

Maine

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Rangeley Lakes Region Community Destination Academy (CDA) Condensed Case Study

CDA Dates: May 1-2; 15-16, 2019 – 9am-1pm

Facilitator & Speakers:

David Beurle, Future IQ – *Focus on Tourism Future Trends and Impact on Rural ME Communities*

Joe Veneto - *Creating Unique Visitor Experiences*

Additional Speakers addressed areas of interest requested by the leadership team

Attendees: 75 community leaders, municipal, business, non-profit, citizens.

The Context:

The community of Rangeley, including the internal villages of Oquossuc, Haines Landing and South Rangeley, is situated in the southwestern mountains of western Maine in the center of the Rangeley Lakes Region. Located 92 miles from Portland, 20 miles from the Canadian border and approximately 8 miles from the NH border, the region is somewhat isolated in the center of beautiful natural surroundings including lakes, forests, mountains and wildlife. Centrally located between the Androscoggin and Kennebec Rivers, the town lies on the eastern shores of Rangeley Lake in Franklin County.

- **Founded:** 1855
- **Elevation:** 1614'
- **Population:** 1,168 (2010 census) 1047 (2019)
- **Area:** 55.62 miles (41.48 mi Land; 14.14 mi Water)

Famous for trophy-sized brook trout in the late 1800's, the area brought fishermen and women from as far as New York City.

The fishing gave rise to Grant's Kennebago Camps, "Fly Rod" Crosby, who promoted Rangeley's fishing and hunting, Carrie Stevens who invented the Gray Ghost fly, among other early pioneers for tourism in an area also known for forestry and logging. Named one of the best winter towns in New England by Yankee Magazine, winter activities and events include downhill skiing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.



The Catalyst: Loss of Key Winter Business

Saddleback Ski Area opened winter of 1960-61 and grew to be the 3rd largest ME ski area, especially popular with families. All trails are named after famous fishing flies and the lifts for fishing rivers based on regional history. Prior to the 2015-2016 ski season, Saddleback Mountain Ski area closed its doors after failing to amass the funding to replace its 51-year-old double chairlift that provided access to the main lodge from the summit.

This situation precipitated a loss of many local jobs on the mountain and in the village along with a loss of winter reservations which was a huge driver of the winter economy - lodging, dining and shopping - in this ski community. The region and community were devastated by the loss and scrambled to find other ways to continue to attract the critical winter business. The ski area workforce was a critical base of workers for the summer season, thus impacting year-round employment.

Vertical: 2000'

Base elevation: 2,120'

Runs: 66

Top elevation: 4120'

Skiable terrain: 440 acres

Lifts: 3 quads

Snowfall: 225' annually

Note: March 2019, Arctaris Impact Fund made an offer to purchase. Sale culminated January 2020

Community Destination Academy Focus

TRAINING MODULE 1 – May 1-2, 2019

CDA Module 1 featured in-depth presentations and discussions with two nationally and internationally recognized destination and experience development experts.

Global Demographic and Travel Trends – David Beurle, Future iQ

David's presentations focused on long-term global economic and demographic trends and projections that will impact the travel and tourism sector in the coming decades, and related implications for the Maine Woods and the Rangeley Lakes region.

Highlights include:

- **Urbanization**, particularly among young people, means people will increasingly seek escape and renewal in natural settings, but also points to a decreasing familiarity and comfort with the rustic experiences that currently predominate in many rural areas
- **Rapidly changing global middle-class** spending patterns point to significant need and opportunity to build products and experiences that appeal to international visitors will change travel and visitation patterns and require destinations to build products and experiences that align with international traveler interests
- **High Touch-High Service** experiences featuring supported outdoor activities (for inexperienced visitors) and high-quality lodging and dining services are needed to engage evolving travel markets, ensure rewarding visitor experiences, and drive visitor spending in the local economy.



Engineering Unforgettable Experiences – Joe Veneto, Veneto Collaboratory

This presentation focused on the need and value of creating immersive visitor experiences that align with the high-touch-high-service markets identified by Future iQ and to build emotional connections that drive repeat visitation, word of mouth promotion, and visitor spending. Highlights include:

- Experiential tourism is driven by discerning, sophisticated customers who are wired and seeking connections and bragging rights.
- Effective experience development results in visitors who remember and recount their experience, refer others, and return for subsequent visits and experiences.
- Visitor experiences run across a spectrum from Show & Tell (photo opportunity) to Engagement (creating a story to share) and ultimately Immersion experiences that create a lifelong memory and connection

TRAINING MODULE 2 – May 15-16

CDA Module 2 featured presentations and panel discussions with a dozen resource organizations addressing state infrastructure programs, marketing and funding raising. Session included:

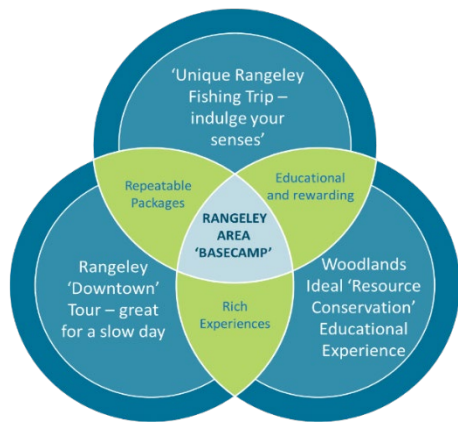
State of Maine Assets and Resources

Marketing Your Destination Resources

Finding the Money – Funding Resources for Destination and Business Development

The group then focused on opportunities to create new “immersive experiences” that appeal to expanded market opportunities – particularly city-dwelling millennials and international travelers who tend to bring foreign values and skills to a Rangeley experience. To engage this new market Rangeley needs to be prepared introduce and educate visitors about ways of the woods, rural life and culture, outdoor recreation, wildlife, conservation, forestry, safety and more.

Experience concepts developed around the idea of Rangeley and Oquossuc serving as base camps for visitors and included:



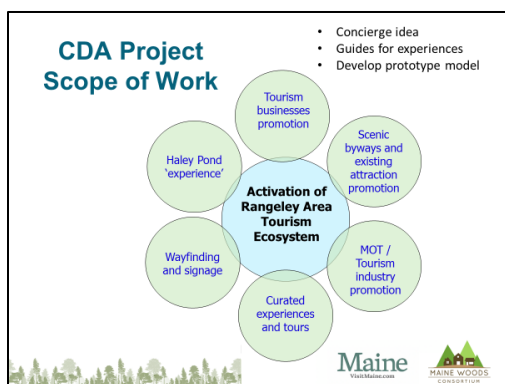
- 1) Downtown Experience (multi-activity)
- 2) Rangeley Highflyers (float plane)
- 3) Multi-modal Outdoor Recreation & Water Experience
- 4) Snowmobile like a Mainer (training & certification)
- 5) Family Eco-venture (citizen science)
- 6) Conservation & Wildlife Education

Participants also focused on the need for investments in the downtown experiences (including parking, façade improvements, music/art walks, and repurposing of the old IGA building), and basic visitor infrastructure like wayfinding signs and trail connectivity.

Throughout the process, the group also recognized challenges that need ongoing attention, including:

1. Better understanding real collaboration and the work and attention it requires
2. Finding the financial resources necessary to implement and sustain projects
3. Building alignment between local culture with the values and expectations of emerging markets
4. Educating residents about the links between successful destination development and local business and employment opportunities.

Participants agreed that their highest priority is to activate the Rangeley Area Tourism Ecosystem to create new marketable visitor experiences. While this approach doesn't create a physical product, participants agreed that it should result in new activity products to be marketed by area businesses/organizations and that it should generate new business income.



Actions:

Post Community Destination Academy

- Leadership Team formed to follow-up with actions.
- Met approximately every two weeks for six months. (Team: David Miller, Travis Ferland, Laura Reynolds, Kate Williamson, Kate Gary Langille, Nick Leaderly, Catherine deLutio, Jim Ferrara, Karen Ogulnick, Beth Eastlack)

CDA Goals:

- Protection of Rangeley's core values, beauty and natural resources
- Greater year-round visitation to sustain a vibrant downtown, eliminate peaks and valleys, and increase chances of new residency
- Seeking increased population (10%) through new families becoming year-round residents to maintain health of school and class sizes
- Improved visitor experiences to entice return

Actions Discussed and Tested

Results

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| Rangeley Rises Campaign – Covid-19 response | Successful 16-wk summer 2019 campaign: 77 businesses involved; 98 Facebook posts; 75 Instagram posts; 1,361 followers; 184,633 impressions; 14,700 video views Rangeley visitation soared throughout the pandemic. Visitors were helped to feel safe in this community. |
| Re-Branding Reprise | Fall 2020 – 2 nd revised report from Rinck was very well received. Awaiting the final branding proposal. Working with the chamber to insure buy-in from the marketing organization. Chamber board presentation was well received. |
| New Downtown Experience: A walking path around Haley Pond | Landowners opposed to the concept via a survey. Town purchased the parking lot where the walk would have begun, for a “Welcome to Rangeley” sign at the main entrance to downtown. |
| Concierge service for visitors | Rangeley Inn and Nick Leadley’s Nature Photography Tours successfully developed a simple prototype of a real-time reservation service between two businesses in Fall 2019; Determined that a more complex software system would be required when adding multiple businesses into such a venture. Proved that this approach can work well. |
| Re-branding for Rangeley | Agreement on the need to rebrand: developed an RFP, Group interviewed various companies and hired Rinck Advertising; negotiated contract; received initial report; asked for further detail; then Covid-19 entered the picture; contract on hold for a local campaign as a Covid response. |

Leadership teamwork in Rangeley is still moving forward. There will be more to report as the rebranding effort is completed and the renewed marketing effort moves forward through the Chamber of Commerce.

Projects Underway Since 2019; Discussion part of CDA

- Scenic Byway improvements for Route 16 – DOT support
- Federal application for All-American Road – DOT; Feb 2021: application unsuccessful
- Wayfinding signage program developed with DOT support and funded by Northern Forest Center
- December 2020, Reopening of Saddleback Mountain Ski Area – Arctaris Impact Fund; Andy Shepherd, General Manager.

Budget

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| Strategy & Experience Development: | \$35,000 (MOT via Maine Wood Consortium) |
| Brand Positioning; Dark Skies Designation: | \$20,000 (MOT & Maine Woods Consortium) |
| Meeting Expenses (space, food, etc.): | \$ 5,000 (MOT via Maine Woods Consortium) |
| Project Management: | <u>\$10,000 (MOT via Maine Woods Consortium)</u> |
| | Total Expense: \$70,000 |

Additional Support

MOT Enterprise Grant 2019 –Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust Birding Festival - \$10,000

Birding Festival changed from a Spring 2020 live event, limited to 60 participants, to a virtual event which hosted 300 attendees.