2021 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title of the Story: The Price of Popularity-Sustaining Natural Resources in a Sensitive Environment

Destination Name: Transylvania County and Brevard, North Carolina,
Country: USA
Submitter name: LEE MCMINN
Email address: Leemcminn@comporium.net
Position: Transylvania Always Committee Member

Nomination Category:

☐ Localizing the destination supply chain
☐ Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
☐ Culture & Communities
☐ Environment & Climate
☒ Nature & Ecotourism
☐ Tourism Reset & Recovery
☐ Other
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**Issues faced**

Transylvania County was discovered as a tourist destination at the turn of the last century but tourism as a sector of our economy has really ignited since 2000. Our two state forests, our state park, two national forests, and the Blue Ridge Parkway which describes the northwest county line have set attendance records nearly every year since. The resulting impact of tourism on our natural resources has gone up correspondingly to the level where the terms “overuse” and “loved to death” were creeping more frequently into conversations related to the enjoyment of our natural resources. Our forest trails have become rutted and overcrowded. Complaints from hikers, bicyclists, and horse riders regarding dangerous confrontations and failures to yield were occurring almost daily during heavy use seasons. Tourists were ignoring warning signs around natural hazards, were being swept over the tops of waterfalls, and were causing other preventable and sometimes fatal mishaps at the rate of several each year. It was obvious that overuse, ignorance of appropriate conduct while in the wilderness, disregard of safety protocols like trail etiquette, and the seriousness of hazard warnings were trending in undesirable directions. The French Broad River, our local Blue Way, originates in the County and is subjected during heavy rain events to blockages that present hazards to river paddlers and fishermen and its access points are limited in numbers and adequacy.

**Methods, steps and tools applied**

Faced with rising visitor and resident complaints and their possible negative effects on tourism as a vital contributor to the local economy, Transylvania County Tourism created a subcommittee, Transylvania Always (TA), with the mission of working to support our natural environment by addressing such issues as sustainability and safety. TA began its work by offering grants to environmental agencies such as the Pisgah Conservancy and the French Broad River Stewards to begin the process of repairing or rerouting trails around the most damaged areas and improving river safety, expanding access to the river, and enhancing the attractiveness of access points. TA brought different interest groups together to facilitate coordination of sustainability efforts regarding our natural resources including the French Broad River, the third oldest river in the world. TA partnered with public land managers and their various “Friends of…” groups (volunteer organizations created to assist public land supervisors) to increase the level of tourism planning in the management of public lands and to assist in sustainability planning of tourism-related activities. The goal of this collaboration was to achieve and maintain a sustainable natural environment for the enjoyment of all users. For the river, a broad study was completed three years ago but specific plans were needed to implement corrective and enhancement efforts. A partnership was joined with an environmental non-profit, Conserving Carolina, to create such a document and collaboration with County and City of Brevard governing bodies was begun. A public relations firm, Market Connections, was engaged to develop marketing campaigns around the issues of waterfall hazards, trail etiquette, overuse, and litter in public lands. Communication was established with local conservation groups and natural resource-focused government agencies such as the Transylvania Natural Resources Council to focus on sustainable management of natural resources on both public and private lands.
Key success factors
Having defined goals of improving sustainability and maintaining our exhaustive list of natural resources to enhance the tourism experience was instrumental in providing direction and in prioritizing differing projects according to their impact on residents and tourists. This effort required the convergence of many different interest groups to identify and determine the relative value of sustainment projects, of which there is no shortage. Fortunately, these groups are looking for partners with grant funding, to which TA has access as provided by an Occupancy Tax on short term rentals within the County. Our grant recipients are required to plan and execute their projects once TA funds are awarded, and to report on progress and completion while TA gets a sponsorship mention on any publicity material they generate. Encouraging collaboration between partners is a key element of success. This bridging of diverse groups together creates a synergy that often leads to lasting relationships between local businesses and recreation-related nonprofits. Of course, having the broad support of our overarching organization, Transylvania County Tourism, and local governmental offices was vital to these efforts.

Lessons learned
The problem of overuse and misuse of our natural resources was larger than the ability of TA to answer all the associated needs caused by the impact of tourism on our natural resources. Prioritization became important in order to decide between worthy projects. We found that a wide range and depth of knowledge must exist among TA members and engaged stakeholders and that their interests must be compatible with TA’s mission of increasing sustainability and the safe enjoyment of natural resources. This required a personal outdoor recreation involvement and a knowledge of appropriate recreational opportunities on the part of our committee members as well as personal relationships with owners of outdoor recreational businesses and government representatives since most public land policies are determined by the governmental agencies charged with managing the land. Integrating the various interests involved in tourism planning, creating “win-win” scenarios, is often difficult and requires a deft touch. Face-to-face meetings to develop consensus often become too cumbersome and must be limited in scope and attendance to focus on important issues and not broad-brush applications that are too large to retain meaning or too impractical to accomplish. And, the County’s shift from an industrial-based economy to integrate a vibrant tourism sector is not yet complete as some resistance to change on the part of long-term residents is still encountered. Educational campaigns touting the advantages of tourism as a pillar of our economy have yet to reach everyone while County efforts to provide non-tourism jobs to county residents who felt left behind have yet to gain traction.

Coping with the impacts of tourism on our natural resources, our economy, and our cultural assets is a work in process and, though short term and intermediate goals may be met, the long term will require diligent attention as long as tourists continue to visit us.
Results, achievements and recognitions

Market Connections has been a vital partner in achieving positive results using multi-media presentations ranging from videos to posters. Their material has received wide dissemination in visitor centers and educational forums not only in Transylvania County but regionally as well. The first project embarked upon was a campaign to get local residents and tourists alike to become involved in maintaining the natural resources they all enjoy. Trail crews are constantly out improving and rerouting trails to make them safer and more enjoyable with the desirable side effect of improved water quality. Next was Waterfall Safety, which is currently undergoing its first update. This campaign has resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of waterfall-related deaths and injuries. Our most recent effort was “Leave it Better”, a campaign aimed at reducing litter in our forests and alongside our trails. This program went a step beyond “Leave No Trace” in that we asked trail users to pick up litter where they saw it and carry it out with them, thus leaving the environment better than it was when they entered at the trail head.

And a comprehensive river inventory conducted by Conserving Carolina with actionable suggestions for improving river enjoyment and safety will be completed by the end of this year marking the beginning of the implementation phase. This will be a long-term project that has been long overdue.

Two trail improvements in the Pisgah National Forest have been partially funded by grants from TA. The Avery Creek Trail was rerouted because its path had merged with the stream next to it, creating water quality problems and hazardous, slippery conditions. The Joel Branch Connector is in work and will create a loop trail connecting the City of Brevard to the Pisgah National Forest and the North Carolina Center for Wildlife Education. Other river and trail improvements are in the planning stages.

In sum, more than $225,000 has been distributed to various organizations involved in the management of natural resources for the improvement of the tourism experience since TA was created four years ago. We like the progress we have made and appreciate the Smithsonian Magazine for listing Brevard as one of the 15 Best Small Towns to Visit in 2021.

Additional references

Explore Brevard
Crowded Conditions: Pisgah National Forest users are crowding into newly reopened trails, rec areas (citizen-times.com)
Parking at Sliding Rock: Sliding Rock — Pisgah Campgrounds (adventurepisgah.com)
Trail Restoration in Pisgah NF: For the Love of Trails and Trout | USDA
Trail Assessment, Pisgah NF: Trail Assessment - Pisgah Conservancy
Smithsonian Magazine 15 Best Small Towns to Visit in 2021