

CONFERENCE REPORT

Tourism Away from the Mainstream: The Travel and Tourism Research Association Canada Conference

The Canadian Chapter of the Travel and Tourism Research Association held its 2009 conference in Ontario, under the theme of "Tourism Away from the Mainstream". As a counter to the long established tradition of mass tourism, the conference sessions explored new traveler demands for authenticity and unique experiences, emerging destinations, and niche product offers. Researchers and marketers must address critical issues such as sustainability, and develop new and differentiated approaches in order to advance in the rapidly changing world of travel and tourism. The conference highlights are shared in hopes of supporting this direction.

Keywords: conference report, niche tourism, TTRA

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Chapter of the international Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA), winner of the 2009 Best Chapter Achievement Award, held its annual conference in Guelph, Ontario in October 2009. The achievement award is presented to the chapter that best furthers the mission of TTRA through spirit, innovation, effectiveness and creativity. The Canadian chapter conference is the association's primary means of fostering the value and use of quality tourism research and marketing, bringing together academics, practitioners, and students in a forum of exchange.

The 2009 conference theme, "Tourism Away from the Mainstream", reflects both social and economic trends toward more individuality, authenticity and unique travel experiences, encompassing emergent topics such as niche tourism in urban fringes, cultural quarters and rural roads, as well as a diversity of experiences ranging from sport to war tourism. Even the conference location, 100 kilometers west of Toronto, is away from urban crowds, in itself part of the appeal to seekers of an alternative to mass tourism.



The conference attracted 135 delegates, largely representative of three groups of travel and tourism researchers: (i) college and university faculty and graduate students, (ii) public sector bureaucrats from municipal, provincial and federal organizations with tourism-related mandates, and (iii) private sector research suppliers, consultants and associations. The majority of delegates were Canadian, with coast-to-coast representatives from nine provinces and two territories, embellished by a small contingent of Americans and one European delegate, Dr. Dominique Vanneste, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, who has a serendipitous link to Guelph. Poet John McCrae, author of *In Flanders Fields*, was born in Guelph, and wrote his celebrated Remembrance Day poem in Belgium while on active duty during World War I. Dr. Vanneste presented her study of war tourism in the Conference Centre's aptly-named Flanders Room.

STUDENT EVENTS AND CASE STUDY

The TTRA Canada Chapter conference-related activities have grown over the years, and in 2009 covered five days of events. Pre-conference, the University of Guelph hosted an inaugural Undergraduate Tourism Student Day for 175 delegates from 11 area colleges and universities. The morning began with an inspirational presentation by Bruce Poon Tip, founder and CEO of Gap Adventures. His dedication to community-based tourism, the environment, and social justice charged the student audience with ambitions to move tourism toward a better future. The balance of the morning was dedicated to presentations of options for graduate studies led by Dr. Marion Joppe, University of Guelph, followed by a networking lunch. The afternoon presenters represented key sectors of the tourism industry, including Chris Jones, Vice President of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, and Vicky Lymburner, President of the Ontario Tourism Education Council. To match the greater sophistication in tourism operations and marketing, the speakers stressed to the students the need for skilled communicators, researchers and managers, capable of thriving in an industry that is increasingly competitive, wired, and global.

The next morning featured the fifth annual Student Research Symposium, an opportunity for graduate students to present their thesis research in a professional setting of peers. Eight student papers were accepted for presentation and four for poster display. The best presentation award was won by Stephen Gilmour, University of Waterloo, for his study of Ontario snowmobile tourism's response to climate

variability and change. As a collection, the student work was reflective of the shift from traditional tourism, with topics ranging from culinary festivals to farm stays.

A popular component of the TTRA Canada Chapter Conference is the Research Case Study. Despite unseasonably cold weather, participants toured an agricultural research station, brewery, farm, and retail market to experience agri-tourism from field to plate. There is nothing like a team building exercise through a corn maze in the cold to bring delegates together! The case tour research component was extended by featuring a culinary tourism panel as part of the main conference the following day. Gastronomer Anita Stewart, restaurateur, Bob Desautels, and entrepreneur Amy Strom of Strom's Farm, a working farm but also a significant farm attraction, shared their experiences in the commercialization and marketing of local produce. With the growth in food and wine tourism, and greater consumer awareness of, and interest in, place origin, their timely stories illustrated the value and impact of applied research to make food-related products and experiences market-ready.

CONFERENCE SESSIONS

Given the extent of possibilities now open to tourism hosts and developers, much research is needed to understand the behaviour of the new tourist, and the viability of the new experiences. Table 1 lists the topics of the conference sessions that took place over a two-day period, delivered by over 50 presenters. The following is a summary of highly rated sessions selected as illustrative of the type of research underway, and the practitioner-focused outcomes of interest to both researchers and marketers.

Table 1. TTRA Canada Chapter Conference 2009 Session Topics

Aboriginal Eco-Tourism	Issues and Trends
Cultural Tourism	Marketing and Management
Culinary Tourism	Measuring Tourism
Emerging Markets	Niche Tourism
Global Tourism	Rural Tourism
Heritage Tourism	Shades of Tourism
Hospitality, Food and Beverage	Tourist Behaviour and Motivations
International Tourism	World Heritage Tourism Research

A highlight of the conference was the opening keynote address, delivered by Dr. Eddie Friel, Expert-in-Residence at the Hospitality and Research Center, Niagara University, titled “Reinventing places: the challenges of a post industrial age”. More than ever, places today have to identify why anyone should be interested in them. Increasingly, the unit of analysis of economic performance is the city region. Dr. Friel not only entertained with humor, personal stories and genuine sensibility, he illustrated the import of arts and cultural industries, and the potential of small communities by sharing his own experiences in Glasgow and beyond, where he has helped redefine place.

Another highlight was the Tourist Behaviour and Motivations session. University of Calgary graduate student, Vincent Tung, presented his thesis research on the essence of a memorable travel experience. Tung identified salient travel experience factors by analyzing the content of 208 interviews to identify the most frequently recollected elements of a destination. He found social and family experiences to be most salient, and recommends an integration with specific destination activities (e.g. sightseeing, hiking, camping, skiing, shopping, gambling) to create effective memory points.

The Niche Tourism session was also highly rated by attendees. Presentations included an assessment of the Prince Edward County Taste Trail, a self-guided culinary route along the north shore of Lake Ontario (by Richard Wade, Hersch Jacobs and Karen Pun, Ryerson University). Surveyed trail users, though hard to find, were highly satisfied with the trail, the published trail guide, and the trail wineries. The assessment also surveyed retail operators, the majority of whom recognized the importance of locally sourced products, and producers, who acknowledged the financial benefits of the trail, albeit a small percentage of income for most. Another noteworthy presentation by Tony Fisher, Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance, explored the differences among sport tourists. Lastly, Scott Forrester and Martha Barnes (Brock University) examined the impacts of an artificial white-water river development that was a catalyst for revitalizing a decaying downtown urban core, and linking together an extended park system, as a case study of municipal revitalization.

The Emerging Markets session was led by Kent Stewart, Western Management Consultants and colleagues, and effectively told the story of how the Canadian Badlands, an emerging destination, moved from strategy to action. Dave Pierzchala of Ipsos Reid provided a quantitative look at how Canadians are looking to new markets as they tighten their belts during economic strife.

The Cultural Tourism and Rural Tourism sessions explored the challenges of attracting travelers to unique tourism experiences, such as cultural festivals in multi-ethnic neighborhoods of Toronto (McClintchey and Carmichael, Wilfrid Laurier University), genealogy tourism in Nova Scotia (Darlene MacDonald, Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage), and cultural tourism in Colombia, where several challenges hinder tourism development, including lack of community preparedness, lack of resources, intrusion of outside groups, and fragmentation of interests (Blanca Camargo, Texas A&M University).

Individual sessions of note included a study of two dark tourism attractions in Winnipeg, Manitoba by Laura Jane Bissell and Kelly MacKay (University of Manitoba). An assessment of visitor motivations to a cemetery and a ghost tour resulted in relatively low scores of dark motives on a motivation scales, suggesting that these particular sites, like many, are paler attractions. Jackie Dawson (University of Waterloo) and colleagues studied last chance tourism and found that for visitors to the 'polar bear capital of the world' in Churchill, Manitoba, the vulnerability of polar bears in the region was motivation to view the bears before they are gone. The paradox of last chance tourism is that as tourist demand increases for endangered destinations, so too does the speed of their demise.

The second keynote was a particularly strong address by Allan Gregg, Chairman, Harris/Decima. Gregg, one of Canada's most respected research professionals and political analysts, looked from our past to the future of tourism, connecting the economy, public opinion, business and government issues. The conference ended with a plenary session on the World Heritage Tourism Research Network. Spearheaded by Dr. E. Wanda George, Mount Saint Vincent University, this international initiative of Canadian and international social scientists have launched a collaborative and comparative research program focused on growing concerns associated with the UNESCO World Heritage designation. The network explores the complex relationships between heritage planners and tourism destination managers to advance understanding of issues critical to the future of world heritage sites. Post-conference, Parks Canada hosted a satellite session, where a small group of delegates discussed current research initiatives pertinent to parks.

CONCLUSION

While *Tourism Away from the Mainstream* covered a range of topics relevant to this thematic field, the commonality evident across the

conference presentations was the significant shift in product focus, traveler behaviour, and critical issues. The traditional approach to maximizing visitation at a sun, sea or surf destination is changing, affected by new demands for unique and memorable experiences, the challenges of global warming, environmental and social equity, and greater opaque and connected networks. These concurrent influences are a call for researchers to explore, and a call for marketers to develop new and differentiated strategies. The dialogue has started, but we have much more to talk about, at TTRA's Canada Chapter Conference in Quebec City, October 2010.

Statia Elliot
University of Guelph

ENDNOTES

The accepted refereed submissions are available to conference attendees and members. For more information about TTRA's Canada Chapter, visit <http://www/ttracanada.ca>.

Statia Elliot (statia@uoguelph.ca) is an Assistant Professor at the University of Guelph, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Canada.