

AN ECOTOURISM BRAND FOR RURAL MAINE — THE TIME IS RIGHT

By David Vail

Five years ago, the *Maine Policy Review* published my article, “An Ecotourism Quality Label for Maine?”¹ I’m convinced that it is now time to drop the question mark and get to work. The encouraging news is that several building blocks for a Maine ecotourism brand are already in place. Accrediting and branding Maine’s highest quality tourism products can be a cost-effective use of our extremely limited public, private and philanthropic resources.

Right now, tourism is in the recessionary doldrums and the State is in a severe fiscal squeeze. A “business as usual” tourism strategy is neither advisable nor sustainable. Only minimal State funds have been earmarked for creative tourism investments, such as those proposed by the Governor’s Council on Quality of Place (2009) and the Green Infrastructure Coalition (2007). Meanwhile, recreation activities such as camping, hunting, whitewater rafting, and snowmobiling are in decline. Back country destinations like Baxter State Park, Lily Bay, and the Allagash have shrinking visitor numbers. The Maine Woods and Downeast destinations, in particular, face the challenge of reinventing and re-branding themselves in an era of shorter vacations and higher fuel prices. Meanwhile, our Northeast competitors -- the Adirondacks, Champlain Valley, White Mountains, and, of course, coastal Maine -- have mounted their own strategies to lure tourists.

Learning from Sweden’s “Nature’s Best”

Many use the term “ecotourism” to connote any nature-based facility or activity meeting basic environmental standards. Two decades ago, the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) articulated a much broader set of principles which are the basis for ecotourism certification and promotion from Costa Rica to Australia.² The Swedish Ecotourism Society (SES) built its *Nature’s Best* (NB) quality label on six principles (see inset), which are a good starting point for designing Maine’s ecotourism brand.



Rural Sweden is not unlike Maine and provides a starting point for designing Maine’s ecotourism brand.

SES' founders shaped a broad stakeholder dialogue to develop the principles and then hammer out detailed accreditation criteria and application procedures. The process took several years and was grounded in an alliance between Sweden's largest tourism trade association, Visit Sweden, and the country's largest environmental organization, the Society for Nature Conservation. Their partnership solidified SES' legitimacy and facilitated recruitment, especially of businesses. Ultimately, fifty stakeholders joined the design effort, resolving thorny issues along the way, for instance:

- Should there be a single high standard of accreditation or a less rigorous entry level option? Answer: Set a single high standard and build participation by demonstrating the payoff to top quality.
- Should all applicants meet identical standards? Answer: No. There is a mix of mandatory and optional (bonus) criteria; and some criteria vary by product (e.g. sled dog safaris vs. sea kayaking).

Following a major recruiting effort, the Ecotourism Society today has over 500 members, 400 of them businesses. Adjusting for population size, that is equivalent to a 70 member Maine organization.

All told, there are 56 mandatory criteria, with most falling under three headings: "respect the carrying capacity of the destination," "make all the company's operations environmentally sustainable," and "quality and safety throughout." Twenty-three bonus criteria allow flexibility and encourage creativity. Examples: give clients an

opportunity to participate in conservation projects, purchase over 50% of supplies from local businesses, and offer guide services in languages other than Swedish or English.

Applying for the *Nature's Best* label is a multi-stage learning process. Interested firms receive a starter packet setting out NB's philosophy and accreditation criteria. Next, they attend a two day course, held during

offers feedback on practices needing further improvement. Finally, NB's quality labeling committee evaluates the application. Those who do not make the grade receive advice on necessary improvements. Most unsuccessful applicants have made the recommended improvements and re-applied.

This exposure to best practices and expert advice is especially valuable for very small tourism

Ecotourism's Potential to Energize Rural Tourism

- Creates a unifying theme for currently fragmented tourism initiatives.
- Makes certified quality a cornerstone of tourism strategy, enhancing the reputation of destinations, not just accredited businesses.
- Gets a jump on neighboring states and provinces in the ecotourism market niche.
- Makes high value added, rather than low cost, the centerpiece of tourism strategy.
- Strengthens small business outreach through the accreditation process and member networking.
- Captures economies of scale in marketing – a boon for small tourism businesses with minimal marketing budgets and market visibility.
- Creates more livable wage tourism jobs. Top quality services require highly skilled and highly motivated employees.
- Strengthens businesses' incentive to adopt best environmental practices and contribute to nature conservation and cultural heritage.

the tourism low season, with interactive sessions devoted to everything from firm-level environmental practices to destination market assessment. Tour operators get feedback on their own operations from NB staff and the other participants. Applicants then complete a lengthy written form, accompanied by letters of recommendation. The application fee ranges from \$500 to \$1500, based on the firm's revenues. An expert evaluation team makes a site visit and

businesses – the majority of NB applicants. However, the fee and the time-intensive application process also have a cost: some prospects choose not to apply or get bogged down and fail to complete the application.

Most applicants are personally committed to following best environmental and business practices. However, they also seek a bottom line payoff, and that hinges on effective branding and marketing. The evolution of NB's marketing strategy deserves an essay

in its own right. Here, I just mention briefly the strategy's two prongs: experimenting with tactics to promote *Nature's Best* products; and strengthening the organization's public profile and reputation. Domestic marketing strategy has centered on creating a dynamic web site. NB recently launched a web-based Travel Club, with free membership, special seasonal offers, and a lottery offering free tour packages. (Check www.naturesbest.org.) NB has also mastered "guerilla marketing": securing free publicity in print and electronic media. Three examples: the Swedish national railroad has featured *Nature's Best* in its on-board magazine; the Swedish Tourism Society promotes its forty accredited NB products to 300,000 members; and the 2008 TV series, "The Back Country Chef" featured NB tour operators.

Nature's Best is also making a name for itself as an indispensable partner in regional tourism efforts. NB staff work closely with the indigenous Sami people of northern Sweden to accredit a rich menu of products, such as reindeer safaris and arctic char fishing. And the Swedish national park authority has contracted NB to train tour businesses operating in and around a brand new park on the North Sea coast. Beyond its contract fees, NB expects to recruit many new applicants and steer tourists to them.

The Swedish Ecotourism Society is a private-non-profit-government partnership, not a creation of Sweden's central or regional governments. Nonetheless, policy makers and government agencies have backed the initiative from the start, recognizing its potential contribution to tourism growth

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and rural economic revitalization. Substantial public funding at the organization building and planning stage came from grants targeted to distressed rural regions, analogous to Maine's rim counties. Today, over half of SES' budget continues to be underwritten by a mix of contracts and grants from the Swedish Agriculture Department, the National Forest Corporation and the Sami legislature.

As we take the first steps toward our own Maine ecotourism brand, the Swedish experience illustrates creative ways to tackle the many challenges we will face: building a broad stakeholder-based organization, encouraging business "ownership," enlisting government support, adopting foundational principles, shaping accreditation criteria, spreading best environmental and business practices, creating a potent brand, and developing an effective marketing strategy.

Building blocks

Sweden started by building an inclusive stakeholder organization, the Swedish Ecotourism Society. *Nature's Best* accreditation followed a few years later. In Maine, the initial action is at the operational end. In their own ways, the ventures described below embody four key aspects of the Swedish ecotourism model: certified environmental practices, outstanding nature conservation, top quality nature tourism experiences, and small business outreach and training.

Establish Environmental Standards

In 2007, Maine's Department of Environmental Protection launched *Environmental Leader*



(EL) certification of lodgings. EL is a technical certification system that fulfills one *Nature's Best's* principle: "Make all the company's operations environmentally sustainable." EL certification requires a

savings.³ The program was extended to restaurants in 2008 and certification of sporting camps is under discussion.

Certified businesses display the Environmental Leader flag and use its logo in their advertising. The Office of Tourism's "Visit Maine" Web site highlights Environmental Leader and the Maine Tourism Association's visitor centers stock EL brochures. Overall, however, the

Six Principles of Sweden's NATURE'S BEST Quality Label

1. Respect the limitations of the destination – minimize negative impacts on both nature and culture.
2. Contribute to the local economy through local hiring and purchasing.
3. Make all the company's operations environmentally sustainable.
4. Contribute actively to nature conservation.
5. Promote tourists' joy of discovery.
6. Ensure the highest quality and safety throughout.

threshold point total, with points awarded for "green" facilities, equipment and practices under such headings as housekeeping, waste management, energy, water conservation, landscaping, kitchen and food, and environmental education. This approach offers applicants great flexibility, since there are no mandatory criteria or point requirements in each category. One DEP staff person devotes quarter-time to EL, offering limited technical assistance. EL's self-certification is essentially an honor system: only twelve of 105 participating businesses are chosen each year for site visits to verify practices.

Lodging certification has achieved impressive results, measured by reduced waste and input use, decreased greenhouse gas emissions, and monetary

branding effort is rudimentary. In sum, EL is an excellent starting point, but its technical criteria meet only a narrow slice of internationally recognized ecotourism standards and do not emphasize high quality customer service.

Create Integrated Packages



This summer, seven leading rural tourism businesses launched Maine Woods Discovery. It embodies several *Nature's Best* principles, notably "promote tourist's joy of discovery and their knowledge and respect", and "quality and

safety in every aspect." Several participants are Environmental Leader certified. This is an initiative of Maine Woods Rural Destination Tourism, a two year old partnership that includes public, private, and non-profit entities. Two examples of MWD's seven "experiential" tour packages are Maine Huts and Trails' exploration of Flagstaff Lake, including an underwater camera tour of submerged Flagstaff village; and the New England Outdoor Center's "Making it by hand" course in arts and crafts from local materials. Excellent food and lodging are part of all seven tour packages. The principle marketing tool is a new Maine Woods Discovery web site.⁴

This experiment is just getting under way, so it is too early to evaluate commercial success. But with incorporation of Environmental Leader certification and a strong emphasis on nature conservation, it could become the prototype for an ecotourism brand.

Practice Environmental Stewardship



For two decades, the Maine Island Trail Association (MITA) has been assembling a roster of over 180 accessible public and private islands along 375 miles of Maine coast. This unique recreational resource is the sole Maine destination recognized by *National Geographic Adventure* in its "50 Best American Adventures."⁵ Kayakers, sailors, power boaters and windjammer cruises that use the islands are

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continually reminded to “leave no trace” - protecting fragile island ecosystems and avoiding interference with marine mammals, nesting birds and other wildlife. Many members of the Maine Sea Kayak Guides and Instructors (MASKGI) seem to be good candidates for an ecotourism quality label. Guide certification, administered by the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, places great emphasis on nature conservation; and best practice guide services have Leave No Trace accreditation.

Deliver High Quality Service

Maine Woods Tourism Training Initiative

The Maine Woods Consortium, another partnership endeavor, has secured a mix of federal, state, and philanthropic funding to develop pilot training programs for small and emerging tourism businesses and their frontline employees

in three rim counties. The project description stresses that training and outreach are serious gaps in Maine’s tourism strategy: “We are not well organized to deliver training to business owners and their employees within the tourism sector.”⁶ Curricula and delivery mechanisms will be tested in three subject areas: Product Design and Development, Marketing, and Product Delivery (i.e. customer service). If environmental practices and nature conservation were added to the list, the Maine Woods Training Initiative would look a lot like *Nature’s Best’s* outstanding suite of learning opportunities.

From talk to action

There has been endless discussion of a rural Maine tourism development strategy in recent years. The four initiatives sketched above are inspiring because they translate talk into action. We can achieve a powerful synergy by combining these and numerous other tourism efforts to certify and brand rural Maine’s very best and “greenest” tour products.

With public and philanthropic funding for tourism scarce for the foreseeable future, such a sharply focused effort would be a cost-effective targeting of limited resources. As with the Swedish Ecotourism Society, organization building is critical for mobilizing broad support, legitimizing fund raising efforts, establishing founding principles, and working through thorny issues such as certification criteria. This will take skillful and patient leadership. In my view, the Maine Woods Consortium, which has already forged a partnership among rural businesses, non-profits, and state and regional agencies, would be an outstanding lead organization. MECEP is ready to help facilitate the process.

About the Author

David Vail directs MECEP’s “Spreading Prosperity to All of Maine” project and teaches economics and environmental studies at Bowdoin College. This report reflects on a five-year collaboration with the Swedish Ecotourism Society.

Endnotes

- 1 Vail, David. 2004. “An Ecotourism Quality Label for Maine? Insights from Sweden’s *Nature’s Best* Initiative.” *Maine Policy Review*. Fall/Winter. Pp. 76-86.
- 2 For an excellent overview of the international ecotourism movement, see Honey, Martha, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*. Island Press. 2d edition, 2008.
- 3 See www.maine.gov/dep/innovation/greencert/savings.htm
- 4 See www.maineecotourism.com.
- 5 “Maine Island Trail Recognized as one of the 50 Best American Adventures by National Geographic.” www.mita.org/node/555.
- 6 Maine Mountains Heritage, Inc.. 2009. “Maine Woods Tourism Training Initiative.” Farmington.

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