PLANNING A TOURISM STRATEGY FOR THE YEAR 2000

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For my topic today, I'd like to modify the title slightly in order to identify the major challenges I see ahead for tourism. To me, these are very important if we are to have a tourism strategy for the year 2000 and beyond, especially for small towns and rural areas.

It has been my good fortune to have witnessed many advances in tourism development over my lifetime. I recall vividly the dusty gravel roads in an open Model T Ford as I traveled with my parents to Michigan’s upper peninsula in 1925. Then what an improvement it was to travel from Michigan, some 7000 miles throughout the West in a Model A Ford in 1929. Of course, we went through three sets of tires and a set of brakes on this camping adventure. As I began my career in tourism in 1945, our major educational task then was to convince cabin operators to update from "a room and a path" to "a room and a bath." Or, that the market much preferred central heat to the smelly and hard-to-light oil burners of the day. It is tempting to reflect on the dramatic shift from the bouncing and slow-going propeller planes to the comfortable and speedy 747s I traveled on last week, returning from Australia.

But, we are here to look ahead and plan for a better future of rural and small town tourism. As I gathered my notes for
this occasion, it seemed to me that we now face four major challenges—challenges that may require an entirely new thrust for Extension.

GREATER COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

My first challenge I call the need for "Greater Community Integration."

In my work in community tourism development, here and abroad, I find that the myopic vision of tourism is a major obstacle to progress. Tourism is seen in a very narrow and naive manner.

In most small towns, the expansion of tourism is seen as a simple task requiring only more money on promotion. And, there is a belief that this can be done overnight if the chamber of commerce would just get busy or, all we need is a new motel.

We have not yet learned the lesson that tourism is everybody's business. No other business or industry involves so many facets of the community. A simple test I have used often is to ask a resident what he does when friends or relatives come to visit. Does he leave town because he is so ashamed of what his town has to offer?

Are the highway approaches to town lined with weeds, trash and billboards? Do all activities die at five o'clock? Are you ashamed of your community's amenities, such as its parks, museums, and streetscapes? Are your shopkeepers aware of the value of courteous and helpful service to visitors or do they begrudge tourists as bothersome? It has been my experience, reinforced just last week in several small communities in
Australia, that most small towns are unaware of the key stakeholders in tourism—that the decisionmakers involve many people in three different categories.

A major category, and one usually forgotten, is that of government—government at all levels from local to federal. Decisions that impact tourism are made regularly on street improvements, route changes, signage, water supply, sewage disposal, safety and fire protection. How well government agencies develop and maintain campgrounds, park areas, and waterfronts can make all the difference in tourist appeal and service—the difference between an ugly and an attractive community. Yes, city councils, political leaders, park managers, police and county commissioners, as well as state and federal agencies are involved in tourism.

A second actor group, often little recognized, is that of the many volunteer and nonprofit organizations. Parks and recreation areas sponsored by Rotary and Kiwanis clubs and historic sites developed by women's organizations are often the backbone of local tourism. Sponsors of festivals and events are likely to be nonprofit organizations. Cultural groups (arts, music, drama) and church and youth groups are involved in tourism.

A third actor group is of course the commercial sector—but, this includes much more than the obvious lodging and food businesses. The banks, garages, hardware and food stores are often used by tourists. Insurance agents, realtors, doctors, and repair shops, such as for watch and eyeglass repair are
frequently sought by tourists.

Unfortunately, very few communities have set up any mechanism to bring these many stakeholders together—to alert them to how dependent they are on each other. In fact, the go-it-alone attitude actually stimulates antagonisms that hamper understanding and cooperation.

Townspeople often resent tourism developers and some park managers actually believe their job is to keep people out of their parks. Public agencies at all levels of government are so busy protecting their bureaucratic turf that they seldom reach out to cooperate with other agencies.

I have observed the dramatic effectiveness of problem-solving by merely bringing opposing forces together. Once at a coastal tourism conference a representative of Hyatt hotels sat opposite a delegate from the Conservation Foundation at a luncheon. What started as cutting criticism of each other's policies on coastal land use ended in congenial agreement that hotels had a place in the coastal zone but did not need to destroy access and vistas of waterfront lands. In many instances, groups can solve their own problems if some neutral force can bring them together.

And so, a major challenge before all of us who work in the field of tourism is to seek out ways in which we can bring these diverse tourism actors together, not only for the good of tourism but for their own success. I am convinced that few communities are going to measure up to their opportunities for tourism unless dramatic changes take place in greater integration of all actors and actions in tourism—and, Extension
is the very one to do it, but only if it can mount a much greater thrust than we see today.

GREATER CONSERVATION-SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The second challenge I would like to place before this group is the need for greater conservation and resource protection. Somehow we seem to have forgotten that the very foundation for tourism is the land, and especially the rural lands. We have been so preoccupied with promotion that little attention is paid to the very important roles of the natural and cultural resources.

And, the dominance of urban tourism has diverted our attention from the many values of rural lands. The super domes, big convention centers, and big hotels and their flashy advertising draw our attention away from the importance of rural tourism. In Texas, for example, a study in 1983 showed that outdoor recreational travel amounted to $9 billion—60% of total travel expenditures that year! Yet, we continue to focus attention and spend most promotional dollars on the cities.

Where would tourism be without water resources for swimming, fishing, skiing, boating, cruising, and canoeing, mainly in rural areas? Wildlife resources are increasingly important for nature appreciation and photography as well as for hunting. Hills, mountains, and valleys give us the very foundation for mountain climbing, soaring, hang-gliding, down-hill skiing, and scenic overlooks. Clear and unpolluted air in the country gives the traveler a refreshing break from the fouled atmosphere at home. And, the vegetative cover—the trees, shrubs,
wildflowers, and grasses--provide habitat for wildlife and background for much of our scenic enjoyment.

In recent years, several of our travel market segments have demonstrated great interest in their heritage. Archeological digs and underwater archeology are becoming significant tourist attractions. The historic sites, ethnic customs and crafts, industrial and technological achievements are increasingly popular among many travelers.

But, in spite of our greater environmental awareness since the 1970s, these great assets of rural lands are again under attack. There is no room for complacency. It is the main topic in every small town tourism meeting I have attended lately--I heard it in Texas, in South Africa, in Canada, and in Australia.

Outside investors are buying up rural lands for new resort and condominium development everywhere I go. On the surface, this sounds like progress--and it does reflect a market need. But, the key issues are where and how such developments are made.

Too often, new developments today erode the very resources important to tourism. Poor location and poor design are stealing our beaches, ruining scenic views, and eroding fragile resources. Historic areas are being smothered by highrise glass boxes and many communities continue to pour their sewage and toxic wastes in nearby waters.

It seems that the greatest abuse is taking place in rural areas near the cities. The very attractiveness and life styles of rural lands are being threatened daily by these abusive land
developments. And, because rural areas generally have little
clout, they are unable to fight back. Environmental issues are
more critical than ever. The future of rural and small town
tourism is increasingly bleak if greater action is not initiated
right now. New land use legislation, new plans and planning, and
stronger political action must take place in rural areas. If
there ever was a time when Extension is needed, it is now.

GREATER URBAN-RURAL COLLABORATION

My next point concerns the very important relationship
between a small town and the nearest large city.

For many reasons, we think of ourselves as competitors
rather than friends. The rural and small town life style—a
quieter pace, less congestion, and romantic belief in the
country—foster not only independence but often rivalry with the
nearest large city.

Antagonism toward the big city also comes from the fear of
outside pressure. Big investors, financiers, and political
leaders frequently impose their will upon small towns and rural
areas. This causes frustration and defensive attitudes locally.

From the tourism perspective, this results in many lost
opportunities. Little understood is the opportunity for better
tourism in both the larger city and surrounding rural areas and
small towns if they worked together. If the truth be known,
much of big city tourism depends upon the rural resources and
activities.

When cooperation replaces antagonism, large cities increase
their tourism by adding motor coach tours to nearby areas. They
can increase their store of attractions by encompassing a larger area. Small towns and rural areas can benefit by the many programs of promotion and information if they are a part of the larger complex.

Even small towns tend to ignore the importance of the surrounding rural areas. I have seen many instances of poor cooperation between the county and a city, reducing the tourism opportunities of both.

Recently in Texas, we have seen some dramatic examples of tourism progress due to new collaboration between small towns and the surrounding region. The superintendent of the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Park—the Texas "White House," has stimulated excellent cooperation with tourism development in the nearby towns of Blanco, Johnson City and Stonewall. A nonprofit organization that he fostered, called the LBJ Heartland Council, is now planning for greater resource protection and compatible tourism development. For the first time public-private cooperation is taking place.

Not long ago, Dr. Carson Watt and our Extension program became involved in solving conflicts between tourism and conservation in the rural area surrounding New Braunfels. The Guadalupe River had become extremely popular for rafting and tubing, resulting in erosion of the river bank, trash and litter along the riverside, vandalism and drunken disorder, and invasion of privacy of nearby homes. Meanwhile, commercial development was increasing in response to this water recreation demand. This had resulted in a complete stalemate between conservation and development groups.
After two years of catalytic action by Extension, the river is now safe and controlled, the banks have been restored, the park agencies are cooperating as never before and conflict has virtually disappeared.

A major challenge and opportunity for Extension today is to bring urban and rural areas together for greater tourism achievement by both.

OVERCOME TOURISM ILLITERACY

My final point is that we need to do a better job of overcoming tourism illiteracy. Yes, most communities are illiterate regarding tourism as a system. Individual businesses and agencies know a great deal about their separate enterprises but very little about how it all fits together—or perhaps, doesn’t fit together.

First of all, we need better understanding of the demand-supply function.

An Australian tourism development manual asks communities to perform a "gap" analysis—the study of whether there is a gap between what visitors want and what the community could provide. Most areas have no information at all about markets, especially potential markets. Traveler interests and objectives are changing rapidly. Travelers are more sophisticated and more active today and certainly they are more diversified.

But, how well are communities and rural areas responding to these new needs with the proper development of the supply side—the appropriate attractions, the transportation and access, the services, and the information and promotional systems?
In the last three years I have collaborated with Price Waterhouse on the development of three state tourism plans—New York, Oklahoma, and Washington. In order to gain local insight we held several workshops throughout each state. In each case, the local tourism interests identified the need for technical and professional assistance. Even well developed areas said they would like a team of specialists to come in and evaluate what they were doing in tourism.

The entire range of tourism research and education must be utilized to a much greater extent than today. Conferences, workshops, meetings and short courses as well as higher education can be very effective but today's programs need to be multiplied.

CONCLUSIONS

What do I conclude from this discussion? Certainly, most of the points I have made are not new to you. And, many of you have already made progress on their solution.

Surely, we do need greater community integration, greater conservation and sustainable development, greater city-rural cooperation, and much greater progress to eliminate tourism illiteracy. And, Extension has the tradition and the structure to meet these needs.

Unfortunately, the volume of Extension activity is so small and spread so thin that it is virtually impotent. The need is clearly evident but unfortunately neither the public nor private support is sufficient to give Extension the muscle it needs to get the job done.
It is refreshing to see that a few states, such as Michigan and Minnesota, are rallying to the need for better research and education. But, if tourism is to live up to its expectations and avoid many pitfalls, these efforts must be multiplied many times throughout the country. Political leaders, industry leaders, and university leaders must be convinced that they are missing their greatest opportunities by giving so little support to better public service education for tourism, especially in the rural areas and small towns.

In my opinion, the greatest need in this country today is a joint public-private research and educational program at the state level. If the national and state policy of the Cooperative Extension Service can be amended to make tourism as important an objective as agriculture, this would be the logical agency to sponsor a new tourism educational thrust. This may require new legislation at both the federal and state levels.

If, on the other hand, tourism is given only token support, or, as has been done in the past, it is justified only as it relates to agriculture, it will never meet the need so vividly evident throughout the land. In this case, it may be necessary to create an entirely new agency to get the job done. Governments of other countries, notably Canada and Australia, have recognized the need and are providing staff support for tourism guidance at the local level.

Notice that I emphasize a joint public-private program. So far in this country the private sector has not yet gone beyond the stage of promotion. At both the state and national levels,
tourism organizations provide little or no support for educational programs. An outstanding exception is the scholarship program of the National Tour Foundation. Recently, at the annual conference of the Travel Industry Association of Manitoba, I learned that it was giving high priority to matters of the environment and human resources—a policy unheard of by the private sector in this country. Our own National Tourism Policy Act of 1981 recognizes the need for greater education in domestic tourism. However, thus far, congress has not been interested in supporting the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration very much beyond promotion overseas. Only recently was it given the charge to investigate the need for a national policy on rural tourism.

Again, I feel that the major challenges ahead, in order to plan for a better tourism future, include: greater community-wide integration, greater conservation and sustainable development, greater urban-rural collaboration, and the great need to overcome tourism illiteracy. These are the gleanings of one who has seen enough of the past in his lifetime to believe in people like yourselves to meet these challenges and to assure us a bright and productive future.