

Geotourism Map unveiled to officials

By Jarrod Lyman / Community Correspondent
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Representatives from National Geographic, the Sierra Business Council and Sierra Nevada Conservancy unveiled the newly created Geotourism Map to a packed house of tourism officials in Yosemite Valley April 8.

The unveiling was the culmination of a process that began in August 2009 with the gathering of attractions, lodging and events in the Yosemite gateway region, which includes the foothills of Madera County.

According to the official Web site, Geotourism is defined as "tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place -- its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents. Geotourism incorporates the concept of sustainable tourism -- that destinations should remain unspoiled for future generations -- while allowing for ways to protect a place's character."

More than 1,200 nominations were received for the site and currently more than 400 sites have been identified and placed on the map.

Yosemite and the surrounding region hold a special place in so many people's hearts, according to Kevin Cann with the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors and former deputy director of Yosemite National Park, who spoke during the unveiling. It's that connection, he said, that resulted in so many nominations.

"There is a tremendous ownership from a large constituency, for every inch of this place," he said.

Most of the sites on the map lie in the gateway communities, a phenomenon Cann credited with the unique quality of the communities, one of the key elements of Geotourism.

"They (tourists) didn't come with the intention of coming to Coarsegold or Mariposa or Groveland. What Geotourism is, it's a sense of place. Our gateways have a sense of place. Now we have a means of letting people know," he said.

Nicole DeJonghe, the project manager for the Geotourism mapguide, said she's seen numerous people connect with the land in the gateway region, and come away with special experiences.

That is what the Geotourism project does. It connects them with the land and supports the economics of the gateway communities."

Numerous local businesses and attractions are listed on the map. Bass Lake, for instance, is listed as a "Natural Area." Other natural areas listed on the map include Horsetail Falls and Sentinel Dome in Yosemite.

Attractions go as far south as O'Neals, where Westbrook Wine Farm owned by Ray and Tammy Krause is listed as an attraction.

"Our positive customer feedback makes us very glad to have been included in this

excellent tourism tool," said Ray. "It is really special to be a small part of Geotourism."

Numerous lodging properties are listed as well, such as Paradise Springs Resort outside of Oakhurst.

Rhonda Salisbury with Paradise Springs said the property's inclusion is a tremendous opportunity.

"The worldwide exposure that comes with partnering with the National Geographic Magazine provides more than a small property could afford. Our whole area should benefit from it being a part of this project," she said.

Nominations are still being accepted for other attractions throughout the region. To view the map, or submit an attraction, log on to www.sierranevadageotourism.org.