

An Ecotourism Quality Label for Maine?

Insights from Sweden's Nature's Best Initiative

by David Vail



Nature-based tourism may be one way to revitalize lagging rural economies. Here, David Vail offers “food for thought” based on Sweden’s recent development of an accreditation and branding process for ecotourism operations. For an ecotourism product to be awarded the label Nature’s Best, the operator must undergo a voluntary accreditation process which certifies that a set of quality standards has been met. Vail notes that effective marketing, ongoing financing, and demonstrated economic payoff both to operators and to local areas are key to determining the long-term success of Sweden’s Nature’s Best process. Like Sweden, he suggests Maine may be able to capture an ecotourism market niche by establishing its own ecotourism quality label. 🐾

NATURE TOURISM ON MAINE'S POLICY AGENDA

Over the past two years, nature-based tourism has moved up on Maine's policy agenda.¹ It is about time! In 2003, the untapped potential of our outstanding natural attractions was highlighted at the Blaine House Conference on Maine's Natural Resource-based Industry (Vail 2003). The legislature's Business, Research and Economic Development Committee created a Natural Resources Committee to advise it and the Maine Tourism Commission on sustainable tourism opportunities. In 2004, the Department of Economic and Community Development contracted a nationally renowned consulting firm, Fermata, to design pilot projects for the Western Mountains, Greenville-Millinocket, and Cobscook Bay regions. And, on a broader canvas, the three states and two Canadian provinces that make up the Gulf of Maine Council are framing a regional geotourism strategy.

These public sector initiatives are complemented by a host of private and non-profit ventures. On the coast, an example is the island stewardship partnership between the Maine Sea Kayak Guides and Instructors and the Maine Island Trail Association. In the northern forest, a Debsconeags-to-Greenville destination strategy is being explored by conservation landowners, The Nature Conservancy, Appalachian Mountain Club, and Chewonki Foundation, in concert with a new association of "quiet guides."

A thread running through all these activities is the desire to develop and more effectively promote top-end nature tour "products," ranging from sporting camps to windjammer cruises. The ambition of tour operators, quite naturally, is to attract a growing number of discriminating, high-income visitors, willing to pay top dollar for top quality. As Governor Baldacci stressed in his Blaine House conference remarks, the public's goals also include revitalizing Maine's economically distressed rural communities and creating more high-quality tourism job opportunities.

The question motivating this essay is whether Maine could advance these public and private goals by introducing the United States' first ecotourism quality label.

Not just here, but in economically advanced nations from Norway to New Zealand, regional development strategists are promoting nature-based tourism as a way to revitalize their lagging rural economies. Most are trying to develop quality tourist attractions to compete for high-income travelers. Clearly, this is a competitive game, but in a market with great growth potential. A few nations, such as Australia and Sweden, are attempting to strengthen their competitive positions by creating voluntary ecotourism accreditation programs, backed by aggressive promotion campaigns. They are convinced that world-class nature tourism experiences, honoring the principle of environmental stewardship, are a "win-win-win" formula: building profitable tourism businesses while also contributing to thriving host communities and sustainable natural resource management.

This essay takes a close look at Sweden's *Nature's Best* initiative, offering food for thought about potential "win-win-win" opportunities here in Maine.

OVERVIEW: WHY DEVELOP AN ECOTOURISM QUALITY LABEL?

What is ecotourism?

Twelve years ago, the International Ecotourism Society (IES) offered a general definition of ecotourism: "Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that contributes to the conservation of natural habitats and sustains the well-being of local people" (cited in EF 2002: 4).

The Swedish Ecotourism Association's 50 private, public, and non-profit partners elaborate the broad IES definition into six core principles (Hellmark 2004a: 78):

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- Respect the limitations of the destination—minimize negative impacts on nature and culture;
- Support the local economy;
- Make all the company's operations environmentally sustainable;
- Contribute actively to conservation;
- Promote the joy of discovery, knowledge and respect;
- [Stress] quality and safety in every aspect of the tourist activity.

Why accredit and promote ecotourism?

From Costa Rica to Australia, ecotourism labeling seeks to further two closely linked goals. The first is to strengthen nature-based tourism's market attraction by offering certified, top-quality tourism products: securing greater *value added* from natural attractions, generating better job opportunities, and injecting more tourist spending into host communities, while avoiding the social costs of mass tourism. The second goal is to protect and enhance healthy ecosystems—tourism's *natural capital assets*. There is a growing body of evidence to support the claim that rigorously accredited, attractively labeled, and effectively marketed outdoor recreation is an economic and environmental "win-win" (Honey 2002). In the words of Staffan Widstrand, of the Swedish Ecotourism Association, ecotourism is "a way to give conservation of nature and culture an economic value they otherwise would not have" (Hellmark 2004a: 75, author's translation). Note Widstrand's emphasis on the complementarity between nature and culture in ecotourism.

In environmental terms, the process of accreditation strengthens tour operators' incentive to practice exceptional environmental stewardship. At a minimum, natural attractions receive protection from overuse and degradation. Accredited operators also covenant to minimize waste and conserve energy. At best, participating tour operators also invest in local, national or global nature conservation and restoration efforts.

The economic payoffs accrue to participating tour operators, host communities, and even the nation (or state, or province). At the firm level, accredited operators win favorable attention from individual tourists, tour organizers, and travel agents. The ecotourism label certifies both their environmental stewardship and the high quality of their products. These businesses, most very small, benefit from economies of scale in marketing, through national and international promotion of the ecotourism brand. This marketing advantage should encourage more operators to upgrade their own service quality and environmental "friendliness." Tourist-dependent communities benefit from the spin-off demand for local dining, lodging, crafts, entertainment, and other products and services. At an even larger scale, "activities that give an unforgettable impression of nature...can be developed into 'spear-head products' that act like unique magnets to draw tourists' interest to Sweden as a travel destination" (Nygqvist 2002). As the Swedish Ecotourism Association put it, "Ecotourism experiences are cutting-edge products that can be used in the marketing of both regions and whole countries" (EF 2002: 4).

***Food for Thought:** Ecotourism's economic payoff is likely to be greatest for regions that get to market first with a recognized quality brand. Sweden was able to get a jump on the rest of Europe when it launched Nature's Best in 2002. Maine faces a similar opportunity in the U.S. Northeast.*

Ecotourism's economic-environmental win-win potential makes it especially attractive for distressed rural regions, whose traditional resource-based and manufacturing industries are stagnant or in decline. This includes Maine's "rim counties," from Oxford in the west to Washington, downeast. They have much in common with Sweden's archipelagoes and its interior and northern regions.

***Food for Thought:** Certified ecotourism is a niche market, but promoted effectively, the ecotourism brand enhances tourism's broader growth potential in distressed rural regions.*

Why consider Nature's Best a model? Principles and Process

Nature's Best (NB) was launched in spring 2002, with just 12 approved tour operators and 25 tour products. Its history on the ground is too brief to support formal economic benefit-cost analysis. However, its rapid growth to 55 approved operators and more than 150 products by mid-2004, plus the steady flow of new fee-paying applicants, show that many tour businesses view accreditation as a winning strategy.

Sweden's private-public non-profit ecotourism partnership, with its incentive-based business recruitment, is quite compatible with the way we do things in Maine. Sweden's nature-based tourism—ranging from traditional hunting and fishing, to hiking, camping, sea kayaking, mountain biking, and cross-country skiing—also is much like Maine's. It has been largely an unorganized, underutilized, and underpromoted segment of the tourism economy. As in Maine, many back-country and coastal island recreationists are largely self-sufficient. They generate relatively little business for commercial outfitting, guiding and other services, and they inject relatively little money into local economies. The Swedish Ecotourism Association's founders sought to change that, giving a boost to tourism businesses by raising the market profile of best practice operators (Westin, Widstrand).

Following several years of preliminary discussions, 20 diverse stakeholders began to hammer out principles and practices in a four-day workshop in the fall of 2001. This process continued with 50 participants until the *Nature's Best* launch in February 2002. This broadly representative gathering included, among others, tourism trade associations, individual tour operators and travel businesses, environmentalists, regional tourism boards, special interest organizations (e.g., hunters and sport fishers, the snowmobile federation, animal rights advocates, forest owners, farmers), and several state agencies. Naturally, disagreements had to be resolved. But there was consensus on core issues. Accreditation must be voluntary, not regulatory. Commercial success required a quality label and promotional effort to make *Nature's Best* truly distinctive to travel agents and tourists. And certifying *total product quality*

would be more compelling to discriminating tourists than a mere environmentally friendly label.

Food for Thought: *To be economically successful, an ecotourism brand must guarantee discriminating clients a quality tourism experience exceeding market norms. It must stress excellence in the particular tour features customers care most about—and are willing to pay for. By definition, it must also guarantee environmental stewardship that exceeds minimum regulatory standards, though high environmental standards are not enough to create a profitable market niche. Voluntary participation requires a bottom-line payoff.*

Nature's Best was invented “bottom-up,” not initiated or directed by government agencies. But that does not imply a “hands-off” government attitude. The Swedish Tourist Authority was eager to “stimulate an increased environmental labeling of tourist businesses” (Lagerkvist et al. 2003: 2). And the Swedish Board of Agriculture, plus several county councils, contributed critical start-up funding. Nonetheless, government was a facilitator, not a director. Today, NB's three-member Steering Group is composed of Sweden's largest tourism trade association (The Travel and Tourism Council), its largest environmental organization (The Society for Nature Conservation), and the Ecotourism Association. There is no governmental representative. This organizational model seems compatible with Mainers' views of government.

Food for Thought: *Tourism operators are more likely to buy into an ecotourism initiative that they view as their own, and not a government creation. At the same time, government facilitation and start-up funding can be crucial in overcoming inertia.*

ORGANIZATION BUILDING: PATIENTLY INVENTING NATURE'S BEST

I have sketched how *Nature's Best* came to be. The Swedish chapter of the World Wide Fund for Nature

(WWF), assisted by the national Environmental Protection Agency, launched multiparty discussions in the early 1990s. Stakeholders' time commitments were entirely voluntary. In 1996, with WWF funds running out, participants framed "Ten Commandments" of ecotourism and formed the Swedish Ecotourism Association (Hellmark 2004).

Over the next four years, progress was slow. The lack of funds for background studies and organizing was a key constraint. In 2000, two rural counties, already active in tourism promotion, allocated \$25,000 for a feasibility study. The study predicted a big economic payoff to rural tourism regions, as well as participating tour operators, if Sweden could launch Europe's first ecotourism brand. It optimistically forecast that accreditation could be up-and-running within a year (Widstrand).

Sweden's Board of Agriculture channeled \$300,000 of European Union (EU) rural development funds to the design process. (EU nations suffer from chronic regional economic disparities similar to our "Two Maines" problem. The EU's "structural measures" promote economic transition in such regions, with a major emphasis on tourism.)

Food for Thought: *Ecotourism should be seen as more than a minor niche market—it is part of a rural revitalization strategy. The public interest in developing sustainable tourism for distressed rural regions justifies government financial support. Sweden's county and national agencies are impressed by how cost-effectively Nature's Best has used what amounts to a very small infusion of public funds (Widstrand).*

Stakeholders agreed that the decisive moment had arrived. In the fall of 2001, representatives of 20 stakeholder groups gathered at a remote Lapland ecoresort for four days of "total immersion" negotiations. Using a consensus decisionmaking process, they reached agreement on the basics of accreditation standards and application procedures. There was a special emphasis on testing proposed measures with the stakeholders most likely to find them unacceptable. For example,

before the Lapland gathering, nature conservation and animal rights representatives were critical toward ecotourism labeling for hunting and fishing. Feasting on locally caught ptarmigan, moose, and arctic char, they came to recognize and accept the integral place of hunting and fishing in traditional Sami (Lappish) culture and in Lapland tourism (Widstrand).

A second example of conflict resolution centers on the use of snowmobiles (and other motorized vehicles). It was agreed that snowmobile rental and safari businesses would not meet basic nature conservation and environmental protection standards for certification. (For the past decade, there has been a high-profile debate in Sweden about the pollution, noise, and habitat disruption caused by the nation's 240,000 snowmobilers [Vail and Heldt 2004].) However, after extensive give and take, the wilderness and "quiet adventure" advocates accepted the use of snowmobiles for transfers during a tour. Thus, a certified ice fishing outfitter would be able to ferry clients and gear to remote lakes by snowmobile, provided they avoid wildlife corridors, drive in groups with a guide, and use four stroke machines.

Negotiations then shifted to Stockholm, where 50 parties hammered out the details. Resolution of differences was enhanced by the mutual respect and trust built-up over several years of dialogue. Skillful professional facilitation and a clever blending of work, play—and food—at the Lapland gathering also helped. In spring 2002, *Nature's Best* was ready for launch with its first 25 certified nature tour activities.

Food for Thought: *In designing an ecotourism system, it appears critical that the broadest possible range of stakeholder groups be invited to the table early on. Especially for groups with a history of disagreements, personal interaction around a mix of substantive discussions and relaxed socializing helps break down mutual suspicion and build trust. This requires sophisticated event planning and facilitation.*

SETTING STANDARDS FOR A QUALITY LABEL

The discussions summarized above led to several core decisions regarding accreditation standards.

First, there should be just one level of certification and it should apply only to nature-based tour products. These choices followed a close look at Australia's Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP), which includes three levels of accreditation (nature tour, ecotour, and advanced ecotour) (Chester and Crabtree 2002). These were deemed too complicated to administer and likely to send a confusing message to tourists and travel agents. With *Nature's Best*, an applicant either succeeds or fails in meeting the standards. However, a big effort (described below) is made to help applicants make the grade. Australia's accreditation of lodging facilities and tour destinations was thought to dilute the notion of ecotourism. *Nature's Best* applicants do, however, receive bonus credit for encouraging clients to patronize environmentally friendly establishments, such as *Swan*-marked hotels and farm bed-and-breakfasts (Widstrand).

Second, flexibility is built into the standards. Although a successful applicant must meet 61 "basic demands" under the headings set out below, they can choose how best to fulfill a subset of bonus criteria. In addition, some standards are tailored to specific activities, for instance hunting, dog sledding, and sea kayaking (EF 2002: appendixes).

Food for Thought: *To be manageable—and credible in the marketplace—core standards should be met by all certified tour operations. However, there should be some flexibility, reflecting key differences among activities and rewarding outstanding practices.*

Third, the *NB* label is awarded to specific tour products, not to entire businesses. For example, an outfitter who offers winter cross-country ski tours and summer mountain bike tours might be accredited for one but not the other.

Food for Thought: *Certification standards can be designed to apply to a tourist destination, a tourism business, or a specific tour product. After considering each approach, Nature's Best opted for specific products as the most readily audited, branded, and marketed (Lagerkvist et al. 2003: 13).*

Finally, the standards stress high quality in every aspect of an accredited tour. This includes a twin emphasis on culture: respecting local culture and promoting local cultural traditions. Interpretation is a central aspect of all ecotourism, and Swedish operators earn bonus points for steering tourists to local cultural and heritage attractions.

To illustrate the breadth of the standards, I present one basic criterion and bonus criterion under each of six major headings. (The following text is taken literally or paraphrased from EF 2002.)

1. Respect the limitations of the destination

Basic: An analysis of the destination's carrying capacity is made in writing and filed with the application.

Bonus: Codes of conduct and clear distance limits are used for determining how closely various wildlife species may be observed.

2. Support the local economy

Basic: As many as possible of the products and services used on the tour are produced and purchased locally (an estimate is submitted in writing).

Bonus: The percentage of personnel and subcontracting costs paid to local individuals and businesses exceeds 50%.

3. Make all the firm's operations environmentally sustainable

Basic: When buying paper, chemicals, food or office supplies, the best available eco-labeled choices are made.

Bonus: The operator's permanent staff have undergone environmental training and are familiar with the company's environmental plan.

4. Contribute actively to conservation

Basic: The firm contributes to some nature or cultural conservation program or organization.

Bonus: The firm gives conservation organizations free promotional space in its marketing materials.

5. Promote the joy of discovery, knowledge and respect

Basic: The tour operator emphasizes every visitor's personal responsibility to treat local people with respect and to avoid environmental damage.

Bonus: Guides and interpreters are recruited among professional experts and local people.

6. Quality and safety in every aspect of the operation

Basic: Routines and backup plans exist for extraordinary problem situations.

Bonus: Customers are asked to fill in a post-trip questionnaire, including questions about the operator's environmental practices and attention to quality. Questionnaires are available for a quality audit.

Food for Thought: *The Swedish standards are comprehensive. Taken together, they are also quite demanding. Quality labeled tour products meet standards that "the market" can easily recognize as distinctly above industry norms.*

THE APPLICATION PROCESS AS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

The 110 tour operators who have gone through the *Nature's Best* accreditation process and the 25

currently in the pipeline have learned about the program in various ways. *Nature's Best's* Web site, extensive mass media coverage, and word of mouth have each played a role. Perhaps most important, the Ecotourism Association recruits applicants through frequent presentations at trade shows and meetings of sectoral groups, such as fishing guides, and regional organizations, such as county tourism boards.

Briefly, application entails the following steps:

1. Prospective applicants purchase a start-up informational packet from the Ecotourism Association.
2. Potential applicants, in groups of 20-40, attend a three-day "basic course" on ecotourism philosophy, worldwide experience, and the Swedish approach.
3. Written applications are screened by a seven-person labeling committee. (The committee members have been trained to prepare for this role.) A tour operator may submit applications for one or more products. The application fee ranges from \$70-450, depending on the firm's annual sales.
4. Applicants who pass the preliminary screening receive a site visit by a pair of "quality assessors." They are drawn from a pool of 10 private consultants who are qualified environmental auditors and have been trained in ecotourism assessment.
5. The labeling committee reviews assessors' recommendations at semiannual meetings where it makes final decisions on awarding the *Nature's Best* label. (Another source of flexibility is the possibility of provisional approval for a tour product that falls short of a basic standard, with a deadline for its fulfillment.)

For both philosophical and marketing reasons, *Nature's Best* sets comprehensive standards and sets them high, but then helps applicants meet them. Although just over half of the first 110 applicants were accredited on their first application, it is telling that

almost all the others are upgrading their practices and plan to reapply (Widstrand).

The application process is strategically designed as a series of opportunities for tour operators to learn about and move toward best practices in all aspects of their businesses. The curriculum of the three-day basic course, for instance, goes well beyond actions needed to meet *NB*'s environmental and community standards. It includes "how to" sessions on management topics such as cost control in procurement, energy conservation, and effective Web page layout. The seminar format and ample time for socializing maximize the participants' opportunities for "beehiving"—sharing ideas with each other. Supplementing *NB*'s three-day course, some county tourist offices have added free consulting services to help their local tour operators reach *NB* standards.

At the written application stage, the labeling committee's screening includes detailed written feedback, suggesting ways to upgrade performance in areas of weakness. And the on-site quality assessors are as much advisors as auditors. Simply by picking up on tips for better business management, many tour operators have recouped the time and money costs of their applications (Barthold).

Food for Thought: *Swedish nature tour entrepreneurs typically are very talented in their craft. Yet few are highly trained business managers, with deep knowledge about best practices in finance, marketing, labor relations, or other aspects of business management. A well-designed ecotourism accreditation process offers applicants a series of opportunities for feedback on their current business practices and ideas for profitable new ones. Even unsuccessful applicants can often improve their bottom line performance (Barthold, Widstrand).*

MONITORING AND ENFORCEMENT

The system's operation relies upon the rigorous accreditation process, trust, and customer feedback. There is no regular audit of accredited tour products.

Operators of the 150 current *Nature's Best* tours are trusted to uphold the standards they have previously met. In the end, tour participants are the quality auditors. Operators are required to give them an evaluative questionnaire at the end of the tour, including Ecotourism Association contact information, in case they want to communicate complaints—or praise. Operators must keep the surveys on file for inspection.

In principle, an operation can lose accreditation if it fails to "meet the criteria at an audit or assessment" or if it "consciously uses the *NB* label in a suspicious or fraudulent way" (EF 2002: 8). This wording suggests more aggressive surveillance than the Ecotourism Association can—or wishes to—mount. To date, half a dozen complaints have been filed. One outfitter has lost certification for a wildlife safari operation, following local complaints about its shoddy business practices. Two others are under investigation by the Ecotourism Association's administrator, who is working with them to improve the practices in question (Widstrand).

This rather loose approach to monitoring and enforcement has both practical and philosophical motivations. Realistically, the Ecotourism Association lacks the staff resources to pursue more intrusive inspections and audits. But there is also a belief that a tour operator's commitment to *Nature's Best* principles can be accurately gauged during the multistep application process. In the last analysis, their reputations are at stake. In the small world of Sweden's 3,500 nature tourism businesses, it is likely that someone will eventually blow the whistle on an accredited operation that violates core ecotourism standards. And the tourists who go out of their way to find certified nature tours will not hesitate to complain if they fall seriously short.

Food for Thought: *Where there is a lack of legitimacy and resources for intrusive inspections and audits of tours, day-to-day quality control must rely on the participants' ethical commitments and incentives. Systematic customer feedback mechanisms play a key role in discouraging backsliding.*

PROMOTING THE BRAND AND SECURING ECONOMIC PAYOFFS

From the tour operator's viewpoint, the ultimate test of *Nature's Best* accreditation is whether it attracts high-spending customers and increases the firm's revenues more than its costs. Costs include the application fee, implementation of upgrades to meet standards, and an annual fee that ranges from U.S. \$333-2,666, depending on the firm's turnover. From a community, regional, or national perspective, economic success means that the ecotourism brand boosts tourist numbers and spending. At base, success hinges on effective marketing of the *Nature's Best* brand, both by the accredited tour operators and by the Ecotourism Association.

Given its limited promotional budget, the Ecotourism Association's has followed a two-prong first-stage marketing strategy. The first has been to generate a great deal of free publicity, creating a public profile in the Swedish and, to a lesser degree, international mass media. The second tactic has been to develop a state-of-the-art Web site promoting the *Nature's Best* initiative and highlighting every accredited tour product.

The media campaign stresses Sweden's vanguard role as the first European nation with a fully accredited nature tourism trademark. Media coverage has highlighted Sweden's diverse and outstanding natural attractions to viewers and readers at home and in other European Union countries. A sample of low cost publicity successes includes:

- Frequent invitations to participate on television and radio talk shows;
- Feature stories in broad distribution publications of environmental organizations, the national rail system, the consumer cooperative movement, and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency; and
- Recruiting the Swedish Crown Princess to award diplomas to newly approved tour operators, turning the award ceremonies into media events.

One executive of an outdoor adventure firm credits this exposure for the decision of more travel agents to include his firm's offerings in their brochures and client recommendations (Westin).

Since travel agents and tourists increasingly search the Internet for information, a top *NB* priority has been to develop a world-class Web site. The *Nature's Best* site, a U.S. \$130,000 investment, went up in spring 2004. (See www.naturesbasta.se)

***Food for Thought:** Effective marketing is at the heart of successful ecotourism development, and maximizing the payoff to a tight promotional budget is at the heart of marketing strategy. Natures Best's main tactics, maximizing free media publicity and building a world-class Web site, appear to be a smart start-up strategy.²*

With less than two years' experience on the ground, there are no cost and revenue data to estimate *NB*'s economic payoff to participating tour operators or to the tourism-dependent counties that have helped bankroll the initiative. (Accredited operations must make business data available for analysis—a project I hope to undertake in the near future.) Entrepreneurs invest in a new venture based on its expected payoff, and from this perspective, there are several promising indicators. The three-day basic course continues to attract 20-40 participants, roughly 25 new tour products are in the application pipeline, and an even larger number of operators are preparing to apply or reapply (Widstrand).

A WORK IN PROGRESS: CHALLENGES FACING NATURE'S BEST

Just three years ago, 50 stakeholders joined to create *Nature's Best* and 12 pioneering tour businesses were approved to display the *NB* logo. It is less than a year since *NB*'s new Web site was launched. Obviously, *Nature's Best* remains a work in progress, one that faces several challenges. One is budgetary; a second is demonstrating ecotourism's profitability; and a third is

resolving emerging differences within the organization. An inescapable fourth challenge, inherent in international tourism, stems from the energy-intensity and greenhouse gas emissions associated with long distance travel to natural attractions.

The Swedish Ecotourism Association's specific financial challenge involves taking the marketing strategy beyond free media publicity and an excellent Web site. It needs a stable funding base for commercial advertising (Barthold, Widstrand). More generally, *NB's* challenge is to achieve greater financial self-reliance, reducing the current dependence on subsidies from state agencies and counties for two-thirds of its budget. (Public support is currently U.S. \$265,000 per year [Widstrand].) The initial goal was to wean *Nature's Best* from government funding by 2005. The revised target year is 2008. In my view, there is a strong case for ongoing public support, even if not at the current level. In Sweden, as in Maine, strengthening nature-based tourism by building demand for high-end tour products is a "public good." It enhances rural economic vitality.

Application and membership fees currently finance just one-third of *NB's* budget. As the number of branded products expands, the amount of the budget derived from fees will increase. However, *NB's* big push is to attract corporate sponsors that have reputations for environmental commitment. Konsum, the Swedish consumer cooperative movement, is already onboard, and negotiations are underway with the state rail line, a hotel chain, a bank, a forestry corporation, and an insurance company.

Food for Thought: *It is an open question whether a non-governmental, non-profit, ecotourism initiative can—or should—become financially self-sufficient. To the extent that ecotourism generates "beneficial externalities" in the form of nature conservation and rural economic development, it warrants continued public support. At a minimum, several years of public and/or corporate underwriting are required for an ecotourism initiative to reach financial maturity.*

Ecotourism's economic payoff remains largely hypothetical. Will accredited tour operators benefit from significantly increased demand and enjoy higher profit margins? Will counties that have invested in *Nature's Best* receive significantly more tourists and a boost in their overall lodging, dining, and retail sales? Will *NB's* favorable publicity noticeably raise Sweden's share of the European nature tourism market? The answers to these questions are not yet clear, and marketing the *Nature's Best* brand remains a major challenge.

Two Swedish tourism economists are skeptical. One points to Europe's generally limited growth potential for outdoor adventure, rooted in two trends: an aging population and a broad downward trend in human- and animal-powered recreation activities that could qualify as ecotourism. The other analyst doubts that accredited operators can, in fact, offer the exceptional quality that will truly set them apart in travel agents' and tourists' eyes. Both warn that if *Nature's Best* does prove to be a marketing success, it may breed second-generation problems, such as having so many certified tour products that the *NB* brand loses its potency; or so much tourist pressure on "hot spot" attractions that environmental degradation worsens, in spite of individual tour operators' exemplary practices (Hellmark 2004b, Fredman).

Finally, *NB's* accreditation standards are currently under revision, following a three-year trial period. Back in 2001-02, months of informal discussions, four days of intensive bargaining and then formal stakeholder negotiations went into crafting *NB's* 61 basic criteria and 14 bonus criteria. This time around, significant fissures pose a new test of *NB's* consensus-building capacity. Some industry representatives, for instance, propose a second tier of accreditation, with less rigorous standards. The goal is to encourage participation by more tour businesses (Westin). In contrast, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SNF) seeks tougher standards. Among the issues SNF will probably raise this time around are making the present bonus criteria mandatory, replacing "soft" criteria (no measurable result) by quantitative standards, and excluding all motorized technologies that

pollute the environment and potentially disrupt wildlife habitat (Eiderström, Widstrand).

***Food for Thought:** It is a never-ending challenge to maintain broad support for an ecotourism labeling system, given that participation by both sponsoring organizations and tour operators is voluntary. Even when a program is up and running, there is a danger that compromise and consensus will be undermined, whether by environmental idealists or business-oriented pragmatists.*

BRINGING ECOTOURISM HOME TO MAINE

The concept of ecotourism quality labeling, and Sweden's experience in designing and launching *Nature's Best*, have been discussed by the Maine Tourism Commission's Natural Resources Committee and by participants in the geotourism workshop at the 2004 Gulf of Maine Summit. My unscientific (and perhaps biased) interpretation is that most people who have digested the food for thought presented in this essay find the idea of a Maine (or Gulf of Maine) ecotourism quality label appealing.

However, they are quick to add that we have quite a way to go. Education has barely begun around basic issues, such as ecotourism's potential economic, community and environmental benefits, standard setting, the application process, choice of brand image, marketing strategy, government roles, and start-up funding sources. No group of lead organizations has stepped forward to declare their commitment to an ecotourism quality label. And a broad stakeholder dialogue seems to be some way off. (Several discussants believe that market research demonstrating a quality label's "bottom line" payoff is the key to mobilizing interest among tour operators.)

None of these facts is discouraging: a core lesson from the *Nature's Best* experience is that it takes several years to progress from germination of the ecotourism seed to blossoming of the plant. Indeed, there are many reasons to be optimistic. To cite just three:

- With some fine tuning, the Maine Sea Kayak Guides' (MASKGI) commitment to cultural and natural interpretation and their "leave no trace" ethic might serve as a prototype for quality labeling. The Maine Sea Kayak Guides' efforts involve important partnerships with the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, the Maine Island Trail Association, and the Bureau of Parks and Lands.
- Enthusiasm for quality labeling led 2004 Gulf of Maine Summit participants to create a voluntary steering group, which will explore the very Swedish idea of holding a 4-5 day planning retreat.
- Perhaps most important, the Maine Governor's Office, the Office of Tourism, the University of Maine System, and the regional tourism offices all show a new awareness of how crucial nature-based tourism—and especially world-class tourism products—are for rural Maine's economic future.

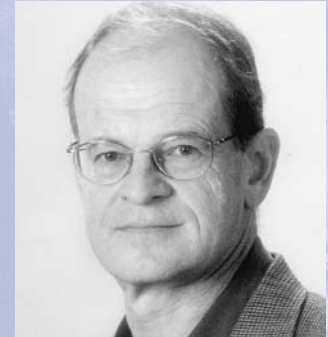
A Maine ecotourism quality label may not be an idea whose time has come—yet. But I am convinced it is coming. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the October 2004 Gulf of Maine Summit's "Geotourism Workshop" in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Bowdoin College's Coastal Studies Center and Sweden's Axel Wenner-Gren Foundation provided financial in-kind assistance. Special thanks to Swedish "key informants": Fredrik Barthold, The Swedish Travel and Tourism Council; Eva Eiderström, The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation; Peter Fredman, ETOUR; Gösta Westin, Äventyrsresor; and Staffan Widsrand, The Swedish Ecotourism Society.
2. In Maine, Headwaters Writing and Design is developing a Web site, *Natural Choices*, that would perform similar educational and marketing functions for Maine's "environmentally friendly" nature tour operators, land trusts, and other non-profit organizations. Although formal third-party accreditation is not involved, the incentive to be listed on the *Natural Choices* site could be a catalyst for developing a Maine branding process.

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KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

- Barthold, Fredrik, Swedish Travel and Tourism Council, Stockholm.
- Eiderström, Eva, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, Göteborg.
- Fredman, Peter, ETOUR (EU financed tourism research center), Östersund.
- Westin, Gösta, Äventyrsresor (certified sea kayak outfitter), Stockholm.
- Widstrand, Staffan, Swedish Ecotourism Association, Järfälla.