

Strategies for Ecotourism Development in the North Quabbin

A Summary of Recommendations by the North Quabbin Ecotourism Task Force
And Research by Marketing Expert Cynthia Barstow

Prepared by Jim Heyes, April 2002

Introduction

The nine towns of the North Quabbin region are loved by community members for their beautiful natural setting, consisting of lakes, streams, wildlife, and forested landscapes. Some community members recognize an opportunity to revitalize the historically depressed local economy through a carefully planned set of strategies to bring more tourists to the region.

Recognizing this potential, the New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) included forest-based tourism as a part of its five-year project to enhance the economic, social, and ecological health of the North Quabbin through sustainable utilization of the region's forests. NEFF hired UMass environmental marketing specialist Cynthia Barstow to assist in the development of strategies that would bring more tourists to the region and generate more tourism-related local business.

Barstow presented her initial research in Spring 2001 at a well-attended meeting at the Millers River Environmental Center. The enthusiasm generated by her presentation led to the creation of an Ecotourism Task Force to develop a marketing plan for the region. The task force met monthly over a period of several months to analyze further market research, determine target markets, set goals and objectives, and plan strategies.

The objectives of the task force were:

- ❖ Insure buy-in through a multi-stakeholder approach to strategy development;
- ❖ Focus on both environmental stewardship (minimal impact) and economic development in planning; and
- ❖ Develop realistic research-based and market-driven strategies for ecotourism in the North Quabbin.

The work of the task force followed a traditional marketing plan outline. On the road to developing their strategies, the task force examined current market trends, tourism trends, profiles of ecotourists, and geographic data on target markets. The task force looked closely at related projects for lessons, and conducted an informal inventory of existing assets in the North Quabbin. Finally, they developed their goals, objectives, and strategies. The results of their work are summarized in this document and in Cynthia Barstow's final report.

Market Trends

At the core of any successful marketing plan is an examination of market trends at the regional and national levels. A few of the trends from Barstow's compilation of existing research are noted here; for a more complete discussion, please see a copy of her final report.

- ❖ The U.S. population is aging. Currently one in ten persons is sixty years or older, and by 2050 one in five persons will be sixty or older. By 2030, the age distribution for the U.S. is projected to look like Florida is today.
- ❖ In spite of the economic downturn of the last year, spending by consumers has remained stronger than expected.
- ❖ Americans are working harder than ever; however, there is an increased desire for a more balanced existence. This means that they are looking more for flexible work hours, options to work from home, and ways to simplify their lives.
- ❖ Environmental concern continues to grow among the population. Nearly six in ten Americans desire a balance between economic growth and protecting the environment, but generally feel that protecting the environment should win out when both can't be achieved together.

Industry Trends: Travel and Tourism

Much of the data available about travel industry trends are at a national level. Here are a few of the most relevant trends, again from Cynthia Barstow's research:

- ❖ In 2000, direct traveler spending in the United States reached \$563.6 billion, 5.7% of the nation's GDP.
- ❖ The top activities for domestic travelers are shopping (33%), outdoor activities (17%) and visiting museums or historical sites (14%).
- ❖ Travel is slowest in the winter months of January-March (5-7%), grows slowly in the spring to the peak summer months of June-August (10-11%), and tapers off during the fall (8% each month).
- ❖ Hotels, motels, and B&B's are used for over half of overnight trips in the U.S.
- ❖ One in five adults attended a festival while on a trip away from home in the past year. The most popular type of festival is an arts or music festival.
- ❖ Most of the travel in the U.S. is made up of short trips. More than half of all travel in the U.S. is for two nights or less.
- ❖ As a result of September 11, more Americans are traveling to new destinations closer to home, rather than flying for their vacations.

In Massachusetts:

- ❖ 50.7% of all trips to Massachusetts come from New England, while 24% come from the mid-Atlantic region. The top five states of origin for visitors to Massachusetts are Massachusetts (20%), Connecticut (15%), New York (15%),

- New Hampshire (6%), and New Jersey (5%). For visitors to Western Massachusetts, 27% come from in-state.
- ❖ The average length of stay in Massachusetts is 2.3 nights. 30% of visitors to Western Mass stay in a motel or B&B, while 27% stay in private homes.
 - ❖ The average spending per trip to Western Massachusetts is \$315.
 - ❖ Visitors to Western Massachusetts partake in the following activities: Shopping (35%), cultural events/festivals (20%), historical places and museums (16%), and outdoor activities (14%).
 - ❖ Currently, Franklin County receives only about 4% of tourist dollars spent in Massachusetts.

Ecotourism and Nature-based Travel

Ecotourism is a nature-based form of specialty travel defined by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as “*responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.*” While ecotourism is often thought of in the context of developing countries, ecotourism is growing by 20-30% per year in the United States. Much of the market data available about ecotourists applies to international travelers. However, a North Carolina study of domestic ecotourism gives this perspective on ecotourist traits:

“First, the results indicate the 80.4% of the sample traveled three times or more for overnight weekend vacations during the past two years. Second, 45.9% of the sample spent four to nine nights away from home on a typical annual vacation. The following preferences associated with an ideal nature-oriented vacation were chosen as the top seven: uncrowded (60.9%), experiencing nature (56.9%), inexpensive (51.9%), historic (42.4%), educational (42.0%), friendly (39.3%), and hospitable (30.9%). Finally, the top five sources for travel information are previous experience, travel books/guides, word of mouth, tourist bureaus, and 1-800 telephone numbers.”

Market Analysis of the North Quabbin

Much of the work of the Ecotourism Task Force was dedicated to a careful analysis of potential markets for ecotourism. The task force followed a standard market planning process, which included:

- ❖ **SWOT analysis:** The group identified Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats to ecotourism in the North Quabbin.
- ❖ **Positioning discussion:** Building a strong brand identity is critical to the success of any marketing project. In order to develop a position for the North Quabbin, the task force identified positive and negative characteristics of comparable and competitive market regions, discussed how those regions are perceived by tourists, considered how North Quabbin is perceived currently, and developed a set of perceptions that would benefit tourism in the region. This was synthesized into the positioning statement listed below.

Positioning statement:

A positioning statement is used by marketers to define how a product (in this case the North Quabbin region) should be perceived by consumers/visitors. Based on the extensive analysis and discussions of the ecotourism task force, the group came up with the following positioning statement, with the accompanying goals and objectives:

The North Quabbin area is a mosaic of small New England villages with beautiful town commons and a couple of historically rich mill towns of friendly but reserved people conserving and working in their richly forested environment and offering unusual opportunities for intimacy with nature.

Goal: To have a successful sustainable ecotourism program which builds local pride and ownership, and attracts visitors from outside the area.

Objectives:

1. To bring dollars to the region through increased visitation by the target market;
2. To increase community pride, involvement, awareness, and support of ecotourism;
3. To enhance current facilities which support the NQ ecotourism identity position;
4. To conserve current natural resources, beauty, and historical/community character.

Strategies for Developing Ecotourism in the North Quabbin Region

The Ecotourism Task Force, based on a detailed analysis of existing assets in the region and potential markets, came up with a series of recommended strategies for developing tourism in the North Quabbin region. These strategies, if properly implemented, would work together to improve the local economy through developing the proper local support for nature-based tourists.

These strategies address several different potential target markets, including:

- ❖ **Self-directed travelers:** Some visitors like to come and explore the region at their own speed. Strategies such as online maps, access to outdoor rental equipment, clear signage, and bathroom facilities all work together to improve the experience of the self-directed traveler and bring them back to the region for repeat visits.
- ❖ **Travelers who seek education and guided interpretation:** In addition to the above strategies, a cooperative of local guides who are knowledgeable about the natural and cultural history of the region would provide a customized educational experience to visitors.
- ❖ **Travelers who are interested in the culture and history of the region:** These visitors, whether self-directed or guided, would benefit from tours of local mills, antique shops, and festivals.

- ❖ **North Quabbin Residents:** Community members would benefit from all of the strategies listed below.

Products:

- ❖ **Online Maps:** More and more, travelers are looking to the internet for maps and information about potential destinations. Online maps would allow self-directed individuals the ability to design their own experience. They would also be an invaluable resource for North Quabbin residents. The website would also link to equipment rental opportunities, accommodations and local businesses, and other information about the region.
- ❖ **Outdoor Equipment:** There is a high demand for accessible rental equipment as well as other outdoor products, particularly in a location geographically removed from a sizeable community with significant outdoors stores. Access to canoes, fishing tackle, hiking and backpacking gear, etc. is critical both for self-directed travel and for local guiding businesses. This would also be an asset to local residents.
- ❖ **Facilities:** As a basis for any woods experience, various baseline facilities, such as bathrooms at trailheads, must be available. To this end, tourism proponents should focus on working with local government, associations, and businesses to improve North Quabbin facilities.
- ❖ **Signage:** Improved signage should guide visitors to information centers, trailheads, restrooms, and other tourist facilities. Consistent graphics will make it easier for tourists to find their way around and will build an identity for the region. Signage could also include information about local standards and acceptable use of the region's resources.
- ❖ **Guided Tours:** There is demand for education and interpretation of the natural and cultural history of the North Quabbin. Forest guides could offer a wide range of trips to visitors, including hiking, tracking, fishing, canoeing, history, and more. NEFF has already initiated a program to train community members in natural history, group dynamics and other necessary skills to serve visitors to the region. In addition, the guides will be offered small business and marketing skills, and the opportunity to work cooperatively to best attract visitors from inside and outside the region.
- ❖ **Fairs and Festivals:** Community fairs and events in the North Quabbin region reinforce the feeling of small New England villages and towns. The Garlic Festival, Old Home Days, the Engine Show, and other fairs like it should receive the necessary promotion to reinforce the position. Fair organizers are encouraged to use consistent community promotion materials.
- ❖ **Promotion of Existing Assets:** The North Quabbin region should reinforce its unique community personality. Several strategies would address this goal. Tours of working local mills would focus on the modern community. Sawmill tours would highlight the role that forests and wood products play in our local economy. History trails, developed in partnership with local historical societies, would highlight our rich industrial history.

Local antique shops could promote their businesses collaboratively and draw connections to the heritage of the region.

Ecotourism Promotion:

A full communications campaign, including public relations and pro bono and grant funded advertising, should promote ecotourism and the products within this plan to the target markets described in Barstow's report. Consistent use of the logo and slogans, as developed, should be ensured by those directly involved and encouraged by those who will peripherally benefit. Press release language should be agreed upon and distributed throughout the community. A lead organization should be identified to ensure continuity.

Care should be taken not to focus on promotion without devoting attention to developing products and strategies that will be in place when visitors start coming to the region. Experience in other communities has shown that first impressions make a big difference. If the first experience is not a positive one, people will not come back!

Members of the Ecotourism Task force:

- ❖ Earle Baldwin, Athol Conservation Commission
- ❖ Ron Cloutier, Mt. Grace Conservation Land Trust
- ❖ Sue Cloutier, Millers River Environmental Center
- ❖ Robert Day, Winterwood at Petersham Bed and Breakfast
- ❖ Annette Ermini, Ermini Marketing
- ❖ John Foster, New England Natural Training Center
- ❖ Jim Heyes, New England Forestry Foundation
- ❖ Bonnie House, Phillipston Conservation Commission
- ❖ Carol Joyce, White Buffalo Herbs
- ❖ Tom Kussy, North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ Marion Larson, MassWildlife
- ❖ Scott Maslansky, New England Forestry Foundation
- ❖ Alice Rojko, Millers River Watershed Team Leader
- ❖ Dave Small, Athol Bird and Nature Club
- ❖ Don Stone, Small Business Consultant
- ❖ Bruce Scherer, Orange Planning Board