



Exceeding Expectation and the Knotty Question of State Tourism Policy

by Kathryn Hunt

Two events in the last year tell an interesting story and, perhaps, suggest some ideas for untangling the knotty question of state tourism policy. This is an essay about those two events—the National Folk Festival, now entering its third year in its host city, Bangor, and the Biathlon World Cup, recently hosted for the first time in Fort Kent.

A little background about each. Established in 1934 by the National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA), the National Folk Festival is a traveling event where the NCTA partners with a coalition of local organizations to present the festival in a host community. In the early 1980s the National Folk Festival began a tradition of three-year stints in a host community, after which the festival moves on in the hopes that the community it's leaving will continue to host an equally successful annual festival. Bangor is the smallest city ever chosen to host the National Folk Festival.

Because of Bangor's size and distance from major urban centers, planners and sponsors alike expressed modest expectations about the size of the event. Indeed, many wondered whether visitors from outside the region would make the trek. Year one, 2002, dispelled all modesty. Planners expected roughly 50,000 visitors in their first year, and over 80,000 came—including the largest opening-

night attendance in the history of the traveling festival. Year two, this past summer, continued the trend: 110,000 flocked to Bangor, thus marking the largest second-year jump in attendance ever seen at the National Folk Festival. Survey results gauged the economic impact for the three days of the event to be \$3.7 million.

Currently, Bangor is gearing up for year three of the National Folk Festival and planners fully expect a repeat of last summer in terms of visitors, community participation, and economic impact. Indeed, more than 600 volunteers in 2002 and 930 volunteers in 2003 working together showed that Bangor is capable of hosting a major cultural event that draws visitors from all corners of Maine, New England and Canada, as well as from countries as far away as Venezuela, Russia, France and England. Perhaps Bangor also has demonstrated that investments in riverfront restoration and cleaner water can reap dividends in economic as well as environmental terms.

Next, turn to a more recent event: the 2004 International Biathlon Union Ruhrgas World Cup, hosted for the first time by the Maine Winter Sports Center and the people of Aroostook County, March 3-6. Biathlon was unheard of in the county just five short years ago when the Maine Winter Sports Center (MWSC)

was founded with monies from the Libra Foundation. With a mission to reestablish skiing as a dominant winter lifestyle, the MWSC seeks to help communities leverage that lifestyle in ways that lead to economic growth, youth aspirations and healthier lifestyles.

In the span of five short years, the MWSC has created two world-class venues for nordic skiing and biathlon—the Nordic Heritage Center in Presque Isle and the 10th Mountain Lodge in Fort Kent. The quality of national and international events held so far at these venues led the International Biathlon Union to award Fort Kent the eighth world cup event in this year's international circuit. (In turn, Presque Isle will host the 2006 Biathlon Junior World Championships.)

Although MWSC staff and local organizers were optimistic in their planning, some (particularly those outside the county) questioned whether the anticipated large numbers of spectators would materialize. But what happened this March 3-6 exceeded all expectation. Six races over four days brought 100 top competitors from around the world. More than 400 volunteers worked night and day to ensure the events went off seamlessly. Three thousand spectators showed up midweek for the first day of competition—a record for a non-Olympic biathlon event staged in the United States. By day three more than 6,200 enthusiastic spectators filled the bleachers and covered the hillsides along the racecourse to cheer on the competitors. To the athletes and foreign television press, it felt like Europe. Some 10,000 spectators lined the streets of Fort Kent for the final parade—clearly

the largest crowd ever seen in the town of Fort Kent. Meanwhile, in Europe, 26 million viewers watched live German television broadcasts of not only the races but also of life in Aroostook County. Similarly, some 100,000 North American viewers followed the event on the Outdoor Life Network.

The enthusiasm, the numbers, and the hospitality of the people of northern Maine enthralled athletes and international officials alike. Unlike Europe, where biathlon competitors are household names, and thousands turn out and millions tune in to watch the world cup circuit, Americans typically have been lukewarm if not downright cold in their support of biathlon. Indeed, the world cup held the previous week in Lake Placid drew only 100-200 spectators per day.

So, what can be learned from these extraordinary events in Maine? The first is that both represent the culmination of inspired local leadership and years of hard work by local organizers. In both cases, the magnitude of accomplishment is enormous. In tourism jargon, these communities have built powerful “destination drivers”—events that generate widespread recognition, bring people to the state, and confer a tourism marketing edge over other states and regions.

Of course, long-term results rest on Bangor's ability to harness in future years the momentum generated by three years of the National Folk Festival and, likewise, Aroostook County's ability to sustain local enthusiasm and a community-wide commitment to being a world-class nordic skiing and biathlon venue. But assuming this to be the case, both events are inspired by a larger vision of quality of life and

economic opportunity that features sustainable tourism in a lead role.

This leads to the knotty question of state tourism policy. With the recent Governor's Conference on Tourism and the Blaine House Conference on Natural Resource-Based Industries, there are some promising signs that tourism finally is being taken seriously not only as a major sector of the state's economy, but also as a potential source of quality jobs.

In hopes that these promising signs turn into something of greater substance, permit me to suggest a few radical (or perhaps no-brainer) ideas regarding state tourism policy:

First, develop a state strategic plan for tourism *development*. Marketing is not enough. Development requires looking inward at our assets and opportunities. At its best it builds upward from local leadership and grassroots community involvement. It begs the question: What do we want to be when we grow up?

Focus significant resources in the plan to destination development. Further, put people and most of the money into building destinations in northern and interior Maine as well as Washington County.

Grant parity in our economic development policies and investments to sustainable tourism development. Tourism development should no longer be construed as the poor stepchild to other forms of economic development. Consider this factoid: in 2000, New Brunswick invested \$11 million in cultural tourism alone; in contrast, Maine's entire tourism budget was \$4.5 million.

One of our greatest competitive advantages is our natural resources. Develop destinations that feature nature, recreation, and our outdoor heritage in sustainable ways.

Protect these assets through continued investment in land conservation.

Do a study of all new destination drivers that have emerged in the last 10 years. Find out what makes some successful and others at risk of petering out. Share what is learned with everyone.

Do whatever it takes to help promising drivers reach their full potential (consider, for example, the Common Ground Fair in Unity, Waterville Opera House, Kennebec-Chaudière International Corridor, Downeast Heritage Center, The American Folk Festival on the Bangor Waterfront, and 2006 Biathlon Junior World Championships in Presque Isle).

Realize that tourism and downtown revitalization are integrally connected. Support efforts to build Maine's creative economy. Cultivate diversity, beautiful public spaces, and expressions of Maine's cultural heritage. Ultimately, Maine needs to be viewed as a place in which people want to live, not just visit. Put another way, creating local demand for tourism services also is important.

Also, let's get real about transportation. It shouldn't be so hard to get into and out of Maine. With billions of dollars at stake, we need inspired leadership to create a truly multimodal transportation system, an interstate highway all the way to Fort Kent, and an East-West highway.

Finally, someone—dare I say the governor—needs to do a better job of selling these ideas and, in some cases, dreams to Maine's people. After all, Mainers have consistently voted against other forms of economic development, especially when there was a perceived threat to quality of life. (Recall—as just one recent example—the vote in Harpswell to reject the liquid natural gas terminal.)

Sustainable tourism represents one of our best opportunities to create jobs and

preserve what we value most—our communities and environment. Moreover, it is possible to create liveable-wage jobs through tourism development. This outcome isn't guaranteed; rather, it's the result of forward-thinking tourism policy, training and education and, ultimately, the creation of high-quality, niche services for which visitors are willing to pay.

Finally, I was struck by the comment of a visitor to the recent Biathlon World Cup in Fort Kent. He said, "It feels like Europe." I'd like to think that some day visitors attending world cup events in Aroostook County (or cultural events in Bangor) will comment, "It feels like Maine." Then I'll know we're on the right track. 🐾

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