

Lessons from the Road



Case #6: Visitor Experience & Services



"Out of car" experiences are one key to providing a positive visitor experience.

The visitor experience of a place involves both the tangible and the intangible, which together meet the needs and expectations of travelers. A good scenic byway accommodates these needs and interests to create a rewarding experience.

The Intangible

Byway planners want to share their love and respect for their region. They want visitors to discover what's special and to take that memory home. What are the special or unique places to be shared?

Is the goal an appreciation of scenic and natural qualities, or culture and history? Or some other combination?

Imagine a tour over several days that would provide a wide-ranging, sensory experience. Think about the places visitors

should go, the people they could meet. How will you provide that experience? How will you enhance the experience?

The Tangible

Is the byway open and ready for business? What do visitors need and desire? What intrudes on the visitor experience, and how can those intrusions be handled?

This case study draws on the experiences of five byway projects to share ideas about tangible and intangible aspects of visitor experience planning.

About Lessons from the Road

This case study features lessons learned by scenic byway advocates across the country that are applicable to many scenic byway initiatives.

Scenic byways are public roads with special scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, and/or natural qualities that have been recognized as such through legislation or some other official declaration.

Nomination guidelines for National Scenic Byway designation require a series of planning and management elements. Some byway efforts lead to nomination, and possibly national designation; the rest choose other paths for implementation. These case studies show how various byway managers address planning and management issues in distinctive ways.

Each case study in this series concludes with a resource list of helpful publications and details on how to contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse.

Good luck with your byway.

The Series

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Four Steps Toward a Positive Visitor Experience

Throughout the following steps it is essential to remember that good visitor experience is linked not only to the quality of byway services, facilities, and accommodations, but also to the quality of what visitors come to see: scenery, history, nature, and culture.

1. Build a Local Framework

Assemble an interdisciplinary team made up of those who can develop the plan and those who can implement the plan. A variety of specialists may be needed to assist the team.

Whenever possible, use statements of byway purpose, intrinsic qualities, and primary interpretive themes that already have been prepared for the **C o r r i d o r** Management Plan. These form the foundation upon which the visitor experience plan and implementation strategies are built.

Hold community workshops to consider changes in the community that

might accompany growing numbers of visitors. Through facilitated discussions, identify specific concerns and generate a wide range of potential solutions.

Right from the start, it is important to recognize the value of these specific concerns and ideas. By listening carefully and using what you hear, two things will happen. First, you will create a better byway community and, second, you will manage byway services and facilities with the priorities of both visitors and residents in mind.

2. Analyze Resources & Uses

Analyze corridor resources and how visitors and residents use them. Create and use maps to involve people who live in the corridor, and help them understand the relationship between resources, uses, and the quality of the visitor's experience.

Based on interpretive themes, brainstorm about the potential experiences to be shared, and the memories that visitors might take with them. Identify intrusions. Identify new facilities needed to accommodate more visitors.

3. Make Recommendations

One way to develop a quality visitor experience is through "Experience Zones." Like the fabric squares that combine to form a beautiful quilt, these areas overlay the byway corridor map to show a pattern of varied activities and management, both current and desired. A zone might describe big changes, or continuation of the status quo.

4. Monitor & Act

Develop a monitoring plan to track changing conditions. Identify and select critical areas to monitor for visitor experience quality. Be prepared to take management actions when monitoring indicates visitor experience or resource conditions fall below standards.



The Coal Heritage Trail takes in numerous sites that were part of the region's working heritage, such as the Itmann

Visitor Plans at Work

“Experience Zones”

On the Coal Heritage Trail

Along the Coal Heritage Trail, a 128-mile industrial heritage route in southern West Virginia, the visitor will first tour a coal mine, then learn about the impact of rail-roading, visit a company store, get insights into local political history, visit historic coal mining communities, and finally tour a coal baron’s community. Each of these Experience Zones has proposed activities and management actions.

The Coal Heritage Trail showcases exhibition coal mines at each end and company towns with historic structures and working coal mines between.

Involving the Visitor Experience Team

A dedicated visitor experience team should play a major role in planning and implementation. Here are some ways the team can help develop the visitor experience plan:

- Reach out to residents, business owners, and local government;
- Encourage small successes through early implementation projects;
- Organize “adopt-a-byway” programs;
- Identify existing and new opportunities to enhance visitor experiences (See page 6);
- Identify intrusions to the visitor experience and their solutions.

Monitoring on the Norbeck Byway

The Peter Norbeck Scenic Byway—a 70-mile scenic and recreational loop that crosses the heart of the Black Hills in southwestern South Dakota—formed a Monitoring Committee (including public members) to review the plan and evaluate site conditions twice a year. At least every five years, the committee will survey user satisfaction and report on the condition of specific resources. The goal is to protect and enhance resources that are essential to the visitor experience.

Other Examples

Check “Lessons Learned” on page 5 to see how these byways served their visitors:

- San Juan Skyway (southwestern



The Coal Heritage Trail showcases exhibition coal mines at each end.

Colorado), a 236-mile mountainous loop through the San Juan National Forest, features historic towns, diverse alpine life zones, and intense natural beauty.

- Pyramid Lake Scenic Byway (western Nevada), a 50-mile lakefront route completely within the Paiute Indian Reservation, focuses on cross-cultural understanding of values and sustainable interaction with the Lake.
- The Seaway Trail (northern New York), a 454-mile cultural route crossing 10 counties along the Great Lakes coastline, offers insight into the lifestyles of those who are intimately connected to the land and the water.

Getting to Visitor Satisfaction

Visitor satisfaction depends upon four elements: 1) adequate and realistic trip planning; 2) accurate expectations; 3) the experience itself; and 4) memories of the trip. Meeting the needs and expectations of travelers is key to their satisfaction.

Establish Expectations

If visitors to the Coal Heritage Trail expect a refined scenic route with fancy visitor facilities, they may be disappointed and not return. But if they expect an industrial coal-producing region with a warm welcome and proud traditions, visitors will likely enjoy themselves and recommend the trip to friends.

Byway planners and managers can directly and positively affect the visitor experience. Here are a few ideas:

- Make it easy for prospective visitors to

learn about your destination and regional opportunities. Offer up-to-date and truthful descriptions of what visitors can expect to see and do. Don't market promises you can't keep.

- Provide hospitality training in communities along the byway so cashiers and front desk staff are well-informed and helpful.
- Put yourself in a first-time visitor's shoes. Listen to current visitors and their suggestions. What is making the trip a success? What's missing, and what's wrong?

Basic Needs of Visitors

Are you having trouble figuring out basic visitor needs? Try solving the question with a game; there's no law against having fun with a Corridor Management Plan.

At a public workshop, set up a role play using the list of visitor groups you expect (or hope) to attract, such as families with young children, singles, retirees, tour groups, bicyclists, and non-English-speaking visitors. Also designate a police chief, a hotel operator, a restaurateur, a service station owner, and any other byway service managers you have or may need. After giving the players five minutes to get into character, have a moderator walk them through a special weekend (or even a whole season). Along the way, "visitors" and "managers" should interrupt with questions, complaints, surprises, observations, and compliments. Have a person on the sidelines to write down how the script unfolds.



Don't keep your visitors confined to their cars.

Lessons Learned

- ✓ Make partnerships a major aspect of your Corridor Management Plan and its implementation. The San Juan Skyway has benefited from a variety of strong private interests that have assisted in constructing scenic turnouts, visitor centers, entry stations, wayside exhibits, a rails-to-trails project, and identification and stabilization of historic structures.
- ✓ Encourage multi-day trips. Visitors need basic accommodations and services such as food, gas, lodging, comfort stations, and welcome centers along the corridor. To achieve the broader goals of tourism and economic development, however, you must give visitors reasons to stay a second or third day, and to return.
- ✓ Provide off-the-byway outdoor recreational opportunities, which give people a chance to explore the region and communities, as well as reasons to stay longer. The San Juan Skyway provides outdoor adventure at every turn, from biking to hunting, paddling, rock climbing and llama trekking. Four-wheel-drive vehicles are allowed to use old mining roads. Outfitters, guide services and rental equipment in every town help visitors take advantage of these opportunities.
- ✓ Train and employ residents as tour guides and interpreters. Residents have lived the stories and can tell them in an engaging, memorable way. Along the Coal Heritage Trail, a former miner leads visitors through the Exhibition Coal Mine. He explains not only mining technology, but also the experiences of friends and family. Visitors take home strong impressions of life in the corridor, as memorable and colorful as their photographs.
- ✓ Write a Corridor Management Plan for action. It documents resource conditions and should guide development, but it must also specify needs, responsibilities, and initial priorities. The Peter Norbeck Scenic Byway plan lists intrusions and recommended enhancements for every mile of the Byway.
- ✓ Invite visitor comments and listen to them. The Seaway Trail, Inc., ran a pilot “one-on-one communication” project for three years called the “Road Scholar Program.” They mailed a report card kit with incentives so visitors could grade sites, events, and facilities. Responses indicated that families with a thirst for heritage information were touring. The annual “Journey” magazine, guidebooks, and construction of a new Discovery Center will respond to these visitors’ needs.
- ✓ Invite visitors to join residents in celebrating the local culture. Along the Coal Heritage Trail, annual homecoming picnics allow residents to share their heritage, memories, music, and dance, and to renew old friendships. The Pyramid Lake Byway promotes cross-cultural understanding to meet the Paiute tribe’s goals of strengthening their culture, which is dependent upon a restoration of the Lake’s fishery and respect for its life force.

Enhancements for Visitors

Following is a menu of possible enhancements for visitors, to help ensure the quality of their experience, and to bring them back again:

- accessible visitor centers and information kiosks along the route
- affordable lodging, eateries, and service stations
- automobile tour cassette tapes
- building facade improvements
- bicycle and pedestrian paths
- bicycle racks
- convenient public transit with links to other modes of travel
- entry portals or orientation kiosks at end points
- effective law enforcement
- fairs, festivals, and heritage tours
- friendly tour guides and shopkeepers
- guidebooks for walkers, cyclists, boaters, as well as drivers
- improved roadways and bridges
- knowledgeable staff at front desks and check-outs
- picnic and rest area shelters
- recreational opportunities and rental outlets for gear
- scenic turnouts, overlooks, and wayside exhibits
- screening of intrusions
- traffic calming street and intersection designs
- well-designed and situated parking areas
- well-managed system of signs for directions, safety, education, and commerce

Additional Resources

Visitor Experience and Resource Protection and National Park Service Planning (brochure), National Park Service, Denver, 1997.

Tourism Planning: Basics, Concepts, Cases, 3rd edition, Clare A. Gunn. 1994, Taylor & Francis, Washington, DC.

Rural Tourism Handbook: Selected Case Studies and Development Guide, US Travel and Tourism Administration, US Dept. of Commerce, Washington, DC.

Contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse for these and other resources (see below).

About this Series

The National Scenic Byways Program of the Federal Highway Administration and the Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service collaborated to research, write, and produce **Lessons from the Road**. The series was written in 1998.

For information on resources mentioned in this series, contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse: 1-800-4-BYWAYS (1-800-429-9297), press 2, or visit our website at www.byways.org.

The Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program works beyond national

park boundaries to bring conservation assistance to communities, serving as a catalyst for tangible results.

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