



Minnesota Travel Green Program Development

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1. Overview

State legislation passed in 2007 directed Explore Minnesota Tourism, the state's tourism promotion office, to develop a Minnesota travel green program based on the input of related agencies, organizations and businesses. The emphasis of a travel green program is to protect the environment, promote tourism business practices that reduce environmental impact, educate travelers, and promote Minnesota travel. Explore Minnesota Tourism organized a task force of 22 representatives from various tourism associations, state agencies and businesses to analyze existing travel green programs and develop recommendations for Minnesota.

2. Program Establishment

A survey conducted by Explore Minnesota Tourism and the University of Minnesota Tourism Center found that consumers are interested in knowing that a tourism business is environmentally friendly, but were less interested in a travel green certification program. A second survey of the travel industry found high levels of interest in marketing Minnesota as a green destination and in implementing green business practices, but less interest in participating in a certification program.

As a result of this assessment and research, the Task Force focused on development of a Minnesota travel green program aimed at increasing the environmentally beneficial practices of Minnesota tourism businesses and at directing consumers seeking "green" businesses to those that are implementing green practices.

The specific recommendations and next steps include:

1. Educate tourism businesses about “being green.” This would include information about best environmental practices provided in print, online, and through education sessions, such as the annual Sustainable Tourism Conference.
2. Create a self-reporting system to add “travel green” information for businesses and attractions included in the state’s Explore Minnesota travel website, to allow consumers to search for businesses utilizing green practices.
3. Promote the availability of Minnesota green travel information to consumers, increasing awareness of Minnesota tourism industry efforts to operate in an environmentally sensitive way.

Explore Minnesota Tourism Accommodations (Lodging/Camping), Attractions and Festivals/Events Databases

Explore Minnesota Tourism will begin collecting and disseminating information about the tourism industry’s efforts to “go green.” Because this subject area is emerging and largely undefined, there are not criteria or specific definitions in place for the policies or practices that various types of businesses and organizations may be implementing. The intent is to be able to address the unique variations that travel consumers may have of acceptable or qualified green business practices.

As a starting point initially, we have chosen eight subject areas to begin asking facilities about. With such a wide range of business types that make up the Minnesota tourism industry – from properties with indoor lodging to campgrounds, ski areas & trails, museums, festivals and other events, golf courses, wilderness outfitters, the list goes on – we recognize that the “green” policies and practices that may be implemented at each of these facility types will vary; not all policies or practices will apply to all facilities.

Minnesota tourism businesses and organizations receive a free listing in the Explore Minnesota database. A section will be added to the Explore Minnesota Tourism database survey forms to collect information on some of the most common categories related to “green” practices at tourism facilities & events. These eight subject areas will be presented as check-boxes, allowing a business/organization to indicate whether they have implemented specific policies or practices.

An open-ended text field will also be provided, so that the facility can provide detailed descriptions of their green practices, or can list other features, policies, etc. that are not included in the list of check-offs.

The new section of the survey forms will include:

Environmental/“Green” Practices

- Waste reduction/Reuse/Recycling
- Water conservation/Wastewater Mgmt Plan
- Energy efficiency/conservation
- Air quality improvements
- Eco-friendly landscape & facility design
- Transportation-related policies or programs
- Eco-friendly purchasing practices
- Organic or local food & beverage choices

Description of green practices in place at this facility:

As is the case with all of the information in the Explore Minnesota database, the data is self-reported by the facilities. However, we expect that offering the open-ended text field will allow consumers to see detail about the level of eco-friendly practices or improvements at each facility, and help them to make better-informed choices based on their own preferences.

During our ‘soft-launch’ period, beginning in October 2008, we only collected the data from facilities that update their listing online, or new listings that receive a survey form from us. Information that is provided through these channels will be included on the facility’s detailed listing page on exploreminnesota.com.

However, these attributes will not be included on search pages, or called out in any way to consumers as being available information in the Explore Minnesota database, until we have completed a survey cycle for each major database category. This way, we will be able to populate the database with a reasonable number of responses, and provide some valid search results for consumers.

Survey cycles are scheduled for January 2009 for accommodations, March 2009 for attractions, and April 2009 for Fall 2009 festivals & events. At this time, we will notify all listings in the respective categories, and will include some additional instructions and suggestions for completing these areas of the survey.

After each database category has had an opportunity to provide their Travel Green information, a check-off box will be added to the applicable Advanced Search page on our website. A facility that checks off any of the green features and/or provides a text description of their eco-friendly practices will be included in search results that meet all of the other criteria for the consumer’s search.

Marketing of the website’s Travel Green feature, and a dedicated page on ExploreMinnesota.com are scheduled for summer, 2009.

3. Goals and Benchmarking

The goal of Minnesota's Travel Green program is to increase environmentally beneficial practices of Minnesota tourism businesses and to direct consumers seeking "green" businesses to those that are implements green practices.

A baselines survey (State of Sustainable Tourism in Minnesota) was conducted by the University of Minnesota Tourism Center in spring of 2007. The goal of the study was to identify a baseline of practices; identify needs for education and information; identify attitudes about sustainable tourism and continue dialogue on sustainable tourism.

Periodic use of this survey will measure the progress made in Minnesota toward green practices. Additionally, as businesses provide information on their green practices for the exploreminnesota.com database, it will also offer a point of comparison on the change in green business practices.

4. Outcomes and Environmental Benefit

Implementation of a travel green database, as well as development of educational tools and resources (particularly a Minnesota travel green tourism industry website, to be managed by the University of Minnesota Tourism Center) is just getting underway. It is too early to assess outcomes.

5. Relevance to Traveler/Travel Industry and Real-World Example

The program encourages Minnesota tourism businesses to add their green business practices to their promotional information included free of charge on the State of Minnesota's official travel website, exploreminnesota.com. Consumers who are planning trips in Minnesota and who are interested in patronizing green businesses, will be able to use the website to identify places to stay and places to visit that have environmentally friendly business practices. Modifications may need to occur once this process has been tested in the marketplace.