

# TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON THE VIKING TRAIL: Can Information Technology (IT) Make it Sustainable?

BY DR. EDWARD ADDO

*Large-scale commercial fishing is no longer the economic lifeblood of many small coastal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador.*

In 1992, the federal government introduced a moratorium on fishing in response to problems of over-fishing and declining fish stocks in the Atlantic Ocean. Whilst forestry, mining, oil production and diversification in the fishery (aquaculture, for example) continue to provide employment and income to many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, most communities have looked upon tourism as the panacea for the three most common socio-economic challenges they face: unemployment, declining family incomes, and out-migration of the unemployed and youth to other Canadian provinces, particularly Alberta, to work in the booming oil industry. The Viking Trail is one of the regions which has turned to tourism to address these socio-economic challenges.

The Viking Trail has abundant and untapped natural and cultural resources for sustainable tourism development. It boasts Gros Morne National Park, one of the most spectacular natural attractions in North America, as well as the only known Viking settlement in the New World at L'Anse aux Meadows. Both attractions have been designated World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. As well, the region boasts limestone caves, other geological formations, a Nordic settlement, and many small communities that host events depicting European cultures that are several centuries old.

However, if the region is to develop a sustainable tourism industry, there is an urgent need to overcome two serious challenges related to geography; the dispersed populations and settlements in the large region make it very difficult for tourism operators to coordinate their operations; and the external tourism markets on

which the industry depends are far removed (mainland Canada, the United States and Europe). The problems of distance and dispersed population problem are not unique to the Viking Trail. Destinations like Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Ghana, and Alaska – among many others – are all visited by tourists from far away, who have the knowledge, motivation, and interest to travel. These destinations seem to have made excellent use of information technologies (computers and communication technologies, also known as “IT”) to achieve sustainable tourism development.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (better known as the Brundtland Report) defines “sustainable development” as the management of all resources in such a way that we can fulfill economic, social, and aesthetic needs while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and the support systems. In accordance with this definition, “sustainable tourism development” is considered to be a development process that meets the needs of today’s tourists, host communities or regions, while enhancing opportunities for the future. Sustainable tourism development aims at protecting and augmenting the environment, meeting basic human needs, promoting current and intergenerational equity, and improving the quality of life for all people or stakeholders.

The goals of sustainable tourism development include efforts to build greater awareness and understanding of the significant contributions that tourism can make to the environment and the economy, to promote equity in development initiatives, to improve the quality of life of a host

community, to provide a high quality of experience for the visitor, and to maintain the quality of the environment on which the other goals depend. IT can be an effective tool to enhance productivity and sustainable tourism in many regions in the world, including on the Viking Trail.

Information is the lifeblood of the tourism industry and developments in IT have revolutionized enterprises as well as entire industries. Suppliers, operators and destinations who demonstrate creativity and innovation are better able to survive the increasing and intensifying competition in the tourism industry, and IT plays a crucial role in tourism innovation – including marketing, distribution, promotion, co-ordination and database development.

Today's tourist uses IT for booking reservations (flights, car rentals, cruises and accommodation), as well as for searching and storing information on travel directions, attractions, exchange rates and many other items. The Internet has truly revolutionized how tourists gather information and make travel decisions. But IT has also transformed tourism businesses, who use it to control, promote and sell travel products, facilitate yield management, integrate a range of business functions, enable capacity alterations and flexible pricing, reduce the cost of communication, provide intelligence information on partners and competitors, and facilitate operational and strategic management.

More complex IT systems known as Global Distribution Systems are used in developing destination management systems, (representing small and medium-sized tourism enterprises) and managing reservations globally. Much of the world's tourism business is now carried over networks connecting people and companies.

While some concerns expressed about the Internet (such as security of transmissions, credibility of information, intellectual property and copyrights, bandwidth and speed limitations) the advantages seem to far outweigh the concerns. These advantages include: convenience (purchases can be made from any place at any time), ease of gathering information, and price (consumers feel they get a better price and price comparison between competitors is also made easy). The United Nations World Tourism

Organization recognizes that the key to success lies in the quick identification of consumer needs and in reaching potential clients with comprehensive, personalized and up-to-date information – and the Internet certainly makes this easier.

The Internet can positively transform and strengthen the marketing and communication functions of remote, peripheral and insular destinations as well as small and medium-sized enterprises in those destinations. The question then is, can this happen on the Viking Trail? Can the tourism industry of the Viking Trail become sustainable? The answer is a conditional “yes”, conditional because the following prerequisites have to be met: a long-term strategic plan, an innovative business re-engineering process, top management and political commitments, training offered throughout the hierarchy of tourism enterprises, appropriate public policies, community commitment and sacrifices, and the design and development of an effective web site. To create and sustain customer loyalty, it is imperative that the tourism industry of the Viking Trail be able to meet the needs and demands of its customers. Customers need convenient access to transparent and easy-to-compare information, a variety of choices of tourism products (accommodation, food, leisure and recreation activities, transportation, packages), affordable prices, immediate provision of reservations, and flexibility to book at any time and make changes to reservations.

Empowering potential travelers by letting them design their own travel packages not only increases personal efficiency by creating tailor-made products independently, but it makes the job of the tourism operator that much easier, much as automatic teller machines have made the job of banks easier by allowing clients to do their own banking. The tourism industry is continuously affected by IT because it enhances competitiveness. Communities and tourism principals on the Viking Trail must join the IT revolution if they are to reap the benefits associated with it. To be globally competitive, new tourism products have to be created, the industry has to be restructured, changes have to be made in the way communities and enterprises compete, consumers and suppliers have to be more

effectively linked electronically, more value has to be added to tourism products, and accurate information has to be generated and disseminated as quickly as possible to customers and potential tourists.

It has been noted that sophisticated travelers seek information about more exotic destinations and more authentic experiences. (After all, they've been everywhere else.) Remote destinations like the Viking Trail will benefit from this trend and, therefore, need IT to better serve this adventurous set. There is also a need to offer potential tourists the opportunity to be able to regularly and effectively interact with suppliers in order to satisfy their specific needs and wishes. Potential tourists to the Viking Trail must have access to reliable information and make reservations in a fraction of the time, cost and inconvenience required by conventional methods. Improvement in service quality will contribute to higher guest-traveler satisfaction, as underscored by many experts and researchers in numerous studies. So, IT could help make the tourism industry on the Viking Trail more sustainable.

There are some encouraging developments on the Viking Trail. Cow Head, a small coastal community located in an enclave adjacent to Gros Morne National Park, has created a five-year tourism development plan which incorporates some of the principles of sustainable tourism development already discussed. The development plan identifies specific projects that can be efficiently and cost-effectively managed to attract tourists. The projects include building a trail to the local lighthouse, the restoration of the lighthouse, an amphitheatre, road upgrading, a bird satellite station, interpretation signage and construction of a replica of a post office, among other things. The Destination Marketing Organization of Western Newfoundland, in response to declining tourist visitation in the past two years, has also produced a comprehensive regional plan to facilitate destination marketing and to boost tourism in the region.

Other developments further north on the Peninsula are encouraging. Although this area experienced a 28% decline in population between 1986 and 2006 (from 12,392 to 9,000), the economy has been diversified to create new jobs in forestry (secondary processing of non-timber

products), agrifood (primary and secondary processing), fisheries (secondary processing and research coordination), tourism (services, adventure tourism, heritage and interpretation), and information technology, (training, programming, marketing and management). Between 1997 and 2006, the forestry sector in this area generated \$19 million and employed 76 people, the fishery generated \$45 million and employed 1,285 people, and the tourism industry generated \$30 million and employed 1,380 people; in other words, for the first time in the area's history, tourism provided more employment than the area's other key industry sectors.

A visitor once said about Newfoundland and Labrador that it is "so difficult to stay in and even more difficult to leave this marvelous terrible place". If the tourist destinations in the province are managed cost effectively and efficiently in the interest of everyone – tourists, host communities, host governments and businesses – the statement could become "so easy to visit and so difficult to leave this marvelous tourist destination". Sustainable tourism development is feasible on the Viking Trail. The problems of geographic distance and small populations necessitate development of more effective visual tourism promotion, all-inclusive and all-season packages, and regional development plans instead of independent and uncoordinated community development plans. ❏

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