

Sustainable Mystic Initiative

Building a Sustainable Destination Rooted in Sense of Place, Sense of Community



TravelGreen.Org

Environmental Case Study

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Overview

The community of Mystic, Connecticut celebrated its 350th anniversary in 2004. As part of that celebration a documentary was created highlighting the origins of the area, its history and transition to modern times. The documentary ended with a question: What Mystic will become in the future? In response to this question, as well as the mounting pressures of a tourism philosophy that more is better, The Sustainable Mystic Initiative (SMI) was conceived in the spring of 2006 during conversations between two Mystic Seaport Museum officials, Peter Glankoff and Susan Funk. Sensitized to the issues facing our seaport community, Peter attended the first Civic Tourism Conference* in March of that year. This conference, held in Prescott, Arizona, brought together academics, environmentalists, tourism officials and others to explore ideas and approaches for thinking about tourism in a more place-based, sustainable way.

In parallel, within roughly the same timeframe, the two primary anchoring cultural institutions of Mystic -- Mystic Seaport Museum and Mystic Aquarium & Institute for Exploration -- realized the potential of a joint marketing initiative. Physically only one mile apart, there had been little collaboration in the three decades since the Aquarium's founding. A fledgling joint marketing program, however, opened a dialogue and the opportunity to consider ways to deepen the alliance around the idea of an institution-lead initiative exploring civic tourism and sustainable destinations. Following several conversations between the institutions, the group was expanded to include leaders in a variety of fields from Mystic and other locales. The first gathering of about 25 individuals took place in fall 2007.

Mystic became a destination with the rising popularity of Mystic Seaport in the 1960s. Julia Roberts's 1988 cinematic debut in *Mystic Pizza* secured the renown of the Mystic brand, at least in Hollywood, if not maritime history terms. With the opening of the Mystic Aquarium in 1973 and the more recent advent of two major Indian casinos, bringing millions of additional visitors to the region, Southeastern Connecticut became even more dominant as Connecticut's main tourism driver, today generating nearly 40% of Connecticut's total tourism revenue.

Against a backdrop of relentless seasonal automobile traffic (the Seaport and the Aquarium together count over 1 million visitors annually); commercial and residential development; pressure on green and open space; rising energy costs; growing awareness of local and global environmental issues; and, lack of a comprehensive, inclusive vision and plan for ensuring a sustainable community and destination, the need for a leadership forum to develop strategies defining the future of our community gave rise to the Sustainable Mystic Initiative.

Program Establishment

The SMI has been completely voluntary and administered on an ad hoc basis. A core group of about a dozen “founders” has kept the roughly quarterly meetings and agendas on track. A bold mission statement: *To build a sustainable destination and community that becomes a recognized national model in two years* was adopted over a year ago and has proven to be

* Organized by Dan Shilling, teacher, author and former Executive Director of the Arizona Humanities Council, the Conference brought together academics, environmentalists, and tourism and government officials to explore tourism and community - building from a place-based, sustainable perspective.

Remarkably, with few exceptions, the original group has remained intact. Seaport and Aquarium management remain committed to the effort as do local elected officials, corporate, tourism and community leaders.

The SMI group has followed a variety of guidelines toward developing its program, initially establishing three exploratory teams to gather information and develop an action plan:

- Transportation – Charged with addressing needs and options within Mystic to foster a more pedestrian and bike-friendly environment. Explore rail and water connections capitalizing on Mystic’s unique proximity to both (Amtrak, Metro-North, ferries).
- Energy - What opportunities exist to demonstrate and model alternative energy solutions? To adopt energy-saving practices? To link residential and commercial needs?
- Sense of Place - What makes Mystic unique and different from any other place? How do we define and demonstrate its uniqueness? How do we protect this Sense of Place, and why is it important?

Each group wrestled with issues and priorities in its assigned area, trying to capture the highpoints within the context of a small community and limited resources. The reports that emerged ranged from the expansive (Disaggregated Utilities and Hydrogen Village on the Energy front) to tactical (Thursday evening Sense of Place Open Houses and Strolls). Clearly, a more robust and coherent work plan was needed before any of the ideas could be realized.

Certain key players helped keep program development on track despite the breadth of ideas and options and loose structure of the group, notably, in addition to Funk and Glankoff, management consultant Dean Macris, a Mystic resident; Stonington First Selectman Ed Haberek; State Senator Andrew Maynard; Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center Director Maggie Jones; landscape architect Elena Pascarella; rail advocate Jim RePass; Pine Point Head of School Paul Geise; and, Blackstone Valley (RI) Tourism Council Director Bob Billington, who had attended the first Civic Tourism Conference and hosted the second one in October 2008.

Goals and Benchmarking

The goals of the program, beyond the mission of creating a national model for a sustainable community and destination, are to finalize a plan to:

1. Create interlinking demonstration projects in the Transportation, Energy and Sense of Place/Sense of Community areas
2. Incorporate existing public and private initiatives into a plan and support/facilitate their development
3. Tie-in with and help leverage Town of Stonington and Town of Groton initiatives
4. Secure widespread community involvement and endorsement of plans and initiatives
5. Identify and pursue funding sources for key projects
6. Go public using media and other forums once plan is in place (spring 2009).

Benchmarking to date has relied primarily on self-assessment, with active SMI participants providing feedback on a regular basis. During the Civic Tourism Conference II, Mystic served as one of five Civic Tourism Laboratories where a dozen conference attendees from around the United States and Canada participated in a day-long Mystic experience consisting of a guided three-mile walk originating in downtown Mystic, up the Mystic River by boat to Mystic Seaport for an abbreviated tour; continuing along Greenmanville Avenue past the historic Elm Grove Cemetery, final resting place of many renowned shipbuilders and seafarers; on to the "Golden Triangle" commercial area; brief tour of the Mystic Aquarium & Institute for Exploration, where Dr. Robert Ballard's deep ocean explorations are exhibited; and, onto the greenway hiking trails leading to the Nature Center. From there, the group traveled to the Pine Point School for lunch and an extended debriefing and discussion.

Conference participants were enthusiastic about their experience, expressing "better than expected" impressions of the destination and our sustainability goals. They suggested more focused facilitation of our process and a move toward practical implementation of specific environmental projects and practices. A recap evaluation of the Mystic Laboratory was provided by the conference organizers.

The biggest challenge at this point is keeping the group engaged, focused and productive. To this end, the first meeting of the New Year will present a review of accomplishments to date and a "straw man" plan for 2009. Specific organizational/administrative assignments will be sought to assure that the plan is carried forward.

Outcomes and Environmental Benefits

It is too early to quantify and evaluate outcomes of the Sustainable Mystic Initiative because the group is still constructing its action plan. Planning is influenced by the cultural attractions which draw visitors to Mystic. Since both are education, history, science, conservation and research based, the initiative reflects shared institutional missions and values. The Nature Center is located in an expansive greenway lying between the two attractions. Historic downtown Mystic, defined by its iconic 1923 bascule bridge spanning the Mystic River, completes the central visitor causeway. None of this is linked together in a pedestrian- or bike- friendly manner. Bike rentals are available, but there are no designated bike paths; sidewalks exist, but they are neither continuous nor contiguous. Seasonal trolley services operating within Mystic have been adopted in the past, but neither as part of a comprehensive people-mover plan, nor marketed as a highpoint of the Mystic experience. Phase I of the SMI plan will be a transportation implementation strategy.

Assessment of environmental benefits will be built into the 2009 plan. Benchmarks will be set for reduced car traffic within Mystic and increased use of rail and water access. The idea of “creating a national model” for a sustainable community and destination is intended to be replicable, both in process and product, and serve as a learning center for residents and visitors.

Relevance to Traveler or Travel Industry

This is where Sustainable Mystic shines brightest because it is based on an already excellent travel industry product involving two highly-regarded marine cultural attractions, extending their inherent environmental themes to visitors and the surrounding community. The evolution of “green” travel over the past 20 years, from its narrow, somewhat elitist eco-tourism origins toward broader environmental consciousness among a majority of today’s travelers, puts Mystic in a strong position to become the sustainable “model” – both as community and destination – envisioned by the SMI mission.

Mystic’s natural history and setting along the legendary Mystic River tidal estuary, halfway between New York and Boston, offers a convenient, accessible location for millions of travelers to easily jump off I-95 (or even better, arrive by Amtrak, Metro-North or ferry) to experience an increasingly interconnected, pedestrian- and bike-friendly destination devoted to environmental education and hands-on learning. Under the theme “Sea Everything” marketing theme, Mystic Seaport and Mystic Aquarium have been jointly – and successfully -- marketing the destination and establishing a strong foundation for the next phase. The marketing systems are in place to carry the sustainability promise forward.

SMI has begun to engage and encourage restaurants, hotels and retailers in environmentally responsible practices. There is already an emphasis among several leading establishments to present locally grown and raised foods, and to follow environmentally appropriate food service and catering guidelines. Eco-friendly

marketing messages at our websites and helpful signage and collateral featuring sustainability themes and sites within Mystic are being planned.

Real-World Example

The October 2008 Civic Tourism Conference II's Mystic Laboratory was the first test of SMI's ability to present a coherent program based on a concise overview of the destination's core assets. The three-mile walk ending at the Pine Point School, led by several members of the SMI leadership group, was a big hit and participants provided many comments and suggestions that will enrich future planning. Pine Point School, an innovative grade K-9 private school located in Stonington within easy biking distance of Mystic, has itself become a sustainability laboratory, very much part of the overall SMI program. With extensive solar paneling already installed, grant-funded wind turbines and greenhouses on the way, Pine Point presents itself as an extension of the learning program inherent in the Sustainable Mystic Initiative. Head of School Paul Geise has been part of the SMI leadership group from the start.

The Mystic River before colonial settlement was the summer fishing grounds of native people. Its rise in the 18th and 19th century as a thriving shipbuilding center gave way in the 20th century to a marine preservation organization that became Mystic Seaport – *The Museum of America and the Sea*. Following the opening of Interstate 95, by the 1970s, Mystic Aquarium, Olde Mystik Village, a revitalized downtown, new hotels and restaurants had catapulted Mystic into prominence as Connecticut's premier tourism region. The Sustainable Mystic Initiative represents the next phase of smart development capitalizing on the natural and historic legacy of the Mystic River tidal estuary. Conjuring the soul of the place and putting it front and center, SMI endeavors to provide a blueprint for a sustainable community that can inspire, inform and engage residents and visitors alike.