

Journal of Rural and Community Development

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Citation:

Jones, N., & Jones, D. (2024). The SEED model for sustainable economic development in small rural towns via outdoor recreation. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 19(4), 83–106.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.



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Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

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The SEED Model for Sustainable Economic Development in Small Rural Towns Via Outdoor Recreation

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Abstract

Rural small towns continue to face serious challenges, including population decline, high poverty levels, and insufficient infrastructure, among others. The sustainable ecosystem economic development (SEED) model provides a framework for remote rural communities to work collaboratively with government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits facilitated by project champions to develop and maintain healthy, sustainable economies. While these concepts are not entirely new, lack of expertise and awareness of resources by current town personnel can represent the ultimate challenge for revitalization. This paper explores sustainable ecosystem economic development with project champions helping local leaders achieve success. Because many rural communities have opportunities for economic development via outdoor recreation, we also explore revitalization in this context and the role of sustainability in the model.

Keywords: economic development, rural small towns, sustainability, outdoor recreation, nature-based tourism, project champions, ecosystems

Le modèle SEED pour le développement économique durable dans les petites villes rurales via les loisirs de plein air

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Résumé

Les petites villes rurales continuent de faire face à de sérieux défis, notamment le déclin de la population, des niveaux de pauvreté élevés et des infrastructures insuffisantes, entre autres. Le modèle de développement économique durable des écosystèmes (SEED) fournit un cadre permettant aux communautés rurales éloignées de travailler en collaboration avec des agences gouvernementales, des entreprises et des organisations à but non lucratif facilitées par les promoteurs de projets pour développer et maintenir des économies saines et durables. Bien que ces concepts ne soient pas entièrement nouveaux, le manque d'expertise et de connaissance des ressources de la part du personnel municipal actuel peut représenter le défi ultime de la revitalisation. Cet article explore le développement économique durable des écosystèmes avec des promoteurs de projets aidant les dirigeants locaux à réussir. Étant donné que de nombreuses communautés rurales ont des opportunités de développement économique grâce aux loisirs de plein air, nous explorons également la revitalisation dans ce contexte et le rôle de la durabilité dans le modèle.

Mots-clés : développement économique, petites villes rurales, durabilité, loisirs de plein air, tourisme axé sur la nature, promoteurs de projets, écosystèmes

1.0 Introduction

Why do so many small rural towns continue to struggle economically? According to a USDA economic research report, rural areas have almost double the poverty rates of urban areas. In addition, small businesses in rural areas have greater difficulty getting access to financing, the level of infrastructure, including broadband Internet, is insufficient, and many regions are facing a population decline with staffing shortages in many businesses (Dobis et al., 2021)

One significant factor is a lack of professional planning staff. For example, a recent report cited only three professional planners in Maine towns. Instead, many towns, probably small rural ones, tend to rely on volunteers who do not possess the knowledge and expertise needed for complex economic development. Many do not understand the ecosystem of laws, policies, applications, or requirements necessary to work with town, state, and Federal regulations. In Maine, a State Planning Office used to provide guidance on many varied, complex economic issues. This agency had more than 50 people, including code enforcement staff, planners, a state economist, land protection experts, and statistics and policy analysts, and it was widely used by towns throughout Maine. However, it was disbanded by a prior governor, leaving towns, especially small rural towns, to navigate the complex ecosystem of different agencies and laws for revitalization on their own (Cough, 2023).

In this paper, we propose a sustainable model called SEED (sustainable ecosystem economic development), which creates an ecosystem of the needed stakeholders for economic development facilitated by a “project champion,” similar to a town planner. We also use outdoor recreation/nature-based tourism as a driver of economic development in Maine as the test area because of the abundance of desirable outdoor places in rural areas. We also integrate the importance of sustainability into the model.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Challenges for Rural, Remote Communities

According to the United States Census Bureau, the U.S. contains approximately 19,500 incorporated places, roughly 63% of the population. Of those incorporated places, approximately 76% had less than 5,000 residents. Further, about 42% of those had fewer than 500 residents (U.S. Census, 2021). Thus, it becomes clear that we are a nation of small towns. In addition, according to the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI, 2023), about 80% of counties in the United States with long-term persistent poverty are in rural areas. The incidence of poverty is even higher in rural areas with people of colour (CORI, 2023). Furthermore, according to the U.S. Census, about 20% of the population lives in rural areas (United States Census Bureau, 2022). According to the USDA, U.S. poverty rates were almost 30% higher in rural (15.4%) than in urban (11.9%) areas (Dobis et al., 2021).

Rural areas in the U.S. have unique challenges, including infrastructure, labor, internet access, health care, and education, among others (Heinrich, 2017). In addition, we suggest that a major reason they cannot overcome poverty and continuing decline is a lack of personnel, resources and expertise to change their conditions. Given their economic situation, they often have limited budgets to afford the personnel to implement revitalization efforts. This often leads to difficulty

knowing about and accessing federal or state funding, grants, and other programs and resources because of a lack of awareness and complex and difficult application processes. Many small rural towns do not have the economic development professionals or community planners necessary for revitalization efforts (USDA, 2024; United States Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2024). This suggests the need for project champions to fill this role, which is discussed below.

While many rural areas have attractive outdoor recreational opportunities that could contribute to revitalization, many still struggle economically. Not all rural communities are created equal. They may differ by types of industries, natural resources, or agricultural focus (Dobis et al., 2021). A McKinsey & Company (Kerlin et al., 2022) study suggests that the “Distressed Americana” sector probably represents rural areas that have not effectively leveraged their outdoor recreational areas. Many have attractive outdoor recreational opportunities but still tend to struggle economically. As mentioned, small rural towns also often lack the professional expertise to address economic revitalization effectively, including expertise in funding or grant writing opportunities, among others.

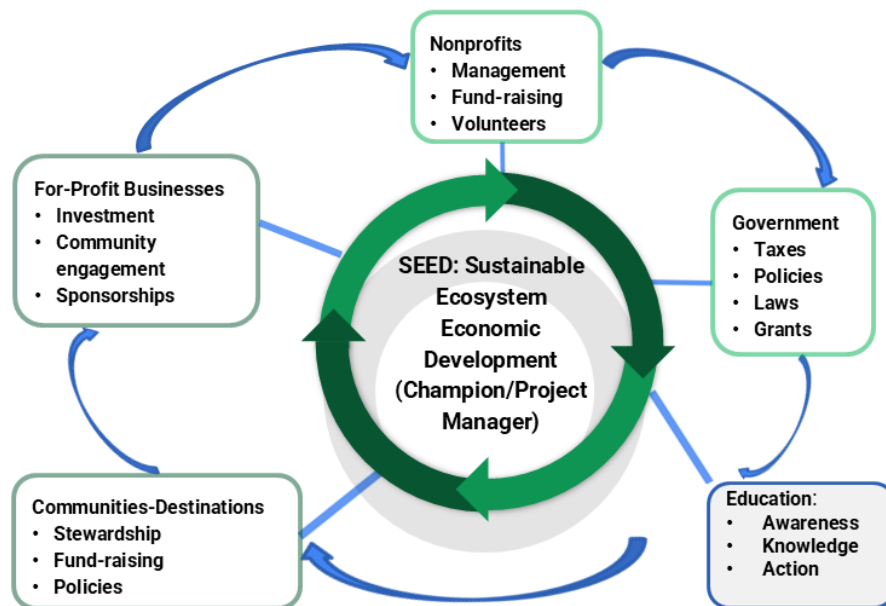
2.2 The Proposed SEED Model with a Focus on the Project Champion as the Key Driver

Our model focuses on rural small towns or community development with a need for a project champion to connect them using an ecosystem approach with stakeholders with the knowledge and resources necessary for revitalization.

The SEED model is a proposed methodology to create a sustainable ecosystem with valuable, relevant stakeholders, facilitated by a project champion to effect successful small-town revitalization.

This is conceptualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The proposed SEED model with major stakeholders.



Source: N. Jones.

2.3 The Project Champion in the SEED model

Small rural towns are often resource-starved due to declining populations, lower tax revenues, inadequate finances and infrastructure, and the flight or bankruptcy of businesses, among other factors. Town managers and other personnel often lack the time, knowledge, and resources to research, plan, and implement the ecosystem stakeholder partner ecosystems needed for revitalization (UCUI, 2019). As mentioned, most towns in Maine do not have professional town planners. The knowledge, expertise, and resources are there and often abundant. However, many towns do not have the awareness or knowledge to harness the “alphabet soup” of resources effectively. They can be paralyzed by the overwhelming magnitude of government, nonprofit, and for-profit resources needed for effective town revitalization.

Project champions can play a crucial role in overcoming this barrier. They have the knowledge and skills to find the relevant stakeholders, bring them together, identify problems and resource gaps, and create the collaborations required for successful implementation. They also bring the crucial skills of effective communication among the stakeholders, acting as translators and facilitators to build relationships and trust. They can also involve the community and the stakeholders to truly understand and respond effectively to their needs and problems. The project champion also creates and communicates a shared mission and vision among the stakeholders, which is necessary for engagement, involvement, and successful implementation (; EPA, n. d.; Fobbe & Hilletoft, 2021; Love & Powe, 2020; Santos et al, 2022). Finally, to be effective and successful, a project champion should have some degree of power, authority, and the other skills mentioned. There are many forms of power and authority. In the context of this model, working with different stakeholders from different organizations, we suggest that effective project champions should have a combination of expert, referent, persuasive, and relational power. This allows them to develop trust, respect, and communication among the stakeholders (Smith, 2014).

A project champion should be an effective change agent who works with disparate stakeholders and uses proven change management strategies to affect a successful small-town revitalization effort. The literature provides a vast foundation of knowledge and theories about change management and change agents. One interesting study found that projects with effective change agents met or exceeded project goals more than twice as often as those with less effective agents. This study also found that 62% of associates resist change (Oxford Global Resources, 2022). A review of major change management theories found some interesting commonalities. These included effective, transparent communication, a shared mission and vision, stakeholder involvement, and a corporate culture that encourages acceptance of change, support, and encouragement. Furthermore, successful change management strategies emphasize a culture of inclusion where diverse perspectives, values, and expertise are all valued, often focusing on DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) (Phillips & Klein, 2023).

3.0 The Stakeholders

3.1 Government

Local, state, and federal government agencies play a crucial role in helping rural areas with tax incentives, zoning laws, grants, laws, and policies. For example,

federal and state agencies can create regulations, standards, and certifications for businesses to improve energy performance and reduce emissions and pollutants. They can provide loans, grants, or tax incentives for investments in renewable energy, waste management, or carbon reduction. Regarding remote, rural economic development, government funding can help with infrastructure investment—roads, broadband, and utilities. In addition, favourable licensing for small businesses, startup grants and loans, and favourable tax policies support nonprofits and communities (Atalla et al., 2022; Macleod, 2023). Government agencies also routinely support communities in the outdoor recreation sector. For example, the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities (RERC) program assists rural communities across the country in improving their outdoor recreation economies, facilitating town revitalization efforts. This is a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and the Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) (USDA, 2022).

3.2 For-Profit Businesses

Small and micro businesses are essential to the health and vitality of rural, remote communities. They provide the preponderance of jobs in these rural areas and are necessary for vibrant communities with businesses like grocery stores, banks, hardware stores, and other essential establishments.

As mentioned, many rural areas can use outdoor recreation/nature-based tourism for economic growth. For example, in Montana,

Tourism is a critical driver of the city's economy, accounting for 8 percent of the GDP. Eighty-seven percent of non-resident spending involves dining, retail, fuel, lodging, and grocery stores in a community driven by small businesses. Businesses that make up the tourism industry account for 3,080 jobs, over \$72 million in local payroll, and over \$33 million in property taxes (Engum, 2019, p. 28).

The dilemma is that declining communities have often lost many needed businesses to support a tourist infrastructure, such as motels, restaurants, shops, and services such as gas stations, banks, and others expected by visitors. While outdoor recreation supports the local economy with small businesses, the "chicken and egg" situation is that the towns need the small businesses to fulfill visitor expectations. Still, small businesses do not want to invest in a small town without guarantees of tourist activity. Thus, an ecosystem of government incentives, community engagement, and nonprofits is necessary to break the "chicken and egg" stalemate to promote entrepreneurship and small business investment.

3.3 Nonprofits

Nonprofits often play a crucial role in creating or sustaining outdoor recreation-based destinations such as hiking trails in rural areas. For example, the Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS) is "an environmental charity promoting sustainable public access throughout Scotland, the Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS) innovates, develops and implements path building, habitat

regeneration and other outdoor access projects” (OATS [About Us] n. d. p. 1). Their mission includes satisfying diverse interests "from land managers to outdoors enthusiasts to local communities, while protecting and enhancing the natural environmental heritage.” (OATS, “About Us” n.d., p. 1). They play a vital role in working with communities to maintain the natural wonders desired by tourists. In the U.S., a nonprofit in Maine called GrowSmart Maine (Smart Growth, p. 1) has a similar mission:

We advocate for policies and projects that advance Maine's business and economic growth and development in balance with the conservation and enrichment of our greatest assets; the beautiful and productive built and natural environments that are the bedrock of our cultural and economic heritage (...) we work to revitalize historic neighborhoods and vibrant communities suited for residents of all ages, to foster entrepreneurs and creative thinkers, and to provide a safe and inclusive place to raise children.

Thus, nonprofits like this can be critical stakeholders in a sustainable ecosystem to help small towns and communities.

Almost all nonprofits raise money and organize volunteers in outdoor recreational areas like parks. They can also advocate for more public sector commitment to parks and often provide essential marketing and outreach activities and project management. (Projects for Public Spaces, 2008). One example is the Conservation Alliance that:

Funds and advocates for the protection of America's wild places by teaming up with outdoor communities and more than 270 businesses—like Adidas Terrex, Cascade Designs, and Domestic—to leverage the government for conservation-forward legislation, such as influencing President Biden to cancel federal mining leases near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. So far, the nonprofit has helped save more than 73 million acres of wildlands and 3,580 miles of rivers, stop or remove 37 dams, designate five marine reserves, and establish 21 climbing areas” (Arvesen, 2022, p. 1.).

3.4 Communities

Communities and their engagement are essential in our SEED model. They have the most to gain from being a vital part of the ecosystem. People in these communities also live and work in these rural areas, so they want to protect natural resources. According to Bryden’s Theory, communities provide vital support for revitalization using immobile resources, including social capital, cultural capital, environmental capital, and local knowledge capital (Bryden & Munro, 2000). Thus, local communities represent a vital part of the ecosystem.

An interesting example of a proactive community in the Scottish Highlands is the Loch Ness Community Hub (see Figure 2). The Glen Urquhart Rural Community

Association (GURCA) raised funds to create the Loch Ness Hub. Volunteers transformed an old "Visit Scotland" visitor information center into a sustainable community hub selling local products and providing other services like e-bike rentals. They also offer free services to the growing recreational vehicle travellers with a donation-based waste disposal system. Profits are reinvested back into the community, building car parks and bathroom facilities to help mitigate the effect of tourism on the environment (Loch Ness Hub & Travel, n. d.).

In addition, rural communities are often stewards of the local natural resources and public lands (Love & Powe, 2020). While outdoor recreation represents a potential economic driver for economic development in these rural communities, the communities have a vested interest in maintaining them sustainably.

Figure 2. Loch Ness Community Hub.



3.5 Education

Education plays a vital role in this model by building a collaborative shared vision for the goal of sustainable economic development in these remote rural communities. The old phrase that it is bad when "you don't know what you don't know" is relevant to education, which provides the information and knowledge needed to implement the SEED Model. Knowledge sharing in the context of education can result in stakeholder commitment and successful implementation (Doten-Snitker et al., 2021).

It has been widely recognized that a knowledge-based society is strongly correlated with long-term economic growth, with a “Knowledge Transfer Approach” deemed essential to spreading knowledge through education (Jellenz et al., 2020). Awareness and knowledge of the benefits of this collaborative approach or the ecosystem of diverse, relevant stakeholders provide better stakeholder engagement. Finally, educating all stakeholders about the project, the goals, the implementation plans, and each other's interests, knowledge, and resources facilitates better communication and engagement in the project and potentially a better, more successful outcome.

3.6 Champion/Project Manager

As mentioned, the proposed ecosystem in our SEED model requires a project manager or champion to manage it effectively. We use the term project champion because they can be seen as the *chief cheerleader* for bringing the stakeholders together with a sense of purpose and pride. The project champion communicates with the different stakeholders, shares the mission and vision, and establishes roles, tasks, schedules, and priorities. Research shows that most projects have a 70% failure rate. Project champions have been shown to reduce the failure rate to 20%, a huge performance improvement. As mentioned in a prior section, many small rural towns do not have the budgets for professional planners or economic development offices.

In our pilot project, discussed below, we, a small team of university faculty and students, acted as the project champions. Because most universities have a service mission, this model could potentially be incorporated into relevant departments such as business, economics, and outdoor recreation. Similarly, as mentioned in a previous section, Maine used to have a state planning office that provided the services of a project champion. This seems to be a valuable use of public resources to help small rural towns.

3.7 Ecosystems

Thriving, healthy communities often require all of these elements to work in harmony for an effectively functioning ecosystem. An ecosystem is simply defined as a complex network or interconnected system. Furthermore, a synergistic ecosystem would be one where two or more systems work together to provide added value from their collaborations. In the SEED model, we envision a functioning synergy between the partners described above where they help and support each other, creating an interconnected network that adds value from the multiple collaborations and synergies.

In business, synergy infers that the sum of the parts is greater than what the entities can create independently. A classic example would be “mergers and acquisitions, where the new company provides more value than the two businesses independently. The concept implies that collaborating on a task can lead to better decision-making and outcomes than working alone” (Dheeraj, 2023, p. 1). A recent study found that a value-added ecosystem approach to small businesses in rural areas is vital to their success (Tutuba & Vanhaverbeke, 2022).

The ecosystem formed in the SEED model: communities, government, for-profit and nonprofit organizations can result in successful sustainable communities that are economically viable, providing visitors with authentic outdoor experiences that enhance their quality of life while creating thriving local rural communities (Kerlin

et al., 2022). Kerlin et al. similarly suggest that developing vibrant communities in a rural area, termed "placemaking," is "the process of creating quality places that people want to live, work, play, and learn in," enabled by collaborative efforts as we have discussed with our SEED model.

In knowledge management, the term "creative abrasion" (Leonard & Straus, 1997, p. 1 means that you create new knowledge or innovation when you bring people together with different expertise, knowledge, and perspectives. Our SEED model represents this through the ecosystem approach, bringing people from government, businesses, nonprofits, and communities together to integrate their unique knowledge, experience, and perspectives to create a collaborative to leverage resources better, resulting in a better system. The concept of business ecosystems has gained traction with a recognition that these collaborative systems create continual innovation and sustainable competitive advantage (Tsou et al., 2022).

A moderating variable in the success of this synergistic ecosystem involves the level of interest and commitment of the different stakeholders. A recent survey on stakeholder research showed that different stakeholders should have similar cultural norms, values, and compatible processes and practices. In addition, the different stakeholders should perceive the value that the others bring to the ecosystem and agree on a shared mission and vision. In terms of relationships, the researchers found that effective stakeholder collaboration was based on developing strong relationships via trust, loyalty, honesty, integrity, fairness, and equity. Thus, all stakeholders should be involved and engaged in the process (Fobbe & Hilletoft, 2021). To achieve this, the project champion is critical to creating the culture and communication.

3.8 Communication

Communication is crucial to the success of a collaborative ecosystem (Feeney et al., 2023). Effective communication strategies are necessary for stakeholders from different backgrounds and industries, cultures, expertise, and perspectives. A classic theory *The Strength of Weak Ties* by Granovetter (1973), forms a foundation for effective communication and knowledge transfer. The essence of this theory is that people in homophilous groups have common backgrounds and strong relationships. Thus, they understand each other and can effectively transfer tacit knowledge. However, they tend to share the same foundation of knowledge that inhibits new knowledge creation. Thus, there is a need for *boundary-spanning* people to form heterophilous networks. These people have different knowledge and expertise but have credibility and commonalities with several different groups and can act as liaisons or translators to link different groups together to form more diverse networks. Therefore, each stakeholder group should have a boundary-spanning individual to communicate effectively with the other stakeholder groups, introduced into the ecosystem and facilitated by the project champion.

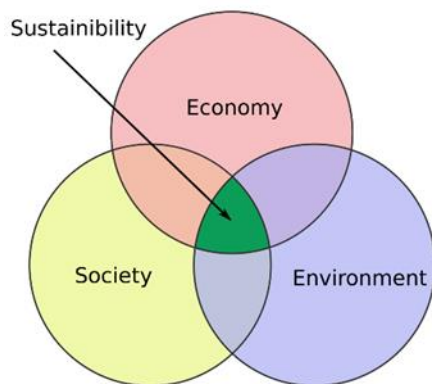
Again, the project champion represents the crucial element in the SEED model. In addition to boundary spanners to link the disparate stakeholders, someone must be responsible for planning, organizing, implementing, and leading each SEED project.

4.0 Sustainable Economic Development

4.1 Basic Concepts

The concept of sustainable development may be traced back to antiquity (Du Pisani, 2006). However, many begin the discussion of sustainable development with a report released in 1987 by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development United Nations General Assembly. (1987) entitled *Our Common Future*, commonly referred to as the *Brundtland Report* (Redcliff, 2005). This report defined sustainable development, which is now widely used, "that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UNWCED, 1987, p. 32). At roughly the same time, the now ubiquitous three pillars paradigm emerged (Purvis et al., 2019). This defined sustainable development as "the ability to maintain or support a process continuously over time," which includes "three pillars: economic, environmental, and social—also known informally as profits, planet, and people" (Mollenkamp, 2023, p. 1). The three pillars of sustainability are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The three pillars of sustainability.



The social pillar represents the goal of promoting equality and respect for individual rights. The economic pillar refers to economic development in an environmentally sustainable way where economic activities should be done responsibly, considering society and the environment. The environmental pillar focuses on environmental conservation. Some have suggested adding a fourth pillar representing culture (Safdie, 2023; Emerick, 2022). This cultural pillar represents lifestyle and living standards.

The sustainable development concept was adjusted to fit the existing frameworks of various academic fields. In the business literature, the sustainable development paradigm was realized in the sustainable business model (SBM) (Schaltegger et al., 2016) and the idea of the *triple bottom line* (Elkington, 1997). The paradigm was employed in the public policy literature to model government policy. (Hull, 2004). The list continues. These discipline-focused iterations of sustainable development acknowledge the roles played by entities outside the scope of their respective fields, e.g., the role of stakeholders in SBMs (e.g., Fobbe & Hilletoft, 2021) as well as the role of local governments (Kim & Chan, 2023). This infers the need for an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to sustainable economic development.

4.2 Integration of Sustainability into the SEED Model

This paper reinforces the proposition that outdoor recreation/nature-based can help to revitalize small rural communities by encouraging investments in these areas to entice tourists. The ideal situation involves integrating sustainable practices to conserve these beautiful natural areas while improving the quality of life for residents and the authentic experiences for visitors (USDA, 2022). However, a "build it, and they will come" (Robinson, 1989) approach may ignore the complexity of development. Further, the current conceptualization of sustainable development, the three pillars, and associated learning have led many to focus on sustainable development at the entity level.

A more sensible approach would explore sustainable economic development on a broader scale. This involves balancing the needs of the communities, visitors, natural environment, and businesses while creating an authentic experience (Ivona, 2021). Their research showed that all partners/stakeholders bring unique knowledge and skills to facilitate sustainable practices and resources to help with infrastructure and other needs. In terms of conservation, their research showed that stakeholders could help with the conservation and preservation of the natural environment, as well as marketing, recycling, and other necessary sustainability practices. They suggest that collaboration is essential among stakeholders to create sustainable practices, resulting in a holistic ecosystem for effective revitalization.

Acknowledging the need for an integrated approach, at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) founded SEED. SEED is a global partnership that supports sustainable development and the green economy. "The SEED Initiative aims to: support outstanding and innovative start-up entrepreneurs working in partnership in developing countries to improve livelihoods and manage natural resources sustainably develop practical tools to help social and environmental entrepreneurs to scale up influence policy-makers to create enabling environments for sustainable development businesses inspire new entrepreneurial ventures to deliver social and environmental benefits." (SEED, n. d., p. 1). SEED seeks to accomplish this by working collaboratively with different government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits to create and maintain thriving communities in an environmentally sustainable way.

The premise behind the U.N. model parallels our interpretation of the SEED model. Namely, they work collaboratively with government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits to create and maintain thriving communities in an environmentally sustainable way. One example is The Circular Economy Catalyst harnesses the transformative potential of small and growing enterprises to contribute to circular and inclusive economies in India and Kenya. (SEED, 2024, page 10)

One major differentiator in our proposed SEED model is the project champion's vital role in developing and facilitating the ecosystem of stakeholders that generally includes government agencies, for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, and communities. Education is integrated with the project champion to incorporate awareness, communication, and continual learning.

Our interpretation of the SEED model also expands on classic theories of sustainability, including the *Triple Bottom Line* and *Three Pillars*, including environmental, social, and economic sustainability. In our SEED model, we suggest

that a confluence of critical stakeholders, including government agencies, for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, and communities, create these sustainable ecosystems with a project champion as a key focal point. These critical stakeholders bring their unique knowledge, resources, and expertise in the context of social, economic, and environmental sustainability using creative abrasion (Leonard & Straus, 1997) to create the synergies needed for truly sustainable, vibrant communities that provide value to their constituents, visitors, businesses, and others in the ecosystem. Our model recognizes United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, n. d., p. 1). The relevance of the project champion with the ecosystem of stakeholders to create sustainable communities is the ability of Federal and state agencies to create policies and incentives for environmental, social, and economic sustainability while communities provide the culture and human capital to implement them.

4.3 Role of Outdoor Recreation as a Driver of Sustainable Economic Development

Outdoor recreation activities can facilitate investments in local communities, motivating citizens to engage in volunteer activities to revitalize their downtowns. Communities also often recognize their roles as stewards of their precious natural resources, leading to conservation efforts and improved quality of life for residents and visitors (USDA, 2022). However, the "build it, and they will come" approach mentioned earlier (Robinson, 1989) does not consider the many variables needed for successful implementation. Thus, our model fills this gap by adding a project champion to help small rural communities and serve as the focal point, facilitator, and coordinator using the SEED ecosystem model.

Outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism represent essential opportunities to revitalize remote and rural communities, bringing revenue, employment opportunities, and economic development to these economically disadvantaged areas (Kim & Chan, 2023). A silver lining to the global COVID-19 pandemic was a surge in interest and demand for outdoor activities such as golf, hiking, bicycling, fishing, and other nature-based activities. One economic study reported that:

Outdoor recreation contributed \$454 billion (1.9%) to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). This is more than twice the size of motor vehicle manufacturing and air transportation, three times the size of oil and gas development, and nearly three-and-a-half times the size of performing arts (Lawson, 2023, p. 1).

A Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) report also showed that the outdoor recreation economy supported over 4.5 million jobs, representing about three percent of U.S. employment (Roth, 2023).

According to IBIS World (Dalal, 2023), continued increased demand for natural experiences in an environmentally friendly way represents increasing demand for outdoor recreation. Their research suggests that for-profit businesses rely on partnerships with nonprofits and government entities to create sustainable experiences. This infers the involvement and collaboration with local communities.

For example, local recreation areas for hiking or bicycling may rely on government grants and donations to develop, maintain, or improve them. In addition, these destinations ultimately require an infrastructure including local businesses (hotels, restaurants), a decent transportation system with access roads, and often nonprofits to manage them effectively.

A recent report by the Bureau of Economic Analysis demonstrates the economic significance of outdoor recreation. Their research showed that the economic output of the outdoor recreation industry was about \$862 billion per year, which was greater than industries like mining, utilities, farming, ranching, and chemical products manufacturing. Table 1 shows some major outdoor activities (Walsh, 2023).

Table 1: *Economic Contributions of Outdoor Recreation Activities (Walsh, 2023)*

Outdoor recreation activities	Economic contribution
Biking	\$6.2 billion
Boating	\$37.2 billion
Climbing, hiking, and tent camping	\$8.8 billion
Canoeing and kayaking	\$2 billion
Equestrian	\$12.2 billion
Fishing	\$11.3 billion
Hunting, Shooting, and trapping	\$18.4 billion
Motorcycling and ATVing	\$16.2 billion
RVing	\$48.2 billion
Skiing and snowboarding	\$5.9 billion
Snowmobiling and other snow activities	\$5.1 billion

According to the National Golf Foundation, golf is a \$102 billion industry in the U.S. This represents 20% growth since 2016 and is “five times the revenue of the NFL” (Lorentz, 2023, p. 1).

Thus, the outdoor recreation market is clearly growing, especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is causing many people to seek authentic outdoor experiences. The question is how these rural recreation markets can sustain themselves.

While the premise of using outdoor recreation for economic development seems intuitive, many small communities do not appear to have the knowledge, expertise or awareness of how to accomplish this. Using the SEED model, the project champion can help these small rural communities create and maintain healthy, sustainable economies by using a collaborative (ecosystem) approach. Bringing stakeholders into this ecosystem with the knowledge, resources and expertise to create synergistic value can result in sustainable, healthy communities. Morse et al., 2022).

Thus, outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism represent a viable driver for economic development and revitalization in rural small towns.

4.4 Possible Challenges of the SEED Model Related to Nature-Based Tourism/Outdoor Recreation

While the prior discussion showcases the possible benefits of this model with nature-based tourism/outdoor recreation as a driver of economic development in small rural towns, there are also some challenges to consider.

During our visit to the Scottish Highlands, which is discussed below, we spent a day with the chair of the Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS). He shared his knowledge and experience with nature-based tourism and its potential negative environmental impact. During our tour with him, he explained and showed us the environmental challenges, such as pollution and the degradation of natural resources. However, we also visited the Loch Ness Community Hub, which we discussed earlier, which works with local citizens to mitigate these environmental problems by building car parks, bathroom facilities, waste disposal for recreational vehicles, and e-bike rentals. These small but important tactics help mitigate the environmental impacts of nature-based tourism as more people visit natural areas, creating the potential for pollution and destruction of these beautiful areas (Hovius et al., 2023).

While we have proposed the benefits of stakeholder ecosystems, they may be problematic with conflicts between stakeholders with different priorities or goals. For example, one agency may prioritize rural ecotourism to attract visitors for economic gain, but in reality, may cause significant environmental damage. There can also be financial problems, a lack of appropriate talent, or a focus on short-term gains to the detriment of long-term sustainability. (Sun et al., 2021). In addition, there is the risk of cultural or social problems. Similar to the issue of too many tourists damaging the environment, too many tourists can also create a decline in local cultures and traditions, which could cause a loss of cultural identity. Or, if a government agency declines to allocate funds for appropriate infrastructure to support the influx of visitors, there can be problems with traffic congestion, overworked local people, and potential damage to the social fabric of a small rural town (Hovius et al., 2023).

In terms of economic development via nature-based tourism in small rural towns of colour or with Indigenous populations, the statistics are sobering. According to - Shea et al. (2020),

- Communities of colour are three times more likely than white communities to live in nature-deprived places. Seventy-four percent of communities of colour in the contiguous United States live in nature-deprived areas, compared with just 23 percent of white communities (p. 1).
- Seventy percent of low-income communities across the country are located in nature-deprived areas. This figure is 20 percent higher than those with moderate or high incomes (p. 1).
- Nature destruction has had the largest impact on low-income communities of colour. More than 76 percent of people who live in low-income communities of colour live in nature-deprived places (p. 2).

Thus, communities of colour do not appear to have the same nature-based tourism opportunities, representing a significant social problem.

5.0 Test Pilot of The SEED Model

5.1 Trade Mission Learning Trip

In May of 2023, we led a class of MBA students to the U.K. for a field experience to learn about gold-standard examples of the SEED model. To illustrate, we met with:

- A Baroness in the House of Lords, Environment and Climate Change Committee Chair. She focused on developing collaborations with other government agencies (national, regional, and local) and local communities to understand the impacts of climate change and sustainability on communities, including their economic health and revitalization.
- 40-year expert with the U.S. Department of Commerce. He focused on helping communities, including small towns and regions, understand how to leverage their natural resources/outdoor recreation to bring visitors in and potentially people who would want to move there. The goal was to increase revenues to the areas and assist with economic development.
- General manager for Hardy Fishing: During this visit, we learned the power of brand development as it relates to the outdoor industry.
- President and founder of Stoats Oats: This sustainable oat-based food company showcases how a small business can use sustainable practices to help mitigate climate change and leverage sustainability for competitive advantage.
- Marketing manager of St. Andrews Golf Course: shared best practices for community engagement to preserve the cultural identity of a small rural town while helping to use St. Andrew's iconic brand to contribute to community economic sustainability.
- Tomatin Whisky Distillery manager shared experiences of working collaboratively with the local community to preserve a successful symbiotic relationship with citizens and visitors.
- Chair of the Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS): shared gold-standard practices in communities in the Scottish Highlands to develop outdoor recreational areas in sustainable ways while creating healthy, thriving communities that had been in decline.

5.2 Lessons Learned

Major lessons learned relating to the SEED model, especially as it related to nature-based tourism/outdoor recreation as a driver of economic development in small rural communities:

- Successful collaboration among important entities includes government agencies at all levels in a country.

- Engagement and commitment by local communities that interact with government agencies and nonprofits create successful ecosystems for economic development.
- Collaborations with for-profit businesses similarly develop synergies with the local communities by leveraging their well-known brands and resources.

What was prominently missing in this experience was the project champion. While each of the extraordinarily knowledgeable experts we met with demonstrated success strategies in small collaborations, we did not meet anyone who had the role of project champion to put them all together into a truly synergistic ecosystem for a much greater impact on small rural communities.

6.0 Test Pilot Project

6.1 Background

During the 2023–2024 academic year, a small team of faculty and students from the University of Maine Business School conducted a small test pilot of the SEED model, acting as the required project champions. Phase 1 included learning about the SEED model, performing a SWOT analysis, evaluating the stakeholder partners in terms of expertise and resources for revitalizing a small rural town, and then reaching out to several small rural towns to ask for participation in the project. One town manager who had been on the job for about eight days was eager to participate, especially since this town had been experiencing a decline in its finances and a loss of many of its businesses.

6.2 Success Factors

A key success factor was that the stakeholders who agreed to help were eager and enthusiastic to be part of the test pilot with the shared mission of helping this small, struggling town. The stakeholders included a middle to high-level representative from the U.S. Small Business Administration, the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development, the Maine Office of Tourism, the Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation, the Maine Office of Community Development, and the Northern Maine Development Commission. For-profit stakeholders included a large regional bank and an international outdoor recreation company. The nonprofit stakeholder was Grow Smart Maine, which is dedicated to helping communities with revitalization strategies. The team then worked on a project proposal and strategy plan.

The project champions communicated with the entire team ecosystem weekly with email updates and follow-ups if the town manager or stakeholders provided information or had questions.

6.3 Implementation

In phase 2, the stakeholders met early in the project to meet and share their expertise and resources. The team also worked with the town manager to understand and identify his major priorities, which were communicated to the ecosystem of stakeholders. Later in the semester, the team held a knowledge summit with the stakeholders and town manager to share knowledge, resources, and strategies to meet the identified goals of the town manager.

Early in 2024, the team (faculty and students) visited the town manager, who provided a comprehensive tour of the town and in-depth information on the challenges and opportunities for the town. Based on the town manager's goals and priorities and the knowledge of the stakeholder expertise and resources, the team worked on developing feasible tactics and strategies to achieve those goals.

The last phase of the project was a final meeting of the entire stakeholder group with a presentation of the proposed tactics and strategies. The different stakeholders provided supporting information and resources to support those tactics. This ecosystem also allowed the town manager to contact any stakeholders at any time for help, guidance, or resources throughout the project. Several of the stakeholders proactively reached out to the team and the town manager to offer these things.

This pilot project resulted in the town manager having a tangible plan with the needed stakeholder knowledge and resources to implement it. Because the needs of this town were significant, the town manager planned to implement them based on the original priorities with a short-term plan followed by a long-term one. However, the project champions provided vital links and relationships with the crucial stakeholders.

The team plans to follow up with the town manager to learn how the implementation worked but given the time limitations of the project champion team, further implementation was not possible.

7.0 Discussion and Conclusions

This paper suggests that rural communities can benefit from an ecosystem/collaborative approach to revitalization facilitated by a project champion. Our SEED model, an adaption of the SEED partnership created by the U.N., represents a new paradigm for government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits to work with and maintain healthy, sustainable, thriving economies in rural communities in the outdoor recreation industry, facilitated by the project champion. Developing synergistic relationships in an ecosystem approach with these different entities provides support, resources, knowledge, and funding in many different areas. Outdoor industries and nature-based tourism represent the authentic experiences many seek to drive this ecosystem. This can increase tourism, awareness, and interest in these small towns to attract new residents and businesses.

While this basic model has been studied in great depth, the addition of the project champion represents the unique variable that we suggest is essential to the success of economic development in small rural towns. As discussed, many small rural towns do not have the resources to fund professional project planners or an economic development office. Thus, they often lack the awareness, expertise, and relationships to develop and implement a revitalization strategy.

A 2024 study by Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) found that sustainability was expected to impact outdoor recreation tourism the most. Similarly, Statista reported that (Kelly, 2024; Statista, 2024). Rural tourism experiences were also reported as a key tourism trend for 2024, according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Roadbook, 2024).

Our pilot project suggests that the SEED model with the project champion plays a vital role in the success of small rural town revitalization.

8.0 Limitations and Future Research

This paper represents a theoretical model. Additional research into the specifics of an economic ecosystem would be needed to determine the true efficacy of the model. Pilot projects could demonstrate the efficacy of the approach. Detailed planning and strategies would be necessary to ensure that all parties involved in the ecosystem worked collaboratively towards a common goal.

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