



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Assembling a Coalition for the Preservation of Parks and Open Spaces

Destination, Country: Sonoma County, California, United States of America

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In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

The Coalition encourages visitors to leave a place better than they found it.



Summary:

An unsustainable influx of visitation to Sonoma County’s parks and open spaces during the coronavirus pandemic led to a successful partnership between Sonoma County Tourism, Sonoma County Regional Parks, and the nationally recognized Leave No Trace (LNT) organization. The partnership elevated to new heights in 2022 and 2023 with the development and release of the Sonoma County Leave No Trace Five Year Stewardship Action Framework, the Sonoma County Leave No Trace Coalition Toolkit and Initiative, and the expansion into a three-county “Cleaner California Coast” alliance. By working together to communicate uniform messaging, and getting local businesses to amplify the messaging, we’re empowering visitors to act as good stewards of the land to protect this special corner of the world for generations to come.





Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Encompassing 1,575 square miles in northwestern California, Sonoma County is known for its natural beauty, rural charm, and unique ecosystems that include mountains, redwoods, rivers, valleys, and fifty-five miles of coastline. Sonoma County also offers amazing wines and legendary vineyards.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

Sonoma County's beautiful and diverse parks and open spaces have always been popular attractions for visitors and residents, but never more so than during the pandemic. With other venues either closed, or too enclosed for comfort, the great outdoors became the go-to activity for those seeking fresh air and plenty of space for social distancing. Sonoma Countians and visitors from throughout the North Bay and beyond poured into the region's parks and open spaces and unfortunately, they were not always mindful of the negative impacts their visitation was having on the natural environment. Full parking lots led to unsafe street and neighborhood parking, trash cans overflowed faster than park attendants could empty them, and all manner of waste was left behind in parks and surrounding areas. These avoidable negative impacts were adding up and taking their toll, and it became clear that something had to be done.

In April 2021, Sonoma County Tourism (SCT) and Sonoma County Regional Parks (SCRP) announced a partnership with the national Leave No Trace (LNT) organization to help ensure visitors who enjoy the region's parks and open spaces do so responsibly. SCT and Regional Parks chose to partner with LNT because of its proven track record for successfully implementing research-based solutions to help protect the natural world. We share LNT's belief that education—versus costly restoration programs or access restrictions—is the most effective and least resource-intensive solution to land protection.

With Sonoma County having experienced the benefits of collaboration with Leave No Trace, it felt only natural to expand that partnership when the opportunity presented itself. Sonoma County was not alone in having experienced an influx of visitors to its parks and open spaces during the pandemic, particularly along the coastline. Our neighboring counties of Marin and Mendocino were also experiencing negative impacts and were seeking a solution – one that could be applied across the entire coastline of the three counties.

In June 2022, Marin, Sonoma, and Mendocino Counties announced a coordinated effort to provide visitor education and outreach to reduce the amount of litter and waste in coastal regions and watersheds through a three-County memorandum of understanding with Leave No Trace. The





three-County working group was encouraged by Sonoma County Tourism to partner with Leave No Trace for the development of its litter reduction messaging. The three-County group, now known as Cleaner California Coast, utilizes LNT intellectual property under a sublicensing agreement with Sonoma County Tourism.

The power of Cleaner California Coast comes from its coordinated messaging focused on community and visitor outreach, education, and training. The intercounty cooperation is notable in that stakeholders from all three counties are committed to communicating uniform messaging along the Northern California coastline. This not only reduces competing messaging (which can obscure clarity for visitors), it greatly increases the likelihood of visitors being exposed to these important principles.

While Cleaner California Coast is still in its infancy, it has ambitious goals to see additional coastal destinations within the state sign on as partners with the aim of sharing consistent minimum impact practices to visitors along the entire coastline of California.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

The Leave No Trace organization is perhaps best known for its Seven Principles of Leave No Trace — an easily understood framework of minimum impact practices for anyone visiting the outdoors.

Sonoma County Tourism and Sonoma County Regional Parks worked with Leave No Trace to develop a Sonoma County-tailored version of the Seven Principles with each Principle covering a regionally relevant topic and providing clear guidance for minimizing negative impacts.

To support the distribution of the messaging, Sonoma County Tourism developed the Sonoma County Leave No Trace Coalition Toolkit. The toolkit contains free physical items like a window cling, three region-specific informational table tent cards (coastal, river, inland), poster, and 14-page guide that local businesses can employ to help spread the important message of Leave No Trace with their customers. The toolkit also contains digital assets including social media posts, visitor talking points, language that can be added to reservation confirmations, and photography tied to each of the Principles of Leave No Trace.

Sonoma County Tourism also commissioned a series of seven English and Spanish language videos filmed at Regional Parks throughout Sonoma County, providing visual representations of the seven Principles of Leave No Trace. Beyond providing an additional medium for communicating these values, the footage is included in a reel that runs at the Charles M. Schultz Sonoma County Airport, so that visitors are exposed to this important messaging as they first enter the destination.



Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

The development of our action framework began with an online stakeholder survey that was sent out to hospitality partners and local land managers to help attain a comprehensive understanding of the impacts being experienced in our parks and open spaces. This survey was followed up with a series of focus groups made up of respondents from the survey to gain additional insights. Those insights were used to identify priorities within our Five-Year Stewardship Action Framework, which was finalized in April 2022. The framework describes the imperatives of the initiative and outlines the activities required to achieve key priorities, along with a set of short and long-term outcomes to monitor progress.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

The biggest challenge was determining strategies for getting the Principles shared with as many visitors and residents as possible on a limited budget. While Sonoma County Tourism and Sonoma County Regional Parks promote the Principles of Leave No Trace through paid marketing channels, the main distribution of this messaging comes from our Coalition Members. These are businesses that share the values of Leave No Trace with their customers by incorporating LNT language into their reservation confirmations, posting a LNT poster in their windows, or placing LNT tent cards on their tables and front desks. Some even train their employees using our free online educational module to effectively share Leave No Trace messaging in their interactions with customers. Sonoma County currently has 60 coalition businesses sharing the message of Leave No Trace with their customers. Sonoma County Tourism is committed to growing this coalition by 50% over the next two fiscal years.

Three online training modules were developed for specific audiences. The visitor-facing module provides an overview of Leave No Trace and offers tips for minimizing negative impacts to parks and open spaces. The Hospitality module and Visitor Center module help hospitality and visitor center employees understand the core concepts of Leave No Trace and the simple but meaningful steps they can take to help share its messaging with customers and visitors.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

The partnership between Sonoma County Tourism, Sonoma County Regional Parks, and Leave No Trace is a unique and beneficial arrangement. Leave No Trace has previously worked with state and



regional parks, as well as destination marketing organizations, but independently. What we've done with this partnership is incorporate Sonoma County Regional Parks as an equal partner in this mission. This tightknit collaboration has allowed us to magnify the message by combining resources on projects like summer radio ad campaigns, with Regional Parks securing local radio broadcasts, and Sonoma County Tourism covering the San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento markets (in both English and Spanish language stations). Total impressions for Sonoma County Tourism's portion of the 2022 summer radio campaign were 2,116,431 (1,512,600 English language, 603,831 Spanish language). 2023 summer radio impressions are still being determined.

The messaging we communicate to visitors through paid marketing channels is also reflected in signage present in many of our regional parks. The consistency and uniformity of this messaging makes it substantially more effective in reaching visitors.

Ultimately, the partnership allows us to get more accomplished. One example of this is Sonoma County's recent inclusion in LNT's HotSpot program. HotSpot's are areas across the country that are identified by LNT as experiencing heavy use and could benefit from expert attention. Sonoma County Regional Parks applied Steelhead Beach Regional Park for consideration, and thanks to its efforts, a special team from LNT was dispatched to that location to host free trainings for parks' staff and community members, conduct clean-ups along its beaches and on the water, and engage with park visitors about Leave No Trace Principles.

While it is difficult to capture quantitative data on the results of this messaging to visitors, Sonoma County Regional Parks has been pleased with the outcomes of the partnership and is eager to see it continue for the foreseeable future. The coordinated amplified messaging with Marin and Mendocino Counties for the Cleaner California Coast initiative is in its early days but will succeed in reaching more people than any one stakeholder could touch independently. By working together, sharing best practices, and speaking with a unified voice, we hope to succeed in preserving Sonoma County's natural environment and the larger Northern California coastline.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

While Sonoma County Tourism highly recommends the Leave No Trace organization as a resource for destinations looking to implement research-based solutions for the protection its parks and open spaces, we appreciate that financial partnerships may not be practical for everyone. However, Leave No Trace has a growing body of free resources for all people, whether affiliated with Leave No Trace



or not. From sharable social media content to Leave No Trace Basics, wildfire information, its latest research and a large library of Leave No Trace skills videos, access to and sharing of these resources is encouraged. You can learn more at <https://lnt.org/research-resources/>.

Whether utilizing Leave No Trace messaging or not, we encourage destinations to reach out to local stakeholders to determine what negative impacts are being felt and observed from visitation within the destination. Try to verify those perceived impacts with data where possible. And then work with those stakeholders to craft messaging and implementation plans to communicate expectations and goals to visitors.

One of our most effective strategies was to partner with local businesses to help in this mission. Our resources to distribute messaging to the masses are finite, but with business owners being residents invested in the long-term health of our destination, they were eager to help share our messaging with customers.

And while neighboring destinations may naturally compete for tourism revenue, working collaboratively can get so much more accomplished than any one destination could hope to do on its own.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

- [Sonoma County Leave No Trace Five Year Stewardship Action Framework](#)
- Consumer-facing Sonoma County Leave No Trace Seven Principles landing page: <https://www.sonomacounty.com/leave-no-trace-seven-principles>
- Sonoma County Leave No Trace video series:
 1. Know Before You Go: [English](#), [Spanish](#)
 2. Stick to Trails and Be a Water Wise Camper: [English](#), [Spanish](#)
 3. Trash Your Trash and Pick Up Pet Waste: [English](#), [Spanish](#)
 4. Leave It As You Find It: [English](#), [Spanish](#)
 - 5: Be Extremely Careful With Fire: [English](#), [Spanish](#)
 - 6: Keep Wildlife Wild: [English](#), [Spanish](#)
 - 7: Share the Outdoors: [English](#), [Spanish](#)
- Partner-facing Sonoma County Leave No Trace Coalition toolkit page: <https://www.sonomacounty.com/partner/leave-no-trace-coalition-toolkit>



- Online Educational Modules: [visitor-facing module](#), [hospitality business module](#), and [visitor center module](#)
- Summer 2022 radio ad buys:
 - [English language buy Sacramento, English language buy San Francisco](#)
 - [Spanish language buy Sacramento and San Francisco](#)
 - [Radio spot \(English\), Radio spot \(Spanish\)](#)
- Cleaner California Coast:
 - Front page [Press Democrat article](#)
 - NBC Bay Area's [OpenRoad with Doug McConnell](#)
 - Cleaner California Coast website cleanercoast.org

“Sonoma County Regional Parks is delighted with our productive partnership with Sonoma County Tourism and Leave No Trace. Our unified messaging, developed with the expert guidance of Leave No Trace, has touched substantially more people than we could have hoped to reach on our own. We’re grateful to have a dedicated partner in Sonoma County Tourism that shares our goals to keep visitors safe and parks and open spaces pristine so that everyone can enjoy the benefits of nature and the beauty of Sonoma County.”

- Meda Freeman, Marketing Manager at Sonoma County Regional Parks

“Sonoma County Tourism saw the need, and has successfully executed, an innovative stewardship education initiative that reaches visitors and residents alike. Its novel approach to destination stewardship involved not only Leave No Trace, but also the crucial perspective and voice of Sonoma County Regional Parks who manages more than 50 parks and open spaces across the county. No other destination has been able to work in collaboration with their land manager counterparts. With Sonoma County Tourism’s leadership, the three partners and the entire Sonoma County stakeholder community foster an education initiative that invite all visitors and residents to be part of the solution.”

- Andrew Leary, Director of Sustainable Tourism and Partnerships at Leave No Trace

