THE PLACENESS OF TOURISM

The quality of placeness of the South - does growth mean erosion?

By Clare A. Gunn

Tourism involves both a we and a they. We--those of us who live here--make the decisions on how we develop our resources for them, the visitors to our place. As the South becomes more and more popular as a place, both for temporary visitors and permanent residents, it is well to review what is happening to the quality of this place. Will the increased hordes of visitors and the consequent increased resource development destroy the quality of place for both us and them?

Review of development for visitors over the last 50 years in the South shows many gains but also some trends that should alert us to the need for better planning.

For example, will we continue to wall off more miles of precious seacoast with massive concrete hotels and condominiums or follow the pace of the very environmentally-sensitive planning of Sea Pines Plantation, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina? Will we repeat the many miles of poorly sited waterfront development that is now threatened by severe beach erosion or
select better protected sites, such as has been done at Sandestin, Destin, Florida?

Can we break from the past clutter of motel row and create new and well-designed motel-restaurant-information complexes at important interchanges such as the attractive and functional Oasis Village, near Savannah? Will we be able to resist the flossy and sun-fading plastic street sides and instead create new business section landscapes with crape myrtle and other indigenous plants as has been done in Natchez and Birmingham? Can we recognize the reusable value of old buildings, as publisher Harris Mullen has done by creating a vibrant shop center, Ybor Square, Tampa, out of the old stemmery, warehouse and cigar factory of V.M. Ybor instead of razing them in the name of progress? Can we resist the temptation to bulldoze out the valuable plant assets of the South, such as the magnificent oaks and cypress and retain them for all to enjoy, as we now can the Evangeline Oak, St. Martinsville, Louisiana and the Angel Oak, South Carolina? Maybe You Can't Eat Magnolias (as editors Ayers and Naylor have written) but there may be many tourism jobs related to the scenic bounty of magnolias in the South.

Do we want the place qualities that are so well represented by the poised and cultured Southern belle to be found only in tourist-oriented settings, such as Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia and the Houmas House, Louisiana? Are we glad that the mysticism, flourishing spiritual faiths and legends, so typical of the South, are being replaced by new technology and matter-of-fact attitudes?

Do we want those places that could revere bloody conflicts over the principles of a free and cohesive America to turn into silly blue and gray
major components: (1) **People**—those who make up the market, have desire and ability to travel; (2) **attractions**—physical developments of land (parks, theme parks, historic sites) that offer activities and provide satisfaction; (3) **services/facilities**—those establishments that support the attractions with services and products for tourists (hotels, motels, restaurants, car services, shops, etc.); (4) **transportation**—means of bringing the people to and through the attractions and (5) **information-direction systems**—advertising, TV, radio, signs and other means of informing and directing the traveler. Each of these components is linked to each other and to the quality of place and therefore what we do to change the environment affects each component. And, what we do to develop tourism affects the environment.

**PEOPLE**

It all starts with people who have both the desire and the ability to travel. Travel is a reality for over half the population of the United States. But, travel, as an American right, is cherished by all. Our desire to see their part of the country, how they work and play and how they have developed their resources is strong in all of us. And, it should come as no surprise that in regional terms, many times, they are us. The majority of visitors to the South generate from the South.

Do we know what travelers are like? How well do we understand the traveler? How can we protect and develop those assets that are important to our visitors?

Sometimes our vision is like that of the three blind men in the fable of the elephant. The restaurant operator sees tourists as eaters. The car service station operator sees tourists as gas users. The park manager sees tourists as nature lovers. The highway engineer sees tourists as occupants of thousands of four-wheeled vehicles hurtling down ribbons of concrete. Each one is correct in his view but wrong in describing tourists as a whole. A major problem of planning
is to be comprehensive in thinking. Tourists may be all these things and more—and within the same locality and at the same time.

Actually, research on the behavior of tourists is not very plentiful. Generally, we have been satisfied with statistics on numbers of visitors and impressive figures of expenditures. More and more, businessmen and government agencies are performing marketing studies to learn more about the characteristics of tourists. Presently, for example, a pacesetting marketing study of visitors to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park is showing the need for new planning and administrative policy—that conservation and preservation alone are insufficient.

Citizen groups, businessmen, service organizations and governmental agency officials might benefit greatly from surveys of visitors. It might be discovered that the migratory birds, the spectacular era of steamboats on the rivers of the South, the old historic town centers, the open sandy beaches and the forest-covered mountainsides are more important assets of the place than had been realized locally.

Texas tourist leaders, for example, revamped their promotional and developmental efforts when a sociological study was made of outsiders. The outside image appeared to be that of an arid and flat cultural wasteland, devoid of recreational opportunity. Now, all promotion emphasizes, with ample documentation, the thousands of acres of reservoir waters, the mountains, the Gulf coast beaches, the East Texas forests and the many ancient missions, battlesites and other important historic places.

Better understandings of people as travelers can assist in making our own communities and countrysides into more beautiful and more livable places.

ATTRACTIONS

Although some are more conspicuous than others, all tourist attractions—the lures to travel—depend upon qualities of place for their success. Parks,
camping areas, natural resource areas, beaches, islands and wildlife areas are especially important for the development of tourist attractions. Cultural attractions, such as historic buildings and sites, museums, engineering feats, events and battlesites are dependent upon special environmental settings. Even man-made attractions, such as Walt Disney World and Six Flags Over Texas, have certain locational and spatial place requirements.

Sometimes, visitor implications of development are not recognized at the start. For example huge reservoirs are developed by the Army Corps of Engineers primarily for flood control and power production but often become important recreational lakes for tourists. An outstanding example is the well-designed multiple-use recreation and resort complex, Lake Lanier Islands, north of Atlanta. TVA, originally a dam-building and power production agency, for example, now finds itself fostering extensive tourist attractions. The spectacular Land-Between-the-Lakes in Kentucky is not only popular but also is a carefully planned place. Historians promote the identification and restoration of old buildings and sites for purely professional interests but often, because of pressure from visitors, are forced to learn about planning and managing for volumes of tourists. Natural resource protagonists are often disturbed because their protected areas become popular—become tourist attractions.

Throughout the areas in which we live, we should be insisting upon greater sensitivity of place when attractions are developed. The physical qualities—special soil conditions, slopes, mountains, rocks, plants, animals, waters, climates—are grouped differently for every place. Many are irreplaceable. Equally important are the cultural qualities—special historic sites, buildings, special legends, lore, mystique; special music, poetry, prose; special man-made structures and institutions. Extreme care in the design, construction and management of places to serve the function of visitor attraction must be taken or placeness is diminished or even destroyed. Attractions for tourists, in a sense,
are consumer products. But, contrary to most, they do not lend themselves to mass production, freeze-drying and multiple distribution.

A word about overuse of attractions. Much has been written and said about overcrowding and resource erosion due to too many visitors, especially in our parks and historic sites. This concern has led to a rash of policy jitters by park planners—even development of "use capacity" theories and threats of rationing. In most instances, the blame for place erosion should not be laid on the visitors. They are merely responding to the environmental preachings of the last 100 years—that enriching, satisfying and worthwhile experiences can be obtained by contact with nature and historic artifacts.

No, the major error has been one of decision-making. Generally, we have underplanned, underdesigned and understaffed our attractions—all ownership, design and management problems. The quality of place can be protected only when physical development and programs are designed and carried out to meet the needs and desires of people concurrently with environmental sensitivity.

For example, if thousands of people wish to experience the life of Colonial America by visiting Colonial Williamsburg, they may have to park their cars, view audio-visual media presentations, listen to guides, take bus tours and read about the place—instead of walking upon every square inch of lawn and carpet that would be destroyed by the trampling of thousands of feet. This was a wise management decision that meets the need for a quality visitor experience and yet does not destroy the quality of place.

Land development for vacation homes—both detached and multiple housing—is facing the same issue. Perhaps no other tourism use gobbles up more land than does that of vacation homes. Living near oceans, rivers, lakes and reservoirs is increasingly desirable. But, in the process, it is not necessary to block out the waterfront. Planning sensitive to place, can provide open water-
fronts for all to enjoy while development—hard physical development of build-
ings, drives, parking, utilities—is kept back from the water's edge. The
demand need not be curbed; better solutions should be offered.

Conceptually, all attractions have three elements. The main feature—
the waterfall, historic building, beach—is the principal attracting force.
Certainly, it should reflect the special qualities of its place. But, there
is more. How the feature is introduced depends much upon its setting. His-
toric restoration faces this problem when a delightful old relic is surrounded
by modern glass and steel. Special design and development of the "inviolate
belt" is critical to place. Finally, for all attractions, even the most re-
 mote park, there is need for a supporting service community. The need is to
plan, design and manage these elements for visitors at the same time that the
qualities of place are protected.

SERVICES—FACILITIES

One of the most conspicuous and important components of the tourism
functional system is the full array of accommodations, food services, car
services, guide services, entertainment—all the commercial support for attractions. It is the component most sought by economic developers of tourism because it provides the greatest impact on jobs, incomes and taxes.

Today, throughout the South, even the franchise establishments are bending to place demands. Differential rates, different accommodation services and the addition of recreational complexes adapted to the locale are springing up. As yet, few are abandoning their stereotyped building design and sign. But, it is refreshing to see at least one lodging organization—Best Western—banding hundreds of independent operations together, often with indigenous designs.

Unfortunately, most of the historic inns, once with service and architecture well adapted to local sites, have burned or been demolished over the years. Some with excellent locations for modern tourism have been converted to other uses. Some massive restoration efforts of waterfront cities are so single-purpose (contrary to the original variety) that only residential use is allowed. Services and facilities as well as residences were a part of early history and are as legitimate today as then. The mix of attractions, services and facilities provides a desired balance for both local citizenry and tourists. This is well demonstrated by both the French Quarter of New Orleans and the San Antonio River Walk.

Facilities and services near major attractions such as national parks and recreation areas do present a planning problem. The several specialized segments tend to be so preoccupied with internal problems that interrelated functions receive little attention. Businessmen, in their private enterprise zeal, frequently locate and design with little regard to the theme and esthetic qualities of adjacent park areas. Defenders of natural re-
source reservations often forget that visitors need a variety of services and facilities and become over-critical of supporting businesses. Gatlinburg and Great Smoky Mountains National Park, for example, are but two sides of the same tourist phenomenon and must rely on the functions of each in order to succeed.

TRANSPORTATION

Tourism puts a peculiar twist on transportation. In addition to its obvious importance of providing access to attractions, a transportation corridor, such as a highway, is an important visual lane. For all levels of roads, from expressways to forest trails, the traveler leaves, passes through and arrives at environmental settings that have special place meanings.

For some, especially older travelers, the meaning of experiencing a mosaic of city, farm and forest landscape is now lost on the new expressway; he may opt for the "shunpike." On the other hand, the destination-oriented traveler prefers the uniform standards of expressway travel.

As yet, we have not developed the art of designing those special travel places that act as entrances. Each interchange appears like every other; airports reflect only air transport technology. Why shouldn't entrances reflect the special qualities of the places of our arrival? The design of both Tampa and Miami airports, for example, offers the traveler some insight into his new destination.

As yet in this country we have not made the simple transportation policy decision to link travel modes in a logical design manner. Each travel mode now stops abruptly at its terminus and the traveler has diffi-
difficulty in fighting his way through unwelcome places to find linkage with the next portion of his travel.

INFORMATION-DIRECTION

Placeness has a psychological as well as a geographical dimension. In other words, the pre-conceived image of place has much to do with satisfaction (or disinterest, or dislike) upon arrival. Therefore, do we do the traveler a real service if we exaggerate or provide half-truths about places in our promotion and advertising? Perhaps some of the conflict between us and them is due to misleading information regarding this place. Perhaps we need a Michelin of the South.

A continuing frustration of travel is the difficulty of obtaining adequate directions to destinations. Neither the anti-billboard esthetes nor the tourist businessmen are addressing themselves to the communication and direction problem of informing travelers. The "travel boards" of Texas and Georgia--expressway signs that list names of motels, attractions and car service stations--and information complexes at interchanges are clues to improved means of finding places.

PLANNING

Once we recognize these components of tourism and how they function, we should be able to do a better job of planning. Planning for better resource use offers many advantages. Planning should provide the businessman with greater overall perspectives for better land use decision-making--for his success and for better service to the visitor. Planning should provide better satisfactions to the visitors by giving them a greater sense of place. And, planning should allow better protection of all those valu-
Community-Attraction Complex

1. Circulation corridor
   - Gateway: direction, information, impression

2. Community
   - Services, facilities, products, attractions

3. Attraction cluster
   - Group of things to see and do based upon research-design

4. Linkage corridor

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Diagram showing the integration of circulation, gateway, community, linkage, and attractions.
able and special places of the South.

Suppose, for example, a community and its surrounding area were viewed as one huge "community-attractions complex." This would allow us to examine what has been done in the past and to obtain clues for future potential that could also protect qualities of place.

1. This allows critical examination of the access: functional design of circulation corridors and gateways. What impressions do first-time visitors obtain? Should beautiful vistas be guaranteed by zoning, visual easements or other controls? Can the newcomer find his way to lodging, attractions, food service and other objectives, easily and quickly?

2. The community, itself--has it become so introverted that it has forgotten company manners? Are beauty spots properly identified, protected and developed for visitor use? Are historic sites and buildings protected, redeveloped and adequately interpreted? Are tourism functions a part of ongoing everyday city planning and development?

3. All resources (natural and cultural) within a radius of influence of a community could be screened for attraction potential. Some resources, such as marshes and mangrove swamps, may be so fragile and so important for their biological production that they should be left alone. Other resources may be well adapted to nature-oriented or special man-made attractions. Without thorough landscape analysis, we are guessing about these matters.

Because clustered attractions are more successful than isolated ones, our research could show how historic or natural resource attractions could be bunched.

4. Finally, a critical review of the linkage between the main access and connection to the attractions may show need for improved land use and
landscape design.

Such a study of the overall community-attraction complex could be helpful in other ways. It could reveal the need for certain policies to be changed. Private enterprise may need to include greater sensitivity to the environment and to the interests and functions of related establishments run by governments and non-profit organizations. Governmental agencies that own and operate tourist-related establishments may need to broaden their legal and operational responsibilities. All owners-managers-planners may need to collaborate more to plan and coordinate development action steps.

The South has special qualities of place--its cities, natural resources, history, lore and a stronger land ethic than anywhere in the country. Tourism need not destroy these. But, without broad participation and action by citizens of the South, it could. Because of the great fragmentation and complexity of tourism, the responsibility for local planning appears to fall, by default, upon the local citizen. Today, no other group is demonstrating interest and ability to do so. With concerned interest by its citizens, the South can demonstrate artistic, poetic, and environmentally sensitive development that emulates the fine qualities of placeness of the South.