Come on UP: The Great Waters fine!

Not long ago, typical visitors to Michigan’s eastern Upper Peninsula drove up from the Detroit area to visit family or friends, maybe fish or hunt a little. After a decade of local collaboration, new visitors are streaming in from all over to visit The Great Waters—and to explore a world-class mix of landscape, heritage, recreation, local food and lively culture.

The catalysts


The stakeholder circle. The five eastern UP counties had been losing population for over a decade. In 2004, a set of stakeholders—small firms, local tourism bureaus, chambers of commerce, cultural organizations, food concerns, artists, local governments, and land managers—came together to figure out how to connect their dots to attract more tourism. As they talked, enthusiasm grew for trying “something together.”

The regional development group. Northern Initiatives (NI), a regional nonprofit community development financial institution, convened the stakeholder circle. NI set out to build a more diverse and resilient economy across the UP, the northern Lower Peninsula, and adjacent Wisconsin counties. NI knew that beyond access to capital, small rural businesses need up-to-date information on markets and what customers want.

The value opportunity

In the early 2000s, UP residents started worrying about their tourism economy as well. Stocks of yellow perch, popular in sport fishing, began dwindling. Hunting and fishing license applications had fallen off. Younger generations were leaving. Tourist cottages were being sold off as private homes. Local tourism businesses—lodging, outfitters, shops and restaurants—were struggling. In spring and fall off-seasons, unemployment neared 30 percent. A nature travel expert visiting the region offered advice: Embrace your potential as a great outdoor destination. Broaden your marketing efforts and partnerships.

The demand

But first, they needed to know what tourists wanted. NI linked them to research, data, the state tourism bureau and its Pure Michigan brand campaign. They learned that today’s savvy travelers are looking for recommendations, route guides, convenience, quirk and quality—and a rich mix of experience on one trip.

Two critical challenges also surfaced. Too few tourists knew what the eastern UP had to offer. And the region was further from their target markets than competing destinations. Bottom lines: They had to meet rising tourist expectations—and get tourists to go the extra mile.

Locals next identified shared goals: Build out the “shoulder” timeframe of each tourist season. Attract new markets and track visitor trends. Elevate the brand profile. Help visitors navigate the region. Offer reasons to travel further and stay longer.

Critical to every goal was developing the brand, which emerged as The Great Waters, calling forth the region’s location amidst three Great Lakes—and the great wonders that lie between.
Putting it together

The initial stakeholders reorganized as the Great Waters Steering Committee—with business owners, tourism councils, chambers, museums, historical groups, local government, development agencies, Tribal organizations, the state Department of Natural Resources, and the National Forest Service. With NI as lead convener, connector and capacity builder, the Committee started weaving in a network of resource partners who could both help and benefit.

Early on, the Committee realized that local tourism promotions were not reaching the right audiences—or linking visitors to each other’s attractions. And their colorful brochures stashed in Welcome Center racks weren’t the answer. With The Great Waters, communities pooled funds to afford buying into a partnership with the Pure Michigan campaign—leveraging their visibility into wider regional and national markets.

To drive people further and deeper into the region, the Committee developed three “trails” tourists could follow over a block of days—each named after a Great Lake. They launched a website that integrates places to see, events, lodging and outdoor recreation options. Facebook and social media campaigns followed.

NI worked with many small tourism-related firms to boost business planning and operations know-how, and leverage marketing and financing. In a partnership with Northern Michigan University, tech-savvy students developed new websites for local firms.

Local government and public land managers facilitated more access to natural and cultural sites. Old territorial habits started melting, as cross-marketing each other’s attractions helped them all do better.

And NI has kept the useful data flowing. For example, a 2010 visitor survey helped attractions help them all do better.

Routing a stream of new tourists

The Great Waters Steering Committee is reviving “community.” Some local firms and organizations witness higher participation by board members. Others report more frequent and effective meetings. Local firms are seeking ways to share marketing and outreach efforts. And overall, small firms are finding and adopting regional “best practices.” New young leaders are emerging. Even the state Department of Natural Resources has been holding community meetings, asking, “What can we do differently? How can we better connect with local communities?”

Not two decades ago, denizens of the declining eastern UP saw little future. To some, their Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point might have felt more like a metaphor for their economic situation than an economic asset. But today, the museum caps their new Lake Superior Trail and draws new visitors. Working together, finding common ground and linking their resources, isolated communities and firms in the eastern UP have become The Great Waters—“where the wonders never end.”

The bottom line: Grow your own wealth

Tourism revenues have stabilized or grown in eastern UP communities, despite recent economic downturns and weather woes. Jobs have been retained and created.

Local perceptions that tourism can’t produce a better economy are changing, as ripples move beyond beyond tourism. For example, Mackinac Straits Fish Company has retained jobs and diversified its market to meet growing demand from local customers. Pictured Rocks Cruises’ business increased by 12 percent in a period in which tourism grew by only 8 percent.

Successful Great Waters collaboration recognizes a market beyond gamers. The tribe is now developing cultural tourism in tandem with its casino.

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