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## Issues in Rural Community Tourism Development

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ISSUES IN RURAL COMMUNITY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Policy makers are turning to tourism as a potential industry force that may bring both economic and demographic stability to American rural communities. The systematic planning and appropriate utilization of community related physical, economic, and socio-cultural attributes is the key to the establishment of sustainable tourism. This paper focuses on several issues that are increasingly recognized as critical factors in the community system. Both quality of life and sense of place are emphasized. The paper concludes with broadly defined guidelines for future planning toward sustainable development.

## INTRODUCTION

"A nation which has existed only a few hundred years may not be expected to have too much in the way of foundations. We in America, however have built with amazing speed, and whatever stages in the process of development we have skipped in fact we have created in our imagination. A belief very dear to us is that there was once a time when a harmonious relationship was established between men and the work which they did, that honest enterprise, untainted by exploitation, was the keystone of American growth (8)."

## THE RURAL COMMUNITY SETTING

Rural American communities are usually associated with economic and demographic change and instability (3, 2, 27). Since change is endemic to these communities, assistance has been identified as a fundamental policy issue for the 1990's. In the 1970's the demographic trend indicated that rural populations were growing more rapidly than the urban populations overall (34). Due to a severe economic recession in the 1980's, the 1970's "turn around" trend has stopped, unfortunately, and there is evidence of a return to the previous pattern of significant rural to urban migration. The reasons given for this decline include increased foreign competition and weak world markets for primary rural products such as agriculture, forestry, and manufacturing (6, 34). In many rural communities today a disproportionate share of the U.S. population lives in poverty. Tickamger and Duncan (31) found that overall, rural communities lacked the employment stability, community investments, economic diversity and social institutions necessary for stability and growth. Thus, most of rural communities have turned to alternative businesses including tourism to revitalize and improve their economies.

## THE ECONOMICS OF TOURISM

The "National Policy Study on Rural Tourism and Small Business Development" (9) recognized tourism as a major segment of the national economy. The industry was ranked as the third largest in the U.S. In 1988, foreign and domestic travelers spent in excess of \$313 billion dollars for goods and services. Travel and tourism represented 6.5 percent of the GNP and contributed an estimated 36.6 billion dollars in federal, state and local taxes. Although tourism is recognized as a significant portion of the economy, the national policy study found that a comprehensive federal policy on rural tourism development was nonexistent. Economic development efforts for most states have not recognized the importance of small businesses and/or the tourism industry. States spend approximately 80 to 85 percent of their tourism related budgets on promotions and have allocated an extremely small amount of their resources toward assisting rural communities in the development of tourism related industries and amenities.

## THE COMPLEXITY OF RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Rural community development professionals are currently cognizant that rural revitalization depends on innovative diversification of community economies. To be successful, undeveloped and under utilized human, cultural, and natural resources must be identified and appropriately utilized. A tendency exists to define and simplify the tourism systems into rather large components such as attractions, promotion, infrastructure, hospitality, services and the associated management, market, and financial elements (32). Successful rural tourism destinations are more than these basic components, they represent distinctive sensitive environs consisting of interdependent cultural and environmental components that offer unique products that are non-urban in nature. Partial alleviation of the inherent demographic and economic instability normally associated with the rural setting will require a more in-depth planning approach than has previously occurred. Peter Murphy (21) suggested that a development philosophy based on an ecological system concept could enhance the physical, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of a community. In Murphys' work destination communities are recognized as unique zones in which tourists interact with biological (humanity, flora and fauna) and non living components (geological, historical, architectural, and energy production). The purpose of tourist interactions is to experience or consume a tourism product within the community. Interdependence, interaction, and symbiotic relationships are ever present within the rural destination community system. Community developers need to recognize that the rural community should be classified based on the diversity and scale of its resources, component durability, resource interaction and carrying capacity (Figure 1). Figure 1 represents a cross-section of the concerns rural tourism offices should consider before planning and implementing policies that will impact local residents. Rural communities, as with most systems, also have temporal and spatial qualities of significant importance that must be understood.

### PHYSICAL IMPLICATIONS

"But I must add that not only does humanity place its imprint on the natural world and transforms it. To use the language of hierarchy against itself: it is not only we who "tame" nature but also nature that "tames" us. Very specific forms of nature, that is to say, very specific ecosystems constitute the ground for very specific forms of society" (1).

Rural tourism development is occurring in a wide diversity of environmental settings including coastal communities, desert towns and alpine villages. All of these communities have atypical environments which require individualized planning approaches. The concept of carrying capacity "the maximum number of people who can use a site without an unacceptable alteration in the physical environment and without an unacceptable decline in the quality of experience gained by

visitors" (20) should be integrated into the development planning process. It has been generally thought that destinations have a life cycle and therefore naturally decline (4). Martin and Uysal (19) recognized that life cycle and carrying capacity are interrelated. They proposed that with proper assessment, planning and policy, tourist destination areas may delay indefinitely the decline of their tourism industry. Protection, conservation and enhancement of the physical environment are perhaps the key components of sustainable tourism development (25, 15, 17). Improperly managed tourism development can result in changes in both flora and fauna, loss of environmental resilience, pollution of air, water, soils, depletion of agricultural lands, and the inefficient use of scarce resources. Fortunately ecological research has made available common criteria for impact assessment components. Legal requirements exist for many aspects of development including air and water quality standards, public health, rare, threatened and endangered species, and protected areas or habitats. Aesthetic values have been established for landscape appeal, attractive communities, appealing species, species at higher trophic levels, air and water. Economic concerns have been investigated for species of habitats of recreational, tourism or commercial interests and ecosystem components. Criteria for identifying environmental values such as ecosystem rarity, sensitivity of species or ecosystems to stress, naturalness, recovery potential and "keystone" species have also been completed (23). These criteria can provide invaluable guidance for decision making in the planning process.

Awareness of the importance of environmental values and systems to the tourist is increasing among tourism development professionals. Ecotourism or nature based tourism, which is rural in its very essence, has become both the buzz word for the 1990's and a viable rural community tourism market segment (16, 5). Dixon and Sherman (7) in their work "Economics of Protected Areas: A New Look at Benefits and Costs" recognize that ecological based tourism produces many of the attributes associated with environmental stability such as watershed values and bio-diversity. The modern tourist in the rural setting has a renewed sensitivity to environmental quality that requires almost pristine environments; fortunately land-protection and management techniques that are applicable to small community settings have been extensively developed in the U.S. (30). Both regulatory and voluntary techniques now exist for property protection. Current regulatory tools offer a variety of approaches to ensuring environmental quality in rural areas. These tools include critical area zoning, cluster development, development guidance systems, performance systems, transfer of development rights and design guidelines. A diverse and innovative menu of voluntary techniques such as temporary binding agreements, acquisition of conservation easements, purchase of development rights and land trusts are beginning to be applied successfully throughout America.

#### ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

The implications of economic changes associated with rural community tourism development should never be underestimated for these changes are interrelated and interdependent with both the physical and

social-cultural components of the community. Fiscal costs of tourism cover a broad spectrum and include road construction and maintenance, recreation and park facilities, police and fire services, water supply and sewage, trash and litter disposal, health and sanitation, and public transportation (13). Unfortunately in many communities the linkage between tourism and infrastructure is not recognized by local officials (14). Tourism by its very nature draws outside capital into the local community that can lead to positive economic benefits which may be essential attributes for the survival of a rural community undergoing economic transition. These economic benefits include diversification of the local industry base, increased public and private employment, higher incomes, enlargement of tax base, and business revenue growth. Ryan (29) identifies six factors that have an effect on the magnitude of economic impact of tourism in a local area: level of development, nature of facilities, degree of outside ownership, employment of outside labor, the type of tourist and government support for infrastructure. Sustainable rural economies require a level of development that fits within the scale of the community resources. The nature of the tourism related facilities within the community must match the needs of the visitor. The degree of outside ownership and utilization of outside labor can lead to significant economic leakage to those outside areas. Optimal economic development requires innovative financial approaches that support and encourage local ownership of facilities and services. Cooperative efforts with local educational institutions can provide a more efficient utilization of the local work force and further reduce leakages. Unfavorable Federal policies in the 1980's have created some barriers to rural economic development, for example, programs for local infrastructure vital to tourism development such as water and waste management (10). Deregulation has also led to a reduction in rail, bus and truck services to small communities which impact tourism potential. These and other federal policy issues which are currently restricting rural tourism and related industry sectors of the economy need to be addressed.

#### SOCIAL-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

"Community a united body of individuals: as the people with common interests living in a particular area an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location ... a body of persons or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests." (33)

Community in its very nature is a social artifact which represents a body of individuals sharing common cultural values and tools. These cultural traits are represented in the art, language, cuisine, architecture, customs, and leisure activities of the area. The very way that the land is farmed and the surrounding landscape is modified is a cultural artifact. The unique cultural traits of a rural community create the special "sense of place" that is one of the primary travel experiences being sought by the rural tourist. Too often community tourism developers and planners neglect to include the "sense of place" component of communities in their development efforts. Renewed focus on the improvement of the quality of life of the individuals that constitute the

community in such a way that it ensures survival of local culture and its artifacts is imparitive for rural tourism. Inappropriate tourism development can destroy the very "sense of place" that made or may have made a rural community a successful tourism destination (28). More importantly, improper development can lead to the destruction of the social fabric of the community (12), the loss of property and life, increased crime, elevated cost of living, displacement of local citizens from their family property (26), and destruction of historical buildings and local customs (11). Conversely, tourism development can, if correctly planned and managed, provide the basis for the improvement of the "quality of life" related attributes such as health services, transportation facilities, educational opportunities, recreation amenities, historic preservation, and cultural celebrations that are desired by every community (18).

### CONCLUSIONS

Those involved in rural tourism development in the 1990's and on into the next century will increasingly be called upon to balance that fine line between profit motives and local quality of life issues. It is the authors contention that rural tourism developers need to "see" beyond the usual short term planning horizons and become aware of the long term economic potential that may be gained through a more judicious systematic utilization of cultural and natural community resources. Rural community tourism planners and developers need to seek:

1. a better integration of development and the physical/environmental factors in tourism planning,
2. an improved understanding of the importance of the social-cultural components of the community and sense of place in sustainable rural community tourism development,
3. increased community participation in the areas of planning, financing, and hospitality,
4. optimal community quality of life as the primary development goal.

It is essential to remember that: "We don't inherit our land from our parents, we borrow it from our children" (24) and that we are also the curators of our childrens' culture.

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**Major Component Areas  
of  
Rural Community Tourism Destinations**

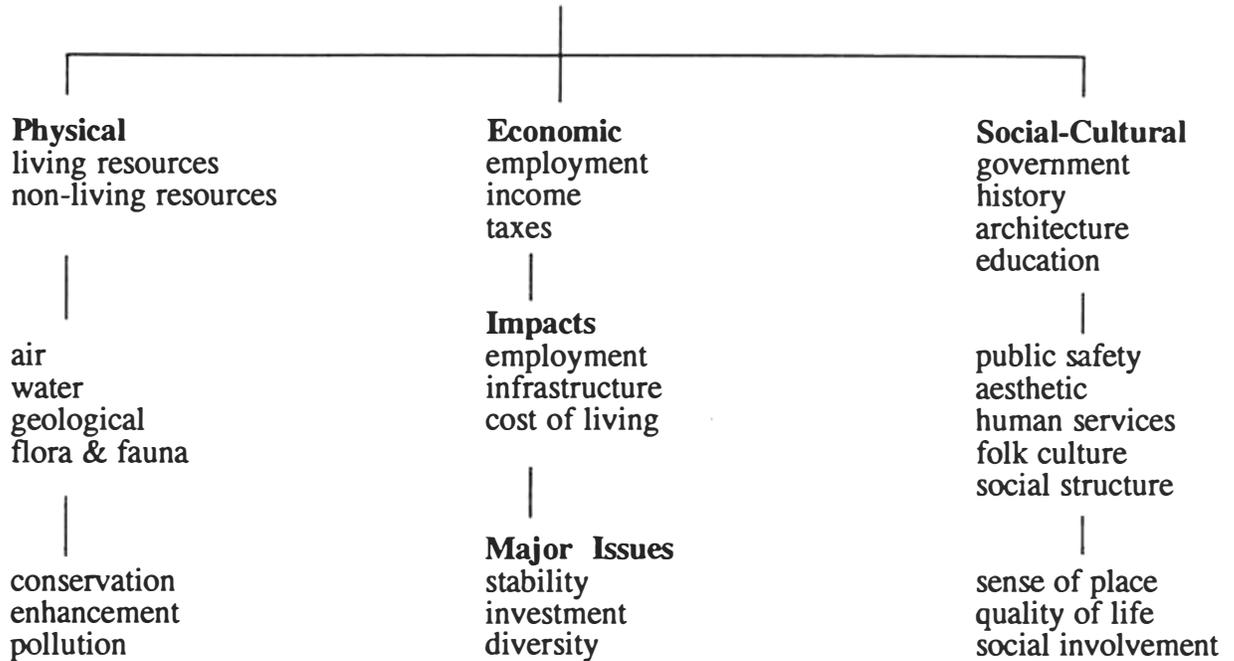


Figure 1. Component Areas of Rural Tourism Development

(Note: This is not all inclusive but is intended to serve as a frame work for discussion of some major emphasis areas for rural tourism development.)