



Practice Section

The practical application of sustainable tourism development principles: A case study of creating innovative place-making tourism strategies

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Robert D. Billington is a lifelong resident of the Blackstone Valley, Rhode Island. He has been President of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, since 1986. The Council develops the historic, cultural, natural, and agricultural and commercial resources using sustainable, resilient, place-making strategies. In June of 2006 his organisation won the Ulysses Prize, awarded by the UNWTO. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council earned the UNWTO's Sbest Certification in Tourism Governance. Billington developed the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory to assist other communities in tourism development. Billington is an Adjunct Professor at Boston University and Bristol Community College both in Massachusetts.

Natalie Carter has worked in the nonprofit field for 40 years. She joined the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council in December 1992 and served as the Council's first Education Director coordinating and developing the historical and environmental programmes RiverClassroom and River-In-The-Classroom. In 1997, Natalie became the Council's first Director of Operations/Business Manager. In addition to administering the day-to-day operations of

the Council, Natalie continues to serve as the co-chair of the Amber Valley Blackstone Valley Compact and is the Council's principal grant writer.

Lilly Kayamba is from Rwanda, was born in Uganda and raised in Kenya, Africa. She supports the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory using her international experience. She obtained her undergraduate degree at the American University in Africa. She pursued an MBA in Organizational Leadership at Johnson & Wales University in Rhode Island. Ms Kayamba joined the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council as a Research Analyst. She has specialised in research and analysis of minority-owned businesses. She is currently working to bring the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory programme to Rwanda.

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: sustainable tourism, place-making, regeneration, community development

The Blackstone Valley is working to create a sustainable, resilient, visitor destination using whole place-making techniques. The Blackstone

Valley Tourism Council applies leadership and commitment to innovative sustainable geotourism principles. The Tourism Council fulfills the vision of sustainable tourism through its Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory (STPDL). The Laboratory's purpose is to share the Tourism Council's experience in developing planned sustainable tourism with tourism leaders and community stakeholders seeking to develop viable destinations. The STPDL presents a learning initiative that prepares decision makers and shapers to thoughtfully develop and regenerate their communities using sustainable tourism principles. In the formation of the Laboratory mission, certain sustainable tourism development issues stood out as significant and needing prompt attention by practitioners. In response, the Laboratory has developed and continues to develop a series of robust symposiums, conferences, and programmes to link the Laboratory's work to the thirst for sound tourism development knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

The Blackstone River Valley, located in New England is the first industrialised valley in North America. This is where the American Industrial Revolution was launched to transform the United States into an industrial world power. After 150 years of economic growth the Blackstone Valley lost its economic base, which began a downturn in all facets of community life. After years of significant economic, environmental, socio-cultural, and historical degradation, thoughtful tourism development and a new approach to community regeneration, emerged to transform the Blackstone Valley into an interesting place to live, work, and visit. Today the Blackstone Valley is a viable destination and a role model in sustainable tourism management (Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, 2006; Billington & Manheim, 2002).

The Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory (STPDL) is a project of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council of

Rhode Island, USA. The Laboratory focuses on place-based tourism development through an educational platform concerned with supporting whole communities through creative and innovative sustainable tourism development practices. It operates as an experiential, community-based learning opportunity that offers tailor-made solutions to communities seeking to create a tourism programme using sustainable, resilient, place-making strategies. The STPDL is also home to a growing network of members seeking to understand and apply new approaches to sustainable tourism development.

There appears to be a need in communities to create well-developed, thoughtful tourism planning and development strategies. Tourism can impact a community negatively and yet many see only positive results from bringing visitors to their existing and potential destination. The goal of the STPDL is to prepare community leaders with knowledge necessary to create and shape a successful, sustainable visitor destination. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Inc created the STPDL after years of experience in implementing tourism development programmes. The Tourism Laboratory seeks to be the place where the principles of sustainable and resilient community development through tourism are explored, practiced, and applied. The Laboratory is working to develop a host of programmes to assist other destination communities with their tourism development and management issues.

The Tourism Council exchanges ideas and forms relationships that have nourished economic development and considers creative, imaginative leadership vital for success. The Council gained an understanding of sustainability issues while working with the Amber Valley Borough Council of Derbyshire, England. In 1994 the Amber Valley Blackstone Valley Compact was formed creating a working bond, between the two post-industrial regions, to work on shared community development visions and goals. The two areas are similar river valleys whose industries and population shared a like history and fate. This relationship continues strongly today.



STPDL 2006

In 2006 the STPDL began implementing tourism-learning programmes for individuals, organisations and governments. These programmes brought together international specialists, practitioners, and educators in sustainable tourism principles and practices to discuss, explore and develop implementation plans. All presentations are public and are available on the Sustainable Tourism Laboratory website. Below are selected examples of programmes delivered.

Blackstone Alert

The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory developed a disaster mitigation symposium. Blackstone Alert, created to bring together local, state and federal officials to consider a multi-state, multi-community strategy to analyse flood conditions along the Blackstone River in Massachusetts and Rhode Island with the aim of mitigating damages to public, private, and government infrastructure. Over \$300m in private development is taking place along the banks of the Blackstone River (Billington, 2004) yet a river flood mitigation strategy was not in place.

Emerging from that convening is a multi-state strategy and action team to bring the Blackstone Valley communities in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island into harmony so that they can determine sustainable development and disaster mitigation policies in the Blackstone River Watershed. An immediate outcome was a website <http://www.blackstonealert.com> hosted by the Tourism Council with 17 resource links and a list of related articles.

The United States VolunTourism Conference

The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory presented the United States VolunTourism Conference. The conference was presented in collaboration with Rhode Island Foundation, the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, Johnson & Wales University, the University of Rhode Island, The George Washington University, and VolunTourism International.

VolunTourism is a visitor experience that combines both travel and service to a destination. This is also referred to as participatory travel. This experience provides significant economic, social, and environmental benefits to tourism destinations (Hawkin *et al.*, 2005). In addition to visiting a destination, VolunTourism allows the traveller to follow their passion and interest as well as lending their talents to this experience. VolunTourism provides the traveller an opportunity to interact with the community, leaving something of themselves through a labour of gratitude that is offered as part of their overall vacation (VolunTourism, 2007).

The goal of the conference was to create awareness among stakeholders in Rhode Island. The conference provided an opportunity to learn about this emerging travel sector and how the concept can be domestically incorporated. Participants learned innovative ways to:

1. enhance the visitor's experience with VolunTourism
2. add value to their already existing products by using VolunTourism as a tool
3. identify new markets through VolunTourism
4. discover the benefits of VolunTourism and apply them to their organisation.

The VolunTourism Conference presented creative ways to package and brand a destination for a unique and growing market. Participants learned new ways of generating income for their businesses and were enlightened on how to enhance their labour force through the VolunTourism experience. The conference met its goals by preparing and offering on the state website Rhode Island's first VolunTourism itinerary.

Sustainable Tourism Summit

In November, the Tourism Laboratory hosted a Sustainable Tourism Summit. The Laboratory brought in leading policy makers and shapers on tourism development that worked with a group of 80 to find long-term strategies to

improve their economy while preserving the natural, cultural, and historic resources. The Summit discussed tourism development using place-making strategies as opposed to place-taking strategies. In addition, the Tourism Summit discussed following a sustainable path requiring leadership from local authorities and an efficient mechanism that involves all stakeholders and a vision to create tourism policies by providing an institutional framework to build livable communities.

The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory presented the Summit in cooperation with the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations, New Commons of Providence RI, The George Washington University, Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, and the United Nations World Tourism Organization. The Summit was presented in the Lab's signature format using a cafe style workshop. The author of the Geotourism principles, Jonathan Tourtellot, was a keynote speaker at the Sustainable Summit, as a result of his presentation and the discussion afterwards the state of Rhode Island will be signing and adopting the Geotourism charter in May 2007. Geotourism, as defined by the National Geographic Society, is tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place — its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well being of its residents (National Geographic Society, 2007). Additional presentations addressed using tourism to make whole places, community value of sustainable development to communities and the United Nations World Tourism Organization's knowledge management perspective for sustainable tourism.

Participants at the Tourism Summit learned that Geotourism incorporates the concept of sustainable tourism — that destinations should remain unspoiled for future generations — while allowing for enhancement that protects the character of the locale. Geotourism also adopts a principle from its cousin, ecotourism — that tourism revenue can promote conservation — and extends that principle beyond

nature travel to encompass culture and history as well; all distinctive assets of a place. The concepts as presented at the Laboratory:

1. 'First, do no harm'. It is basic to good destination stewardship. Do not abuse the product — the destination. Seek to avoid the 'loved to death' syndrome.
2. Anticipate development pressures and apply limits and management techniques that sustain natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture.
3. Conserve resources. Minimise pollution, waste, energy consumption, water usage, landscaping chemicals, and excessive nighttime lighting.
4. Respect local culture and tradition. Visitors learn about and observe local etiquette. Residents learn how to deal with visitor expectations that may differ from their own.
5. Aim for quality, not quantity. Measure tourism success not by sheer numbers of visitors, but by length of stay, distribution of money spent, and quality of experience.

After the presentations attendees entered into the café session, conducted for the lab by New Commons of Providence, Rhode Island. The directed conversation enabled attendees and presenters to engage in a creativity group technique and generate specific 'nuggets' or ideas that are gathered into a specific action plan. The exercise is based on a whole community model that allows the participants the ability to formulate and implement place-based strategy that integrates the key elements of community planning and development; social, economic, environmental, cultural, and built environment (New Commons, 2007).

The Goals of the Sustainable Tourism Summit were to:

1. create a sustainable approach to tourism and discuss the importance of place-making rather than place-taking through tourism
2. define the discussion of 21st century tourism development and prepare for the future



dynamics challenges that the tourism markets will present

3. ensure actions that regenerate and restore the community of place and enhance the livability and attractiveness of destinations for residents, businesses and visitors
4. gain an understanding of the application of Geotourism principles to a community/region.

One result of the Sustainable Tourism Summit was the signing, adopting of the Geotourism Charter, and formation of an 18-member Geotourism Collaborative by the Governor of Rhode Island. Rhode Island was the second of the United States to adopt the Charter.

Fieldwork in South East, Ohio by STPD Laboratory

The STPDL was sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to work with community development specialists on the creation of their tourism plans. Subsequently, a team of five community members from Ohio participated in the Laboratory's Tourism Summit. The South East Ohio community has adopted some of the tourism development principles learned in the Blackstone Valley and has applied for a grant to bring members of the community to the Laboratory for a five-day programme.

Answering community concerns — The Green Tourism Symposium

In April 2007, the STPDL is hosting The Green Tourism Symposium, responding to local concerns to provide local planning for 'green' issues in tourism development. The symposium will invite tourism practitioners, community decision makers, elected officials and others interested in sustainable tourism development. The agenda will comprise interactive presentations, workshops, dialogues, and development of usable concepts. The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory will collaborate with the National Recycling Coalition, The George Washington University, the Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, The National Geographic Society Center for

Sustainable Destination, the Rhode Island Foundation, the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, and New Commons of Providence RI to present the Symposium.

The aim of the symposium is to develop an understanding of how residents, businesses, and governments perceive a destination's protection, not just the promotion of its resources. In short, the symposium will expand on the concept of responsible tourism where people are reminded to leave a smaller footprint in the destinations they visit. Global warming and a carbon footprint are major international concerns; therefore, it is critical to integrate protection of the environment into tourism management practices to improve visitor satisfaction, enhance marketing, and satisfy emerging consumer demands.

The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory plans to discuss the above and achieve the following goals in the Symposium:

1. establish a common language and understanding of green concepts among the stakeholders
2. identify issues impacting destinations
3. access information and practices for Green Tourism
4. discover market trends for Green Tourism.

The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and the STPD Laboratory has implemented the National Recycling Coalition's Green Meeting Policy. At the Symposium the Laboratory will present New England's first Green Guide. This 50-page booklet contains proven ways to help save the environment in the Blackstone Valley, how to enjoy a 'green' holiday, and ways to offset a carbon footprint of a Visitor to the Blackstone Valley of Rhode Island.

STPDL IN THE COMMUNITY

The STPDL is involved and involving communities in sustainable discussion, solutions, and network. The Laboratory is working in Blackstone Valley cities and towns to create

sustainable communities. These are some of the ongoing projects of the Laboratory:

Riverfront development

The Lab developed a Central Falls Riverfront plan, and is working on river access in several Blackstone River Valley communities. The Tourism Council has operated five passenger vessels along the Blackstone River. While the Blackstone River can now be viewed by riverboat, it is difficult to provide public tours with limited public access. The STPDL is working with communities and private landowners to open up the river to recreation and commerce. This 15-year effort of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has raised over \$1,000,000 to establish safe, accessible river landings in five communities.

Heritage and cultural preservation

Work is underway with the restoration of the St Anne's Arts and Cultural Center in Woonsocket. Staff members from the Laboratory are working with the community to determine operational uses for the Center and how to fund them. In May, 100 people are invited to consider ways to restore and operate the Arts and Cultural Center. The STPDL considers this effort essential in the protection and promotion of cultural resources. The Lab is working to develop funding sources to create a museum to Thomas Wilson Door, a voting rights activist from the 1800s.

The Blackstone Valley partnership

The Laboratory is working with New Commons and 20 Blackstone Valley organisations to develop a new network of thinking and linking. The STPD Laboratory is doing this on behalf of the 24 Blackstone Valley communities that seek to define problems and explore solutions to community sustainability.

Connected Communities

The STPD Laboratory sponsored the Connected Communities Jam in April 2007, bringing together 50 unrelated organisations from four Blackstone Valley communities, to gather

knowledge for an upcoming community development plan. The meeting allowed participants to discuss obstacles that are blocking the progress of getting several communities working together. A formal report will be issued and future meetings will help to discuss the benefits of community engagement for obtaining sustainable development.

Footsteps in History

The Tourism Council launched the Blackstone Valley Preserve America, Footsteps in History weekend. This three-year project, to be completed in 2008, creates an open house weekend for over 100 recreational, artistic, environmental, cultural and historic sites along the 45-mile long Blackstone River Valley. A programme developed by First Lady Laura Bush financially supported this project.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines innovation in sustainable tourism practices by the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council's STPDL. The STPD Laboratory is the product of 22 years of tourism development experience applied to the Blackstone Valley landscape. During the course of its work, the Council has been recognised for its innovative approach to community development for tourism. In respect to tourism planning, Patrick Kennedy, US Congressman, stated, 'the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has worked to inspire private and public investment, and renewed sense of pride in the Blackstone Valley' (personal communication, 16th April, 2006). David DePetrillo, Director Rhode Island Division of Tourism and immediate past Chair of the US Council of State Travel Directors stated, 'The Blackstone Valley region of Rhode Island is probably one of the best examples in the country of a destination that built its tourism promotion and product development program from practically a zero base' (personal communication, 1st May, 2006).

Recognising the necessity to educate itself, its destination communities about sustainability



and sustainable principles the STPD Laboratory initiated a series of symposiums and conferences that presented national and international experts to educate and challenge stakeholders, practitioners, and decision makers. These proceedings developed strategies for participants, mobilising them to use this knowledge back in their communities. Symposiums and conferences are held in conjunction with the work in community projects by the STPD Laboratory enabling recipients the ability to implement sustainable practices. The STPD Laboratory endeavours to have tourism development 'by' communities rather than tourism development done 'for' communities and believes that education and process is necessary for stakeholders. The Tourism Laboratory works to educate about sustainable principles and assist in their implementation.

In June 2006, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council was presented the Ulysses Prize from the United Nations World Tourism Organization in Madrid, Spain. The Ulysses prize recognises outstanding achievement but also highlights best practices, making those working in tourism throughout the world aware of the ongoing innovative developments taking place in destinations, businesses and institutions in all regions of the world as well as encouraging greater innovation, knowledge development and the dissemination of this knowledge (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2007). The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council was Sbest Certified in September 2006 by the UNWTO as a Destination Management Organisation demonstrating excellence in 240 standards in tourism destination management.

Leadership, creativity, collaboration, commitment, and social accountability from all sectors of the community have led the Blackstone Valley to find its direction, follow its vision and share it with others along the way (Billington & Manheim, 2002). This vision is now embodied in the STPDL of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. The STPDL is offering the knowledge and practices that have proven to be effective and successful in

achieving the aims of sustainable development in one small destination of the United States and sharing them with the world.

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