

## IT'S REAL SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDIES FROM THE HEARTLAND

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**Abstract:** In order to be sustainable, tourism development must involve the local population, proceed only with their approval, and provide a degree of local control. The most promising approach involves development which is low impact, small in scale and careful in progress, appropriate and sensitive to the local natural and socio-cultural environment, and readily integrated into the existing social and economic life of the community. This study examines two case studies of county-wide rural tourism development, one in west-central Illinois and the other in southeastern Iowa. With local involvement, planning, management, and ongoing assessment of impacts, based on collaborative and cooperative relationships developed through positive interactions among key leaders, sustainable tourism development appears to be attainable, as demonstrated by the accomplishments of residents in these two rural counties in their tourism development efforts.

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### Introduction

Because of the potential for substantial economic impact, there is great interest in tourism as an economic development strategy, especially for rural communities and areas with an abundance of resource amenities. Tourism as a development industry can create recreational uses for the natural and man-made amenity resources of a rural community and convert these into income producing assets (Siehl, 1990; Willits, 1992). Tourism relies on the development and utilization of natural, historical, cultural, and human resources in the local environment as attractions and destinations (Burr, 1995). A critical challenge is to make such development and accompanying use sustainable in order to not degrade environmental resources nor negatively exploit local human and cultural resources, and insure that such resources are maintained for present and future use (Inskeep, 1991).

### Sustainable Tourism Development

Sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43). Sustainable development is often tied to sustainable use, referring to the notion that careful and sensitive economic development is possible without degrading or depleting natural and human resources needed by present and future generations. Tourism is often presented as an ideal, non-polluting, and environmentally friendly, labor intensive industry. Tourism relies on the development and

utilization of natural, historical, cultural, and human resources in the local environment as tourist attractions and destinations. It is dependent both on these resources and on a clean and safe environment. "Increased emphasis is being placed on those forms of tourism that are particularly sensitive to promoting and retaining the integrity of natural and socio-cultural environments" (Swinerton & Hinch, 1994, p. 5). In many rural areas, new development initiatives have begun to place more emphasis on the sustainable development of tourism resources as part of a viable community base (Burr, 1995, p. 12).

Although sustainable tourism may be defined as tourism which maintains its viability over time, sustainable tourism development can be viewed differently as meeting the needs of tourism and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future (Inskeep, 1991). Sustainable tourism development fulfills economic, social, and aesthetic needs while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems. It too remains viable over time, but it does not degrade nor alter the human and physical environment to such a degree that it prohibits successful development and well-being of other activities and processes (Butler, 1993).

Cronin (1990) developed the following criteria for sustainable tourism development. Tourism development, in order to be sustainable, should 1) *follow ethical principles* that respect the culture and environment of the host area, the economy and traditional way of life, indigenous behavior, and local leadership and political patterns; 2) *involve the local population* in planning, proceed only with their approval, and provide for a degree of local control; and 3) *be undertaken with equity in mind* with the idea of access to a fair distribution of benefits and costs among tourism promoters and host peoples, now and in the future. There must be a balance between "a degree or type of development that will bring economic and other benefits to a community and the point at which that development starts to feed on rather than sustain the very elements at its basis" (p. 15). Sustainable tourism development should be: 1) planned and managed for the protection of the natural environment for future generations; 2) planned in an integrated manner with other economic sectors; and 3) assessed on an ongoing basis to evaluate impacts and permit action to counter any negative effects. Thus with sustainable tourism development, the fundamental focus should be on *achieving equity and balance*. Sustainable tourism development is determined largely by what "stakeholders" want it to be.

Of critical importance to sustainable tourism development is "an informed, open participatory public process for decision-making" (Nelson, 1993, p. 259). This creates empowerment and involvement, for working together toward goals of sustainability through cooperative action. Sustainable tourism development involves "mutual learning and adaptation among all concerned parties in the context of shared responsibility and equity" (p. 260). The best chance of achieving sustainable tourism development can come from developers of tourism. The most promising

approach involves development which is low impact, small in scale and careful in progress, appropriate and sensitive to the local natural and socio-cultural environment, and readily integrated into the existing social and economic life of the community (Gunn, 1994). Such an approach can facilitate resident involvement, participation in decision-making, and local control in development. Cooperative interaction can create networks both within and outside the community, roles for involved community members, shared experiences, opportunities for further community development, and contributions to the general quality of life in a community.

### Case Studies of Sustainable Tourism Development

The following two case studies demonstrate the creation of two rural cultural tourism industries accomplished by 1) preserving and enhancing local small town character and history, 2) creating complementary attractions and activities associated with lifestyles of the farm and small river towns of the Illinois and Iowa prairies and woodlands, and 3) developing a county-wide marketing image based on collaborative and cooperative relationships developed through positive interactions among local leaders in participating rural towns.

#### Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive

The Spoon River of west-central Illinois flows southeast through a scenic valley of woodlands and farmlands in Fulton County, emptying into the Illinois River. The Spoon River was made famous in the early twentieth-century by poet-author Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*. Masters lived in Lewistown, and in his youth wandered along the banks of the river and in Oak Hill Cemetery. Later, he developed thoughts and ideas he gathered into a written book of poems about the local residents. Today, the highways and byways in Fulton County sport the colors of four seasons and are open to visitors year-round with routes running approximately 140 miles through a variety of picturesque rural towns such as London Mills, Avon, Farmington, Babylon, Canton, Ipava, and Vermont, to name a few. Although the Spoon River Valley Fall Festival is the largest special event in the area, a variety of other festivals and special events occur throughout the year. Marketed with the theme "Spend Some Time with Nature's Joys on the Spoon River Scenic Drive," a marketing mix employing a variety of approaches, attracts a large number of visitors to the area. In 1996, over 120,000 people visited Fulton County over two weekends in October for the Spoon River Valley Fall Festival.

When key informants were asked, "What's special or unique about the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive?", a variety of responses were given which encompassed the following themes:

- What's really special is so many people have been working together from nineteen different villages and towns in our county for over thirty years.
- We have been able to reach back to the "roots" of our area and preserve the historical buildings, landscapes, and traditions in each village that are important. This has kept people working together.

- The original people involved in this effort are now in their 80s and 90s. They have passed on valuable information and been sources of strength and encouragement; our "roots." So now, three generations have been involved in our efforts.
- People giving of their time and talents throughout the years, this is what keeps the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive great! The dedicated efforts and hard work of volunteers along with the assistance of the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive Friends contributions have been very important.
- People here really enjoy sharing their rich heritage with visitors, the beautiful scenery, crafts and demonstrations, antiques and quilts, historic buildings, house tours, great food, outdoor recreation, and many other sights and sounds of Fulton County, our "Forgotonia."
- The Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive has instilled "pride" in our towns, villages, county, and even the whole region; pride in place, tradition, and family.

The support of county government has been important to the success of the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive. The Fulton County Board of Commissioners and Planning Commission are very much involved and supportive of tourism development efforts. The Fulton County Highway Department has taken on the responsibility of erecting directional signs with the red and white Scenic Drive logo and maintaining and oiling the country roads. The County Civil Defense helps with parking and traffic flow during the busy Fall Festival. In addition, the county Historical and Genealogical Society works to support the efforts of the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive. Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive has been able to network with a number of regional, state and federal agencies and organizations for assistance in order to take advantage of "outside" expertise and resources, including the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the State Historical Society, the Illinois Department for Economic and Community Assistance (DECA) for grants for development and publicity, the Western Illinois Tourism Council, the Illinois Bureau of Tourism, and the Army Corps of Engineers for the development of boat docks on the Spoon and Illinois Rivers. Additionally, representatives of the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive have annually attended the Illinois Governor's Conference on Tourism and even the White House Conference on Travel and Tourism held one time in Chicago.

According to Joan Johnson, Publicity Chairman for the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive, the main market for visitors is from the Chicago metropolitan area, "literate people with money and time to travel who want to get out in the country" (personal communication, March 13, 1997). But in addition, visitors come from all over the states of Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Indiana, and Missouri. Visits by owners of recreational vehicles have increased, and a number of campground facilities have been developed in the county to meet this increasing demand.

Word-of-Mouth marketing has been successful. "People come to visit our county and return home to tell their family and friends" (personal communication, March 13, 1997). Additional marketing efforts have been directed at target marketing, based on information associated with inquiry calls about the scenic drive. Bus tour groups have been increasing and accommodations have been made to handle this particular demand. Visitors can even take a "virtual tour" of the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive by visiting a home page on the World Wide Web (available at [www.outfitters.com/illinois/fulton/srd.html](http://www.outfitters.com/illinois/fulton/srd.html)).

Certainly one of the benefits of the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive is the economic impact of visitors coming into the county and spending money. Local crafters and artists sell their creations, local groups make money from food sales, and visitors spend money in stores, at gas stations, motels, and campgrounds throughout Fulton County and in the surrounding counties of west-central Illinois. This impact is especially felt during the busy Fall Festival, but also throughout the year to a somewhat lesser degree from visitors touring at other times. Local farmers are not always thrilled with the traffic during the busy Fall Festival, since this occurs at harvest time. Yet, the "city folk" have become fascinated with the harvest, watching the huge combines traveling back and forth across the immense fields harvesting the corn and soybeans. This has actually developed into another attraction in the county. In fact, several enterprising farmers have even developed a Spring Farm Day, where visitors can watch forty head of horses plow, disk, and harrow the fields the "old" way. Some farmers even offer "Farm Weekends" for visitors, providing weekend accommodations and activities.

Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive, now in its thirtieth year, has become a model for other scenic drives and rural tourism development in Knox and Stark Counties in Illinois, in several Missouri counties, in one Michigan county, and for the Villages of Van Buren in southeast Iowa. "This is something any community can do, taking advantage of its 'specialness' or 'uniqueness', whether it's historical, geographic, natural, or just an 'odddity'" (Joan Johnson, personal communication, March 13, 1997).

### **The Villages of Van Buren**

The Des Moines River extends from the heart of Iowa to the Mississippi River in the southeast. Riverboats used to steam upriver to Des Moines, passing through scenic, wooded Van Buren County and its old river towns of Bentonsport, Keosauqua, Bonaparte, and Farmington. Today, these and nearby towns market themselves under a unified rural tourism concept as the Villages of Van Buren, preserving a slower-paced environment in which visitors can relax and enjoy the rural small-town settings and amenities. County tourism promotional history began in 1987, with "Bike Van Buren," an event which brought bikers from throughout the state. The success of this event demonstrated to local leaders the great potential for tourism development which lay untapped in their county. Today, tourism visitation is promoted through the theme of "Explore the Villages of Van Buren—An Age Apart."

Marketing efforts include 1) gathering information through surveying visitors to learn more about their characteristics, needs, and satisfactions, 2) target marketing of seniors, young families, and relaxation-seeking young urban professionals, 3) target advertising using a video promotion for four selected area television stations, 4) publication of a visitors guide which supplies information on attractions and history, 5) production of a promotional video for use at area tour motor coach shows, 6) active catering to travel magazine writers, and 7) a creative and informative home page on the World Wide Web (available at [www.villages@netins.net](http://www.villages@netins.net)). In addition, hospitality training is used to enhance the ability of local hosts to provide directions and offer a quality experience to visitors. A variety of festivals, special events, and other activities attracts a great number of visitors to the Villages of Van Buren from April through December.

When key informants were asked, "What's special or unique about the Villages of Van Buren?", a variety of responses were given which encompassed the following themes:

- Van Buren County is a very rural county with a population between 7700 and 7800. There are eight incorporated towns plus about seven more unincorporated villages. We have lots of history and scenic value in our county that you don't find in other places.
- We're off the beaten path in southeastern Iowa, just a short drive to the "big cities," but far enough away to make it a great place to live and visit.
- Our people here have banded together to present ourselves as a unit through coordination and cooperation. Our focus on unity has really been beneficial for the county.
- The success of our tourism has made the people in the county more aware of the amenities here. It's a really nice place to live.
- We're proud of our heritage here and we enjoy sharing it with our visitors.

In 1996, over 200,000 visitors toured the Villages of Van Buren. The Fall Festival attracts about 15,000 to 20,000 visitors each weekend. Other festivals, held throughout the year, draw about 3,000 to 5,000 visitors. Most of the visitors come from a 100 to 150 mile radius which includes the cities of Des Moines, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, and the Quad Cities of Iowa and Illinois on the Mississippi River. However, more and more visitors are coming from as far away as Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

For the most part, local residents support the tourism development efforts of the Villages of Van Buren. They can see and realize the benefits. However, some residents do not like the increased traffic and presence of crowds during the busy times of the year. According to Mary Muir, Executive Director of the Villages of Van Buren, because of increased tourism development, some property

values are going up which is generating more tax revenue for the towns and county (personal communication, March 14, 1997). In addition, there has been an increase in construction of both second homes and retirement homes, as visitors have become residents, attracted by the county's amenities. More professionals have moved into the county, especially in the health care industry. The main economic base of the county is still agriculture, but there are also some strong industries which have grown 70% in the last ten years. Muir believes it is important to have diversity in the economic mix (personal communication, March 14, 1997). Tourism certainly plays a role here, as it helps the mainstreet businesses, the hotels, motels, bed & breakfasts, and campgrounds. Visitor spending helps to bring in money to the local economy. There has been some local control in terms of tourism development. In fact, there are no fast-food franchises in the county, although this may be due more to the sparse year-round population.

### Conclusion

With sustainable tourism development, besides maintaining resources for present and future use, it is important to emphasize the concept of equity—recognizing the contributions that people and communities, customs and lifestyles make to the tourism experience (Cronin, 1990). This implies that people must share in both benefits and costs, now and in the future. This in turn, implies a strong commitment of participation by local people and government, and to leadership on their part. In order to be sustainable, tourism development must involve the local population, proceed only with their approval, and provide a degree of local control. With local involvement, planning, management, and ongoing assessment of impacts, based on collaborative and cooperative relationships developed through positive interactions among key leaders, sustainable tourism development appears to be attainable, as demonstrated by the accomplishments of the Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive and the Villages of Van Buren in their tourism development efforts.

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