

Blackstone Valley Tourism Council
Sustainable Tourism Lab



Whole Place Development

*The Sustainable Tourism
Planning and Development Laboratory*

of the

*Blackstone Valley Tourism Council
175 Main Street
Pawtucket, RI 02860*

Contact:

Robert D. Billington, Ed. D.

401-724-2200

BVRI@aol.com



Overview

The Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory (STPDL), established in 2005 under the leadership of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council (BVTC), is growing the Blackstone Valley into a vital, sustainable tourism destination. Known more for its abandoned textile mills, polluted river and landscape and depressed job base; not long ago few would have thought of the Blackstone Valley as a 'destination' at all, let alone one implementing sustainable principles. This change began in the 1980's when lifelong resident Robert Billington of the Blackstone Valley, a former mill worker, sought to create a sustainable tourism initiative in which he could promote the rich history of the area, while bringing it back from the brink of extinction.

Because of a vision which began in 1985 and 25 years of hard work, the Blackstone Valley is now home to culturally relevant and sustainably based attractions that build-off the region's history while encouraging its re-birth.

This tourism development, however, has not been done in a traditional manner. Far from it, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has concentrated on *Whole Place Development* as a methodology of tourism development that seeks to improve the quality of place for residents while at the same time promoting the region to visitors. In the 20th century, tourism development was just about economic benefit at any cost. However, in the 21st century, we know the *whole community* is affected, and therefore the whole community must invest in a sustainable future of tourism. This provides benefits for all that reside in the community; not just one-time visitors. We cannot promote our towns and cities without creating places in which our citizens can be proud.

Program Establishment

In the 1970's and 1980's the Blackstone River was an environmental catastrophe. Considered to be officially 'dead', the river was simply the part of town that you avoided at all costs. Since the late 18th Century, the Blackstone River was the region's dumping grounds; home to old cars, thousands of used tires, refrigerators, and dams that changed colors depending on which chemical the mills were using that day. Additionally, the mills themselves went from industrious (yet polluting) and vibrant places of employment to abandoned and deteriorating eye sores.

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This was the setting in which the Sustainable Tourism Lab was born. The Sustainable Tourism Lab sought to not only clean up the Blackstone River Valley, but also to turn the area into a visitor destination. In 1985 the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council (parent organization to the Sustainable Tourism Lab) was established in Pawtucket, RI. Without the benefit of professional consultants, Mr. Billington sought to create this tourism destination based on what his gut told him. The river needed to be cleaned up, and the mills had to be “re-invented.”

Despite its polluted river and empty mills, the Blackstone River Valley did have some solid ground on which to build. Knowing that the area was home to the first factory in America, The Tourism Council decided to reinvent and promote the Blackstone based on its rich history. The ‘Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution’ concept would help lead to a cleaner river, re-used mills, and the tourism destination that the Sustainable Tourism Lab sought to build.

Goals and Bench Marking

The goals of the Sustainable Tourism Lab were two-fold. First, the environmental damage had to be repaired, and second the economic downfall needed to be reversed. Dating back to the 1970’s as Billington began to work with other local agencies on cleaning up the Blackstone, goals were set. By 2015, the Blackstone River was to be clean. The official campaign was underway. ‘Fishable Swimmable 2015’. ‘Zap the Blackstone’. ‘Clean by 2015’. Local groups began to gather to simply pull the debris out of the river. One event included 10,000 volunteers and resulted in hundreds of *tons* of debris being removed. Similar events were organized. Abandoned cars, appliances, and countless other dumped objects were retrieved. But with goal of making the Blackstone River fishable and swimmable, there would need to be benchmark goals as well. One such goal was making the river recreation friendly. Another goal was to reintroduce native species that were completely decimated by the chemically altered water.

A second major goal was to lay the foundation for a growing tourism industry that could help offset lost revenue from the rapidly shrinking manufacturing sector. Not only was the region to be marketed for tourism, but that tourism must be done in a sustainable manner that helped to create a ‘whole place’ destination. When an architect designs a sustainable building, he uses local materials. In the same fashion, when putting together a sustainably based tourism industry, local resources needed to be utilized. Whether those resources were old rail lines, a polluted river, local artists, or even abandoned buildings, local heritage resources would be the key to a sustainably based economy.

Outcomes and Environmental Benefit

Twenty five years after the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and the Sustainable Tourism Lab were born; the results have provided benefits both to the local economy and to the environment. The Blackstone River is now open to recreation crafts and was recently promoted to a class B river. The river is clean enough to support a local

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boating outfitter as well as countless kayaks, fishing boats, and canoes. While the fishing is restricted to catch and release, the fact that people are willing and able to fish the waters of the Blackstone shows a significant level of progress. When the Blackstone's rebirth began in the 1980's, two species of fish could survive in the river. Today, 19 species of fish are found in addition to turtles, birds, and other flora and fauna that just were not there 20 years ago. These environmental outcomes would not have been possible without a substantial level of clean up organized both by the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and a host of other local organizations dedicated to the success of this river.

In addition to the improvements in the Blackstone River's water quality, many of the mills are no longer abandoned. Two of Pawtucket's most prominent mills are now home to a mixture of upscale and affordable residential apartments and condominiums. This not only helps recycle these high quality structures, but the presence of a residential population helps to sustain the downtown business community.

The tourism industry has also seen a significant increase in the Blackstone Valley. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council now hosts more than a dozen local events each year highlighting the past and future success of the Blackstone Valley. The Blackstone Valley's visitor appeal was strengthened when it was declared a National Heritage Corridor by the National Park Service in 1986; a designation for which the Tourism Council advocated.

Much of the surge in tourism has happened on the Blackstone itself. Since 1993, the Blackstone Valley Explorer offers river boat heritage tours of this former industrial powerhouse, allowing tourists to see first hand the turn-around of the region. The Explorer has hosted more than 350,000 passengers since its inception. Each September, the revived river hosts the Rhode Island Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. This unique boat race draws 10,000 visitors per year to view authentic Dragon Boats taking part in 40 races as part of the Pawtucket Arts Festival. Finally, in 1999 the Tourism Council debuted the Samuel Slater Canal Boat which offers visitors the opportunity to sleep in a floating bed and breakfast on an authentic British Canal Boat.

In addition, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has utilized the rail as part of a sustainable tourism effort. The Polar Express excursion train tour hosts 4,000 children and adults each holiday season on a live train ride re-enacting the famous children's story written by local author Chris Van Allsburg. Each autumn, the Tourism Council hosts a Fall Foliage tour taking advantage of New England's beautiful scenery from the comfort of the train. Both of these train trips utilize the Worcester Providence freight train line, an active remnant of the former industrial glory days.

In 1996 the Sustainable Tourism Lab and the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council worked to support the creation of a local Visitor Center in an abandoned department store downtown Pawtucket. The Visitor Center allows locals and visitors alike to view a free documentary video showcasing the history of the polluted river and highlighting its revival. In addition to the Visitor Center, the building now includes municipal offices, an art gallery, law offices, and a job training center.

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Finally, three times per year, the Lab organizes and hosts forums, conferences or summits dedicated to the advancement of sustainable and successful tourism practices. The conferences feature international presenters, a facilitated outreach café and include participating tourism professionals from throughout New England.

Relevance to Traveler or Travel Industry

The primary effect that the work of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and the Sustainable Tourism Lab can have on the travel industry is simply to provide a model of what other communities can do with their depressed manufacturing economy. The example set forth in the Blackstone Valley proves that other communities can indeed utilize their historical and heritage assets to establish a robust tourism economy based on principles of sustainability. In the 1970's the Blackstone Valley was home to a 'dead' river, a vanishing economy, and little hope. We were far from the envy of the tourism industry. So if we can create sustainable tourism, other communities should be asking 'Why not us?'

The effect on today's traveler is one that proves what many believe deep down in their heart, but many never actually experience. And that is that the authentic travel experience is still possible. In a world of cartoon amusement parks, mega cruise lines, and isolated five-star resorts settled amidst developing-world poverty; few travelers actually get to see what is *real*. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has created a product that not only helps re-create the local community from the ground up, but the experience allows the visitor to authentically see and feel the American Industrial Revolution. From the working mills to refurbished lofts and river cruises, the visitor gets a first-hand look at all phases of our authentic heritage. The experience includes not only a look back into history, but also the dark days that followed, and finally the re-birth in which they in turn play an integral part.

Real-World Examples

The most obvious example in which the visitor will experience the sustainable investments made by the people of the Blackstone Valley is on the Blackstone Valley Explorer – a 50 minute river boat cruise highlighting the rebirth of the river. From the outside, the river cruise seems pleasant but perhaps nothing more than a simple nature tour on a Sunday afternoon. But upon a closer inspection the cruise is remarkable. Thirty years ago, not only would the river cruise not have been possible, but it would have been highly unenjoyable. Imagine a foul smelling 50 minute cruise through a trash filled stream that changes colors throughout the tour as the boat weaves through a course of dumped refrigerators and old cars. Today that same tour includes a nature guide pointing out the species of fish, birds, and other wildlife that have returned to the cleaned up river. The tour takes the visitor by newly restored mills that are being used as anything from new condominiums, to light manufacturing, and heritage museums. An onboard river guide explains what the area would have been like 200 years ago as a manufacturing force and what it would have been like 50 years ago as an industrial

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wasteland. The tour begins and ends at the site of an abandoned mill and yet the tour is remarkably removed from the dense urban surroundings.

While many cities and states across the nation have done impressive work with river clean ups, few offer the historical heritage of the Blackstone River. In our case the very same river that brought the mills and pollution of the American Industrial Revolution will be the entity that brings the Blackstone Valley back.