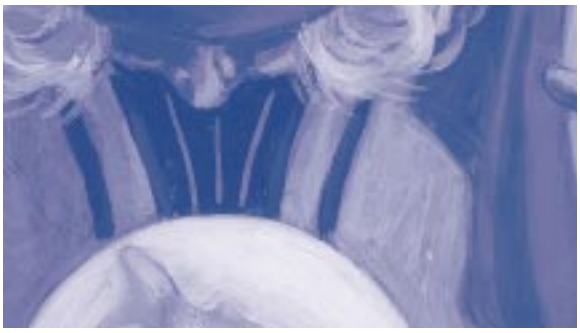

Planning for Ecotourism on the Coast of Maine

by Natalie Springuel

Ecotourism, or nature-related travel, is one of the fastest growing types of the tourism. This is particularly good news for Maine, a state rich in scenery and outdoor recreation opportunities. However, as Natalie Springuel cautions, without good planning and good management, the impacts of ecotourism may harm the very resources that make it viable. Springuel describes four elements of good ecotourism planning and management that came to the fore during a recent set of interviews with ecotourism guides, environmental advocates, and tourism promoters. While Springuel endorses the growth in Maine's ecotourism industry, at some point, she argues, it will be up to the people of Maine to decide how much of a good thing is too much.

INTRODUCTION

By 2010, tourism is projected to be the world's largest service industry. Tourism activities cover a broad spectrum, including visits to museums and historic sites, fall foliage tours, relaxation at "B&Bs," outdoor recreation at national and state parks, and even shopping in places such as Freeport, Maine. Yet of these myriad activities, "nature-related travel" has been consistently among the most popular. It appears that travelers, be they boaters, beachgoers, hikers, or bird watchers, want to spend their time in nature—they want to be ecotourists.

Even more evident is the trend toward adventure travel. According to "The Adventure Travel Report, 1997," over a five-year span in the mid-1990s, 46% of adults in the United States took a "soft" adventure vacation, involving activities such as sailing, skiing, camping, or biking; sixteen percent took a "hard" adventure vacation, involving activities such as mountain climbing, whitewater rafting/kayaking, or sea kayaking.[1]

Nowhere is this trend more evident than along Maine's coast: Seventy percent of tourism expenditures in Maine are on the coast,[2] with the vast majority of tourists visiting the southern coast and greater Portland regions.[3] Direct use of the Gulf of Maine for recreational activities, such as sea kayaking, whale watching, and cruising, has been growing steadily[4] and, in the last five years, use of the public islands off Maine's coast has grown by 40%.[5] Recently, the Office of Tourism reported that 24% of visitors to Maine take part in some form of ecotourism activity that involves hiring a local guide.[6] Moreover, according to Nat Bowditch, Associate Director of the Maine Office of Tourism, "ecotourism didn't exist as a visible market trend fifteen years ago. While it was certainly happening, it didn't have a label. But today there is a whole market out there." Clearly, Maine has established a niche in the ecotourism industry.

With declining opportunities in Maine's traditional fisheries, few would disagree that this is a good trend. Indeed, at face value, nothing seems more simple than growing an ecotourism industry. Unlike other forms of tourism, which may require substantial initial investment to, for example, renovate a museum, restore an historic site, or build a resort complex, there is no comparable up-front cost to providing nature. So, the theory goes, one simply needs to point ecotourists in the direction of the beach, give them directions to the trailhead, or send them down to the local boat landing from which they can launch their sea kayaks. Yet is giving tourists access to nature all that ecotourism is about?

The Ecotourism Society, the nation's leading organization on the topic, defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people."[7] This is a tall order and one that suggests ecotourists will leave no trace other than their dollars in the regions they visit. However, the reality is that ecotourists (and their guides) do leave traces, impacts that may be good or bad. Ideally, the impacts of ecotourism include life-enhancing experiences for tourists, increased revenue for local tour guides and communities, and heightened conservation and preservation of the environment. However, taken to the other extreme, the impacts may include a degraded environment, a

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loss of local community culture and traditions, the exploitation of people and the environment, and poor visitor experiences. Further complicating the picture is the fact that the determination of benefit versus harm to a region, its people, or to the ecotourists who visit, is hard, if not nearly impossible, to gauge.

This article looks at some of Maine's recent efforts to promote coastal ecotourism opportunities. It asks whether we are planning well for a future that promises both an increased demand for and increased supply of coastal ecotourism opportunities. It loosely summarizes a recent set of interviews with ecotourism providers, state and local tourism promoters, educators, and environmental conservationists working for either state government or nonprofit organizations. The purpose of the interviews was to explore current best practices in ecotourism planning; this article highlights these practices so they may form the basis of future ecotourism planning along Maine's coast.

THE ELEMENTS OF GOOD ECOTOURISM PLANNING

Element One

Partnerships between state government and private/nonprofit organizations are vital to carrying out tasks such as educating the public, monitoring the ecological health of heavily visited areas, and implementing restoration and habitat protection plans.

State agencies, nonprofit organizations, and commercial outfitters each have unique missions that often preclude strategies outside their realm of experience or effectiveness. When any one of these entities is left to the job of managing a resource as multifaceted as Maine's coastal resources, the job sometimes falls short, particularly in resource protection. On the other hand, when various entities share their expertise, they are often able to develop comprehensive management plans that support a spectrum of stakeholders.

For example, 1,500 of the more than 3,000 islands off the coast of Maine fall under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Parks and Lands. Approximately forty of these islands are co-operatively managed by the Maine Island Trail Association (MITA), a non-profit organization that strives to model thoughtful use and volunteer stewardship of the Maine islands. Because the bureau lacks the resources to comb the islands during the busy summer season, MITA volunteers monitor island use, educate users in leave-no-trace camping techniques, and conduct island clean-ups. Looking to further extend their partnership model, the bureau and MITA are seeking new alliances with the Maine Coast Heritage Trust and other land trust organizations to purchase islands currently for sale. Essentially, the land trusts would purchase these islands, and the bureau in partnership with MITA would manage the public's use of them. As a result, the islands will be protected from development, and public access for minimum-impact recreation will be ensured.

Together, the bureau and MITA are involved in other partnerships that are smaller in scale but no less significant. For example, this past summer, the bureau and MITA partnered with The Hurricane Island Outward Bound School to construct tent platforms on Hell's Half Acre Island, which lies off the coast of Deer Isle. Tent platforms are used to prevent campsite sprawl, a problem that plagues many popular primitive camping areas throughout the country. According to the bureau's recreation specialist, Steve Spencer, it is only through partnership efforts such as this one that the bureau is able to fulfill its mandate of protecting and conserving Maine's public islands.

Element Two

The question of how much ecotourism is too much is important for every region to address. Addressing this question may entail identifying the social and ecological carrying capacities of a region and, in some cases, restricting the use of areas that are being "loved to death."

How many ecotourists can a particular ecosystem tolerate before it is negatively affected? Likewise, on any given day, how many ecotourists can share the same island or mountaintop without feeling crowded or finding the presence of one another annoying? These types of questions are often lumped together under the title "carrying capacity," which is a tricky and

controversial measuring stick used by natural resource and recreation managers throughout the world.

Karen Stimpson, Executive Director of the Maine Island Trail Association, distinguishes between two types of carrying capacities. Social carrying capacity is the point at which a person's experience is marred by the presence of too many other people. When this point is reached is quite subjective and dependent on any number of factors, including a tourist's culture, experience, age, and expectations. The second type of carrying capacity is perhaps more easily measured: Ecological carrying capacity refers to the maximum number of people who can use a natural area before significant harm to the ecosystem occurs. On islands, evidence of significant harm includes bank erosion, vegetation trampling, habitat destruction, and campsite creep. Vast amounts of funding have been poured into identifying ecological carrying capacities in other areas of the country but, as Stimpson points out, the social limit of an area is often reached first.

Last winter, the Bureau of Parks and Lands and MITA enlisted the help of island "stakeholders" to set specific carrying capacities for Maine's public islands (essentially, the maximum number of people recommended for each island on any given night). The stakeholders included tour guides, outfitters, island owners, schooner captains, conservationists, and many others. Rarely have stakeholders been given the opportunity to play such a large and direct role in the creation of a management plan.

Likewise, the implementation of the island capacity plan is equally innovative. Capacity guidelines are voluntary, and enforcement is left solely in the hands of users. Island users who did not participate in the plan's creation (or who missed the ongoing public education campaign) found, this past summer, signs erected on each public island urging users to adhere to the individual island's carrying capacity. The capacities, however, are intentionally left unenforced. As such, they represent an experiment not only in ecotourism management but also in human nature. If the effort succeeds, it may well set a new standard in managing recreational impact. Summer 2000 marked the first season these guidelines were in place. The bureau, MITA, and island stakeholders are currently evaluating the results; thus far, feedback has been positive and non-compliance apparently minimal.

Element Three

Establishing volunteer guidelines for ecotourism operators and their customers may be one of the most effective means of promoting a "leave no trace" or "green" ethic. Ultimately, this is critical to ensuring that the natural resources attracting ecotourists today, remain attractive to future generations.

It is important to distinguish between regulations and guidelines. At the federal level, the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act protects whales and other sea mammals from harassment. Regulations such as these define a legal minimum standard of acceptable behavior. In other words, such regulations promulgate basic standards to regulate all people's behavior on a select, few topics. Similarly, guidelines are intended to promote certain standards in behavior; however, guidelines are usually voluntary, and more typically used to promote best practices (as opposed to minimum standards). In the ecotourism industry, the use of voluntary guidelines to promote a "leave-no-trace" or "green" ethic is seen as a way of influencing not only the behavior of guides and outfitters, but also of ecotourists themselves.

For example, while federal regulatory standards dictate the minimum distance between marine vessels and whales, the "code of ethics" among Maine's whale-watch tour operators is also based on courtesy, common sense, and education. According to Steve

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DESTINY 2000

Held up as a national model by The Ecotourism Society, the nation's leading organization on the topic, Destiny 2000—the Downeast Sustainable Tourism Initiative for the Year 2000—is the result of four years of planning and research conducted by the Vacationland Resources Committee of the Downeast Resource Conservation and Development Council of Cherryfield, Maine. The plan calls for expansion of the region's cultural and nature-based tourism opportunities. Recognizing that the vibrancy of such tourism depends on the quality of the region's cultural and natural experiences, and that tourism can be a destructive force when not properly managed, Destiny 2000 focuses on strategies that conserve local natural resources, preserve cultural heritage, and promote sustainable regional economic development.

Development of the plan arose out of a collaborative process involving many of the region's visionary leaders. As many of the plan's creators will admit, the hard part is yet to come; it is only through regional partnerships among public, private, and nonprofit entities, and a strong measure of local entrepreneurial initiative, that many of the plan's strategies will be realized. Still, as Stephanie Clement of Friends of Acadia states, "Destiny 2000 provides focus to what otherwise might be seen as a set of disjointed efforts to promote the region's cultural and nature-based experiences."

The comprehensiveness and sheer ambition of Destiny 2000 lie in its sixty strategies, categorized under five goals: economic development, ecological conservation, cultural distinctiveness, education, and local coordination. Examples of the actions called for by Destiny 2000 include:

- Explore opportunities for "agri-business" as supplemental income for smaller family farms.
- Further improve Route 1 and side roads; establish scenic by-ways; make such corridors more accessible to cyclists.
- Expand opportunities for guided back-packing tours along rivers and trails.

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Katona, President of the College of the Atlantic and founder of Allied Whale, a leading marine mammal research organization, "Ecotour operators have a vested interest in not harassing animals, and many tour operators have been tremendously involved in the process of identifying safe practices for whale-watching vessels. They've also been heavily involved in educating ecotourists; tour boat captains post their guidelines in places where customers can read them and then monitor the boat's behavior around whales. It's also expected that a naturalist will be on board to narrate the tour with information about whale ecology."

Katona estimates that whale watching may be the state's second largest draw, after the park system, for ecotourists. "Public education," he asserts, "is what brought the idea of whale protection and preservation to the fore. After whale hunting was stopped, the whale watching industry, as well as the ecotourists who traveled with them, played an important role in promoting further protective measures. I believe that whales and other marine mammals have benefited substantially as a result of the rise of responsible whale watching."

The effort to promote voluntary guidelines also has been adopted by the Maine Association of Sea Kayak Guides and Instructors (MASKGI). MASKGI is a fledgling trade organization that was formed to provide a unified voice for the state's sea kayaking industry. From its inception, MASKGI has been unique in its involvement in the management and conservation of the resource it utilizes most—the Maine islands. MASKGI members have signed onto a shared code of environmental and safety standards. They agree to train their clients in the principals of minimum impact, which ranges from how to avoid disturbing seals that are hauled out on ledges to the more draconian, such as carrying out human waste. Last winter, members of MASKGI agreed to provide each other with their respective guide itineraries to ensure that they would not bring clients to the same islands at the same time. According to Matthew Levin, Outdoor School Director of Rockport's Maine Sport Outfitters and President of MASKGI, these efforts seem to be working. This year, outfitters also agreed to reduce their group sizes in adherence with the social carrying capacities described earlier. In exchange, MASKGI members are recognized as leaders in the island-use management process.

Element Four

Local entrepreneurship is critical to growing a sustainable ecotourism industry. Successful ecotourism projects in the private sector involve local business owners creating innovative ways to tap into the growing ecotourism market using some resources they already possess as well as finding new ones.

People who have lived on the coast for generations have become quite adept at patching together a living from a variety of projects, depending on the season. According to Debbie Metzler, Project Manager of Incubator Without Walls, a program offered by Eastern Maine Development Corporation, many of these folks have been involved in ecotourism projects for a number of generations without knowing to call it that.

A few examples: A former downeast lobsterman now takes tourists out to learn all about lobstering. A winter scallop dragger retrofits his boat each summer to take clients deep sea fishing. Bar Harbor's former harbor master teaches tourists about undersea life by broadcasting live footage on a screen on the deck of his boat from a video camera carried by a scuba diver below.

As Stephanie Clement, Conservation Director of Friends of Acadia explains, the challenge for these folks is to distinguish themselves from more traditional tourism ventures and establish a unique marketing identity. Clement and others involved in the Downeast Sustainable Tourism Initiative (DESTINY 2000) are working with local businesses to establish Washington and Hancock counties as unique destinations full of opportunities for ecotourists. "Currently, I do not think we are fully taking advantage of everything we have to offer to tourists who come here."

Indeed, in light of changes in fisheries on the coast of Maine, tourism is often touted as a viable alternative for displaced fishermen. But it is not an easy road. Fishermen may possess a boat and vast knowledge of the ocean, but difficulties involved in crossing from a traditional industry, such as fishing, into a public relations industry, such as tourism, are not to be underestimated. As a tourism business, you need to create a marketing strategy and make sure your brochures reach potential customers. If the business is boat-based, the appropriate licenses are required by the Coast Guard. How will customers find your boats? Where will they

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- Help resolve the deliberations over how to use the Calais Branch Railroad right-of-way so that this passage from Brewer to Calais can become a productive asset to the region, as a railway, trail, or both.
- Create and distribute low-impact hiking and camping brochures at trail heads, guide and outfitter businesses, etc.
- Assist entrepreneurs to develop and market packaged ecotourism experiences to encourage longer stays and involvement in a broader range of activities and sites.
- Promote the University of Maine at Machias and College of the Atlantic as convention centers.
- Design voluntary certification programs and ethical conduct codes for ecotourism guides.
- Identify natural areas with the potential for recreational use and conduct an inventory of such areas, emphasizing especially fragile lands and unique habitats requiring special restrictions related to ecological carrying capacity.
- Provide the National Trust for Historic Preservation workshop, "Your Town: Designing Its Future," for municipal leaders to assist with land-use planning.
- Work with the Passamaquoddy Tribe to incorporate local Native American heritage into tourism plans, and seek funds for the Waponahki Museum and Cultural Center renovation at Pleasant Point.
- Develop and promote cultural attractions/destinations across the region, e.g., Quoddy Maritime Museum, Calais Natural Heritage Center, Abbe Museum, Craig Brook Salmon Museum, etc.
- Expand interpretation related to St. Croix Island International Historic Site.
- Develop an inventory of professional guides, restaurants, hotels, and attractions to all tourism-related businesses to maximize regional cross-selling. (The 1997 tourism-oriented inventories funded by the Sunrise County Economic Council could be expanded.)

buy their tickets? As Metzler states, "The easy part is coming up with a good idea, the hard part is managing the business." And there is of course a great learning curve. Metzler adds, "You have to learn to trap tourists rather than trapping lobsters."

Sometimes, it takes thinking outside the box to find ways to match ecotourists with existing businesses. These businesses may not be considered typical ecotourism ventures, yet they can take advantage of a growing market trend by offering services all tourists need or may want.

Author Lee Bumsted has enabled this process to happen quite smoothly for a number of business owners and tourists alike with her book *Hot Showers! Maine Coast Lodgings for Kayakers and Sailors. Hot Showers!,* which includes B&Bs, inns, and campgrounds has a greater goal than squeaky-clean boaters. It provides alternatives to camping on primitive islands, an activity that is widely considered as having more of an impact than simply day use. It draws boaters into towns where they contribute to the local economy in many of the usual tourist ways. Not only do they stay at shoreside accommodations, but they also eat in restaurants, buy gifts, shop for groceries, and of course visit the local hardware or marine store for those always necessary repair items. Boaters can leave their cars, and often their trailers, at most lodgings. This reduces congestion at put-in sites, which, in the end, helps to reduce the friction between traditional users and the recreating public. These were Bumsted's goals in writing the book, and feedback has been great. Several lodgings and campgrounds have reported increased reservations as a result of the book.

With *Hot Showers!* Bumsted found one market, weary boaters with a desire for a bit more comfort than a tent, and matched it with another market, B&B, inn, and campground owners in search of expanding their customer base. The result is a little less use on the islands and a little more income for the towns. Bumsted may not have intended her guidebook to be an ecotourism prototype, but it certainly meets a lot of criteria for good planning, such as complementing or enhancing existing businesses through the added market incentives provided by ecotourists.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Ecotourism is a term widely bandied about these days. The traveling public wants nature. Tour operators the world over are jumping on the trend by selling nature and touting their product as ecotourism. But the effects of selling nature are more complex than the effects of selling a plane ticket or a cheap souvenir. In order to successfully achieve the vision of sustainable tourism, planning processes must integrate elements of conservation, education, and economics.

In this article, we have examined a number of examples of successful ecotourism initiatives on the coast of Maine. They may not call it ecotourism but tour operators, non-profits, state agencies, and small business owners throughout the coast are accepting the challenge of planning for long-term sustainability.

Long-term sustainability, however, is predicated on good data, something that is lacking in the big picture of ecotourism on the Maine coast. "The importance of the coast in tourism and recreation is widely appreciated, but very poorly measured," says a report by the Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment.[4] The problem lies in the difficulty of quantifying economic return from things like viewing scenic vistas or strolling along the beach, and statistics tend to be buried in employment, retail, and restaurant data. This should not be taken lightly, the council stresses, because tourism and recreation may very well be the coastal region's most important economic activity and, with "all of the landslide development associated with tourism and recreation, [it is] one of the major sources of changes affecting the ecological resources of the region." Given the propensity of promoting tourism as the region's economic golden goose, it is widely understood that analysis of the market and the market's effect on the resource and local community would provide a foundation for successful long-term planning to take place.

As Clement states, "Unfortunately, because there is such a long history of tourism in the state, there is an attitude that tourism will take care of itself. People think that tourists will come, no matter what. A lot of it has to do with the legislature recognizing that

tourism is not a free thing. There is some cost associated with planning and protecting the resources you are marketing."

The need for research and planning is gaining acceptance in a variety of tourism arenas. The Saco Bay Planning Committee, for example, has stated that tourism information would help to determine the importance of southern Maine beaches to the region's economy. In order to effectively manage beaches, the committee goes so far as to recommend "a rigorous study of the economic impact of tourism to each of the beaches in Saco Bay."[8] Once the information is in hand, then planning can take place for growth that taps Maine into the increasing demand for nature-related activities while keeping local negative impacts low.

The ecotourism planning process is just beginning. The fraction of groups and individuals who prioritize the principles of ecotourism in their projects and business ventures is minute compared to the behemoth that is tourism in Maine. How can we expand on these few examples to reach a wider audience? What are the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead?

One of the greatest challenges faced by ecotourism planners lies in having their message heard by those not currently involved in the process, both in state and out: the camp groups, Boy Scout troops, outfitters, tour operators and countless others who either live out of Maine or simply don't know there has even been a planning process. Stronger partnerships between those that manage the coastal resources and those that sell their use to the public would go a long way toward educating the public about responsible tourism. Perhaps Maine's Office of Tourism could add a more visible environmental ethic to their marketing strategy. They are the best source, in all the materials they send out of state, to reach beyond the choir.

This could be done in a number of ways that would enhance the Office of Tourism's goal of creating an appealing image of Maine: a beautiful setting where experiences in nature can meet all the goals of a visitor. Some examples: a rating system could be created to classify tour operators on a scale with components such as contribution to local economy, involvement in planning, and voluntary guideline adherence. Tourists could be provided with a list of questions they might ask potential tour guides to help determine which ones measure up to standards of responsible tourism ventures, such as employing registered Maine guides who are trained in minimum impact and safety. The Office of Tourism and other marketing organizations—such as chambers of commerce—could include in their literature information about what it takes to be a responsible tourist in Maine. Such examples would show potential tourists that Mainers care about their coast and their communities, factors that only make the state more appealing for a visit.

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Maine, because of its pristine setting, will continue to attract entrepreneurs who come specifically to tap into the nature-related tourism market. This group is often at an economic and educational advantage compared to local folks. The challenge will be to find ways to enhance the options for local individuals or existing businesses by providing necessary start-up funds and

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training to tap into the growing demand for nature activities.

Ecotourism is still a new concept with a variety of new challenges. Planners, tour operators and those attempting to enter the business have a lot to learn. How about creating an ecotourism module to assist people who are new to the business? Courses could be taught at universities and through adult education programs. Current job retraining initiatives could be expanded by offering ecotourism as a viable option. The advantage of an expanding ecotourism market is that the financial ripple effect of nature-lovers often also reaches restaurants, inns, and gift shops.

Finally, it all boils down to vision. Given the global trends in tourism, the people of Maine will eventually be faced with deciding how much is too much, no matter how well planned. Maine's tourism vision should be mapped out, or we place at risk the very qualities tourists seek in this state. Historically, Maine has relied on serendipity and a good dose of marketing to take care of tourism. Indeed, the tourists will probably keep coming; it is what they do when they get here that is up to us to decide.

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