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Traveling Companions

Tribes build a tourism industry by forging alliances





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Tribes build a tourism industry
by forging alliances

By Michelle Tirado

THOUGH INDIAN RESERVATIONS may not have the “tourist destination” brand recognition of New York or Las Vegas, they have the four-star hotels, spas, casinos and resorts that tourists want. The tribes’ dilemma — how do you get vacationers to beat a path to your door when you are off the beaten path?

Tourism is a \$1.3 trillion industry in the United States. But tribes have a much harder time getting their share of that money. They have fewer dollars to use on marketing; and then there is the difficulty of selling the general public on remote destinations they are not familiar with.

Tribes have been working hard at defining their appeal and selling it to the public and it is beginning to pay off for some. Many are finding that the best way to drive tourism to the reservation is to partner with local, regional or national organizations or agencies. They have realized the importance of aligning with organizations that share or complement their tourism missions and goals, such as with local chambers of commerce and tourism boards, convention and visitor bureaus, state tourism offices and, yes, other tribes.

Here is a look at a few of the partnerships tribes have developed with outside organizations.

FORT MCDOWELL AND FOUNTAIN HILLS: NEIGHBOR HELPING NEIGHBOR

The Fort McDowell Yavapai tribe is relatively new to tourism, but it has really made itself a major player in Maricopa County and the state of Arizona. The tribe owns and operates two luxury Radisson resorts: the four-diamond rated Radisson Fort McDowell Resort, which opened in 2005, and the Radisson Poco Diablo Resort in Sedona, purchased in 2004. It also owns Fort McDowell Adventures, a tour company; Eagle View (Aseh Gweh

For More Information ...

Cherokee Heritage Trails

www.cherokeeheritagetrails.org

The site, which was visited by 40,000 unique visitors in 2006, provides information on the Cherokee communities that the Cherokee Heritage Trails travel through. It also offers the Cherokee artist directory, a link to purchase the Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook, an online store featuring Cherokee-made items and a map of the trails.

Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians

www.atntribes.org

ATNI was founded in 1953 by a group of tribal leaders to address the Northwest tribes' economic development needs. Today, it represents more than 50 tribes, mainly in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. PDF versions of the 2005 issues of *A Travel Guide to Indian Country: Washington Edition* and *A Travel Guide to Indian Country: Oregon Edition* can be accessed from the site's "Media" page.

Institute of Ecotourism

www.ioet.org

IOET's site features an overview of ecotourism and the ecotourism industry and information on becoming a corporate partner. Corporate partners have access to the institute's sustainable operations training curriculum and best-practices clearinghouse.

munities. Along them are ancient towns, places in Cherokee legend, museums and opportunities to meet Cherokee artisans and storytellers.

The Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative has brought nothing but benefits to the EBC. Barbara R. Duncan, Ph.D., education director for the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in Cherokee, N.C., said the *Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook* that was published through the initiative is more than just a guidebook.

"If you read the book, you will have a very thorough understanding of Cherokee history and culture," Duncan said. "For me, the trails are a way to teach visitors or Cherokee youth about [the tribe's] history using the landscape as a classroom."

Through the initiative, the tribe has trained Cherokee people to serve as trail guides. So far, about 40 have been trained. Some have specialties, like in storytelling, music, crafts or the outdoors. All have knowledge of the tribe's history and culture.

Duncan said, "I think this is what people want. This is what the focus groups say. This is my experience in doing education programs. Visitors really want to connect with Cherokee people."

The EBC has also created a Cherokee artist directory. Duncan likens it to a speaker's bureau. It contains a list of all the Cherokee artists — basket makers, carvers, potters, weavers, dancers, storytellers, etc. She said it has connected a lot of individuals and groups to the artists.

The EBC, a community of about 12,000, today occupies a reservation of 100 square miles, a minute fraction of their ancestral lands. "I think the value of this project has been to reclaim this large area as part of the Cherokee heritage. There are people in Georgia and Tennessee that don't know that the Cherokee once lived there," Duncan continued.

The success of the initiative, Duncan said, can't be measured with visitor numbers. The tribe will probably never know how many are coming as a direct result of the guidebook, tour guide service and artist directory. The guidebook is selling, the guides get regular business and the Cherokee Heritage Trails Web site, www.cherokeeheritagetrails.org, has received millions of hits (40,000 unique visitors last year).

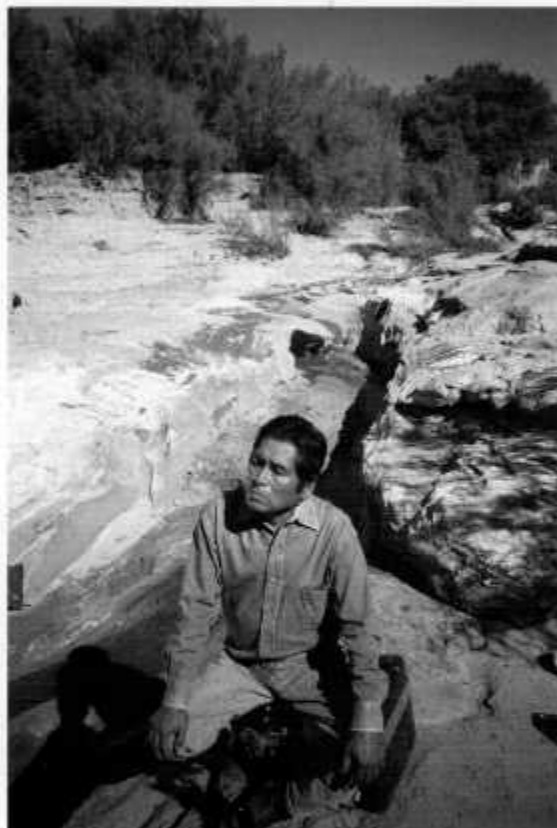
In 2004, President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush presented the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative with a Preserve America Presidential Award. Preserve America, a White House initiative launched in 2003, honors projects that exemplify efforts and a commitment to protecting and interpreting the nation's cultural and natural heritage resources.

HOPI AND THE ECOTOURISM INSTITUTE: A NATURAL FIT

More than 100,000 visitors come to the Hopi reservation every year — some invited

and some uninvited. When they come, usually during the high season months of summer and fall, they take in the archaeological and historical sites, the cultural events and the striking high desert beauty that belongs to the 1.5 million-acre reservation.

When it comes to tourism, the Hopi people have been somewhat conservative. For good reason. They are very protective of their



Vernon Masayeva. Photo by John Schaefer

traditional lifestyle and keep closely guarded the sacred, which includes their cultural sites and their natural surroundings, like the land and the water. All archaeological sites, for instance, can only be seen with a tour guide. A few sites, such as the petroglyphs at Pumpkin Seed Hill, can be accessed without a guide, but require a permit from the tribe's cultural preservation office. All Hopi villages have photography restrictions; one, Walpi, can only be visited with a guide.

The Hopi's new partnership with the Sedona-based Institute of Ecotourism seems

like a natural fit. The Hopi see tourism as an economic development opportunity, but they also value their cultural and natural resources. The institute is committed to promoting tourism that protects, not damages, these resources. It is also dedicated to educating the public on ecotourism and environmental conservation.

Diane Dearmore, IOET's executive director, said she wants the institute to be a "green" concierge for sustainable tourism, starting locally by identifying examples of sustainable businesses, such as farms, hotels, restaurants and tours. She also wants IOET to have a role in developing cultural heritage tourism in the area, one that is rich in Native American culture and heritage. There are 22 tribes in the state, and five are in close reach to the Sedona area.

The Hopi is the first tribe that IOET has worked with in a collaborative way, and they are working very closely together. Dearmore now sits on one of the tribe's tourism boards. IOET is not only working with the Hopi to increase the tribe's tourism revenues, but it is also helping to define who the Hopi people are in the traveling public's eyes and bolster their common values.

Water conservation is the theme of the tribe's and the IOET's first collaboration, a two-day, 130-mile relay that will be run April 21-22, 2007. Beginning in Hopi and ending on the banks of Oak Creek Canyon, tribal members young and old will run to raise awareness of the impact people have on the planet's water supply. They will carry a vessel that contains water taken from five different bodies of water on the tribe's ancestral lands. The event will be preceded by a series of events, including a student exchange, when Native American students in the Sedona area will visit each other's communities to become



The Radisson Fort McDowell Resort, owned and operated by the Fort McDowell Yavapai Tribe.

immersed in their respective cultures, and art will be shared.

"We really want people to get the idea that water is a precious gift of life. That is the connection between us. That is how we can share culture, by sharing our concern for water," Dearmore said.

Water is as much a part of Hopi heritage as the ceremonies and dances that thousands flock to the reservation to observe every year. So is long-distance running. Because there is a lack of vehicles in Hopiland, it is major form of transportation, and the Hopi people start using their legs to cover the distances between the villages at a very young age.

"Our biggest contribution to society is the message — the lessons," said Vernon Masayesva, a former Hopi chairman and director/founder of Black Mesa Trust. "We carry messages through running. If you run, you pray as you run. As your feet hit the ground, it vibrates into all directions, carrying your prayers. That is why we run a lot."

The run, Masayesva hopes, will teach the world, including any curious tourists that are there to watch the relay, that water is an element that can not be taken for granted and that this precious natural and spiritual resource is threatened. Masayesva said only one-third of the earth's water is fresh water. Of that, only a small fraction is accessible; the rest is ice.

"If we can get that message out to the tourists, who knows. They might join the struggle and start healing the water," Masayesva said.

In addition to the run, the Hopi and IOET are partnering this summer to provide tourism internships to Hopi young people who are interested in doing tours. They will be trained, in part, with older Hopi guides. In Sedona, Dearmore said, a lot of the tours that go to Hopi are led by non-Hopis. IOET plans to promote Hopi-led tours in the future, which will redirect some tourism dollars to tribal members and the Hopi's economy. ■