ECOTOURISM: A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO THE CHALLENGE

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INTRODUCTION

Many communities in Northern Ontario are experiencing economic distress as their traditional economic bases are changing.

Ecotourism is being considered as a new opportunity, given the region's natural beauty, unique features, and the presence of some globally significant protected areas and parks. The objective of this study was to answer the question: Under what conditions does ecotourism represent a valid, sustainable economic development opportunity for communities in northwestern Ontario?

Opportunities, successes, and key ingredients in ecotourism were examined in three Canadian communities–Armstrong, Atikokan, and Rossport; and in two United States communities–Bayfield, WI and Ely, MN.

This article highlights ingredients that, in the authors' view, contribute to community success in tourism and ecotourism. The ingredients take the form of questions so that any community can look at itself and decide whether ecotourism is in its best interests. If so it can then take steps to move in that direction.

But first, what is ecotourism? Knowledge of this concept is, to date, limited in northern Ontario. Some people see ecotourism as a new name for the same old thing. Others see it as a purist form of tourism that threatens traditional activities such as hunting and fishing.

The literature on ecotourism has yet to provide a clear, generally accepted definition. It is the authors' conclusion that an appropriate working definition includes these elements:

- based on the natural, cultural or, historic environment
- managed so that impact is low
- generates economic activity and wealth which stay in the local area
- encourages conservation
- fosters learning or increased understanding

Three gradations on the ecotourism scale were identified:

Traditional forest-based tourism

This would include fishing, motor boating, and flying or driving in to roadless or "end of the road" locations.

Hybrid (a range of tourism offerings)

This includes a blend of, or choices between, many of the offerings of both traditional and pure ecotourism.

Pure ecotourism

This features the "silent" (nonmotorized) sports e.g., kayaking, canoeing, sailing, hiking, and biking and combines learning-oriented guided tours of historical, cultural, or natural history sites.

Most appropriate for northern Ontario would appear to be the Hybrid–the best of all worlds–a range of options from which people may choose. This will require careful planning because not all types of tourism are compatible in time and place.

The full report *Forest Based Ecotourism in Small NWO Communities: Panacea or Placebo* (available from the Canadian Forest Service–Ontario) reviews the current situations and prospects of the five communities. This article focuses on a generic set of ingredients that could apply to any community in northern Ontario.

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS IN ECOTOURISM: COMMUNITY SELF-ASSESSMENT

PART 1: General Ingredients

These questions are written from the perspective of the community. The authors conclude that a readiness for tourism is a prerequisite for pursuing ecotourism. Questions more specific to ecotourism appear in Part 2.

A. ATTITUDE – Does the community see it as beneficial to pursue tourism?

1. DESIRE: Does the community want to develop tourism?

2. NEED: Is there economic pressure to diversify the economic base by developing tourism?

3. OPENNESS TO OUTSIDE ENTREPRENEURS: Is the community open to and supportive of developments by outside entrepreneurs?

4. OPENNESS TO INSIDE ENTREPRENEURS: Is the community open to and supportive of developments by entrepreneurs within the community?

5. OPENNESS TO TOURISTS IN THE COMMUNITY:
a) Are community members willing to share their community with outsiders and to treat them in a welcoming way?

b) Are community members willing to be helpful and friendly to tourists in the community?

6. OPENNESS TO TOURISTS IN THE SURROUNDING AREA: Are community members willing to share the natural resources surrounding the community with tourists?

7. APPRECIATE BENEFITS: Does the community appreciate the benefits that an increase in tourist traffic can bring to the quality of life of residents?

8. SEE THE AREA AS OTHERS SEE IT:
a) Are community members able to see and appreciate the tourism features and benefits that tourists come for?

b) Are community members able to see the community (good sides and bad) as an outsider might?

B. COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND DIRECTION – Does the community work together strategically to achieve its plans, including tourism?

1. PLANNING:
a) Are community economic development plans in place that encourage and support the development of tourism in an effective way?

b) Are plans in place so that the community can act quickly and opportunistically if appropriate circumstances arise?

c) Are plans made to ensure that economic benefit comes to the community from use of tourism resources in the area?

d) Have ideas and opportunities been tested for market potential, financial viability and the likelihood of private and/or public sector investment?

e) Is the niche that the community has chosen and the overall style of the community needed for that niche protected in bylaws or other enforceable agreements?

2. COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: Do community agencies work together to achieve common goals?

3. LEADERSHIP: Does the community have in place the organizations and people who can help the community move in the tourism direction?

4. HUMAN RESOURCES: Do both the community and local businesses provide training for staff so that the quality of service is high?

5. COLLABORATION: Do tourist industry people and other resource users work collaboratively to meet all needs and ensure sustainability of tourism resources?

6. ECONOMIC UNDERSTANDING: Does the community as a whole understand the nature of the local economy and the role of tourism within it?

7. MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MECHANISMS: Are there mechanisms in place which facilitate multi-stakeholder planning and problem solving about issues which affect the natural resource base?

C. FEATURES AND PROTECTION – Is the community's tourism based on world-class natural features which are managed for sustainable tourism use?

1. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FEATURES: Are natural features/parks world class? Can they compete with natural features that are closer to major markets?

2. PROTECTION: Are these features recognized in land use and resource management plans? Are these tourism sites afforded the kind of protection they need for sustainable tourism use?

3. OPEN FOR BUSINESS ATTITUDE: Do park or land use plans encourage tourism businesses while at the same time protecting the natural features?

4. PART OF A BIGGER PICTURE: Is the community identified with and promoted as part of a bigger tourism attraction or destination?

D. MARKETING AND PROMOTION – Are systems in place to attract tourists?

1. UNIQUE NICHE FOR COMMUNITY:
a) Has the community identified and developed a unique niche for itself?

2

b) Can it communicate that niche in terms that make the area of interest to tourists?

2. MARKETING PLAN:
a) Is a marketing plan in place?

b) Is it updated regularly?

c) Does it include a broad range of tourism offerings?

d) Does the marketing plan focus on the appropriate market for the community's niche?

3. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS:
a) Are records kept at tourist bureaus, provincial parks, etc., of what people are interested in, where they are from and where they are going, length of stay, spending?

b) Is the information analyzed regularly and are attempts made to respond to any weaknesses identified?

4. PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL: Does the community make available a variety of material about the various attractions, activities and businesses in the area?

5. PROMOTIONAL COST SHARING: Are mechanisms in place for businesses to cost share promotional efforts?

6. SHARING LEADS AND GUESTS:
a) Are arrangements in place to pass leads and prospective customers back and forth between and among businesses and agencies?

b) Is there cooperation between businesses to try to keep customers in the region?

7. SPECIAL EVENTS: Does the community use special events as a way of attracting people to the area and raising profile?

E. TOURISM – Are we offering the range of tourism products that people want?

1. VARIETY AND QUALITY:
a) Are a variety of types of tour packages available? – variety in price levels, age of groups, degree of difficulty, focus, length of time, etc.

b) Are the packages good quality and good value for money?

c) Are all safety practices up to standards?

2. ENTREPRENEURS: Are entrepreneurs available with the commitment, facilities, equipment and money to create tourism businesses?

3. GUIDES: Are guides/naturalists/interpreters ready, willing, available and properly trained?

4. PACKAGING: Are coordinated or complimentary packages available which can be combined into a critical mass of attractions?

5. RAINY DAYS: Are there activities available to happily occupy tourists on rainy days?

6. SEASON EXTENDING: Is attention given to how the tourist season can be extended toward four seasons?

7. MAXIMIZING BENEFIT: Is attention given to developing related businesses which can compliment tourism and increase the community benefit from tourism?

F. INFRASTRUCTURE – Are developments in place which will help tourists experience the natural features with minimum impact, and enjoy the creature comforts?

1. FACILITIES: Are quality, comfortable accommodations and restaurants available in appropriate price ranges?

2. ACCESS: Are roads, bridges, docks, etc., in place so that tourists can gain access to environmental features with minimum impact?

G. FINANCIAL AND OTHER ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT – Are the relationships in place so that financial support will be available to support the community's development?

1. PRIVATE CAPITAL: Are private funds available to support development of tourism?

2. LOCAL FUND-RAISING:
a) Does the community have the ability to raise funds to contribute to tourism development?

b) Is there a mechanism (e.g., Resource Development Corporation) to collect funds, apply for matching or other funding opportunities, pay out disbursements, and exert responsible financial control.

3. GOVERNMENT CAPITAL: Are community leaders aware of government programs and how the community might benefit from using them?

4. BANK SUPPORT: Are local banking officials aware of and supportive of the community's tourism development plans?

5. RELATIONSHIPS WITH SUPPORTIVE AGENCIES: Does the community have a good working relationship with the staffs of agencies which might support tourism development?

PART 2: Ecotourism-specific Ingredients

An openness and readiness for tourism is the first step. In addition there are some ingredients which apply more specifically to ecotourism.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE ECOTOURISM MARKET:
a) Are efforts made to understand what tourists are looking for and to develop the types of facilities and attractions which encourage them?

b) Has the special <u>type</u> of ecotourism customer to be sought been well identified?

2. ECOTOURISM OFFERINGS: Do the product offerings take into account the eco-tourist's interest in natural, historic, cultural and human features?

3. INTERPRETIVE MATERIAL AND EXPERIENCES:
a) Does the community have in place brochures and leaflets that can interpret the natural features to guests?

b) Does the community have leaflets and brochures for people to use to take self-guided tours in the area?

c) Are guided programs available with guides who have in depth knowledge?

4. EDUCATION: Are mechanisms in place to help people learn about the heritage and natural history of the area?

5. COMBINING OUTDOOR ADVENTURES WITH CREATURE COMFORTS: Are there ways in place that eco-tourists can use to gain easy access to an immersion experience with unique natural features and have comforts available either daily or at the beginning and end of their trip?

6. ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION: Are systems in place so that eco-tourists help to pay for the protection and sustainability of the features they visit and enjoy?

7. STANDARDS OF PROTECTION FROM USERS: Are there in place Codes of Conduct or guidelines which will ensure the ongoing protection of this resource from users?

8. QUALITY OF THE NATURAL EXPERIENCE:
a) Will eco-tourists experience natural areas which are significantly less altered by human activities than are areas closer to their homes, and which could be considered ecologically intact?

b) Do tours reflect appropriate use of resources?

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations suggest ways in which the potential of ecotourism can be achieved. Following these steps can support community initiated planning and development.

Who leads at the community level?

Various approaches to community planning have emerged in different areas. In some cases municipal councils take the lead. In others it is economic development committees or corporations. In still others it is Community Futures committees. In some cases local tourist industry associations are strong; in other cases they are weak or not present. The ideal lead force in community planning, as in all multi-stakeholder work, is a broad cross section of interests that could include those listed above as well as others. Most communities already have many of the ingredients in place and a thoughtful look at the current situation can be a valuable starting point. Establishment of ecotourism sub-committees of any of the above local planning bodies may be a useful step to begin the process.

Where is government investment in ecotourism best placed?

The community's self-assessment, based on the "Ingredients for Community Success in Ecotourism", will provide valuable insights into where the cost/benefit returns will be positive.

Key indicators of success potential might be: (1) desire to be involved in ecotourism (2) strength of local leadership and planning (3) proximity to a world scale or regionally significant ecotourism destination (4) well developed multi-stakeholder planning processes and (5) opportunities for diversifying the range of tourism offerings.

Public involvement in natural resource planning on crown and park lands

The development of multi-stakeholder processes is getting much attention in Ontario at this time. In each of the communities studied are underway about what form they should take. While there is room for concern about the effectiveness of these mechanisms, they hold the most promise of any method developed to date. With appropriate membership and focus, their creation will be important to the development of ecotourism based on Ontario's natural resources.

Diversified economies require diversified planning

The Ontario government recently released a *Policy Framework for Sustainable Forests*. Some of the key messages that relate to the development of ecotourism are:

• sustainability of forests should be the number one concern, followed by sustainability of communities and businesses,

• planning processes should deal effectively with all values (12 key ones have been identified),

• there should be meaningful involvement of people with concerns about all the values,

• the community's sense of self-direction should play a role in determining how the resources are used, and

• planning and land use decisions should be made on the basis of extensive and accurate information (which has, to date, been very limited for the tourism industry).

Development of the information base for making decisions

Little factual information exists about the economic impact of tourism in the three communities that were studied. We believe that this problem is widespread. As a result, it is difficult for either local people or government personnel

to make sound decisions about how to best diversify the economy and how to make the best long-term use of available resources. Development of a suitable information base for strategic planning and decision making is one area where government support and initiative will be needed.

Tourism development in unorganized communities and adjacent to parks

Tourism development in both Armstrong and Rossport is hindered by the fact that both are unorganized communities and have no effective means of planning or acting in concert. Attention should be given to setting up tourism development zones. Zones could be established adjacent to national or provincial parks as well to foster the development of tourism infrastructure and services.

Wilderness tourism industry association needed

For ecotourism to flourish in the region, a nongovernment body that provides peer support, education, marketing, and lobbying services will be needed. This is a role that the Northern Ontario Tourist Outfitters Association could serve if it were interested. If not, a new organization may be needed.

Senior government research support

The next decade will be a turbulent time for the economy of northern Ontario. Research support that will contribute obtaining economic benefits from ecotourism includes the following:

- evaluation of community-based multi-stakeholder advisory committees as mechanisms to provide the support needed by ecotourism and other forest-based industries,

- development of information bases that make it possible to use long-term economics as one of the criteria for making land use decisions,

- more comparative analysis to better understand from the community perspective the key ingredients that are needed to support ecotourism,

- investigation of possible collaborative marketing and referral approaches for small ecotourism businesses,

- review of possible approaches to achieving community consensus about preferred economic paths,

- review of key ingredients needed to develop a diversified economic base, and

- review of the impact of provincial resource management and economic development policy on the creation of ecotourism opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

We return to our original question, "Under what conditions does ecotourism represent a valid, sustainable economic development opportunity for communities in northwestern Ontario?"

In its simplest form, the answer to the question is:

1. When the community has the desire (as indicated by their effort) to move in that direction, and

2. When the natural, historical, or cultural features are significant enough to attract people from a considerable distance.

It is when those two preconditions are met that both entrepreneurial and government input can be most effectively used to create valuable economic diversification.

A key point is that in most situations ecotourism can be an important contributor to diversifying the economy of a community. The cases in which it will be the economic mainstay of a community will be few. Nonetheless, ecotourism, particularly as an addition to the already existing tourism base can be a valuable element in a sustainable economy.

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