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A New “Civic” Model Redefines the Purpose of Tourism

In March 2006, more than 300 people from 35 states, Canada, and Mexico gathered in Prescott, Arizona, for the final event of a three-year federally funded project on Civic Tourism. Little did they know that the meeting would be the launching pad for a new “way into” the tourism conversation. As one participant said, “This was an inspirational, mind-changing conference – a valuable contribution to my personal and professional life.”

Since the Prescott conference, Dr. Dan Shilling, the project director, has been on the road, playing the Pied Piper of Civic Tourism – giving presentations to chambers of commerce and city staffs, meeting with cultural and environmental organizations, doing radio interviews, speaking at universities, and writing newspaper and magazine articles.

A second national conference will be held in Rhode Island in October 2008, and Shilling recently released a book that describes the mission, strategies, and practices of this new approach titled, *Civic Tourism: The Poetry and Politics of Place*. A website (www.civictourism.org) also explains the principles and best practices. What’s all the buzz about?

The Power of Place

“It’s clear,” says Shilling, “that we tapped into something with this project. Many places feel their history, culture, and environment can be positioned for tourism development, but they’re still trying to figure out how to do it in the most appropriate, profitable, and sustainable way.”

Economist Richard Florida writes in his best-selling book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, “Place is becoming the central organizing unit of our economy and society.” Shilling says that’s true of tourism, where “attractions” increasingly *are* the ingredients of place – natural, built, cultural. “We hear a lot about sense of place in tourism circles,” says Shilling, “but the challenge is to do it right, so you preserve the things you love at the same time you enhance the economy.”

What’s Different About Civic Tourism?

As the book and website indicate, Civic Tourism is an extension of and tool for ecotourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, geotourism, and other place-based activities that have proliferated over the last two decades.

“People have always traveled to experience nature and culture,” says Mark McDermott, former director of the Arizona Office of Tourism and today a sought-after travel consultant. “But it’s only been since 1983, when ‘ecotourism’ was coined, that alternative travel earned any meaningful degree of respect from the industry.”

Civic Tourism builds on that interest but takes a somewhat different approach. Ecotourism, cultural tourism, and other approaches are generally distinguished by the product: stories, nature, buildings, cultures. Civic Tourism is more concerned with process: *How* is place articulated? *Who* does the interpretation? And, at the core of everything, *why* does your town “do” tourism?

To answer the “why” question, Civic Tourism encourages communities to “flip the frame.” Rather than view tourism as an economic end in itself, which usually means planners design places simply to attract more visitors, Civic Tourism encourages citizens to use tourism as a tool to help them preserve the things they admire and respect about their place. In other words, design the community for residents first. “If that’s done well,” McDermott says, “tourists *will* visit.”

“That’s a difficult frame flip for some traditional tourism professionals,” observes Shilling, “but the more visionary communities are beginning to realize that adopting this strategy ultimately leads to a stronger economy and a healthier society. It’s a win-win.”

The Triple Bottom Line

Phrases like “sense of place” frequently appear in today’s economic development literature, such as Richard Florida’s popular Creative Class hypothesis. Related schools, such as Corporate Social Responsibility, Natural Capitalism, and Sustainable Development, subscribe to what’s termed “Triple Bottom Line” accounting. The idea behind TBL is that in addition to the financial ledger, businesses must also factor in social and environmental costs.

“Few 21st-century industries will thrive in a fiscal vacuum,” Shilling says.

According to McDermott, “Tourism is uniquely suited to take advantage of TBL strategy. Think about it: what sector benefits more from a healthy environment and strong social bonds?” The problem, he says, is that the industry has not made its case to economists, nor do many economists and planners consider tourism a respectable form of economic development.

“Tourism advocates are missing the boat,” McDermott says. “They’re stuck in what Richard Florida and other economists call Industrial Age thinking, where more is always better. More isn’t better, better is better!”

Things Are Changing

Tourism leaders simply have to drop the more-is-better approach and focus on creating great places for residents, counsels Shilling. “In the end, this will draw the kind of tourists who stay longer and spend more, and it will build stronger relations between the industry and community.”

To encourage communities to think about tourism as an important and effective means to a better place, and not an end in itself, Shilling’s book, which features an introduction by noted author Scott Russell Sanders, outlines the three strategies of Civic Tourism:

1. *Rethink Economics* urges communities to connect tourism planning to restorative, place-based market policies such as TBL and the creative economy. Tourism proponents routinely use “economic development” as *the* reason cities and legislatures should underwrite their activities. No doubt this argument will always remain a weapon in the industry’s advocacy arsenal, but relying solely on it is incomplete and short-sighted. GDP-driven schemes only measure market activity, not the social or environmental costs of transactions; and tourism, more than most industries, profits from a vibrant cultural scene, tasteful streetscape, and unspoiled natural setting. In addition to generating commerce, tourism *can* and *should* make the case that it protects the environment, celebrates cultures, and preserves history. Reframing tourism as an “enabler” of place will ultimately build stronger ties with elected officials and citizens.

2. *Connect to the Public* recommends engagement practices that foster understanding of and support for a responsible tourism ethic. Historically, hospitality discussions have been fairly narrow and impenetrable – a chamber of commerce or city department, for example. When movements like heritage tourism emerged, representatives from nontraditional sectors joined the policy-making conversations. Still largely absent, however, is the group most affected by the industry’s decisions: the public. Certainly, other alternative approaches stress civic engagement, and most recent tourism studies recommend listening to residents. Often left unsaid, though, is *how* engagement happens. Here tourism can benefit from fifty years of research on public participation. For communities to reconstruct tourism as *the* source of prosperity, wellbeing, and sustainability they need transparent policy designs that encourage the industry, in partnership with residents, to imagine outside the tired “either/or” debate frame.

3. *Invest in the Story* encourages a robust conceptual and financial commitment to place-making. Most “tourism organizations” market. Chambers of commerce and state travel offices allocate most of their time and budget to researching and implementing ad campaigns.

That's okay, that's their mission; but where's the reciprocal investment in *the thing marketed*? Beyond money, it's conceptual: "R&D for place-making." Today, technical assistance and development dollars are scattered across local, state, federal, and private sectors. Well-meaning and needed as they are, these services seldom relate to tourism, and their bureaucracies can perpetuate silo thinking. Civic Tourism encourages states and regions to establish programs parallel to, and in partnership with, their advertising bureaus – programs that work with communities to identify, preserve, and enhance place-based products in a concerted, comprehensive, tourism-specific fashion. Given that tourism is the largest industry in many towns, with tremendous potential to change the look and feel of places, citizens can channel that influence into smarter product design.

A Powerful Agent for Change

Shilling says there are elements of the industry that already do much of this work: the for-profit sector that builds hotels, golf courses, theme parks, and other commercial attractions.

"We have to think about the place-based attractions, which tend to be operated by nonprofit organizations and public agencies, in the same concerted way," he says.

Shilling begins his presentations by saying tourism professionals should take pride in their industry: "What other job," he asks, "allows you to share your home with strangers everyday?" Beyond that, he believes tourism can be *the* agent for social, cultural, environmental, and economic regeneration. In his book Shilling writes: "The hospitality industry has the potential to transform towns – to create prosperous, sustainable, dynamic, distinctive *places*."

David Weaver, a professor of tourism in Australia, agrees: "All places are now tourist destinations, and this can be a blessing or curse depending on how this new reality is planned and managed. Civic Tourism invites your community to engage in a conversation about tourism and place that it cannot afford *not* to have."

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