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# The Other Maine Guides: How the Humanities Create Sense of Place and Enrich Tourism

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# The Other Maine Guides:

## How the Humanities Create Sense of Place and Enrich Tourism

by Kreg T. Ettenger

### INTRODUCTION

In a pithy 1933 poem, American humorist and newspaper columnist Don Marquis imagined a conversation between the universe and his own alter ego, an irascible, typewriting cockroach named Archy. In the poem, Archy challenges the universe by saying that it seemed to know little about itself, to which the universe replies that it was trying to forget many things—“such as cockroaches and poets.” Archy (who jumped on individual typewriter keys and therefore could not type capital letters) offers this response:

you are wrong contended archy  
for it is only by working up  
the most important part of yourself  
into the form of poets  
that you get a product capable  
of understanding you at all  
(Marquis, “Poets”)

This poem says something essential and important about the nature of art and the role of artists. The universe is out there, in all its beauty and awesomeness, but it is artists (poets among them) who make sense of it, who define it, who give it context—who make it mean something.

This fundamental idea can help us to understand the connections between place and people, and between a tourist destination such as Maine and the people who want to visit it. No travelers go somewhere without some idea of what they will find once they get there. For the growing number of people who travel to experience culture and a sense of place, expectations are often formed by the work of writers, artists, poets, musicians, historians, and other representatives of the humanities. Such writers and artists might be travelers themselves, presenting their experiences as tourists. They could be residents who were first drawn to a place by the magical qualities they now seek to express. Or they could be lifelong residents, descendants of generations in the same location,

who feel a need to tell others about the special place they call home.

Place, as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan once said, is not just a geographical term. Place connotes experience, meaning, and context. Tuan explained this concept by referring to a conversation that was said to have taken place between physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg as they visited Kronborg Castle, a famous tourist site in Denmark. Bohr remarked, “Isn’t it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together.... None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely” (Tuan 1977: 4). Tuan suggests that humanistic accounts, wherein “intricate worlds of human experience are recorded,” inform our understanding and enrich our experience of place (1977: 7).

As we explore the connections between the humanities and public policy in Maine, it is worthwhile to consider their complex and vital relationship to tourism, Maine’s hallmark industry. For one thing, the creative arts enhance the overall experience of visitors by offering a rich variety of encounters involving multiple senses, perspectives, and sensations. In addition, the arts and humanities help create an image of Maine that acts as a magnet to visitors. Stories, art, photographs, music, crafts, and other interpretations of Maine have created a sense of place that is at least as important to Maine tourism as the iconic natural places, wildlife, and scenic beauty that visitors often equate with the state.

The value of tourism to Maine is well known, but the role of the humanities in helping create this important sector is less understood. Studies show that many visitors participate in some form of cultural activities while here, ranging from visiting art museums and historic sites to participating in festivals or watching a performance. If culinary tourism is included as a part of cultural tourism, then the numbers grow considerably (Maine Office of Tourism 2014). But visitor surveys do not tell the whole story of the importance of the humanities to Maine

tourism. For example, creative works play a critical role in generating images of Maine that attract visitors to the state, or that deepen their connection to Maine and lead them to return and to encourage others to visit. Film, television, literature, and other products of popular culture create a pervasive and compelling image of a destination and can generate significant tourism traffic (Kim and Richardson 2003). Visitor surveys also miss the growth potential of cultural tourism in the state. Asking people why they come to Maine is different from asking them why they would come—in other words, what elements of tourism, as yet undeveloped, might lure them to Maine instead of other destinations with similar natural and cultural assets, such as Scandinavia, Canada, Alaska, or the Pacific Northwest?

In this article, I explore several themes related to the intersection between the humanities, cultural tourism, and public policy in Maine. I use two examples from Maine's rich literary and artistic tradition to show how this canon can be drawn upon to create cultural tourism products and how such products respond to the desire of many travelers for authentic and meaningful experiences. I then describe several ways in which the humanities and cultural tourism can become better integrated in Maine. Among other suggestions, I propose that the humanities can and should play a critical role in the education of Mainers about tourism, whether or not they are (or intend to become) employed within the hospitality industry.

## ...cultural tourism remains an area of relatively untapped resources

Framing tourism in humanistic terms, drawing upon its diverse fields to help us to understand the layers and complexities of this rich subject, can improve understanding and reshape decision making about tourism. The humanities offer perspectives on tourism that can make better graduates, better employees and employers, better hosts, and even better citizens. Incorporating the humanities into tourism education in particular holds real promise to meaningfully improve public policy and the quality of life in Maine. Before

discussing this topic further, however, I want to explore how the arts and humanities enrich cultural tourism in Maine, and have done so for generations.

### CULTURAL TOURISM IN MAINE

Tourism is widely known as one of the most important industries in the state, as well as worldwide (UNWTO 2014). Unlike manufacturing and some service industries, tourism cannot be outsourced or relocated. Its strength and resiliency come from its connection to place, and the Maine brand, built on natural beauty, livability, and authenticity, continues to attract over 30 million visitors every year (Maine Office of Tourism 2014). Within the general tourism sector in Maine, though, cultural tourism remains an area of relatively untapped resources. Others have written previously in this journal about the status and potential for cultural tourism in Maine. Calhoun (2000) makes a strong case for investing in cultural tourism as a form of community development and for the critical role that arts and cultural organizations play in this form of tourism. Calhoun concludes that cultural tourism needs to be better promoted in Maine and suggests that products such as the Maine Art Museum Trail, Maine Maritime Heritage Trail, and Maine Garden and Landscape Trail provide good models for connecting visitors with Maine's cultural heritage (see also Routhier 2015). In this issue of *Maine Policy Review*, Schmitt (2015) describes the Downeast Fisheries Trail, a network of 45 sites along the Downeast coastline in Hancock and Washington counties that demonstrate the fisheries heritage of local communities. Griswold (2002) notes that compared to other states its size, Maine has a disproportionately large number of authors, publishers, and literary works. This, she says, contributes to a strong sense of regionalism, which in turn draws visitors to the state. In terms of policy, though, "the question is not how to nurture a sense of place but instead how to encourage its translation into visible forms of cultural expression" (Griswold 2002: 83).

To explore these issues further, I consider two examples of how the arts and humanities can create a demand for, and help define and interpret, tourism experiences in Maine. The first is the quintessential account of a journey to Maine to experience wilderness, Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*. The second example is the Winslow Homer studio in Scarborough, Maine, a site recently developed by the Portland Museum of Art as a tourist

attraction. From a tourism perspective, these two individuals and their works represent major forces that attract people to Maine and provide polished lenses with which to view our state.

### LITERARY TOURISM: THOREAU, TRAVEL, AND THE MYTH OF MAINE

Literary travel is a well-established form of tourism that attracts millions of people each year to sites associated with authors and their works (Herbert 2001). Perhaps no literary work about Maine has had more of an impact than Henry David Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*, which Cramer (2009: xviii) describes as "writer's art presented in the guise of unadorned travel narrative." *The Maine Woods* has provided many readers with their first introduction to Maine, especially its wild character and, of course, the fabled Mount Katahdin. At the University of Southern Maine, my own institution, professors have used this text to develop a course that includes a three-day excursion to the mountain. Even more ambitious was a 16-day canoe tour organized in 2014 as part of the 150th anniversary celebration of *The Maine Woods* by Maine Woods Discovery (Allen 2015; <http://www.mainewoodsdiscovery.com/150thoreau/>). The trip involved a small group of experienced paddlers completing a 325-mile loop including Moosehead Lake, parts of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, and the East Branch of the Penobscot, all areas explored by Thoreau during his trips to Maine. Other paddlers joined the trip for shorter segments, similar to trips designed around Thoreau's journeys offered by several guiding companies in Maine.

Part of what made this trip special was the composition of the core group of paddlers, which included Maine guides, members of the Penobscot Nation, and several well-known Thoreau scholars. According to Mike Wilson of the Northern Forest Center, one of the key organizers of the trip, the main motivation for these scholars was the "opportunity to personally see and to feel the places and experiences that informed and inspired one of America's great philosophers."<sup>1</sup> Like other forms of experiential cultural tourism, the Thoreau-Wabanaki tour was a means of connecting with an inspiring figure from the humanities, in this case someone "whose writing about nature and wilderness has inspired so many and helped set the stage for the modern conservation movement." Wilson points out that Thoreau was himself inspired by his Penobscot

guides, who in addition to navigating routes and keeping Thoreau safe and fed, "filled Thoreau's mind and imagination with the stories, legends and traditions of the people who experienced the Maine Woods before him."

Thoreau's mythic and vivid descriptions have been an important driver for tourism in the state for 150 years, and there is no sign that they have lost their grip on the collective imagination. Building upon the success of the Thoreau-Wabanaki Tour, Maine Woods Discovery created a new section of its website describing the trip and promoting wilderness experiences in Maine's North Woods. The Maine Office of Tourism devoted the fourth issue of its multimedia publication *The Maine Thing Quarterly* to a photo essay of the tour that promotes nature-based tourism in the state. As they say in the issue, "From whitewater rafting and scenic kayaking to moose watching and rock climbing, there's a guide and a transcendental experience just waiting for you.... Whatever makes you happy and helps you transcend whatever needs transcending" (<http://mainequarterly.com/thoreau/>). Several Maine guides, including those who helped lead the Thoreau-Wabanaki Tour, now offer Thoreau-inspired trips. These and other businesses have clearly benefited from the literary legacy of *The Maine Woods*, just one example of the potential economic impact of the humanities in Maine.

### WINSLOW HOMER AND THE PURPOSEFUL ART TOURIST

While many artists find their muse in the places they visit, these sites are often already well-established tourism attractions known for natural beauty, graceful architecture, or existing collections of art. For example, northern New Mexico was already both a tourism destination and a haven for artists by the time Georgia O'Keeffe arrived in 1929, thanks largely to the promotional efforts of people such as entrepreneur Fred Harvey and designer/architect Mary Colter (Weigle 1992). In addition to artists being tourists themselves and following in the footsteps of other travelers, many have played critical roles in the creation of tourism destinations, including iconic New England sites such as the White Mountains of New Hampshire (Cenki 2006). Rather than separate artists from other classes of travelers, therefore, we benefit from seeing the long historical relationship between art, tourism, and regional identity as richly interwoven.

Maine's coast has provided inspiration for artists for many generations and has also long been the site of a thriving art industry based in part on the tourism economy. One of the most successful recent examples of art tourism in the state was the purchase and restoration (to period authenticity) of Winslow Homer's studio on Prouts Neck in Scarborough by the Portland Museum of Art, and the opening of it for visitor tours. Homer's art remains the apotheosis of visual depictions of the Maine coast, representing for this rugged region what Thoreau's Maine Woods is for the inland forest.

Homer, whom many think of as a "Maine artist" (see Kinghorn [2015] for a discussion of this term), was well traveled by the time he reached Prouts Neck, having spent extended periods in France and England along with Boston, New York, and Virginia. He continued to travel and paint in the Caribbean, Canada, Florida, and the Adirondacks long after he settled in Maine (Johns 2002). Not only was Homer an itinerant traveler, but according in an article by Ken Johnson (*New York Times*, November 12, 2012), he played a role in the development of Maine as a tourism destination, investing in several hotels on Prouts Neck with his brother and developing other property for summer homes.

The Winslow Homer Studio Tour is an example of a tourism attraction designed for purposeful cultural tourists, "who seek deep experiences that they actively research and plan for on subjects that interest them personally" (McKercher 2002). To protect the site and reduce the disturbance to neighbors, as well as to maintain a sense of intimacy for visitors, tour groups are limited to 10 people twice a day. According to the Portland Museum of Art's website, the tours "celebrate the artist's life, encourage scholarship on Homer, and educate audiences in some of the lesser known facts about the artist.... Guests leave the Studio not only with a fuller appreciation of Homer the artist, but a deeper understanding of Homer the man—how he saw the world, lived his life, and found his inspiration" (<http://www.portlandmuseum.org/homer/visit>).

Reviews of the tour on TripAdvisor show that well-educated visitors appreciate the experience of visiting Homer's studio and admiring the views that inspired his work. The following excerpts illustrate the reactions of several visitors who would likely meet McKercher's criteria for purposeful tourists.

[T]he studio is well restored and a gem; so many artists' studios have been lost. Regardless, the

enduring experience is really in the view, the magnificent rocky coastline and views across to islands and land with which we associate Homer's Maine work. [Nancy 2005, "Feeling Homer's Maine Coast," May 19, 2013]

I'm a big fan of Winslow Homer's art, especially his watercolors, and a visit to his studio was a glimpse into the inner life of this very quirky man.... The experience of visiting his studio is not as visceral as visiting Cezanne's studio in Aix-en-Provence, which is still full of the objects he immortalized in his still lifes, but it helps to reveal the extent of Homer's genius. [LAWatercolor, "Eccentric Aerie for an American Icon," October 30, 2014]

For tourists who seek a deeper connection with art and artists, the experience of visiting an artist's studio with a small group of like-minded enthusiasts can be more rewarding and memorable than standing in line to view a popular exhibit.

#### LINKING THE HUMANITIES, TOURISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION

As Maine prepares to enter a new phase of tourism in which we compete with international destinations for highly informed and wealthier travelers, a humanities education may be critical for those who interact with such purposeful cultural tourists on a regular basis. International tourists in particular often expect tourism workers to be cosmopolitan and conversant about an area's artistic and literary traditions (Johnson 2014). A broad education that connects the humanities with travel and tourism is therefore a prudent strategic policy goal to prepare Maine residents for the future. According to a report by Maine's Creative Economy Council (CEC) (2006), Maine is lacking a comprehensive approach to developing the state's cultural tourism workforce, and a similarly comprehensive marketing plan for this sector of the tourism industry.

Higher education is a part of this problem and can be an important part of its solution. In the CEC study, the authors found that 75 percent of those in Maine's creative economy workforce had at least a bachelor's degree. In fact, many occupations in the cultural tourism sector require college degrees. The payoff is that these jobs tend to pay more than the average worker in



Maine receives. What might help is to link these creative occupations more closely with the tourism industry so that they can build upon each other to create more opportunities for workers in both sectors. If the humanities represent a “bridge to empathy” for tourism students, as Caton (2014) suggests, then tourism may represent a bridge to economic opportunity for Maine humanities students and graduates.

There are numerous ways in which the humanities can build greater ties with cultural tourism in Maine, to the benefit of both the creative economy and the tourism sector. I will describe several tangible and practical ways these linkages can be strengthened.

First, Maine can promote the creation and development of artists, writers, and other producers of tangible cultural heritage, who will produce art and other products that visitors can buy before, during, and after their visit to Maine. In addition to the direct revenue that such arts-based commerce provides, many of these cultural products create additional demand for tourism in Maine by generating public interest in and knowledge of the state and creating curiosity about its landscapes, people, history, and culture. Research shows that cultural products such as films and books can have “particularly powerful effects on destination image formation” because they are seen as unbiased sources of information about a place, unlike traditional marketing techniques (Kim and Richardson 2003: 217).

The Maine Film Office (MFO), which encourages filmmakers to come to Maine, is a division of the Maine Office of Tourism. But there is little on the MFO website to suggest that Maine tourism officials recognize the potential of films set in Maine to actually generate tourism demand. While filmmaking can be big business, most films shot in Maine tend to be small, low-budget productions. Even in the best case, how does a million dollars or so in production costs injected into the local economy compare with the millions generated every year by the *Field of Dreams* site in Iowa, or the more than \$100 million spent every year by tens of thousands of visitors to New Zealand who say their main reason for going is to see where *The Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* movies were filmed? The real money comes from cultural products that entice people to come to Maine, and this depends on creative types who can write stories, make films, and create art with Maine as their focus—or at least that capture some essential aspect of Maine. What Thoreau and Homer accomplished through the pen and the brush, creating dramatic,

mythical images of Maine that drew visitors in their times (and still do today), will likely be done in the future by filmmakers and multimedia artists.

A second strategy is the training of professionals in areas such as cultural documentation, preservation, interpretation, and curation, as well as in business and organizational skills that allow them to lead and run Maine's various arts and culture institutions. Art curators, archivists, historians, folklorists, exhibit designers, and many others who collect, document, preserve, and interpret cultural heritage and art objects must have formal training. These and other occupations form the backbone of cultural tourism, guiding and operating the institutions that either work at the front line of the visitor economy or behind the scenes to support this sector.

A third strategy involves creating a core of tourism industry professionals who understand Maine's cultural and natural heritage and its literary and artistic traditions, and who can interact meaningfully with, and create products designed for, Maine's cultural tourism visitors. While this goal is directly tied to the study of Maine and other regional cultures, as opposed to the humanities more generally, arts and humanities courses would form the central pillar of such training. The professionals involved would be trained in developing tourism products that appeal to the global traveler who is familiar with cultural attractions in other destinations.

Fourth, the humanities can be employed to create a sense of “awareness, pride and a nurturing spirit” among Mainers for what their state has to offer visitors (Maine Office of Tourism 2014). The humanities can help average Mainers develop their own knowledge and appreciation of the state as a place of adventure, romance, excitement, inspiration, and enlightenment. It is all too easy to take where we live for granted or assume that we know a place simply because we were born or live there. Learning about a familiar place through the lenses of the humanities can broaden and deepen our understanding of that place, adding layers of knowledge that inevitably create a sense of richness and appreciation. This awareness and pride will come out in myriad ways as many parts of Maine reinvent themselves as visitor destinations.

Finally, as an educator in the state university system, I propose creating a new degree that studies tourism in Maine from a perspective that draws largely upon the humanities. This degree could be targeted towards those already working in the tourism industry who would like a college diploma but do not need the business skills of

a hospitality management degree. It could also be attractive to other residents of the state who would like to better understand the role that tourism has played in the development of the place they call home. Finally, if developed as an online degree, it could be of interest to non-Mainers who would like to learn more about Vacationland and how artists, writers, composers and others, many of whom first came to Maine as tourists, have played a critical role in creating Maine's image and sense of place. The humanities offer the disciplinary tools, perspectives, and knowledge to explore these subjects with depth and thoughtfulness. To paraphrase Don Marquis' Archy, the humanities provide a product capable of understanding the universe—or at least our little corner of it.

## CONCLUSION

Henry David Thoreau and Winslow Homer, two of Maine's most famous tourists, were, curiously, as famous for their solitary habits as for their penchant for travel. Even more ironically, their depictions of Maine as a rugged wilderness where individuals could escape the bonds of civilization and connect with their true selves, as well as with nature, helped secure Maine's fate as a tourism destination. Now the state finds itself wanting to appeal to special-interest travelers who bring more value as tourists, staying longer and spending more money than the average tourist. These travelers are seeking "authentic, unique experiences" that match "one's personal identity and values" (Maine Office of Tourism 2014: 16). Many of these tourists wish to do more than just read books and view paintings about Maine. They want to see the world the way their favorite artists and writers saw it, which means visiting the sites that gave them inspiration and fueled their creative drive. They want to experience the places and meet the people who fill their favorite stories, films, and photographs. They also have new tools, including digital media devices, which allow them to connect with places and stories in new and powerful ways. Responding to the growing demand for cultural tourism products that employ new technologies while also protecting the authenticity and sense of place that bring visitors to Maine demands a thoughtful reconsideration of how the humanities inform tourism. This includes educational programming that prepares those who work in the tourism sector, as well as in the large network of related cultural and arts organizations throughout the state.

Given the high expectations of cultural tourists, especially those with the financial means to travel to well-established global tourism destinations, the products created in Maine will have to meet high standards for quality (Vail 2007; Vail and Daniel 2012) and provide a meaningful and well-presented interpretation of local culture and nature (Milliken 2007). And because many cultural tourists are highly educated and knowledgeable about the places they visit, communities and local guides should be prepared to discuss their region's literary, historical, artistic, and other traditions. While not every local resident will need to become an expert on Maine literature, those in the tourism industry will benefit from having at least some level of cultural literacy (Johnson 2014) or literary cultural competence (Herbert 2001) in order to make the experience of cultural tourists more meaningful and satisfying.

Humanities professionals are gifted at and trained in the craft of showing the essence of things. Artists, musicians, writers, scholars, and other humanities practitioners can reveal and interpret the deeper nature of something, whether a place, a person, or a way of life. They often find beauty in the mundane, complexity in the seemingly simple, and basic truths within apparent chaos. With a few strokes of a brush or well-chosen words they can show us the world in new ways, like turning a gem this way and that to reveal all of its facets and brilliance. What the humanities offer is an emotional and even visceral response as we connect what we see, hear, or think with something deep within ourselves. Like an experienced Maine Guide, those in the humanities can take us to new places, teach us new skills, and help us to develop a new and deeper appreciation for the world.

At its best, this is what tourism informed by the humanities achieves: a lasting change to how we see the world and our place within it. At the very least, our view can be broadened and our understanding expanded by the experience. Looking forward, we need to find ways to broaden and deepen the connections between the humanities and tourism in the state so that all Maine visitors can take away deep and meaningful experiences that bring them back again and again and lead them to encourage others to follow, just as Thoreau and Homer did before them. Finally, and perhaps above all, we need to prepare our residents to be culturally savvy hosts who appreciate for themselves Maine's rich literary, artistic, and humanistic traditions and in turn can share these with visitors from away. 🐟

**ENDNOTE**

1. Mike Wilson's blog about this trip is available on the Maine Woods Discovery website: <http://www.mainewoodsdiscovery.com/2014/07/11/maine-woods-rare-opportunity-immersion-nature/>

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