



The mission of the Tennessee Overhill is to preserve and promote the natural, cultural, and historical resources of McMinn, Monroe, and Polk counties through cultural tourism.

Background

In 1990 the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development (TDTD) announced that Tennessee was chosen as one of four states to participate in the Heritage Tourism Initiative and would, in turn, choose four state pilot projects for the three year program. Phones immediately began to ring across the mountains between communities in McMinn, Monroe, and Polk counties. We were already talking to each other about the challenge of marketing our museums and historic sites and this appeared to be an opportunity to address the problem. The Etowah Arts Commission was charged with developing the project proposal and brought on the first partner, the Southeast Tennessee Development District, to assist with the application. We were overjoyed when our project was chosen, but the initial euphoria was soon replaced by fear that local governments might not provide the essential funding that was required in order to complete the three year pilot program. But support did come from each of the counties, as well as several municipalities and civic groups. And the City of Etowah donated free office space in the L&N Depot. The Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association (TOHA) formed at that time to guide the project. Governed by people from across the three counties, TOHA named the pilot area “Tennessee Overhill” in honor of the Overhill Cherokees who lived here prior to statehood.

Heritage Tourism Initiative

The Heritage Tourism Initiative was created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to demonstrate that arts, preservation, and the tourism industry could collaborate to develop sustainable tourism programs. This proved to be timely because TDTD was looking for new products to sell to a changing market. They were also searching for ways to stimulate tourism in rural parts of the state. TDTD viewed this initiative as a vehicle to accomplish both.

The Situation in 1990

Tourism activity existed in our three counties, but it was limited mostly to large attractions like the Lost Sea and Ocoee River. New museums and cultural programs were developing but strained budgets left little room for paid advertising. The entire southern half of the Cherokee National Forest is located in the Overhill, providing the infrastructure to attract outdoor enthusiasts, but the Forest had little in the way of funding for marketing. Those factors set the stage for a productive partnership that continues today.

Guiding Principles

The Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association (TOHA) embraced the principles of heritage tourism as defined by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and continues to follow them today. They are authenticity, interpretation, preservation, finding the fit between the community and tourism, and collaboration. TOHA added another principle, which is strengthened local capacity. After decades of dependence as company towns, we recognized the importance of local communities taking charge of their own destiny.

Charting a Course: Marketing and Development

The Heritage Tourism Initiative was designed to follow a process that included resource identification, investigation of opportunities, planning, product development, marketing, and evaluation. The first two years focused on training, technical assistance, research, and product development. TOHA worked with local groups to develop new museums, new events, new publications, and new cultural programs. It became clear that a regional approach would be necessary to successfully market the area to tourists.

Individual counties alone did not possess the critical mass of attractions or support businesses to be considered a destination, but once the assets of the three counties were combined the Tennessee Overhill could present itself as an overnight destination. Our first marketing efforts focused on a theme that could serve as an umbrella for local communities. The “Furs to Factories Heritage Trail” interprets the economic history of the region, from the Overhill Cherokee fur trade through the coming of the mines, mills, and railroads. Later other themes served as centerpieces for regional trails or marketing campaigns. Agriculture, Cherokee heritage, outdoor adventure, genealogy, scenic drives are examples.

Preservation

Product development and marketing were important program elements but we understood that preservation must play a role too. TOHA negotiated the transfer of Starr Mountain from Bowater to the Cherokee National Forest and also took the lead in working to secure federal funding to acquire Fort Armistead. TOHA is actively working to preserve, interpret, and promote the Unicoi Turnpike Trail. In 2002, thanks to a loan from Glenn Springs Holding, Inc, TOHA purchased the Old Line Railroad, a historic railroad built in 1890. After completion of a historical survey, a 20-mile segment of the railroad corridor was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Through an operating agreement with Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum, the Old Line Railroad is now home to the Hiwassee River Rail Adventures. TOHA believes that preservation should extend beyond buildings and landscapes to include the preservation of local folkways and traditional arts. In 1995 TOHA hired a folklorist for three years to identify local art forms and artists and incorporate them into public programs. The program included managing the cultural events for the 1996 Olympic Whitewater Races on the Ocoee River. Work is still ongoing to document and preserve local culture as we continue to discover the rich artistic legacy that is right under our noses.

Today

Things have changed in the Tennessee Overhill since 1990. There are new motels, lodges, cabins, bed and breakfasts and retreats –all fueling more overnight visits. The Cherochala Skyway and Ocoee Whitewater Center both opened in 1996, providing exciting new attractions. River outfitters now offer mountain biking and retail shops. There are new museums and new special events. The Hiwassee River Rail Adventures now run on the Old Line Railroad. Many of the downtowns are working on revitalization programs. We have seen an increase in visitation, increased financial investment in commercial development, and a stronger non-profit cultural sector. To sum it up, the blending of natural and cultural resources across three counties has resulted in a tourism program that makes sense for us. Our assets are matched to tourism niche markets. Financial resources are combined and shared. Most of our new tourism businesses are small, locally owned businesses and TOHA believes this to be a strong advantage. Our history has revealed that dependence on one industry and one business is fraught with danger. Lots of small diverse businesses builds resiliency into our local economy. While we aim to increase community wealth we also do not want to exceed our carrying capacity. As a TOHA Board Member said, “We want some of the people; we just don’t want all the people.” We are blessed to have public lands that we know will be cared for in the future but we still worry about the lack of planning for private development. We hope the Great Smoky Mountains Sustainable Tourism Summit will signal the beginning of a conversation about how we can sustain our region economically, socially, and environmentally.

Partners

TOHA is blessed with many partners who are willing to invest time and money to help preserve and promote our part of the world. Due to the limitations of space in this document we have only listed agencies that provided grants for special projects: Southeast Tennessee Development District, Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, Tennessee Arts Commission, Humanities Tennessee, Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Tennessee Historical Commission, Tennessee Department of Transportation, USDA Forest Service, Appalachian Regional Commission, USDA Rural Development, National Endowment for the Arts, North Carolina Arts Council, East Tennessee Foundation, The History Channel, Tennessee Valley Authority, Southeast Tennessee RC&D Council.