



2018 Advocacy Scorecard

Empowering tourism community leaders to speak with elected officials on the importance of tourism to the vitality of their communities, is one of the four pillars of Southeast Tourism Society's mission. While the importance of advocacy is widely recognized, assessing its impact can be difficult. Advocacy is a long-term endeavor. It is measured in small steps that add up to progress in the form of informed policymakers, stronger coalitions, and laws and government policies that drive the economic growth and vibrant communities.

In 2018, Southeast Tourism Society worked to advance a number of issues critical to community-focused tourism in 2018. Listed below is the progress made, large and small, on those issues.

✓ denotes a step forward

√ denotes a policy goal achieved

Correct the Discrepancies in International Visitation Data to Allow for Timely and Accurate Travel Reports

√ The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) shares its international arrival and departure data with the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis in order to calculate Gross Domestic Product (GDP), balance of trade, and other key indicators. Since the I-94, international arrivals data collected by Customs and Border Protection, was automated more than 4 years ago, a series of discrepancies caused inaccuracies in the reports from DHS and hindered the ability of the Department of Commerce to provide quality and timely visitation reports and to calculate the nation's balance of trade. As a result, Commerce suspended its monthly and annual visitation reports in March 2018. These reports are essential to the ability of tourism communities to plan for providing services and travel experiences to international visitors. STS rallied congressional support for DHS to resolve the data issues and provide ongoing quality control analysis of all its data. In September, the Commerce announced the issues had been resolved and the international visitation reports were resumed.

Advance the Explore America Act

Seeking to empower gateway communities to leverage their cultural and heritage tourism assets to tell their stories and drive increased visitation, Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) developed the *Explore America Act* to authorize the provision of technical assistance under the Preserve America Grant Program to direct the Secretary of the Interior to enter into partnerships with communities adjacent to units of the National Park System. The legislation's focus is on economic growth and places an emphasis on frequently overlooked

communities: rural, tribal, and national heritage areas. Committed to ensuring the bill was bipartisan, Sen. Schatz decided not to introduce the bill until he had secured a Republican sponsor. STS supported the bill by securing Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA) as a sponsor and recruiting endorsements from Destinations International, Destination Marketing Association of the West, and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. In February, the *Explore America Act* was introduced in the Senate. In July, Rep. Don Young (R-AK) introduced a companion bill in the House. The legislation was not acted on in 2018, but a strong foundation for enactment has been laid for the 116th Congress.

Address the National Park Service Deferred Maintenance Backlog

Each year, more than 330 million travelers visit national park sites, spending more than \$18 billion in local gateway communities, but this vital tourism segment is threatened by the backlog of deferred maintenance on the national parks, which is currently estimated to cost \$11.6 billion to address. The growing list of infrastructure repairs includes: visitor centers, historic buildings and landmarks, campgrounds, trails, roads, bridges, rest stops, and electrical systems. Working with our federal advocacy partners, STS secured resolutions in two state legislatures, Louisiana and Georgia. Both states called on Congress to provide a long-term solution to the maintenance backlog. They also supported bipartisan legislation to direct offshore and onshore mineral royalties, that are not otherwise dedicated to other purposes, to fund public land deferred maintenance. The legislation was approved at the committee level in both houses of Congress, but was not acted on in the final days of the 115th Congress. The legislation has substantial grassroots and congressional support and will be re-introduced in the 116th Congress.

Preserve and Promote America's Cultural, Historic and Natural Resources

STS has been a strong supporter of the effort to expand the Ocmulgee National Monument in Georgia into a National Historical Park. *The Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park Boundary Revision Act* was approved by the House of Representatives in January 2017 as one of the first acts of the 115th Congress. The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee approved the bill in May 2018, but it got caught up in an unrelated political dispute and was not considered by the full Senate. An agreement was reached with Senate leadership for "expedited consideration" early in the 116th Congress.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) establishes fees on visitors to federal lands fund programs to enhance the visitor experience. STS is working to provide a long-term reauthorization of the program and in the interim has secured an extension of FLREA fees through September 30, 2019.

Strengthen the Federal Voice on Tourism Issues

STS drafted and helped secure publication of two op-eds on federal tourism issues in local newspapers in Macon, GA and Savannah, GA.

The 2018 STS Congressional Summit on Travel & Tourism was the most successful to date. Participation exceeded 80 registrants for the first time.