

Background

The Sierra Nevada Geotourism (SNGT) MapGuide Project is a multi-faceted tourism promotion effort managed through a partnership of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC), National Geographic, and the Sierra Business Council (SBC). Through the use of an interactive Web site, a printed MapGuide, mobile phone applications, and social media tools the project highlights and promotes California's Sierra Nevada Region as a world class tourism destination. The project supports the SNC's mandate to enhance tourism in the Sierra Nevada Region while also promoting the preservation of cultural and heritage resources.

Funding and in-kind support for the project has come from several sources, in addition to the SNC, including: The National Scenic Highways and Byways Administration, Sierra Business Council, Morgan Family Foundation, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, California State Parks, Nevada Commission on Tourism, multiple Sierra counties, several Tribal Entities, Northern Sierra Partnership, and many more local businesses and service groups. The project has grown a list of more than 92 supporters that have formally endorsed the project, including all 22 Sierra Nevada counties.

Current Status

The SNGT Web site continues to be the foundational element of the project. The site currently contains more than 1,549 published destination pages, 180 videos, and receives more than 179,000 content views from 113 countries every month. Staff continues to assist local contributors establish new destination pages and events every month. The site can be accessed at www.sierranevadageotourism.org. During the last year, the project launched mobile phone applications (apps) for iPhone and Android users providing access to the entire Web site content while traveling in the Region. Users have the option of enabling GPS technology to enhance functionality of the apps for real-time updates based on their current location in the Sierra. Software developers are currently working to enable "alert" tools for the apps allowing travelers to be notified of business special alerts, travel packages, itinerary suggestions, traffic conditions, and current events. More than 4,481 people have downloaded apps, which are available for free to the public.

To help promote the Web site and increase usage, the partnership has printed and distributed 160,000 printed MapGuides, highlighting 250 destinations in the Region. The MapGuides were strategically distributed at visitor centers, California Welcome Centers, corporate locations, rental car agencies, sports events, museums, and businesses to encourage more travel to the Region.

Marketing of the project's services and products has been a primary focus during the last year. Significant achievements been made to build brand identity and reach target markets of travelers most inclined to visit the Region. Marketing accomplishments include earned-media attention in more than 140 printed publications, television and radio interviews and references in online and social media. The project has also

secured advertising placement in Visit California's Annual Travel Planner, Sunset Magazine, Via Magazine, and Sierra Heritage Magazine. Since print advertising began in April 2013, content views on the Web site have increased by 55 percent (179,000+ in July). Sunset, Via, and California Travel Planner offer their readers the opportunity to request more specific information about destinations. As a result of this service, more than 1,400 MapGuides have been direct-mailed to individuals who requested more information on reader service cards.

Next Steps

SNC Staff and project partners will continue to assist in the development and addition of fresh content to the Web site and will also be working with existing destination page-owners to strengthen their support and use of the site as a marketing tool. Project partners also publish and distribute a monthly GeoExplorer Newsletter to a subscriber database of 3,054 and growing. The newsletter features Web site tips, business marketing suggestions, new destinations, and additional opportunities for supporter involvement.

A broad range of marketing efforts will continue for all aspects of the project, including distribution of regular press releases, attendance at shows, events, and conferences, and placement of paid advertising. Project partners are also pursuing grant opportunities to further develop the project.

To date, the development of the project and its supporting products has been co-managed by the SNC and the SBC. Staffs from both organizations are currently developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines the future management strategy of the project. As the project has shifted from a construction phase to a business maintenance phase it has become apparent that management should be consolidated under one entity. This approach will ease decision making and maximize use of resources for both organizations. The MOU will outline the ongoing commitments of the SBC to manage the business aspects of the project and also identify the ongoing roles of the SNC as a founding partner. In order to consolidate business operations, some of the project assets (mobile phone applications) are anticipated to be transferred to SBC to support the ongoing success and growth of the project. The SNC will continue to support the project and participate in annual strategic planning to help guide future developments and improvements to the project.

Recommendation

This is an informational item only; no formal action is needed by the Board at this time, although Boardmembers are encouraged to share their thoughts and comments.