Understanding Ecotourism

The Southeast Regional Sustainable Development Partnership Capstone

In spring, 2015 the University of Minnesota Southeast Regional Sustainable Development Partnership (SE RSDP) Capstone team partnered with Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center to complete a project focused on rural ecotourism in Fillmore County MN. This project had three phases:

- Phase 1: The capstone team developed a framework for understanding ecotourism in relation to other forms of tourism.
- Phase 2: The capstone team facilitated a community meeting in Fillmore County. During the meeting community members participated in a SWOT diagnostic exercise related to ecotourism in Fillmore County.
- Phase 3: The result of the SWOT analysis were used to develop a final tool for community members interested in engaging in ecotourism activities. The tool can be used by tourism organizations, buinses and communities to facilitate changes in practices and move closer towards practicing ecotourism.

A Framework for Understanding Ecotourism

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<th>Nature-Based Tourism</th>
<th>Sustainable Nature-Based Tourism</th>
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<tr>
<td>Toursists + Economic Gain + Nature-Based Attractions = Nature-Based Tourism</td>
<td>Toursists + Economic Gain + Nature-Based Attractions + Water Education + Sustainability Principles = Sustainable Nature-Based Tourism</td>
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Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a tourism activity that includes nature-based tourism that is sustainable. Ecotourism activities may include hiking, bird watching, wildlife viewing, and nature study. The key elements of ecotourism are conservation, education, and cultural understanding. Ecotourism helps to promote environmental awareness and social responsibility.

Community SWOT Analysis

The Capstone Team provided a presentation of the five distinct types of tourism occurring in the region and participants were then split into groups where they conducted a SWOT analysis where they listed and discussed the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Chaînages related to ecotourism in the region.

SWOT Results

**Strengths**
- Friendly small-town atmosphere
- Unique natural beauty
- Diverse tourism opportunities
- Local people and passionate leadership
- Accessibility to urban centers

**Weaknesses**
- Barriers to Environmental Sustainability
- Barriers to local economic and social sustainability
- Limited capacity of existing tourism infrastructure
- Getting the word out

**Opportunities**
- Attracting new talent and investments
- Building upon existing attributes and infrastructure
- The Destination Medical Center
- Regional collaboration

**Threats**
- Local infrastructure and capacity
- Lack of collaboration
- Inertia
- Unsustainable growth
- Environmental hazards

Development of Interactive Assessment + Learning & Coordination Tool

The team developed an interactive assessment and learning coordination tool to help communities understand and address the challenges of ecotourism.

Acknowledgements

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