

THE CONSERVATION FUND

How to Start a Sustainable Tourism Program

NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM BROADCAST SERIES



case study **Agritourism in Madison County, North Carolina**

Madison County is located in the Appalachian Mountains region of western North Carolina, about 30 miles north of the city of Asheville. The three small towns of Mars Hill, Marshall and Hot Springs make up the County. With 973 farms, agriculture is still an economic driver in the County, and tobacco remains the major cash crop. The Appalachian communities of western North Carolina have a rich Cherokee and Scotch-Irish heritage of crafts that complements their agricultural industries. Pottery, woodworking, weaving, and furniture making have been part of the regional culture for centuries. In the face of a declining tobacco market and uncertain job prospects in manufacturing, community leaders recognized a need to diversify the local economy. Agritourism was a natural fit.

“Many counties in the Eastern and Piedmont parts of the state are asking how they can emulate the same energy that Madison County possesses.”

~ Carol Kline, North Carolina State Tourism Extension

Photo above: Madison Celebrates Art! Festival in Marshall, NC

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2003, county leaders formed the Madison County Partnership, made up of several key stakeholders and funded by The Duke Endowment Program for the Rural Carolinas. The Partnership's goals were to assist the local farms in identifying alternative means of income generation, to create community wealth, and to build capacity within the community. Led by the non-profit organization HandMade in America, the Partnership has helped Madison County producers create and market successful new tourism products. The process included intensive community involvement in visioning and planning, leadership capacity building, and marketing to help connect producers to the market.

HandMade in America's economic development work is governed by several key principles. The process is inclusive: everyone is welcome to participate from the beginning to end. There is substantial emphasis on sustainable community development using local resources. The community and stakeholders define

Goals

- **Develop agritourism and craft-based heritage tourism to stimulate economic growth in rural communities**
- **Diversify local economy**
- **Build capacity in marketing and product development**

PROJECT OVERVIEW

their own goals and needs, and this is the basis of activities and support. Finally, the organization focuses on creating long-term solutions with a 20-year plan so that communities can become financially self-sufficient.

There are many individual success stories of farmers and artists who have seen their income grow by more than the projected goals over the past 3 years – farmers selling their produce to the school system, at Tailgate Markets, at their farms, and artists selling at craft festivals and events, at their studios, and on the Web. Continuing promotion, both internally and outside the county, has helped produce the “buzz” about Madison County that has been so beneficial to the Partnership’s efforts. The quote from Carol Kline, North Carolina State Tourism Extension reflects this buzz: “News about the synergy and successes of Madison County is reaching far beyond Western North Carolina. Many counties in the Eastern and Piedmont parts of the state are asking how they can emulate the same energy that Madison County possesses.” Tourism statistics reflect the County’s success: in 2005, Madison County had the top increase in North Carolina in domestic traveler expenditures in the state, with a 16.6 percent increase over 2004 expenditures¹. By comparison, direct domestic traveler spending in North Carolina increased 7.3 percent in 2005.



Visitors pet sheep on a farm tour

KEY LESSONS

The Madison County Partnership imparts several key lessons that can enlighten other destinations. The project demonstrates the importance of partnership and the benefits derived from working together to accomplish much more than any single organization could do on its own. Just as important is creating a climate that recognizes and supports entrepreneurship, particularly in small communities. The Partnership helped nurture small and micro-businesses by developing and providing appropriate and innovative marketing assistance. Additionally, the Partnership built the community development strategy on existing assets: agriculture and the arts. Growing and promoting existing assets allowed farmers and craftspeople build on their strengths and see a rapid return on investment. The Partnership now plans expand its development strategy by adding a “green” business cluster.

Finally, the Partnership discovered a need for a greater variety of accommodations to support the tourism sector, as there are only 2 motels in the county. As a result, there are a growing number of bed and breakfasts, cabins, and campgrounds as well as one remodeled inn. These new accommodations will help prevent leakage and keep more tourism spending in the County. The County plans to next look at developing more restaurants, as there is still a lack of diversity in the County’s choices for dining.

¹Data from the study *The 2005 Economic Impact of Travel on North Carolina Counties*. This study was prepared for the North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development by the Travel Industry Association of America. To view the 2005 county-by-county numbers, visit <http://www.nccommerce.com/tourism/econ/countybycounty.asp> and click on one of the three files under “County level economic impact statistics.”

Success Factors

- Form strong partnerships
- Foster an entrepreneurial business environment
- Build on existing assets
- Develop supporting infrastructure

Stakeholder Engagement Phase

1. County leaders, at the instigation of The Duke Endowment potential funding, identified key local stakeholders and formed a strategic partnership with the goal of developing sustainable agritourism and cultural/heritage tourism. The Madison County Partnership consists of government and community leaders from Madison County, local farmers and craftspeople, HandMade in America, the Madison County Arts Council, the Madison County Cooperative Extension Service, Mars Hill College, and the Hot Springs Health Program.
2. The Partnership obtained a 3-year grant (2003-2006) from the Duke Endowment Program for the Rural Carolinas to fund operations and marketing. The grant is \$75,000 per year.
3. The Partnership held community meetings and led visioning exercises that addressed questions such as, “What do you want Madison County to look like in 10 years?”
4. The Partnership core planning team met monthly throughout 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006.



A community planning meeting

Assessment Phase

1. The Partnership surveyed local farmers to produce an inventory of all the farms in the county. The survey sought information such as the types of crops raised, the how much acreage each farm devoted to crops, and other farm needs such as marketing and product development assistance.
2. Using an existing mailing list managed by the Madison Arts Council, The Partnership mailed 800 surveys to local artists and craftspeople to create an inventory of people interested in promotion or joint marketing activity or events. The survey collected contact information and type of artistry or craft produced.

Planning Phase

1. The Partnership formulated objectives for the project:
 - o Increase income of participating individual farms by \$500 per year
 - o Increase income of participating individual crafts enterprises by \$500 per year
 - o Build the capacity of Madison County leadership to allow for growth
2. Using information obtained through the surveys and community meetings, the Partnership developed plans for Farm Tours, printed directories, seasonal retail guides, annual community festivals, Web site promoting both farmers and artists, and marketing workshops.

Implementation Phase

To meet its goals, the Madison County Partnership focused on three strategies of building leadership capacity, tourism product development, and marketing.

1. Leadership capacity building by:
 - o Helping place people on the community economic development committee, the Chamber of Commerce and the tourism development authority
 - o Building relationships with the county manager
 - o Helping place people on the advisory boards of the Madison County Cooperative Extension Services and the Madison County Arts Council
2. Assisted local farmers, craft people and artists with tourism product development such as:
 - o Farm tours with farm animal petting zoos, cheese making, and tastings
 - o “You-Pick” farm visits inviting tourists to pick crops such as berries and pumpkins
 - o Clay skeet shooting
 - o Cabins and Bed ‘n’ Breakfasts
 - o Rafting trips
 - o Horse-back riding
 - o Hand-crafted gift boxes containing locally produced soaps, oils, candles and jams
 - o Festivals like Madison Celebrates Arts Fest and the Burley Festival
3. Provided education and collective marketing strategies including:
 - o Engaging local artists and farmers to help develop project materials such as the MadisonFarms.org logo
 - o Using data collected from the farm inventory, the Partnership created www.MadisonFarms.org, an on-line presence for more than 90 farmers. The Web site features a farm directory, current events, and a destination guide.
 - o Using data collected from the crafts inventory, the Partnership created www.madisoncountyarts.com, a searchable directory of local artists and craftspeople.
 - o The Partnership produced brochures to advertise the agritourism tours in the County.
 - o The Partnership published the Very Small Business Directory of Madison County of farmers and craftspeople.
 - o HandMade in America organized the AgriTourism Speaker Series and Marketing 101 Workshops to educate small businesses on marketing and tourism.



A gift basket of handmade bath products

Results

- Strengthened community leadership
- Farm tours
- Arts festivals
- www.MadisonFarms.org
- www.MadisonCountyArts.com
- Numerous new tourism products

KEY CONTACTS AND REFERENCES

For more information about the Madison County Partnership, please visit the HandMade in America Web site or contact the following people.



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Agritourism How-to Guide:

Summers, C., & Hargrove, C. (2005). *AgriCultural tourism: Asset building and marketing*. Asheville, NC, USA: HandMade in America. Available for purchase at www.handmadeinamerica.org.

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