

## **Presentation IIPT Carribean Community Tourism Conference**

### **Community Tourism Summit May13-15 2003, The Pocantico Conference Center, Tarrytown New York**

BEST (Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel) is non-profit organization based in New York City. BEST is a leading source of knowledge on innovative travel and tourism practices that advances business, community, and travelers' interests and promotes sustainable tourism efforts among tourism practitioners.

From May 13-15 2003, BEST held an International Community Tourism Summit in New York, at which 30 leaders in Community Tourism, both urban and rural practitioners came together to discuss Community Tourism. The purpose of the meeting was to advance the development of the emerging field of Community Tourism. The specific summit objectives were to: (1) exchange information among existing community tourism programs; (2) articulate strategies for evaluating the success of such programs and disseminating information about best practices; and (3) launch a continuing peer support and learning group. The Summit consisted of seven sessions:

- Deliberating on Community Tourism's Core Values;
- Designing and Developing Community Tourism Offerings/Products;
- Marketing to Key Audiences and Gauging Customers' Interests;
- Building Links and Partnerships Within the Tourism Industry;
- Training Local Residents;
- Documenting and Evaluating Outcomes;
- Financing Community Tourism

I would like to discuss some of the conclusions of the first session - Deliberating on Community Tourism's Core Values - because it is, in my opinion, quite important to determine these before developing community tourism. In addition, I would like to discuss several patterns that emerged as the discussions continued.

In the first session, participants agreed that in order to define the core values of community tourism, we should first take a look at the community's values. It is important for a community to develop an organized set of core values in order to protect the peoples cultural resources and the integrity of the place. This is necessary because sometimes a visitor may value something that is not good for the community. To develop that aspect would be purely considering the economic benefits and not taking into account the community's other needs. Therefore, when negotiating tourism development with project developers, an organized set of core values provides a basis for a stable decision making environment, which will enable the community to make clear beforehand what is, and what is not, acceptable in tourism development.

Some of the important conclusions that came out of this session include the following:

- Community tourism should protect and preserve *the integrity of the place*. We do not want to create an artificial environment like a theme park, where people just come to look at attractions and go back home at night. Residents should be able to maintain their original way of life, while visitors experience the authenticity of a place
- Community tourism should *add value* to, and not subtract from the community; any tourism efforts should contribute to the strength of a community, economically, culturally, environmentally, or in any other way
- *Balance between ecology and economy* should be maintained. A careful assessment to determine the economic benefits of development against the negative effects to the environment should be made before developing new products and facilities
- Public Policy should reflect values and assure some sort of *distribution of benefits to all forces of the community* so that everyone will benefit from tourism
- An *educational component* should be included to provide the visitor with a unique learning experience
- While advertising of a product is often emphasized, investment in *product development and sustaining and preserving the environment* should take place as well as advertising. This includes training and education of community businesses, government agencies, and residents.
- The *carrying capacity* of a place should be taken into account. Not just the environmental capacity, but also the social capacity. Sometimes residents do not want visitors, some rituals may be sacred and secret, and not intended for outsiders. In this regard it is important to *ask permission*

And finally, and this conclusion is one of the patterns that were discovered;

- We should allow the community *to tell its own story*; we want the visitor to find their story in the community's story in order to create a fair and genuine exchange of value

This aspect of the 'community's story' was one of the patterns we found throughout the meeting. Why is this important? Because this is what makes the community unique. The subject returned in the second session; 'Designing and Developing Community Tourism Offerings and Products'. It was agreed upon that the community's stories are an important aspect of the tourism product. Story tellers and community cultural leaders could partner with the business community to create opportunities for tourism development. Stories can be used in marketing as well; in marketing their destination, rural communities tend to focus their story on natural beauty, agriculture, and general cultural heritage, but to build a competitive advantage over other destinations, it needs to be discovered what it is that really makes a destination unique. Most often the uniqueness of a destination lies in their stories and the things that are part of the daily life patterns of the community. 'The ordinary for the community becomes the extraordinary for the visitor'. Meaning that daily activities, e.g. like cooking local recipes, can become a learning experience and part of the tourism experience for the visitor.

The second pattern was 'taking people into the community to show them what's there'. And by this is meant not just the visitors.

Start with the community members themselves. Why? Because sometimes, the communities aren't even fully aware of the values and assets they have and that they are of interest to visitors. One aspect therefore is to show to them the values of their cultural heritage through the visitor's eyes. This is also important because 'In self discovery lies pride'.

Other parties that can be taken into the communities are partners and funders. Mrs. Diana McIntyre-Pike, president of the IIPT Carribean Chapter, visited BEST's Community Tourism Summit, and explained how they had taken managers and staff from Sandals, an all-inclusive resort chain in Jamaica and other Caribbean Islands, into the community to show them what is there and what the community can offer to visitors. In doing this, it is important to make clear to them that the community is NOT competition to them, but an addition to the visitor experience. All inclusive resorts can add value to their product by offering visitors to see the authenticity of a place as well as the opportunity of staying in a luxury environment. Mrs. McIntyre's team has convinced Sandals that partnering with the community will be beneficial to both parties and Sandals is now actually offering community tours to their visitors.

The same goes for funders. They will ask *why* should I fund your project? One of the ways to make that clear to them is to take them into the community, show them what they have to offer, and convince them that the project will enhance the visitor's experience and benefit the community and the destination as well.

The third pattern that came up is the importance of Training and Education. We devoted an entire session to 'Training Local Residents', but training and education does not end with local residents.

Visitor education is crucial. Including an educational component into the tourism product is necessary to create a unique learning experience for the visitors. They can also be educated about the things they can do to help protect the environment and the integrity of the place.

Also important is training the trainer. For obvious reasons; only a well-educated trainer can create well-trained employees. One recommendation is to use community training graduates as trainers for their peers. People are more likely to listen to those they feel are living their same day to day experience.

And, as mentioned before, partners and funders sometimes also need to be educated as they might not know what lives in a community.

Conclusions concerning the training of local residents include:

- Newly emerging hospitality (small) businesses need better customer service training. Front line staff have the most intensive contact with the visitor, and thus the most influence on the visitors experience. The importance of good customer service needs to be emphasized to employees
- One challenge is to improve general education, higher level education (college) in particular, is scarce in some destinations
- Communities need to better convey the idea that everyone in the community is a host or ambassador. Everyone, even if they do not come in contact with the visitor, has the ability to enhance the visitor experience

- Crucial is that training is an ongoing process. The ultimate goal is for the community to drive the tourism industry in their place. Therefore, employees need to be given ongoing goals and be made clear that raising the bar is possible, it should be done, and it is everyone's responsibility. They need to know that it is possible to climb higher on the career ladder.

The fourth session, Building Links and Partnerships within the Tourism Industry, was also a recurring theme throughout the meeting.

One key aspect is to identify stakeholders - who has the interest in rebuilding the community – there is a whole list of unusual suspects out there, partners that are usually forgotten about when developing tourism. Think of schools, community organizations, religious organizations, etc. They can all take part in developing community tourism offerings.

If an independent project developer wants to develop a community tourism product, the first thing he has to do is build a relationship, a partnership, with the community. There has to be a climate of trust if you want to create a tourism offering that involves the community of a destination.

Secondly, communities need to partner with the government. Sometimes, the government needs to intervene in community based tourism because the community has limited assets. A government partner can provide economic assistance, aid in capacity building, and develop infrastructure.

Community Tourism Practitioners should also establish partnerships with the media, in order to effectively spread the message about the community.

Also important are partnerships with tourism consultants, to advise the community on how to best operate their business.

Other partnerships concern development agencies, NGO's, organizations like WTO, and so on.

And finally, partnerships with other tourism practitioners, in order to discuss opportunities, challenges and obstacles in practicing community tourism are essential. Sharing experiences will give practitioners the opportunity to learn from each other and improve their products and activities. And that's one reason why it's so important to keep organizing tourism conferences and other gatherings: so that people can come together to share their experiences.