

Cherishing the Work of the Ancestors: Community Strategies for Sustainable Archeological Tourism

Participating Museums and Staff:

- Tribal Museum of San Gabriel Pueblo, San Gabriel, New Mexico
Mr. Joseph Santos, VP for Development & Outreach
- Museo Tulum, Republic of the Yucatan, Mexico
Mr. Carlos Ortiz, Director

In cooperation with:

- Town of Durango, New Mexico, Chamber of Commerce
- Village of Ciudad de Los Cielos, Yucatan, Mexico

Requested MCCA Grant Amount:

\$75,000

Proposed Project:

Rationale

Archaeologists value Native sites throughout the Americas as intellectual resources; they feel the contextual information in these sites can tell important stories of human behavior over an enormous period of time. Among modern Native peoples, there is no single corresponding "Indian attitude" toward archaeological sites and archeology. Some specific Native cultures believe strongly that ancient sites are associated with the spirits of ancestors and should not be disturbed in any way. Others feel no particular spiritual connection between their living communities and ancient ruins but have distinct practical concerns over access and economic exploitation of sites.

Despite the diversity of their underlying belief systems, however, Native peoples and archeologists must all be concerned over the impact of uncontrolled and unsustainable tourism at ancient sites. Accelerated destruction of sites by looting, most often motivated by greed, or even by inadvertent damage due to resource exploitation or recreation threatens the very continued existence of ancient sites throughout the Americas.

San Gabriel Pueblo, New Mexico is situated near an enormously rich trove of Ancestral Pueblo rock art. All of the art is sacred to the San Gabriel people but much of it is on Bureau of Land Management rather than Pueblo lands. Recently, the nearby Town of Durango has developed a thriving off-road adventure tourism industry on BLM lands. ATV tourism by inexperienced or incautious drivers is badly damaging ancient pictographs and sites. This non-sustainable tourism is a source of great concern to the San Gabriel community.

Outlying the Mayan town of Tulum are many cenotes, or deep natural limestone wells. These cenotes are critical to both ancient and modern Mayan cultures both as sources of

water and as spiritual sites. Recently, a thriving cave-diving industry with international reach has developed around the cenotes. Left uncontrolled, this dive industry has the potential to become a source of severe archeological looting. Further, little of the tourism revenue is flowing through from the diving community to improve the lives of local Mayan farmers and villagers.

Through this project, the Tribal Museum of San Gabriel Pueblo in the United States and Museo Tulum in Yucatan, Mexico will work with Native communities as well as non-Native businesspeople and entrepreneurs together to compare any current activities the two locations are undertaking to preserve these sensitive ancient sites; to build a consensus concerning the importance of protecting ancient sites as well as develop practical, community-based strategies to this end; and to develop long-term strategies for promoting sustainable tourism.

Activities

Museum professionals from the Tribal Museum of San Gabriel Pueblo and the Museo Tulum will use their ties to the community to assemble a “stakeholders group” composed of Native and non-Native people in each community with a spiritual and/or economic interest in local ancient sites. Through Skype, a free Internet teleconferencing platform, the two groups will brief each other on the issues in their communities and strategies each community has developed for promoting tourism in a way that protects sites.

Participation of both a US and a non-community is critical to the success of the project. In both San Gabriel/Durango and in the Tulum area, relations between indigenous and non-indigenous groups are not always smooth. Issues such as who should control access to ancient sites and who controls their meaning and use have in the past divided indigenous and non-indigenous people in each community.

Having the two “stakeholder groups” serve as advisors/coaches for the other for each other is key to the success of this project. As the two groups learn about one another’s situation and brainstorm strategies to encourage tourism in a way that accommodates outside interest in local ancient sites, brings income into the community, and respects Native spiritual beliefs, they will have the chance to form a group identity. This cohesion of purpose is expected to break down their internal Native/non-Native divisions.

Then, using the relations of trust built as they worked together to help others, each group will return to the challenges of protecting sites in its own community with new ideas and increased goodwill. For each “stakeholder group”, the final goal will be to create a preservation action plan for their own community that incorporates the ideas of their partners abroad as well as their own experience. Finally, this plan will be vetted by their foreign partners for critique and further suggestion.

Following the initial implementation of the plans, Native and non-Native representatives from each group will travel to their partner’s country for a public forum to discuss successful strategies for collaboration. These forums will take place in conjunction with local indigenous gatherings. The US forum will be held in conjunction with the Talking Stick Film Festival in Santa Fe in April 2010. The Mexican forum location and date are TBD.

Community Outreach Activities

In each community, several specific activities will be scheduled to bring the indigenous and non-indigenous communities together outside formal project meetings. These will include joint potluck dinners, reciprocal visits to town government and indigenous council meetings, and interviews with town and tribal radio stations.

Outputs

The chief output of the project will be a sustainable archeological tourism action plan for each community that commands the support of both indigenous and non-indigenous stakeholders. Each plan will include medium- and long-term goals that may require new resources or extend beyond the scope of this project, but it will also include inexpensive, short-term activities that can be implemented in the last phase of the project.

Outcomes

The desired outcomes of the project include:

- increased mutual understanding between the peoples of San Gabriel/Durango and Tulum
- increased awareness among non-Native stakeholders in Durango and Tulum of indigenous spiritual beliefs regarding ancient sites,
- improved communications and collaboration between Native and non-Native peoples in each community, and
- concrete strategies and tools that the people of San Gabriel Pueblo and the Town of Durango in New Mexico and the people of Tulum can use to educate tourists about the importance of ancient sites and way to interact with them responsibly.

Themes

The project directly addresses the theme of Sustainable Tourism and indirectly addresses the themes of Volunteerism and Biodiversity/Cultural Diversity.

Project Timeline:

May 2009	Research; Phase I: Selection of Forum Participants in San Gabriel/Durango and Tulum
June – August 2009	Dialogs; Phase II: Facilitated Skype dialogs between communities to share situation, perspectives, goals, concerns strategies
Sept – Nov 2009	Planning; Phase III: Creation of brochures, educational signage, advisory councils, and other strategies for mitigating impact of archaeological tourism while preserving economic development
December 2009	Presentation and critique of draft plans via Skype
January – April 2010	Implementation; Phase IV: Each community implements strategies proposed and refined
March – April 2010	“Stakeholder Group” representatives travel to their partner’s community for public forums
May 2010	Evaluation
June 2010	Reporting