

Mythbusting Part 2: The Who, What, Why, and How of the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau

True or false: The Visitors Bureau is located in downtown Friday Harbor where people can go for maps and information. False. That's the San Juan Island Chamber of Commerce. They run the Visitor Information Center, answering questions once visitors arrive, while the Visitors Bureau works behind-the-scenes to help visitors figure out how to get here, where to stay, what to do, and how to treat our Islands with care.

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.

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 time and resources on destination management and stewardship. Our approach 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 to move forward responsibly into the future.

For more details regarding our background and funding, see Part 1.

Managing Tourism Sustainably

We understand that the Islands' vibrant tourism economy has created challenges as well, including increased impacts on infrastructure, housing, public lands, the environment, and pace of Island life. We understand there must be a balance between our economy, our quality of life, our environment, and our visitors' experiences. We agree that *"We have to be more careful with an Island."* This is why the Visitors Bureau has had a Stewardship Manager on staff since 2004 and has advocated for a tourism management plan for almost a decade.

We began holding Tourism Management Plan steering committee meetings in 2014. However, we soon realized that the best course of action was for the County to manage this planning process, likely by hiring a consultant. Shortly after talks of a Tourism Management Plan began, the Terrestrial Managers Group – land managers from the national, state and county parks, as well as other public lands – began meeting and talking about their challenges, including impacts, capacity, etc. They applied for lodging tax grants and hired a consultant to study these challenges in 2017, perform visitor and resident surveys, and report on solutions in a 2018 [Visitor Study](#). In 2019, the Visitors Bureau applied for a lodging tax grant to fund a County-driven Sustainable Tourism Management Plan that includes the Terrestrial Managers' findings. COVID delayed everything, as you might expect, but the public input Zoom meetings were spread over several weeks last spring. Islanders weighed in and laid out priorities such as infrastructure, land use, regulatory fees, transportation, and education.

Many of the potential education action items are right in the Visitors Bureau's bailiwick, and we have been proactively brainstorming and collaborating on some of these recommendations while the plan is still being drafted. These actions include expanding stewardship messaging to visitors and tour operators, not only through our website and printed materials but also potentially through new signage and social marketing campaigns. Other items involve collaborating with the County Department of Environmental Stewardship to develop a certification program for tourism businesses and non-profits, and expanding shoulder and off-season tourism development and promotion to connect visitors with more local food purveyors, farms, artists, craftspeople, etc. The ultimate goal? Continuing to cultivate a traveler base that will slow down, respect island culture, and appreciate a sense of place.

The draft Sustainable Tourism Management Plan will be released sometime this month for public input, and lay out a shared community vision, goals, and implementation measures to thoughtfully guide tourism in the San Juan Islands, now and into the future. Please participate.

Part 3 coming in September!