



Business

R.I. signs charter for 'geotourism'

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Tourists on a Collette Vacations trip ride by the State House. The company, originally out of Boston, is now based in Pawtucket.

JOURNAL FILE PHOTO / SANDOR BODO
SANDOR BODO

PROVIDENCE — Billboards, traffic jams, nondescript hotels. Popular tourist destinations often include these unwanted attributes. When it gets out of hand, it hurts tourism.

To help promote proper management of tourist destinations, the National Geographic Society has launched an effort to encourage governments to adopt the principals of "geotourism," which it defines as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place.

Yesterday, the society signed a "Geotourism charter" with the State of Rhode Island at a luncheon attended by about 400 leaders in various tourism and hospitality industries. It took place at the Rhode Island Convention Center.

The agreement is largely symbolic — there is no money or promotional benefit associated with the deal. But it provides a tool for environmentalists, government and tourism officials to think about the best way to draw tourists while at the same time protecting the character of the state that draws visitors in the first place.

“Part of the purpose of promoting this idea of geotourism is to think holistically, to plan holistically,” said Jonathan B. Tourtellot, director of the National Geographic Society’s Center for Sustainable Destinations.

Rhode Island became the eighth government to sign a geotourism charter, he said, and only the second state, after Arizona.

In signing the charter, which is an “agreement of intent,” the state said it would support the principles of geotourism to sustain and improve the state’s environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and well-being of its residents, according to the document.

To that end, Governor Carcieri asked Preserve Rhode Island to form the Rhode Island Geotourism Collaborative, which includes 18 people representing various private, public and nonprofit interests, including Save the Bay, the University of Rhode Island’s Coastal Institute, Grow Smart Rhode Island, Johnson & Wales University, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation and others. The collaborative is to be headed by Jonathan Stevens, executive director of Preserve Rhode Island.

The new organization’s goal is “to recognize, celebrate, promote and preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Rhode Island for the enjoyment of present and future generations by advocating for the protection of community character, foster appropriate signage, and the maintenance or the adaptive reuse of historic and significant structures and sites, and the conservation of scenic and urban landscapes, seascapes and wilderness,” according to a description provided by Stevens.

Specifically, the group plans to set up meetings with local and regional stakeholders, developing white-papers and amendment proposals to the Rhode Island State Guide Plan. It will meet quarterly.

“Signing this charter today is an important catalyst that will create a new level of collaboration among the organizations that contribute to and impact geotourism in Rhode Island,” Carcieri said.

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