

Rural Tourism: It's Never Been A Better Time to Be A Small Town

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Times have never been better for adding tourism to a small town's economic mix.

Here's why: For the first time ever, rural communities can become successful for being exactly who they are.

One of the biggest objections to tourism is that residents don't want their small town to be "Aspenized" or "Bransonized." They are afraid of becoming discovered, which could lead to big development, increased land values and cost of living, and loss of the small town way of life they love.

In the past five years tourism has seen some big changes. Large numbers of travelers have lost interest in cookie cutter restaurants, lodging and attractions.

Instead, they want local food, local attractions and connection to the lifestyles of local people. This has led to huge new trends – the Slow Food Movement, Authentic Tourism, Geotourism, Agritourism, Heritage Tourism and more.

Geotourism is all about preserving local culture. Heritage tourism is getting visitors onto the backroads looking for historic churches, quilt barns and traditional crafts. Authentic tourism attracts visitors who like to see things just the way they are. The Slow Food Movement is getting people off the Interstate and into small town restaurants, where local cafes serve up their own specialties.

There is a ready market of interested visitors for small towns that are prepared to grow a tourism sector.

Preparing for tourism requires that a rural community take a critical look at itself.

It isn't necessary to hold big scoping sessions and do SWAT analysis to get started moving slowly to incorporate tourism into your economic mix.

Look at your region with a tourism lens. Do you already have visitors coming to fish, hunt, river raft, and hike? Without that tourism lens, it is easy to miss the value and opportunity of the traffic that outdoor recreation is already generating.

In the little farming community of Tulelake, California, thousands of visitors drive through the town on their way to birdwatching and hunting in the national wildlife refuges. One resident opened a bed and breakfast, and offered birding driving tours, capturing enough of these travelers to make a good living. Another entrepreneurial resident who sells auto supplies and sporting goods put in an espresso bar. Tulelake is slowly capturing the opportunity created by their location near an existing outdoor recreation destination.

In Kansas, [The Kansas Sampler Foundation](#) is helping small communities look at themselves in a new way. Local volunteers are trained to identify their town's assets in eight areas,

architecture, art, commerce, cuisine, customs, geography, history and people. Townspeople begin to see their old buildings, their local art and customs with new eyes.

The Kansas Sampler Foundation doesn't initiate this work to ready towns for tourism. They do it because it helps local residents of towns as small as 600 or 800 see the value in their own communities. Sharing these gems through tourism is one possible outcome.

Looking at the tourism potential of a region can lead to collaboration, with communities too small to offer all visitor services coming together to create a Regional Flavor Destination.

The Harrison Ohio [Quilt Barn project](#) is a great example. The self-driving tour takes visitors throughout the county, past other small attractions, restaurants and lodging.

Rural tourism is vastly different from urban tourism.

Rural tourism is about small locally owned businesses that support families. Urban tourism is mostly about big businesses creating low wage service industry jobs.

Rural tourism is about community and economic development. The reality for small towns and rural regions is that there is no money for business attraction.

The good news is that by building a tourism sector, a town is also implementing a business attraction strategy. Most business owners in small towns who aren't born there, are first attracted to the community as a visitor. Check this out by asking business owners in any successful small town with an active tourism economy.

These successful towns focused on strategies for welcoming new businesses and making it easy to open up shop, and the tourism industry took care of the marketing.

Agritourism is providing small family farmers another income stream, by capitalizing on their way of life as a product.

U-pick opportunities, farm tours, dude ranch type programs, and community supported agriculture bring urban dwellers who live a few hours away onto farms to learn more about where their food comes from and to buy local.

Taking the first steps toward tourism can be simple.

I'm a great fan of chambers of commerce. As part of their support for the existing business community of a town, they are the obvious organization to take these first steps. They work with economic development organizations and regional groups that understand the special needs and concerns of rural regions.

1. Look for visitors who are already coming to your region and determine what is attracting them.

2. Identify what the community can do to gain more benefit from these visitors. It can be improving signage, providing more community information at places or businesses these people are already frequenting, or looking at services these visitors need that it would be easy to provide.

3. Look at your assets. The Kansas Sampler Foundation is helping small towns in Kansas look critically at what they already have. This is a fantastic activity. It doesn't look at what's

needed or what small towns wish they had. It looks at what is already there. That catalog of assets helps rural regions see how they fit into the new tourism sectors mentioned above.

4. When a town is clear about what they have and know what they would like, it's time to ask for help from regional and state tourism offices.

The Tennessee Department of Tourist Development is creating wonderful trails to connect rural communities and their rich assets to urban centers.

All across the country new scenic byways are being designated that bring people out of urban areas into the countryside.

Once a town has taken steps to evaluate its tourism assets and interests, a tourism industry can be created that serves the town while honoring local traditions and lifestyle.