SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Robert E. Manning
University of Vermont

The tides of student interest ebb and flow across the college campuses of America. In the park and recreation departments of the nation, the current trend is clearly toward "tourism." Students once devoted to wilderness and careers in national and state parks now want to get rich. And they look to those of us on the faculty to teach them how. (Perhaps this is the ultimate test of that cynical adage "those who can't, teach.")

But incorporating tourism into parks and recreation has been challenging. This is particularly true for those of us who consider ourselves part of the conservation community. There is a long and glorious association, of course, between parks and recreation and conservation. Indeed, our greatest park and outdoor recreation systems - the national and state parks and the national forests - were born out of the intellectual revolution we now proudly call the Conservation Movement. Conservation focused on wise use of resources and this meant taking a longer term planning and management horizon, placing limits on the free market economy and doing more in the public sector to ensure socially equitable allocation of resources. This conservation heritage is still manifested in the fact that a number of park and recreation departments (including mine) are administratively housed in schools of natural resources, forestry and the like.

So how can tourism be part of parks and recreation? Isn't tourism focused on economic development? Isn't tourism primarily a private sector or business matter? Indeed, isn't rampant and insensitive tourist development, such as that which occurred at Niagara Falls in the early 19th century, one of the problems which led to the Conservation Movement?

Despite such misgivings I decided a few years ago to try my hand at tourism. Because of student interest I would develop and teach a course in tourism within my parks and recreation program. But what course would (could) I teach? To answer this question, I decided to explore the literature on tourism to learn more about it and to search for ways in which I might be able to contribute. In other words, what were the linkages between tourism and parks, recreation and conservation? I believe my search was successful. I have taught my course - which I call "Sustainable Tourism" - for several years and I must admit I've enjoyed it more than I anticipated. I believe the course contributes to the professional education of students who are seeking a career in tourism and, equally important to me, it "fits" within the park and recreation - and by
extension, conservation -- community. Let me explain by reviewing some of the things I learned about tourism.

First, I found what most people who read this paper already know: tourism tends to be controversial. Many people feel strongly about tourism, but they feel strongly in different ways. One popular book of the 1970's titled The Golden Horde, labels tourists as "the barbarians of our Age of Leisure," and suggests that tourism works "like King Midas in reverse; a device for the systematic destruction of everything that is beautiful in the world." Equally simplistic and naive are views on the other extreme. A prominent U.S. Congressman once testified before Congress that:

The fastest growing industry in America is tourism... These people come to your community. They help make it green. They just leave dollars behind. You do not have to build schools. There are not any smokestacks, none of the things that cause problems for a community. They just come and leave their money and depart, and have a good time while they are there.

Controversy over tourism is not a recent phenomenon. Earlier I noted the issue of Niagara Falls. Even in my home state of Vermont, debate over tourism goes back well over a hundred years. Vermont, in the late 1800's, was the first in the nation to create a state tourist publicity service. The first publication of those tourism proponents was a booklet ambitiously titled "Vermont, Designed by the Creator for the Playground of the Continent." But even then there was some disenchantment with tourism among Vermonters. Mathew H. Buckham, President of the University of Vermont, wrote in 1867 that when tourists:

...come with their long baggage trains and take possession of a country village ... importing into industrious communities [the habit of] doing nothing and doing it elegantly, they ... demoralize the whole tone of society, [and] convert respectable villages into the likenesses of suburban Connecticut or New Jersey.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The second conclusion I reached is that tourism is diverse. In fact, it is extraordinarily diverse. Certainly, people travel for a variety of motivations: some for educational purposes, some to improve their health, some for religious or spiritual reasons, many for business purposes, many to experience different environments and cultures, and increasingly many for recreation. Indeed, tourism industry people now speak of the familiar four "s" of much contemporary tourism: sun, sea, sand, and sex. Others have suggested that tourists differ in their desire for "authenticity." There seems to be a certain tension between our desire to truly experience other environments and our desire to cling to the safety and comfort of our own familiar surroundings. Daniel
Boorstin, in his classic essay "From Traveler to Tourist," laments the fact that contemporary tourism has become "diluted, contrived, prefabricated," and that many tourists are too easily satisfied with more "pseudo-events." Travel has become, for most, according to Boorstin, a "spectator sport." Dean MacCannell, on the other hand, argues in his book, The Tourist, that many tourists seek meaningful, authentic experiences. They wish to truly see, even participate, in the essence of other places and cultures. Tourists, then according to MacCannell, are modern-day pilgrims in search of meaning. As is the case with most extreme positions, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle: tourists fall all along the spectrum defined by Boorstin and MacCannell.

On more familiar ground, tourists also vary by the amount of money they spend. Some spend freely while others are tight. Regarding the latter, I'm reminded of the Vermont businessman who complained of the stereotypical low-spending tourist who "arrives with a clean shirt and a $20 bill and changes neither." Finally, tourists vary by their relative numbers. Some areas, because of location, cost, capacity, fashion or other reason draw relatively few visitors. Other places are subject to mass or charter tourism drawing tourists who vastly outnumber residents.

That brings me to my third conclusion: tourism is dynamic. Just as tourists differ so does the tourist industry which caters to them. In fact, the tourist industry is often seen to evolve in a series of stages from "discovery" through "growth," to "maturity" and, often, on to a later period of "decline" and, possibly, "rejuvenation." The discovery stage of tourism is characterized by a few "adventurous" tourists who discover an "unspoiled" area which has not previously catered to tourism. Visitors are few as are facilities and services, most of which are owned directly by residents. Contact between hosts and guests is direct, extensive, and rewarding to both. Tourism in this stage provides a marginal, but welcome source of income to some residents. The discovery stage of development is followed by a period of growth in both demand and supply. Tourist facilities and services remain largely in the hands of residents, though they begin to adapt to "standards of quality" more generally demanded by visitors. Host-guest contact remains direct, but becomes more oriented to monetary transactions. Some residents shift out of traditional occupations, earning their livelihood entirely from tourism and, thereby, increasing their material standard of living. If tourism development continues, it may reach a stage of maturity. In this stage large numbers of tourists are present, often outnumbering residents. Tourist facilities and services become institutionalized or standardized for the sake of efficiency and to meet the needs of less "adventurous" visitors. Because of the capital investment and technical expertise needed for this type and level of development, outside interests in the form of national or international corporations exercise increasing ownership and control within the area. Contact between hosts and guests is conducted almost entirely on a "service-for-pay" basis. Tourism development may evolve eventually to a stage of decline where both visitors and residents become disenchanted. Crowding and overdevelopment may abuse the distinctive features or values of an area which originally attracted tourists. Residents may also resent these impacts, the demands made upon them by visitors, and the feeling of loss of control over their communities. A later development stage of rejuvenation is possible, though it is usually based on contrived or artificial attractions such as gambling.
It is important to note that this pattern of development is not necessarily fixed, and that self-determination can be exercised over this cycle. Nevertheless, there is much evidence to suggest that tourism development often conforms to the classic S-shaped curve characteristic of the traditional product life cycle. Acapulco, Mexico, Honolulu, Hawaii, and Atlantic City, New Jersey seem to offer outstanding case studies of this cycle.

My fourth conclusion was that tourism has multiple effects. Tourism can have both positive and negative effects and these effects can be registered on an area’s economy, its environment and its social and cultural systems. Before I describe these effects in a little more detail, I should make one important caveat. tourism had none of these effects necessarily or inherently. Remember – tourism is diverse and dynamic. The effects of tourism will depend very much upon the type and level of tourism in question.

For the sake of efficiency, I’m going to focus on a few of what I think are the most important potential effects of tourism – effects that have been found in a number of studies. Let’s look first at economic effects.

1. Tourism can have important economic benefits including income and employment opportunities and tax revenues. I’m not going to cite specific figures because they are quickly outdated and fraught with methodological difficulties. However, it is difficult to conclude anything other than tourism is an important (and increasingly important) component of the national and global economy. Tourism has also been shown to be a labor intensive industry and to be an efficient government investment.

2. The income multiplier effect of tourism is often relatively low. The multiplier effect of tourism refers to the degree to which money spent by tourists remains in the local area. The higher the multiplier, the greater the economic benefit of tourism to local residents. Early feasibility studies of tourism estimated tourist income multipliers of 2.3 to 4.3. More recent studies have found these figures to be vastly overestimated. I found tourism multipliers in the literature for 25 areas and they ranged from a high of about 1.9 to a low of .33. The vast majority were under 1.0. These low multipliers are due to chronic leakages in rural economies. Many goods and services are imported and profits from businesses which are not locally owned are sometimes not retained in the local area. Generating economic impact in rural tourist economies is much like trying to fill a bathtub with the plug out.

3. Employment opportunities created through tourism are often characterized by relatively low pay and a seasonal nature.
4. Tourism can cause abnormally high inflation in consumer goods and land prices. This can be a particular problem where tourists have substantially higher incomes than residents. It can also impact traditional economic sectors such as agriculture.

5. The long term prospects for tourism are generally good. Though tourism can be affected by outside forces beyond the control of local areas, the basic, causative factors of tourism are continuing to rise, even in times of general recession.

6. Analysis of the economic effects of tourism must go beyond total economic impact and consider the distribution of benefits and costs. Clearly, tourism has important economic benefits. But it also has potential costs as I will describe below. These benefits and costs should be distributed equitably throughout the population.

Let's turn now to environmental effects.

1. Tourism can serve as an important rationale for conservation. Tourism often relies on "unspoiled" natural and cultural environments as basic attractions. Tourism can provide a vital economic justification for maintaining the character and integrity of these environments. In many instances, the highest economic return from these resources is through their conservation as tourist attractions rather than development for commodity production. The parks and wildlife refuges of Africa are a classic example of this relationship.

2. Paradoxically, tourism development itself can cause environmental impacts. The old adage of tourism being an "industry without smokestacks" is naive and outdated. Many studies have observed that tourism development can and does impact the environment in a variety of ways including damage to fragile soils and vegetation, water pollution and depletion of ground water, disturbance of wildlife, littering, and damage to historical and cultural artifacts. In fact, some people have blamed tourism for nearly everything perhaps even including the demise of mountain goats in Austria who leap to their deaths in mass suicide as a consequence of tourists' bad attempts at yodelling!

While these environmental impacts of tourism are important, there is another more subtle, but more insidious and
pervasive impact. Tourism development can introduce incremental changes to the environment and landscape which, over time, alter the basic character, integrity or uniqueness of an area. Early in this paper, I discussed motivations for tourism. In the most fundamental sense, it is the distinctiveness of places -- a sense of place -- that is the driving force of tourism; tourists travel to experience something different than where they live. When tourism development is of a scale, style, or location that is not in keeping with an area's sense of place, that sense of place is diminished. And so in the long run, is that area's attractiveness for tourism. John Steinbeck knew this when he wrote "You can travel all across America and never see it." So did Gertrude Stein when she wrote that, "all too often, "When you get there, there is no there there." In this tragic sense, tourism can carry the seeds of its own destruction. If poorly conceived and executed, tourism can be a force to homogenize the world diminishing its inherent diversity and interest.

3. Environmental impacts tend to increase as an area progresses through the stages of tourism development. Though this relationship is not necessarily fixed, the bulk of the evidence suggests that as the scale of tourism development grows, so do the number of tourists attracted and the amount and type of associated development. Moreover, as mature or mass tourism tends toward more "standardized" styles for purposes of efficiency, incompatible or inappropriate designs and technologies may be introduced, further diminishing sense of place.

4. Tourism environments can be renewable resources if planned and managed properly. By maintaining an area's inherent uniqueness and attractiveness -- its sense of place -- an area can maintain its tourist appeal in the long run. However, the decline stage of the tourism development cycle implies that once sense of place is substantially diminished or gone, tourists move on to new "unspoiled" areas. Once sense of place is altered, it may be lost permanently. Isn't it ironic that the worst thing tourists can say about an area is that it's "too touristy."

Finally, let's turn to social and cultural effects.

1. Tourism can serve as an important rationale for conservation of cultural resources. Just as with natural
resources, tourism can help maintain and rejuvenate cultural heritage by emphasizing and preserving these resources as tourist attractions.

2. Paradoxically, tourism development can distort cultural patterns. There is often a temptation—particularly under conditions of high demand—to change elements of culture to make them more attractive to tourists or so they can be more readily "consumed" by tourists. Sacred dances of Balinese natives once reserved to welcome high priests are now performed on demand for tourists. American Indian culture is inaccurately glorified and embellished to increase its tourist appeal. Amish culture is reduced to caricatures to simplify complexities which may not appeal to the average tourist. Spanish villages introduce flamenco-style dancing and bull fighting even though neither are indigenous to that region of Spain. In Tunisia the demand to see a local wedding has outstripped supply, so mock ceremonies are staged for the unsuspecting. A hotel in Fiji has hired a consultant to teach Fijians how to act more like Fijians as suggested in travel brochures. These distortions present inaccurate images—often only stereotypes—to tourists and diminish the inherent significance of cultural heritage to native people.

3. Tourism can be a constructive use of leisure time. Travel and tourism have the potential to fulfill many basic human motivations. To the extent these motivations are fulfilled, tourism is a useful and productive social phenomenon.

4. Tourism may lead to enhanced intercultural understanding. As people travel, they may learn more about other cultures and may become more tolerant. Mark Twain wrote in his first book, The Innocents Abroad, that travel is "fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrowmindedness." I must add, though, that these benefits have been difficult to verify empirically.

5. Tourism may cause feelings of resentment among local residents. Resentment may be based on tourist behavior that is perceived by residents as frivolous, indulgent and, sometimes, even bizarre. In some poorer areas of the world, tourists may spend more money in a week than residents earn in a year. Resentment can occur even when there are not large differences in income. The British have complained for years that American tourists are "over rich, over sexed, and over here." Resentment can also be based on congestion, crime, feelings of loss of control over one's...
community and other social problems which research indicates are sometimes associated with tourism. In the extreme, resentment can boil over into conflict. In an heroic euphemism, one writer on tourism suggests that locals can sometimes even demonstrate "aggressive dissatisfaction." A recent tragic example are 22 foreign tourists murdered on a Caribbean resort island.

From this brief review of tourism, it is clear that tourism is complex. The literature suggests that tourism is controversial, diverse, dynamic and has multiple effects. Out of this complexity come both an opportunity and a caution. The opportunity is that tourism is a powerful force which can be made to serve many desirable ends. The caution is that these ends are not necessarily achieved spontaneously, at least not in the long run. Tourism can serve the needs of society, but it must be thoughtfully conceived.

In thinking about this complexity of tourism, I am convinced that there is a place for tourism in parks and recreation and the conservation community at large. In fact, I think the relationship can be mutually beneficial. My conception of this relationship is what I call "sustainable tourism." Sustainable tourism draws on the traditions of both tourism and parks and recreation. It recognizes and builds upon the emerging linkages between economic development, environmental protection, and social welfare.

Tourism is clearly an important means of economic development. However, it cannot be successful in the long run if it does not build in adequate protection of the natural and cultural resources upon which it ultimately depends. Concepts such as renewable resources, carrying capacity, limits of acceptable change, and the recreation opportunity spectrum have long traditions in parks and recreation. These concepts have potentially important applications to tourism development. We must work to transfer these conceptual frameworks from parks and recreation to tourism. We must educate tourism leaders that maintaining sense of place is in their own long run interests, as well as the interest of society at large.

While these concepts of conservation must be applied to tourism, it is also important to recognize that tourism can provide a vital economic rationale for the protection -- conservation -- of parks and outdoor recreation resources. It is important to understand that conservation can "pay" and tourism helps conservation pay when it comes to park and recreation resources. In the parks and recreation field we have been slow to give explicit attention to the economic implications of our profession. Parks and outdoor recreation resources are an important component of the economies of many communities. Tourism can help us better understand and appreciate the economic business and private sector aspects of our profession.

Finally, sustainable tourism must be built upon a foundation of concern for social welfare and equity. Review of the tourism literature suggests that tourism has both benefits and costs associated with it. Sustainable tourism must work toward maximizing
benefits and minimizing costs. It must also ensure that benefits and costs are distributed equitably throughout society. Only in this way can tourism be truly sustainable in the long run.

A blending of tourism and parks and recreation into the notion of sustainable tourism seems to make sense. It draws on the strengths of both fields of study -- the private sector orientation of tourism and the public sector orientation of parks and recreation -- to create a concept which serves the needs of society now and in the long run. It also recognizes the inherent interrelationships between these fields. After all, park visitors and outdoor recreation participants are, like it or not, subsets of tourists and parks and outdoor recreation opportunities are substantial generators of tourism activity. Moreover, tourism can and should be a wise use of natural and cultural resources.

In my course we discuss these matters and debate planning and management strategies designed to operationalize the concept of sustainable tourism. In doing so we attempt to create opportunities for economic development through tourism while at the same time conserving natural and cultural resources for the long term benefit of society at large. In this way I welcome tourism into the field of parks and recreation and the conservation community at large.