

# The Thirteen Principles of Geotourism

Written by Laura Von Harten

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When people are talking about what makes the Lowcountry special, “sense of place” is a phrase that gets tossed around a lot.

Sense of place is difficult to define. Most residents would agree though, that whatever “sense of place” is, the Lowcountry has it. And we want to keep it.

There’s a similar concept that is less familiar, but just as important: integrity of place. Integrity of place is so important, in fact, that it is the first of the Thirteen Principles of Geotourism.

Geotourism is a term coined by the folks at the National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations. They define it as “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.”

They also developed a set of guidelines to help communities become better places to visit – while at the same time becoming even better places to live. I see it as being like a Ten Commandments of Tourism. Or maybe it’s more like the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Tourism Destinations.

Whatever you want to compare it to, communities that make a commitment to the Thirteen Principles of Geotourism are, in theory, on the road to becoming more sustainable, more compassionate and more just, while also -- we mustn’t forget this part – making more money.

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The Thirteen Principles are found in a document called the Geotourism Charter, which was drafted by National Geographic in hopes that it would be adopted by forward-thinking governments. It is my hope that the Geotourism Charter will be adopted by all of the counties in the Lowcountry region, starting with Beaufort County.

Here's how the proposed Beaufort County charter would read:

## Geotourism Charter of Beaufort County, South Carolina

WHEREAS the geotourism approach is all-inclusive, focusing not only on the environment, but also on the diversity of the cultural, historic, and scenic assets of Beaufort County,

WHEREAS the geotourism approach encourages citizens and visitors to get involved rather than remain tourism spectators, and

WHEREAS the geotourism approach helps build a sense of regional identity and pride, stressing what is authentic and unique to Beaufort County,

THE UNDERSIGNED parties to this Agreement of Intent commit to support these geotourism principles, to sustain and enhance the geographical character of Beaufort County—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents:

**Integrity of place:** Enhance geographical character by developing and improving it in ways distinctive to the locale, reflective of its natural and cultural heritage, so as to encourage market differentiation and cultural pride.

**International codes:** Adhere to the principles embodied in the World Tourism Organization's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism and the Principles of the Cultural Tourism Charter

established by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

**Market selectivity:** Encourage growth in tourism market segments most likely to appreciate, respect, and disseminate information about the distinctive assets of the locale.

**Market diversity:** Encourage a full range of appropriate food and lodging facilities, so as to appeal to the entire demographic spectrum of the geotourism market and so maximize economic resiliency over both the short and long term.

**Tourist satisfaction:** Ensure that satisfied, excited geotourists bring new vacation stories home and send friends off to experience the same thing, thus providing continuing demand for the destination.

**Community involvement:** Base tourism on community resources to the extent possible, encouraging local small businesses and civic groups to build partnerships to promote and provide a distinctive, honest visitor experience and market their locales effectively. Help businesses develop approaches to tourism that build on the area's nature, history and culture, including food and drink, artisanry, performance arts, etc.

**Community benefit:** Encourage micro- to medium-size enterprises and tourism business strategies that emphasize economic and social benefits to involved communities, especially poverty alleviation, with clear communication of the destination stewardship policies required to maintain those benefits.

**Protection and enhancement of destination appeal:** Encourage businesses to sustain natural habitats, heritage sites, aesthetic appeal, and local culture. Prevent degradation by keeping volumes of tourists within maximum acceptable limits. Seek business models that can operate profitably within those limits. Use persuasion, incentives, and legal enforcement as needed.

**Land use:** Anticipate development pressures and apply techniques to prevent undesired overdevelopment and degradation. Contain resort and vacation-home sprawl, especially on

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coasts and islands, so as to retain a diversity of natural and scenic environments and ensure continued resident access to waterfronts. Encourage major self-contained tourism attractions, such as large-scale theme parks and convention centers unrelated to character of place, to be sited in needier locations with no significant ecological, scenic, or cultural assets.

**Conservation of resources:** Encourage businesses to minimize water pollution, solid waste, energy consumption, water usage, landscaping chemicals, and overly bright nighttime lighting. Advertise these measures in a way that attracts the large, environmentally sympathetic tourist market.

**Planning:** Recognize and respect immediate economic needs without sacrificing long-term character and the geotourism potential of the destination. Where tourism attracts in-migration of workers, develop new communities that themselves constitute a destination enhancement. Strive to diversify the economy and limit population influx to sustainable levels. Adopt public strategies for mitigating practices that are incompatible with geotourism and damaging to the image of the destination.

**Interactive interpretation:** Engage both visitors and hosts in learning about the place. Encourage residents to show off the natural and cultural heritage of their communities, so that tourists gain a richer experience and residents develop pride in their locales.

**Evaluation:** Establish an evaluation process to be conducted on a regular basis by an independent panel representing all stakeholder interests, and publicize evaluation results.

I'd prefer that the Lowcountry not have to consider itself as a tourism destination. But the reality is that we are, and it's not enough just to cope with it. We need to embrace the fact that we are a tourism destination if we are to shape our destiny as a sustainable community,

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