

THE CHEROKEE CULTURAL TOURISM PROGRAM

Seeking a Balance Between Authenticity and Economic Development

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Abstract. The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma is developing a cultural tourism program that is far-reaching, both geographically and in its potential social, cultural, and economic impact. To inventory, restore, interpret, and protect significant historic and cultural places, the program is constantly seeking a balance between the inherent tensions of maintaining authenticity while developing marketing opportunities. An example of this challenge is the Trail of Tears, the most painful of memories in the community's history, yet the most identifiable and iconic when considering branding the program to attract tourists. This presentation will discuss the process for developing this ambitious program in a way that respects and promotes the identity of the Cherokee people through the active participation of the tradition bearers, such as elders, storytellers, and artists, while attracting national and international visitors to the Cherokee's home in modern-day Oklahoma.

1. Vision

Chief Chad Smith of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma has a vision for his people that builds on the Cherokee people's past experience to achieve a sustainable future. Chief Smith's vision for his people is, "The Cherokee Nation shall achieve and maintain an enriching cultural identity, economic self-reliance, and a strong government." He aims to achieve this vision through the following mission statement:

The mission of the Cherokee Nation is "ga du gi," working together as individuals, families, and communities for quality of life for this and future generations by promoting

confidence, the tribal culture, and an effective sovereign government.

To implement this vision, the Cherokee Nation established a cultural tourism division to develop programs that communicate the cultural identity of the Nation and help sustain the economic self-reliance of its people. Before we explore this program, it is worthwhile to briefly revisit the history of how the Cherokee people came to be in Oklahoma and some of the broader challenges Native people have faced since Europeans set foot on North American soil.

2. Cherokee People in Oklahoma

Cherokee culture thrived for thousands of years in the southeastern United States before European contact in the 1500s. In the 1830s, gold was discovered in Georgia. The European settlers began to covet the Cherokee homelands, and a period of Indian removals began to make way for more white settlement. In 1838, thousands of Cherokee men, women, and children were rounded up and marched 1,000 miles to Indian Territory, known today as the state of Oklahoma. Thousands died along what became known as the Trail of Tears. In Indian Territory, the Cherokee soon rebuilt a democratic form of government, churches, schools, newspapers, and businesses, which continued up through Oklahoma statehood in 1907. The Cherokee Nation is the second largest, and some say the largest, American Indian tribe in the United States, with more than 200,000 tribal members. Almost 70,000 of these Cherokees reside in the 7,000-square-mile area of the Cherokee Nation, which is not a reservation but a jurisdictional service area that includes almost fourteen counties in northeastern Oklahoma.

3. Native Identity and Stereotypes

Before we look further at the cultural tourism program of the Cherokee Nation, I ask you to consider, for a moment, what immediately comes to mind when you hear the word “Indian” or “Native American.” In many cases, the images and thoughts that materialize are bound within a EuroAmerican frame of reference, and, in turn, the negative and clichéd often supersede the positive and genuine. Common understandings of Native culture are often grounded in:

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- History textbooks that present Native Americans as a defeated people
- Hollywood's pop culture: from John Wayne to *Dances With Wolves*
- Alcoholism, impoverishment, and casinos

Conflict and struggle are often the central elements in these types of knowing. Yet what is largely missing is a depth of understanding. When most people think of the history of North America, they think of a relatively recent history. "Ancient" is a word associated with the pyramids of Egypt and the Paleolithic cave paintings of southern France, but ancient is rarely a term related to America. Yet, Native people and their ancestors are very much an ancient people. The temporal depth of their experience on the land is profound and thousands of years old. The stories and events of that past are not ancient history to Native people; they are as real and vivid as if they happened just yesterday. Therefore, this greatly affects and challenges the process of interpretation of Native stories and history by the descendants of the colonizers. Conflict and struggle are often the central elements in these types of knowing. This is one of the greatest challenges facing the creation of a Native American cultural tourism program, as there are inherent differences in expectations, perceptions, and realities from whichever perspective one looks.

4. Strategic Planning for Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is tourism that enhances or sustains the character of a place—its culture, heritage, environment, aesthetics, the well-being of its residents—and provides a meaningful visitor experience. Cultural tourism requires strategically addressing economic development needs, partnerships and community collaboration, interpretation and storytelling, resources management, site planning, and marketing.

The Cherokee cultural tourism program is organized around these six components.

- Economic development: Economic development and financial analysis
- Community: Stakeholders, partners, and staff
- Interpretation: Identity, stories, education, exhibits, and programming

- Resources: Historical, archaeological, cultural, natural, and recreational
- Site planning: Aligning resources, programming, interpretation, and infrastructure
- Marketing: Analyzing and understanding market demographics; aligning programming with markets, branding, and advertising

However, none of these areas can be developed or implemented in isolation; the development of a successful program requires maintaining a delicate balance between all six components. When these components are developed in harmony with one another a synergy develops that can transform the individual resources into a new and cohesive whole. Strategic planning and disciplined, thoughtful implementation is the key to a successful program.

Successful, sustainable growth of the cultural tourism program requires a clear process—a strategic, staged process which provides an opportunity to evaluate progress and success, ensures systematic decision-making, provides accountability throughout the process, and allows for adjustments in decisions based on accumulating information. This cycle continually calls for revisiting the program's mission, vision, and principles ensuring that as the program develops it reinforces, rather than erodes, the foundation.

5. Trail of Tears

This framework for decision making can now be applied to one specific resource, a resource that has the capacity to revitalize the spirit of the people whose heritage and identity is so closely entwined with it.

The Trail of Tears is one of the most tragic and shameful episodes of U.S. history. The physical places associated with the trail confront us with making decisions about how something so shameful and painful from our past should be integrated into a tourism program that seeks economic development without diluting the story, or being at risk of exploiting heritage for economic gain.

To tell a painful story to people who pay a fee to hear that story is not exploitive. When my family visited Robben Island, South Africa last year, we never questioned paying a fee to enter the place, understanding that staff and properties have to be maintained. Where the risk lies in ensuring a balance between economic return and

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cultural identity is in altering or twisting stories to tell visitors what you think they may want to hear, or sanitizing or mythologizing a story by over-simplifying the circumstances and their meaning. We should not be afraid to make people feel uncomfortable, without preaching or talking down to them.

The Illinois Campground is one of three disbandment camps for the Trail of Tears located within Cherokee Nation's jurisdictional area. It is currently farmland in private ownership. Even with power lines overhead and a sewage plant at the edge of the property, the place is powerful and compelling, some would say haunting. It probably contains remarkable archaeological resources, but I would argue that the true power of this place lies in its very existence as open space by the creek where the survivors of the long removal march stopped and realized this would be their new home in a strange land. Only a few people know of the significance of this place—hundreds drive by it daily completely unaware of what it represents and could reveal. The place is a metaphor of the recent history of indigenous people who have been made invisible on the American landscape. It is also iconic and therefore hugely powerful in how the Cherokee people choose to preserve, reclaim, and interpret this place and all it represents as their own. To ensure that the revitalization of this place will contribute to the revitalization of the spirit of the people, authenticity and economic development must work hand in hand—be in balance.

A preservation management plan for the Trail of Tears is proposed. The trail followed several routes, both on land and water, through the southeastern United States and all the way to the current Cherokee Nation. The development of a preservation and management plan for portions of the trail within the Cherokee Nation jurisdictional area will allow this complicated resource and its associated sites to be considered and overseen in a comprehensive manner that will enable the best possible stewardship of this important resource. Active participation by the Cherokee people should be key in the development, preservation, and interpretation of this significant resource as a tourism destination. The nature of the interpretation and the story that is told throughout the trail must be consistent with and true to the legacy of the Cherokee people.

The message or interpretation of the trail, as with any Cherokee site that will be developed as part of the cultural tourism program, will be part of a larger branding effort.

6. Branding

Successful branding is emotionally rewarding to consumers and financially rewarding for the business. For the Cherokee Nation, it was agreed that the brand should communicate truthful and distinct characteristics of Cherokee culture but make every effort to choose images that may be understood to a wide audience. The following criteria were proposed to guide brand development:

- The geographic location of significance is northeast Oklahoma
- The time period of significance post-dates the removal from the southeastern United States and places the Cherokee people very much in the present
- Cherokee history is the story of cyclical renewal and rebirth; the Cherokee experience has been marked with periods of calm and success followed by conflict resulting in some form of resolution.
- Language of identity; the culturally distinct Cherokee language and syllabary reinforces cultural identity

Themes to avoid including:

- Imagery or messages associated with a location or tradition irrelevant to the Western Cherokee story
- Imagery or messages that perpetuate stereotypes of Native Americans, e.g., a “red man,” user of the tomahawk, frightening and warrior-like
- Images of the Cherokee that are non-Cherokee but relate to other Native people, e.g., use of feathers

7. Integrating Marketing and Economic Development

Good branding and marketing are key to developing a viable, sustainable cultural tourism program. Cultural tourism is a venue in which economic development takes place by attracting visitors to experience a community’s unique culture and related resources. In order to attract visitors these resources need to be preserved, managed, and interpreted; this requires dedication, planning, good management practices, and financial commitment. Entrance fees and some related sales may generate minimal return, but the real economic benefit to the community manifests itself in new business growth, job creation, an expanded tax base, and a strengthened cultural pride and identity.

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The program in itself is not meant to be economically profitable, but it is an effective tool for strengthening the economy. The first benefit takes the form of the economic opportunities that develop to support the needs of the visitor. These include lodging, food and drink, and other entertainment. Money from these services in turn provides jobs and opportunities for small businesses, and stimulates the economy by expanding the local tax base.

In contrast to efforts to attract firms from elsewhere using subsidies or other incentives, a small business network would initiate and cultivate business aspirations of Cherokee entrepreneurs. A small business network can support new and existing businesses with a range of tools, such as providing legal and technical assistance, and mentoring opportunities for young entrepreneurs.

The other significant benefit of a successful cultural tourism program comes in the form of heightened community and cultural pride based on strengthened cultural identity. If the visitor travels for an authentic experience of Cherokee culture, then the ground is fertile to develop Cherokee arts and crafts and to provide a venue for the next generation to tell the story of the Cherokee experience in new and dynamic ways.

8. Maintaining Authenticity While Developing Market Opportunities

To ensure that the necessary services are developed to support the needs of the visitor, it is important to understand how tourism businesses and infrastructure are developed, how they impact cultural resources, and how they are conceived and integrated into the local economy. This can be a crossroad for the success of the project. For if the associated businesses are not developed and marketed with sensitivity to the resource, it can minimize or even destroy the authenticity and actually weaken the cultural pride and identity that should be one of the key goals of any cultural tourism program.

The first, and most common, method of market development is an organic approach in which the primary funding and focus is on developing individual historic resources, but the participation of the surrounding community is loosely promoted subsequently through a series of meetings where people are encouraged to embrace the spirit of the resources and to respectfully integrate the interpretive themes and messages into their various services. However, there is no formal

structure to control the entrepreneurial growth that would occur. Those who defined the original message of authenticity can only hope for the best as local entrepreneurs, chain hotels and restaurants, and other attractions take advantage of a developing market. Imagine again the haunting landscape of the disbandment camp at the Illinois Campground, only now with an enormous billboard just outside the limits of the property, advertising the world's largest water park.

The second method of development is a top down approach as exemplified with Disney and other types of large purpose-built resorts and tourist attractions. In this model, virtually all services and facilities are designed and controlled first from the drawing board and then from the boardroom. This method ensures a cohesive message, experience, and appropriate facilities, but usually lacks reality and therefore authenticity. More importantly, in order to have the control needed to maintain a consistent message and development, one needs to retain ownership, and ownership ultimately retains profits. The programs that have the most cohesive message and integrated facilities most often seem to lack authenticity, and view the local population as a workforce to manage rather than a community of partners.

This is the challenge. In order to maintain authenticity, there needs to be some level of strategic planning and control on development to ensure continuity and sensitivity in all of the individual messages and imagery of each service. However, in order to have true economic development that stays within the community, the services and infrastructure need to be owned and operated by local businesses,

To address this challenge, a third approach was proposed which strives to integrate the control and cohesion of the purpose-built developments but applies those key controls within a local free-market economy. This is accomplished by expanding the planning process to include a clear overarching marketing and development strategy for the entire region. A storefront-style cultural tourism center would be established in the heart of the tourism district. Its primary role would be to provide an open door approach for interacting with local businesses, calming concerned citizens, and directing potential new business to the various community and economic resources available. The other key role such a business center would play is to encourage, educate, and award certification to small businesses that agree to market in a fashion that is sensitive to the resources and the vision and purpose of the overall cultural tourism program.

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The six key components to safeguarding authenticity while providing market opportunities within a cultural tourism program are:

- Establish a neutral authority to serve as a review agency, such as a Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, to ensure that all cultural resources are protected or treated in an appropriate manner.
- Establish a Main Street program to oversee the integrity and design of the community center.
- Incorporate zoning laws that are in alignment with the goals and values of the cultural tourism plan
- Establish a storefront cultural tourism office to serve as a meeting place, educator, and clearinghouse for all community redevelopment and business needs.
- Establish a small business network to educate, coordinate, and subsidizing the marketing messages of local tourism-specific businesses through incentives and information.
- Review all new tourism-related businesses within the context of the missions, principles, and five-step review process outlined of the strategic plan.

9. Program Success

Ultimately, the success of the program, or any cultural tourism program, is dependent upon four key factors:

- Always keep sight of the big picture—think about the program as more than a few interesting museums, sites, or tours, but as a cohesive whole
- Maintain the desire and ability to implement a community process that will bring stakeholders together around a common vision and approach
- Commit to long-term thinking that never loses sight of who you want to attract and what this audience will demand
- Dare to dream and realize the possibilities

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