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Recreation/Nature-Based Tourism in Rural Areas: Literature Review and Case Study

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Introduction

Located in northwestern Massachusetts, Franklin County is the most rural area of the Commonwealth. From the Berkshire foothills in the west to the Quabbin Reservoir in the east, Franklin County has a wealth of natural and cultural resources. This landscape has fostered the development of attractions and services that highlight the region's rural and scenic amenities. Efforts are being explored to further leverage these assets for economic purposes while also protecting and preserving them. To support these efforts, the FRCOG has prepared this literature review and case study to provide further information about this industry sector and how another region promotes recreation and nature-based tourism in their respective area.

Potential Advantages and Disadvantages to Rural Tourism Development

Before a community or region embarks on a tourism development strategy, it should first determine what the potential negative and positive outcomes of such a strategy could be. Potential advantages include stimulating local economies by bringing in outside dollars, which in turn will benefit both recreation and tourism businesses, but also a myriad of other businesses that support those industries. Attracting more visitors to town will lead to business and job growth. The local government benefits through increased tax revenues, which can help support quality services for residents. Another benefit for residents is greater access to recreation and cultural amenities. Finally, the infrastructure improvements needed to support tourism, such as improved transportation and telecommunications, can attract other industries to the area (Reeder and Brown, 2005; Potts and Marsinko, 1998).

Potential disadvantages include those associated with rapid growth: erosion of natural and cultural amenities and community character by unplanned development; increased congestion and pollution; higher housing costs; overcrowded schools; locally-owned businesses driven out by national chains; and farms burdened by higher land prices. Additionally, jobs in the tourism industry are typically seasonal, and have traditionally been low wage and require little education, though this may be changing due to shifting tourist demands towards higher quality experiences (Potts and Marsinko, 1998; Vail, 2010). This change in tourist demand will be discussed in more detail later. Jobs also may not always be filled by existing residents but instead may be filled by temporary foreign workers.

A 2005 study conducted by the USDA's Economic Research Service compared economic and social statistics from non-metropolitan counties in the United States with existing mature recreation tourism industries (including non-outdoor recreation, such as casinos), to other non-metro, non-recreation counties. The study found that from 1990 to 2000, recreation counties grew in population much faster than non-recreation counties. Additionally, employment growth was higher in recreation counties over this period. In general recreation counties had higher employment rates for younger (24 years old and below), and older (65 years old and above) workers. Employment rates for 25-64 year olds were roughly the same in recreation and non-recreation counties (Reeder and Brown, 2005).

The study confirmed that earnings per job were lower in recreation counties, though earnings per resident were actually higher. The study concluded that residents in recreation counties may earn less per job, but work more hours on average, possibly at multiple jobs, to earn more overall than residents in non-recreation counties. Income, which includes earnings from jobs as well as interest, capital gains, retirement benefits and other assets, was found to be higher in recreation counties (both per capita and median household incomes), likely due to the fact that recreation areas often attract wealthy individuals and retirees. Housing rents were found to be higher in recreation counties, though this is only one part of the housing picture and does not account for owner-occupied units. The study notes that the higher median income of households in recreation counties more than covers the higher cost of housing. Poverty rates were also found to be lower in recreation counties (Reeder and Brown, 2005).

While the study looked at counties across the United States, northeastern recreation counties located in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York, stood out from the rest of the country in several ways. Northeast counties had the highest levels of earnings per job, and one of the lowest poverty rates. Additionally, the northeastern recreation counties were the only area in the country that did not experience double digit population growth from 1990–2000 (Reeder and Brown, 2005).

Planning and support from government, businesses, and residents is needed to ensure a successful tourism strategy that minimizes the potential for negative impacts (Potts and Marsinko, 1998).

Changing Tourist Demand – Experiential Tourists and Quality of Place

Demand for outdoor recreation activities such as camping, fishing, downhill skiing, snowmobiling and whitewater rafting has declined or remained stagnant in recent years. Instead, tourists to rural areas are looking for a broader experience that combines outdoor recreation with quality accommodations, shopping and cultural opportunities. In short, they are looking for experiences, not just beautiful scenery (Vail, 2010; Gartner, 2005). As David Vail, Professor of Economics at Bowdoin College, describes it, tourists to rural areas want “quality experiences in quality places,” (Vail, 2010, p. 3). This type of tourist is known as an experiential tourist.

This type of tourism supports the preservation and enhancement of rural communities' quality of place, or the characteristics of a community that make it *distinctive* (varied from place to place) and *attractive* (outstanding from the norm) (Reilly and Renski, 2007). Focusing on improving a

community's quality of place can both attract more visitors and benefit existing residents. Examples of strategies to support quality of place that also support tourism include downtown revitalization, land conservation and protection, historic preservation, transportation improvements and development of outdoor recreation opportunities (Reilly and Renski, 2007).

As noted above, improvements made to support tourism can also help attract other businesses and new residents, further diversifying the economy. "Footloose" businesses that are not tied to a specific location are more likely to consider quality of place as important in their location decisions (Reilly and Renski, 2007). "The community qualities which attract nature-based tourists, such as pristine environments, outdoor recreation, cultural opportunities, cleanliness, friendliness and community pride, are the same qualities which will impress other industries and retirees in their location decisions. Although a few communities are suitable for tourism as their primary economy, most would benefit more with a balanced, mixed economy, with nature-based tourism as one segment," (Potts and Marsinko, 1998, p. 4).

Maximizing the Economic Impact of Tourism

The tourism market today is highly competitive, with many regions rich in natural and cultural amenities looking to grow their tourism (Vail, 2010; Reilly and Renski, 2007; Potts and Marsinko, 1998). Many challenges exist that impede the development of tourism in rural areas. The longer a trip lasts, the more money a visitor will spend on lodging, food and other goods. The current recession has led to shorter and less frequent vacations for the average family. "Staycationers," residents who choose to take vacations close to home, typically take more day trips and have less money to spend than visitors coming from farther away. Higher fuel prices also place more remote destinations at a disadvantage, especially if there are no transportation alternatives to the personal automobile. Finally, current budget pressures at the state and local level limit funding for tourism as well as quality of place improvements that would support tourism (Vail, 2010).

The quality of the natural environment plays a key role in drawing visitors to rural areas. However, natural amenities alone are not enough to bring tourists to a region. Access provided by sufficient infrastructure such as roads, trails, and signage, must be in place, as well as supporting businesses including lodging, restaurants, and equipment stores or rental services. Marketing and promotion activities including web-based materials, maps, guidebooks and advertising are also needed (Beyers, 2007). High speed internet and cell phone service are needed to meet the needs of businesses and the demands of visitors (Vail, 2010). To the extent possible, the time it takes a visitor to travel to and within a region should be minimized, and the time and effort needed to find lodging, restaurants, recreation areas, shopping, etc. should be minimized (Marcouiller and Prey, 2005).

As discussed previously, tourists are now more and more seeking unique and high quality experiences that might be different than what existing businesses offer. Training for employees and businesses may be needed to improve the quality of customer service and to fill gaps where business opportunities exist. As a result, jobs in tourism will require more training and education than in the past, and likely will be higher paying. As Potts and Marsinko (1998) explain, "for many years jobs in the tourism industry required only moderate formal education. However,

with increased competition among states for tourism dollars, coupled with an interest in quality outdoor experiences, salaries have increased as have job opportunities for those seeking professional careers. Nature-based development can provide exceptional opportunities for those who have special insight into their local environments and who are willing to professionally provide outfitting, guide services, educational tours, food and lodging,” (p. 3).

Finally, while increased access to and promotion of natural amenities can lead to increased tourism and economic growth, at the same time the integrity of the natural resource must be protected in order to sustain a healthy tourism industry into the future.

Case Study: Maine Woods Consortium

The Maine Woods Consortium (MWC) was formed in 2008 as an association of non-profit organizations, businesses, and government agencies whose goal is to advance the economic, community and ecological well-being of the Maine Woods region, comprising Maine’s six most rural counties and northern Penobscot County. The MWC includes many economic and community development organizations within these counties. It operates a website and publishes a periodic newsletter intended to inform Maine Woods stakeholders of significant initiatives and trends and to encourage coordinated action across a number of sectors.



According to the website, the MWC is “committed to advancing quality of place and strengthening the link between the natural environment and built human communities in the Maine Woods through a collaborative approach to experiential destination tourism development.” There are currently three programs spearheaded by the group that focus on tourism development:

- Maine Woods Tourism Training Initiative
- Maine Woods Tourism Quality Labeling Research
- Maine Woods Discovery

The Maine Woods Tourism Training Initiative began in 2009 as a response to requests from businesses for more effective tourism training. After surveying local businesses on training needs, trainings were developed for three of the six counties. Customer service training for employees and managers is a key focus of trainings, as well as marketing (including social networking), and destination training (answering the question “what is there to do around here?”). Trainings range from workshops to motivational speakers. There is also a lending library of training DVDs. Trainings are being extended to an additional county in 2011. The initial round of trainings was funded through the Betterment Fund and USDA Rural Development. The initiative is intended to be self-sustaining in the long term (Hazard, in Vail, 2010)

The MWC is currently researching the feasibility of initiating a quality labeling and branding initiative in the Maine Woods region. Quality labeling is a certification that a business meets identified standards, such as a high level of customer service. A quality label could be used as a marketing tool for accredited businesses and help brand the region's tourism products and experiences.

Maine Woods Discovery is a collaborative effort of small to medium sized businesses and organizations involved in outdoor recreation tourism in the Maine Woods region. The Main Woods Discovery website, separate from MWC's, offers information on destination areas within the region and travel packages that bring together various businesses to provide a unique experience of the region to visitors, tying directly into the demands of experiential tourists. Through this project, MWC hopes to learn what the common characteristics of a successful Maine Woods experience are, and how to bring together different business to provide network-based tourism promotion and packages.

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Additional Resources

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Maine Woods Consortium website: <http://www.mainewoodsconsortium.org>

Maine Woods Discovery website: <http://www.mainewoodsdiscovery.com/>