

# Creating a Sustainable Tourism Destination

*For the Red Cliff & the Bayfield Peninsula Area*

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1/31/13

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## Introduction

### *The Opportunity*

Endowed with a tremendous natural environment and culture, the Red Cliff/ Bayfield Peninsula community has an unprecedented opportunity to take charge of its future growth and development by focusing on its core values for sustainability. The immediate challenge is to understand what sustainability means to the area, how to develop and instill its guiding principles into the community, and how to apply these principles to build a regional economic model that contributes to long term sustainability, rather than unsustainability.

## The Mission

*To create a socially and economically vibrant community by creating and managing a sustainable tourism destination*

If one accepts that this is a reachable goal then it should also be accepted that the most practical way to accomplish this is to rely on what Mother Nature has provided, the outstanding natural environment of the Red Cliff/ Bayfield region of Lake Superior and its surrounding forests, to help promote a vibrant nature and cultural based tourist destination; and that gaming, while currently a major employment component in the community, is not the primary reason travelers come to Lake Superior.

And, further, the Red Cliff and Bayfield Peninsula region has tremendous potential tourist experiences that promote its intrinsic natural and cultural attributes that are currently, particularly from a regional and national perspective, under promoted or simply un-tapped.

Thoughtful smaller projects such as eco lodge construction, marina expansion, creation of groomed nature trails, camp grounds, etc. are important spokes in the wheel. The Destination *is* the wheel. Through destination planning and implementation, the Red Cliff /Bayfield community can become a national model of sustainable tourism – *increasing the number of travelers and travel expenditures in the community by preserving and promoting the natural amenities that are responsible for attracting them in the first place.*

## Community Tourism Status

**Though currently undeveloped and under promoted, the abundance of nature and cultural experiences Lake Superior, Red Cliff, and the Bayfield Peninsula offer an excellent opportunity to become a true experiential travel destination.**

However, the current tourism industry status in the area is basically a fractured and under organized model. There are a handful of second home developments and small locally operated hotels. There are no major flag, boutique, or ecolodge operators. Though the area could create scores of cottage industry nature and adventure tour operators, as a whole, these businesses are seasonal and cannot afford to individually attract a national or international market. The little regional planning that exists seems to be confused with no real commitment to tourism as a destination.

All of this is normal in the early stages of destination evolution. Until well-funded and well organized tourism entrepreneurs enter the local market, and until these groups gain local and governmental support with respect to destination planning and development, tourism will continue to see slow, interrupted growth.

To create enhanced and continued economic opportunity with respect to sustainable tourism, the Red Cliff/ Bayfield area must strive to become a destination, understanding that high-quality destination planning is critical to its success. Both the private and the public sector must be involved with sustainable destination planning that:

- Respects the local community
- Creates adequate employment
- Protects regional culture and environment
- Offers a high-quality experience to visitors

## Definitions

### *Sustainable Tourism Models:*

#### *Nature-Based/ Cultural-Based “Experiential” Tourism*

With almost 1 billion tourists each year, tourism represents 35% of the world’s economy. Leisure and business travel (mass tourism) is the largest segment of tourism. But within the world of tourism, mass tourism models (beach, theme park, casino, etc.), because there are so many, are considered flat experiences; meaning that they will not grow more than 5% per year (the annual average growth of tourism world-wide).

The fastest growing tourist segment since the 1990’s has been “experiential” travel. These tourists want to experience pristine natural environments and authentic cultures while they still exist. In many of the world’s natural and cultural destinations poorly planned growth and development have destroyed the very thing that attracted tourists in the first place.

The International Ecotourism Society ([www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)) offers the following information of nature-based and sustainable travel:

- Nature-based tourism is growing globally 3 times faster than the tourism industry as a whole
- One of the tourism sectors expected to grow most quickly over the next two decades is “experiential” tourism, which encompasses ecotourism, nature, heritage, cultural, and soft adventure
- Sustainable tourism could grow to 25% of the world’s travel market within the next 5 years, taking the value of the sector to \$473 billion per year

Nature/ cultural-based and sustainable tourism (with annual growth rates of up to 25%) involve education and interpretation of the natural environment and are culturally and ecologically sustainable. It can typically be defined as travel to destinations where the flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions.

**Sustainable Tourism is “Tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future”.** (TIES) Some of the characteristics of responsible tourism are:

- Minimizes negative economic, environmental and social impacts.
- Generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well being of host communities.
- Makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage embracing diversity.

- Provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues.
- Is culturally sensitive, encourages respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence

The typical demographic of these markets include Baby-boomers who want authentic experiences rather than the traditional golf, cruise, theme park, and casinos; and Generation X travelers who are quickly becoming the new affluent traveler and who have been environmentally aware since childhood. These markets demand environmental and cultural sustainability in the destinations where they choose to travel.

## *SUSTAINABILITY*

Sustainability means different things to different people. In this case, a successful sustainable destination requires clear understanding of a shared vision and a strong commitment by the community to embrace and employ sustainable practices. Sustainability has three primary components and several secondary characteristics. The primary components are:

**Economic Sustainability** is not a linear argument of economy versus environment. Instead, in this case, it promotes long-term economic viability of the community by implementing best practices to help protect and promote the area's intrinsic natural environment and local culture for the benefit of the community now and into the future. It requires having a sound ecosystem, a healthy social environment, and a political system that allows adaptation to ever changing conditions.

**Environmental Sustainability** involves understanding and taking inventory of natural system processes in order to help planning and the design of sound economic development strategies that preserve these natural systems. An unsustainable destination tries to govern nature; a sustainable destination allows the natural environment to dictate what, where, and how many in order to preserve habitat and maintain biodiversity. A sustainable destination is not defined by legal boundaries but by patterns of relationships, human, environmental, and physical. Sustainable communities within the destination are inhabited by people with a sense of stewardship and strive to maintain and enhance the environment and natural ecosystems for their beauty, their livability, and their ability to provide sustainable provide employment, without destroying their function as economic assets in the future.

**Social Sustainability** insures equal access to jobs, education, natural resources, and services for the community. In unsustainable communities, individual interests override a collective will to preserve and promote the uniqueness of the destination. Sustainable societies promote social equity and insure that social and cultural systems are preserved. This includes a sense of

belonging, a sense of place, a sense of self-worth, a sense of safety, a sense of connection with nature.

None of these three primary components can stand alone. Emphasis must be placed equally on all three in order to achieve sustainability. It is a three legged stool. If any one of these systems fails the entire stool fails.

Other characteristics include:

Community Engagement:

Engagement is a participatory approach by the community that promotes awareness, understanding, education, respect, helps create guidelines and best practices for destination implementation, and continues strategic planning for the destination through monitoring and setting benchmarks. It requires a commitment by the communities to strengthen the sense of place by working together with a shared vision.

Cultural Integrity:

A sustainable community is one that preserves cultural attributes developed over its history, while also embracing the best part of alternative traditions as they evolve.

Institutional Cooperation:

Businesses, neighborhood and community groups, the media, and citizens, government authorities, and NGOs, need to be informed and work together to help form the vision and to help build, monitor, and protect the destination.

Making Connections and Tradeoffs:

Planning for a sustainable destination cannot be done in isolation. The process needs to consider social, economic, and environmental links within the region, not just the destination. As the sustainable destination planners elicit support from businesses, local government authorities, and citizen organizations and work with other communities, or in a greater context, County, State, Lake Superior officials; they need to plan for connectivity. But sometimes there will be conflicting needs. When it is not possible to solve these issues, there needs to be reasonable and balanced tradeoffs, informed by the community's core values.

Resilience:

Resilience can be characterized as the amount of disturbance in economies, relationships, and ecosystems that can be sustained by a destination before a change in its structure and policies may be needed. It is important for the community to identify possible disruptive sources and set up measures and criteria to reduce their impacts before reaching threshold limits. For example, if crime rates get too high, social sustainability is lost. If critical ecosystems are lost, environmental sustainability is lost.

### Adaptation:

The ability for the destination to succeed into the future depends on its ability to continue to develop and perfect its sustainable policies. This type of adaptive management is built upon the premise that people learn from their actions, as well as their mistakes. This learning-based approach requires finding ways to maintain flexibility and improve decision making by promoting cooperation between disciplines (government and science) and being prepared to adapt new strategies or to abandon unsuccessful strategies.

### *Destinations*

Everyone has seen or has heard of great destinations – New York, Paris, Disney World, the Grand Canyon, etc. These are all locations where people want to see or experience. They are places people will leave home to visit.

They are all the product of continued successful branding and marketing. Some were branded as a planned process by governments or private sector – Cancun, Disney World, Costa Rica, etc. Some were branded over time as more and more travelers discovered them – Las Vegas, Miami Beach, Chichen Itza, etc. And some were simply branded by their natural beauty – the Grand Canyon, the Everglades, Antarctica, etc. Some are “image oriented” like Disney World or other theme park even casino destinations that use images to attract tourists; while others are “place oriented” where their intrinsic natural environments are emphasized in planning and marketing.

As stated earlier, Lake Superior and the Red Cliff/ Bayfield areas are already blessed with a world class natural environment and a very good cultural base. It simply has not been identified, branded, and promoted as such.

## Combining Sustainability and the Destination –

### *Creating the Sustainable Tourist Destination*

*“This century’s new luxury with respect to travel destinations will be space.”*

It is easy to for those already living or frequently traveling to this area to take for granted, even to the point of not recognizing, how expansive and unique this natural environment is. But there is an entire population outside of this region who has never heard of Bayfield or Red Cliff or the Apostle Islands.

Attracting these new and under-informed travelers to the area with the promise of a world-class natural environment, and then consistently delivering a high-quality and unique travel experience are trademarks of successful destination that can compete with similar tourist destinations nation-wide.

The destination must have a clear identity and “sense of place” and it must differentiate itself from its competition.

To accomplish this, several key ingredients are needed:

- **Attractors** – these are the things that bring travelers to the area. They are the natural environment, cultural facilities and events, etc. These are “wow” factor experiences necessary for the travel experience. It is important to identify, inventory, and map all of the available attractors, large and small, in order to understand what each one can bring to the destination experience.
- **Infrastructure** – this is necessary for seamless movement to and within the destination. Existing infrastructure needs to be mapped and additional infrastructure, if needed to access and connect many of the attractors to the destination, will need to be planned.
- **Services** – the core of the destination. Services cater to tourists needs, create jobs for the community, activities for visitors, and increase tourist spending. Services include tour operations, hotels, restaurants, shops, etc.
- **Brand** – Branding packages all of the destinations experiences in concise, memorable marketing presentations. It creates the identity, one in which simply the name and logo of the destination immediately conjures up the areas unique attributes in the mind of the audience. Successful destination branding efforts promise quality experiences and services – and the stakeholders within the destination keep those promises.
- **Destination management** – While tourist services and resorts within the destination will be under individual management for the most part, the destination, as a whole, must also be strategically managed in order to stay relevant and competitive.



## How to Get there – *Creating the Vision*

*To insure a healthy future our earth, humans and nature must respectfully co-mingle in ways that each will benefit.*

The concept of creating a sustainable destination is a very broad brushstroke on a much broader canvass. It is easy to get lost in the myriad of ideas and that normally accompany this concept. For there to be an effective and efficient planning effort there needs to be a clear focus on the ability to create and implement a practical Sustainable Destination Plan for the community (physically, environmentally, and economically). This focus starts in the form of a “road map” that is provided by experienced planners using input from local and regional experts from multiple disciplines. The physicality, ecology, infrastructure, hydrology, attractions, circulation patterns, etc. are analyzed and inventoried for the purpose of determining practical locations, sizes, and types of proposed sustainable tourism activities and accompanying infrastructure.

This process eventually forms the vision for the sustainable destination which is packaged in a series of graphic images, maps, and descriptions. This “Vision Plan” is the first of many critical steps in order to bring the destination to fruition. Applying the phrase that “a picture is worth a thousand words”, the Vision Plan is vital to further the planning process. As the planning effort expands to more groups within the destination and to State and possibly Federal agencies the Vision Plan provides the images, descriptions, and professional guidance that allow these discussions to effectively focus on specific issues addressed in the Vision Plan; discussions and input that will eventually lead to a more Comprehensive Master Plan for the destination.

The Vision Plan is a working interactive tool that is designed to change as these ideas and additional information is brought into the Destination discussions by these new groups. Eventually, near the completion of multiple presentations of the Vision Plan, the final version of the Vision Plan needs to be economically validated by a major hospitality accounting firm. These expert firms add credible confirmation (or not) to the Vision Plan by providing reports that analyze the destinations potential tourist demand, its strengths and weaknesses with respect to competitive destinations, and the anticipated growth of tourist and tourist dollars if the destination is properly implemented and marketed. This validation helps answer the question of economic viability of the concept and helps the decision making process to move forward with the planning and branding efforts.

## Steps to Success

### *First Step:*

#### Vision Plan –*The Tool That Enables All Subsequent Planning Discussions*

One of the first steps in destination planning is to understand what exists and what can or should exist within the parameters of physical, environmental, legal, and social constraints; and needs presented by the client.

The Vision Plan is not a Comprehensive Master Plan, which requires significant community input and the expertise of many consulting disciplines. It is, however, the glue that enables every individual or group engaged in the planning process to focus on a common vision. It is the basis of all subsequent planning discussions and represents a common focus as the Vision evolves into a working Sustainable Tourism Master Plan.

All of this data is then analyzed by planning and environmental experts and translated into graphic images. These graphic images serve as working road maps for all future discussions that start to fine tune the vision into more detailed comprehensive master planning for the Destination.

The Vision Plan will be used to help engage regional, State, and even some Federal agencies, Tribes and NGOs, business leaders, lender hospitality developers and operators - whose collective input will help shape and finance the next steps in the development of the sustainable destination.

Information that should be included within the Vision Plan:

- Boundaries and physicality of the subject area – topography, wildlife corridors, waterways, wetlands, urban areas, parks, trails, etc.
- Inventory mapping of special environmentally sensitive areas
- Existing tourism services and infrastructure
- Under marketed soft tourism activity areas – birding, interpretive biological areas
- Locate best areas for luxury lodges, interpretive centers, new trails, interpretive programs
- Additional regional attractions outside the destination within day trip range
- Location and types of proposed new tourism infrastructure and services
- A preliminary economic validation by a major hospitality accounting firm that addresses the feasibility and potential economic growth in both tourist numbers and tourist dollars of the destination as proposed in the Vision Plan. This will include a demand analysis

that examines both the existing and proposed Vision Plan tourism services and infrastructure and how they relate to travel patterns and market trends. This is essential in order to understand the competitiveness of the proposed destination with other destinations with similar key attractors.

- Guiding principles that help lead all subsequent discussions as the Vision is shaped into a viable Destination Master Plan.

## **Next Steps:**

*The Master Plan* is a comprehensive analysis of the Vision Plan that starts to focus on its overall feasibility to help create a Destination. The Master Plan could take years to fully implement and some aspects may change as they are challenged through continuing economic or environmental scrutiny. The Master Plan will detail each of the proposed tourism services and needed infrastructure components with respect to quantifying, phasing, sizing, location feasibility, and funding. Additionally, and most importantly, the Master Plan must be guided by the Destination's Guiding Principles but it must also be steeped in practicality – with the clear ability to be implemented.

Master planning requires the involvement of the following experts and consultants:

- Project Directors
- Community leaders and planning staff
- Local and regional government authorities
- Land Planners with destination experience
- Civil Engineer
- Flora/ fauna experts
- Sustainability and Environmental Experts
- Hospitality/ Economic Analytic Consultants
- Branding/ Marketing Consultants
- Public Relation Consultants

## *Financial Model and Business Plan*

Upon completion and validation of a Preliminary Master Plan one of the next steps in destination planning involves a thorough cost and revenue projection of the Plan and all of its components. The Financial Model/ Business Plan will help address two primary concerns:

- The client can understand costs and expected returns on individual components or services and can plan accordingly
- Lending institutions and investors rely on well conceived and accurate financial and business planning models in order to take the decision to lend or invest
- Stakeholders and the community will have a consistent reference to help guide the implementation and monitoring process

*Branding and Promoting the Story* – This requires branding, marketing, graphics, and public relation expertise. It packages and conveys the story of the Destination to the market place using print media, internet, billboards, and press releases. It cannot be overstated that the branding and promotional efforts must be of superb quality – on par with promotional information one can see with other exceptional destinations around the country and the world.

*Implementation* – The proposed services and infrastructure need to be put into place according to the business plan schedule. Small business loans and training will be required so that local residents can set up many of the cottage industries that will be created through destination planning. Resort investors and operators need to be brought into the area as tourism grows. Long-term education programs that teach sustainability and “soft” tourism need to be set up for the community, particularly its youth. It is probable that the demand for real estate and second home developments will also increase. It is therefore very important to monitor tourism growth and its impacts on the environment and the community so that the carrying capacity of the area’s natural capital is not exceeded. This will ultimately translate into understanding how much tourism is too much, and planning accordingly.

**Effective branding of the unique travel experience will attract tourists to the destination – understanding and providing high quality service will bring them back.** Critically important is that each traveler must have a unique, safe, and visitor friendly experience. To do this all service providers must be organized as a group and this group must embrace the Destination concept and philosophy experiential travel (nature and cultural based tourism). Training programs and guidelines that re-enforce the Destination concept need to be in place to assist service providers and frequently up-dated as services and tourism grows.

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## **Summary**

Creating a sustainable “nature-based” tourist destination for the Red Cliff/ Bayfield Peninsula community is simply the logical way to insure a sustainable local economy. Providing for industrial or high-tech jobs is also important for economic diversity but it is not likely that the area could become a regional hub for these activities because of the low population base and the logistics of moving large quantities of goods the long distances to the market place. Existing farming, fishing, or logging activities also add to the economic diversity of the area and should continue to thrive on a relatively small scale. However, these industries on larger scales that would provide sufficient product to export to other communities would not be sustainable. The resources would be depleted in a very short time. The casino, while offering diversity and employment, will not be profitable unless many additional tourists could be attracted to the area to gamble. It is located in a sparsely populated area and most tourists come to visit the natural amenities.

While most of the existing non-tourist job creating activities in the community are important and need to continue to be developed and supported – the pristine natural and cultural environment of Red Cliff Lake Superior region is only found one place in the world and, as such, deserves to be explored as the primary source of sustainable economic activity within the community.

If this premise is accepted, then one could look at the process as “selling nature”. Not really “selling” but, rather, “renting” nature. In reality, you are the stewards of this unique environment, and as such, you are allowing travelers to visit, to learn how to respect it, and to then take away a unique and memorable experience. It is therefore critical that the areas culture and ecosystems be understood and preserved. They are the goose that will give you the golden eggs. Further, a thoughtful and properly implemented Sustainable Destination Plan can be thought of as a profitable preservation strategy for the region – drawing tourist and tourist dollars preserving the natural features that attract them in the first place.

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