSE FOR THE 1990s, I couldn't help but reflect on the startling fact that I, personally, have been involved in travel for some 70 years! My parents began taking my brother and me on camping trips -- in Model T Fords -- back in the 20's.

Our real "biggie" was in 1929 -- 7,000 miles throughout western United States, a six week's camping tour from Michigan
and return. Little did I realize then that I would have a career in tourism that has lasted over four decades.

It is from this experience that I'd like to focus on a few trends and challenges that I believe are most important for community tourism development in the coming decade.

First of all, we know we are facing tougher competition everywhere. Watch any television channel, read any magazine, and listen to your friends and neighbors. The number of travel destinations has proliferated tremendously in only the last few years. In only three monthly magazines on my coffee table--non-travel publications--I counted last month 352 destinations in the copy and ads. This means very simply that destinations can no longer rest on past laurels--they must be much better than their competition. This was brought to me forcibly this fall when I participated in a task force evaluation of tourism on a South Pacific Island. The low hotel occupancy--only 50% and 10% repeat business--visibly demonstrated that they were not competing sufficiently with other similar sun-and-sand destinations, such as Hawaii, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

Many communities have not yet learned that the travel market is a moving target. As I work with communities, I am much surprised how little they know about their travel markets. I say markets, in the plural, because today there are many market segments with different needs and interests. Markets are dynamic, constantly changing. Whatever we do on the development of the supply side must be revised regularly to keep up with changes in the market--today, greater adventure travel, cultural travel, educational travel, and ecotourism.
Because the supply side takes considerable effort, time, and even new investment to make changes, communities must constantly be aware of changes in travel markets.

Another challenge—one we must understand better in the '90s—is the complexity of the supply side: that is: everything that is done to meet the interests and demands of the market. Few communities are fully aware of who is involved in tourism supply, believing that tourism involves only the chamber of commerce and the lodging people.

Few realize it involves virtually every citizen, every public agency, and every organization. How the voters support the development and maintenance of streets, safe and attractive neighborhoods, enriching educational museums, beautiful and well-kept parks, and even health services—all are important to tourism as well as to the welfare of local citizens. Even nonprofit groups, such as churches, service clubs, and festival sponsors have important roles in tourism. And, the maintenance of a diverse rather than a singular local economy is critical to a community’s success.

The question is: are all these separate entities fully aware of their roles in tourism and do they understand how they can benefit from cooperation— not for mere altruism, but for their own survival?

A very important trend—an old one with new emphasis—is that of a cleaner environment.
I see altogether too much apathy within the tourism business community concerning the future of the very assets that put them into business.

Fundamentally, this stems from a misunderstanding of the tourism product. Tourism economic impact tables show hotels, restaurants, transportation businesses and shops as providing the most jobs, incomes, and tax revenues. Certainly, they are essential to travel. But, they alone are not the main tourism product, the cause of travel—they are facilitators. The real tourism product is the visitor’s experience at attractions—the places that provide the most meaningful reasons for travel.

As we study attractions, we find that the great majority are dependent on natural and cultural resources. For example, in the United States, in spite of increased volumes of visitors to theme parks, more and more visitors are coming to the natural and cultural resource attractions of our national parks. Our national Park Service tells us that visits have increased by one-third in the last decade—96.5 million visits to NPS cultural areas in 1989.

But, what are communities doing to protect these natural and cultural assets? Typical are several communities I worked with in eastern United States. The state tourism agency was complaining about the health department closing beaches at the peak of the tourist season due to contamination from septic tanks. Yet, neither that agency nor the tourist businesses were promoting the establishment of central sewage purification plants. New technology, such as the Solar Aquatic System, developed in
Massachusetts, is demonstrating the use of natural forces to purify sewage so it can be recycled.

Future tourism expansion cannot take place without vigorous resource protective action.

This leads me to the topic of landscape beauty, a highly appropriate topic in this spectacular part of the world. This kind of beauty, most of us understand. But, what about community beauty and beautiful tourism development?

The greatest objection I hear when I work on tourism development plans is that tourism fosters ugly commercialism. Certainly, we hope it will foster commercial enterprise, producing jobs, incomes and tax revenues, but must it be ugly?

I believe that community tourism development not only can be attractive but also must be in the '90s. The market is increasingly demanding it. Unkempt roadsides, trashy streets, and generally chaotic business clutter will be shunned increasingly by the traveling public.

Perhaps most vulnerable are scenic highways. Many tourist agencies and highway departments in my country are prone to label some highways as scenic drives. Perhaps they are today. But my travel shows that rare is the area that has enacted proper legislative controls to assure scenic vistas in the future. Many legal and voluntary techniques are available and must be implemented if we are to satisfy one of the top market demands--traveling for scenic pleasure.
Perhaps in the past there was some excuse for poor tourism design in our communities because good designers were few and located primarily in the larger cities. Not so today. Talented and experienced landscape architects, planners, and architects are readily available and are having a significant impact on the creation of beautiful cities and tourism environments.

In the '90s, I see need for greater urban-rural partnerships. We cannot treat community tourism development as an isolated phenomenon.

Most tourist service businesses are logically located in the cities. But, the surrounding rural areas usually contain most of the travel attractions. As the traveler experiences both the rural and urban locations, he crosses many jurisdictional boundaries. Too often, differing governmental policies and traditional rivalries result in a poor experience for the traveler.

In one community tourism plan I worked on I was told that if the people at the county seat, just twelve miles away, were for any of my recommendations, they--the people in this community--would automatically be against them. In another instance, I ran into a similar problem between the national park superintendent and the nearby community. He stated that he could not cooperate because his job was to keep people out of his park whereas the community wanted more visitors.

Fortunately for tourism development, in many communities these attitudes are gradually disappearing. Certainly, in the '90s, the leaders and supporters of the several jurisdictions in an
area—for their very survival—will be forced to cooperate and collaborate on virtually all matters, including tourism.

And now, the final point I’d like to leave with you—and in my opinion the most important: the discovery of opportunity. To me, the greatest obstacle to community tourism development is the lack of vision in making the most of opportunities right before us. Conversely, the communities that have done the best job are not necessarily those with the greatest wealth nor abundance of other resources.

Too often, I hear the following comments from communities:
--It can’t be done.
--We tried that before and it didn’t work.
--We’re too small to do it.
--Has it been done before?
--It’s too radical a change.
--It costs too much.
--That’s somebody else’s responsibility.

For successful community tourism development in the future, we know that these are merely excuses, not real reasons for doing nothing. What, then, is the secret for success? Before I try to answer that, let me describe some approaches that are sure to fail.

One I call the gimmick approach. In some communities a chamber of commerce will put all its faith in a gimmick, a quick fix, such as wanting to build a water slide on the belief that this
will put them in the tourism business. One small community spent thousands of scarce dollars on a 35-foot fiberglass Indian! No only do these things fail but they often set tourism development back many years because of their failure.

Another I call the industrial development approach. Many communities have industrial development committees that woo the CEOs of businesses and industries to come to their towns. First, there is danger in dumping a mega-tourism complex onto a small town. I hear many complaints about large outside investments that disrupt the way of life and destroy local environmental assets. Second, tourism development is much more complicated than the simple industry approach.

In some countries, I have observed many problems arising from an elitist planning approach. This usually involves a governmental agent telling a community what it must do to develop tourism. On a tour in western Australia, a government tourism agent complained that the towns were not doing what he told them to do, even after offering the carrot of considerable grant money.

Why do these fail? Very simply, they deny local involvement. Communities must be involved in deciding their own destiny. The most powerful force is a concerted community-wide effort. Although stimulation and technical assistance may be needed, the conviction and action must be local. I say this as a professional designer and planner. My plans are of no value until they are translated into development action locally.
Let me cite some examples.

* Comal County, Texas. Right now tourism is thriving but only two years ago was stagnated by bitter controversy between environmental protection and commercial development of the Guadalupe River. As a popular spot for tubing, visitors were trashing the riverbanks and disturbing riparian property owners. In response to their request for help, our extension service sponsored a series of community-wide meetings for over a year. Merely by catalytic leadership, not highly technical nor autocratic, the people themselves solved their problems and discovered new opportunities. The environmental quality of the river now has been restored and vandalism has disappeared at the same time commercial tourism has increased. Park agencies, local governments, and private enterprise are cooperating as never before.

* The city of Galveston, Texas, has multiplied its tourism many times over during the last twenty years primarily because of a reawakening of community involvement. County commissioners, city council members, commercial enterprise, and loyal citizens are proud of their joint accomplishments: 45 recreation areas, 45 miles of public beach, 15 public boat ramps--all stimulating the success of many tourist businesses.

* The mayor of Kendleton, a small town of less than 700 people reports that tourism has increased largely because a new 34-acre park project gave the people confidence to do bigger projects. This project triggered a $150,000 park and ride grant, a $350,000 sewer expansion grant, and funds for a new $150,000 city hall.
These and many other examples throughout southern Texas are demonstrating how communities can discover their own opportunities. The secret ingredient in these success stories is the catalytic role of one extension agent who helps people help themselves. I quote from a resident of Smithville, a small town in central Texas, "The Extension Service is a must for small communities. They advise us in preparing and planning, find the needs of the community, build leadership, and help get communities working toward the same goals."

Similar examples can be found throughout the United States wherever someone exercises this catalytic role.

* Our National Forest Service has stimulated both resource protection as well as tourism by means of its "Resort Naturalist Program". Resorts near Cook, Minnesota, have benefitted greatly from the program. It involves up-to-date information on hiking trails, canoe routes, berry picking areas, and other things to see and do. Increased paid interpretive positions have been supported by the resorts themselves. Guests stay longer, are more likely to return, and stimulate new business through word-of-mouth promotion. Such joint efforts are stimulating tourism in many communities near our national forests.

* Beginning with the Reagan Administration, a director of tourism, Priscilla Baker, was named within the National Park Service, who has stimulated much community tourism development. She held the first tourism-and-national park conference in the U.S. in 1988, followed by several since. She
reports that their joint activities with tourism enterprise have resulted in:

1. better marketing of parks;
2. many new cooperative relationships of mutual gain for both parks and business; and
3. discovering new sources of expertise.

Although I haven't had a chance to study Canada in this regard, I am confident that many communities have capitalized on their special place qualities to develop tourism. Not long ago, I was impressed with the little seacoast town of Cheticamp in Nova Scotia. Tourism has done much to replace a dwindling fishing economy—primarily because it discovered an opportunity not found anywhere else in the world. The town is now famous for its tourism souvenirs. Hooked rug hangings, chair seats, rugs, and coasters are produced by over 100 talented local craftswomen. In addition, a special attraction is the Dr. Elizabeth LeFort Gallery and Museum that contains spectacular artifacts and tapestries featuring this noted artist’s work.

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Now, let me try to summarize what my experience tells me are the challenges for community tourism development in the '90s. The key is the discovery of opportunity, which depends on two things.

Certainly, communities do need to have more facts in hand. They need facts about market trends. They need to understand that tourism includes many actors, not just promoters and hoteliers.
They need facts about their resources, natural and cultural--where they are and threats to their quality. They need to understand the importance of the surrounding area to their success.

But, these facts, of and by themselves, will not cause any change. There is a wealth of human resources in communities. The challenge in the '90s is to harness these resources with joint and cooperative strategies. Surely, we will need all the expert help we can get. Designers, planners, government agents, and extension specialists are needed now more than ever before. But, I predict the many fruits of tourism development--and there are many--will not be realized until the local people, themselves, discover their own opportunities.
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