Physical Needs: Land Use Planning for Tourism

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New England seaports, like others in the United States, now look both back and ahead—back to the struggle to become established, and ahead toward the challenges of the future.

Today, people want to do a better job of developing the coastline. We have talented and experienced landscape architects, architects, and engineers. We now have more legislation and political backing than ever before. Certainly, the Coastal Zone Management Act provides explicit support for the objectives of this conference. We also have a much more enlightened public who are aware of this precious resource—the coastal zone.

For a thousand years or more, coastal harbors have provided refuge, nurtured settlements, and demonstrated our long-time affinity for this special environment. Some would describe our appreciation of such vistas toward the sea as based upon our biological origin. Others would say that burned into our psyche is our historic dependence upon the products of the sea and the transportation it has offered for thousands of years: the waterfront continues to offer fascination as we visit harbor and shipping activities. Many of us do not know why we are drawn to the coast, but the strength of aesthetic appeal seems to be enough.

Some Misconceptions

Building upon these facts of coastal drawing power, how can we refine our understanding into better foundations for tourism land use? Certain obstacles—misconceptions—get in the way of better understanding and better land use. Let us examine five of these:

1. Tourism is incompatible with resource protection.

There is a prevailing feeling, especially among environmentalists, protectionists, and conservationists, that tourism must be stopped. In their view, the only way to protect fragile cultural and natural resources of the coastal zone is to stop tourism development. While there have been some abuses of coastal assets in the past, it can be argued that it is not because of tourism per se but because of the manner in which tourism, as well as many other land uses, has been developed.

It is doubtful that anyone has the power to stop the human desire to visit, enjoy, and become enriched by the many natural and cultural features of the coastal area. Because of tourism demand, many coastal areas have become more aware of their natural and cultural assets and therefore have made greater concerted efforts toward establishing both protection and useful areas along the coast. Because coastal archaeology, history, ethnicity, ports, and beaches are basic for much of tourism development, it is incumbent upon tourism developers to protect, perpetuate, and interpret these resources.

Resource protection is not only compatible with but is also inherent in coastal tourism development. Our need is not to stop tourism (even if we could), but to bring about better interaction between resource protectionists and tourism developers, for their mutual benefit.

2. Private ownership limits public access to the shoreline.

The fallacy of this statement lies in its narrow definition of "the public." The total public has a multiplicity of access. In spite of some opinion to the contrary, there is no empirical evidence that inaccessibility is even a minor deterrent to coastal tourism and recreation.

Because public agencies make most of the coastal use inventories, they conveniently forget the thousands of establishments developed by two components of the private sector: private enterprise and nonprofit organizations. Think of the millions who now enjoy vacation homes, resorts, marinas, historic sites, archeological sites, pagers, water festivals, fishing and boating contests, and many other opportunities supplied by the private sector. Actually, a strong case could be made that a much greater diversity of segments of the public are adequately served by the private than by the public sector.

The coastal land use decision makers in this country are from all three sectors—government (as a developer), private enterprise, and nonprofit organizations—and therefore we have the best opportunities for development of the coast when all three sectors interact.

3. Public ownership provides preferred land use.

There is a widespread opinion that development for leisure that is not planned, owned, and managed by the public sector is inferior. The fallacy of this is dramatized in coastal states where beach quality has worsened since an "open beach" law was passed. Public ownership does not guarantee good land use. Only good design and superior management can do this. The Williamsburgs and the Sea Pines Plantations provide ample evidence that appropriate land use can be accomplished by the private sector.

At this point, one argument can be made against government as a competitive participant in recreation and tourism development. There are increasing instances in which governmental agencies, with all good intent, build hotels, marinas, and campgrounds which compete with private establishments. The outcome is an economic drain rather than an economic input. Such development, often done on the premise that it will stimulate business, actually depresses it: No business can compete with government pricing. Such a situation presents unfair competition as well as improper government.

4. Tourism development is not a community affair.

The dominant attitude within most communities is that tourism involves only the buyers and sellers of travel. Most things we do for our communities strongly affect tourism. The decisions we make about our museums, parks, protected ecological zones, arts, crafts, parkways, recreation

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areas, streets, residential areas, convention facilities, shopping centers, theaters, and even our churches are extremely important for tourism. The community policies we maintain regarding treatment and hosting of visitors strongly affect tourism; tourism is not the domain of the chamber of commerce or the visitor’s bureau alone. It is important that we enlighten all sectors of our coastal communities regarding their roles in tourism development.

5. Plans are forever.

If there is any lesson we can learn from observing past tourism development, it is that both the noun “plan” and the verb “planning” are equally important. By this is meant that the capricious nature of markets demands a continuing revision of plans and a disposable array of development, rather than long-lasting monuments to designers. How often do we bring designers back to reevaluate what they have designed and built?

One powerful force which has shortened the life span of buildings is financing. Most buildings today must be paid off in 5 to 10 years rather than in 30 to 40, as once was the case. While we may not like the thought of disposable developments that we flush down the drain every few years, neither can we afford monumental works that outlive their utility.

Perhaps we can build into our planning of tourism some annual self-correcting contingencies to allow for shifts in social and economic conditions.

These misconceptions suggest that our main problems with the use of land for tourism, especially along our coasts, can be solved once we achieve a better understanding of and greater commitment to this use of land.

Tourism as a System

We are learning that it is increasingly difficult to develop tourism in isolated spots. As tourists, we seek out specific regions—e.g., the Southwest, the California Coast, New England—perhaps because they are more easily identified than isolated spots, or maybe they are easier to get to, or offer more to the traveler.

Within a region, it is the attraction complexes or developments which generate tourism by providing enticement, appeal, personal satisfaction, cultural enrichment, relaxation, challenge, or repose.

Thus, tourism is complicated and involves much more than the businesses associated with travel. In spite of its complexity, however, there is a definite, functional, tourism system, made up of the following major components which are always in a delicate, dynamic balance:

- **People.** Where they live; their propensity to travel; their leisure interests; how they are influenced by cultural and economic change.
- **Attractions.** Those activities or sights which draw people, thereby fueling the entire tourism system.
- **Transportation.** The link between people and attractions.
- **Services and facilities.** Hotels, restaurants, entertainment, and any other services which tourists might need.
- **Information and directions.** To influence tourists and potential tourists.

Interpreting this system raises many questions about how we could improve coastal tourism and land use. For example, are local people fully aware of their potential coastal attractions and are they willing to plan for development that also protects rare and fragile resources? Are we anticipating the impact of changes in transportation and the critical relationship this has with markets? Are we willing to plan for the services and facilities that tourists need and want when they travel to the coastal zone? And, are we promising, with our slick and convincing media presentations, more than can be delivered when the tourists arrive?

We are now in a dynamic adjustment period in tourism, and it is the purpose of this article to suggest some special considerations and special opportunities for current coastal tourism development.

Our land use planning task will be assisted greatly by understanding the difference between two types of tourists: those who move from place to place and those who have one destination. Tourists who move about on touring circuits need facilities and attractions that can satisfy their special needs. As we turn more and more to package tours, both to satisfy demand and to save energy, we need to be aware of their special requirements. At the same time, we must consider the sometimes contrary needs of destination tourists who want their vacation activities centered in one place and therefore require facilities which can withstand repeated use by the same people. The needs of both types of tourists must be considered by land use planners.

It is essential that we also think about transportation links when we think about developing coastal areas. With relatively low usage in the past, it was convenient to build circulation roads right along our beaches for quick access to the shoreline. However, traffic has increased as waterfront use has grown. With the enlargement of beach roads to expressway proportions, as was once proposed for New Orleans, and high-intensity use—as at Miami Beach—the aesthetic and recreational value of this rare resource can be greatly diminished.
Our waterfront use pressures actually come from inland, perpendicular to the coastline. It is from the land that most of us arrive at the waterfront. And the greatest pressure is at and near coastal cities. Cities are focal points for tourism. Therefore, our coastal tourism problems cannot usually be solved by looking toward the more remote intercity shoreline.

Based on this condition, it is suggested that we plan our coastal tourism development in a manner of concentrated dispersal; we should design development in clusters. (Of course, this requires adequate infrastructure and management control.) Each cluster could be based upon a logical theme for its setting—history, beautiful beach, industry, boat harbor. But, mass circulation would be removed from these areas. Short access links could tie these clusters with the main circulation system, which could then be kept at a distance from the coastline itself.

In our coastal redevelopment plans we could think of “building envelopes,” with open, parklike spaces between, to provide vistas and access, while enhancing property values for both the immediate building masses and those back from the shoreline.

Why not design pleasant visitor places in among and around coastal industries? These could give us views and access enlightening us about necessary nonrecreational uses of the coast. Perhaps this would even foster stronger, better informed interaction among the many coastal land use decision makers.

To better use our waters, we should reach beyond the typical swimming, boating, fishing, and vacation home use into more creative opportunities. For example, it took a TV series, not coastal planners, to stimulate an innovative use of the dying cruise industry. This year, over 800,000 more people from North America took cruises than did the year before. With the imaginative and sensitive use of coastal assets, we can create better leisure developments in the future.

To better use our history, it is suggested that we move beyond the present phase of historic protection into historic interpretation and dramatization. Too often our museums are stuffed full but act only as repositories for objects which are meaningless because they are not interpreted.

Fortunately, there is an upswell of activity in the performing arts, graphic arts, painting, sculpture, music and poetry, as well as in ancient crafts. But we have not as yet understood and interpreted how these are related to place, especially on the coast. How can we better identify, describe, and foster visitor contact with the places where arts and crafts are developing?

Obviously, with greater energy constraint, we will be seeking leisure opportunities nearer home. But, have we analyzed our local area’s potentials for tourism development? Often local people know the least about their own assets and need outside leadership to stimulate local and area development for tourism. It should be emphasized again that tourism is a community affair which should have equal priority with other socioeconomic issues when major community decisions are made.

Pickering Wharf has been successfully recycled as a mixed-use project containing commercial, residential, and entertainment uses.

Perhaps the most critical point of all is that, in spite of television and computer techniques and new organizations, tourism communications have not advanced appreciably over the last 50 years.

We still have a long way to go to improve communications between tourists and hosts. We still have poor maps, poor guidebooks, and poor tour guiding. The public is increasingly frustrated by lavish promotion of resorts and tourist attractions but little guidance on how to get to them, when they are open, what they will cost, what to wear, what the weather will be like, what travel etiquette is important, and how to fight back if things go wrong. Certainly, we need better interactions among the many tourism development actors. When this happens, the visitor is better satisfied, local people have a voice, resources are protected, and the economy gains. We need not wait for a federal grant or some new legislation. When historic preservationists, businessmen, local residents, and developers sit down together and work out coastal plans for tourism, the results can be positive.

Are we willing to put aside some of our prejudices against and misconceptions about coastal development? Are we then willing to bring together all the components of the tourism system to work out our plans for the future? Are we willing to accept the principle that all three goals of tourism can be met at the same time: satisfaction of visitors; good economic results; and protection of resources? If we are willing, the strong potential is there to double or even triple the volume of tourist use without destroying our basic resources.