Must Tourism Threaten Parks?

by Clare A. Gomu

Today there are signs of a new era dawning of tourism and park relations. Both the public and private sectors are beginning to cooperate to a much greater degree, demonstrating that conservation and sustainable development is a viable concept.

Still, as concern over damage to the environment continues to grow worldwide, there are many misconceptions about the tourism-park interface. The cry that "we are loving our parks to death" (implying overuse by visitors) is being challenged by loving them enough to plan and manage for mass use and resource protection at the same time.

Research is now demonstrating that most of the threats to park environments worldwide are not caused by visitors but by other factors such as poaching, pollution and erosion, as reported by Machlis and Tichnell (1985, 24). In California, for example, they reported that two-thirds of the threats to the entire state park system could be attributed to administration and management. And, many of the remaining threats are from factors external to the park and not related to visitors. It appears that we can cope with increased tourist popularity of parks if we implement adequate planning, design and management practices within the parks and greater collaboration with developers outside the parks.

At the first tourism and national park conference held in the United States (1988), several cases were cited where new collaboration between tourism and parks was solving conservation-public use problems. At the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument, for example, in just a few years both resource protection and tourism economic impact have improved as a result of park-community cooperation. A similar cooperative effort around the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park in Texas was led by Superintendent Harry O' Bryant. A new non-profit organization, the LBJ Heartland Council, is planning for improved tourism development in the surrounding areas including Stonewall, Blanco and Johnson City. Also in Texas, in Comal County and along the Guadalupe River, more visitors are being accommodated, riverbank erosion has been mitigated, lawlessness has been stopped and conflict with riparian property owners has been reduced—all because of new cooperation between tourism developers and park agencies in the New Braunfels area (Watt 1988).

Even so, why aren't these practices more widespread in application? The purpose of this article is to identify several barriers to integrated tourism-park development and to offer some recommended solutions.

Tourism as a System

Not well enough understood by either the public or private sector (elsewhere as well as in this country) is how tourism really functions because it is an extremely complicated phenomenon. While the business and economic aspects are most conspicuous, tourism
activity is much broader than this. Figure 1 illustrates the overall tourism functioning system. Study of this can reveal many new opportunities for greater cooperation among the many elements of tourism and parks.

The demand side (push) includes the market—the location and volume of population with interest in and ability to travel. The supply side (pull) includes several major components that are developed and managed by factors within both public and private sectors. The major power unit of the supply side is the attraction component. This component serves two functions—drawing power and visitor satisfactions. Closely related are the other important components of transportation, services, information, and promotion.

Symbiosis

The main lesson to be learned from this diagram is that functionally all parts are interrelated. No tourist business and no public agent for parks can operate in isolation. Each one is subject to the policies and practices of the others. Any change in one has an impact on all others.

Virtually all agencies in the U.S. that manage parks and resource areas are involved in this system by providing attractions. Parks, natural areas and historic sites (national, state, regional, local) serve tourism as attraction complexes based on natural and cultural resources.

As attractions, they must be understood and planned in an overall regional tourism context.

The majority of tourist activities depend upon developed sites that utilize natural resources such as water, waterlife, vegetative cover, wildlife, topographic change, geology and soils. In addition, more parks are being based on archeological, historic, ethnic and technological foundations of increasing interest to tourism market segments. As more visitors are able to visit parks, they are more willing to support park budgets and organizations.

In nearly all instances, mandates of U.S. public park and resource agencies require that they provide for public use as well as resource protection. Most of these agencies are also involved to some degree in other tourism components such as transportation, services, information and promotion. Resource managers, therefore, have a stake in tourism and are dependent upon changes and trends in markets as well as all supply components.

Western parks, for example, have introduced literature, signs and interpretation in Japanese to meet the burgeoning travel demand from that country. In his study of foreign visitors to Canadian national parks (1989), Smith concluded that parks should be viewed in a regional context as one element in a larger system of attractions and accommodation services.

Barriers

In spite of the logic of the interdependencies illustrated
here, several barriers seem to continue to hamper greater cooperation and collaboration among all the stakeholders involved in tourism. Here are a few of the major constraints:

- turf protection that precludes staff interaction with outsiders;
- overheated confrontation between environmentalists and developers that prevents cool-headed discussion of mutual interests;
- legal mandates that proscribe agency functions so much that outside cooperation is prohibited or discouraged;
- lack of personnel, public and private, trained in multidisciplinary tourism interaction;
- philosophical and ideological differences that set apart public and private factors as adversaries;
- misunderstanding by tourism and park developers of the entire day-by-day travel spectrum of tourists that requires integration of all supply-side functions; and
- lack of area-wide approaches to planning and developing parks and tourism service centers as integrated land units.

Gradually, businesses and agencies related to tourism are breaking down these barriers. They are increasingly accepting the dual role of conservation and sustainable development. For example, a joint effort between tourism and conservation interests in Alberta (Wight 1988) identified needs: greater understanding of tourism impacts, planning framework, carrying capacity, different levels of development (zoning), intrinsic development, better communication and improved interpretation programs.

Solutions

Following are a few suggestions for improving the integration of park and conservation with tourism development. However, the true solution to this issue will be resolved best only by collaborative effort, case-by-case by the parties involved.

Multidisciplinary Education. Input must be added from many disciplines to the specialized tourism and park programs in our educational institutions in order to give students the rounding they will need in a real world.

Association Responsibility. Tourist business organizations could take on a stronger proactive role in fostering better integration of parks and tourism development.

Agency Policy Revision. Resource agencies of governments now have the challenge of changing their prescriptive policies to encourage greater networking with outside interests related to tourism.

Joint Public-Private Councils. Much progress can be made by means of joint policy and program development between tourism private sector and government agency officials.

Greater interpretation. Considerable public use pressure can be removed from envi-

Interpretive Trail at Aransas Wildlife Refuge, Texas Gulf Coast, provides nature appreciation and education for tourists without damage to the environment.
Joint Area Planning. Joint physical planning within and around parks could solve many of the current issues.

A suggested concept of joint area planning is illustrated in Figure 2.

This concept is a transfer of the tourism function system onto the land. In other words, the greatest economic impact takes place through the tourist services, dominantly located in a nearby service community. This is the most logical location for the lodging, food service, retail sales and other commercial activity associated with tourism for two reasons.

First, the community, not the park or rural area, has the basic infrastructure (water, waste removal, police, fire protection). Second, the tourist businesses can best serve local residents in a community location. At the same time, the major attractions for visitors are located in the park (or parks) nearby. Joint planning effort by park and area representatives could result in identifying the several use zones illustrated here.

1. Key Resource-Protection Zone. This is an area where the resource features are so rare or fragile that public use would damage them. Qualified biologists, landscape architects, historians and archeologists could identify the prime resources of the park, including scenic resources, rare plants, important animals and habitats, and areas of archeological and historical value that cannot withstand human intervention. Generally, these will be the features that stimulated the creation of the park in the first place. This zone would be intended only for scientific use.

2. Wildland/Low Use. Within the park, other lands may be less valuable but still contain resources that would be disturbed if roads and facilities were introduced. These areas would constitute a roadless zone with limited human access, much like present areas governed by wilderness policy. Controlled hiking, canoeing or other modes of limited use could be designed and managed without disturbance of key resources. An interpretive center at the border between zones 1 and 2 could help visitors understand the environment.

3. Extensive Recreation Zone. Specialists could identify specific areas outside the wildland zone that are extensive and stable enough to support extensive recreation. Hunting, fishing and camping could be provided in accordance with proper planning and design principles. Excessive roads and parking could be avoided by use of buses or other people-movers. The extent of this development would need to be in balance with the resource base.

4. Tourist Zone. Special sites and travelways for motorcoaches, monorails or other forms of mass transportation could be installed for visitor use. Proper design of facilities to handle mass use could protect resources and allow...
public enrichment. For example, travelways could penetrate restricted zones permitting visitors to see, but not come in contact with, special resources. These travelways would not be open to personal vehicles. Special turnouts, overlooks and interpretive centers along the way could contain educational exhibits, literature, slide presentations and lecture rooms.

5. Service Community Zone. At the edge of the park, either just inside or outside the boundary, a service community zone could operate independently as a city. All development would be established in response to market demand, providing services for several market segments. Today, enough is known about urban design to plan and create attractive, functional and market-oriented communities. Although new towns may be necessary, it is far better to expand one that has an established infrastructure and management policy.

This concept is suggested to stimulate consideration of tourist destination zones as a whole. Application of this concept would include many land jurisdictions, public and private. Obviously, it demands cooperation and even collaboration across many jurisdictional lines.

But, experience is now demonstrating that leadership and networking can foster mutual resolution of issues and integrated planning of seemingly scattered and unrelated land developments and programs. No, tourism need not threaten parks. Yes, tourism and parks are compatible provided that joint planning and management programs are put in place.

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