

HERITAGE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL RUSSIA: A CASE STUDY IN COLLABORATIVE TOURISM PLANNING IN AN INTERNATIONAL SETTING

Roy Ramthun, Ph.D.

Concord University
Athens, WV

Susan Williams, Ph.D.

Concord University

Vladimir Shalaev, Ph.D.

Svetlana Guseva

Irina Polinkova

Sofia Chervakova

Svetlana Ivanova

Anna Pahkmutova

Anastasia Shalaev

Mari State Technical University

Abstract.—In the United States, advisers from such organizations as universities and extension services often assist rural communities with community planning and development efforts. These outside groups typically facilitate communication and discussion among stakeholders and help to lay out a process by which the community may proceed towards its shared goals. Faculty members from Concord University, West Virginia, were likewise invited to participate in the community planning process for a rural Russian community seeking to preserve a large historic estate and develop heritage tourism initiatives. Local stakeholders were enthusiastic about the project, yet many cross-cultural barriers slowed or obstructed the planning. Issues of Russian culture and the structure of local government have been identified as conditions that must be overcome for collaborative planning to work in a rural Russian community.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Russia is undergoing a variety of industrial and social reforms as it attempts to move beyond its Communist past. Tourism and the infrastructure to support tourism were never developed under the Soviet Union. Today, however, the Russian republic recognizes the economic potential of tourism and is making efforts to modernize or develop the nation's attractions and tourism infrastructure. These development efforts are often

organized on a local level. Some areas show sophistication in tourism development while others are struggling to begin the process.

Russia has significant historical and cultural resources to offer as tourism attractions. Although St. Petersburg and Moscow have well developed attractions and infrastructure, rural communities in the outlying regions are just beginning the process of identifying, developing, and marketing potential destination sites.

The village of Yurino is located on the Volga River in the Mari-El Republic. During the 19th century, the Sheremetovs, one of Russia's wealthiest families, had their estate in Yurino. The family fled Russia during the Communist Revolution and the manor house and estate fell into disrepair. Today, community leaders in Yurino are seeking to restore the manor and estate to attract visitors from cruise ships passing on the Volga and other international tourists who are seeking historical and cultural experiences. The Russian people have a deep pride in their cultural artifacts, but this pride does not always translate into objective decisionmaking in regards to cultural preservation and marketing.

Yurino's leaders have actively sought input from individuals with heritage or international tourism credentials. When faculty from Concord University (West Virginia) first visited the site, local officials made statements that indicated that United States-based tourism educators were an important source of expertise and guidance. Even at this early stage in the process, local planning appeared still to revolve around an "expert" model of planning. Later work stressed the inclusion of more stakeholders representing more constituencies. These efforts to involve more stakeholders would prove challenging.

2.0 METHODS

During two visits to the development site at Yurino, the study group participated in a variety of formal and informal meetings with stakeholders and state and local

government officials. In addition to formal meetings, there were debriefings and discussions with the Russian students and interpreters who accompanied us. After the meetings, researchers made notes (they did not take notes during meetings) and sought points of agreement. Areas in which there was not broad agreement among researchers are not included as discussion points in this case study.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While many potential models of development are available, Gunn and Var (2002) propose a straightforward eight-step model that fits the needs of the Yurino development very well. We present the study team's observations in the framework of the Gunn and Var model to the extent that current research and site development allow.

- 1) Identify sponsorship and leadership
- 2) Set goals
- 3) Investigate strengths and weaknesses
- 4) Develop recommendations
- 5) Identify objectives and strategies
- 6) Assign priorities and responsibilities
- 7) Stimulate and guide development
- 8) Monitor feedback

As of this writing, the Yurino development has reached the fourth element of this framework.

3.1 Sponsorship and Leadership

Local residents and local government officials are strongly motivated to develop the Sheremetov estate to attract visitors. The town of Yurino is primarily an agricultural community with few employment opportunities. Local people and town officials see the historic estate as a mechanism for creating jobs and a more varied economy. They have made a variety of contacts in Russia and internationally to move the project forward and have been successful in getting initial seed money from the state government to begin the restoration process. No single organization has been willing to provide ongoing sponsorship and funding.

3.2 Set Goals

At this time Yurino developers' primary goal is to create economic opportunities within the community. Secondary goals are the protection of local heritage and the provision of recreational and social opportunities to local residents.

3.3 Investigate Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths of the Yurino community development include:

Outstanding cultural site. The critical elements of the Sheremetov estate are present and the key buildings are structurally sound. Approximately a third of the main house has been restored with money from the state government. In addition, the site is located on the Volga River, providing scenic attraction and a water-based recreation opportunity. Marcouiller and Prey (2005) point out the importance of natural amenities such as these to tourism site development.

Potentially good location. While the location is approximately a 3-hour drive from the nearest major population center, it is located on the Volga River. One of Russia's most popular and growing tourism activities is cruise ship travel and river cruises routinely pass the development site. Large tracts of forest and clean, fishable streams are a short distance from the community, making ecotourism activities a potential package opportunity.

The following issues were identified as challenges to be overcome in the development of Yurino and the Sheremetov castle site:

Remote location. Russia is a large place and the development site is remote. While cruise ship traffic may provide a base of visitors to the site, special efforts will have to be made to attract visitors from other locations. As international visitors are still rare in rural Russia, initial efforts at market development will target the closest urban areas and seek to develop the domestic tourism market.

Short cruise season. The river freezes in winter and most companies offer tours only between May and mid-October.

Limited tourism experience. Local tourism developers have little experience meeting the demands of either domestic or international visitors. Efforts will have to be made to give tourism developers and service providers a better sense of both national and international tourism standards.

Management of the estate. The manor house is currently under the stewardship of the state government, which has classified it as a historic site. While this classification does not preclude various forms of development or commercial use, it does require a high degree of consensus before permission for further development will be given.

3.4 Recommendations

At this stage of the project, three recommendations have been made.

- 1) Plan and implement special events that will highlight the unique attributes of the site and increase awareness of the destination. Festivals that focus on local culture and history would serve to increase the awareness of residents of nearby cities to the features of the destination.
- 2) Develop waterfront facilities that will a) facilitate site visits by cruise ships and cruise ship passengers, and b) serve as an amenity site with food service and entertainment in a relaxed waterfront setting.
- 3) Identify a wider audience of stakeholders to invite into the planning process. Cruise ship companies, private investors, national historic preservation groups, and lodging franchises may all bring valuable input and resources.

3.5 Obstacles

While tourism destination planning is a challenging exercise in any context, a variety of cultural factors have added to the complexity of this project. These

issues became apparent after the second planning visit. Local residents are pessimistic about a cooperative planning model. This observation is consistent with Russians' current views of their political environment (Pipes 2004, McFaul 2005, Kasputin 2008) and was reiterated by several of our collaborators and interpreters. Community members see public meetings as a way for the government to make people feel involved, but residents expect that officials will do what they want in the end. This viewpoint certainly limits the participants' enthusiasm and may have caused some important stakeholders to stay away from the planning process.

Another issue in the planning process was a lack of data. Information relevant to feasibility analysis is not readily available in Russia. Researchers from the United States are used to operating in an environment of information access. A wide variety of organizations routinely survey visitors at local, state, and regional levels. Numerous reports, resource inventories, and databases provide a basis for assumptions about visitation numbers and patterns. In many other countries, information about tourism trends and visitor motivation is also readily available and cost estimates for business start-ups are fairly easy to obtain. By contrast, visitor surveys and visitor preference studies are rare in Russia while estimates for construction or development costs are not readily offered by vendors. In fact, asking about these types of numbers is often discouraged.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

The problems and issues facing small rural communities in Russia are actually very similar to those faced by small communities in the United States. There are significant differences in the tools available to solve those issues and in the amount of experience that stakeholders have in community-based planning; these factors are readily apparent to U.S.-based tourism planners. As the process of tourism development in Yurino slowly moves forward, the use of community development tools will continue to be studied.

5.0 CITATIONS

Gunn, C.A.; Var, T. 2002. **Tourism planning** (4th ed.) New York: Routledge.

Kasputin, B. 2008, Oct. 20. **Liberals must come to grips with new Russia.** The Moscow Times.

McFaul, M. 2005. **Russia and the west: A dangerous drift.** Current History. October: 307-312.

Marcouiller, D.W.; Prey, J. 2005. **The tourism supply linkage: Recreational sites and their related natural amenities.** The Journal of Regional Analysis and Policy. 35(1): 23-32.

Pipes, R. 2004. **Flight from freedom: What Russians think and want.** Foreign Affairs. May/June 2004: 9-15.

The content of this paper reflects the views of the authors(s), who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.