

What did you do on your last vacation? Would you recommend the place you visited to a friend? Or were you disappointed? Did dirty air, traffic congestion, crowded beaches, slipshod service, or excessive commercialism leave you feeling frustrated and cheated? Americans spend almost \$800 billion a year on travel and recreational pursuits away from home. One out of every 8.4 jobs—or 11 percent of total U.S. employment—is related to the travel/tourism industry. Some 37 states claim it as their leading industry and in 2004 alone it generated over \$250 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues.

Tourism provides American communities with many benefits, including new jobs, an expanded tax base, enhanced infrastructure, improved facilities, and a market for local products, art, and handicrafts. It can also create burdens such as crowding, traffic, noise, more crime, haphazard development, cost-of-living increases, and degraded resources.

Sustainable tourism, on the other hand, helps maximize the benefits of tourism while minimizing the downsides. It differs from the mass-market brand of tourism because tangible benefits are measured rather than sheer heads counted.

American cities and towns spend millions of dollars on tourism marketing to entice visitors. This, in turn, helps create demand or expand a market. This is critical in a competitive marketplace.

Yet, tourism involves much more than marketing. It also involves making destinations more ap-

pealing. This means conserving and enhancing a destination's natural tourism assets; in short, protecting the environment. The unique heritage, culture, wildlife, or natural beauty of a community or region is really what attracts visitors in the first place.

In today's tourism marketplace, competition for tourists' dollars can be fierce. If a destination is too crowded, too commercial, or too much like every other place, then why go there? It is for this reason that local planning, land development, and urban design standards are so important to communities with tourism resources. Communities get the message that they are in trouble when new development shapes the character of the community—instead of the character of the community shaping new development.

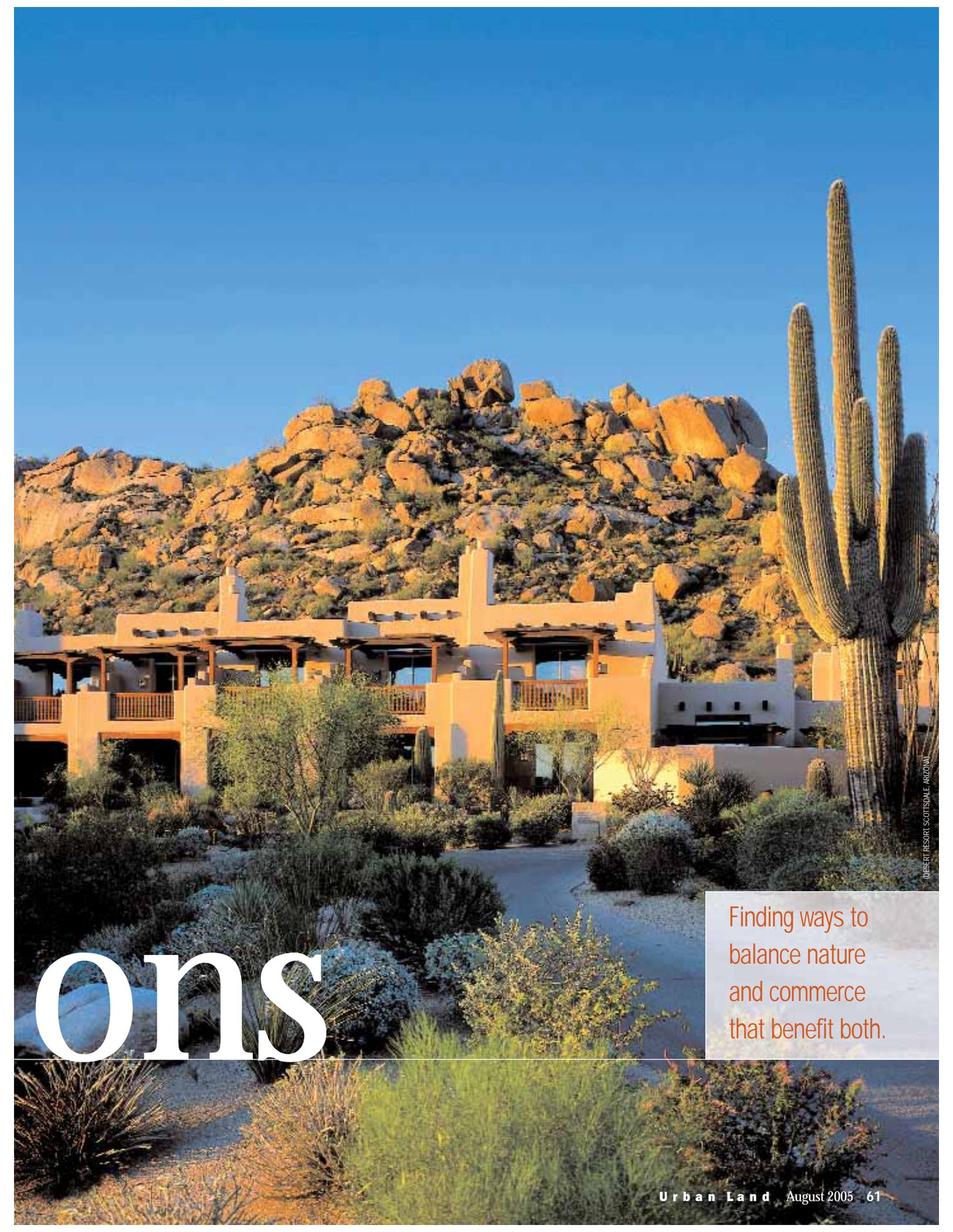
There are significant differences between tourists' and residents' perceptions of a community. Tourists tend to be open and receptive to everything they see, while residents tend to tune out the familiar environment along the roads they travel day in and day out. This suggests that local tourism officials need to become much more aware of the overall character of their community.

If the character of a destination is at odds with its description in advertising and promotional literature, for example, the tourist will feel cheated. Creation of a false image—beautifully photographed uncrowded beaches when the more realistic picture is standing room only—can spoil a vacation. What is more, it can reduce the likelihood of repeat visitation: tourists may come once, but they will not come back. Alternatively, fond memories and word of mouth can be a destination's best public relations.

EDWARD T. MCMAHON



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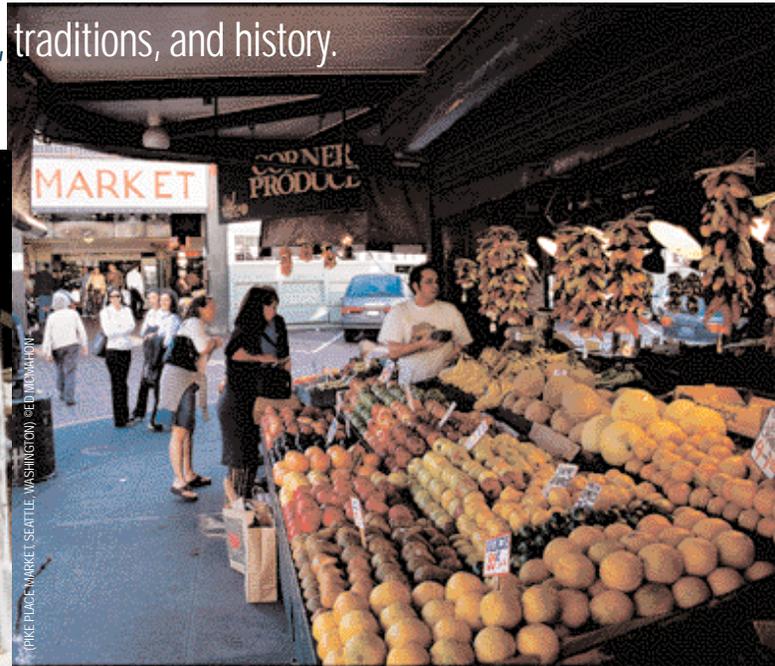


DESERT RESORT, SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA

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Finding ways to balance nature and commerce that benefit both.

Communities should make every effort to preserve the authentic aspects of **local heritage** and culture, including **food**, handicrafts, art, **music**, language architecture, landscape, traditions, and history.



Tourism is a voluntary activity—which means that tourists can choose from a wide range of competing destinations. Given a variety of choices, where will they end up? According to heritage tourism expert Amy Webb, virtually every study of traveler motivations has shown that, along with rest and recreation, visiting scenic areas and historic sites are the top reasons why people travel. In a speech, travel writer Arthur Frommer noted, “Among cities with no particular recreational appeal, those that have preserved their past continue to enjoy tourism. Those that haven’t, receive almost no tourism at all. Tourism simply doesn’t go to a city that has lost its soul.”

So how can a community attract tourists—and their dollars—without losing its soul? First, a community needs to recognize that sustainable tourism is a long-term strategy, not a quick fix. Second, a community needs to understand that people become tourists in order to visit a specific, special place. As economic development expert Don Rypkema says, “Nobody goes anywhere to go down a water-slide or buy a T-shirt. They may do both of these things, but that isn’t the reason they went there.” People travel to see places, especially those that are special, unusual, and unique. In short, any place can create a tourist attraction, but it is those places that are attractions in and of themselves that people most want to visit.

Preservation-minded cities like Annapolis, Maryland; Savannah, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; New Orleans, Louisiana; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Quebec City, Canada; and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, are among North America’s leading tourism destinations precisely because they have protected their unique archi-

tectural heritage. By contrast, cities that have obliterated their past attract hardly any tourists at all, except for the highly competitive and notoriously fickle convention business.

Not every community is blessed with a great natural wonder or a rich legacy of historic buildings, but most communities have tourism potential. Realizing this potential begins by inventorying a community’s assets—both existing and potential. What natural, cultural, or historic resources does a community have to offer? What features give a community its special character and identity? This is how Lowell, Massachusetts, began its transformation from a gritty, industrial city, with an unemployment rate of 23 percent, to a city that now receives over 800,000 visitors a year, has restored 250 historic buildings, and has seen over \$1 billion in new investments. It all began by recognizing the potential that existed in the abandoned mill buildings that characterized the city, and then planning to realize that potential.

Sustainable tourism means preserving and protecting resources. The more a community does to conserve its unique resources, whether natural, architectural, or cultural, the more tourists it will attract. On the other hand, the more a community comes to resemble “Anyplace, U.S.A.,” the less reason there is to visit. Make a destination more appealing, and people will stay longer—and spend more.

The following are six recommendations that communities might want to consider:

Focus on authenticity. Communities should make every effort to preserve the authentic aspects of local heritage and culture, including food, handicrafts, art, music, language, architecture, landscape, traditions, and history. Sustainable tourism emphasizes the

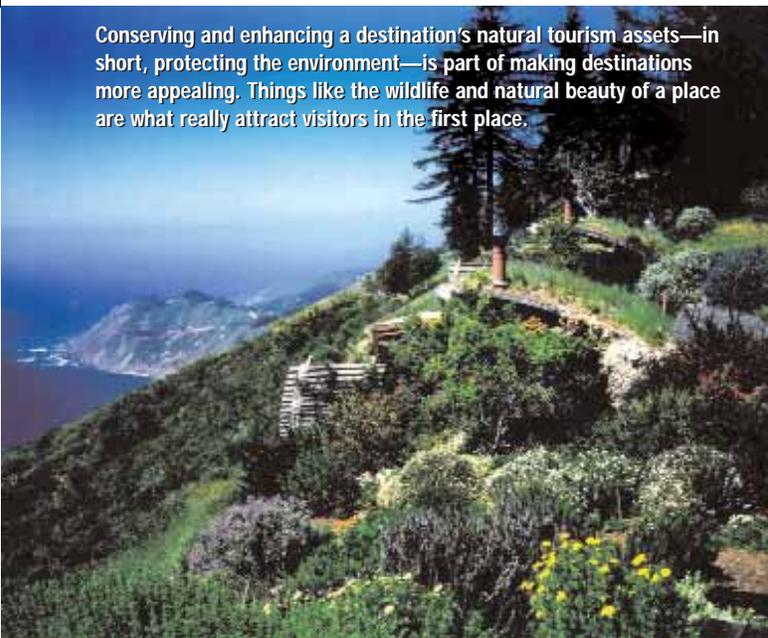
real over the artificial. It recognizes that the true story of an area is worth telling, even if it is painful or disturbing.

In Birmingham, Alabama, for example, the Civil Rights Museum and Historic District tell the story of the city's turbulent history during the civil rights era. The authentic representation of the city's past adds value and appeal to Birmingham as a destination and the museum and adjacent historic district have proved popular with visitors from all over the world.

By contrast, many tourist attractions near the Smoky Mountains National Park portray Cherokee Indians as using teepees and totem poles and wearing feather war bonnets, even though this was never a part of their culture. This commercialized stereotype of a Native American has caused anger toward the tourism industry and devalued the area as a destination.

Ensure that tourism-support facilities—hotels, motels, restaurants, and shops—are architecturally and environmentally compatible with their surroundings. Tourists need places to eat and sleep. They also appreciate the dependable level of service and ac-

Conserving and enhancing a destination's natural tourism assets—in short, protecting the environment—is part of making destinations more appealing. Things like the wildlife and natural beauty of a place are what really attract visitors in the first place.



commodation usually found in American hotels and motels. But tourists also crave integrity of place wherever they go—and homogeneous, “off-the-shelf” corporate chain and franchise architecture works against integrity of place. Freeport, Maine, home of the L.L. Bean Company, for example, is a draw for shoppers seeking bargains at the town's many outlets, but the town has also protected its character by ensuring that the likes of McDonald's, Taco Bell, Arby's, and other chains either reuse historic structures or erect one-of-a-kind buildings rather than the cookie-cutter, anywhere-in-the-U.S.A. type of buildings.

Every tourist development should have a harmonious relationship with its setting. Tourism-support facilities should reflect the broader environmental context of the community and should respect the specific size, character, and functional factors of their site within the surrounding landscape. A community's food and lodging establishments are part of the total tourism package. Hotels should reflect a city and not each other. Hotels in Maine, for instance, should be different in style than those in Maryland or Montana. It is this search for something different that has given rise to the booming bed-and-breakfast, adventure travel, and heritage tourism industries.

Interpret the resource. Education and interpretation are keys to sustainable tourism—visitors want information about what they are seeing. Interpretation can also be a powerful storytelling tool that can make an attraction, even an entire community, come alive. It can also result in better-managed resources by explaining why they are important. Interpretation instills respect and fosters stewardship in both visitors and residents. Education about natural and cultural resources can instill community pride and strengthen sense of place. The town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for example, developed a community-wide interpretation program that involves public art, wayside exhibits, and interpretative markers that tell the story of the town and its role in the battle of Gettysburg. Since the program was developed, the number of visitors spending time and money in the town has drastically increased.

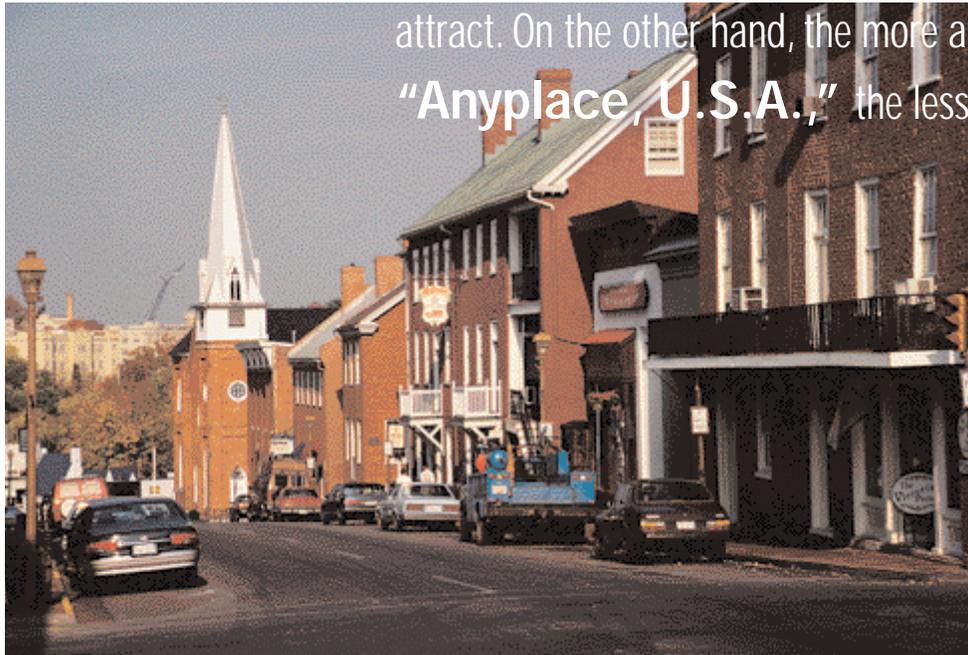
Consider aesthetics and ecology. Clean air and water and healthy natural systems are fundamentally important to sustainable tourism, but so is community appearance. Many cities have gotten used to ugliness, accepting it as inevitable to progress. However, other more enlightened communities recognize that the way a community looks affects its image and its economic well-being. Protecting scenic views and vistas, planting trees, landscaping parking lots, and controlling signs are all fundamentally important to the economic health of a community.

For example, Vermont's tourism office touts the fact that it is one of four states that completely prohibits billboards. Likewise, Oregon's marketing slogan is “Oregon, things look different here.” Imagine a marketing campaign that touts billboards as an attraction or urges tourists to visit by bragging, “Things look the same here.”

Enhance the journey as well as the destination. Tourism is the sum total of the travel experience. It is not just what happens at the destination. It involves everything that people see—and do—from the time they leave home until the vacation is over. Getting there can be half the fun, but frequently it is not.

There are many truly noteworthy destinations in America; however, there are very few truly noteworthy journeys left, which is why it is in the interest of the tourism industry to encourage the development of heritage corridors, bike paths, hiking trails, and other forms of alternative transportation. This is also why local and state

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(LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA) © ED MCMAHON

subtropical environments, while also accommodating a high level of visitation.

In recent years, American tourism has had steadily less to do with America and more to do with mass marketing. As the amount of open land decreases, advertising dollars increase. As historic buildings disappear, theme parks proliferate. Unless the tourism industry thinks it can continue to sell trips to communities clogged with traffic, look-a-like motels, overcrowded beaches, and cluttered commercial strips, it needs to create a plan to protect the natural, cultural, and scenic resources on which it relies. Citizens,

governments should designate scenic byways and protect roads with unique scenic or historic character.

Recognize that tourism has limits. Savvy communities always ask how many tourists are too many. Tourism development that exceeds the carrying capacity of the ecosystem or fails to respect a community’s sense of place will result in resentment and the eventual destruction of the very attributes that tourists have come to enjoy. Too many cars, boats, tour buses, condominiums—or people—can overwhelm a community and harm fragile resources.

A few communities have managed to balance nature and commerce in ways that benefit both. A popular Gulf Coast resort, Sanibel Island in Florida, is one of the world’s premier places to collect seashells and see subtropical birds. To protect its abundant wildlife, white sand beaches, and quiet charm, Sanibel built an extensive network of off-road bike paths and developed a master plan based on an analysis of what was needed to protect the island’s natural systems. The plan set a limit on the island population consistent with its drinking water supply, the habitat needs of wildlife, the need to evacuate the island before hurricanes, and other considerations. By establishing development standards based on ecological constants, Sanibel has managed to preserve one of America’s most exceptional



(“ANYPLACE, U.S.A.”) © ED MCMAHON

elect officials, and developers alike can take a leadership role in promoting—through community education and comprehensive plan policies—a sustainable tourism agenda that will strengthen the local economy by protecting and enhancing the community’s tourism assets. ■

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