

Mythbusting Part 1: The Who, What, Why, and How of the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau

When you hear the name “Visitors Bureau,” what’s the first thing that pops into your head? If it was the lovely, small visitor info centers in downtown Friday Harbor, Eastsound, and Lopez Village, you are...incorrect. But neither are you alone – that’s the most common misconception about us.

This four-part quarterly series will dispel this and other myths by going behind the scenes and uncovering the intricacies of our day-to-day work, differentiating us from the notable Chambers of Commerce, and diving into our involvement with the Sustainable Tourism Management Plan.

How did it start?

Let’s start with some background. Founded in 1999 as the Business Association of San Juan County, the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau is a non-profit 501(c)6 economic development agency which has served as San Juan County’s and the Town of Friday Harbor’s contracted, locally staffed destination marketing organization since 2003. Over the last 20 years, we’ve evolved into a destination marketing and management organization (DMMO) as we continue to focus on responsible, stewardship-minded tourism via branding and messaging. We partner with the Lopez, Orcas and San Juan Island Chambers of Commerce which provide visitor information services at their locations, in addition to their important Chamber work. We are primarily funded by local lodging taxes and receive additional revenues from our member/partner dues and website advertising.

Let’s dig into the money for a moment. The funding used to promote tourism in San Juan County is collected from visitors who overnight here, not residents. Washington State law strictly limits the use of lodging tax (RCW 67.28.180). Although it is considered public funding, it doesn’t come from residents’ taxes and yet residents greatly benefit from the parks, museums and cultural centers which receive “public” lodging taxes. Lodging tax, which is used to fund tourism marketing and management projects, also helps to keep our local non-profit organizations such as art and historical museums, and cultural and performing arts centers, open. Recipients of lodging tax funds have also included the San Juan County Fair, County Parks, San Juan Island Agricultural Guild, arts, literary, and music events, farmers markets, film festivals, a salmon hatchery, the public restrooms in Lopez Village, and much more.

Who are we?

The Visitors Bureau, like many destination marketing and management organizations (DMMOs) in desirable vacation spots throughout the world, acknowledges the need to put resources towards reducing visitor impacts. As a result, we have evolved from a destination marketing organization to focusing more on destination management and stewardship. Our approach to destination management uses four pillars to guide our marketing and messaging. We know that our quality of life and economy depend on our beautiful environment. The four pillars focus on striking a balance between cultivating a vibrant year-round economy, enhancing and maintaining resident quality of life, protecting our fragile lands and waters, and creating memorable visitor experiences. We believe supporting these four pillars is key to helping the Islands’ tourism industry move forward responsibly into the future.

The Experience Economy

Like it or not, tourism is a top economic driver for San Juan County. Visitors “import” new dollars, which benefit small businesses, non-profits, and residents as these dollars circulate throughout our island

communities. Tourism creates business opportunities and jobs, off-sets Islanders' tax burdens when visitors pay local sales tax, and "subsidizes" a variety of restaurants, retailers, museums, community theaters, farmers markets, and more.

Tourism accounts for approximately 1,500 jobs locally. These jobs range from servers and bartenders, park rangers and tour guides, to owners and managers. Visitor dollars support and sustain an overlooked corps of park service professionals, small business owners, non-profit managers, medical and legal professionals, insurance agents, and service professionals such as contractors, plumbers, and electricians -- all play an integral role in our economy and community.

The marketing strategies undertaken by the Visitors Bureau are split between "paid" advertising, "earned" media coverage, and "owned" social media content. At first glance, those may all seem incredibly similar, so let's break those down a bit more. "Paid" print and online ads target our main feeder market — the Greater Seattle area. "Earned" mentions of the Islands seen in articles in various print and online media outlets are often the result of our support of interested journalists by providing story ideas and opportunities for firsthand island experiences. "Owned" social content are posts or stories on our channels promoting events and new offerings from island locales. We'll dig more into the media aspects in the next column, but let's circle back to advertising for a moment. Our messages are meant to inspire mindfulness, and they're strategically placed in outlets whose readership matches that target — outdoorsy couples and families with a desire to tread lightly in destinations like the Islands and plan a trip for the shoulder seasons. Online ads click through to specific pages on VisitSanJuans.com, like the "[Love It Like a Local](#)" hub, with tips to tread lightly, conserve water, respect wildlife, and minimize waste—helping visitors understand that the reasons to love the Islands are also the reasons to protect them.

With a combined 40+ years living in the San Juans, our staff are active community members dedicated to the health and wellness of these Islands.

Part 2 coming May 8th!