

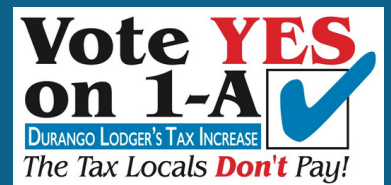
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

EXAMINING THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM TO THE
DURANGO COMMUNITY AND WHY TAKING THIS RESPONSIBLE
APPROACH IS ESSENTIAL FOR SW COLORADO



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WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM?

What is sustainable tourism? Simply put, sustainable tourism (or, responsible tourism, destination management, etc.) is the balance of utilizing and promoting while also protecting the integrity of a destination's resources (environmental, economic, social, community).

These days, when people hear the term sustainability, they often think of the environment. While environmental protection is certainly a critical component, a sustainable tourism program is more holistic and considers a destination's economy, culture and well-being of its residents, in addition to its natural resources.

Visit Durango's practicing definition of sustainable tourism is, "Tourism that takes full account of current and future economic, social and environmental impacts while addressing the needs of all stakeholders: visitors, the tourism industry, the environment and host communities."



Let's examine the various components of the definition:

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

We must protect our natural resources so they can be preserved for future generations and used for conservation purposes. This is done by educating visitors and residents about how to enjoy the outdoors in a way that respects and protects our natural resources, while adopting regenerative practices that support the biosphere.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

We can build up the kind of tourism economy that will allow the industry to thrive without overwhelming the community. This is done by offering more reasons for people to visit, including meetings and events throughout the entire year, instead of only during high traffic seasons. In addition, the value of tourism is the tax generation from sales in local businesses that benefit public services like safety, schools, infrastructure, etc. It also helps with job creation, arts, culture and attractions that residents utilize and enjoy.

SOCIAL/COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

It is crucial that the tourism industry and visitors does not overtake the culture of the community but add value to the destination's residents by cultivating an experience that is authentic to the community and less targeted to tourists. For example, a thriving downtown consists of small businesses such as local restaurants, shops and attractions, and less of t-shirt and gift shops that primarily target tourists as their customers.



A MORE SUSTAINABLE DURANGO, COLORADO

In 2019, Visit Durango decided to adopt the sustainable tourism model and restructured itself as a Destination marketing and management organization (DMMO). Under new leadership and with direction from the Durango community, local elected officials and tourism industry stakeholders, it was clear that sustainable tourism needed to be a top priority.

This strategically sound decision is backed by data. National surveys show an increasing number of Colorado visitors believe it is very important to choose a destination based on sustainable practices. Those figures rose from 15 percent in 2017, to 20 percent in 2018, to 29 percent in 2020, according to research provided by the Colorado Tourism Office.

In April 2020, Visit Durango founded a sustainable tourism task force composed of local stakeholders from a variety of public and private entities, including the City of Durango, Local First, Durango Trails, 4CORE, Southern Ute Indian Tribe, San Juan Mountains Association, and Fort Lewis College Environmental Center.

Visit Durango conducted southwest Colorado's first resident sentiment survey to identify the issues considered most pressing to the community. The organization was able to take these findings and use them to guide its messaging for the summer 2020 travel season.

As a result, Visit Durango rolled out the Care for Durango campaign, in partnership with the City of Durango, with Main Avenue banners, social media videos, informational posters, ski-shaped sidewalk decals and supporting communications. These public information messages urged visitors to respect the community and its resources including encouraging visitors to check current fire restrictions and Care for Colorado/Leave No Trace were placed in key locations. In 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, new responsible travel messages were encouraged: "Mask Up" and "Enjoy Durango (Responsibly)."

In early 2021, Visit Durango entered a partnership with the San Juan Mountains Association, which will provide a staff member for the Durango Welcome Center this summer to teach visitors and recreators about proper trail usage. Partnerships like this are valuable as they can expand visitor education programs and the advocacy power of a destination marketing and management organization. However, these partnerships are fee-based and require staff time and resources in order to maximize the benefits of the partnership. Additional funds would increase Visit Durango's ability to partner with more local and national organizations, including Leave No Trace, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, and Pledge to the Wild.



Sustainable Future Requires Sustainable Funding



Creating and implementing a sustainable tourism marketing and management plan is a strategy to craft not only a better visitor experience, but a thriving tourism economy that supports the residents and workers of Durango and La Plata County.

Creating and maintaining a high-functioning tourism ecosystem that benefits both visitors and residents alike is a priority for the tourism industry, as illustrated in Visit Durango's strategic plan. While progress has already been made on this plan, increased funding would help the industry do more to protect our community, cultural and natural assets, in effective and sustainable ways.

Increased funding for sustainable tourism marketing would allow Visit Durango to create a Sustainable Tourism and Policy Division at Visit Durango, which would benefit each component of sustainable tourism.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Advocate for a green infrastructure like EV charging stations, zero waste programs, and volunteer trail maintenance and clean-up days, and increase the number and scope of partnerships with organizations such as San Juan Mountains Association..

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

Support a more consistent, year-round economy that will lead to a stable and sustainable flow of travelers during periods traditionally considered "off-season." This strategy fuels Durango's economy by supporting year-round employment at its local restaurants, hotels and attractions, and increasing the purchasing power of those local residents employed by these Durango area establishments.

SOCIAL/COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

Utilize the increased funding to advance the quality of life of Durango's residents by increasing access and awareness of the community's arts and cultural offerings, unique dining experiences, and outdoor recreation opportunities.



Post-COVID Tourism Competition



Studies indicate that demand for travel post-COVID will be high - and there will be heightened competition among destinations. Increased funding would allow Durango to further sharpen its marketing efforts to research and attract travelers who are most likely to resonate with what Durango has to offer and participate in a variety of activities during their time in town, like dining out, riding the train, and renting gear. Plus, with a substantial visitor public information program in place, these visitors will be informed on how to respect Durango's lands and residents during their trip. Sustainable tourism means fostering a relationship with tourists who recognize the importance of respecting the place they are visiting. Durango is a special place in Colorado, and it's our community vision and goal to keep it that way.

Finally, it's not enough to enact a strategy without an ability to measure its success. A more robust and sustainable tourism marketing program would allow Visit Durango to determine and measure meaningful indicators, including a follow-up to last year's resident sentiment survey, to track the success or shortcomings of the program and make adjustments as needed. Durango has set an important precedent in being the first community in the state of Colorado to include Sustainable Tourism as part of a ballot issue. Durango has taken an important leadership position in acknowledging, adopting and is practicing sustainable tourism marketing and management, which takes into consideration a destination's economy, culture, well-being of its residents, and its natural resources.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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All In Strategic Consulting's mission is to help community-based organizations meet the needs of their populations and grow their impact by having a focused communications strategy, effective planning, and efficient program management. Co-founders, Anna Michaels-Boffy and Abby Lepper Gibson, understand that in a disjointed world, there is an urgent need to find connections in order to build stronger communities. Their combined experience and complementary expertise bring a unique skill set to their mission of supporting both community-based organizations and the people they serve.

