

MAHOOSUC REGION OF MAINE

Community Destination Academy (CDA)

Case Study 2019-2021

CDA DATES: October 21-22, 2019; November 18-19, 2019; *Summit:* January 15, 2020 for the public

FACILITATORS & SPEAKERS:

Facilitator and Keynote speaker - David Beurle, Future iQ

Victoria Simmons, BVK Advertising

Russell Walters, Regional Director North America, Adventure Travel Trade Association

PLACE:



The Mahoosuc region, named for the nearby mountain range, is comprised of Bethel, the major service center, Newry, Greenwood and Woodstock. Newry, with a population of 329, is largely a seasonal tourist community and home to [Sunday River Ski Resort](#). Greenwood (pop 830) is largely residential as is Woodstock (pop 1,277) which encompasses Bryant Pond, memorialized as home of the last hand crank phone system.

Incorporated in 1796, Bethel, a quintessential New England village, lies on the western edge of the Oxford Hills and just south of the Mahoosuc Mountain range, close to the NH border in Franklin County. Bethel and the surrounding area is drained by the Androscoggin River and its tributaries the Alder, Pleasant and Sunday Rivers.

As the major service provider to the region, Bethel has a population of around 2,600, and as the [town website](#) points out, enjoys an unusually diverse economic base that consists of a “blend of farming, forestry, wood products manufacturing, education, and tourism.” It is home to the acclaimed private preparatory school Gould Academy.

Bethel, calling itself Maine’s most beautiful mountain village, also has many outstanding outdoor recreation opportunities in the surrounding area, including hiking at Grafton Notch State Park, skiing and hiking at Sunday River, in the Mahoosuc Land Trust and on downtown Bethel trails, kayaking on the Androscoggin River and much more. The tourism and recreation economy is a major component of the local economic base.

SUNDAY RIVER RESORT:

Newry is home to year-round Sunday River Resort, one of Maine's largest and most visited ski resorts. Its vertical drop of 2,340 feet (710 m) is the second largest in Maine (after Sugarloaf) and the sixth largest in New England. Sunday River has the most skiable terrain among the East Coast skiing destinations, including six different peaks. The resort features 135 trails across eight interconnected mountain peaks, and is serviced by a network of 15 lifts, two resort hotels and shuttle service during peak visitation. Night skiing is a popular resort offering.



Summer operations include lift rides, mountain biking, zip-lining, golf and numerous other active outdoor adventures.

Peak elevation: 3,140'

Skiable Terrain: 870 acres

Base Elevation: 800'

Longest run: 3 miles

Snowfall:155 “

CONTEXT:

The Mahoosuc region is a well-developed outdoor recreation destination with Sunday River Ski Resort, Mt Abram, the Mahoosuc Forest, Bethel Trails and so much more all nearby. It was clear from early discussions that the community wanted to manage visitation, not increase it. Residents have been experiencing the detrimental impacts of too much visitation in certain popular outdoor destination areas within the region. The desire for a more sustainable future was apparent from the self-polling the group did throughout the CDA process.

CATALYST:

Though sustainability is a fairly new approach in planning, it can help balance the negative impacts of visitors and visitation on small communities. The CDA group had little desire to grow tourism significantly, but rather wanted to find a comfortable balance for both community residents and visitors and to manage impacts of visitation, thus their strong focus on sustainable tourism. *(Future iQ Report p. 4)*

Because the Mahoosuc area is relatively close to the urban center of Maine - (68 mi from Portland), MA (142 mi from Boston) and NH (116 mi to Portsmouth) - and Sunday River Resort as a strong winter and summer attraction, the area has already begun feel the early limited impacts of over-tourism - popular swimming and hiking attractions having to close during the height of the summer season due to high volumes of traffic approaching unsafe, unhealthy and unsustainable levels.

Note: *A result of the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020-2021, the impacts of urban dwellers seeking to escape, recreate and live in safer rural areas have heightened the original concerns that led to the sustainability focus.*

COMMUNITY DESTINATION ACADEMY

Timeline

The Community Destination Academy (CDA) occurred over the span of four months with significant pre-planning and numerous Steering Committee sessions before and after. Each module had about 50 participants and included expert and peer presentations, planning exercises, surveys and community presentations. The design was meant to allow synthesis of ideas and collaborative planning. About 100 participants attended the Community Tourism Summit which was added to the CDA program to further include the greater community for input and feedback. This process allowed for significant contributions from local stakeholders in the strategic plan.



Multiple lively discussion groups determined that the current visitor experience being offered in the region is a “do it yourself rustic outdoors” recreation that focuses on marketing to traditional markets. Consensus around the preferred future of the group landed in a place that offers more “high touch, high service” experiences that will attract new, emerging markets.

Mahoosuc CDA Priority Actions: (Future iQ report, page16)

- Focus on collaboration across the region, especially between towns
- Create a strong sustainability focus and explore unique eco-based approaches
- Build an outdoor recreation focus on a regional scale
- Create a coherent regional message and support it with better wayfinding
- Examine new strategic partnerships and co-ordination, especially between public and private entities
- Want visitors and residents alike to “Embrace Our Place”
- Regional Collaboration, Convening, Communication, Engagement and Leadership Role
- Tourism Workforce and Housing Development
- To take a Green and Environmentally Responsible Role-Model Approach
- Creating and Refining Compelling Visitor Experiences



MAHOOSUC REGION SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PLAN

Creating a harmonious balance between resident and visitor quality of experience



Following the Community Tourism Summit, the Leadership Team met several times and determined the next steps should be to:

- Focus on Sustainable Tourism
- Create a Sustainability Pledge and a website to share it widely with residents and visitors
- Establish Pillar Teams to further that work

ACTIONS:

- Four town managers held a joint meeting with their select boards to work collaboratively on issues critical to them all.
- The town managers have continued to meet to promote projects of mutual benefit.
- Pledge Working Group: A small committee met consistently through the winter months to develop underlying sustainability messaging to deliver a website to speak to residents and visitors. That work was brought to the Leadership Team for further deliberation and approval.
 - Leadership Team issued an RFP to build a website to carry the messaging to the target markets
 - Future iQ was the chosen contractor to build the website
 - The Team met with Future iQ several times to approve website structure, content, photos, and all other details
 - Public-facing *Lunchbox Zooms* (virtual meetings) are regularly held to inform stakeholders of progress
 - Fundraising campaign was accomplished to obtain foundational partners to match challenge grant money to continue building business and community buy-in.
 - Planning for website roll-out to media, local audience and the public statewide.
 - Website Launch: January 15, 2021 <https://mahoosucway.com/>
 - Northern Forest Center positioned a staff person to lead the committee into the further steps required: pledge & website awareness, begin establishing **pillar development** teams to develop the key areas of sustainability importance.
 - Hired **contractor** to carry Marketing strategy messaging in the short-term for business awareness and for longer term outreach.
 - Pillar Work: The team began this third priority in March of 2021.

Other Projects:

Northern Forest Center

- Outdoor Recreation Grant support to Inland Woods & Trails for the design phase of the Mahoosuc to the Mountains recreational wayfinding program (\$20,000)
- Mountain Bike trail and marketing assistance through the Bike Borderlands Initiative
- Technical Assistance to Inland Woods & Trails for development of the 900-acre Bethel Community Forest
- Digital Business Assistance – online marketing and e-commerce assistance for tourism businesses (12 participants)

Maine West Initiative (a collaboration of 12 local non-profits supported by the Betterment Fund)

- Workforce Development – outdoor education-based professional development for area teachers and early college programming in outdoor leadership by the University of Maine Cooperative Extension
- Active Communities – financial and technical assistance for local trail-building, conservation, and outdoor programming for area youth and adults
- Regional Collaboration – financial and technical assistance to the newly formed Mahoosuc Community Broadband Committee to expand access to reliable, affordable, high-speed, and future ready broadband internet service

Budget:

Phase One: Oct. 2019 – Jan. 2020

Workshops, Summit & Report

Expenses

Training & Facilitation (FiQ)	\$24,000
Meeting Space & Food	\$6,000
Program Management	<u>\$15,000</u>
	\$40,000

Funding Source

Northern Forest Center	\$40,000
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Phase Two

Mahoosuc Way Sustainable Tourism Initiative

Expenses

Website & Marketing Strategy Dev	\$22,500
Video Production	\$10,000
Engagement & Marketing	\$10,000
Social Media and Website	\$6,000
Collateral Materials	<u>\$5,000</u>
	\$53,500

Funding Sources:

Maine Woods Consortium	\$15,000
Northern Forest Center	\$10,000
MOT Enterprise Grant	\$10,000
Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce	\$5,000
Founding Sustainability Partners	<u>\$13,500</u>
	\$53,500

Resources:

“Mahoosuc Region Sustainable Tourism Plan Report”, Future iQ, (April 2020)