

# Planning for Small Town Cultural Tourism

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## Introduction

Many small towns in Canada are suffering from serious economic problems. These communities have lost population, their tax base has been reduced, businesses have closed or moved away, the physical environment is deteriorating, the community's spirit is low, and the agricultural base is challenged by world markets and technology.

Smaller communities especially those located some distance from larger urban centres have seen tourism as a major opportunity for economic development. This reliance on tourism as a tool for development is based on some evidence from surveys of American tourism markets that small towns and their way of life are a major interest to visitors from the United States. But a great many communities have adopted tourism strategies without any proof that there are markets for what their towns have to offer.

Very often this reliance on tourism as a strategy for development is based on the natural and cultural heritage resources of the community. Frequently, communities, identify cultural resources that they feel make their locale special and unique. While this recognition of the potential of cultural resources as a means of job creation and economic development is encouraging, there are a number of potentially serious drawbacks to this reliance on cultural resources. The first relates to the lack of proper treatment of the cultural resources that are seen as tools for development as opposed to important cultural resources with a cultural and community value and significance. The second relates to a community's unrealistic expectations of the tourism potential of their cultural

resources. Finally, there are the negative social, economic, physical and cultural impacts on the resources and the host community. These impacts can include traffic congestion, higher prices for housing and other commodities, inappropriate development, changes in social values, and deterioration of the natural environment.

While preserving and presenting any historic resource is difficult, preserving heritage resources at the local level where economic development may be the primary objective provides the community and professionals with a special challenge. The community is faced with the normal constraints of economics as well as the need to develop strategies that will meet their tourism objectives. In a Viewpoint in *Preservation News* the task was described as

"The essence of heritage tourism lies in recognizing an area's unique qualities and making the best cultural and economic use of them."(1)

Cultural tourism in the context of the smaller community can be seen to have a number of the following dimensions: handicrafts, language, gastronomy, art and music, heritage resources, environment and technology, religion, education, and dress.

This paper will discuss the nature of small town cultural tourism and present a case study that illustrates this process.

## Small Town and Rural Cultural Tourism Planning Principles

It is now recognized that cultural tourism at the community level must adhere to a number of basic principles. A number of attempts have been made to

define these basic principles for sustainable and appropriate tourism development. ICOMOS's International Committee on Cultural Tourism has developed a Charter on Cultural Tourism that outlines an approach to tourism development. These principles are discussed by Claude Moulin in a recent article. (2)

The recent International Conference on Cultural Tourism "Universal Tourism: Enriching or Degrading Culture" held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia produced the Yogyakarta Declaration on National Cultures and Universal Tourism. The declaration contained a number of resolutions that stressed sustainability; protection of natural environments; the creation of harmony between the needs of the visitor, the place and the community; broad community support with a proper balance between economic, social, cultural and human objectives; and a recognition of the importance of the relationship of government, the host communities, and the tourism industry.

It is clear that community cultural tourism must meet a number of goals and objectives. The residents of the community must maintain control of tourism development by setting objectives, identifying the resources to be maintained and enhanced, and developing strategies for development and interpretation. As importantly, the residents must be responsible for the implementation of strategies as well as the operation of the tourism infrastructure.

The development must also provide quality jobs for residents. The provision of fulfilling jobs has to be seen as an integral part of any tourism development at the local level. Part of the process of ensuring quality employment is to ensure that the tourism infrastructure (hotels, restaurants, shops) is developed at the local level. The training of local residents and access to loans are central to this type of policy. All residents must have equitable access to the fruits of tourism development.

The development process must also ensure that heritage resources are maintained and enhanced using internationally acceptable criteria and standards. The Charter of Venice as well as other international charters should act as the basis for the development and presentation of heritage resources. The objective of community cultural tourism is to ensure that the experience provided to the tourists is an authentic one that accurately reflects the area's culture and does not attempt to present a false image of the community's culture.

Tourism development must also be sustainable and

"..... must be rooted in the reality of an environment, with all its natural, economic, and cultural characteristics."<sup>(3)</sup>

Robert McNulty has defined cultural tourism at the community level as the end process of making a community more liveable for the residents and then for the tourist. He does not see tourism as a goal in itself.<sup>(4)</sup>

#### **Small Town Cultural Tourism Planning**

If a community cultural tourism strategy is to adhere to the principles described above, the process which is used must be community based, allow for the participation of a range of interest groups and must include access to expert advice in heritage resource management and interpretation as well as tourism planning and development.

It is not possible to fully discuss the process that should be utilized in a community cultural tourism project. It must be recognized that the process involves a number of activities and must be comprehensive in nature if it is to succeed. The following activities must be considered:

- \* a basic inventory and assessment of the community's heritage resources,
- \* an assessment of what the residents feel are important in historical terms,
- \* an assessment of these resources from a tourism perspective using reliable information,

- \* a market analysis of the resources using local experts and educational institutions,
- \* the development of carrying capacities for the heritage resources and the community itself,
- \* the development of alternative options that should be assessed by all local interests,
- \* the creation of a tourism development plan,
- \* the development of the tourism product which will include the following:
  - training and education
  - interpretive planning and development
    - physical improvements (buildings and landscape)
    - building new facilities
    - the support of craft activities
  - \* the ongoing management of the cultural tourism resources.<sup>(5)</sup>

Several aspects of the process bear further exploration.

#### **Inventory and Evaluating Community Resources**

The inventory and analysis process should assess the full range of cultural tourism resources whether they be tangible or intangible. The inventory process must not concentrate only on the buildings of the community but must also stress the way of life and cultural traditions which are important ingredients in making a community unique. The process must be carried out by the local community looking at a range of factors:

- \* Historic Resources: sites, buildings, neighborhoods, districts, landscapes, parks, farms, ranches, barns.
- \* Ethnic Tangible and Intangible Features: features associated with ethnic, minority or religious groups including settlement patterns, languages, lifestyles, values, housing types, work patterns, education.
- \* Natural Features: dominant landforms, landforms, topography, vegetation, water.

#### **Determining Impacts on the Host Community**

There is growing sophistication in a number of areas in assessing impacts of proposed plans and policies. Too often tourism planning strategies are based on hope and false expectations as opposed to a reliable and technically sound evaluation of potential impacts. It is important to be in a position to determine whether a development will have the hoped-for benefits or will there be unintended consequences either on the local population or environment.

The information on tourism numbers must be reliable and based either on government figures or preferably on specially commissioned studies. There still is very little information on small town cultural tourism and one has to be skeptical about projections. It is often the case that in a small community the level of spending that actually stays in the community may be insignificant if the tourism infrastructure is inadequate or owned and operated by outside interests.

The benefits normally associated with community tourism development are:

- \* increased employment;
- \* additional income for individuals as well as local businesses;
- \* diversification of the income;
- \* improved tax base;
- \* more visibility for the community for other economic activities;
- \* preservation and enhancement of cultural resources;
- \* better use of municipal infrastructure and facilities;
- \* realising wider social and economic change.

The costs to the community can be:

- \* investment of public funds which often requires borrowing and servicing costs;
- \* increased servicing costs for police and fire, sewage treatment etc.;
- \* depletion of cultural resources if they are not properly managed;
- \* congestion and over use of community facilities;
- \* can arouse hostility of residents;
- \* brings about change in cultural values;
- \* can reinforce social discrepancies.

#### **Implementation**

Too often communities think of making change occur either through government actions or those made within the private economy. Given the nature of the problems facing smaller communities separate actions often will not succeed. New and innovative techniques have to be considered to implement a tourism strategy. These actions must include partnerships, trusts, co-operatives, development corporations and community councils. Many of these techniques have worked in a wide range of rural economic development initiatives.

#### **Creating an Ecomuseum in the Crowsnest Pass: A Case Study**

The area of the Crowsnest Pass, approximately 27.2 kilometres long, is located in south western Alberta. Extending from Lundbreck, Alberta in the east and crossing the border to Elko, B.C. in the west, the Pass lies 269

kilometres south west of Calgary and 125 kilometres due West of Lethbridge. It is surrounded by several tourist attractions such as Banff and Waterton National Parks and Kananaskis Country. The Pass faces a number of serious problems: a declining economy due to the collapse of coal mining, its only major industry; the decreased commercial viability of its commercial base; and a deteriorating physical fabric. However, the Pass has a number of historic resources that have survived from the coal mining era of the early 1900s and provide an opportunity for significant cultural tourism development.

The arrival of the railway in 1898 was one of the most significant events in the history of the Pass since it made possible viable coal mining activity. While ten communities developed over a distance of 14 miles, only five have survived, Coleman, Blairmore, Hillcrest, Frank and Bellevue. The economy of the Pass has undoubtedly reflected the state of the coal industry in North America and its fluctuations over the course of time. Economic trends, world wars and unpredictable demand for coal have long affected the lifestyles of the people living in the Pass. The collapse of the coal industry began in 1950, once oil and gas replaced coal. The final and most recent blow to the last of the operating mines on the Alberta side of the Pass occurred in 1983, when Japan announced major cuts in its imports of coal from Canada. At present there are no coal industries operating on the Alberta side of the Pass and the probability of their operation in the near future seem rather bleak. The five surviving communities in the Pass were amalgamated in 1979 to form one single municipality, the Crowsnest Pass. The present population of the Pass is 7,577.

The poor economic conditions and the decline in population have adversely affected both the commercial viability and the physical environment of the Pass. Due to the poor economic conditions, merchants have had little surplus to invert in the improvement of their buildings.

This, in fact, has proved to be a positive factor, since many of the boom town facades of the early 1900's escaped the modern facelifts popular in the 1950's and 1960's. Unlike the main streets in many other small towns and centres, which have experienced economic prosperity, the buildings on the main streets in communities of the Pass have undergone minimal changes in their architectural character. In addition to a number of main streets with their historic buildings, the mine structures located in each of the communities in the Pass offer a significant potential for the interpretation of the processing and production of coal.

The residential developments which once housed the various ethnic communities help to enrich both the historical and cultural significance of the Pass. The style of settlement of the communities in the Crownsnest Pass, during the early 1900's, is still evident, particularly in the distinctive residential ethnic pockets that dominate the overall site development of Coleman.

Several important events are associated with the history of the Pass, particularly tragedies such as landslides and mine explosions. Among the most significant are the Frank Slide (1903) and the Hillcrest Mine disaster (1914). The former is presently the site of a major interpretive centre operated by Alberta Culture, attracting record numbers of tourists over the summer months.

Apart from its unique historic resources and the associated significant events, the Pass is endowed with an undamaged and unique natural setting. Cross-country ski-hills, fishing lakes and hiking trails offer the outdoor enthusiasts a valuable amenity.

Studies conducted for the Department of Tourism and Small Industry and Alberta Culture suggested that given the existing problems and potentials in the Pass, the most feasible direction for the community's declining economy was to promote tourism as a stabilizing element.

Apart from complimenting the existing variety of tourism potentials that the Pass possesses, the plans followed the global trend towards the growing importance of the cultural tourism industry. The Alberta Culture study also suggested that given the historic resources of the Pass, the ecomuseum concept of heritage preservation and conservation would be an important tool to employ in the Corwnsnest Pass. In the summer of 1986, Alberta Culture hired the author to further explore the feasibility of an ecomuseum and make recommendations for a development plan.

#### **The Ecomuseum Concept**

The concept of an ecomuseum was adopted given its comprehensive nature and the level of success the ecomuseum concept has had in similar situations. A development strategy using the ecomuseum approach in the Pass, was prepared with the residents and allowed the community to protect its past, rehabilitate and interpret historic resources and improve their economic and community situation. The creation of an ecomuseum required the co-operation of a great many people from the Pass as well as from the public and private sectors. It was seen as a community enterprise with multi-dimensional concerns. The Corwnsnest Pass Ecomuseum makes use of a number of techniques which will address the following objectives: cultural development, economic development, interpretation/education, an increase/improvement of the amenities in the Pass and community development.

#### **Developing the Strategy**

In developing the ecomuseum in the Pass, a number of techniques and approaches were employed; industrial archaeology, Main Street Program initiatives and the concept of historic districts. These approaches employ various methods of preservation such as the rehabilitation of historic resources, public improvements, marketing the promotion strategies, events and festival planning, business recruitment,

hospitality training and the improvement of visitor services (eating, accommodation and shopping).

The development plan suggested various themes that could be illustrated using a number of techniques in order to make the interpretation process as accurate and interactive as possible. Interpretation through the Pass could be conducted in the form of an interpretive sequence, commencing at the Museum/Interpretive Centre in each of the three communities, followed by a tour through the commercial, industrial and residential areas. The natural amenities of the Pass would be utilised to compliment the development of the historic resources. Cross-country skiing, camping, fishing, and hiking facilities should be enhanced to offer the tourist a complete set of activities.

The proposed interpretive centres in each of the towns should be housed in strategically located building of architectural, community and historical merit. The interpretive centres would serve the purpose of orienting the tourists and providing them with an introduction of the theme to be depicted in the particular town. Interpretive centres and the museums should employ modern display techniques, inviting the audience to actively participate in the interpretation process wherever possible. The commercial environments of the main streets in each of the towns in the Pass could be interpreted through the rehabilitation of facades and the use of interpretive displays in key stores. As the economy improves, retail operations could fill the vacant stores.

The above-grade mine structures including the power house, workshop, change rooms etc., were to be rehabilitated to allow the visitors to tour through mine sites in order to interpret the actual production of coal. With the provision of adequate safety measures, the tours could be maintained even if the mines reopen. A mine has been restored as was suggested in the original plans and is accepting visitors.

The development strategy which is briefly outlined above has a number of specific initiatives. It is important that implementation of the plan not be seen as only a physical exercise in rehabilitation but rather a community development activity.

In order to ensure a high quality of development, it was proposed a set of guidelines should be established and enforced to carry out improvements on the main streets and historic districts. Although no attempt should be made to freeze the environment to any particular time period in history, the owners should be encouraged to take the building back to their original appearance as far as possible.

The training and the personal development of local residents was seen as an important objective of the strategy. If public and private investments were to have a long lasting impact, then the residents of the Pass would have to be in a position to assume the new jobs that would be created. The policy must be always to hire people locally even if the implication of this policy is a longer start up time for a program and possibly less efficiency early on in the life of the ecomuseum.

Marketing and programming is seen to be an important part of the activities necessary to attract visitors, have them return and ensure that they stay at least overnight. There are therefore, two sets of tasks that must be carried out: marketing and events planning. Events planning will have to take into account seasonal variations, the resident, the short and longer term visitor. Events could include area-wide festivals such as miners' days and Pass Games and would be seen as major attractions. Plays, cultural performances, band concerts and other mini events would serve to entertain the visitors while they are in the Pass.

All visitor services (motels, restaurants, public toilets, parking, etc.) must be upgraded and constantly monitored. It was seen that the tourist experience will in part be determined

by the quality of these services and along with promotion this will be a significant ingredient in ensuring success. This is clearly the responsibility of everyone in the community.

The Ecomuseum is administered by a Trust with a full-time director funded. The Trust is administered by a Board made up of residents of the municipality. The trust is based on the model used at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust in the British Midlands. The Trust will continue to evolve and will hopefully play an important leadership role in the Pass.

Funding for the projects and operation of the Trust have been and will be obtained from a number of sources: provincial grants and employee secondments; federal and provincial work programs; a loan pool; income from Trust activities etc. Budget projections to accomplish all the plans range from \$ 16 million to \$ 30 million of public and private sector investment and work programs. Initial grantsmanship results are encouraging. It is anticipated that the phasing of the improvements will take over ten to fifteen years in order to allow for maximum community development.

The Ecomuseum in the Crowsnest Pass is a reality and is supported at all Government levels. Improvements are already in place and with sufficient funding and community support, the historic resources of the Pass should help the area achieve a better quality of life.

### Conclusion

The object of cultural tourism in small towns requiring economic development must "an overall improvement in the economic and social well-being of rural residents and the institutional and physical environment in which they live." (6) In addition cultural tourism development must be carried out in the context of a number of other types of economic development activity. Within the context of tourism development the community must emphasize other tourism products that emphasize natural and craft resources, water and land based leisure activities, farm holidays etc.

The challenge of the process is a significant one requiring a number of at times conflicting objectives.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Preservation News*, November 1991.
- <sup>2</sup> "Cultural Heritage and Tourism Evolution," Claude Moulin, *Historic Environments* VII 3 & 4 (1990).
- <sup>3</sup> Jim Molnar, "The Greening of Washington State Tourism," Newsletter of the Ecotourism Society.
- <sup>4</sup> Remarks at a Symposium on Cultural Tourism held at the University of Calgary in March, 1989.
- <sup>5</sup> This process has been developed with the assistance of a presentation by Kenneth Chamberlain at the International Conference on Cultural Tourism "Universal Culture" held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
- <sup>6</sup> I. Hodge, "The scope and context of rural Development." *European Review of Agricultural Economics*, 13 1986.