

Green Routes—Renewing the Countryside

January 2006

Overview

The following information provides an overview of the Green Routes project coordinated by Renewing the Countryside, helpful resources and observations, and recommended strategies for moving forward sustainable tourism efforts in Minnesota.

Green Routes and Renewing the Countryside

Renewing the Countryside (RTC) launched Green Routes, a sustainable tourism initiative, in Minnesota in 2004 in partnership with a number of organizations and communities across the state. Two Green Routes have been established so far in Minnesota. One “route” comprises the Highway 18 corridor that runs from Onamia to Sandstone in east central Minnesota (about 80 miles north of the Twin Cities), and the other, in west central Minnesota, has Montevideo as its center of activity. In each of these regions, RTC has supported the work of local committees composed of business owners, farmers, artists, local government officials, and other residents interested in strengthening their local economies while preserving their natural and cultural assets. These committees issued calls for nominations of “green businesses” and selected destinations to be included in brochures and on the Green Routes web site to attract travelers to and through these regions. Working in close partnership with RTC, the University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships have taken the lead role in convening teams to develop Green Routes in northeast, northwest, central, and southeast Minnesota.

While each regional team can customize the call for nominations and adapt the criteria they use to select destinations, all teams work off of a template that stresses the following features of green businesses:

- They are generally locally and independently owned, and contribute to the local economy by employing local residents, using local products and/or purchasing food from local growers, and supporting other local businesses.
- They conserve natural resources by reducing the use of non-renewable resources and/or using energy efficient appliances.
- They use sustainably produced and/or organically grown products (or grow these products).
- They engage customers and visitors through active, personal, and meaningful participation in the community’s nature, people, places, history, and/or cultures.

By providing tourists with a guide to a variety of destinations that meet these criteria and fit under the umbrella of green tourism, Green Routes can help to stimulate broad-based economic development. Using a Green Routes brochure or consulting the web site, a traveler can find places to eat, stay, shop, visit artists’ studios, learn about local history, and participate in environmentally-friendly recreational activities, and thus in even a short visit can take advantage of a number of opportunities to inject their travel dollars into the local economy. By generating publicity for green businesses, Green Routes also encourages other business owners to adopt more sustainable practices in order to attract savvy green travelers to their establishments as well. Finally, Green Routes fosters community development as well; one very positive outcome we have observed in the two initial regions is that green business owners have gotten to know one another for the first time and others in these communities have begun to recognize the value sustainable tourism can have for their region.

What is Green Tourism?

Sustainable tourism enables a community or region to share its natural and cultural assets with visitors, but does so in ways that respect the natural world, involve the local community, and protect and enhance the local quality of life. This type of tourism can have positive economic benefits for rural communities

while also being thoughtful to maintain the community's resources for future generations. Sustainable tourism represents an innovative, ecologically-minded, and potentially significant economic development strategy for communities that currently depend on conventional farming or hopes of attracting large industries to their communities.

What is a green tourist?

A green tourist supports healthy communities while traveling and at home by respecting the local culture and physical environment, supporting local businesses and artisans, and engaging in meaningful interactions with the local community and culture. A green tourist wants to learn about a place from the people who live and work there, without interfering with the day-to-day life and activities of the community.

What does it mean for a business or destination to be “green”?

A “green” business featured through Green Routes meets some or all of the following criteria:

- Contributes to the local economy by employing local residents, using local products and growers, and supporting local businesses.
- Conserves and/or enhances our natural resource base (e.g. through use of renewable energy, recycling, green building techniques, wildlife habitat protection, etc.)
- Uses sustainably produced or organically grown products (or, in the case of farms, grows these).
- Engages customers and visitors through active, personal, and meaningful participation in nature, people, places, history, and/or cultures.

Why Green Tourism?

A key sector in Minnesota's economy, producing \$9.2 billion in annual revenue, tourism offers tremendous potential for rural communities. But tourism can have negative as well as positive impacts on communities, depending on how the industry is developed. Poorly planned growth in tourism can compromise the health of natural areas and can lead to types of development that compromise the uniqueness of a community and the viability of small, locally-owned businesses (for example, an influx of chain restaurants and retailers). If, however, communities market themselves as destinations for green tourists, visitors' dollars can be directed toward locally-owned businesses in economically depressed rural areas, which can have significant impacts on the economic vitality of those communities.

Green tourism has multiple benefits, including:

- bringing additional income to communities by directing tourism dollars to locally-owned businesses;
- encouraging travelers to patronize businesses where they know something about the owners and their values, thus fostering connections between urban and rural populations;
- helping communities identify their existing cultural and natural assets, as the first step in a strategy to preserve them; and
- increasing the visibility of innovative economic and community development strategies that build upon existing community assets by celebrating and promoting small, local, unique, and independent businesses within each region.

Key Resources and Models

While a number of projects focus specifically on either agri-tourism or eco-tourism, few provide a model for supporting local economies, communities, and the environment. The following organizations and initiatives are among the best examples of green tourism in North America:

Handmade in America www.handmadeinamerica.org

Based in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, Handmade in America's publications and resources support place-based economies by connecting travelers with local crafts, people, and places. According to a 1995 study by Handmade in America, the craft/handmade industry generates an estimated \$121,889,239 in a 20 county area in Western North Carolina.

Kentucky Artisan Heritage Trails www.kaht.com

The Kentucky Artisan Heritage Trails is a geotourism initiative that showcase places, events, food, and artisans in the Appalachian region of Kentucky. The project is a collaborative effort of the National Geographic Society and the Appalachian Regional Commission.

Toronto Green Tourism Association: www.greentourism.ca

The Green Tourism Association of Toronto works with a network of businesses, community and environmental groups, government agencies, heritage and cultural organizations, and individuals to establish an urban green tourism industry that promotes ecological responsibility, local economic vitality, cultural sensitivity, and experiential richness.

What are tourists looking for?

In January 2005, the Tourism Center at the University of Minnesota conducted three focus groups for the Green Routes initiative. Through these meetings, Tourism Center staff identified the following common themes and observations:

1. Focus group participants shared interests in outdoor recreation, valued local food, art, and cultural activities, and appreciated the natural environment
2. Travel information is a constant and continuing issue for focus group participants, in particular
 - What makes up the content
 - The format the content is put into
 - Access to the content
 - Distribution of the content
3. Focus group participants were most enthused and engaged in the conversation when relating stories and anecdotes about their travel experiences. Tourism destinations like Montevideo and the Isle area have to help visitors develop their own "stories."
4. Food and lodging remain the core set of services focus group participants discussed. While there may be an endless array of food and lodging interests beyond the scope of any one location, participants agreed that if they knew what was available in the community and the surrounding area, it would greatly assist their travel planning.
5. A three hour drive appears to be the average maximum drive time for a weekend getaway
6. Focus group participants *want* to support the local area they visit, particularly the local food system. They look for ways to support the local economy.
7. Focus group participants recognized the community social dynamics between local residents and outside visitors. This was described as "tension," "uneasiness", and "conflict."
8. Focus group participants were not clear how local communities organize their visitor information and where it is available.
9. The term, "sustainable tourism" appears to be more of an academic term that focus group participants were not sure about. However, they discussed sustainability in terms of an area being "accessible," being on a "human scale," having "tradeoffs," a "sense of connectedness," and "naturalness."
10. A combination of technology and personal contact is desired when planning a trip to the area. Focus group participants want to talk to a person to get the most current local information.
11. Focus group participants mentioned the importance of hiking and biking trails.

Recommendations

Based on initial research, surveys conducted at large events, inquiries to Renewing the Countryside about tourism opportunities, participation in events and workshops around the state, and conversations with Green Routes businesses and local advisory committees, we have identified the presence of a significant market for green and sustainable tourism in Minnesota. Additionally, we received an overwhelming amount of support from the two pilot Green Routes communities in creating Green Routes, in particular from business owners and community leaders who expressed strong interest in participating in Green Routes as a tool for community and economic development.

Given this high level of interest, we have identified a number of needs and strategies that would move forward a cohesive sustainable tourism effort in Minnesota:

- Form regional committees to facilitate and drive efforts to develop regional sustainable tourism projects. These committees are responsible for identifying potential Green Routes applicants, helping to publicize and get out the word about Green Routes to applicants, screening applications, and selecting businesses based on established criteria. This will also ensure that local communities are involved in decision-making that affects their region, and invested in any tourism projects that are developed.
- Expand the network of organizations involved in Green Routes. This will enable this initiative to leverage more resources and therefore benefit from increased efficiencies.
- Organize a conference or series of workshops to identify needs and opportunities for sustainable tourism in Minnesota, share best practices and information, and establish a common language for and understanding of sustainable tourism. This would bring together tourism practitioners, business owners, organizations, community leaders, elected officials, and others interested in sustainable tourism, and could be a first step in developing a more comprehensive, long-term sustainable tourism strategy for Minnesota.
- Establish a process and set criteria for evaluating Green Routes businesses on a regular basis (e.g., every year). This is important for ensuring the quality of Green Routes-designated destinations, and important for ensuring that Green Routes businesses continue to meet and improve on criteria set forth in the application. Regular evaluation, either by review teams or travelers, will also ensure that businesses see value in meeting Green Routes criteria (as an exclusive program) and that travelers, who rely on Green Routes criteria and standards to accurately identify “green” tourist destinations, regard Green Routes as a trusted resource for travel information. Additionally, more detailed criteria will give Green Routes applicants more opportunities to explain their business and a better understanding of steps that can be taken to further “green” their business.
- As part of the application and Green Routes resources, develop a glossary of terms that frequently come up in Green Routes applications and materials. This will help to create a common language among Green Routes businesses, and help travelers to understand terms and strategies employed by Green Routes businesses.
- Explore a self-supporting structure for Green Routes. A variety of models could be employed to achieve this, such as a fee-based association (similar to a chamber of commerce) or a non-profit organization.