

Background

In early 2009 the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) partnered with the Sierra Business Council (SBC) and the National Geographic Society to develop the Sierra Nevada Geotourism MapGuide Project. The MapGuide Project consists of an interactive website that highlights unique and authentic tourism destinations in the Sierra Nevada. 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.

The project has been divided into four phases covering the entire Sierra Nevada Region, including three counties of western Nevada. Major funding for the project has come from the SNC, SBC, the Morgan Family Foundation, El Dorado County, Inyo County, the US Forest Service, the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA), and the Nevada Commission on Tourism. Many thousands of "people-hours" have also been donated to the project by community volunteers serving on the geocouncils who have taken the time to write and create "nomination pages" for inclusion on the web map. Total committed funding for the project to date is approximately \$485,000. Additional annual investments are needed to market and further develop the project.

Three out of the four phases of the project have been completed and are live on the web at www.sierranevadageotourism.org. These phases are the Southern Sierra, Yosemite Gateways and Byways (which includes the eastern Sierra), and the Tahoe-Emigrant Corridor. The final Sierra Cascade Phase is wrapping-up now. Web site viewing metrics are monitored on a regular basis to help gauge project success and for use by businesses and tourism professionals in the Region. To date, the project has 1,096 Sierra specific destination pages posted on the MapGuide. The site is being viewed approximately 15,000 times per month by people from 89 countries and growing steadily. The Board was last updated on the progress of the project in March 2011.

Current Status

The Southern Sierra nomination phase closed with great success. Individuals from Madera, Fresno, Tulare, and Kern counties created 217 new destination pages which include everything from "Kern River Astronomy Club" nights to Scenic Byway Tours through Kings Canyon National Park.

The fourth and final Northern Sierra/Cascade (NSC) nomination period was opened in June and will close on September 4, 2011. This phase covers the largest nomination area of the project and represents the following eight counties: Sierra, Plumas, Yuba, Butte, Tehama, Lassen, Shasta and Modoc. A very active and energetic NSC Geocouncil has formed to represent communities from this phase area, and they are in the midst of presenting informational "how-to" workshops throughout the northern Sierra. Nominations are coming in and will surely represent a broad collection of what the area has to offer visitors.

National Geographic is starting the design of a printed map for the Yosemite Gateways / Byways phase of the project. Input from local Geocouncil and stakeholders is being

scheduled to help with design and distribution strategies. Funding for this print map comes from a grant from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Additional Print maps may be considered for other areas of the project if funding can be secured.

Additionally, the following activities have occurred since the last Geotourism MapGuide Project update:

- The Sierra Nevada Geotourism web page has received a make-over that presents clearer graphics and a modified web-map that loads with more speed than the previous page;
- Twelve “Virtual Tours” have been added to the website, including Mark Twain speaking from his book, “Roughing It”. The virtual tours have been built by “V-Tours, Inc.” and funded by the Nevada Commission of Tourism as well as other destination cities and sites;
- An introductory video to the website has been produced by Convergence Media featuring well-known television personality, Doug McConnell;
- A hand held application for mobile phones has been developed by Old Town Creative. This app will reflect the assets on the MapGuide and use GPS to inform visitors of nearby Geotourism destination sites.
- The Sierra Nevada Geotourism Partners have been instrumental in the formation of a National Geotourism Council with participation from Geotourism projects across the country.

The North Sierra/Cascade nomination phase will close at the end of the summer and the regional geocouncil will meet in September to review nominations. The culmination of this nomination phase will mark the completion of the “basic construction” of the website and mark a transition towards marketing and fine tuning the content. Even though the website will have been constructed, nominations will continue to be accepted at any time to maintain a constant infusion of fresh content. The geocouncils from all four Regions of the Sierra will continue to stay organized and will meet occasionally to review new nominations and act as forums to organize and support geotourism. With the website constructed, the roles of the geocouncils will shift to maintaining, promoting, and expanding the website.

As completion of the website draws near, the Sierra Wide Geocouncil (SWC) and project management partners are looking ahead and developing multiple approaches to increase exposure and use of the website by visitors and partners. Also, several opportunities have been identified to improve the website by adding functions, tools and more content. Implementing an annual marketing plan and pursuing additional project elements will require continued commitments of time and money from partners and geocouncils. Aggressive goals have been set by the project partners to ensure the project yields a positive return to the region, and will warrant additional investments to maintain and market the project.

In support of previous statements, further development and marketing of The Sierra Nevada Geotourism MapGuide Project is identified as a significant component of the "Promotion of Sustainable Tourism and Recreation" focus in the SNC's draft Strategic Plan.

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.