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CASE STUDY 2. Sustainable Tourism | pdf |

The Pineywoods Experience promotes economic development through ecological and heritage tourism in the counties of east Texas, which are linked by the watersheds of the Neches River. As I listened to the presentation by the facilitator in a stakeholder meeting, a tangible sense of dilemma hung in the air. From an ecological perspective, its high priority to protect the bottomland hardwood forests that soak up the floodwaters periodically overflowing the banks of rivers. However, the general public views floodplains as swamps, lands of little value for timber production or urban development.

Although no one spoke up in the meeting, I heard in the back of my mind the shrill voices "purchase of land by the federal government takes dollars out of the property taxes that we need to pay for schools for our children" and "why spend money on worthless land when we have such high unemployment in our county?" The compassionate part of me understood why representatives from chambers of commerce had been invited to hear this urgent plea to work together to protect the beautiful forested landscape, which many residents cherish as symbolizing quality of life in an otherwise impoverished region.

The skeptical part of me couldn't quite imagine that a positive niche-marketing campaign would bring tourists from Houston and Dallas to rejuvenate the family-run businesses in the backwoods of Texas. Yet I wanted to believe the positive vision that the same miracle that had transformed Appalachia into a destination spot on the east coast, could be repeated in the middle of the continent. At a loss to verbalize what was the dilemma I sensed, remnants of timeless childhood stories flickered through my memory: the little red hen, three little pigs, and the goose who laid the golden egg. I wanted to believe that conservation could pay for itself, that we could "build it and they will come".

Stakeholder Perspectives

Family Heritage

Love of nature is a value that unites many families. However, each member of a family may experience that uplifting feeling, of a beauty larger than ourselves, in different ways. For the eight year old it may be catching frogs. For the grandfather it may be telling stories about a way of life that is now gone but remains as treasures in museums providing glimpses into the peaks of economic activity generated through railroad, timber and petroleum industries that brought immigrants to the region. For the women in the family, it may be shopping in boutiques and antique stores, or eating at family style restaurants where the cooking brings back childhood memories of visits to grandma at the farm. For the young men, the camaradery of a hunt, canoe trip or bird watching expedition may be priceless. Confronted with the impersonal indignities of city life, escape to rural communities may feel like a balm to the soul. How do we fit that into our modern busy lives with families dispersed across the continent?



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Environmental Advocates

Although the purists may focus only on land preservation and laws to protect the environment, a growing number of environmental advocates recognize that conservation of biodiversity will not be achieved solely through charitable contributions and volunteer efforts. The Conservation Fund addresses this issue directly when they speak of the "triple bottom line" that guides their decisions: environment, economics and equity. One option is to separate the actions serving to protect viable human communities from the actions serving to protect viable communities in nature. If the same

conservation organization separately promotes both economic development and the protection of biodiversity, then as a whole, progress is made toward the triple bottom line and society benefits, in the big picture, over the long-term. This is the philosophy underlying the "Resourceful Communities" initiative of The Conservation Fund.

Debates fuelled by controversy over World Bank support for sustainable development in the global arena, have explored the disjunct realities of trade-offs. First, impoverished rural communities living on lands of marginal value for agriculture rarely benefit directly from conservation. Second, protection of biodiversity in watersheds also serves to filter, collect and store water resources needed for downstream agriculture, industry and urban communities. According to one view, anthropologists argue the cultural heritage of existing communities is not always best served by locking up lands in protected areas. Protecting the beauty of a landscape does not put food on the table, medicine in the village clinic, or books in the schools. From the perspective of ecologists, immigrants forced out of sustainable lifestyles by the expansion of agri-business, may not be trusted as the keepers of the ancient forest remnants that are hotspots for imperilled biodiversity.

Agency Regulators

Fostering eco-friendly businesses in gateway communities serving the tourists visiting protected areas, may seem beyond the mandate of the National Park Service. However, visionaries in federal and state agencies recognize that the decisions made by the neighbors of public lands, can profoundly influence the ecological and evolutionary processes they are mandated to protect on the lands for which they act as stewards.

In the last decade, budget cuts for state parks managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department alerted many public employees to the indirect links between dollars and votes. If the voting public does not experience the joys of tourism in protected areas, they do not know what they are missing when the gates to those areas are closed.

Political rhetoric over the "intrusion of the federal government into the lives of ordinary citizens" fuels distrust of the hidden agenda of employees in offices like the Environmental Protection Agency. Ideally, state and federal agencies would see to it that the water flowing through parks and estuaries would be clean and plentiful enough to support not only public needs but also the nursery beds of countless organisms downstream. In reality, private lands are off limits and despite educational programs promoting "environmental best practices", every landowner has the right to make their own decisions. Logically, the best long-term option appears to be purchasing the lands adjacent to river corridors linking units of protected areas. How do agency employees sell this idea to the public?

Development Advocates

Across the continent, youth are leaving rural communities and moving to cities with better promise of employment. Like a receding tidal wave, retirees are leaving cities and returning to rural environments that remind them of cherished childhood memories. In healthy rural communities, young families help provide public services for the elderly; not so in declining communities. Retirees may bring a wealth of experience in business practices. Yet if they are the innovative forces for start-up enterprises, who will take over maturing business when "end of life" issues prevail? One community leader, with long term experience in the local chamber of commerce, explained to me how previously thriving storefronts were boarded up when the guiding energy behind them fell silent.

Where the age pyramid is top-heavy, one development strategy is to promote retirement communities and the medical services on which they depend. Expanding clinics and home health services provide jobs for aspiring young professional families who can afford taxes for their children's schools. Previously boarded up storefronts receive face-lifts in historic districts attractive for family tourism. One viewpoint is that retirees may not visit the protected areas in their region, except for the times when they want to entertain visitors. Another perspective is that active seniors may provide an exceptional volunteer force for tourist events designed to promote both heritage and nature tourism in their region.

Sources

The Texas Pineywoods Experience. <http://www.texaspineywoodsexperience.org/> (accessed February 23, 2010)

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