CHAPTER 12

TOURIST DESTINATION

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"Is Hawai'i becoming less attractive as a tourist destination?"

A 1993 *New York Times*/CBS News poll asked people on the mainland where they would want to go for a dream vacation. Hawai'i was named more often than any other place—in the world! Add the fact that Hawai'i visitor counts rose steadily from 1984 through 1990 and it is natural to conclude that its attractiveness as a tourist destination has not diminished.

But there is a cloud overhead. Despite the poll's "dream results," the reality is that Hawai'i's visitor count is down—way down. Visitor spending reached a peak of $10.63 billion in 1991 and declined by 10.1 percent, to $9.56 billion, the following year. Is this drop merely a reflection of tough times in our two biggest markets, California and Japan, or is there more to it? Is it possible that the reality of Hawai'i today no longer lives up to the dream?

If Hawai'i's attractiveness is declining, then something had better be done about it. After all, tourism is the engine that drives our economy. If it starts to sputter, and can't be tuned up quickly, all of us are in trouble. As local newspaperman George Chaplin once said, "A sound economy doesn't assure a high quality of life, but a shaky or failing economy almost certainly precludes it."

Those of us who care about preserving paradise for future genera-

Capacity to cope. For a population of just over 1 million to be host to over 6 million guests each year—about 150,000 per day—requires a special effort if dreams are to be fulfilled. As our tourist count and expenditures decline, we have to wonder if Hawai'i is beginning to show signs of inability to cope with such a high volume of guests in one location. The Gold Coast of Australia has about the same population as Hawai'i but only about one-quarter the number of visitors. As a result, its coping capacity is in better shape and Australia is now taking market share away from Hawai'i. If the reality there is a better match for visitors' dreams, it suggests that they are not near the saturation point.

As the ratio of guests to hosts in Hawai'i increases, overload will show itself in a deterioration of physical appearance, damage to fragile environments, crowding in once-secluded areas, and increased crime. Traffic will be congested, and it will be increasingly difficult to be nice to so many strangers.

If local citizens feel that their taxes are already too high, they may resist further tourist-oriented government expenditures. What may appear to be isolated cases of unmanageable stress may be symptomatic of tourist overload.

The solutions probably lie in either spreading or sharing the impact. We can do this by creating controlled access to locations around the Islands and attracting carefully targeted tourists. For example, we might want to seek out tourists who are easy to manage, that is, those who wish to observe but not intrude and who can contribute more to the tax collections than they take to support.

Game plan. Of course, it's not simple to locate such "angels," but we're more likely to do it with a game plan than without one. Public interests and private gains must be reconciled or balanced. Industry and government strategies must be cooperative in their design and coordinated in their execution. At the present time, and without a plan, government, the hotel industry, and the community are focusing on potentially conflicting goals. It is difficult to be a good host if everyone pretty much goes his or her separate way.

What is needed is agreement on mission. Australia and New Zealand have strategic management plans for their tourist industries. Both are public documents with agreed upon objectives and measurable outcomes to the year 2000. Hawai'i needs such a strategic focus, one that is professionally objective and ruthlessly realistic about how much can be achieved.

One way to know how well we should be doing is to engage in benchmarking. This requires much more than simply asking people where they would travel to realize their dreams. It requires detailed analysis of where they actually are going and why. In addition, we cannot plan properly until we know what our competition is up to and whether or not it's working for them. It is essential that Hawai'i's performance be benchmarked by comparing tourist travel from newly industrializing countries—those with high-growth economies, econo-

mies with trade surpluses, and firm currencies. Monitoring the strategies and market share achieved by our competition is likely to have a better long-term payoff than promotion to repeat visitors.

It is estimated that over 80 million additional people between the ages of 20 and 40 will emerge as powerful consumers in the Pacific during the next decade. There are already a million millionaires in the People's Republic of China alone. A well-to-do travel-hungry class of business people are sure to emerge from what used to be the Soviet Union. The long-term health of Hawai'i's tourist industry *requires* that we tap into these markets. It simply won't happen by itself: those halcyon days are over.

Product development. There must be more emphasis on product development and less reliance on price-cutting or special promotions. Among the new product options are nature-based tours, health-related tourism, and educational opportunities that fit the interests and time constraints of our visitors. Already there are a few (too few) excellent examples of this: Waimea Falls has a new emphasis on teaching visitors about daily life in Hawai'i before contact with the West; whale-watching businesses on Maui have teamed up with the University of Hawai'i Sea Grant Program to create an experience that's both educational and exciting; Sea Life Park has replaced the silly prattle about "Fat Fred" with a presentation that shows sensitivity to its own interference with the animals' natural habitats; Kualoa Ranch has developed leadership training programs that provide physical as well as a psychological challenge to participants in a movie-maker's dream environment.

Less emphasis should be placed on growth in numbers and more effort devoted to growth in yield to the community and to the industry. This strategy will have implications for human resources policy. "High-yielding" tourists increasingly will come from different cultures. This might lead to less reliance on tipping as an incentive to staff and more attention to training and development. Investment in skills should be a higher priority than new buildings and other physical amenities. This applies particularly to small businesses.

Mindless focus. Finally, we must at all costs avoid the "if we build it, they will come" philosophy. A mindless focus on "supply" leads nowhere, fast. It's the "demand" side that needs attention. We've got to better understand why travelers want to come, where they will come from, what alternatives they have, and how many of them we can successfully host. Being someone's dream means nothing unless we can make it come true.

"I GOT IT! HOW ABOUT A STUDY TO FIND OUT WHY THEY DON'T COME HERE..."


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