

Cultural and Heritage Tourism

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Introduction

Creating the Spirit of Community: Cultural and Heritage Tourism was held on November 15 at Western Carolina University. Approximately 300 community leaders, tourism practitioners, faculty, citizens, and students attended. The conference was sponsored by the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, Advantage West, the City of Asheville, and the Western Carolina University Public Policy Institute with funding coming from the Horowitz Foundation. In addition to listening to leaders speak on the critical elements of cultural and heritage tourism as related to Western North Carolina participants were invited to participate in a concluding policy discussion. In addition, 83 of the conference attendees filled out an extensive survey of closed and open-ended tourism policy questions. Results of the policy discussion and survey will help the region prepare for the future in the area of cultural and heritage tourism. According to conference participants, tourism needs to be recognized as an important industry in North Carolina. Public, private, and nonprofit sector actors must work to address tourism in the region. Many participants expressed the idea that strategies for preserving the heritage, cultures, and environmental beauty of the region must be more systematically developed as tourism becomes an increasingly important part of the regional economy. For example, while 30 percent of those responding to the survey thought governments in Western Carolina were doing enough to promote cultural and heritage tourism, a majority (61 percent) felt governments were not doing enough. This response indicates support for governments to do more in the area of cultural and heritage tourism. Further, while 32 percent of those surveyed thought there was a balance between tourism and economic development in the region, 58 percent did not feel there was an appropriate balance between tourism and economic development. More balance between tourism and economic development seems to be a priority in the region.

A Regional Approach to Tourism

In developing a more systematic strategy between tourism and economic development those participating shared a number of ideas:

1. Governmental agencies and communities need to incorporate tourism into economic development plans. Cultural and heritage tourism are important to building and maintaining a sense of community and these enterprises need to be

prioritized. Governments should also consider strategies to increase the number of attractions for tourists. Most conference participants thought governments played an important role in promoting cultural and heritage tourism by assisting the development of new attractions, providing tax incentives, and cooperating with businesses to promote cultural and historical events. Providing a legal framework for maintaining clean air and environmental protection legislation were other areas that were seen as important governmental functions by participants at the conference. In addition, governmental agencies and universities need to play a greater role in tourism research. Many participants emphasized the importance of historical research. Cooperative websites on the culture and heritage of the region were considered a priority area by some participants. These websites could link tourist destinations across the region. Those at the conference also emphasized quality cultural and heritage tourism over sheer numbers.

2. The need for greater cooperation between counties, towns, government agencies, businesses, and nonprofit groups was another theme expressed by conference attendees. While communities need to proceed with their own plans on cultural and heritage tourism, many participants expressed a desire to coordinate planning and share information. A major priority expressed by many conference participants was that North Carolina should not be a "drive through state." Working together, government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits could create multiple destinations with tourists staying longer in the mountains. Some participants recommended packaging the area as a week-long destination. Other attendees prioritized the promotion of year round tourism.

3. Some participants thought each county should have a certified historic preservation commission with a professional historian. Another idea was to involve local history teachers in studying local history. Participants agreed that historical and cultural sites need to be identified and incorporated into planning decisions. In addition, historians need to become more involved in this process. Finally, cultural, heritage, craft, art festivals, music events would all benefit from local government promotion.

4. More funding for cultural and heritage events by local, regional, and state entities was suggested. There was also a desire to see a higher level of foundation support for these events. Increased funding is especially important for building preservation and maintenance of historical and heritage elements in the community. Some participants thought state funding and support from national foundations was not as prevalent in this region and suggested an equalization of funding for cultural and heritage priorities. Some attendees suggested the need for more tax incentives for historical preservation and the promotion of community cultural activities.

5. As cultural and heritage tourism expands, public participation and education initiatives should also increase. Understanding the need to preserve and restore

unique architectural features of a community was thought to be important. Music and art need to be prioritized in the region and high school history classes and university students need to become more involved in historical preservation. Partnerships between government and private sector organizations can increase awareness of cultural and heritage tourism. Sister city relationships between cities in other states need to be developed to share information.

Environmental Protection is Critical

One of the strongest areas of agreement at the conference was the importance of the environment in the area of cultural and heritage tourism. Of those surveyed, 95 percent thought protecting the environment was an important part of cultural and heritage tourism. Only 5 percent of respondents thought it not to be important. Participants at the conference made several suggestions concerning the environment.

1. Promoting ecotourism was a predominate theme. Ecotourism is derived from ecology and suggests tourism that is ecologically sensitive and environmentally friendly. Natural beauty is a major asset for the region and ecotourism has limited environmental impact.

2. Ensuring clean air and water was a major recommendation. There was strong support for clean air and clean water legislation.

3. Many participants' related sustainability and ecotourism to the need for land use planning to prevent sprawl and protect historic sites and natural beauty. Attendees emphasized the need to sustain what attracts people to the region. There will be no tourism in the future if we do not preserve our communities and environment. Maintaining and promoting opportunities for unique local businesses were considered important in preserving the uniqueness of our communities. Low interest loans for new small businesses were suggested.

4. Emphasis on local natural building materials, preserving historical sights and buildings, local history, music and culture were thought to be environmentally critical. Local crafts, folklore, local music, local museums, and learning centers were all areas that participants indicated as important.

5. Several participants emphasized restrictions on bill boards to preserve the beauty of the region.

6. Promoting agritourism was an important priority for some at the conference. An agritourism business is frequently a farm operating for the enjoyment and education of the public. Some suggested more farm tours, farm related festivals, farm museums, community fairs, petting zoos, and horseback riding facilities. Others emphasized camping and hiking opportunities. All of these areas prioritize

local traditions and agricultural values-important components of the region's history.

Unique Factors of Current Period

One of the final areas the conference addressed was the threat of terrorism and economic recession. Participants in the survey were asked to make suggestions in dealing with these problems. A general consensus seemed to emerge that Western North Carolina is in an advantageous position on cultural, heritage, and nature based tourism. Participants emphasized the safety of the area and the fact that most visitors to Western North Carolina drive to the area. Many participants thought we needed to be more proactive in this period of economic slowdown and terrorist uncertainty. The entire region needs to work together with governments, chambers of commerce, businesses, universities, and nonprofits to promote tourism. Some elements of this pro-active plan were as follows.

1. The safety of the region needs to be stressed during the month's ahead and marketing needs to prioritize areas within a four hour driving range. Atlanta and other metropolitan markets within driving range were considered by many to be important markets.
2. Tour groups need to be more available in this time period with tours that emphasize multiple attractions across the region.
3. During this period some thought a focus on safety, family, traditional values, history, local skills and serene secluded areas with natural beauty should be highlighted.
4. Others emphasized that this unique period will require more local planning and regional cooperation.
5. Regional efforts as well as state efforts to promote tourism in the mountains are more important during this period of greater difficulty.

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