THE DISCOVERY OF TOURISM POTENTIAL

by Clare A. Gunn, Professor Emeritus
Texas A&M University

"The Great Plains Tourism Challenge Conference"
Kearney, Nebraska, October 17, 1991

I accepted the invitation to present this seminar so that I could learn more about tourism in the Great Plains. Thus far, my understanding has been limited to Roger Welsch's narratives on Kuralt's Sunday Morning show, material sent to me by Tom Doering of your state tourism office, stories of range ecology told me by my friend, the late Dr. E.J. Dyksterhuis and my barber whose ancestry begins in Saline county.

And so, for this presentation, I shall be limited to my observations and study of tourism, here and abroad, over the last four decades. I am confident you will see applications to your situation here in Nebraska. Let me focus on two main points—the most important challenges for tourism today: managing tourism as a system and discovering new opportunity.

MANAGING TOURISM AS A SYSTEM

Today, most tourism leaders and practitioners see tourism through very narrow perspectives. States, provinces, cities, and businesses view tourism primarily through promotion—that this is all that's needed to develop tourism. Businesses, highway departments, park departments and historic preservers see tourism at a site-only scale.

These dominant perspectives fail to see tourism as a whole—as an overall system. Just as the human body is a complex system, with all parts functioning in harmony, so is tourism a
complicated system, composed of many, many parts. When we view tourism in this manner, it does make planning and development more difficult. But, at the same time, it allows us to identify where it is functioning well and also where it might be breaking down.

Let me illustrate with an example. Not long ago I was part of a task force to study the present and future of tourism on the island of Moorea just off Tahiti. We were surprised to find that tourism was sick. Resort hotel occupancy was less than 50% and repeat business was less than 10%—not evidence of a healthy tourism operation. This was occurring in spite of magnificent mountain scenery, marvelous beaches, and relatively uncongested development. But, the disease was not due to lack of market interest or promotion. It was failing because of lack of planning and managing tourism as a system. The mountain scenery was being eroded, spoiling its beauty and damaging wildlife habitat. The sea was being polluted by septic tank seepage from the hotels. In spite of rare archeological sites and a rich Polynesian heritage, virtually nothing had been done to interpret these to visitors. Tourist movement was strangled by a high-priced, poor service monopoly.

In my travels I find this is not an isolated case. In most regions, tourism could be increased dramatically if everyone involved got together and examined how well the system is functioning.

WHERE SHOULD TOURISM BE DEVELOPED

My next point centers on a possible answer to the often-
asked question by chambers of commerce—do we have any tourism potential? We believe we now have some techniques that will help answer that question. In the last few years, I have worked with Price Waterhouse on several state tourism plans. These have given me an opportunity to apply a systematic approach to finding zones that have greatest potential for tourism development.

Perhaps, I can best illustrate this with an example of a study in South Carolina. Not only did we find areas of potential but also over 40 project ideas that when completed could dramatically increase tourism in the region. The following slides may offer ideas on how this might be effective in this region.

* Similar to other economic development, tourism depends on a balance between "demand" and "supply".

* The "supply side" is made up of five interdependent components: attractions, transportation, services, promotion, visitor information.

* Potential zones can be discovered by finding those areas where major development factors combine: natural and cultural resources, transportation, proximity to cities.

* A process of discovery uses five steps:

  1. Research of key factors
  2. Mapping factors (GIS computer)
  3. Weighting factors
  4. Aggregating factors—composite maps
  5. Interpreting destination zones.

* Study was made of six counties in northwestern South Carolina
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* Study was made of six counties in northwestern South Carolina.

* Two series of maps were overlaid to show composite maps where natural and cultural resource potential was strongest.

* (The next slides illustrate examples of our study of water resources, vegetation and wildlife, topographic
changes, developed natural resources, prehistoric sites, historic sites, industrial development, urban centers, and transportation.)

* Generalized maps of each of these factors were prepared.

* By computer GIS, the areas where all factors were strongest in support of natural-resource-based tourism were identified.

* These were then generalized into zones.

* Similarly, a cultural resource composite map was prepared.

* This was generalized into zones.

* The two composite maps, when combined, show greatest overall potential.

* Several implications must be emphasized:
  --this process demands new cooperation, collaboration
  --it is dynamic, requires regular updating
  --should be part of a larger plan
  --environmental protection must be considered
  --professional design is required.

* There are many opportunities for tourism to grow provided it is planned as a system and growth is encouraged only in areas with greatest potential.
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