

The Managerial and Educational Aspects of Developing and Sustaining Ecotourism in the Context of the Contentnea Creek Project in North Carolina

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“Travel and change of place impart new vigor to the mind.”

-Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *De Tranquillitate Animi*, A.D.-60

ABSTRACT

The continued growth of international tourism over the last 40 years and the recent emphasis on sustainable tourism has increased the interest in ecotourism projects throughout the world. This paper about the *Contentnea Creek Project* in North Carolina demonstrates the importance of careful strategic tourism planning at the outset of the project to insure its future sustainability. The primary objective of this study was to determine the best practices, principles, and policies for an ecotourism type project in an environment that, if protected, would lend itself to being developed as a sustainable ecotourism destination. While the *Contentnea Creek Project* is not yet a reality, it is important in the developmental stages to determine the best policies, programs and practices that will provide the guidelines for a successful ecotourism project. Furthermore, the research for this paper suggests that well-planned ecotourism projects can be successful for both developed and lesser developed countries throughout the world.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Tourism, Planning, Management, Economic Development, Sustainability, Culture, Heritage, History, Environment, Sustainable Tourism

INTRODUCTION

This journal article discusses the managerial and educational aspects in developing a sustainable ecotourism project along Contentnea Creek (*Contentnea Creek Project*) in North Carolina. It is noted that when strategically well planned and executed, tourism provides an economic stream both into and within a community or area, and an incentive to preserve the best features a community, or destination, has to offer, from its wildlife habitats, its historic districts, its scenery, to its local culture and heritage. Responsibly managed ecotourism enhances, enriches, and embraces the need to preserve nature, heritage, and cultural values. In so doing, ecotourism adds value to the community such that the local citizens and visitors have a quality tourism experience (Edgell, 2006). In addition, a well-designed ecotourism project strongly promotes conservation education and awareness of the natural environment, as well as the history, heritage, and culture at the targeted location (Wright, 1993). Properly integrated as part of an overall local economic strategy, tourism can provide economic development, environmental sustainability, social

benefits, and an improved quality of life for the local citizens. A Contentnea Creek ecotourism project may have the potential to offer a unique opportunity to showcase the areas in and around the creek as potential ecotourism destinations.

The travel and tourism industry is one of the largest contributors to the global economy. World tourism has grown enormously over the past forty years and is likely to continue to grow. Tourism is a valuable industry creating jobs, producing additional income, spurring economic development, promoting economic diversification, adding new products, growing more businesses, increasing tax revenues, and contributing to economic integration. According to research conducted by Oxford Economics (an arm of Oxford University) for the World Travel and Tourism Council (London, England, 2014), travel and tourism is among the world's largest industries at \$7 trillion in 2013, accounting for 9.5 percent of Global Development Product and generating more than 266 million jobs (1 in 11 of the world's total jobs). Ecotourism as a part of the large tourism industry has the capacity to affect positive change and, advance the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of local communities.

This paper discusses the grass roots development of the *Contentnea Creek Project* as an ecotourism site in North Carolina (NC); it notes the N C counties (areas) through which the creek flows; it reviews the application of *The International Ecotourism Society* (TIES) principles; it analyzes benefits to the area; and it suggests policies to increase its future sustainability. The paper also addresses the need for greater education, appreciation, and awareness in developing, maintaining, and managing sustainable ecotourism type projects (Urias & Edgell, 2011). The *Contentnea Creek Project* offers itself as an excellent case study site; it is in the very beginning stages as a concept for possible consideration as a potential ecotourism project. However, the author of this article, a member of *TIES*, and an active ecotourism practitioner, believes this paper offers important information for other possible ecotourism projects throughout the world.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Early History of the Area

The Contentnea Creek area contains beautiful scenery and a magnificent natural environment, richness in flora and fauna, and, a built environment steeped in history, heritage and culture. One of the early non-Indian explorers of the region was the naturalist, writer, and surveyor, John Lawson from England. In December 28, 1700 Lawson was commissioned by colonial authorities in the New World to explore the interior of the Carolina "country" (now North and South Carolina). Starting in Charleston (South Carolina) and traveling by canoe and on foot, he traveled nearly 600 miles in fifty-seven days through the Carolina wilderness ending at the mouth of the Pamlico River (North Carolina). His travels took him near to parts of the Contentnea Creek area. John Lawson made detailed notes about all aspects of his travels. In 1709 Lawson returned to London to write a book about his explorations. The book (written in Old English) was titled *A New Voyage to Carolina; Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of That Country: Together with the Present State Thereof. And a Journal of a Thousand Miles, Travel'd Thro' Several Nations of Indians. Giving a Particular Account of Their Customs, Manners, &c.* and published in London in 1709. In essence, the book is a benchmark for what many members in the tourism industry today refer to as sustainable tourism: travel related to the natural and built environments. His book is a primer for discussing sustainable travel. As he

traveled, he took careful note of the vegetation, wildlife and, in particular, the many Indian tribes he encountered. He also befriended a powerful Indian Nation known as the Tuscarora. The book was an instant best seller being translated into German and French.

John Lawson spent many years in what is now North Carolina and South Carolina studying the flora and fauna, native cultures, and the environment and, through written accounts, passed this information along to his peers in England. By 1710 many new settlers from England, Germany, and Switzerland settled near Contentnea Creek in an area dominated by the Tuscarora Indians. Initially the Tuscarora Indians and settlers were friendly until the settlers began to take over land that was considered to belong to the Tuscarora Indians (Clark, 2011).

During the summer of 1711, Lawson and Christoph von Graffenried, a wealthy Swiss-German explorer and writer, took a trip up the Neuse River toward Contentnea Creek. Perhaps due to the proximity of the river and creek to the lands inhabited by the Tuscarora's, Lawson and von Graffenried were seized by the natives and taken to the Catechna Village, the Tuscarora town of Chief Hancock, on Contentnea Creek. After questioning the prisoners, the Indians decided to set them free. Before they were to leave the following day, the captives were questioned again. The Chief reproached Lawson and von Graffenried about wrongful crimes against the Tuscarora. Lawson responded angrily to the Chief's charges. A general quarrel followed in which von Graffenried did not take part, but resulted in both he and Lawson to again be confined. At another council meeting, the Indians decided to execute Lawson and to free von Graffenried who had promised presents for his freedom. Von Graffenried did not see it and the natives were very secretive about the manner of Lawson's death. Some said he was hanged and others said his throat was slit with a razor he carried with him. However, it was generally believed the Indians "*stuck him full of fine small pitch pine splinters and so set him gradually on fire (Hudson, 1992).*"

Ecotourism

Generally, ecotourism is considered as a subset of the larger term "sustainable tourism" as are, for example, geotourism, pro-poor tourism, responsible tourism, and ethical tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organization's concept of sustainable tourism is tourism that leads to the management of all resources in such a way that the economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and contribute to poverty alleviation. One of the first known successful practices of sustainable tourism (ecotourism) development took place in the Maho Bay Campground project on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands which won the 1978 Environmental Protection Award (Yale University, 1996).

Over the past thirty years there have been many definitions of ecotourism. Possibly the first accepted definition of ecotourism was made in 1983 by the Mexican architect Hector Ceballos-Lascurain who defined it as follows: "That form of environmentally responsible tourism that involves travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the object of enjoying, admiring, and studying the nature (the scenery, wild plants and animals), as well as any cultural aspect (both past and present) found in these areas, through a process which promotes conservation, has a low impact on the environment and on culture and favors the active and socioeconomically beneficial involvement of local communities" (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1998). Most subsequent interpretations and definitions of ecotourism include most of the ingredients described in the above definition.

Most researchers today use the definition of ecotourism as presented by *The International Ecotourism Society* (TIES). Ecotourism is defined by TIES as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people,” (TIES, 1990). In addition, for this paper, the TIES “Principles of Ecotourism” are used as follows: “Ecotourism is about *uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel*. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should utilize the following ecotourism principles:

- Minimize impact.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental, and social climate.”

Another definition of ecotourism used by *The Nature Conservancy* is the definition articulated by the World Conservation Union (IUCN): “Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples” (IUCN, 1993).

In other words, ecotourism focuses on socially responsible travel, appreciation of natural habitats, environmental sustainability, cultural appreciation, and creation of economic opportunities for local communities. Eco-tourists seek to enjoy and learn from the natural and built environments they visit in a responsible manner.

Possibly the most popular and most often quoted guidelines for ecotourism travel are those provided by the *American Society of Travel Agents* (ASTA) which are titled: “The Ten Commandments of Ecotourism:

1. Respect the frailty of the earth. Realize that unless all are willing to help in its preservation, unique and beautiful destinations may not be here for future generations to enjoy.
2. Leave only footprints. Take only photographs. No graffiti! No litter! Do not take away souvenirs from historical sites and natural areas.
3. To make your travels more meaningful, educate yourself about the geography, customs, manners and cultures of the region you visit. Take time to listen to the people. Encourage local conservation efforts.
4. Respect the privacy and dignity of others. Inquire before photographing people.
5. Do not buy products made from endangered plants or animals, such as ivory, tortoise shell, animal skins, and feathers.
6. Always follow designated trails. Do not disturb animals, plants or their natural habitats.
7. Learn about and support conservation-oriented programs and organizations working to preserve the environment.
8. Whenever possible, walk or use environmentally-sound methods of transportation. Encourage drivers of public vehicles to stop engines when parked.
9. Patronize those (hotels, airlines, resorts, cruise lines, tour operators and suppliers) who advance energy and environmental conservation; water and air quality; recycling; safe management of waste and toxic materials; noise abatement, community involvement; and which provide experienced, well-trained staff dedicated to strong principles of conservation.

10. Encourage organizations to subscribe to environmental guidelines. ASTA urges organizations to adopt their own environmental codes to cover special sites and ecosystems.

Essentially, travel is a natural right of all people and is a crucial ingredient of world peace and understanding. With the right to travel come responsibilities. ASTA, as noted above, encourages the growth of peaceful tourism and environmentally responsible travel (ASTA, 1991). It is this sense of ecotourism, which will drive tourism development along the banks of Contentnea Creek. The ideal of keeping the creek basin pristine and the natural areas relatively undisturbed will make Contentnea Creek developments unique and sustainable. In addition, if developed and managed responsibly, ecotourism can provide much-needed revenues to the municipalities and counties along creek.

DESCRIBING CONTENTNEA CREEK

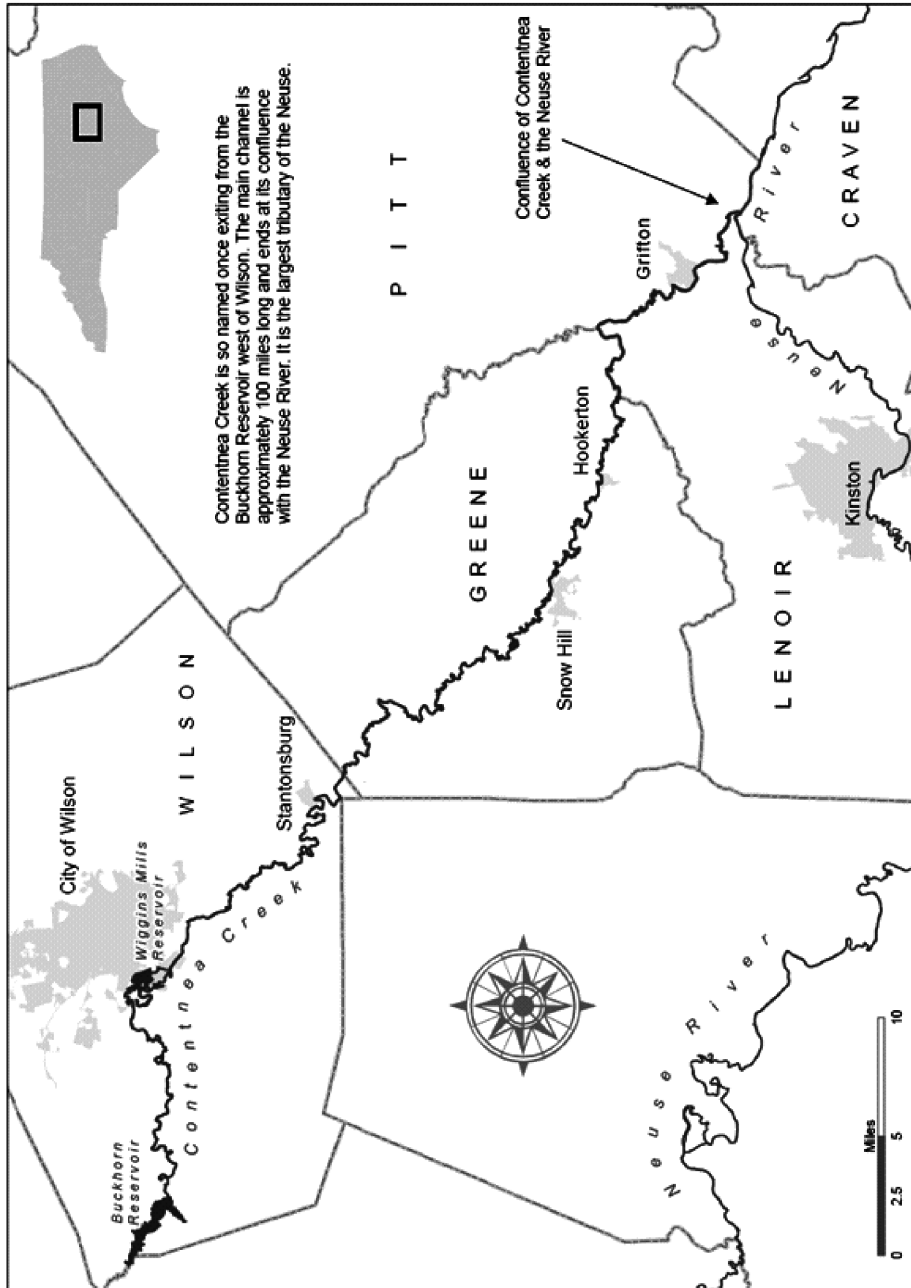
Contentnea Creek is 100 miles in length and flows across the five North Carolina counties of Wilson, Greene, Pitt, Lenoir, and Craven and includes six municipalities of Wilson, Stantonsburg, Snow Hill, Hookerton, Grifton, and Kinston (see map below) and may have the potential to be developed and promoted as an aquatic recreation and ecotourism initiative. The tourism development focus would likely need to highlight nature-based tourism; agritourism; and cultural, heritage, and history tourism (Edgell, 2008).

Through East Carolina University's Center for Geographic Information Science, a complete digital data collection and mapping of Contentnea Creek was conducted in 2008. This mapping and analysis of Contentnea Creek demonstrated that with water quality improvements and conservation of the environment surrounding the creek the area would lend itself to being developed as a recreation site based on best practices of ecotourism principles (Mulcahy, 2008). The map below presents a broad picture of the flow of Contentnea Creek as it empties into the Neuse River, a majestic river that pours into the Pamlico Sound, the largest sound on the East Coast and a part of the popular tourism destination of the Outer Banks on the Atlantic Ocean.

AN EXPERIMENT ALONG CONTENTNEA CREEK

An ecotourism development project that includes a few of the principles of ecotourism described in this article began to take place along Contentnea Creek in 2009 when the small rural community of Grifton (population in 2011 of 2,659), North Carolina, situated along the creek received a Small Towns Economic Prosperity grant from the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center. The town decided to utilize some of the grant money to focus on tourism as a development tool to improve their economic growth and cultural well-being. This approach was captured in an earlier article titled "Investigating Best Practices for Rural Tourism Development (Edgell, 2011) which indicated that many rural areas have a comparative advantage in tourism development because of their natural environment, authentic history, and heritage and cultural attributes of interest to potential visitors. In other words, tourism is a highly viable economic development option because its implementation relies on an area's cultural, historic, ethnic, geographic, and natural uniqueness. While Grifton has many of these traits, it lacks the resources to move the current developments to the next level. Grifton is just one small example of the possibilities that being near Contentnea Creek offers for potential development.

Map of Contentnea Creek



A broader view of ecotourism development that would encompass a larger area of Contentnea Creek is the potential for developing a *Contentnea Creek State of North Carolina Park* or a *U. S. Contentnea Creek Historic National Park*. One residual outcome of this article is to further the promotion of a North Carolina State Park (Contentnea Creek). In addition, at least a few U. S. National Park Service managers have suggested that “.....a Contentnea Creek National Park.....could fill a ‘significant hole’ in the current ‘national park portfolio’.....There is no existing national park that features the woods and wetlands unique to the U.S. Southeastern coastal plain.....” as does the Contentnea Creek Basin.

Such a park could include boundless recreation and educational opportunities engaging people in hands-on experiences that promote appreciation and understanding of the area’s great culture and natural resources. Primitive camping areas, boardwalks through a wetlands preserve, picnic sites, hiking, and paddling trails for kayaks, and canoes would offer a variety of ways to savor the tranquil surrounds of Contentnea Creek. In the longer term, following a strategic tourism plan, and based on comprehensive research, a development scenario might also include ecotourism accommodations, quaint restaurants, handicrafts, recreation equipment suppliers and outfitters, and possibly other tourism-related businesses.

Presently, riparian restoration (including removal of obstructive woody debris from the stream channel of Contentnea Creek) is an immediate need within the Contentnea Creek basin. The Creek, and its surrounding environs, are still in good condition with abundant and healthy wildlife, thus allowing for sustainable tourism development. Unlike many other areas, there are few competing uses along its boundaries such as industrial mills or power plants. This facilitates possible development of public access points and recreation related platforms and facilities. Contentnea Creek could also offer thematic heritage and hiking trails, bike paths, bird watching, hunting, fishing, canoe and kayak ramps and other outdoor related activities.

Another proposal is to possibly designate rural Highway 58, which runs along about 40 miles of Contentnea Creek, as a Scenic Byway. This area contains many historic sites related to wars with the Native Americans and colonists and includes Civil War Trails and beautiful historic homes. Working with the U.S. National Scenic Byways Program, this area would then have state and national historical markers and specially designed heritage trails. The rich cultural of the Native Americans who once lived in the area could be displayed through Indian Village replicas and special ceremonial dance events and educational seminars.

The opportunity the Contentnea Creek offers for the future positive ecotourism benefits depend upon the decisions being made today. It is the natural environment that most visitors to the Contentnea Creek area initially are most interested. It just so happens that the area contains rich historic and cultural resources that that if developed and promoted would bring many additional visitors to the area. The opportunity to study the Contentnea Creek area’s history, culture, and ecology provides a special educational component for such an ecotourism project. In effect, Contentnea Creek provides a unique context for carrying out educational programs in a living laboratory or “real life” setting.

DISCUSSION

It is clear today that most travelers are now looking for “greener” destinations and places where there is an emphasis on the history, heritage and culture of the local people. This practice bodes

well for the potential *Contentnea Creek Project*. For example, according to information provided by the *Center for Responsible Travel* (CREST, 2014):

- 79% of travelers globally “think that it’s important that accommodation providers have eco-friendly practices,” according to a 2012-2013 TripAdvisor survey.
- A 2013 TripAdvisor.com survey of 1,300 U.S. travelers shows that nearly two-thirds “often” or “always” consider the environment when choosing hotels, transportation and meals.
- 67% of U.S. consumers are now “looking for ‘greener’ products,” according to the 2012 study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan Management Review.”
- 50% of global consumers are willing to pay more for goods and services from companies that have implemented programs to give back to society, according to a 2013 Nielsen Global Survey on Corporate Social Responsibility poll of more than 29,000 online consumers in 58 countries. This represents a 5% increase over a similar poll in 2011.
- “Tourist choices are increasingly influenced by sustainability considerations,” states the United Nations World Tourism Organization’s (UNWTO) 2012 *Tourism in the Green Economy Report*. Ecotourism, nature, heritage, cultural and “soft adventure” tourism re predicted to grown rapidly over the next two decades, and global spending on ecotourism is expected to increase at a higher rate than the tourism industry as a whole.
- “A significant number of international travelers seek out nature-and culture-based experiences, such as visiting historic sites (40 percent of overseas travelers), cultural sites (23 percent) and national parks (20 percent),” according to the U.S. government’s 2012 *National Travel & Tourism Strategy*.
- The 2012 *National Travel & Tourism Strategy* “consistently found similar trends among Americans traveling abroad: “Nature-based, culture-based, heritage and outdoor adventure travel represent a significant segment of the outbound tourism market as well.”
- Between 1986 when ecotourism began to take off in Costa Rica, and 2007, tourist arrivals increased 7-fold while tourism revenue increased 14-fold. Therefore, as Costa Rica grew to become a leading ecotourism destination, it doubled its earnings/tourists.
- The CREST information above, and from many other sources throughout the world, demonstrate that sustainable tourism is a major growth component within the general increase of worldwide tourism. It is also interesting to note that most of the younger generation of travelers have endorsed the principles of sustainable tourism. It reminds this author of the ancient proverb (author unknown) that says, “We have not inherited the earth from our ancestors; we have only borrowed it from our children.”

CONCLUSION

The overriding goal for a potential *Contentnea Creek Project* would be to utilize tourism as a generator of economic development and to promote the area as an aquatic recreation and ecotourism tourism initiative. To accomplish this goal will take considerable research, some technical assistance, involvement of interested community members, finding potential entrepreneurs, locating initial financial resources, developing a good strategic plan, and later building brand identification and presenting a marketing strategy for the area in question. An overall mission of the project is that it must seek to improve the quality of life for the local

citizens, add economic development to the community and provide a special experience for visitors interested in ecotourism type experiences.

In addition to the economic opportunities, history, heritage and cultural tourism can also produce social and community development benefits. These include conveying a sense of local pride and identity, enhancing connections across a county, encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit, creating a sense of place, preserving cultural assets, improving the physical environment, and providing educational benefits. The *Contentnea Creek Project* should include the benefits of history, heritage and cultural tourism in the overall planning of the project.

The populations that will be served by this economic development project include the local residents, business entrepreneurs, the historical community, governmental bodies and, of course, visitors. Visitors (local, state, national, and international) as well as local residents will learn of the diverse natural, historical, and pleasurable aspects of Contentnea Creek's environs. Tourism in the Contentnea Creek area will be a valuable industry to the communities, producing income, creating jobs, spurring economic development, promoting economic diversification, developing new products, growing more businesses, adding tax revenue, and contributing to economic integration.

The project will compliment, expand, enrich, and enhance economic tourism strategies as developed by other interested parties throughout the area. The project will also strengthen some of the marketing efforts by these organizations, and go beyond to suggest additional economic strategies, new environmental initiatives, and introduce some of the social impact methodology aimed at increasing the quality of life in the local community through sustainable tourism fiscal development and promotion.

By utilizing the example of a Contentnea Creek as a potential ecotourism project this paper has presented research and best practices guidelines for the growth of ecotourism. It is an attempt to explain what ecotourism means and why it is such an important part of sustainable tourism. It also demonstrates that people want to experience nature; they want to know about responsible travel and to learn to appreciate cultures different from their own. The paper notes that ecotourism is distinguished by its emphasis on conservation, education, and benefits for the local community. It denotes the fact that increased tourism to sensitive natural areas without appropriate planning and management can threaten the integrity of ecosystems and local cultures. Finally, ecotourism can provide a viable economic development alternative for local communities. Ecotourism also presents educational benefits in that it reminds us that tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed areas must be protected and conserved for future generations to enjoy.

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