

Saranac Lake Assessment

Updated November 2008

Intro Statement

Saranac Lake sits in the ideal position to be a hub for those wanting to explore the rich paddling and power boating experiences of the Adirondacks. From a Saranac Lake base, one can explore hundreds of miles of paddling trails among some of the most gorgeous scenery in North America. The creation of Adirondack Park has preserved this opportunity in a way that spawns countless recreation opportunities for those seeking time on the water – and, in doing so, has set the stage for a sustainable tourism economy for Saranac Lake.

Saranac Lake is about more than water. It is the center of the Tri-Lakes where all the roads come together. It is also about hiking, arts, history and wellness. It can be symphony to blue grass. These, added to the draw the water presents, will enable Saranac Lake to build a rounded tourism experience.

Unfortunately, at least for now, nearby Lake Placid offers a broader selection of more up-to-date lodging opportunities along with a much more diverse selection of dining. Lake Placid also provides ample retail opportunities and has places one can rent canoe and kayak gear. Indeed, when driving through Lake Placid one is taken with the number of vehicles bearing canoes and kayaks parked along the shopping strip or in hotel parking lots.

Saranac Lake isn't as up to date as it might be in its selection of lodging with necessary amenities and dining, but there is a clear community initiative to "make over" Saranac Lake so that it is oriented to river and lake frontage. If this initiative results in opportunities to lodge and dine "on the water" and in other great settings then Saranac Lake has huge potential to grow revenues from its existing base of recreational travel. If the area along Lake Flower and the Saranac River through downtown were to become pedestrian friendly, visually stimulating, and filled with great retail and dining opportunities, Saranac Lake will, potentially, see a huge economic return.

There are several tiers of canoe and kayak recreation and paddling events. In the first tier the visitor brings his/her own (or borrowed) craft to the region. Those paddlers leave behind economic impact from lodging, dining, and retail – however they are also more prone to longer voyages involving camping. In the second tier, paddlers rent kayaks and, often, pay to be dropped off and picked up, generating additional jobs and business opportunities. The third tier of paddlers is even more rewarding to the economy. These paddlers, likely to be novices, want to be guided. They feel enough out of their element to want the safety of a talented guide out on the water (or in a remote campsite). And, they benefit by getting lessons and natural history interpretation. They still buy lodging and dining, spend money in retail and patronize other tourism experiences.

Saranac Lake has an active arts and crafts community. That presents, in itself, an incredible opportunity to boost regional revenue while underscoring local lifestyle. If Saranac Lake can coax a larger percentage of its visitors to sleep there, and if the waterfront redevelopment draws pedestrian explorations (especially during long summer evenings) then authentic local Adirondack arts and crafts become prime attractions – especially if those artists are on hand so visitors can experience the creation of art. And, the Saranac Lake’s art community includes music, theater and culinary arts – all with potential to relate to tourism.

Snapshot of Current Tourism

This is an evolving document – more will be added as it comes to the table through research and community discussion. The following lists are not prioritized.

Note:

We have lumped jet skis with power boats for this discussion.

Infrastructure

- Lakes and Rivers
- Canoe and Kayak Rentals and Guiding/Drop-off Services
- Power boat launches
- Lodging associated with boat launch site (Ampersand Bay)
- Lake launch sites for both powered and paddled boats
- Trails
- Tubing
- Lake Colby and beach
- Riverwalk
- Saranac River
- Ampersand Bay
- Mt. Pisgah
- Winter Carnival and Ice Castle
- Physical geography
- 140 buildings on National Historic registry
- Positive hometown appeal

Experiences

- Power boating
- Paddled boating (river and lake)
- Sailing
- Hiking
- Mountain Biking
- Skinny Tire Biking of Scenic Byways
- Cross Country Skiing
- Downhill Skiing
- Snowshoeing
- Snowmobiling
- Ice Fishing
- Rock Climbing
- Camping
- Touring to see great Adirondack views
- Motorcycling
- History
- Arts and Culture
- Winter Carnival and Ice Castle
- First Night
- Rugby
- Pendragon Theatre

Products

- Paddling Race
- Canoe and Kayak Rentals and Guiding/Drop-off Services
- Lodging
- Some retail
- Some dining
- Pendragon Theatre

Gaps

- Adequate lodging (enough rooms and current rooms) oriented to water
- Dining oriented to water and in other great settings
- Pedestrian access that connects dining, retail, and waterfront
- Pub/nightclub for 30-somethings
- More Experiences need to become products
- Hospitality and Skills

Seasons

When the ice is off the rivers and lakes, there should be demand for water-based tourism.

Winter holds much promise, with ice fishing, snowshoeing, skiing, and snowmobiling.

Quality

The water-based experiences that one can have based from Saranac Lake are world class. There is some concern that mixing powered and paddled vessels diminishes the quality, especially for paddlers. Need for a no-wake zone.

Rates

Competitiveness

Like Wilmington, Saranac Lake delivers a lot of experience to people who lodge and dine in Lake Placid. That can be overcome with additions and upgrades to current lodging infrastructure – and new dining opportunities, especially along lake and river fronts. Further, if Saranac Lake can turn more of those great experiences into products, and develop its own brand within the regional brand, it should compete very effectively.

Positive and Negative Impacts

- The volume of outsiders who use boats has changed the sense of solitude that locals enjoy on the water.
- Undecided about tourism – an identity crisis/want more but don't want to be Lake Placid.

Benefits

Locals have opportunities to pursue outdoor lifestyle related to tourism

Visitors (demographics)

- The paddling sports and other outdoor recreation tend to attract patrons who have some level of personal fitness, and a broad spectrum of ages.
- Saranac Lake has a niche market on college orientation programs during August.

Visitor Satisfaction

People seem really enamored with the set of water-based experiences and other outdoor recreation experiences one can have around Saranac Lake. A fair percentage vote with their wallets and prefer to lodge and dine in Lake Placid.

Potential New Products and Experiences

- Lodging
- Dining
- Retail
- Organized artisan retail complex
- Saranac River fly fishing

Community Wants

- Recruit new residents – especially younger families
- Protect lifestyle and hometown community character
- Economic stability
- Sustainability
- Accessibility (remove physical barriers to tourism and doing business)
- Highlight the riverfront and waterfront
- Business and job opportunities – especially those related to environmental and biological training (note that there are a number of graduates in the area with tourism/natural history foci)
- Diversity of visitor experiences
- Undecided about tourism – an identity crisis/want more but don't want to be Lake Placid
- Lake Placid is “open for business” – Saranac Lake is not giving that message

Community Concerns

- Second home buyers chasing locals out of housing market
- Can people raising families afford to be a part of the Saranac Lake community?
- Undecided about tourism – an identity crisis/want more but don't want to be Lake Placid

Visitor Perspectives

Products and Experiences that Contribute to a Sense of Destination

- Kayaking and Canoeing
- Power Boating
- Hiking
- Camping
- Touring to see great Adirondack vistas
- Arts and Culture
- Outdoor Recreation – including winter
- History

Products and Experiences that build on Essex County/Adirondack Sense of Destination

- Kayaking and Canoeing
- Power Boating
- Hiking
- Touring to see great Adirondack vistas
- Arts and Culture
- Outdoor Recreation
- Winter Events

Products that Conflict with Destination Appeal

The entryways into Saranac Lake, from all directions, are less than inviting.

What Makes This (or Would Make This) a Destination

- All the focus on outdoor and water recreation is great
- More (and more current) view and experience oriented lodging and dining would add to the appeal
- Lodging that is water-oriented AND away from traffic would be a great asset
- Bringing the arts community to a pedestrian area along a waterfront would be wonderful
- Omit parking on both sides of the street
- Curb appeal
- Visitor impression of invitation

Visitor Satisfaction (what contributes, what detracts, what is needed)

Other Issues from Local Input

Saranac Lake has a plan in place to revitalize downtown by refocusing on the Saranac Riverfront and the north shore of Lake Flower. That plan, if successful, will contribute greatly to helping Saranac Lake move from a recreation economy to a tourism economy.

Summary

Saranac Lake already has a solid constituency for outdoor and water-based recreation. It will take the development of competitive lodging and dining (competitive with Lake Placid) to turn that recreation into a healthy tourism economy. Having those great lakes and other outdoor recreation opportunities protected by the Adirondack Park opens the door to a sustainable economy that can be engineered to produce jobs and business opportunities for locals while protecting local lifestyle. Local people have a strong orientation to the outdoors – and many have the potential to have jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities related to guided tourism.