



BLACKSTONE VALLEY, USA

DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP AWARD

WINNER 2008

CASE STUDY

Think 'tourism destination' and the image that comes to mind is not likely to be a place known for its polluted rivers, abandoned textile mills, poverty, high unemployment and disenfranchised local communities. Yet that is exactly what the Blackstone River Valley was when the **Blackstone Valley Tourism Council** was launched by local community members in 1985, in an effort to help revitalise a downtrodden economy, along with deteriorating buildings and abandoned factories, and rebuild pride in local communities.

The nine communities along the Blackstone River Valley in Rhode Island once formed the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution.



It was here, in the late 1700s, that descendants of the Mayflower Plymouth Colony worked in the first textile mills, built alongside a powerful river – the Blackstone –

that created the industrial revolution in the new world, gave rise to the first labour unions, and fuelled the American industrial economy. For more than 100 years, the 'hardest working river' in America, as it was dubbed, was at the heart of the age of industrial factory work.

In the process, the Blackstone River became the first polluted river in the Western Hemisphere. Eventually, the Blackstone Valley was left a wasteland of pollution, and the former factories, historic buildings and houses were left to fall apart as the area descended into poverty and economic decline. It stayed that way until 1985, when the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council formed and saw tourism potential "to lead the nine Rhode Island Blackstone Valley corridor communities with sustainable tourism that protects the well-being and values of local residents, enhances community character, improves the environment, education, culture, heritage and aesthetics, and supports appropriate sense of place development."

Twenty years after its launch, the Council was able to bring together and galvanise a multi-stakeholder process to achieve major programmes in destination revitalisation and sustainable development.

CASE STUDY



One of the first tasks was to lobby the US Government to declare the Valley a National Heritage Corridor due to its crucial role in US history. The Council knew that if that declaration could be secured, it would open up federal funds to support heritage restoration and a river clean up. In 1986, Blackstone Valley was declared a National Heritage Corridor. At the same time, the Council launched a local ‘Take back the river’ campaign. Today, there are fish in the river again, tourists kayak on it, canoe on it, fish in it, and the Council has helped to support the creation of several protected areas along the river, including 18 miles of cycling and walking trails, small museums and interpretative signage.

The Council worked with area developers and local authorities to give tax incentives to developers to invest in the abandoned mill factories to restore the historical architecture, rather than knocking the buildings down. Old warehouses and giant former textile mills now house artists’ collectives, playhouses, pubs and restaurants, all of them required to adhere to developing the buildings while maintaining their historical architecture.

In addition, in order to track economic benefits from tourism in the destination, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council conducts an annual Tourism Satellite Account. This helps them determine tourism spending and economic gains towards economic development goals, as well as communicating the full value of the sustainable tourism approach to destination policy-makers, businesses and community members.

As a result of their success, the governor signed a declaration to develop the entire Rhode Island tourism economy according to sustainable tourism principles. In announcing the declaration, the governor claimed that if they could achieve successful sustainable destination development in the Blackstone Valley, it could be achieved anywhere, referring to sustainable tourism in the state. Today, 100,000 tourists annually pass through the doors of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Visitors’ Center, which highlights places to see and stay in the Blackstone Valley.

To help educate tourists on their destination stewardship efforts, a 37-page booklet, *The Green Visitor Guide: Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory*, was written by, and is given out free of charge at, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Visitor Center. Blackstone Valley has since become one of the premier tourist attractions in Rhode Island, now hosting over 1 million tourists a year. These tourists generate US\$475 million in expenditure and create more than 6,400 jobs.

Blackstone Valley demonstrates that carefully planned and managed sustainable tourism can help revitalise local economies and enhance communities aesthetically, socially and environmentally.

