

Craven County: In pursuit of Sustainable Tourism

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Introduction

Sustainable tourism management policy seeks to conserve natural and built environments for the enjoyment of future generations, especially as consumer trends show that more travelers seek “green” tourism products and support destinations that protect socioeconomic and environmental resources (Edgell, 2015). On a local level, it is imperative for relevant stakeholders to be involved in the process to understand perceptions in the community and manage expectations for future strategic planning processes. This case focuses on one county in the United States (U.S.), Craven County in North Carolina (N.C.), and its current and future natural, socio-cultural, and economic environments. It explores how the county might chart its future course related to sustainable tourism. Current information about the county is presented, including the perceptions of stakeholders, to provide evidence for decision making regarding the marketing strategies for the future of sustainable tourism at this destination.

Background: The Context of the Case

Geography

This case focuses on Craven County, North Carolina in the U.S. Craven County is situated between the Piedmont area of North Carolina and the beaches of the Crystal Coast. The county is comprised of abundant water resources and is home to the historic town of New Bern, the county seat. Bern is approximately 112 miles east of Raleigh and 87 miles northeast of Wilmington (Viren, Jones, Allen, & Ritz, 2015). Of the 774 square miles that comprise the total area of Craven County, 66 square miles are water (Life in Craven, n.d.). Throughout the county, waterways connect Craven County to the Atlantic Ocean via the Intracoastal Waterway. The county includes the Croatan National Forest featuring 155,000 acres of woodlands with 40 miles of streams and 4,300 acres of lakes (Life in Craven, n.d.). The annual temperature in Craven County is 62 degrees Fahrenheit and it has an average annual precipitation of 52.85 inches (Viren, Jones, Allen, & Ritz, 2015) (See Figure 1).

Population and Employment

Craven County had a population of 105,466 people according to the 2014 census data with approximately 46,000 households with an average annual household income of \$48,786. Craven County is home to eight municipalities and New Bern is the only micropolitan area (Economic Impact Studies, n.d.). The three largest employers, in descending order, in Craven County are the Department of Defense, Craven County Schools, and the Carolina East Health System/Regional Medical Center (Economic Impact Studies, n.d.). Craven County is home to the Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point (MCAS Cherry Point) and the Fleet Readiness Center East (FRC East). MCAS Cherry Point is a huge economic engine for the region, resulting in an economic impact of \$2.01 billion in fiscal year 2015 (Economic Impact Studies, n.d.).

Craven County Hospitality and Tourism

Craven County ranks 36th out of 100 counties in North Carolina regarding tourism expenditures with a record \$130.55 million spent by domestic visitors in 2015, a 2.5 percent increase over 2014. The direct tourism payroll was \$25.39 million, employing 1,100 people. These tourism expenditures resulted in state tax receipts of \$7.17 million and local tax revenue of \$2.83 million, resulting in a tax savings of \$96.72 per resident (Economic Impact Studies, n.d.). In terms of accommodations and foodservice operations specifically, a total of 4,070 people were employed in those businesses in 2016 in the county and the total for retail sales (with food and drink) was \$1,551 (in millions) (NC Department of Commerce, 2017). Retail businesses (with food and drink) totaled 796 with an average sales per business of \$ 1,948,440 (NC Department of Commerce, 2017).

New Bern features the historic Tryon Palace, the History Center, a Convention Center, and shopping and restaurant options, as well as a historic district with homes dating back 300 years. The city of New Bern hosts the popular Mum Fest festival in mid-October and for that event the New Bern tourism website lists 12 lodging properties, including 7 chain hotel properties, 4 bed and breakfast inns, and 1 campground (Visit New Bern, 2017; n.d.). It is also home to several independent restaurants, including seafood places and brewpubs, in its historic downtown area. The nearby city of Havelock has six lodging properties (five chains and one independent property) listed on hotels.com (2017), a popular online booking site, and is also home to several restaurants located within close proximity to the lodging

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Figure 1

Map of Craven County with Municipalities.*



properties. With regard to transportation, the area is serviced by several highways and a regional airport with direct flights to cities such as Charlotte, N.C., Raleigh-Durham, N.C., and Atlanta, Georgia (Coastal Regional Airport, 2017).

Historical Resources

Craven County was established in 1712 as a precinct of Bath County. New Bern became the county seat in 1722 and was the capital of the colony and North Carolina's first state capital until 1794 (Craven County History, n. d.). Tryon Palace in New Bern, completed in 1770, was the seat for Royal Governors until after the Revolutionary War when it was used by State Governors. Tryon Palace is now a historic site that offers tours and is the focus of special events. The county is also home to many historic sites related to the Civil War (Ellis, 2005). Craven County is rich with history, home to the North Carolina History Museum, and known as the 'Birthplace of Pepsi.'

Natural Resources

Approximately 2,750 acres of prime nursery habitat and 1,250 acres of secondary nursery habitat are provided by the Neuse River

estuarine waters (North Carolina Riverkeepers & Waterkeeper Alliance, n.d.). The Neuse provides wildlife habitats for many fish species such as shad, herring, catfish, bass, and flounder, as well as populations of blue crabs, oysters and fresh water mussels (Office of Environmental Education and Public Affairs, n.d.). The NC Natural Heritage Program identifies 241 species in Craven County that comprise "elements of natural diversity," representing species of plants and animals that are unique, rare, and important (NC Natural Heritage Program, n. d.). Fishing, hunting, hiking, boating, and other outdoor recreational activities are popular in Craven County due to this biodiversity and the county's natural features. Water quality in the Neuse River Basin is a major concern, to ensure that species remain viable and people can safely access the waterways. Development in Craven County is subject to restrictions due to wetland environments. Craven County is susceptible to flooding due to the Neuse River Basin and flat topography, as well as localized flooding due to high groundwater levels, drainage issues, and coastal storm surge.

Access to Waterways

Craven County has 24 publicly accessible boating access points throughout the county and nine private marinas. These boat launches include city, county, state, and federally owned and maintained points. These public access locations allow for motorized boat launches of all sizes and some have additional facilities for picnicking and camping, and include bath houses. Craven County has five National Forest Areas with public beach access to the Neuse River. One of them, the Neusiok Trail, is part of the 900-mile Mountains-to-Sea Trail that begins in the Great Smoky Mountains and ends at Jockey Ridge State Park. The 20-mile Neusiok portion showcases the flora and fauna common along the Carolina Coast, including cypress swamps, hardwood ridges, longleaf pine forests, and pocosin-shrubby bogs. Named after the Neusiok Indians, those traversing the trail can look for signs of Native Americans and early settlers to the region. Craven County also has numerous dedicated paddle trail launch sites ranging in difficulty from easy to moderate to demanding, based on launch conditions and duration of the trip. The Twin Rivers Paddle Club (2018) outlines 25 paddle trails, with 38 launch sites allowing paddlers to access the Neuse River and its tributaries located in Craven County. In addition, paddle clubs organize waterway “clean-up” days to promote education and conservation.

Craven County Tourism Marketing and Promotion and Stakeholder Surveys

New Bern is the major tourism draw for the county, with the largest number of attractions, hotels, restaurants, and general population density. The City of New Bern completed a branding study in 2013, with the resulting slogan of “Everything comes together here,” as a means to “promote the distinct setting and coastal river culture of the community to attract audiences of all types” (North Star Destination Strategies, 2013). As part of this effort, a survey of 55 stakeholders was conducted online. In response to the question, “When you first think of New Bern, which three words come to mind?” the top responses were: “historic, water/river, friendly, beautiful, and charming.” The top responses to the question “What are New Bern’s biggest opportunities for growth?” included: “economic development, more retail businesses, and tourism (restaurants, attractions).” With regard to the question, “What business/industry is best suited for New Bern?” the common themes included: tourism, water-related, environmentally conscious and small business” (North Star Destination Strategies, 2013).

Craven County Stakeholder Interviews and Water Resources

The importance of understanding stakeholder perceptions in Craven County is evident as it will greatly impact the future success of the development of tourism products and experiences related to the local waterways. Thus, the county sought to determine additional stakeholders’ perceptions of quality of life factors and tourism in Craven County,

specifically regarding the local waterways. Twelve stakeholders in Craven County were interviewed. Stakeholders were chosen based on their involvement in the community through either work or volunteer activities that connected them to Craven County waterways and tourism organizations. Stakeholders included individuals in the public and private sector related to tourism and asset management. These individuals ranged in experience and interest level, but all had knowledge of the local tourism sector, economy, and assets in the county. All stakeholder interviewees had worked or been involved in Craven County tourism, related industries, or governmental entities for at least two years.

Through the interviews, several themes and comments were repeated by multiple stakeholders. The interviewees identified the following themes and patterns: climate, charm, fish kills, scenic beauty of waterways, history and historical buildings and houses (Historic District in New Bern), downtown New Bern, slower pace of living, cost of living, military, retirees, Croatan National Forest, golf. The interviewees’ mentioned the following themes in positive ways: charm, friendliness, slower pace of life, and mild climate. Stakeholders also believed that the cost of living is low and the quality of life is high in Craven County. Military personnel and retirees are seen as important segments of the community. Interviewees noted that the area’s scenic beauty and historical sites are attractions, but felt that the area lacks entertainment options and believe that it is not always easy for tourists to access the water and take in the scenic views from the river. In addition, they shared worries about water quality issues in the county. Although the interviewees felt that tourism is a positive addition to the country, they expressed concerns that without proper planning that the area could become a “tourist trap.”

Definitions

This case focuses on planning for sustainable tourism and several components related to the process need to be understood prior to addressing the case itself. Therefore, the following definitions are provided that relate to the case.

Sustainable Tourism

According to the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Tourism Organization (UNEP, UNTWO, 2005, p.12), sustainable tourism can be defined as, “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.” In addition, the historic Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In practice, this sustainability initiative can be understood as striving to balance the triple bottom line between economic, environmental, and socio-cultural components.

Marketing for Sustainable Tourism

The traditional marketing mix includes product, price, place, and promotion (Harker, Brennan, Kotler, & Armstrong, 2015). People and purpose may also be seen as components of the effective marketing mix (Solis, 2013). All of these matter for sustainable tourism; however, some scholars note that too much focus may be put on promotion, with more needed in the other areas (Ryan, 1991). Others have observed that marketers may need to extend beyond the traditional marketing mix to shift from products to solutions, place to access, price to value, and promotion to education (the SAVE model) (Ettenson, Conrado, & Knowles, 2013). Still, others note that for a tourism destination that there needs to be a “systematic examination of the resource-based attributes of the destination that present a unique comparative advantage (Hassan, 2000, p. 240). Among these attributes are climate, location, natural resources, tourism awareness among local citizens, and indigenous cultures (Eccles, 1995; Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (FMECD), 1995; Wight, 1993). In addition, accessibility, facility and land use requirements, environmental and carrying capacity constraints, infrastructure, and labor availability also need to be considered (Nelson, Butler, & Wells 1993).

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis is a tool used to help address the needs of a destination with regard to marketing and promotion. In a SWOT analysis, internal factors related to the strengths and weaknesses of a destination are identified, as are external factors, opportunities, and threats related to achieving the objectives related to an organization’s goals (United States Department of Agriculture, 2011). In this case. The goal is that of promoting tourism. The SWOT analysis generates awareness, of the internal and external factors that can impact the success, and tactics that a destination can pursue to capitalize on competitive advantages and effectively plan to mitigate weaknesses or threats. In addition, with regard to tourism, the SWOT analysis informs destination managers of methods to convert weaknesses and threats into strengths and opportunities.

Strategic Marketing Plan

A strategic marketing plan can be helpful to a destination with regard to the strategic planning process and creating one includes several steps. The first step is to create a vision statement that, in just a few words, will depict an image of what the destination should be in the future, and is shared and endorsed by stakeholders (Edgell & Swanson, 2013). An example of a vision statement is Greater Fort Lauderdale, Florida’s vision of “Share the warmth and beauty of Greater Fort Lauderdale” (Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2015). Developing a mission statement is the next step and it is action-oriented, providing the framework to use to set goals and objectives, and guiding how decisions will be made and action plans

will be formulated (Edgell & Swanson, 2013). For example, the mission statement for Canada is the following, “Harness Canada’s collective voice to grow export revenues” (Edgell & Swanson, 2013). Next, goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics need to be identified. Goals are overarching principles to drive planning in the long- and short-term in a measurable manner. Objectives are practical steps to take to accomplish goals; these operational steps are prioritized to meet the best opportunities. Strategies can include product development activities and actions that relate to the operation of implementing objectives. Tactics are short-term activities and immediate actions to promote day-to-day details. A marketing plan will also include the market analysis and the statistics necessary to understand the context of marketing a destination (Community Tool Box, 2017).

Stakeholder Theory and Stakeholder Involvement in Sustainable Tourism

The stakeholder approach and theory, which trace their beginnings to the business world in connection with the management of companies, focus on the tenet that the management of resources needs to consider the interests of all parties involved (Bryson, 2004; Freeman, 1984; Freeman, 1994; Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004). According to some scholars, tourism stakeholders are categorized into “six broad categories: tourists, industry, local community, government, special interest groups and educational institutions (Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013). Stakeholder groups can also include tourism developers and entrepreneurs, non-tourism businesses, indigenous people, and local residents (Brokaj, 2014). Furthermore, stakeholders in sustainable tourism can consist of the present visitors, future visitors, present host community, and future host community (Byrd, 2007), and within those four groups one can find tourists and others such as “investors, legislators, government agencies, environmentalists, the media, the scientific community, competitors, special interest groups, the general public, and local communities” (Manwa, 2003, p. 46).

Scholars have observed that planning methods for sustainable tourism need to be collaborative and encourage empowerment of various stakeholder groups to ensure community buy-in related to the scope of understanding the following six principle factors: resource preservation, environmental education, stakeholder inclusion, economic planning, cultural awareness, and community resource identification (Cardenas, Byrd, & Duffy, 2015). On a local level, it is imperative for relevant stakeholders to be involved in the process to understand perceptions in the community and manage expectations for future strategic planning processes (Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013). Identifying the dynamics of public and private stakeholder relationships can impact governance approaches and help tourism managers plan a shared destination strategy for the community that will be widely accepted (Franch, Martini, & Buffa, 2010). Furthermore, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) encourages “community and stakeholder

collaboration in development decisions, ensuring that public interests in and rights of access to the waterfront and coastal waters are upheld" (US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2009). In coastal and waterfront contexts, NOAA explains that inclusive planning processes are essential, for what occurs on and near the water can boost property values, support businesses, improve community resilience to natural hazards, and enhance a community's overall quality of life (NOAA, 2009).

The Dilemma

Craven County does have some tourism, but county leaders wish to enhance tourism in their communities in positive, sustainable ways. Sustainable tourism initiatives focus on identifying the existing cultural, economic, and environmental assets of a destination and developing plans to effectively manage growth in the future. The Craven County Tourism Development Authority (TDA) and Craven County as a whole do not currently have a unified marketing message or vision. The local TDA also does not have an active strategic marketing plan or master plan in place. Phrasing used in past marketing materials contained the message, "After 300 years, we know a thing or two about hospitality." However, they are not sure where to go from here. How can the information provided here be used to help promote sustainable tourism in the county? How can the assets of the county and the perceptions of the stakeholders be used to generate strategic marketing initiatives for more sustainable tourism in the county, including tourism that involves the county's many water resources and assets?

Several recommendations have been made to Craven County with regard to tactics to use to enhance its imagery, dining, boating, scenic tours, waterfront attractions, the arts, festivals, fishing, historical attractions, and funding. However, the pros and cons of these entities are not necessarily clear to the tourism managers and leaders in the county and more attention needs to be given to their advantages and disadvantages. The following recommendations have been made, but need to be thoughtfully analyzed to help guide planning efforts for sustainable tourism:

- **Imagery.** Include people and water connectivity in marketing materials. Imagery currently consists of waterways serving as a scenic backdrop.
- **Outdoor dining.** Waterfront dining establishments are popular and Craven County does not have many of these options.
- **Boat rentals/Scenic tours.** Tours and boat rental opportunities could connect visitors to the waterways.
- **Key waterfront attraction area.** A centralized destination area should be created in Craven County where visitors could learn, eat, sleep, and play.
- **Itineraries.** Several trip itineraries could be created online so that tourists can pre-plan and map activities along waterways.

- **Expand arts and cultural options.** Developing a cultural hub for artistic expression would aid tourism.
- **Expand festivals to connect to waterways.** The expansion of events could incorporate the aspect of water resources in more intentional, sustainable ways.
- **Strengthen maritime history.** The county could seek to highlight the history and importance of the Neuse River, Trent River, and their tributaries in the past boom of the community since its inception in colonial times to enhance tourism.
- **Riverwalk / Improve walkability.** The City of New Bern has plans to improve walkability and connect to the existing Riverwalk, to extend it from Lawson Creek Park along the river through downtown and the riverside historic district (New Riverwalk Extension Opens, n.d.). Public piers and walkways could connect visitors to the waterways.
- **Improve public fishing access.** Ample boating opportunities exist, but a centralized communication strategy for fishing opportunities could improve outlying areas, and increasing the number of fishing piers could enhance tourism opportunities.

Craven County is unique and offers diverse recreational activities throughout the county. The county has an opportunity to improve tourism offerings and compete as a coastal destination with the expansion of the brand image to include water activities. However, it could use assistance with its planning with regard to sustainable tourism. Specifically, how can Craven County enhance sustainable tourism?

The Future

Tourism is important to Craven County and efforts to make tourism more sustainable are not easy. Communities are diverse in terms of their natural and built environments and therefore, it is challenging to develop a standard set of sustainability indicators that determine success (Hao, Long, & Hoggard, 2016). Understanding stakeholder perceptions, including those of residents, and their level of involvement in the process is crucial, as residents may seek to protect an area's natural resources and the quality of life a destination provides (Hao, Long, & Hoggard, 2016). The triple bottom line approach to sustainable management and strategic planning can enhance stakeholder relationships, increase transparency, and foster community relations to improve the overall brand image of the destination (Stoddard, et. al., 2012), and help to further develop sustainable tourism in Craven County.

Discussion Points and Questions

- What is sustainable tourism? Define the concept in your own words.
- What are stakeholders, what is stakeholder theory, and why do stakeholders matter?
- Briefly describe Craven County in terms of its location and its current tourism offerings.

- What are the steps needed to effectively plan and promote a strategic marketing plan for tourism in an area?
- Complete a SWOT analysis of Craven County as it relates to tourism.
- What would be possible vision and mission statements for Craven County?
- What suggestions do you have for new branding for this area and why?
- What specific recommendations do you have for Craven County with regard to enhancing sustainable tourism in general in the county, and water-based, sustainability tourism specifically?
- Create a strategic marketing plan for Craven County (this could be an extended class project).
- Who could be target markets for tourism for this county? Describe at three market segments and explain why they might be targets for tourism marketing in the county.

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