

## **Tourism Resource Teams: Innovation with and for tourism communities**

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### **Abstract**

Communities have a variety of interest levels in tourism overall, including sustainable tourism (WTO, 2002). While we have witnessed increased awareness and discussions about sustainability and sustainable tourism, there is often a lack of shared definitions of means and ends among stakeholders, ambiguities in what is meant by sustainable tourism, and constant debate over specific policy and practice options for achieving it (McCool et al, 2001).

Thus, to enhance understanding and application of sustainable tourism principles and practices, a program based on best practices across the U.S. was developed. The program enhances and facilitates progress in sustainable tourism by addressing environmental, economic or social issues as identified by the community. A case study of program application and evaluation is presented for discussion and replication.

The Tourism Resource Team (TRT) program provides technical assistance to community tourism organizations that have encountered an obstacle to realize their sustainable tourism goals. The University based TRT program is grounded in three principles: 1) active citizenship of local citizens in designing and implementing projects, 2) addressing issues according to sustainable development principles; and 3) a vibrant relationship between citizens and their University. The program's process includes an invitation to communities to submit a proposal, objective evaluation of the proposal, and, if/when selected, ongoing interaction for more than one year related to the sustainable tourism obstacle.

Upon selection, the community creates a broad reaching community tourism team, provides a packet of information to the TRT and prepares for a 2-3 day visit. Based on the community's needs, an expert TRT team participates in 2-3 days of site visits and meetings, and prepares a presentation with recommendations to discuss with the community. A final report is crafted within one month of the visit and presented to the community. Program evaluations are conducted immediately, as well as 6 and 12 months following the visit. These immediate, short and long-term evaluations provide various feedback mechanisms and insight for the program and community.

To date, three iterations of the program have ensued leaving a list of lessons learned and successes from which to build. Issues of concern to the communities are similar to those encountered elsewhere (Nickerson and Kerr, 2000) and include: gateway community tensions with

federal and state land owners, seasonality, and integrated community relations. Lessons learned and affirmed from the cases include the necessity for full community participation, need to educate about sustainable tourism, and the delicacy of community relations.

All program implementations met with success and measurable outcomes. Along with an immediate increased understanding of sustainable tourism, community leaders and citizens expressed recognition of the consequences of mass tourism development and development that occurs without public involvement. Longer-term community benefits identified include opportunities for organization, a sense of collaboration, and increased understanding of sustainable tourism. Lessons learned include insight on team formations, community culture, and resource allocation.

The TRT program has proven a valuable tool to address community-driven sustainable tourism issues. The program expands local understanding of sustainable tourism, encourages community participation in using sustainable practices to address local issues, and generates outcomes and long-term impacts for communities. The model can easily be replicated.

## **References**

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- Nickerson, N P and Kerr, P (2000) *Snapshots: An Introduction to Tourism*, Prentice- Hall, Canada, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition
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