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INTRODUCTION: THE CALL FOR A NATIONAL CONVERSATION

By James Vaughan

The Forum on Historic Site Stewardship in the 21st Century, held in April 2007 at Kykuit, was a significant event for historic site professionals, giving leaders in the field the chance to air concerns and propose responses. This special issue of Forum Journal will first present the report produced after that conference. Then I'll introduce the contributors to this issue of Forum Journal, who are adding their voices to the ongoing conversation that meeting has inspired.

SUSTAINABILITY OF HISTORIC SITES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE CALL FOR A NATIONAL CONVERSATION

Final Conference Report, April 2007

Over the past decade much has been written about declining attendance at our nation's historic sites. At a time when the market for heritage tourism, cultural tourism, and eco-tourism is rapidly expanding, historic sites are drawing fewer and fewer visitors. At the very time when Americans are developing historical amnesia and the need for improved teaching of American history in the schools is critical, historic sites seem to have lost their way. How should the historic site profession (that unique cross section of public history and museum studies) respond to this situation?

In April 2007 a small group of experienced historic site professionals and representatives of professional associations and

selected foundations that support historic sites gathered at the Pocantico Conference Center at Kykuit near Tarrytown, N.Y., for several days of thoughtful discussion about the issues confronting historic sites. For the most part we analyzed and debated how to enhance the sustainability and relevance of historic sites in America's future. The goal of this gathering was to initiate a serious conversation throughout the historic site community of professionals and volunteers about the choices we must make to ensure that our sites provide maximum value to our society and thus remain relevant and useful for future generations. The outcome of the conference was a call for critical discussion throughout the field, and a call for dramatic but responsible changes in some of the most basic professional assumptions and practices that guide the way we do our business. It also urged more experimentation with new models for historic sites and innovative pilots for new, more responsible standards for collections care.

The discussions were stimulating and thoughtful, and there was, in the end, a large degree of consensus about the issues that are limiting long-term sustainability. There was not quite as much agreement about how these issues should be addressed, although even here, the differences were often matters of degree rather than direction.

The assembled professionals recognized that they do not speak for a single association or institution and were not authorized or

empowered by any organized body to issue findings, but there was a strong consensus that we need to communicate our deliberations to the larger historic site community by issuing a “Call for Change” that would carry these discussions to a wider audience.

Although these findings and recommendations were submitted to all Kykuit participants for comment and correction, this does not mean that every participant agrees with every finding and recommendation.

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A CALL FOR CHANGE

America’s historic sites offer unique opportunities for learning, for reflection, for inspiration. At their best, they can be powerful places that provide great value to their communities. They can offer programs, services, and experiences that are relevant to many of the most pressing issues of our day. America’s historic sites should be places to nurture the human spirit.

Despite this potential, however, many of America’s historic sites are experiencing declining attendance, financial instability, and poor stewardship, and they are increasingly viewed by their communities as irrelevant and unresponsive to the societal changes around them. Those of us who

gathered at Kykuit urge all of us who are engaged in this important work of historic site stewardship to seriously consider the following findings and recommendations.

FINDINGS

- Successful stewardship of the nation’s historic sites requires financial sustainability.
- Sustainability begins with each historic site’s engagement with its community and its willingness to change its structure, programs, and services in response to the changing needs of that community.
- The long-accepted heritage tourism business model is not a sustainable business model for most historic sites.
- Serving the needs of the local community (not the tourist audience) is the most valuable and most sustainable goal for most historic sites.
- Attendance figures are not the most valid measure of the positive value of the historic site experience or the site’s impact.
- Many professional standards and practices in the historic site field were borrowed from the museum community and, in practice, often deter creativity and sustainability at historic sites.
- New standards of stewardship for historic sites should be modeled to reflect the distinct nature of these places.
- Responsible site stewardship achieves a sustainable balance between the needs of the buildings, landscapes, collections, and the visiting public.

- Caring for the buildings, landscapes, and collections are the means but not the ends of the work of historic sites.
- Innovation, experimentation, collaboration, and a broad sharing of the resulting information are essential to achieving historic site sustainability on a broad scale.
- Undefined collecting coupled with a lack of professional standards and inconsistent practices regarding deaccessioning are an impediment to change and sustainability.
- Over-reliance on program, challenge, and matching grants can reduce long-term sustainability by shifting focus away from operating and endowment needs and by encouraging the growth of non-mission related programs.
- Returning sites to private ownership with proper easements can be a positive means of assuring long-term stewardship.
- Foundations and granting agencies should refocus their philanthropy away from short-term program support to grants that assist sites in building their capacity to sustain themselves for the long term, including general operating support and endowment.
- Foundations should be supported in their efforts to terminate repeated “drip support” to historic sites to focus their support on sites taking positive steps to achieve long-term sustainability.
- Those who educate and develop the leadership of historic sites should amend their curricula to better equip students to deal successfully with rapidly changing realities.
- The major professional associations should encourage, promote, publicize, and recognize experimental and successful models of change and sustainable practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The AASLH Task Force on Standards should seek to establish an appropriate stewardship balance for the needs of buildings, landscapes, collections, and the public.
- The AASLH Ethics Committee should prepare a positive statement to guide the transitioning of historic sites from public use to private stewardship.
- The National Trust and others should experiment with responsible situational standards for collections, buildings, and landscapes at pilot sites that could serve as models for others, and they should publish their findings as appropriate.
- The profession must develop new measures, beyond attendance, that document the quality of visitor engagement at sites and the extent of community outreach beyond the bounds of historic sites.
- Historic sites must no longer think of the “velvet rope tour” as their “basic bread and butter” program and must generate more varied ways to utilize their remarkable resources to enrich people’s lives.
- The historic site community must reaffirm the importance of these places for our nation’s future and redefine our mission in terms of that future rather than the past.

- Selected sites should develop a pilot process to streamline deaccessioning and share their results with the field.

AFTER THE KYKUIT CONFERENCE: EXPANDING THE CONVERSATION

A primary objective of the Kykuit conference was to continue and build upon the conversations about historic site sustainability through presentations at professional meetings and through the publication of articles illuminating the findings and recommendations or suggesting new models and solutions. Eight such articles are published here.

In “Historic House Museums: An Embarrassment of Riches?,” Marian Godfrey from The Pew Charitable Trusts discusses the situation of approximately 300 historic house museums in Greater Philadelphia from the perspective of a foundation that has been engaged in assisting them in the search for sustainable solutions over several decades.

In “Crisis or Transition? Diagnosing Success at Historic Sites,” Max A. van Balgooy, the director of interpretation and education at the National Trust, makes the case that we are too focused on admissions numbers as the measure of our success. Instead, he suggests that we need to refocus on more qualitative measures of visitor satisfaction and on measures of financial condition.

David Donath, president of The Woodstock Foundation, suggests in “Funding the Fundamentals,” that many historic sites have drifted far from their original core values and mission, leading to the costly reality of deferred maintenance. He calls for an increased commitment to preservation and stewardship as central values that

should be adequately funded in our annual operating budgets.

In “Cultural Heritage Tourism Trends Affecting Historic Sites,” Amy Webb and Carolyn Brackett, director and senior program associate for the National Trust’s heritage tourism program, attempt to explain why attendance at historic sites is declining even as the heritage tourism market grows. Informed by extensive market and demographic research, they offer their thoughts on how historic sites could better serve the expanding heritage tourism market.

At the Kykuit conference there was considerable discussion about how professional standards and practices appear to stifle creativity and innovation. Katherine Kane, executive director of the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, in Hartford, Conn., who has served on both AAM and AASLH committees on professional standards and best practices, offers her perspective on “The Impact of Standards on the Sustainability of Historic Sites.” She also describes efforts now underway to reduce the impact of some of the unintended consequences of professional standards.

Among those who see a prosperous future for historic sites — indeed, “A Golden Age for Historic Properties” — are consultants John and Anita Durel. Their article, which was distributed as a “thought-provoking” piece to kick off the Kykuit conference, argues that the cultural tourism business model is not working for most historic sites. They recommend instead a business model that is much more focused on the local community. A longer version of the article appeared in *History News*, Summer 2007. It has generated as much attention in



Participants at the 2007 Forum on Historic Site Stewardship in the 21st Century at Kykuit in Tarrytown, N.Y. Photo courtesy of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

the field as it did at Kykuit. It's worth a careful read.

We close this special issue with articles about two National Trust Historic Sites that demonstrate two different community-focused business models.

David Young, in "The Next Cliveden: A New Approach to the Historic Site in Philadelphia," describes the process by which Cliveden shifted its focus and mission from the traditional tourist-based model to one of real community engagement. Over a period of several decades Cliveden's neighborhood had changed dramatically but Cliveden had not, until the recent decision to alter its mission, programs, and target audience.

Jim Kern, in "Brucemore: A Cultural Center for Cedar Rapids," describes a site located

in an area not known for extensive tourism that set out from the beginning to serve the local population. The variety of programs is truly remarkable and the site's commitment to its community has produced one of the most sustainable and most beloved historic sites of the National Trust.

We hope you will find this issue of *Forum Journal* to be informative and that it will stimulate you to join this important discussion about the future sustainability of historic sites. Join the conversation at <http://blogs.nationaltrust.org/preservationnation/>.

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