

# **THE TWO SOLITUDES: AMISH AND ENGLISH PERSPECTIVES ON TOURISM PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT & PROMOTION PRACTICES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM PLANNING**

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This project explored the perspectives of the Amish and the English as it relates to the planning, development, and promotion of tourism in communities with Amish populations. Little has been found in current literature related to the participation of Amish communities in local tourism-related decision-making. The nature of the Amish culture affords limited engagement with the non-Amish world including limited participation with local governmental agencies. At the same time, local decision-making by government and business communities can have a decided impact on the local Amish community.

Data was collected through personal interviews with members of local Amish communities and with local leaders and public officials (English) involved in tourism planning, development and promotion. Interviews were conducted in communities in two Midwestern American states. Communities were selected for inclusion based on the presence of an established Amish community and because the Amish are promoted as an object of tourist appeal by the English community. Communities representing both well established Amish tourism destinations as well as emerging Amish tourism destinations were included. Research questions of interest related to the manner in which local governmental and quasi-governmental agencies and business leaders involve the Amish community in tourism-related decision-making

## **Protocol**

Subjects for this study included: 1) members of the Amish community in Michigan and Indiana towns where the presence of the Amish is promoted as a local tourist attraction, and, 2) local officials representing agencies that are involved in tourism planning, development, and/or promotion as well as business persons engaged in tourism-related businesses.

Interviews were conducted with individuals using a guided interview format. Interviews were audio taped with the permission of the subjects. Interviews were transcribed from tape for analysis. Interviews ranged from 20 to 40 minutes. All interviews were conducted during 2003 and 2004. The PI conducted all interviews. English subjects were selected from, area convention and visitor bureaus, area chambers of commerce, community development extension agents of the agricultural extension service, as well as local business persons involved in hospitality-related businesses. Amish subjects were identified business directories of Amish businesses. Amish subjects were approached at their places of business or homes. Only adults were approached to participate. Efforts were made to include Amish women in the sample. A minimum of two interviews with Amish subjects and two interviews with English subjects was conducted in each of these six communities.

## **Results**

The Amish persist in their commitment to living lives that are separated from the English world. This separation, however, does not mean that the Amish are unconcerned

about or do not desire to be heard and understood in matters that impact their community. Tourism is not the only area in which decisions within the English community impact the Amish, but is the focus of this study.

Many local tourism organizations actively promote the Amish as a visitor attraction. The development and promotion of Amish driving tours or Amish business directories to visitors is a common practice in many of these communities. Driving maps were produced by CVB's in some communities and by local business people in others. It is not always the case that Amish business people were asked whether they wished to be included in an Amish driving tour or if they desire their neighborhoods promoted for out of town visitors to cruise.

Another common tourism-related concern cited by Amish subjects relates to transportation planning and development. The Amish note that increasing tourism to a community brings increases in traffic. Promotional efforts aimed at drawing visitors to "see" the Amish leads to increases in traffic on secondary roads traveled by the Amish. Lack of planning for alternative modes of transportation (horse and buggy) can lead to conflicts between Amish and English travelers as well as increased buggy/automobile accidents. Transportation issues are commonly cited in literature as well. From the English perspective, the presence of Amish buggies are a source of frustration to local residents who perceive Amish as "inconsiderate" and sometimes just "ornery", backing up traffic intentionally.

Ignorance of the Amish culture by both local residents and visitors leads to conflict between Amish and English visitors. Amish express dismay at what they view as intrusions into their lives by visitors. Taking photographs of Amish and entering Amish property uninvited are evidence of this lack of understanding of the culture. In two communities, the presence of interpretive centers helped educate visitors to the Amish way of life and increase understanding and sensitivity their culture. The Menno-Hof Interpretive Center in Shipshewana, Indiana, created with input from local Amish and Mennonite, is promoted to visitors as the preferred way to learn about the Anabaptist culture.

Amish business people also offer mixed observations about English visitors. The Amish are very pragmatic about business. Although willing to do business with visitors, many Amish businesses primarily serving the Amish community are not intended or designed to be tourist stops. For obvious safety reasons, Amish shops are not designed to have visitors rambling around the shop floor. Despite that, visitors often behave as if a cabinet shop or buggy shop is being operated as an interpretive exhibit for their amusement. Amish are sometimes willing to host visitors in their places of work, but visitors should be considerate in requesting such access. Visitors sometimes do not respect hours of business and may become indignant that the Amish are not open for business on Sunday or otherwise limit access.

A negative attitude directed toward the Amish was evident among local tourism leaders in several communities. The Amish, it seemed, did not live up to the idyllic image that was expected for a positive tourism experience. A lack of cleanliness of the Amish was cited by several persons as was the issue of manure from horses in the streets. Another tourism leader remarked that the Amish "were not the angels everyone thought they were". One individual used a derogatory term to describe the Amish remarking that it was considered common slang among the local residents.

Some tourism industry leaders expressed concern that the Amish behavior was not conducive to a good visitor experience. One remarked that the Amish would not “stay in town where they could be seen by visitors”; suggesting it would be nice to have some “viewing hours” for out-of-town visitors. Another complaint heard was that the Amish were not friendly to visitors. These remarks seem to overlook the fact that the Amish are not a staged experience for visitors, but merely people going about their daily lives. What is interpreted as a disposition to rudeness is often behavior intended to avoid unnecessary contact with strangers.

Perhaps the broadest concurrence expressed by tourism industry leaders was that to successfully work with the Amish community, it was important to develop relationships and trust. In many cases someone in the community played the role of a trusted intermediary between the Amish and English communities. In most cases, tourism leaders could clearly identify the person who filled that role in their community. These individuals were community members who had cultivated a relationship with the Amish community over a long period of time and to whom many Amish would voice concerns or seek information. In several cases, the trusted intermediary was a person with a vested interest in local tourism; two were innkeepers, one operated an Amish tour business. Notwithstanding this seeming conflict of interest, the trusted intermediary had cultivated a relationship with the Amish community that was characterized by sensitivity to the needs of the Amish that was not overshadowed by personal business interests. County extension agents typically had extensive relationships with the Amish, but primarily as it related to agriculture. The necessity of developing trusted relationships was reiterated by members of the Amish community as well.

### **Discussion**

Community planning theory would suggest that in order for planning to be successful that all stakeholders must be engaged in the planning process. It is also suggested that community planning should be respectful of the cultural context of the community. Because of their characteristically insular lifestyle, Amish do not engage in political decision-making processes as non-Amish citizens. This, however, does not mean that they are uninterested or feel insulated from the impacts of these decisions. Tourism industry leaders must develop the knowledge and skills to effectively communicate with local Amish communities and the discipline to respect desires of the Amish as it relates to tourism planning, development and promotion. Evidence suggests that a successful working relationship starts with existing personal relationships between individuals in the English and Amish community. These relationships, however, must be honest and not exploitative.

### **Practical Application**

Leaders in a local tourism industry should be aware of and sensitive to the impact of tourism decisions on the local Amish community. Decisions about tourism development or promotion tied to the Amish community should ideally be initiated by the Amish themselves. Decisions to promote the Amish as a tourism attraction should only be made with input from the Amish community and not be exploitative of the Amish. Local tourism leaders must learn to communicate effectively with the local Amish community using methods of communication that are effective within the Amish

community. Education of visitors about the Amish culture will lead to visitors who are more respectful of the Amish community and lead to fewer conflicts between Amish and visitors. Traditional methods of public decision making are not as effective with Amish communities. Building honest relationships and working with and through trusted intermediaries is likely to enhance communication.

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