

Ecotourism in the city? Toronto's Green Tourism Association

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Abstract

Applying the practices of ecotourism to an urban environment is a relatively new concept but a concept that merits development in multiple cities. The concept of urban green tourism (urban ecotourism), as pioneered by Toronto's Green Tourism Association, is a working example that demonstrates how a city can promote itself, individual businesses and attractions to provide a unique tourism experience and generate demand for sustainability. This paper seeks to outline how urban green tourism can be an effective approach to addressing the issues of tourism in cities – growth, waste, etc., and demonstrates how sustainable tourism options can capitalize on the existing features of a city. The association promotes local businesses, organizations, natural and cultural features through its green map, green guidebook and Website to educate travellers and industry toward greener practices.

Introduction

Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry worldwide (WTO, 2003). While it is commonly perceived that ecotourism exists primarily in remote and often tropical destinations, this paper seeks to explore the economic and social benefits of urban green tourism as an approach to urban tourism, how ecotourism in the city is an emerging trend, and how the Green Tourism Association (GTA) of Toronto has successfully contributed to the development of urban sustainable travel, or "urban green tourism" (UGT).

The GTA has been a pioneer in applying ecotourism and sustainable tourism principles in the city since 1996. These concerted UGT practices are now being explored in many cities around the world such as Victoria, Sudbury, Rio de Janeiro and Jerusalem. This concept holds major potential for economic growth while proactively contributing to local quality of life and environment. As more tourists learn about these kinds of initiatives and demand greener options, supply will increase to meet this demand.

In a time when sustaining our resources has become critical, UGT provides a unique set of opportunities not only for greening cities and city-based tourism, but educating people and industry about greening practices in general. A key opportunity provided by gateway cities such as Toronto is that tourists will often go on to secondary destinations beyond the city core. Promotion of UGT generally influences travelers to make "green" choices beyond the city limits, creating opportunities to widely spread the values of sustainable tourism and local responsibility.

Urban green tourism

While the common connotation of "green" is usually thought to relate to parks, organic products and recycling, for the GTA it is far more inclusive. "Green", as defined by the GTA, adapts the WTO definition of sustainability and thus refers to four main pillars: environmental responsibility; local economic vitality; cultural sensitivity; and experiential richness (Blackstone Corporation, 1996). Specifically, urban green tourism is defined by the GTA as: "... travel and exploration within and around an urban area that offers visitors enjoyment and appreciation of the city's natural areas and cultural resources, while inspiring physically active, intellectually stimulating and socially interactive experiences; promotes the city's long-term ecological health by promoting walking, cycling, public transportation; promotes sustainable local economic and community development and vitality; celebrates local heritage and the arts; is accessible and equitable to all" (Blackstone Corporation, 1996). By extension, "green" could also be read as "sustainable" or "healthy" and UGT is then about ecological, cultural and economic sustenance for the good health of people and their environment.

Toronto's Green Tourism Association

As a world class city, with rich cultural and natural features, a high quality of life, an excellent transit system and safe neighbourhoods, Toronto is ideally placed to develop the concept and practices of UGT. In 1993, a group of individuals in the Toronto area, representing a range of interests,



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businesses, organizations and government agencies, came together to implement the concept of "ecotourism in the city". From this work, the GTA incorporated as a non-profit in 1996 with a mission "to develop and cultivate a green tourism industry within the Toronto region; an industry which is ecologically sound, fosters appreciation of and respect for diverse cultural and natural heritage, and strengthens local economies and communities" (www.greentourism.ca).

Since then, the GTA has gained international recognition by showcasing its UGT initiatives in four continents and seven countries, supporting and marketing a continued and strong membership base, and gaining media exposure worldwide. UGT is good for the Toronto economy, drawing on the city's natural strengths and marketing them to the world.

Promoting urban green tourism in Toronto

With the development of three main products to date, The *OTHER* Map of Toronto, The *OTHER* Guide to Toronto: Opening the Door to Green Tourism, and a robust Web site, www.greentourism.ca the GTA has focused on promoting its members and Toronto as a UGT destination. Increasing exposure for the "green" options offered by its members promotes and enhances demand for these types of local businesses. Since the development of membership in 1999, the GTA has attracted about 100 (paid) members and 25 partners or sponsors who support the association and its mission. Members, partners and funders obtain benefit mainly from media and marketing exposure, which has been successfully demonstrated in the impressive media reach of both the green map and green guide:

- 1 "*Green Map: The OTHER Map of Toronto*":
 - total direct and indirect media reach: over four million people;
 - PR (public relations) value: over \$50,000; and
 - 29 media articles (print, radio, television).

With only \$3,000 spent on promotion, this was a significant communications impact, which speaks of interest in the topic as well as of the association's skill in promotions.

- 2 "*Green Guide: The OTHER Guide to Toronto*":
 - international media reach within the first year: over 16 million;
 - PR value of over \$150,000; and
 - more than 75 media articles (print, radio, television).

These numbers show that there is increasing interest in the concept of UGT. Further evidence of reach and impact are the number of invitations and interest the association has received nationally and internationally, including to the International Year of Ecotourism Preparatory conference in Brazil. In 2002, the association received a total of 1,241 information requests, an increase of 121 per cent from 2001.

Why develop urban green tourism?

Cities

As Canada's largest city with a population of 2.4 million, and gateway for 16.3 million international travelers (Tourism Toronto, 2000) the need to consider impacts of both locals and tourists is clear. Cities have a great deal to offer by way of sustainable management compared to traditional ecotourism destinations. Where rural or wilderness ecotourism must contend with lack of infrastructure, impact on often pristine environments and a host of other concerns, urban environments have more existing infrastructure to support ecotourism growth. Additionally, cities have a variety of natural attractions, large population bases, and are major gateways to other areas and destinations, providing the opportunity to educate not only millions of travelers but also residents.

Nature

Toronto has a great deal to offer travelers looking for natural features to visit that might not be immediately apparent. Features include:

- 1 20,000 acres of green spaces (over 12 per cent of the city):
 - A total of three-quarters of these are ravines, valley lands, woodlots and waterfront natural areas.
 - Over 50 designated environmentally sensitive areas.
- 2 Three million trees on public streets and parks alone (City of Toronto, 2000).
- 3 Over 374 bird species of wild occurrence centered within a 50-mile radius of the city's core.
- 4 Tommy Thompson Park and Toronto Islands are recognized as major migratory path of birds.
- 5 Rouge Park is the largest natural and cultural heritage park in an urban area in North America.
- 6 A total of 46 kilometres of waterfront.
- 7 The Humber River is a Canadian Heritage River (Joppe and Dodds, 2000).

As a prodigy to the future of UGT in Toronto, the 1996 decommissioning of a major Canadian forces base in the geographical center of the Greater Toronto area, has left a legacy in the form of Downsview Park. As Canada's first urban national park, it consists of a total of 130 hectares (320 acres) to be held in perpetuity, designated for parkland, recreational and cultural uses (Parc Downsview Park, 2002).

Many cities have more natural features to offer than might be obvious to the visitor or even resident. Making UGT information available can meet their needs for nature and green space in the city and provide new packaging alternatives and ways of profiling the city.

Infrastructure

The majority of tourism activity that takes place in urban areas is in the form of mass tourism which substantially impacts on water and energy consumption, while creating significant amounts of waste. If every visitor to Toronto were to use only one styrofoam cup, an additional 16 million styrofoam cups would be placed in the waste flow annually. Concentration of people and attractions in urban centers provides the opportunity to more effectively develop and enhance infrastructure to ameliorate the impact of tourism than is possible in rural or wilderness areas. Greening of the city's infrastructure can then be accomplished at a higher economy of scale. Toronto has an award-winning transit system, a growing bike route network and, as Canada's largest gateway city, expects 50 million departures and arrivals annually by 2020 (www.gtaa.com/airportdevelopment). Establishing the best green practice infrastructure in Toronto and positioning the city as such, can greatly contribute to its success as a UGT destination.

People, education and awareness

Globally, populations and, in turn, travel, are concentrated in cities. While Toronto's population of 2.4 million is expected to double by 2021 (City of Toronto, 2000), as an international hub airport, Toronto is expected to attract over 50 million air passengers by 2020 (Greater Toronto Airport Authority, 2000). There is vast opportunity to educate and raise awareness of sustainable tourism issues through gateways like Toronto just based on the sheer volume of travelers coming to and through the city. Providing UGT options and insight to city visitors can foster a significant shift in the awareness and behaviours of consumers.

Influencing tourists (and residents) has far-reaching implications when we effectively raise their personal green consciousness, particularly in regard to their travel patterns and choices. As their UGT experiences increase, so will their discussion about these options with friends and family, in turn catalyzing the demand for similar experiences in other destinations.

The products and promotional materials of the GTA are designed to inform and educate people about the importance of greening their tourism experiences. Showcasing UGT initiatives and options within the city highlights the importance and benefits of environmental, social and local economic responsibility. The GTA works to raise awareness, not only among tourists and residents, but also industry, business, organizations and governments through partnership building, product development, and cooperative marketing. This multi-faceted approach supports the need for increased availability of information, options, research and businesses. The association itself conducts research in support of UGT in the form of visitor and resident preference studies, labour market impacts and member motivations. Education of travelers through urban areas leads to the education of the masses.

Synergy

There are a number of synergies in the concept and practice of UGT. Bringing ecotourism into the urban realm opens up a wide range of possibilities for creativity and innovation supported by the infrastructure and investment readily available in urban centers. The green development of Toronto, or any city, not only enhances quality of life for residents, but also increases the value of the city tourist product when marketed as a green destination. Similarly, developing tourism infrastructure in a green way and enhancing the availability of green spaces in the city serves to enhance the value of surrounding properties (Fox, 1990).

Challenges

Although the GTA provides a unique example of reaching out to both tourists and residents in terms of educating them and possibly affecting their decision making for more sustainable forms of tourism, it has also faced some challenges. First, quantitatively determining the level of "greenness" of members and evaluating their participation are both costly and difficult to ascertain and is a constant battle in today's search for accreditation programs and benchmarking. Economic benefits are also

difficult to determine, since major survey work would be required. The third challenge is financial sustainability. Although incorporated in 1996, the association has only achieved public awareness since 1999, with the launch of the first Toronto green map. Since then, the association has had significant public and some private support, and has moved toward paid membership and sponsorship to help cover costs. As with many non-profits, financial sustainability remains an ongoing issue.

Future opportunities

As recent research indicates, there are many opportunities for the development and further study of UGT, ecotourism and sustainable tourism. UGT development is in keeping with universal urban and new economy trends, including:

- increased concern about quality of urban life, environment, and economy;
- rapid population growth in cities, including an increasing seniors' population;
- increasingly urbanized and flexible lifestyles;
- increased access to new technologies which facilitate mobility and information exchange;
- sustainable development priorities in municipalities; and
- increased domestic travel following 11 September 2001 (Green Tourism Association, 2002a, b).

Specific opportunities include the need to conduct more research into demand, impact of UGT products on purchasing goods or frequenting member businesses (extremely challenging), develop more networking opportunities and UGT-related curriculum. Currently, the GTA is producing the second edition of the green map of Toronto, moving into a Web-based version of the information from the green map and green guide, and looking at helping other cities do this kind of work.

Conclusion

Toronto, as a case study for the development of urban sustainable tourism, demonstrates that there is market demand for such

innovations. It can be concluded that future research of the impacts of UGT and its potential to develop in other cities is now needed. UGT, or ecotourism in the city, is an important vision for government, industry, communities and individuals that holds a wealth of potential for all involved.

Bringing ecotourism to the city takes advantage of emerging consumer trends and shifting demographics, capitalizes on the efficiencies of the urban form to advance sustainable development goals, as well as supporting and enhancing the quality of life and local economies of our urban regions. Successful implementation of UGT practices creates demand for more sustainable products and services and offers a unique learning experience to the traveler.

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