

Urban Green Tourism:

Applying ecotourism principles to the city

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Abstract:

Although ecotourism is considered an enlightened development approach to tourism and is being aggressively pursued as a marketing strategy by governments and businesses alike, there has been almost no attempt to link it with more urban environments. This paper discusses the case of Toronto where urban green tourism has been favourably received and gained increased credibility during the last few years, in part through the development of the first green tourism map.

The growth of ecotourism has generated much ink over the past decade. Indeed, Frangialli (1997), the World Tourism Organization's Secretary General, has suggested that of the 600 million international tourists in 1997, 20% were involved in ecotourism. According to The Ecotourism Society (1991), ecotourism is "purposeful travel to understand the culture and natural history of the environment; taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem; producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people". Boo (1992), on the other hand, suggests that it is "nature travel that advances conservation and sustainable development efforts" (p. iii). Indeed, nature tourism and ecotourism are all too often used interchangeably, even though nature tourism is not necessarily non-consumptive nor sustainable in its focus.

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Résumé:

Malgré que l'écotourisme soit considéré comme une approche éclairée de développement touristique et, en conséquence, énergiquement suivie comme stratégie de marketing par les gouvernements et les entreprises, il n'y a eu jusqu'à présent aucun lien entre cette forme de tourisme et l'environnement urbain. Cet exposé présente le cas de Toronto, où le tourisme vert urbain a reçu un accueil favorable et une crédibilité accrue ces dernières années, en partie grâce au développement de la première carte de tourisme vert.

Almost every country in the world has now added some ecotourism product to its list of offerings for both the international and domestic visitor markets, although there does not seem to be a consistent definition of what constitutes "ecotourism". At its best, ecotourism offers a viable combination of ecological and cultural protection, increased local awareness of the value of preserving the natural and cultural environments, and local economic development. It is most often associated with exotic, undisturbed, remote (or at least rural) areas. In Canada, ecotourism tends to be equated with adventure tourism as long as it does not take place in a major urban centre. This is inconsistent with the Canadian Environmental Advisory Council's (CEAC) 1992 definition which states that: "Ecotourism is an enlightening nature travel experience that contributes to conservation of the ecosystem, while respecting the integrity of host communities." (as referenced in Wight, 1993, p.3) And of course, the product offerings that have nothing "eco" about them except perhaps the inclusion of a whale watching trip or other "exotic" activity, are legion, both in Canada and elsewhere.

The need to “green” mass tourism suppliers

Where does this leave the bulk of tourism suppliers catering to a mass market largely hosted by urban centres concentrated in the developed countries of the world? Where is the pressure and encouragement to these suppliers to practice mass tourism in a way that minimizes and mitigates the obvious disbenefits associated with it? Product development, policy, planning, and marketing can all be instituted in ways to ensure that tourists, host population, and investors reap the long-term benefits of a vibrant and healthy tourism industry (Husbands and Harrison, 1996). Many sources suggest that tourism has the potential to conserve and protect natural resources, however, most efforts have been focused towards advancing the economic objectives rather than protecting the very resources that attract visitors (Wight, 1993, Pearce, 1995). “Where it has been adopted in the tourism industry, it has tended to be accepted for three reasons: economics, public relations and marketing” (Butler, 1998, p. 27).

Just because tourists do not tend to be as noticeable in cities as they often are in most smaller communities or lesser developed countries, does not mean that they do not have a significant impact on their infrastructure, natural resources, social and cultural environment. Toronto, for instance, receives 8 visitors a year for every permanent resident, a ratio that would strain the social and environmental carrying capacity of many destinations. Should the City be successful in winning its bid to host the 2008 Olympics, it is anticipated that this ratio would easily increase by 50%. But Toronto itself is growing very fast. Indeed, by 2021, the city's population is projected to double. But even today, the strain on the city's environment is substantial: on an average day, there are 20.8 million car trips, compared to only 1,1 million transit journeys, 52,300 bike trips and 311,100 pedestrian trips (Environmental Task Force, 1999).

Over 12% of the city is municipal parks and

conservation lands, accounting for approximately 20,000 acres of green spaces. $\frac{3}{4}$ of these are ravines, valley lands, woodlots and waterfront natural areas, including over 50 designated environmentally-sensitive areas. In addition, there are 3 million trees on public streets and parks alone (City of Toronto, 2000) and over 374 bird species of wild occurrence centered within a 50 mile radius of the city's core. Two major green spaces – Tommy Thompson Park and Toronto Islands – are recognized as major migratory path of birds. Toronto has the largest natural and cultural heritage park in an urban area in North America (the Rouge Park), 46 kilometres of waterfront, and a Canadian Heritage River (Humber River acclaimed in 1999) (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2000).

As a tourist destination, Toronto is the largest gateway into Canada and generates over five billion dollars in tourism revenue each year, however, there is no acclamation of some of the city's environmental areas that should be sited for protection. Tourism, by its very nature, is highly resource consumptive and waste-intensive. “Tourism damages the environment in a variety of ways: overuse of water resources and the discharge of untreated waste water into rivers and coastal waters, energy use and large amounts of waste.” (Kahlenborn, 1998, p. 8). Canadian residents and businesses tend to be particularly consumptive and wasteful. For example, in 1993, the most recent year for global data, Canadian consumption of energy was 2.6% of global consumption while its population makes up only 0.56% of the world total (Environment Canada, 2000a). And between 1972 and 1991, Canada's rate of water withdrawals increased by well over 50 percent, from 24 billion m³/yr to 45 billion m³/yr even though our population increased by only 5 percent over the same period (Environment Canada, 2000b).

Although there have been a rapidly increasing number of codes of ethics adopted by various tourism-related organizations, culminating in 1999 with the adoption by the World Tourism

Organization of its own Code, and a few large corporations such as CP Hotels and Resorts (now Fairmont Hotels and Resorts), Inter-Continental Hotels, British Airways and Lufthansa, to name but some of the most recognized environmentally responsible leaders in the tourism industry, efforts to become more environmentally and socially conscious have been sporadic at best. “Even though environmental technologies are widely available and being successfully applied by some entrepreneurs, the level of take up is negligible. One reason is the fragmented nature of the industry itself, which makes it difficult to reach each operator. Others might be a lack of environmental awareness or lack of resources (particularly for smaller operators whose finances are often limited) to build up their environmental management and technological know-how.” (Kahlenborn, 1998, p.8) Efforts are often further hampered by their lack of locational concentration, making recycling or composting, for instance, too costly. Furthermore, suppliers will not accommodate the demands to reduce packaging, as an example, unless the purchaser represents a sizeable piece of business.

The birth of the Green Tourism Association

It is for all these reasons, that a group of interested individuals in the Toronto area representing a broad spectrum of businesses, organizations and government agencies, came together to advance the concept of urban green tourism. The Green Tourism Association, incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1996, not only promotes and markets the concept to tourists and residents, but also supports urban green tourism businesses and works to green the tourism industry.

Urban green tourism, as defined by the members of the association, is composed of four attributes:

- Environmental responsibility – protecting, conserving, and/or enhancing nature and the physical environment to ensure the long term health of the life-sustaining ecosystem;
- Local economic vitality – Supporting local economies, businesses and communities to ensure economic vitality and sustainability;
- Cultural sensitivity – Respecting and appreciating cultures and cultural diversity so as to ensure the continued well-being of local or host cultures; and
- Experiential richness – Providing enriching and satisfying experiences through active, personal and meaningful participation in, and involvement with, nature, people, places and/or cultures.

The association has three main objectives:

- Marketing,
- Business development, and
- Greening the industry

The Green Tourism Association provides best practice examples and education that help develop a sustainable approach to tourism. The association encourages tourism businesses to act in a more responsible manner and the ‘green’ concept aids businesses improve their image while attracting more revenue and providing ways to take the next step.

Initiatives undertaken since the association’s incorporation include:

- development of a website (www.greentourism.on.ca)
- creation of an online Resource Centre
- distribution of the quarterly newsletter “Go Green T.O.”
- setting up of an information centre and bike rental location
- development of a listing of representative green tourism opportunities
- research and publications
- workshops, presentations, event attendance, conferences and display material.

Most businesses identify success as improving profit margins while lowering overall costs and it is usually awareness of bottom line initiatives that convince businesses to take the next

step in becoming more environmentally sensitive. While there is increasing evidence that addressing environmental issues can achieve significant cost reductions for corporations, the most spectacular savings are realized by large organizations. For instance, according to Ivarsson (1998), almost any hotel can achieve a 20% cost reduction without detriment to the comfort of their customers as result of focussing on reduced energy and water consumption. At the same time, he suggests that hotel waste programs typically reduce the amount of unsorted waste by 40-60% and reduce costs accordingly. However, it became quickly apparent to the Green Tourism Association's Board of Directors that buy-in to its mission and workplan by businesses would require tangible proof that visitors coming to Toronto were indeed looking for "greener" experiences and that joining the association would translate into additional revenues for companies. The majority of corporate marketing budgets are simply too small in the tourism industry to justify paying for membership, services and advertising unless there is a direct contribution to a business's bottom line in the form of increased revenues, not just cost savings. Therefore the decision was made to develop a promotional piece that would serve a very useful purpose for visitors and residents alike, by informing them about many aspects of the city that are not normally included in the main stream tourism literature. After all, Canadians spent \$11 billion on nature activities, 67% of which were spent on outdoor activities in natural areas (Canadian Tourism Commission, 2000, p. 22).

The "*Other* Map of Toronto"

"The Green Map System™ is a globally connected, locally adaptable framework for community sustainability. Green maps utilize Green Map Icons™ to chart the sites of environmental significance in urban places around the world." (URL: www.greenmap.org). The objectives of the Green Map System are somewhat distinct from those of the Green Tourism Association in

that its purpose is to "illuminate the inter-connections between society, nature and the built environment, helping residents make lower impact lifestyle choices and discover great ways to get involved in the urban ecology." (URL: www.greenmap.org). Hence, adapting the concept for the promotion of tourism meant highlighting more of the cultural, historic and community resources and businesses and disregarding toxic and contaminated "hot spots" as well as corporations that had a reputation as polluters.

The 22nd map in the international Green Map System™, the "*Other* Map of Toronto" is the first to focus on tourism and the environment. The map provides a single source of information that links tourism to the environment and celebrates a green city.

It colourfully highlights 'green' activities (as defined by the four criteria mentioned earlier) including businesses, green spaces, ecotours, galleries and heritage sites, organic and natural food stores, sustainable transportation options and more. In total, approximately 375 businesses and attractions are featured on the map.

- The map concept appealed to all levels of government and industry and the majority of funding/ sponsorship was raised through these avenues. In addition to funding, a broad market was reached including multiple levels of industry, government as well as tourists and residents. The map was launched by the city's mayor prime tourist season and marketing included media kits and drops, press releases and teasers to top North American travel writers in addition to attending many events. Distribution took place at all key entrance points to the city, tourist information sites, map featured sites, civic centres, the internet, and many events and conferences.

Because of the wide appeal and the unique concept, the map was a success as seen through the following:

- Total indirect & direct reach of the map (as of

October 31, 1999) equalled over 2.7 million people;

- PR value of over \$38,000 was received in the first 6 months;
- 29 media articles were received (print, radio, television)*;
- Readership of media amounted to over 2,200,000;
- Over ½ of the maps produced were distributed within the first two weeks;
- Requests ranged from local to as far away as from Australia and Turkey;
- Figures show that 8% of tourist inquiries at visitor information sites asked for green information or a copy of the map.

Through the map, a better understanding of the linkages between tourism and the environment, and conservation and marketing was identified. It demonstrated a reconciliation of 'green' or environmental habits to the industry through environmentally responsible action. Long-term viability and access to all are some of the main benefits of urban green tourism. The map provided positive benefit through a number of areas:

1. **Awareness** –

- Local small businesses received international exposure that an individual marketing effort could not afford;
- Residents and tourist awareness level of Toronto's 'green' options were increased as the map provided one collective source of ecotourism information in the city;
- International exposure to the concept of urban green tourism was seen through the variety of media articles and requests for further urban green tourism information by tourist offices and academic institutes;
- Overall awareness of environmental issues and projects being undertaken by the city as a whole (the map brought to the foreground many issues such as smog, pollution, urban

* There is a high probability that this number is a low estimate as a large percentage of press was not traced

sprawl, protection of natural and heritage sites,

tourism marketing, etc.).

2. **Reach** – the maps produced were free thereby making them accessible to a wide variety of target markets
3. **Accessibility** – all key information for explorers was in one source. The map provided background information, tips to be green, contact phone numbers, addresses, descriptions and more.
4. **Expansion** - the Green Tourism Association had multiple requests for additional information and overall exposure and further funding options led to the expansion of the organization and many new or expanded projects (membership, newsletters, web site and on-line resource center, green tourist guide book, and event and conference attendance and presentations)
5. **Enhanced corporate image** – businesses and tourist industry's corporate 'green' or environmentally conscious image was enhanced through their relationship to the map
6. **Partnership** – the collection of information and also distribution reinforced and developed partnerships between existing 'green' efforts in the city and the map provided a reliable collective source of information.

Conclusion

“It makes sense to use the fact that 'green' sells for marketing purposes, but only when the product labelling conforms with both consumer expectations and industry standards” (Wight, 1993, p.6). The 'green' concept allows the tourism industry to improve its image and practices while continuing a commercial profit strategy. If 'greening' is used solely for image purposes, rather than an approach adopted in practice, the very landscape, culture and heritage that provides the initial attractions will disappear.

To date there has been little marketing and

education directed at urban tourists about supporting a sustainable environment. The map provided a collective source of information that was appealing, unique and useful. As many of the 21 million tourists who visit Toronto are using the city as a gateway to other destinations, successfully marketing the concept of sustainability to visitors will hopefully influence tourists behaviour on other destinations visited. The Green Tourism Association has demonstrated the challenges of incorporating the concept of urban green tourism and the values of ecotourism with the principals of marketing. The positive conclusion of the green map was evident through its aim to conserve the resources on which the product is based.

Six key strategies are therefore recommended when marketing ecotourism products:

1. **Broad distribution** – your product must be accessible to your market through as many key locations as possible. Systems to facilitate both distribution and tracking should be set up in advance;
2. **Partnership development** – Many environmental or tourism agencies share a common goal of awareness. Contact anyone who may be linked to the tourism/environmental industry and show them your game plan, many will have contacts to share or facilities already set up that can be adopted in exchange for marketing or media attention.
3. **Show bottom line** – Small and large businesses need to see a return on investment. Marketing initiatives have to focus on exposure for all avenues of this niche market and how the product or campaign will ultimately bring more visitors through their doors.
4. **Ownership** – Green sells! Doing a good deed such as recycling, promoting local culture or heritage, buying locally made products etc will go a long way. Make your customers and business associates buy-in and get ownership of the ‘green’ idea so that they in turn will market themselves and ultimately you in this

positive light.

5. **User friendly products** – ‘eco’ marketing can be converting the converted (those who already undertake green activities or support your mission). To convert the ‘other’ customers, make sure you provide products that give your customer easy options and alternatives that require little effort on their part to adapt or undertake.
6. **Practice what you preach** – the organization should be seen to be environmentally and culturally sensitive, not just promote this to others. All promotional materials should be made to the highest environmental standards possible, e.g. 100% post consumer recycling content, recycled and/or vegetable ink, etc. In addition, staff should be knowledgeable in environmental as well as tourism matters.

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