

El Dorado County strives to be geotourism destination; workshop Sept. 9

By Kathryn Reed

What does El Dorado County have that no place else has?

The answers to that question are being assembled by a coalition charged with the job of turning the entire county into geo-tourism destination.

“Some of you might see marketing for Lake Tahoe and it does not reflect what you like. We know skiing and gambling, but what else can we market?” asked Peter Brumis.

Brumis, founder of Ecomentum.com and international ecotourism expert, along with Jacquie Chandler (messaging specialist and local liaison to National Geographic) and Penelope Curtis (California arts and heritage tourism expert) make up GeoSierra.

The threesome was hired by the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce to develop a geo-tourism plan. One-third of the \$90,000 grant El Dorado County awarded the chamber is being spent on the consultants.

About \$18,000 will go toward the website, while the remaining \$42,000 is the “capture component” which could be a video or short trailer so people understand the asset and what it connects to.

In July and August, GeoSierra led meetings throughout the county to gather public input. The idea is for locals to weigh-in on the assets they believe represent the uniqueness of the county.

The four county maps laid out on tables at the U.S. Forest Service were covered with reference points – some natural, some not – by the more than 20 people in attendance. Things like the Tahoe Rim Trail, Alpen Sierra Coffee, Desolation Wilderness, star gazing, wineries, wildflower hikes, Explore Tahoe – and hundreds of others were written down.

“With gaming, construction and the tourism economy in decline, what can a destination do to sustain itself? Change the menu – change the result,” Chandler said before the July meeting. “National Geographic has found that when a destination focuses on what is authentic about the place, visitors are more likely to become engaged in our historical, cultural and national treasure story. When you feel connected to something, you care more about it, and caring leads to appreciation that builds stewardship.”

County Supervisor Norma Santiago said the goal is to have National Geographic, whose website she said gets 3 million hits a day, list El Dorado County as a sustainable destination.

Forty-five destinations in the world are at some level of geo-tourism through National Geographic.

Identifying assets is the first phase. People can continue to suggest resources that should be included by going to www.geosierra.org. A steering panel consisting of people on both sides of the county will make the ultimate decision about what is included.

A big part of geo-tourism is linking the assets so people stay in the county longer and spend more money. It's visiting a county winery and then ordering a bottle at a local restaurant. It's having local businesses refer tourists to other destinations in the county. It could be an alpaca farm in Placerville providing wool to a Tahoe business.

Through the Sierra Business Council, geo-tourism may become a

basin-wide endeavor in the future.

The last workshop in South Lake Tahoe is Sept. 9, 3:30-5:30pm, South Lake Tahoe Public Library Meeting Room, 1000 Rufus Allen Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.

The last El Dorado Hills workshop is Sept. 11, 4-6pm, El Dorado Hills Holiday Inn at the Town Center, 4360 Town Center Blvd., El Dorado Hills.