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A STRATEGIC PLANNING APPROACH TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism planners have called for more consideration to be given to potential social and environmental costs associated with tourism development. This paper demonstrates a process of developing a tourism strategic plan with goals consistent with the limitations imposed by the social and environmental conditions of the destination area. It outlines the seven sequential steps of a rural tourism planning approach. A strategic planning process of inventorying attractions, competitive analysis, assimilating resident, business leader and natural resource advocate input, using a Delphi approach to work toward consensus, testing ideas with potential or existing tourists and monitoring quality of life and visitor satisfaction is summarized. Although most of the individual steps of this approach have been applied in different tourism planning settings, the full strategic planning approach where this information is integrated into an applied development plan has yet to be implemented.

INTRODUCTION

New strategies for economic development are increasingly needed to assist rural communities enhance or maintain their quality of life. Economic development in rural communities has often been capriciously planned and managed (28). As a result, these communities remain largely devalued with one or two natural resource based industries dominating the economic landscape. In the rural counties of Florida, the declining harvests of off-shore fisheries and timber production coupled with the Free-Trade Agreement with Mexico's impact on rural area's livestock and truck farms are expected to create greater instability in communities that currently
Tourism is one part of the service sector economy that is increasingly receiving attention as a tool for regional economic development (12, 22, 25, 42). Florida's 48 rural counties have not benefitted from the states' substantial growth in tourism activity during the last three decades. The majority of tourism development activity has primarily occurred along the state's beaches and areas surrounding Central Florida's major theme parks even though many rural communities contain natural assets that have significant tourism potential. For example, the northern one-third of the state contains the Suwannee River (made famous by composer Stephen C. Foster's song "Old Folks at Home" in the 1800's), nine of the nation's first magnitude springs, and miles of undeveloped coastline on the Gulf of Mexico. Tourism development activities have traditionally overlooked these assets because most are controlled and managed by various state and federal agencies. Cooperation between natural resource agencies and the business community has been limited. To date, there has been no consistent dialogue between those parties responsible for preserving and managing the state's natural heritage and those interested in improving the economic opportunities of these rural communities.

Researchers involved with rural tourism planning have called for more consideration to be given to potential social and environmental costs associated with tourism development (10, 33, 35). The lack of planning and management considerations given to the social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts of tourism can have severe consequences on the host communities (38, 40). In addition, small, closely knit communities feel that they lose control of their communities if they do not have some input to the development process (44).

There is a need to refine methods through which a potential rural tourism destination area can enhance its opportunities for attracting tourist patronage that are socially and environmentally acceptable to local residents (31). To date, there are a number of manuals available for planning, developing, supporting and marketing rural area attractions in a strategic fashion (1, 19, 43). In addition, there have been several attempts to initiate tourism development planning that is host sensitive (6, 12, 15) but additional refinement, especially to incorporate environmental protection is needed (23). In Florida and other states, Growth Management Regulations are compelling planners to consider environmental impacts and infrastructure needs before pursuing economic growth (11).

The purpose of this study is to articulate a method that can be used by rural communities to develop their tourism potential. More specifically, it demonstrates a process of developing a tourism strategic plan with goals consistent with the limitations imposed by the social and environmental conditions of the destination area. The approach developed from a partnership aimed at enhancing the quality of life potential of Florida's rural areas. The following section will outline the seven sequential steps of this rural tourism planning approach.
The strategic planning process outlined here combines three important but seldom combined data foci: resident's attitudes toward tourism, visitor satisfaction studies and levels of acceptable environmental impact per destination site. Resident's attitudes toward tourism studies (29, 33) identify specific tourist segments that residents view as most appropriate (i.e., less disruptive) to their social and ecological environment. Visitor satisfaction studies (9, 36, 39) identify problems and opportunities in service deliveries. Environmental impact assessments utilizing expert or regional advocate judgments (4, 7, 37) impart a degree of environmental protection into the process. Combined, these data illuminate the most appropriate target markets and provide the basis for evaluating the destination's ability to attract and retain these visitors. By design, elements of the process are less complicated and costly than previously utilized measures. This planning process should be within the abilities of rural community leaders who wish to develop tourism potential in a straightforward and sensitive manner. By incorporating this methodology into an on-going tracking system, a destination may be able to increase economic benefits derived from tourists while minimizing social and environmental costs.

Step 1: Inventorying and Competitive Analysis of the Rural Communities' Existing and Potential Tourist Attractions.

Tourism is activated by attractions (8, 14). Rural communities in the study region are assessed for their attraction potential. Historical, cultural and natural resource based attractions existing on private and public lands are identified. Inherent in the analysis is also an assessment of each attraction area's infrastructure, environmental restrictions and labor availability to determine all the potential barriers to recreation and tourism development. Next, a competitive analysis (3, 17) will follow for all attractions that prove developable in terms of the size or depth of their market potential. A competitive analysis looks at competing attractions and explores the viability of a new destination opening to serve the existing market. The results of this step will distinguish the more economically viable forms of future tourism development. It will be of little advantage for a community to develop its tourism potential towards markets that cannot be reached, attracted or maintained in sufficient numbers. In rural North Florida, information is currently being collected to ascertain the area's existing and potential tourist attractions.

Step 2: Measure Resident Attitudes Toward Tourism Development

The next step of the strategic planning process is a survey designed to understand resident's perceptions of existing and future tourism development. The most developable attraction areas (as identified in step 1) will be listed and residents' generic attitudes toward potential tourism development of these sites assessed. If several potential developments are possible, assessing attitudes toward each of these
should be included. Involving those residents who would experience the majority of negative impacts (e.g., congestion, noise, parking competition, etc.) of the attraction's development would provide a more conservative estimate of local support that government or business leaders could expect for tourism expansion.

Surveys can be patterned off of previous studies (5, 22, 33). The content of the survey will focus on beliefs, preferences and perceived benefits of the potential tourism development. Generally results will indicate a range of attitudes. Insights will be gained on the one community that is most open to and tolerant of development of their tourism potential. This one community will become the demonstration site for the tourism development pilot project. Input from this community's residents will continue to be solicited in the future stages of the planning process so that its tourism potential can be enhanced in a manner harmonious with residents' attitudes.

Step 3: Assemble Panels of Business Leaders, Environmental Advocates and Residents to Work Toward Consensus

Step three will identify local or regional representatives of the business community and natural resource managers or advocates and concerned residents who would be willing to participate in the planning process. One panel will include individuals from the lodging, food and beverage, and retail business sectors. A second panel consists of managers of local parks, wildlife sanctuaries, or fish and wildlife refuges. In addition, active participants in organizations such local Audubon Societies, Garden Clubs or other preservation groups will be sought. A third panel of residents identified as having strong concerns about the potential tourism development will also be asked to participate (18, 32).

Once these panels are formed (21), a Delphi process (13, 30) will be used to gain group consensus on the development options. Information from steps one and two will be summarized for each panel. Each option will be assessed by participants in terms of its potential economic, social and environmental impacts of various development options (i.e., tourism use types) and ranked by degree of preference. The Delphi process involves at least two rounds of individuals ranking and commenting on each tourism development option, including looking at rankings and comments of other panel members. Participants can compare their original listings with that of the aggregate of the other members of the group (i.e., business community, residents and natural resource managers). Such feedback allows participants to modify their opinion after reviewing the overall responses. The feedback loop is designed to move participants toward consensus.

Next, the Delphi process will be repeated among all members of the three panels combined. This more difficult stage will attempt to move all parties toward modifying their opinions after reviewing the responses of other concerned parties. These steps can be repeated as many times as practical to achieve consensus among participants. Absolute consensus is not expected. The final ranking can then be used to identify development options that would be reasonably acceptable to all parties concerned.
In practice, this step will be coordinated by the University of Florida's Cooperative Extension Services and the Florida Sea Grant College Program in identifying and involving community leaders, residents, natural resource managers and business persons of the community in the form of the project's advisory panels. The results will define the strategies needed to guide community leaders in incorporating appropriate tourism development into its long-term economic development plans.

Step 4: Measure Visitor Satisfaction with Current and Potential Attractions

Important information can be gained from focus groups (20, 41) that represent potential visitors in several target market areas. Current strengths and weaknesses of selected attractions, development and support businesses could be explored. This approach allows potential tourists to evaluate the proposed development through a series of artist renditions and willingness to pay questions.

Secondly, for communities with an existing tourist clientele, a visitor satisfaction tracking study (24) can be implemented in the community to monitor strengths and weaknesses of existing attractions or support businesses. Intercept techniques with on-site interviews or quick intercepts of non-resident visitors entering an attraction by capturing their address and following up with a mail survey can be used to collect information. The mail survey approach allows visitors to reflect on their entire visit to the community and perhaps, provide a more balanced and complete reaction to the development options.

Content areas to include in the survey are: additional destinations visited on this trip, types of travel information sources accessed in deciding to take the trip, and visitor profile information, etc. These data will provide insights into existing strengths and weaknesses of the existing tourism attractions and infrastructure. Another set of questions on the survey will likely be presented in an Importance-Performance format (16, 26). An Importance-Performance Analysis will identify how visitors, stratified by activity type, evaluate aspects of their visit. This analysis will indicate how each group rates their satisfaction of visitor opportunities with the importance they place on these opportunities. The results should reveal, in order of priority, visitor needs and concerns as well as highlights of the destination area, for incorporation into tourism development plans. The focusing of limited development resources where tourist segments have the greatest needs, will improve the destination's long term ability to attract and maintain preferred markets. The analysis will also reveal those segments of the visiting publics who are most fulfilled by existing opportunities.

Step 5: Recommendations

After the strengths and tourism development tolerance of the community are known, preferred tourist segments to be attracted are identified, acceptable environmental costs recognized, demand and competitive environments assessed, and potential and/or existing tourist input analyzed, a set of findings can integrate these factors to propose environmentally and socially preferred forms of tourism development from
the perspective of the host community and quality, attractive and needed destination sites from the visitor perspective. The results will be the basis for a mission statement and objectives. An implementation action plan to recommend adjustments or develop new facilities to improve the hospitality level for targeted markets will also be written. The regional tourism planning council and project leaders will facilitate this phase of the planning process.

Step 6: Implementation Phase

Extension and small business development leaders will work with community members interested in the business opportunities associated with the tourism development activities. Workshops in how to start or expand a business, counseling on sources of start up and expansion capital, financial accounting, and state regulatory licensing, etc. will be presented in the form of concise evening sessions in the community. This step is designed to enable local residents to seize upon the economic potential of the tourism development. Local and state government personnel will be counseled and assisted in applying for various foundation, state and federal grants to develop and acquire lands for public recreation opportunities. This step will involve the University of Florida's Cooperative Extension Services and the University of North Florida's Small Business Development Center.

Step 7: Evaluation

Procedures to monitor the quality of life in the host community brought about by the tourism development (2, 34) and the quality of the tourist experience for the visitor (27, 36) will be initiated. In the Florida case, a longitudinal study of the change in the quality of life of the community brought about by the tourism development activity will be instigated. Annual publications provide quantifiable measures of economic activity in each community in terms of the value of the (1) tourism and recreation sales; (2) agricultural harvest; (3) timber harvest; (4) commercial fisheries landings; and (5) manufacturing exports as well as numerous quality of life measures. It is assumed that changes in economic development activity will have both positive and negative impacts on a host community. Through this standardized assessment method, changes in each community's economic sectors and quality of life measures will be tracked.

Measurement of tourist satisfaction is essentially continuing the measurements initiated by Step 4 over time and monitoring changes as the tourism infrastructure, environmental and/or social conditions evolve due to development initiated changes or unplanned, natural changes.

CONCLUSION

A strategic planning process of inventorying attractions, competitive analysis, assimilating resident, business leader and natural resource advocate input, using a Delphi approach to work toward consensus, testing ideas with potential or existing tourists and monitoring quality of life and visitor satisfaction was summarized. Although most of the individual
steps of this approach have been applied in different tourism planning settings, the full strategic planning approach where this information is integrated into an applied development plan has yet to be implemented. The authors believe that each step is within the abilities of small town leaders, aided with the expertise of extension agents, university faculty or experienced residents who are interested in taking charge of the future of their community.

If existing rural assets can be marketed with the addition of new infrastructure development, a unifying theme or topical special event, and this information targeted to an identified tourist segment which has been chosen for its positive (and minimal negative) attributes, that is a formula for success. The strategic planning approach presented here should facilitate and generate conditions that will enhance rural tourism development success rates.

ENDNOTES

1. The process reported in this paper reflects a collaboration of the University of Florida's Center for Tourism Research and Development, University of Florida's Cooperative Extension Services, Florida Sea Grant College Program, North Central Florida Regional Planning Council, and the University of North Florida's Small Business Development Center. Step one has been initiated through a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce to assess the tourism potential for an 11 county region of north Florida. Steps two through seven await the results of additional grant applications before they can be initiated.

2. Questions such as: "I would prefer less tourism", "I would benefit from more tourism development" and "Tourism is good for our community" with a response scale of agreement – disagreement are useful for gauging community support. Open ended questions such as: "What is your primary concern about increasing tourism in our area?" will provide further insight on topics of concern.

3. Sources of quality of life data are found in the Florida Bureau of Economic Analysis's Florida County Comparisons, Clements Research Inc.'s Florida Facts, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis's Survey of Consumer Confidence. Five years of data (1986-91) will be used as base line information needed to mathematically model the economics of the targeted communities and note patterns of residents' quality of life. The same measures will be tracked annually through 1996.

REFERENCES


