

# **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY: THE ROLE OF LEISURE, RECREATION, AND TOURISM**

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## **Introduction and Background**

Communities across Canada are recognizing the importance of incorporating sustainable practices in their day-to-day operations. This is due largely to the increasing awareness that our planet is currently in an ecological crisis and that immediate action is required by all people including municipalities to offset this crisis. Support for municipalities to develop sustainable policies and practices have emerged from governmental and non-governmental sectors. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), has in fact, an administrative and funding arm dedicated to assisting communities in Canada explore and develop sustainable practices. The Natural Step (TNS) organization, widely recognized by the FCM and individual municipalities, has developed pragmatic methods for assisting communities in implementing sustainable practices. It is within this context, the research emerges.

The definition of sustainable community varies (Kemmis, 1990) and will depend on each community's values, culture, and unique needs in terms of health, environmental, and socio-cultural factors. However, it is generally agreed upon that it is anything but the *status quo* and is based upon long-term planning that ensures the continued health and vitality of the environmental, economic, and social and cultural dimensions within a community. Key to moving toward sustainable community is a holistic and integrative planning process (Beatley & Manning, 1997) that allows the development of a community vision that integrates the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sectors into a unified strategic planning process guided by sustainable philosophy and practice (James & Lahti, 2004). The foundation for these planning processes requires community engagement exercises that enable residents to share their perception of the community and to offer insight into how it can move toward sustainability.

The Wolfville Sustainability Initiative (WSI) is an initiative developed in partnership with the Town of Wolfville, local citizens and Acadia University scholars. Broad goals include the education of town administrators, staff, and council on sustainability concepts and practices with the intention of guiding future municipal planning and development. Through this partnership, several research projects have been undertaken that examine *sustainable community*. Although the research has not been explicitly guided by leisure, recreation and tourism studies, it has become apparent that perceptions of community by residents and the movement toward developing a sustainable community are inextricably linked, in part, to where and how people spend their leisure time in the community. Therefore, this paper reports on the findings of a community-based research project on sustainable community but draws specifically on the role of leisure and recreation and tourism in supporting the development of a sustainable community.

## **Methods**

Focus groups and follow-up interviews with 6 groups served as the core of our research methods. Research groups included seniors (> 65 years), adults, elementary

youth, high school youth, Acadia University students, and the local business community. The size of focus groups ranged from 6-12 people and some in some cases more than one focus group occurred. During the focus groups, participants were asked a series of questions that related to the concept of sustainable community and their vision for the future of Wolfville. Participants were also provided a map of Wolfville and asked to indicate on the map, areas that were special to them and to indicate why. Follow-up interviews with 12 participants' representative of each focus group allowed additional insight. Paralleling this process were on-going consultations with town administrators related to sustainability education. Acadia University students enrolled in the authors' Sustainable Nova Scotia course were instrumental in gathering some of the data related to this project.

## **Results**

For the purpose of this abstract, general results will be discussed and will be elaborated upon in the presentation.

### **Focus Groups**

Sustainable community was perceived by focus group participants as consisting of numerous factors that contribute to the overall quality of life in Wolfville; recreation and tourism being key components. Recreation was perceived in several dimensions. Recreation space (e.g., soccer fields, recreation centre) was viewed as physical space for events to occur and where people could be physically active. Leisure and recreation were viewed as a vehicle for developing stronger personal and interpersonal relationships, building community capital through volunteering, creating a sense of community identity, and enhancing the physical health and wellness of the community.

Tourism provided opportunities for exchange between community members and guests although not all people viewed tourism as a positive thing for the community. For most people, tourism was viewed in its traditional sense as diversifying the economic base and providing jobs in the community. Several individuals noted that while tourism helped support a diversified economic base, it did little to empower individuals working in the tourism sector or to empower the community as a whole.

### **Special Places Mapping**

Special place mapping revealed a dramatic depiction of areas within the community that were meaningful to participants. When all the participants' special places were placed on to one large map (4 x 6 foot) of Wolfville and later developed as an interactive cd-rom, it displayed the use of and value of physical space in the community. Participant's special places included parks, houses, business establishments, schools, ponds, streams, vacant lots, trails between neighbourhoods, dyke lands, and even trees. A significant portion of the special places were areas designated formally as recreation areas and sites guided by tourism development. The use of special places normally occurred during leisure time but also occurred walking to and from work, picking up the mail from the post office, or walking the family dog. Special places were very important to participants and most indicated that these special places anchored them to the community and without these places, their relationship with the community would suffer. There was an unwillingness to sacrifice these special places for economic development of any kind.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The perception of Wolfville as a good place to live was linked, in part, to how and where people spent their leisure time in the community. This was demonstrated verbally through focus groups and interviews and graphically through special place mapping. Special place mapping allowed participants to rediscover their community and reflect on areas that were significant to them and why. Collectively, the research methods engaged participants in the process of developing individual and collective perceptions of what makes Wolfville a good place to live now and what is required to develop a sustainable Wolfville.

The development of one special place map that collectively showed participants special places in the community had an empowering effect on participants and town administrators. It painted a mosaic of use and values that typical maps do not represent. The map stressed the importance participants placed on green spaces in the community, the significance of certain heritage buildings, and the park adjacent to the post office where people casually met as they collected their mail.

Building a sustainable community must begin by engaging the community in a meaningful exercise that captures their relationship to the community and empowers them to visualize the future of their community. The knowledge created from such an exercise is valuable in guiding discussions on growth and development of a sustainable community. The Wolfville Sustainability Initiative (WSI) has provided significant insight to town administrators in their efforts to move toward a sustainable Wolfville.

**ABSTRACTS**  
**of Papers Presented at the**  
**Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research**  
**May 17 – 20, 2005**  
**Hosted by**  
**Department of Recreation and Tourism Management**  
**Malaspina University-College**  
**Nanaimo, B.C.**  
**Abstracts compiled and edited by**  
**Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson**  
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**and**  
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**ISBN 1-896886-01-9**



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