



Chapter 3: Making a Living



Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association

For the past three decades, Nantucket has survived mostly on tourism. Although our economy could arguably be divided into five, six, or even eight separate parts, in truth it is vacation dollars that are pumped through all of those sectors and that have allowed the island to prosper. Aside from its obvious impact—money spent in stores, restaurants, and lodging establishments—Nantucket’s appeal as a travel destination fuels the construction and real estate markets which, by adding to the island’s tax base, help fund government agencies and provide employment opportunities. Our seasonal visitors and summer residents generously support island-based nonprofit organizations. Even those few businesses aimed exclusively at year-round residents benefit from tourism, for their customers are also spending dollars earned in the tourist trade. There are exceptions to this, of course, but very few: our economic well-being hinges almost entirely on the island’s appeal to tourists.

Ironically, much of Nantucket’s current prosperity can be attributed to the poverty it suffered in the century after whaling declined. The exodus of people and money from the island during that time not only caused many of Nantucket’s buildings to fall into disrepair but prevented anyone from knocking them down and rebuilding. Even in the years following World War II when most of America began a period of dramatic expansion, moving

The economy of Nantucket, once centered around the whaling industry, turned to tourism in the late 1800s when whaling was no longer economically viable. When the tourists went home, the islanders relied on fishing and agriculture to sustain themselves.



out from traditional urban centers and into the countryside, Nantucket remained economically depressed, slumbering in the past while the mainland charged ahead.

The result was as inadvertent as it was dramatic. Always different, Nantucket by the 1960s was in many ways a time capsule, boasting such a tremendous distinction from the mainland in its appearance that visionaries soon saw preservation as the key to its prosperity. With cobblestoned byways instead of multilaned roads, understated historic homes instead of cookie-cutter suburban developments, and vast tracts of open space, Nantucket as a destination offered quite literally what no other place could. The

combination of historic preservation and land conservation became, and remains, the foundation of our economy.

As the island grew more popular and dollars began pouring back in, however, a trend

emerged that began to alter the economy's course. Although many seasonal visitors stayed in Nantucket's guest houses and inns, a tradition that began

in the late 1800s, more and more visitors wanted to own their own Nantucket vacation homes. As a result, tourism became inextricably linked to construction. In many respects, this was a positive development: unlike a hotel stay, the purchase of a vacation home is a long-term investment and one that all but

guarantees return visitation by its owner. In addition, the advent of a strong construction sector provided a significant boost to our economy.

“The combination of historic preservation and land conservation has been, and remains, the foundation of our economy.”



Nantucket's historic character, epitomized by structures such as the Jethro Coffin house, built in 1686 and now owned by the Nantucket Historical Association, combined with an aggressive strategy of preserving open spaces such as the stunning but fragile barrier beach of Coatue, now owned largely by the Trustees of Reservations, has drawn tourists to Nantucket and formed the basis for the most significant part of Nantucket's economy.



Rob Benchley

Mary Novissino



In other ways, however, the surge in construction posed problems. Even as new homes were being built, the Zoning Bylaw was pushing them into previously undeveloped areas (see chapter 1, “Guiding Growth,” page 39), causing them to consume the open space upon which so much of Nantucket’s appeal was based. More important, however, the linkage between tourism and home building had a profound impact on our housing situation. The advent of the seasonal-rental housing industry turned homes into commodities rather than simply places to live. As new homes began to take on roles once reserved for hotels and inns, they were removed from the supply of housing available to year-round islanders and their value shot up (see chapter

2, “Housing Needs,” pages 51-53). This, in turn, drove up the cost of homes still available to islanders, which drove up the overall cost of living and, ironically, sent more islanders into the building trades since jobs in construction paid higher wages than did those in other economic sectors.

By the late 1990s, Nantucket had undergone a remarkable economic evolution. Originally a town whose success rested on the fact that it had not changed, the island had seemingly become a place where **only** change, in the form of building, could keep its residents afloat. But perpetual change is not healthy for a community whose prosperity is based on preservation: it creates a situation where, if left unchecked, our economy could devour itself.



Joel Russell

The increasing demand for vacation rental houses such as many of these dominating the Madaket landscape, has fueled an economic segment that has benefited Nantucket in the past, but is now ironically beginning to seriously erode Nantucket’s unique historical and environmental character.



Making a Living

Rob Benchley

The Island Today

By conventional standards, Nantucket's economy is extremely healthy. The island in season enjoys virtually full employment, and all of its regular indicators—hotel revenues, merchant receipts, and real estate sales—have been at record levels in recent years. What those indicators do not demonstrate, unfortunately, is that the wealth Nantucket has created has not been distributed in a balanced fashion. While people employed at the top levels of their respective professions have done very well in recent years, the lower tiers of most economic sectors have not seen the same level of prosperity. A widening gap has

Tourism is the lifeblood of the Nantucket economy.

developed between the “haves” and “have-nots:” even as new vacation mansions are built, island residents do the “Nantucket shuffle,” cycling from place to place and living without the economic and emotional stability that comes with a regular home. The average resident's buying power has diminished; many residents work two or three jobs simply to get by. For these people, Nantucket's boom is a distant abstraction: there are more and more houses, yes, but fewer and fewer places to live; more and more jobs, but never enough money to buy a home.



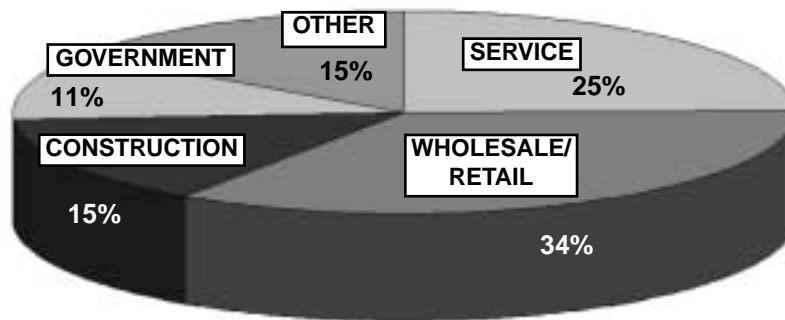
A central problem is that despite the abundance of work available, many jobs simply do not pay well enough to keep pace with Nantucket's cost of living. Of the jobs that do pay well—waiting tables at an upscale restaurant, for instance—many do so only in season and are not available in the slower times of year or pay much less if they are.

This income gap is not the fault of island employers, who have demonstrated a consistent willingness to pay their workers more. Salary increases on island simply cannot match the phenomenal growth of home prices—even as Nantucket wages rose by 3.5 percent a year from 1993 to 1998, the cost of housing rose an average of 15 percent annually. Indeed, the rising cost of living actually places employers at a serious competitive disadvantage, because it escalates the prices they must pay to rent or own property and the wages they must pay in order to attract and retain employees. These costs pass through to the sticker price of goods and services on the island, making virtually any product produced on Nantucket more expensive than a similar item made on the mainland. The cost of shipping an item here is inconsequential compared to the housing-induced labor costs involved in producing it on the island.

For all those reasons Nantucket has come to depend to an excessive degree on construction, even though, statistically, construction does not constitute the largest segment of the island's economy. The two largest sectors of

Nantucket's commercial community are the service sector, which comprises 25 percent of the jobs on-island, and the wholesale/retail sector, which comprises 34 percent. Construction is third (15 percent), and government employment, at 11 percent, is fourth (transportation and utilities, agriculture and fisheries, finance, and manufacturing—all at 15 percent—round out the economy).

The Nantucket Economy Job Distribution



Source: Regional Economic Information System, U.S. Department of Commerce, Regional Economic Models, Inc. (1999 estimates) and FXM Associates

Construction's importance, however, is not based on its size in comparison to other economic sectors. Rather, construction is significant for its advantages over other island industries. Like tourism, construction does not suffer from expenses being greater here than elsewhere, because building houses and providing visitor services are the only industries that **must** be conducted on island, regardless of what it costs

to do business here. And unlike tourism, construction also offers stable year-round employment at a wage that at least approaches the cost of living. Thus, while the building trades may comprise only 15 percent of overall employment, it is more telling that they account for **35 percent** of all jobs in the winter, and over **40 percent** of the income earned on Nantucket in February. Construction, in other words, is the primary business capable of supporting year-round island families.

This is problematic for two reasons, the first being that new-home construction is by definition a finite endeavor. The amount of buildable land is dwindling, and the recent boom has created more work than island contractors



can handle, which has resulted in over 300 off-island workers being imported each day to meet the demand. Those workers are essentially doing tomorrow's work today, and depriving Nantucketers of a future income resource. Furthermore, excessive construction takes a heavy toll on our environment—in traffic, infrastructure, lost open space—and in degrading our natural world we mar the aesthetic appeal on which our economy is based. But if we are to reduce construction levels, we must also reduce our construction **dependency**, so that slowing growth does not fiscally paralyze island families. We must pursue economic diversification.

In that regard, the advent of advanced telecommunications, e-commerce, and greater transportation accessibility (more frequent

flights to more destinations) has presented increased employment opportunities for Nantucket. In recent years the island has seen numbers of individual entrepreneurs, professionals, and small companies choosing to move here—people who could locate anywhere but choose

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Nantucket, largely for its outstanding quality of life. This segment of our economy does not depend on island sources for its income, instead generating revenue by providing services to off-island clients and customers. The

people who run these businesses offer undeniable benefits to Nantucket, because the money they make is derived elsewhere but spent here. The jobs they create often pay well and are usually year-round.

Retirees present a similar economic profile. As more people choose to retire on Nantucket,



Rob Benchley

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they bring with them money that is generated off island but spent here.

In one sense, then, the influx of retirees and entrepreneurs has made Nantucket a more economically and culturally diverse community. But it has not, as yet, represented economic diversification in the way Nantucket most needs, because it has not been able to ameliorate the dependency of year-round islanders on construction. In some instances this is because the education and training levels needed to work in some of the recently established entrepreneurial businesses are beyond those of the island’s workforce, but in many cases the problem is simply that the two sectors have not connected sufficiently for training to begin. Island residents may not be aware of the opportunities afforded through those new businesses. Although steps can (and should) be taken to begin making those jobs more accessible to Nantucketers, we should be cautious about depending to a large degree on imported entrepreneurs to diversify our economy, as that would pose problems of its own. Every new business that moves here only adds to the island’s infrastructure needs, exacerbates the scarcity of housing, and creates an additional demand for—but not a supply of—seasonal labor. Our goal of economic diversification should not be achieved at the expense of managing growth and making housing affordable for those committed to year-round Nantucket residency.

The search for economic diversification is not new to Nantucketers, as evidenced in this 1890s photo.

Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association



Our Goals

- ◆ To promote a healthy, balanced economy that improves the quality of life for island residents.
- ◆ To maintain the vitality of Nantucket’s on-island construction workforce and its ability to meet year-round islanders’ construction and maintenance needs.
- ◆ To reduce dependency on the seasonal economy without causing further escalation in housing costs.
- ◆ To promote the integrity of the island’s principal, long-term industry—tourism—while respecting limitations of our environmental, historical, and archaeological resources.
- ◆ To promote the economic development of mid-island commercial areas.
- ◆ To restore the year-round character and economic vitality of downtown.



Strategies for the Future

Economic diversification is a complex goal. As noted above, there is little point in diversifying the economy simply for diversity's sake; diversification serves a purpose only if it affords people who choose to live here the opportunity to explore new avenues of employment. It should also be recognized that no matter how successful we are in our efforts at diversification, tourism will most likely always be our primary industry. Therefore any strategy to broaden our economic base should be accompanied by a strategy to keep tourism viable.

This does not mean, however, that tourism should be expanded by increased marketing,

and there are good reasons why it should not be. A healthy tourist economy relies on successfully attracting and maintaining a stable population of visitors and attracting and maintaining an equally stable population of workers to serve those visitors' needs—the two tiers on which tourism is built. Since Nantucket has reached a point where visitors are actually competing with employees for housing, any expansion of our peak-season vacation population actually weakens, rather than strengthens, our economy, because one tier cannibalizes the other. The percentage of employees to visitors gets smaller, and the island's ability to provide a quality vacation experience suffers.

Perhaps of more importance, the relentless



Rob Benchley

Any strategy for economic diversification should keep tourism. But Nantucket has reached its saturation point of visitors during the peak season, so tourism is not the best source for the new jobs necessary to diversify the economy.



expansion of tourism risks fundamentally altering Nantucket itself, not only in its physical appearance but in the way it is perceived. A community that allows a visitor-oriented economy to override all other aspects of its existence is a community willing to gamble away its character and its economic stability. When community character erodes, it is all too often replaced by market-driven contrivances that alienate both residents and visitors. We are already beginning to see this happen in our historic core. Originally appealing not only for its historic character but also for its year-round vitality, downtown today is on track to becoming a museum of itself—a collection of upscale boutiques aimed exclusively at visitors, with little to offer the person who calls Nantucket home. By surrendering the

core district to tourism commercially, we have surrendered it emotionally as well. As year-round establishments have disappeared from its precincts, so too have year-round residents. Islanders today feel a dwindling attachment to the downtown; they carry on their lives and businesses elsewhere and consider town to be less the “real” Nantucket than a sort of cobblestoned Disneyland. It is, in the end, a situation where everyone loses: visitors detect the diminished authenticity of their environment and residents feel like strangers in their own town.

Relying heavily on tourism growth, then, is not a wise long-term option for Nantucket. As a consequence, tourism cannot be expected to generate the new jobs necessary for economic diversification.



Rob Benchley

The most promising avenue of diversification may be within the construction industry itself toward projects in already developed areas including the repair, and particularly, the renovation and restoration of already existing homes.



In the short term, therefore, the most promising avenue of diversification may be within the construction industry itself. The most severe impact of construction is in the building of new, single-family homes, which are usually located in rural areas. Although these large, expensive dwellings may contribute significantly to the dollar value of the island's economy, they also generate substantial traffic, place the greatest strains on our environment and infrastructure, and create the greatest demand for seasonal service workers and for an off-island commuter workforce who spend their dollars off-island. If construction-related energies can be channeled away from new houses in remote areas and toward projects in already developed areas, and can include the repair and renovation needs of existing homes, then this generation and the next generation of Nantucketers in the trade can reclaim this industry and stay employed at wages that allow them to live here.

The most effective tool for redirecting construction energy is the building cap. As detailed more extensively in chapter 1, "Guiding Growth" (pages 40, 44, 46-47), a building cap point system can distribute construction where it is of least harm to the island as a whole. By slowing the pace of development, the cap will also give us the time we need to purchase more land for open space and improve upon the preservation that supports our prosperity. Most important, an effective building cap will forestall the day when the island is fully built out. We owe it to future generations not to

"mine out" the housing resource too quickly, but to make it last so our children and grandchildren will have jobs as well.

Other, longer-term steps can also be taken. Efforts to revive the scallop population should be ardently supported; a sustainable fishery could once again provide vital supplemental income during the winter months, much as it did twenty years ago. Also, in the near future, there will most likely be an increased demand for health and wellness services, particularly as the retiree population ages. In addition to traditional medical care, jobs in this sector will include alternative medicine, recreational and physical therapy, health clubs, and spas, which will provide a wide range of jobs that would fit well with the skills of Nantucket residents.

Historically, as a result of the island's dependency on cyclical industries, Nantucket's economic booms have been followed by catastrophic declines. This does not have to be the



Rob Benchley

The Community Plan ardently supports efforts to revive the scallop population; a sustainable fishery could once again provide vital income during the winter months, much as it did twenty years ago.



case. Our challenge today is to harness the prosperity we have and push our economy toward stability and sustainability and away from a boom-bust cycle. This means maintaining the tourism base while reducing its impact (e.g., channeling visitors toward in-town lodging establishments), and reducing our overall dependency on the summer by carefully guiding low-impact tourism into the shoulder season. It also means taking advantage of the educational opportunities afforded by our new population of entrepreneurs and training our young people for the nontraditional careers that are newly available here. Finally, it means a continuing investment in education—not only to produce white-collar workers but

to sustain the service-sector portions of our economy. Nantucket must continue its support of the school system and to help families who are sending their children off to college or technical or trade school. But it will be difficult to attract and retain quality teachers unless the problem of housing school employees is solved.

At bottom, the cost of housing is the core economic issue on Nantucket and the central obstacle to diversification. If the cost of living can be lowered by programs like NRCH (see chapter 2, “Housing Needs,” pages 54-61) and other initiatives, then so can our dependency on the building trades.



Rob Benchley

Another promising opportunity for diversification is in the increasing demand for health and wellness services, particularly as the retiree population ages.



Making It Happen: Making a Living

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Objective 3.1

To regulate the construction industry by placing limits on new home construction.

Recommendation:

1. IMMEDIATE: Monitor and evaluate the impact of the building cap on the island's construction workforce in connection with the long-term implementation of the building cap and point system.

Objective 3.2

To strengthen the on-island construction sector and substantially reduce reliance on the off-island workforce.

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: Encourage the private sector to market the special skills of Nantucketers in the trades. Consider the feasibility of government involvement in such marketing.
2. SHORT TERM: Encourage programs to develop a high level of workmanship and more varied specialized skills to better compete with off-island labor.
3. SHORT TERM: Aggressively expand apprenticeship programs for high school students and others to

develop skills in various trades, including training in preservation.

4. SHORT TERM: Encourage a Nantucket Artisans Certification Program in cooperation with the Nantucket Historical Association, the Preservation Institute: Nantucket, the Historic District Commission, and relevant nonprofit organizations.
5. SHORT TERM: Encourage the private sector to market Nantucket tradespeople as the top building trades workforce in the East; developing the capabilities of the Nantucket workforce as an exportable commodity. Consider the feasibility of government involvement in this venture.



Rob Benchley

The Community Plan encourages a Nantucket Artisans Certification Program to promote apprenticeships and marketing for the special skills of Nantucketers in the trades, such as this woodworker making window sills at a local contractor's shop.

IMMEDIATE (will occur within the timeframe of Town Meeting),

SHORT-TERM (will begin within five years of plan adoption), LONG-TERM (will begin more than five years after plan adoption)



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Objective 3.3

To build a stronger year-round economy and restore and support downtown as a year-round business and employment center.

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: Develop an economic strategy to retain in the Core District governmental facilities and existing businesses (e.g., the A&P) and to attract new businesses that serve the needs of the year-round population. Among the techniques that should be examined are fiscal incentives and the possible role of community-development organizations with the resources to acquire downtown properties, and offer preferential leases to year-round businesses.

2. SHORT TERM: Amend the Zoning Bylaw to encourage mixed uses, infill development, and rehabilitation in character with downtown's historic fabric.

Objective 3.4

To encourage the expansion of existing year-round businesses and establishment of new year-round businesses in the mid-island area in the vicinity of Pleasant Street and Sparks Avenue in a manner that promotes a cohesive, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use retail, service, and residential area center.

Recommendation:

1. SHORT TERM: Amend the Zoning Bylaw to establish a commercial zone that permits and encourages expansion and establishment of coordinated, appropriate mixed-use development that includes residential apartments, including a pedestrian-friendly environment with streetscapes and amenities, shared parking, and incentives to reduce dependence on the automobile.



Mary Novissimo

The Community Plan encourages the expansion of year-round businesses and the establishment of new ones.

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Making It Happen: Making a Living (continued)

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Objective 3.5

To create exclusive commercial and industrial zones.

Recommendation:

1. SHORT TERM: Create from the RC-2 zone both commercial-only zones along Old South Road and industrial zones in the vicinity of the airport. This would require surveying the traffic and water-quality impact of that rezoning in the face of the decreasing supply of commercial land due to competing residential development. (See chapter 5, "Managing Transportation," page 119; chapter 6, "Island Infrastructure," page 134; and chapter 4, "Protecting the Environment," pages 95-97.)

Objective 3.6

To provide for a high-quality service economy.

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: Establish training programs in hospitality and tourism within the high school curriculum to secure Nantucket's continued appeal as a high-service market.
2. SHORT TERM: Conduct frequent surveys during peak periods to determine the preferences of Nantucket's visitors and seasonal residents as a basis for developing strategies to fine-tune the service economy.
3. SHORT TERM: Discourage promotion or expansion of special events in the shoulder seasons unless public health, safety, and hospitality services, as well as benefits to island residents, are provided for.

Courtesy of the Nantucket Land Council



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Objective 3.7

To restore and promote Nantucket's shellfish industry.

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: To encourage the Town of Nantucket to promote the nurturing of shellfish seed for lease to and propagation by private entities and, specifically, to encourage the private propagation of conch, quahogs, sea clams, oysters, and scallops.
2. SHORT TERM: Further encourage private aquaculture operations through leasing of Town of Nantucket facilities, sponsoring research on predator control and management, and seeking grant-making opportunities.
3. SHORT TERM: Urge the private sector to develop a strategy to expand production and marketing of Nantucket goods and services off-island, including development of an export market for Nantucket shellfish.
4. SHORT TERM: Promote aquaculture as a source of supplemental income for islanders.



Rob Benchley

Objective 3.8

To support agriculture as an important economic activity and as a critical component of the traditional landscape.

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: Make it a high priority of the Strategic Land Preservation Plan to preserve all significant agricultural lands and operations through acquisition of agricultural preservation restrictions.
2. LONG TERM: Encourage the identification and restoration to agriculture of inactive agricultural land.



The Community Plan supports agricultural activities as pictured here as an important part of Nantucket's economy. To the left, the Bartlett Family Trust has placed a conservation restriction on 22 acres of land bordering Hummock Pond and reserved them for agricultural use. Above, a small harvest is collected at Moors End Farm.

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Making It Happen: Making a Living (continued)

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Objective 3.9

To recognize, support, and expand the island’s arts and cultural enterprises as significant contributors to the Nantucket economy.

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: Encourage the local arts sector.
2. SHORT TERM: Encourage the creation of a Performing Arts Center (see chapter 6, “Island Infrastructure,” page 147).
3. SHORT TERM: Encourage endeavors that bring substantial, lasting economic benefits to the island's cultural organizations.

Objective 3.10

To expand the island’s arts and crafts business enterprises.

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: Encourage the off-island marketing of crafts that are unique to Nantucket, including the private-sector establishment of web sites that make on-line retailing possible. Consider the feasibility of government involvement in this endeavor.
2. SHORT TERM: Promote passing on to future generations Nantucket's unique craft skills (e.g., making lightship baskets and scrimshandering) through expanded internship and classroom programs.
3. SHORT TERM: Poll the existing arts and crafts community to determine the cost and availability of studio, marketing, and/or display space to expand local productivity.



Terry Pommert, courtesy of Faraway Productions

The Community Plan promotes cultural endeavors that bring benefits to the island, such as the locally written and scored production of “Faraway Land,” (as shown at left) and Nantucket’s unique craft skills such as scrimshandering and the expansion of the local arts sector (as shown at right).

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Objective 3.11

To encourage and develop opportunities for low-impact home-based businesses.

Recommendation:

1. IMMEDIATE: Encourage development of home-based businesses that because of advances in information technologies yield employment and retraining opportunities and benefits to the Nantucket economy; amend the Zoning Bylaw concerning customary home occupations to reflect these trends.



Rob Benchley

Objective 3.12

To implement other diversification strategies, particularly those that benefit the year-round economy

Recommendations:

1. SHORT TERM: Encourage the private sector to explore the feasibility of establishing a "Hospitality School" on-island. (See Objective 3.6 above.)
2. SHORT TERM: Encourage the development of an Assisted-Living Facility (as recommended in chapter 2, "Housing Needs," page 67), similar health-care economic enterprises, and any other low-impact, high-economic diversification services that the growing senior citizen community will require.
3. SHORT TERM: Encourage the establishment of a health clinic for service-industry employees.
4. SHORT TERM: Explore diversification strategies that benefit the year-round economy, while recognizing the need to provide that they are low impact and in keeping with the goal to place limits on tourism in the peak and shoulder seasons.



Rob Benchley

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