

Research Reports

Mitigating encroachment of park experiences: Sustainable tourism in gateway communities

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Introduction

The National Park Service's obligation to balance visitor use and enjoyment of parks with resource preservation, along with the overarching need to maintain relevance with the American public, gives credence to a concept known as sustainable tourism. Holistic in nature, sustainable tourism is an approach to tourism development that fosters deliberate and strategic regard for the social, natural, and economic environments of a community (including the park). Park managers may use and encourage sustainable tourism principles to safeguard resources while enhancing the marketability of the destination's cultural and natural characteristics.

This article provides park managers with a comprehensive definition of sustainable tourism and key principles that differentiate this approach from that of unsustainable (mass) tourism. Given that park gateway communities—particularly in rural areas—increasingly look to tourism to enhance their economic potential, parks are exposed to threats: gateway communities that demonstrate unsustainable characteristics can dilute both the NPS brand and visitor experiences in parks. This justifies a mutually beneficial approach: sustainable tourism. Using sustainable tourism principles and the management and marketing tools derived from them, park managers will be better equipped to provide education and leadership to tourism partners.

Definition and principles

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism is “tourism which leads to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems.” In addition, this type of development is described as a process that meets the needs of present tourism and host communities while protecting and enhancing needs in the future (Shah et al. 2002). It places great emphasis on mitigating negative impacts of tourism while maximizing positive growth, diversity, and equitable distribution of benefits among all stakeholders.

Sustainable tourism requires a multidimensional approach to cultivating equilibrium between growth and capacity. It adds incentive to preserve ecology and to increase community livability and community self-worth. Financial benefits include increases

Abstract

There is a misperception that the National Park Service has no or little connection to the tourism community and that what goes on outside parks can be left to gateway communities to be decided without park managers' influence. This approach can prove detrimental to both park resources and visitor experiences. Since the president issued an executive order to highlight and increase visitation to America's public lands and to enhance job growth, the urgency to engage the tourism community has been heightened. Additionally, the increased recognition of park tourism as a form of community economic stimulus presents the Service with opportunities to become more involved with decision making at the local, state, and national levels. This article presents a perspective that the relationship between parks and the tourism community is interconnected in resource management responsibilities and stewardship. In this case, resource management is expressed in socioeconomic, cultural, and ecological terms. These elements are key in the discussion of balancing tourism growth in gateway communities with their respective capacity to host visitors. Four studies reviewed here demonstrate empirical evidence suggesting a potential equilibrium of economic activity and preservation in gateway communities. Furthermore, park visitors mixing park perceptions with experiences outside parks can be detrimental to park resources. Nevertheless, tools for mitigating negative impacts of tourism are available, so that good resource management practices align with socioeconomic goals.

Key words

authenticity, economics, enjoyment, experience, incentives

in public revenue from local products, goods, and services. Moreover, the community presents its unique character, folklore, customs, and heritage.

Contrary to a mass tourism approach, which often demonstrates minimal regard for local natural and cultural experiences, the principles of sustainable tourism require that tourism development consider factors such as the special attributes of the community; the status of current infrastructure; benefits that exceed costs; and improvements in social, ecological, and economic conditions as prerequisites to development (fig. 1). This method requires community engagement and therefore must include citizens, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and national, state, and local governments. In other words, the community becomes a

partner initially and permanently in an ongoing, sustainable tourism development process.

Geotourism is a form of sustainable tourism that has been gaining traction in the National Park System, particularly in western states. Geotourism is defined as “an emerging niche market within sustainable tourism and is centered on sustaining and enhancing the geographical character of a place” (Stokes et al. 2003). In 2008 the National Park Service, along with other Department of the Interior bureaus, the USDA Forest Service, and National Geographic Society, signed an agreement to promote geotourism on federal and Indian lands.

A study conducted by the U.S. Travel Association and National Geographic Society helped to define the principles of geotourism and found that stakeholder engagement, particularly from local residents, is a valued component of its development. Specifically, a finding of the study indicated that 99% of the 3,608 respondents agreed that local people should be included in any tourism planning process; 96% felt that tourism must contribute to the integrity of the community; 95% agreed tourism must build cultural pride within a community. At the same time, 91% expressed concern that tourism could have negative impacts on a community if not implemented correctly. These findings help support an argument for the adoption of sustainable tourism principles in the National Park System.

In the context of the National Park Service (NPS), the concept of sustainable tourism and its guiding principles can be used to include gateway communities in tourism development and safeguard “NPS brand” characteristics and park experiences. The term “gateway community” can be interpreted in two ways: as communities of place and as communities of interest. Typically, both are self-defined. Communities of place are significant to parks because of their location, often contiguous with park boundaries. An example of a gateway community of place is Mariposa County and Yosemite National Park (California). Alternatively, communities of interest claim a connection to the park, such as Las Vegas (Nevada), as a gateway to Grand Canyon National Park (Arizona).

In both communities of place and communities of interest, issues may arise that demonstrate the value of embracing a sustainable tourism approach. In the case of Las Vegas, characteristics of this destination are unlike those of Grand Canyon and may contribute to a disconnect between the park and the community. Regarding gateway communities of place, which are connected to parks and used as an entry portal and for commercial services, excessive development of commercial areas may reduce visitor utility and mischaracterize the NPS brand.

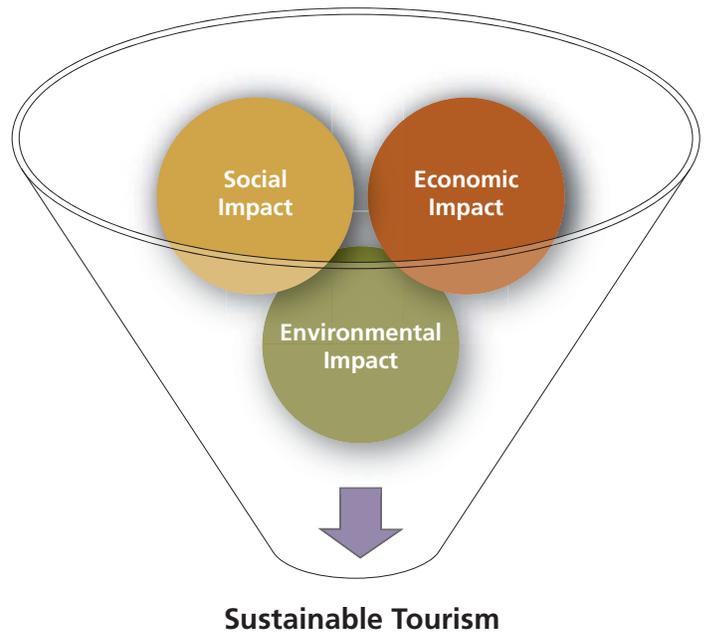


Figure 1. The illustration demonstrates the nexus among social, environmental, and economic considerations that make up sustainable tourism.

Park experience encroachment

“Over the past several decades it has become increasingly evident that parks cannot survive as ‘islands,’ and that activities and conditions outside the park boundaries affect the management of resources within them” (Steer and Chambers 1998). The park and neighboring communities are interdependent where the shared goal is a positive visitor experience. Negative implications of tourism development in gateway communities may negatively affect the physical attributes of parks and park experiences. In addition, mass tourism affects the NPS brand, for example loss of wildlife habitat, poor air and water quality, noise and light pollution, and visual obstructions (fig. 2, next page). Indeed, park units are effective in maintaining resources within the park, but often park managers have no specific authority over development outside park boundaries. This is a concern in that many visitors choose to stay overnight in gateway communities, pass through, and seek services within them, suggesting a visitor’s overall satisfaction is contingent on combined park and gateway community experiences.

According to the NPS 2008–2009 Comprehensive Survey of the American Public (Taylor et al. 2010), 57% of park visitors stay overnight during a park visit, of whom 78% seek accommodations outside of park units. These numbers indicate a substantial segment of visitors potentially mixing perceptions of park experiences with those of the gateway communities to create an overall opinion of their trip experience. In addition, the survey

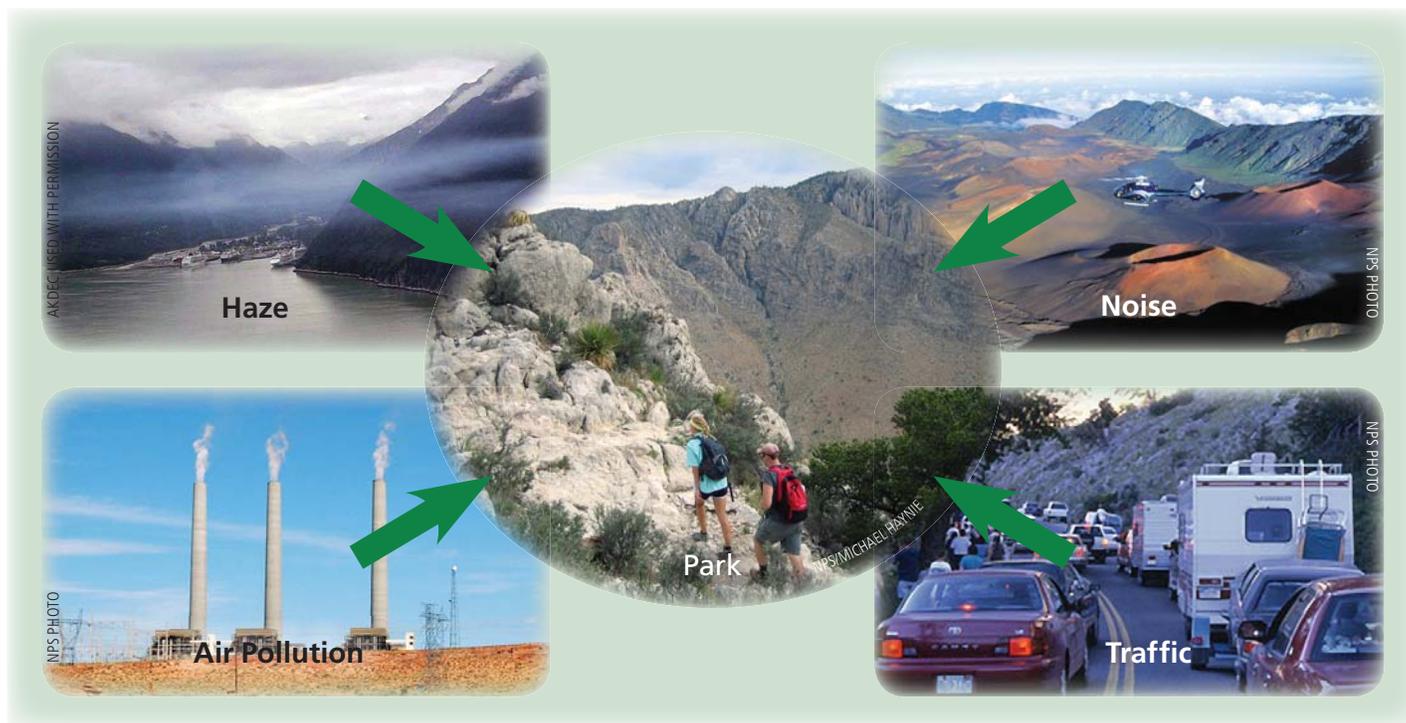


Figure 2. A variety of extraneous factors from gateway communities have the potential to affect park units.

sought responses indicating which experiences gave visitors the most satisfaction during their visit. The following percentages represent responses of “Pretty much” and “A lot”: 73% wanted to get away from noise, 70% wanted to get away from bright lights, 85% enjoyed seeing unobstructed views, and 75% enjoyed sounds of nature. Adversely, these indicators of visitor satisfaction are in jeopardy from unsustainable tourism growth in gateway communities.

Tourism as an economic driver

When visitors go to a park, they first encounter a gateway community. To meet the demands of park visitors, gateway communities supply goods, services, and infrastructure. Consequently, these communities often form the first impression of the park area. Inappropriate signage, out-of-context messages, and conflicting scenes (e.g., the commercialism of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, versus the serene views of Great Smoky Mountains National Park) may affect visitors’ experience before they even arrive at the park. Consumer expectations and environmental and cultural management challenges in the community may also affect visitor experiences. Examples are rapid growth, inappropriate land use, disregard for social norms and degradation of cultural, structural, and ecological authenticity. Thus, the way in which these amenities are developed is important for visitor perceptions of parks.

These issues are more apparent in rural communities, as they increasingly look to the tourism sector as a source of major eco-

nomic growth (Hodur et al. 2008). This is noteworthy, considering that more than 200 national park units are located in rural areas. According to a study by Reeder and Brown (2005) that examined socioeconomic trends of 311 rural communities in the 1990s, tourism and recreation development led to higher employment growth rates, earnings, and income levels.

Though the potential for unsustainable tourism lingers, rural areas have extra incentive to develop nature-based tourism, which should embrace a sustainable tourism approach. A study titled “Developing the nature-based tourism in southwestern North Dakota” revealed economic incentives to offering activities conducive to natural areas. From 1998 to 2002, tourism-sector receipts in southwestern North Dakota grew by 50%. This increase was attributed to consumers who sought vacation activities such as biking, wildlife viewing, working on a farm or ranch, participating in fossil digs, and stargazing. In the study, interview and focus group participants frequently acknowledged that Theodore Roosevelt National Park was a key contributor to the region’s success. Alternatively, in New Mexico, state and community leaders have felt the loss of tourism revenue given significant visitation decreases at Carlsbad Caverns National Park and White Sands and Bandelier National Monuments.

A 2011 report by the McKinsey Global Institute finds that the leisure and hospitality economic sector, among six sectors studied, has the second-highest potential to affect gross domestic product

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and employment recovery. A key projection is for 3.3 million new jobs created in a sector that currently supports 14 million jobs. In response, the president issued an executive order charging a task force on travel and competitiveness to prepare a national tourism strategy to meet the objective of marginal increase in job creation through tourism. The question is whether or not this gives impetus to national park managers and NPS tourism partners to take advantage of sustainable tourism opportunities. You can read the National Tourism Strategy online at <http://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2012/05/10/administration-officials-announce-national-strategy-increase-travel-a>.

Many participants stated that landowners are beginning to regard wildlife preservation as a positive factor in economic viability. This is encouraging, considering there are some who believe policies such as the Endangered Species Act inhibit job growth. Additionally, in the study, tangible outcomes from the growing demand for nature-based tourism highlight conservation. These included local efforts in planting trees, water conservation, and establishing nesting cover and food plots.

Three strategies for park managers

Retaining the distinctiveness and sustainability of a destination is key to gateway communities' comparative advantage. In addition, tourism should enhance residents' quality of life. These ideas can be demonstrated and achieved through a deliberate framework of strategic planning. To develop a framework of sustainable tourism, park managers can encourage gateway communities to use the following principles: (1) integrate tourism policies with environmental, social, and economic policies; (2) employ a three-stage evaluation process; and (3) embrace and feature local attributes.

Integrating tourism policies with other policies of community development demonstrates forward thinking; as the economic viability of tourism increases, so may the negative implications for the community. Examples are the reduction of green space, overcrowding, and crime. These impacts can be mitigated through proactive and reactive policy measures. For instance, provisions that limit where development may occur, such as around animal migratory routes, can offset policies that support increased visitation. Additionally, policies can be developed to trigger positive

externalities to growth, such as dedicating revenue to social programs.

A three-stage policy evaluation process is necessary to gather current data on community and resource conditions at each phase of tourism development (Edgell et al. 2008). The process includes a formative (predevelopment) phase, developmental (midstream) phase, and summative (evaluation of long-standing policies) phase. The formative phase is the creation of new policies, also referred to as prerequisites to tourism development. In the developmental phase, unexpected issues may arise that require additional policy consideration. For example, an increase in visitors due to an effective marketing campaign may not be supported by the current infrastructure. To mitigate the negative impacts, the destination community may choose to place a policy premium on matching visitor services with visitor demand.

In the summative phase, reevaluation of long-standing policies occurs. From a wildlife management perspective, a summative policy may be consideration of current provisions to increase a specific animal population. As the result of a specific policy, the population number may have improved to an acceptable level; therefore the policy may no longer be needed. It is important to note that both the developmental phase and the summative phase are not exclusive to reactive measures. They also include proactive evaluation of the environment, as all issues may not be apparent or brought to the forefront without investigation.

The foundation of sustainable tourism is offering supply-driven products, services, and experiences that demonstrate the community's unique attributes, making it more competitive while preserving those qualities that make it unique. No two communities are identical; therefore, maintaining cultural and ecological integrity is essential for differentiating a destination's brand from others. In addition to increased marketability, embracing local attributes encourages the community to retain its historical value and social norms. Residents may develop a sense of pride, which produces respect for their heritage and traditional way of life. In many ways this may coincide with the cultural attributes of the park, as both the gateway community and the park offer stories that will complement each other. Furthermore, residents are empowered with the demand for their historical interpretation of the community's evolution.

Conclusion

For the National Park Service it is crucial to encourage ongoing engagement with the tourism community around park lands. Failure to do so may be detrimental to park stories, visitor experiences, and NPS brand characteristics. Ideally, communities would prefer a balanced mix of industry segments making up their local

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economies. In a more dynamic and globalized economic environment, they would prefer not to be dependent on any one business sector for the well-being of their citizens. As they evaluate their options, many communities are taking a second look at tourism development. In focus groups and community meetings citizens have voiced a strong preference for models that stress retention of community values and character. At the same time, both quantitative and qualitative research have highlighted demand implications where the “ideal vacation” emphasizes real experiences, authentic places, and opportunities to partake in local foods, music, markets, and festivals (Brand USA 2012). Destinations that commission these data use them to match their unique community characteristics to the desires and preferences of prospective visitors.

Further evidence of this trend toward high-quality experiences can be found in the growth of geotourism. In the first five months of 2012, local stewardship councils have established three new geotourism regions in the United States. Communities have additional incentive to embrace local cultural, structural, and ecological attributes holistically. Considering that this growth is occurring directly outside the boundaries of national parks, it is in the best interest of park managers to proactively engage with gateway communities in adopting sustainable tourism as a productive strategy. More than ever before, the partnership prospects are improved where both partners pay attention to authentic experiences. Our joint objective is for park visitors to continue to enjoy the depth and breadth of America’s natural and cultural history, both inside and outside the parks. This will require a strategic alliance between park units and the tourism community that recognizes a mutually beneficial framework of resource preservation and high-quality visitor experience.

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