

NATIONAL EXTENSION TOURISM (NET)



2021 Conference Proceedings

Edited by Lisa Chase, Natalie Chin, and Xinyi Qian

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Introduction

The mission of the National Extension Tourism network (NET) is to integrate research, education and outreach within Cooperative Extension and Sea Grant to support sustainable tourism, thus contributing to the long-term economic development, environmental stewardship, and socio-cultural wellbeing of communities and regions.

NET was formed in 1994, with the first conference taking place in 1995. NET holds biennial conferences that move to different regions of the US. The 2021 NET Conference took place in Savannah, GA and online November 7-10. Since our network last met in 2019, our tourism communities have faced immense challenges from natural disasters and social unrest to an ongoing global pandemic. How we as tourism professionals have responded and adapted to these changes also continues to evolve. The NET 2021 conference theme of “Navigating the Uncharted” reflected on these transformations and catalyzed future extension programming that serves our stakeholders’ needs.

To increase access to the impactful work presented at the conference, we are publishing the NET 2021 conference proceedings. The intended audiences for the proceedings include Extension faculty and staff, researchers, tourism professionals, and practitioners who can benefit from the wide array of applied research and outreach programs presented in the proceedings. The second audience includes faculty and students in tourism and outdoor recreation related academic programs who can benefit from having access to current applied research and programs that highlight how Extension and partners help address opportunities, issues and trends in tourism and outdoor recreation. The proceedings will be shared widely via the [National Extension Tourism website](#) as an open source publication for faculty, students and practitioners.

This proceedings document contains eight submissions from the 2021 NET Conference, which we have grouped into the three categories of: data, training, and marketing. Goetz et al., Qian, and Schmidt et al. shared recent data about the state of the tourism industry in the U.S. Phillips, Burkhart-Kriesel, and Leeds and Barrett provided examples of cutting-edge training programs from across the country. Finally, Stewart, Higgins and Sterling detailed a few examples of marketing programs. We hope these papers will inspire you in your work supporting tourism as it continues to recover and evolve towards resilience and regeneration.

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The U.S. Recreation Economy: Data, COVID-19, and Implications for Extension

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INTRO/BACKGROUND

The breadth, depth, and speed of the economic collapse associated with the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in economic history. No sector was hit harder than Leisure and Hospitality, which accounts for the economic core of tourism and recreation-based activity. Only recently has employment in this sector begun to show signs of recovery toward pre-pandemic levels. Here we document the importance of the Leisure and Hospitality sector to the economy and identify impacts from the pandemic and recovery, at both state and local (county) levels. Selected implications for Extension Services programming by Land- and Sea-Grant institutions are highlighted.

METHODS

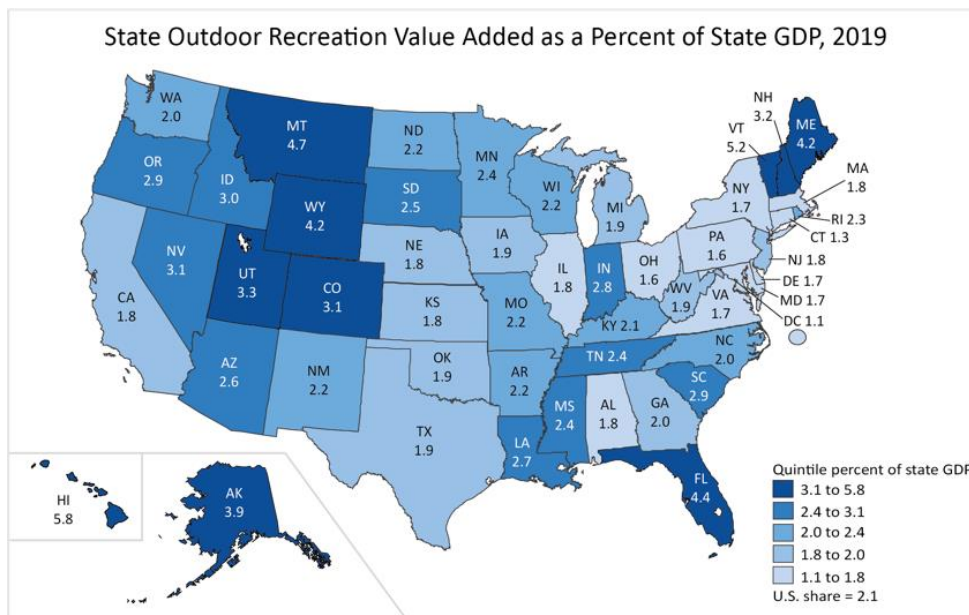
We use secondary public data from federal sources including the Bureau of Economic Analysis' Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account and Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages program, and descriptive analysis to document how COVID-19 affected U.S. states and counties in terms of the tourism and recreation employment and wages. Data are presented in geographic terms using maps with jurisdictional boundaries. These include calculations of the share of employment in the Leisure and Hospitality sector and changes between 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2020 (pandemic height) in the 3rd Quarter, when seasonal employment in tourism and recreation are typically at their largest. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic at the end of the 1st Quarter of 2020, on March 11th.

FINDINGS

Importance of recreation to state economies

Newly compiled data by the U.S. Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis show that (Fig.1), in the year preceding the COVID-19 pandemic's onset, the outdoor recreation sector contributed on average 2.1 percent of state GDP in 2019, or \$459.8 billion (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019). The highest shares at the state level are found in the intermountain West, upper New England (especially Vermont, with 5.2%), and Florida. In general, these states also are areas with high levels of natural amenities (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2019). Despite the importance of the sector to many rural economies, only a few Extension services offer significant outreach programming (see Arbogast et al. 2022).

Figure 1 State Outdoor Recreation Value Added as a Percent of State GDP, 2019



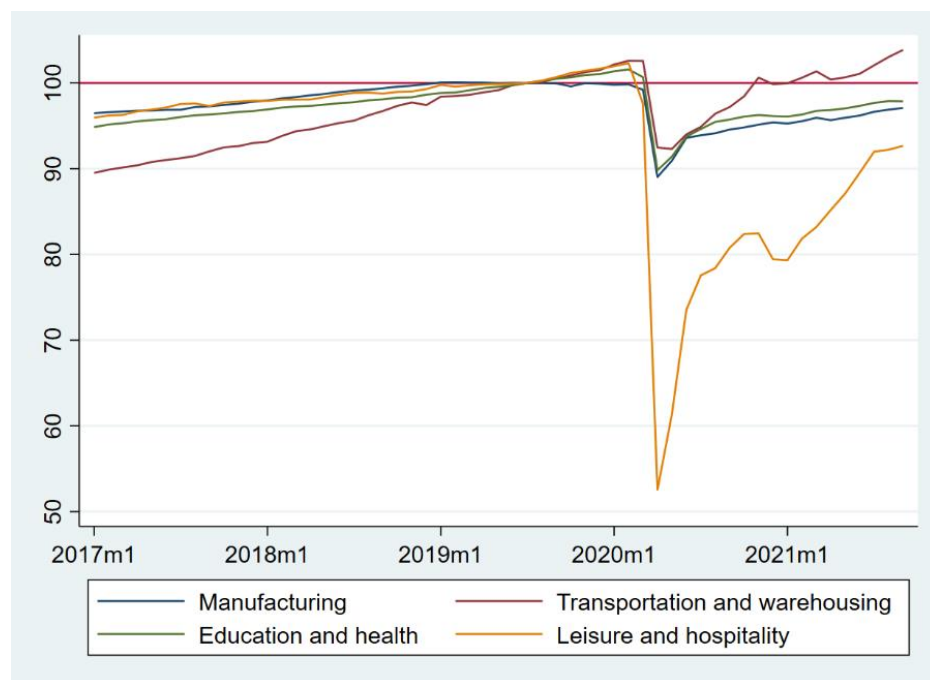
U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Source: Retrieved from U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis at: <https://www.bea.gov/news/2020/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2019>, Updated state-level data are available at: <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>; <https://www.bea.gov/news/2021/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2020>

Covid state-level impact, by major sector

In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, outdoor recreation's share of GDP shrank to 1.8 percent (\$374.3 billion), underscoring that the sector was among the hardest hit. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) summarized in Figure 2 show the employment impacts of COVID-19 closures for key sectors on a monthly basis. These data are indexed to July 2019, the height of the tourism and recreation season pre-pandemic. Leisure and Hospitality sector employment collapsed in the first month of the pandemic (March 2020), declining by more than 50%, because of shutdowns and social distancing requirements. In comparison, employment in the other major sectors shown fell by a quarter or less. As recently as September 2021, Leisure and Hospitality employment had not returned to pre-pandemic levels, although there was a rebound to roughly 90% over the two-year period. At the time of publication, data is not available for the end of 2021, which saw a resurgence of COVID-19 cases as the Delta and Omicron variants circulated.

Figure 2 Monthly Employment by Sector, July 2019 = 100



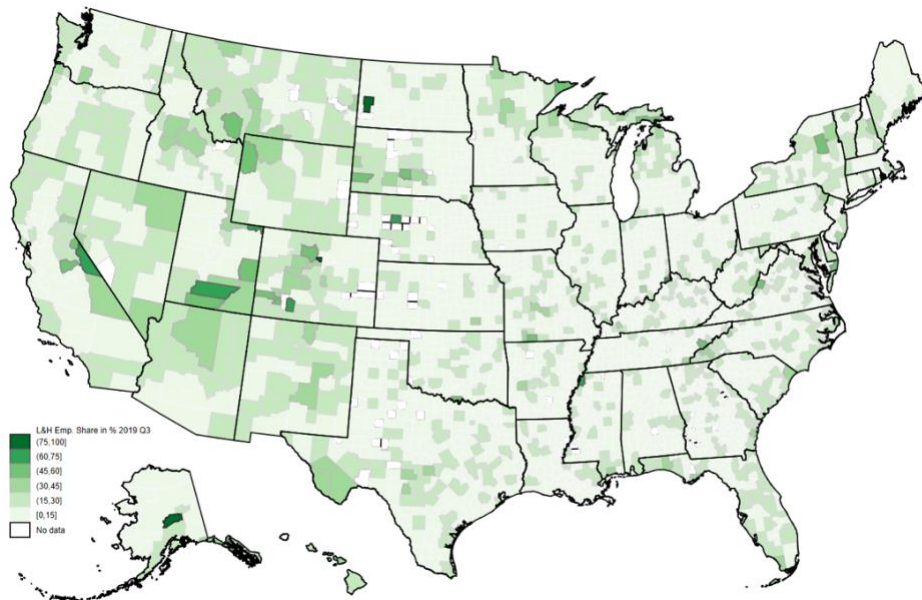
Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics based on authors' own calculations.

For other sectors and state level updates, as well as for county-level overall employment and different income ranges, see the website (<https://tracktherecovery.org>). There are significant differences by state in these patterns, and data are not available for some states for statistical reasons.

Impact at county level – for extension (rural areas)

County-level data from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019) show the local impacts of tourism and recreation via the share of total employment attributable to the sector. Employment in the sector pre-pandemic varies significantly across jurisdictions (Fig. 3). However, in several counties Leisure and Hospitality employment is an important source of community livelihoods. Communities with pronounced dependence on this sector include the recreation hubs of the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky, lower Appalachians, and the Adirondack Mountains; gateway communities for attractions such as Bryce Canyon, Zion, Grand Canyon and Roosevelt National Parks; tribal communities adjacent to National Forests in South Dakota, Nebraska and New Mexico; coastal areas along the Great Lakes in Minnesota and Michigan; and border communities along the Big Bend of the Rio Grande in Texas. This data represents the baseline for the analysis that follows.

Figure 3 Share of Leisure and Hospitality in Total Employment, 2019 Q3

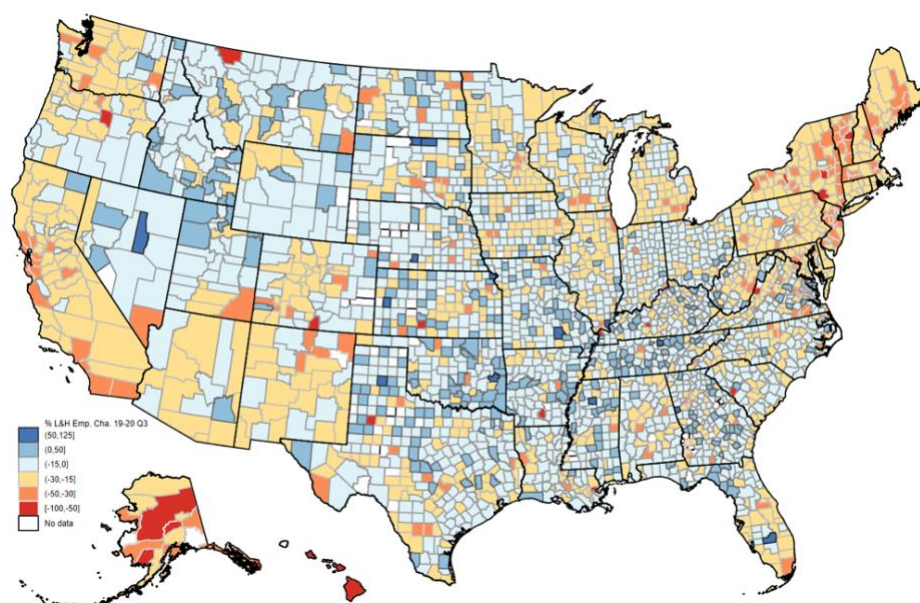


Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) based on authors' own calculations. The share is calculated as L&H employment in 2019 Q3 divided by 2019 Q3 total employment in percentage. Missing data is due to non-disclosed counties.

Comparison of the data from 2019 to that of 2020 shows dramatic differences across counties in terms of employment change, with large metropolitan areas generally experiencing significant reductions (Fig. 4). In contrast, many rural, remote, and isolated counties, with lower population densities, experienced significant increases. Underlying these trends is the general desire to socially distance during the pandemic, when tourism activity shifted

from areas of high population and visit density to those of lower density. This continues to represent an opportunity for rural areas and those with attractions less frequented prior to the pandemic. It also poses challenges, as many communities in the South, Midwest, and Mountain West experienced booms in tourism and recreation employment share (counties shaded in blue).

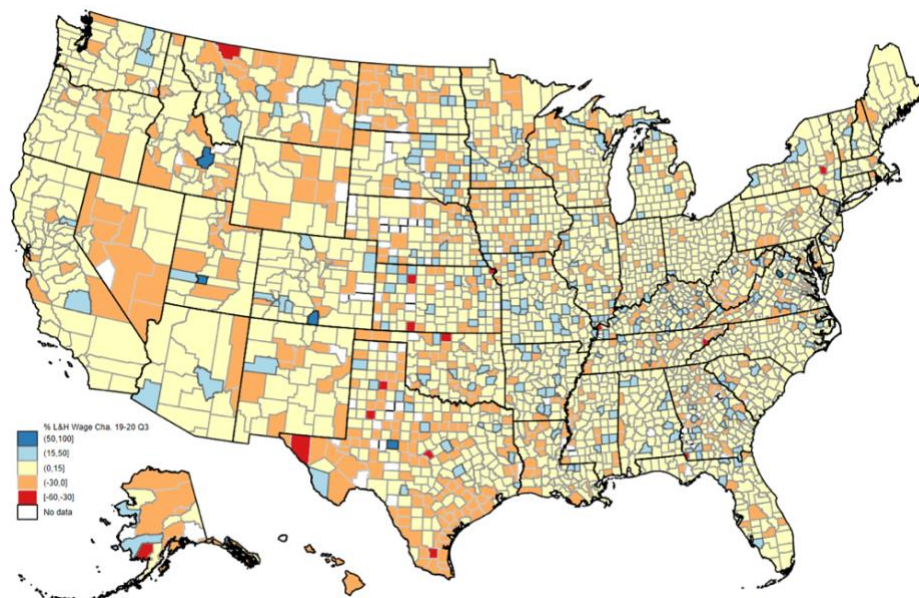
Figure 4 Leisure and Hospitality Employment Change, 2019Q3 - 2020Q3



Sources: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) based on authors' own calculations. The change in percentage is leisure and hospitality employment in 2020 Q3 minus 2019 Q3 divided by 2019 Q3 L&H employment. Missing data is due to non-disclosed counties.

Focusing next on wage changes during the pandemic, Fig. 5 shows that wages rose in some rural communities, starting arguably from a lower base, while they fell in most counties. Declines include many rural counties and metro areas. Even as growth in the number of persons employed represented a boost to local incomes, it appears from the maps that such increases in share of total employment were not consistently associated with higher pay within the sector. Comparisons cannot yet be made to 2021's 3rd Quarter, which has been characterized by persistent labor shortages (especially in the Leisure and Hospitality sector) and increasing inflation, which are typically associated with upward pressure on wages. Updates when data become available will be important next steps beyond this publication.

Figure 5 Leisure and Hospitality Wage Change, 2019Q3 - 2020Q3



Sources: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) based on authors' own calculations. The change in percentage is leisure and hospitality average weekly wage in 2020 Q3 minus 2019 Q3 divided by 2019 Q3 L&H average weekly wage. Missing data is due to non-disclosed counties.

Discussion

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable economic difficulty nationwide, stark differences can be seen across the nation, with some counties benefiting from the shift in recreational activity away from higher density communities. In addition, anecdotal evidence and popular media articles (Guilford, 2020; Pohle, 2021) reveal the growing attraction of lower density, rural places. The challenge for Extension is, first, to appreciate the important role of this trend and the recreational sector more generally and, second, to help communities to take advantage of the increased demand for rural spaces while ensuring benefits are more widely distributed.

With shifts in demand for tourism and hospitality industry employment, programming that prepares workforce participants and business owners may need to be re-distributed or expanded within a state. Efforts to engage community leaders in planning and destination development may also be required, including efforts to address housing supply, infrastructure limitations, and overuse in those communities experiencing new growth. Local Extension professionals may face new demand for such programming, and may require additional resources from their campuses, such as funding, connections with new research specialists, and expanded partnerships with industry. In states that have not yet invested in tourism and recreation programming, Extension service professionals may need to actively network with colleagues outside the state to build new expertise to serve their local

stakeholders. Entities like NET and the USDA NIFA Regional Rural Development Centers will be critical to facilitate these relationships and knowledge sharing. Similarly, funding opportunities like HATCH and AFRI, which recognize the need for integrated programming to address challenges should be pursued to encourage knowledge sharing and cross-state collaborative research and outreach programming.

Keywords: Community and regional development; COVID-19; Extension; Recreation; Tourism

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Agritourism Successes and Challenges: Results from a National Survey of Farms and Ranches Open to Visitors

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Agritourism – welcoming visitors on farms, ranches, and vineyards – is an important diversification strategy that can benefit farm families, drive rural economic growth, and leverage the tourism industry in rural areas (Thilmany et al., 2019; Barbieri, 2013). According to Chase et al.'s (2018) conceptual framework, agritourism activities fall into five overlapping categories: education, hospitality, outdoor recreation, entertainment, and direct sales of agricultural products. The core of agritourism is on-farm experiences and product sales deeply connected to agriculture. Peripheral activities that are sometimes defined as agritourism and sometimes not, include off-farm experiences and direct sales as well as on-farm experiences that are not connected to agriculture. Most practitioners and researchers seem to agree on the definitional core of agritourism, but the peripheral activities can lead to disagreement and controversy in agritourism research (Lamie, et al. 2021) and in regulating agritourism activities at the State and local government levels. Along with agreement on the definition of agritourism, a better understanding is needed of factors contributing to agritourism operators' successes and challenges. To that end, a multi-state team of collaborating Extension colleagues recently conducted applied research to benefit agritourism operators and their communities.

METHODS

Beginning with interpretive inquiry, the researchers conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with farmers and ranchers from Vermont, California, Oregon, West Virginia, and Minnesota in the spring of 2019. These states were

selected because of their substantial interest in agritourism and geographic variability. The interview subjects in a state were selected to maximize the range of variation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) within the study focus of farms or ranches classified as small or medium by USDA standards. A variety of farm products as well as on-farm experiences were represented in the sample, as was race, gender and experience working in agritourism. They analyzed those data to identify themes that were then used to develop an online survey instrument. The findings from the qualitative analysis of the interviews were combined with questions drawn from previously developed agritourism surveys used in published research (e.g. Schilling et al., 2012). The online survey was programmed in Qualtrics and sent to agritourism operators across the United States between November 2019 and February 2020. The project team used national and local networks and databases to distribute the survey to agricultural producers. The survey's first question served as a screening question and limited responses to farm, ranches, vineyards, aquaculture, and other agricultural production facilities that are open to visitors. Thus, off-farm experiences and sales (e.g., farmers markets) were not included. The timing was such that survey responses were completed prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing baseline data on the state of agritourism before the pandemic.

FINDINGS

The research team received 1,834 usable responses to the online survey, with at least one respondent from each of the 50 states. The average age of respondents was 55 years old and over half of the respondents identified as female. Most respondents (7 out of 10) had a college degree or higher, and a little more than half had more than ten years of agritourism experience. About 50 percent of responses came from operators with less than 100 acres of land. The median farm size of respondents was 60 acres. Most farms operated 50 miles or more from a city of at least 50,000 people.

Breaking down the responses by region, 29 percent came from the South, 26 percent from the West, 24 percent from the Northeast, and 21 percent from the Midwest. All regions reported offering crops, livestock, and value-added products, to varying degrees. Agritourism operations in the Northeast had the most crops (67 percent of respondents), the Southern operations had the most livestock (48 percent of respondents), and the Northeast and West led with the most value-added product offerings, at 56 and 49 percent of respondents respectively (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Product Offerings



Producers were asked which of the five categories of agritourism they offered. In all four regions, on-farm direct sales was by far the largest category, with 89 percent of respondents in the Northeast offering direct sales, 78 percent in the South, and 77 percent in the Midwest and West. Educational activities followed, being offered by 55 percent of respondents. Entertainment was offered by 48 percent, outdoor recreation by 27 percent, and accommodations/hospitality by 19 percent of respondents. As with the types of products, many respondents offered multiple options.

In addition to firmographics, questions in the survey asked operators about their motivations for offering agritourism activities, challenges operating an agritourism business, and the type of support they receive to help develop their business. Overall, agritourism operators have a positive outlook, with almost 70% of respondents planning to expand their operation, either with more employees or capital investment. Almost 20% of respondents planned to hold steady, with less than 5% indicating they would reduce or close their operations. The top three support categories respondents rated as necessary for success were social media marketing and management, legal and liability information, and marketing plan development.

When it comes to challenges, operators across the country felt that time management was their biggest challenge, followed by labor availability and concerns about liability issues (see Figure 2). While some of these challenges are faced by all agricultural producers, many agritourism operators noted that the regulations and taxation they experienced and the lack of available

insurance (either due to cost or coverage for the activities offered) make agritourism a particularly difficult enterprise.

Figure 2. Top Ten Challenges Identified by Agritourism Operators



The project team conducted in-depth analyses, focusing on different aspects of the survey. Quella et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions to investigate the motivations of farmers offering agritourism. The results show that non-monetary motivations (specifically community engagement and leadership) are important for farmers when they decide to start offering agritourism activities. Turning to monetary motivations, Hollas et al. (2021) examined the profitability of responding agritourism operations. The authors found that operators with more agritourism experience (measured in years) were more likely to be profitable with agritourism efforts. They also found that larger agritourism businesses (measured in revenue and acreage), and those that offer entertainment and/or on-farm direct sales had positive associations with profitability. Respondents that either identified as female and/or offered off-farm sales were less likely to be profitable.

Wang et al. (2021) used a probit regression model to analyze the perceived accessibility of resources and support for agritourism operators across the four regions, with the Northeast region as the baseline. They found that agritourism liability (insurance) is an issue that all regions share as a common concern. However, some challenges are more region-specific. For example, e-connectivity is a major issue in the Southern region. This is problematic because operators rely on a stable internet connection for marketing

purposes, online reservations, and to run credit card payments for purchases. The Western region was especially concerned about state and local regulations, as well as city and county zoning and permitting.

Schmidt et al. (2021a) analyzed the role of women in agritourism entrepreneurship in the United States based on the survey results. Women in agritourism are foremost farmers, and investigating the impact of gender differences is important, as Fremstad and Paul (2020, p.124) point out that "Farming is one of the most unequal professions in the United States today". In 2017, 38% of all farm operations were operated by women (Schmidt et al., 2021b), and, as mentioned above, 58% of the agritourism survey respondents were women. However, similar to previous studies, results show that women in agritourism make significantly less profit than their male counterparts, and they are less likely to assess themselves as being successful at increasing farm revenue. This is a critical issue that would benefit from additional research and outreach.

Summaries of survey results and links to publication are online at <https://www.uvm.edu/vtrc/agritourism-survey>.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS

The analysis of the national survey of agritourism operators showed that respondents are not driven solely by profit but that non-monetary goals play an important role as well. These findings are similar to other survey studies (Nickerson et al., 2001; Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008; Schilling et al., 2012). We also find that agritourism operators across the United States are not operating on a level playing field. As mentioned in the introduction, there is no uniform definition of agritourism available. Different definitions at the state and municipal levels, in addition to agritourism regulations impact producers' abilities and motivations to offer experiences on their farms. A current USDA NIFA project "Creating an Effective Support System for Small and Medium-Sized Farm Operators to Succeed in Agritourism," is focused on analyzing how these differences in the support system impact agritourism operators across the country. This project also explores Extension programming to help address these inequalities.

The results of the survey reported in this article have already been applied to develop Extension programming in several states, including a Northeast multi-state project on agritourism safety and liability and a tool to help producers navigate regulations related to agritourism. These resources can be found online at <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/vtagritourism>.

Although this project was limited to the US, agritourism is a global phenomenon and the survey is now being adapted for use in other countries.

An international group, including researchers from the US multi-state team, have formed the International Research Network for Agritourism (IRENA)¹. One of the group's goals is to analyze differences and commonalities across participating countries to share experiences and lessons learned. Through the expansion of this research internationally, we anticipate it will continue to have important implications for Extension programming into the future, especially as we learn new ways to support agritourism operators and their communities.

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Keywords: Agritourism, Direct-to-Consumer Sales, Survey, Extension

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Irish Fair of Minnesota Attendee Profile: What we learned from four waves of panel-level longitudinal data in 11 years

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INTRODUCTION

Festivals and events have a direct impact on residents who may develop a stronger sense of community, find more pride in local culture, and enjoy local entertainment (Hall, 1992; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001). One such event is the Irish Fair of Minnesota, which aims to provide attendees with a fun, authentically-Irish, family-friendly event. To assist marketing decisions, enhance the event itself, and maximize benefits to the community, the Irish Fair of Minnesota has continually profiled its attendees.

METHODS

Study setting

The Irish Fair of Minnesota takes place on the second weekend of August, from Friday afternoon through Sunday evening. The venue has been Harriet Island Regional Park in downtown Saint Paul since 2001. Activities offered at the Fair ranges from live music, Irish dancing, and a marketplace to cultural areas, Irish-themed children's activities, and a sports area, among others. According to Fair organizers, the event attracted 75,000 to 100,000 attendees.

From 2007 to 2017, the University of Minnesota Tourism Center contracted with the Irish Fair of Minnesota to profile its attendees for four times: 2007 (Schuweiler & Schneider, 2007), 2011 (Ofstedal & Schneider, 2011), 2014 (Qian, 2014), and 2017 (Qian).

Questionnaire

For the first attendee profile in 2007, an onsite questionnaire was developed, based on other event attendee profiles that the Tourism Center had conducted and the needs of the Fair organizers. The same questions were asked in the questionnaires for the subsequent attendee profiles.

Questionnaire sections included event participation, information sources (i.e., the places where attendees learned about the Irish Fair), enjoyable attributes

of the Fair, main reasons to attend the Fair, group composition, expenditures, mode of transportation, and basic demographic information.

Data collection

For each attendee profile, a sampling plan was created with both spatial and time considerations to: (1) ensure coverage of various activities and areas throughout the Fair, and (2) reach a range of Fair attendees. A convenience sample was used with survey volunteers asking passing attendees to complete the questionnaire. University of Minnesota Tourism Center staff trained and coordinated volunteers who administered the questionnaire. Survey volunteers collected 395 usable responses in 2007, 532 in 2011, 475 in 2014, and 471 in 2017.

Data analysis

Completed questionnaires were entered, cleaned, and checked in SPSS, a statistical data analysis software. Analysis provided frequencies to describe the sample of Fair attendees and to provide descriptive information on variables of interest. Means, medians, and standard deviations were also provided where applicable. Comparison between the 2007, 2011, 2014, and 2017 profile results was conducted using chi-square tests to compare categorical variables and Analysis of Variance to compare means.

FINDINGS

Data from the 2007, 2011, 2014, and 2017 profiles were compared where applicable. Analysis revealed differences in select information sources and expenditures, average age, gender, income, and Fair experience.

Differences among information sources included Irish community sources, traditional media, and online sources (Table 1). There was a steady and significant decrease in the percentage of respondents who used the *Irish Gazette* as an information source ($\chi^2=7.51, p<0.05$). In 2007, attendees were more likely to use newspaper ($\chi^2=18.29, p<0.0005$) and radio ($\chi^2=18.82, p<0.0005$), two traditional information sources, than in subsequent years. Respondents in 2017 were significantly more likely than those in earlier years to use Facebook as an information source ($\chi^2=69.90, p<0.0005$). Additionally, attendees in 2011 and 2014, compared to those in 2007 and 2017, were more likely to use “other” information sources ($\chi^2=110.17, p<0.0005$).

TABLE 1: Comparison of 2007, 2011, 2014, and 2017 Irish Fair of Minnesota attendee information sources

	2007 (%) (n=395)	2011 (%) (n=532)	2014 (%) (n=475)	2017 (%) (n=471)	Statistics		
					χ^2	Sig.	
Irish							
Irish	8.1	9.8	7.2	5.3	7.34	0.062	
<i>Irish Gazette</i>	NA	5.8	4.4	2.3	7.51	0.023	*
Word of mouth	NA	46.6	42.9	48.8	5.37	0.252	
Traditional							
<i>Pioneer Press</i>	9.9	8.5	7.6	3.0	18.29	<0.0005	**
TV	11.9	8.3	11.8	12.3	5.53	0.137	
Radio	12.2	6.8	5.9	5.1	18.82	<0.0005	**
Poster/flyer	4.3	5.3	3.8	3.4	2.45	0.485	
Online							
Irish Fair	NA	11.3	12.2	11.7	0.21	0.900	
Facebook	NA	6.6	9.5	23.4	69.90	<0.0005	**
Other	11.6	25.6	27.6	5.5	110.17	<0.0005	**

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .0005$.

Attendees across the four years differed in average age, generational composition, gender composition, and income (Table 2). The 2011 Irish Fair respondents were significantly younger than those in 2007 and 2014 ($F=5.31$, $p<0.005$). Attendees' average age was 43 years old in 2011 and 47 years old in both 2007 and 2014. However, given that respondents are within the same decade, the meaningfulness of this difference is in question. Generation-wise, there was a strong increase in the percentage of millennials ($\chi^2=64.14$, $p<0.0005$), as they came of age in the past decade. At the same time, there was a sizable decrease in the percentage of baby boomers. Members of Gen X, as well as the Greatest and Silent generations, showed steady percentages for attendance. In 2014 and 2017, more females answered the questionnaire than in 2007 and 2011 ($\chi^2=9.79$, $p<0.05$). Distribution of attendees in various income categories also differed across the four surveys ($\chi^2=32.15$, $p<0.005$). In 2017, the number of respondents in the less than \$25,000 income category decreased, and the number in the \$50,000-99,999 category increased.

Meanwhile, the percentage of respondents with Irish heritage stayed at approximately two-thirds of the sample, and the sample was predominately White and non-Hispanic across all four surveys.

TABLE 2: Comparison of 2007, 2011, 2014, and 2017 Irish Fair of Minnesota attendee demographics

	2007	2011	2014	2017	Statistics
Age					
<i>Sample size (n)</i>	335	483	439	342	--
Mean (years)	47.13 _a	43.38 _{ab}	46.82 _b	45.64	5.31**
Generation					
<i>Sample size (n)</i>	278	449	471	331	--
Millennial (1982-1999; %)	8.6	28.5	21.6	33.5	64.14***
Gen X (1965-1981; %)	37.8	30.5	34.8	33.5	
Baby Boomer (1946-1964; %)	52.2	39.9	42.2	31.4	
Greatest & Silent (1945 & earlier; %)	1.4	1.1	1.4	1.5	
Gender					
<i>Sample size (n)</i>	389	501	449	425	--
Female (%)	56.3	53.1	62.6	59.8	9.79*
Income					
<i>Sample size (n)</i>	329	427	405	377	--
Less than \$25,000 (%)	8.8	15.2	12.6	8.2	32.15**
\$25,000-49,999 (%)	23.4	19.4	17.5	19.9	
\$50,000-99,999 (%)	35.3	36.5	34.1	40.1	
\$100,000-149,999 (%)	22.5	22.0	20.2	21.2	
\$150,000 or more (%)	10.0	6.8	15.6	10.6	
Irish heritage					
<i>Sample size (n)</i>	386	515	467	471	--
Yes (%)	65.8	69.3	66.2	67.7	1.66
Ethnicity					
<i>Sample size (n)</i>	364	445	392	410	--
Non-Hispanic/Latino (%)	97.8	97.5	97.4	97.8	3.10
Race					
<i>Sample size (n)</i>	395	532	475	471	--
White (%)	89.6	89.1	88.2	91.5	2.96
Other ¹ (%)	2.5	4.3	5.3	1.1	
Black or African	2.0	1.3	0.6	0.8	
Asian ¹ (%)	1.5	1.3	2.3	1.9	
American Indian or Alaska Native ¹ (%) ¹	1.3	0.9	1.5	1.3	
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander ¹ (%)	0.3	0.6	0.6	0.0	

Note: Means with pairing subscripts within the row are significantly different at the $p < 0.0005$ based on Bonferroni post hoc paired comparisons.

¹Response too low for statistical comparison.

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .005$, *** $p \leq .0005$.

Comparisons of attendees' experience and expenditures yielded additional differences (Table 3). Respondents spent significantly fewer hours at the Irish Fair in 2017 compared with earlier years ($F=19.87, p<0.0005$). In terms of expenditures, attendees spent more money on souvenirs in 2007 and 2017 than in 2014 ($F=3.08, p<0.05$). Respondents in 2007 spent significantly less money on parking than in all subsequent years ($F=20.44, p<0.0005$).

TABLE 3: Comparison of 2007, 2011, 2014, and 2017 Irish Fair of Minnesota attendee experience and expenditures

	2007		2011		2014		2017		F
	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	
Attendee experience									
Hours spent at Irish Fair	376	5.45 _{ab}	461	5.39 _{cd}	429	5.87 _{ace}	459	4.45 _{bde}	19.87**
Satisfaction	NA	NA	522	4.33	470	4.24	466	4.41	2.57
Average expenditures (\$)									
Marketplace	NA	NA	NA	NA	97	71.2	82	68.2	0.037
Other	32	51.1	33	24.9	49	32.6	26	71.8	1.91
Souvenirs	143	50.9 _a	159	39.9	92	36.2 _{ab}	77	53.9 _b	3.08*
Food & Beverages	251	31.8	410	34.1	364	35.3	341	36.9	2.28
Parking	242	7.3 _{abc}	287	9.7 _a	284	9.6 _b	236	10.6 _c	20.44* *
Off-site food & beverage	NA	NA	25	37.6	52	26.6	24	35.1	0.63

Note: Means with pairing subscripts within the row are significantly different at the $p<0.0005$ based on Bonferroni post hoc paired comparisons.

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .0005$.

DISCUSSION

In terms of respondents' demographic characteristics, the 2017 Irish Fair attracted significantly more millennials and fewer baby boomers in 2017 than a decade ago. This is not surprising, as millennials have come of age in the past decade while baby boomers have aged. While the ethnic and racial composition of attendees remained unchanged across the four survey years, respondents' household income levels changed. The percentage of respondents in the lowest and highest income ranges in 2017 was roughly

the same as those in 2007. However, the percentage of respondents in the lowest income range increased and the percentage in the highest income range decreased in 2011 compared to 2007. Additionally, the percentage of respondents in the \$50,000-\$99,999 income range increased compared with previous years. Furthermore, the Fair has continued to attract its primary market, considering about two-thirds of respondents were of Irish descent, as was the case in 2007, 2011, and 2014.

Attendees consistently reported a high level of satisfaction with the Irish Fair across the years, which is encouraging. There was, however, a significant decrease in the number of hours attendees spent at the Irish Fair. In 2007 and 2011, attendees spent around 5.4 hours at the Fair; in 2014, they spent close to six. In 2017, attendees did or planned to spend 4.45 hours. The fewer hours attendees spent at the Fair in 2017 could significantly influence sales at the marketplace, spending on souvenirs and food and beverage, and the attendance level at various performances.

People heard of the Irish Fair in a variety of ways. Although the festival and event sector frequently utilizes various Internet-based tools to disseminate information (Qian & Simmons, 2014), word of mouth still serves as the key information source for the Irish Fair, trumping both traditional and new media platforms. Given the unwavering importance of word of mouth, Fair organizers should plan and execute marketing efforts early. Doing so will allow ample time for information to “sink in” and be disseminated through social groups and personal networks. Over the years, usage of the Irish community and traditional media as information sources declined, especially the *Irish Gazette*, *Pioneer Press* ads, and radio. Irish Fair organizers may need to assess whether it is worthwhile to keep marketing the event through these channels.

When it comes to spending, respondents spent the most money at the marketplace, on souvenirs and food and beverages at the 2017 Irish Fair. This finding is consistent with previous years. Clearly, providing uniquely Irish merchandise, as well as food and beverages continues to attract attendee spending. In fact, the average amount of money spent on souvenirs in 2017 surpassed the amount spent in 2007 for the first time (spending on souvenirs much lower in 2011 and 2014.) Spending on parking, however, steadily increased over the years. The Irish Fair has provided complimentary shuttles from St. Paul’s Union Depot, where the cost of parking varies for different lots. Would it be possible for the Fair to negotiate reduced parking fees? The Fair also works with the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metro Transit to provide complimentary mass transit passes to attendees. It will be worthwhile for Fair organizers to promote the availability of these passes in conjunction with the shuttle. This will encourage attendees to use free mass transit and shuttles as their choice of transportation.

In summary, findings from the four attendee surveys at the Irish Fair of Minnesota over 11 years suggested attendees were satisfied with their Fair experience. Meanwhile, as the ways in which people seek out information continue to evolve, the Irish Fair needs to adapt its marketing approach to reach its audience. Additionally, it'd be important for the Irish Fair to keep attendees engaged, to lengthen their time at the event and potentially to boost their spending. Lastly, to help reduce attendees' parking expense and the environmental footprint of the Irish Fair, event organizers need to consistently promote the availability of the free transit pass and the free shuttle.

Keywords: attendee profile, fair, event, survey, longitudinal

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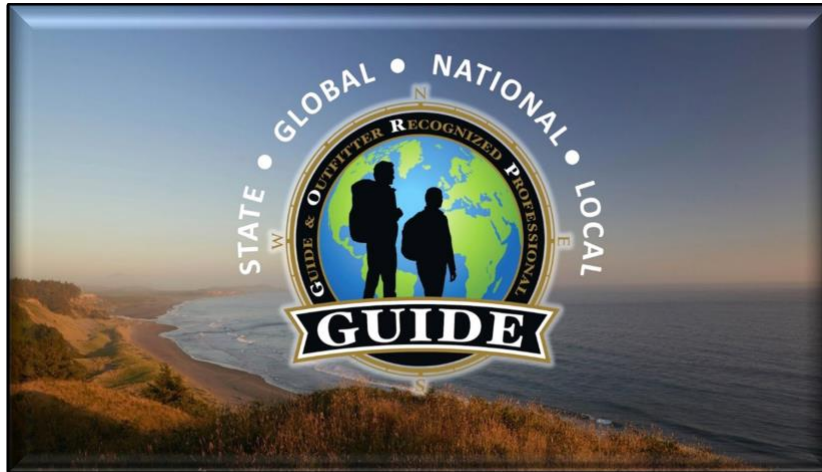
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Guide & Outfitter Recognized Professional – (GORP) Professional Educational Program

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ABSTRACT

In 2018 the Oregon Coast Visitor Association (OCVA) provided funding for Miles Phillips of Oregon Sea Grant/Oregon State University Extension to develop a new Guide Training and Recognition program (GORP) to support coastal guide businesses and communities. A review of existing training programs for guides had revealed no such program existed. Visitors that utilize guided experiences spend more than other visitors on tours and other local products, helping rural communities with economic growth and recovery from economic downturns. In communities that feel they already have too many visitors, the increased utilization of professionally guided tours can help with visitor management to reduce disruptions to local residents. Based on input from guides, tour companies and the visitor association, a set of online courses were developed by Extension. This online program can be supplemented with live workshops. The program was designed to meet the needs of guides and communities by having a low cost, flexible participation schedule, and quality content, including content on universally applicable processes and locally specific information.

BACKGROUND

In Oregon in 2019, total direct travel spending was \$12.8 billion, a **3.6% increase over 2018**. Total travel-generated employment was 117,500. Oregon hosted over 29 million overnight visits in 2019. In 2020 Oregon travel spending declined by 49.5 percent from 2019, from \$12.8 billion in 2019 to \$6.5 billion in 2020. Employment directly related to tourism dropped by 22.1 percent. That translated to a loss of more than 26,000 jobs. (Source: *Dean Runyan & Associates Economic Impact of Travel in Oregon Report*)

The changes and impacts both locally and globally from COVID-19 restrictions may provide opportunities for tourism base recovery efforts by destination communities and travel companies to adjust practices that better suit sustainability goals. One of these tactics could be the increased use and management of high quality guided experiences and corresponding training. A local guide/tour company operating according to International best practices can generate economic growth, job opportunities, and enrich a visitor's experience through collaboration with the destination community. Guide training and certification program work done by Texas AgriLife Extension (Miles Phillips) informed the initial format and methodology for the GORP. This work also included review and assessment of training and certification programs around the world.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Purpose

To assist in the economic, social, and environmental (**triple bottom line**) efforts of destinations and tour operators, GORP is designed to provide a training and testing program that:

- 1) Recognizes the knowledge of existing professional guides without requiring weeks of expensive training,
- 2) Educates participants on International Best Practices and key locally specific knowledge,
- 3) Provides a method for communities and tourism marketing efforts to support professional guides in their marketing campaigns.

GORP Program Development

The **Guide & Outfitter Recognized Professional** (GORP) program and was first offered in the fall of 2018. GORP was designed in a modular format to allow utilization anywhere in the world.

This program was initiated in a blended training format that included both the online courses and in person workshops. Due to COVID, that format changed to 'online only' in 2019. Webinars were conducted, of which some were recorded and are available to participants online.

A Spanish language Global course and 4-H Youth Entrepreneur Club Instructor and Participant books were also created. This program targets 9-12th grade youth.

The program was developed for and by guides in collaboration with University Extension faculty and tourism industry destination marketing and management organizations. The online materials can be used as a basis for an independent university credit course similar to a textbook. GORP can also be used for agency and or community/business or tourism marketing, business certification or permits.

Format

This program consists of four online courses (Global, National, State, and Local) designed to be completed one per week, working from home, and at your convenience. Some participants are able to complete the program in less than a week. Total hours for the online program is about 12 hours. Additionally, webinars and in-person workshops on a variety of topics are provided by local topic experts.

The content includes the international voluntary best practice standards compiled by guide businesses with the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA).

Learning and training with the GORP Guide Program is accomplished through answering quiz questions, with immediate feedback, along with written and audio/video content to provide context and utility.

This program supports any existing training and blends online knowledge courses with live skills training. The four core online courses are designed to allow easy customization to any location.

Courses are developed using the CANVAS online course software platform with Ideal-Logic registration software.

What GORP Achieves

The GORP Program provides **recognition of knowledge and experience** and provides awareness of international best practices, knowledge of the tourism industry and value-added skills and knowledge related to the local area, history, and managing your business by certifying individuals. Companies may advertise and market the fact that their guides have GORP Certification but the GORP program does not currently recognize businesses as it is focused on individual guides.

For aspiring guides, the GORP program gives a **great foundation for future business** and provides knowledge of a wide range of topics and industry organizations, as well as international best practices, which can raise the value of guiding services.

Businesses, such as a tourist destination, can use this program to educate their own employees, or be recognized for using GORP certified program guides as part of better business practices and services.

GORP content provides a broad range of knowledge and skills including:

- ATTA International Best Practices (Guide Standard)
- Identification of 101 species of plants and animals
- Knowledge of region-specific history, culture, events, and natural features
- Natural resource agencies, tourism organizations, and economic impacts of travel and tourism
- Providing quality customer services to meet client needs (group management, customer service)
- Strengthen sustainability through interpretive communication skills to help deepen client's appreciation and care for the region (personal interpretation skills, knowledge of regional plants and animals)
- Marketing, adaptable services, safety, and more

Outcomes & Updates:

As of early fall 2021:

Approximately 200 people have participated in the program, many of whom run their own guide business.

100 certifications have been issued to people that completed the full set of 4 courses (Global, United State, Oregon, Coastal Oregon) with a score of 100%. Other participants may have obtained just the Global certification or multiple certifications but not all four.

Oregon Coast class cohorts are usually about 12 guides, 21 guides enrolled in the Fall 2021 cohort. Multiple companies and resorts now have all their guides get GORP Certification.

11 Certifications (Global) have been issued for Kyrgyzstan guides through a US-AID sponsored project.

In 2021, course content and format was updated based on guide input. In addition, a grant from the National Sea Grant Program supported the creation of six new courses offering local content for Hawaii & Island of Oahu, Wisconsin and the Northwest Wisconsin Region, and South Carolina and Coastal South Carolina.

Currently the GORP program is available to use across the U.S. and Internationally. A **Spanish language** global course has been developed but not yet fully implemented as this is primarily for destinations with clients whose primary language is Spanish.

We also offer supplemental webinars and graduation ceremonies. Ten of these webinar recordings are available for free online at <http://gorpguide.org>

GORP 4-H Youth Entrepreneurship Program. A 4-H pilot program was started in North Bend, Oregon prior to COVID-19 with eight students participating and multiple guides volunteering time with the students.

Evaluation:

Evaluation of the courses was and is conducted through the use of questionnaires built into the course so participants can provide immediate feedback, suggestions and testimonials as they complete a course. In addition, completion times are recorded and quizzes document the knowledge obtained. Webinars were conducted with participants that allowed for verbal feedback and suggestions along with explanations of how they expect to utilize what they learned.

Participant Comments...

"I found that being able to retake the quiz immediately cut down on time which is highly valuable to me in a busy life running my business."

"I would recommend this course to others, for their own development and for strengthening the [guiding] industry."

Next Steps:

In collaboration with other organizations, the GORP program will be offered and marketed across the country. Any county Extension agent, Sea Grant agent, Destination Management Organization, etc. can market and utilize the GORP program as a component of their own plan for offering and supporting local professional guides. The GORP program can be integrated with specialty programs for fishing guides, birding guides, agritourism guides, etc. The four states with a full set of GORP programs will be marketing their own state GORP programs without having to manage or develop new content.



<https://seagrant.oregonstate.edu/tourism>



<http://gorpguide.org>



Example of Certificate for GORP Global

Keywords: Tourism, Guide Training, Tour Guide Certification, Best Practices

We Serve! Bridging the Culture Gap with Training

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Excellent customer service is the ability of an organization to constantly and consistently exceed the customer's expectation; being able to provide the needs and wants of a customer in a professional manner no matter what the circumstances are. (Clardy, pg. 103).

Few people, if any, would disagree that good customer service is at the core of business success. It is the engine that keeps businesses running and moving forward. But delivering customer service and integrating service behaviors in an ever-changing business environment can be challenging. As some would say, "that is easier said than done".

The development of the educational training, "We Serve" is an approach to front line customer service training to support service delivery in a unique multi-cultural, post Covid, retail environment in rural Nebraska. This paper outlines the underlying research models and supporting documentation to illustrate how the service training was conceptualized and organized for delivery. It also showcases the importance of communicating with the community to understand both the obvious and not so obvious expectations that can be a part of the training.

RESEARCH LINKAGES

Typically, what comes to mind when you think of customer service is the one-on-one interaction between a customer and a front-line employee. This is an important element in the experience; however, customer service involves an entire business delivery system. Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser Jr. and Schlesinger, in *Putting the Service Profit Chain to Work* (2000), clearly outlined the relationship between internal service quality, employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and business profitability (Figure 1). This model provided a foundational framework for the development of the "We Serve" curriculum. It illustrates an undeniable connection between the desire for internal service quality and the connection to employee development and business profitability. When the right people are hired, trained, and rewarded for service, and the position and workplace are organized with available tools to support service actions, you lay the groundwork for service delivery. What follows is employee satisfaction, retention and productivity which translates into greater service value for customers and ultimately business growth and profitability.

A closer look at research focused on service behaviors indicates that there are both hard skills or technical expertise and knowledge, as well as soft skills or interpersonal qualities and personal attributes (Robles, 2012). Employers want employees with a mix of both skills sets to optimize the customer experience. Soft skills are often highlighted as the most important set of behaviors at all levels of business because you can more easily train on technical skills, like how to use the in-house computer software system or respond to a policy but it is much harder to train on interpersonal qualities like the ability to help a customer positively solve an issue. Robles (2012) polled a broad spectrum of executives for the top 10 soft skills needed in today’s workplace and the attributes they lifted up included: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, interpersonal skills, professionalism, positive attitude, teamwork skills, flexibility, and work ethic.

Another lens on how to view customer service behaviors was developed through research by Dixon, Ponomareff, Turner and DeLisi (2017). After identifying a variety of technical and interpersonal attributes from over 1,400 sales representatives in a cross-industry study, seven service profiles were created that captured distinct differences in personality and approaches to the position. The profile attributes are identified below, how they ranked in making interactions efficient and painless and the proportion of the sample:

The Controller	Outspoken and opinionated; likes demonstrating expertise and directing the customer interaction; ranked #1; proportion 15%
The Rock	Unflappable and optimistic; doesn’t take difficult conversation personally; ranked #2; proportion 12%
The Accommodator	Meets people halfway; involves others in decision making; eagerly offers discounts and refunds; ranked #3; proportion 11%
The Empathizer	Enjoys solving others’ problems; seeks to understand behaviors and motives; listens sympathetically; ranked #4; proportion 32%
The Hard Worker	Follows rules and procedures; likes working with numbers; is persistent and deadline oriented; ranked #5; proportion 20%
The Innovator	Identifies ways to improve processes and procedures; generates new ideas and options; ranked #6; proportion 9%

The Competitor	Focuses on winning, outperforming colleagues, and changing others' views; ranked #7; proportion 1%
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(Dixon, et al, 2017)

These research related frameworks, which included service delivery, interpersonal skills broadly needed for customer service, and sales representative clustered profiles provided the foundation for the curriculum development of “We Serve”.

PROGRAM CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

Business owners in a rural Nebraska community approached a local community development extension educator concerning the need for customer service training. The training was going to be delivered in a unique situation: it was targeted at a retail environment composed of a variety of businesses owned and operated by a culturally diverse group linked to a common street location. The location was one block away from the main retail trade area of the community. It seemed to the business owners on that street that this “one block away” location made it difficult for them to be fully recognized as part of the retail community. They felt that customer service training would be a good first step to energize their collective businesses and give them some visibility within the community. The extension educator had a close working relationship with many of the businesses and with her bilingual skills, had been a part of conversations where the many facets of customer service gaps were highlighted. Due to this relationship, she also realized that there were both stated and inferred goals linked to the training.

A team of four Extension faculty with business and hospitality training experience were assembled to think broadly about the goals and how best to package the training. One of the primary objectives was to offer timely, relevant, and low-cost skill training to a multi-cultural front-line employee audience in a changing Covid environment. Another key objective was to help the business owners understand their critical role in providing a good work environment, tools, and training to support their front-line employees. In addition, it was hoped that the training would inform the front-line staff of the many local aspects and hidden treasures of the area to help them feel a part of the community and connect them to the various segments of the community.

While the faculty were discussing the training, other more subtle expectations were uncovered through previous statements from the businesses. Specifically, the businesses were interested in increasing their retail visibility within the community and region and to increase the customer comfort level in shopping within the multi-cultural business

environment. From their viewpoint, they hoped to get more people to explore this unique retail experience and relish in the diversity and not be apprehensive of it. By understanding what customers want and need they hoped to better serve them to develop and expanded their customer base with increased word-of-mouth referrals.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The mix of technical skills, interpersonal qualities and personal attributes often touched on in customer service trainings can result in so many aspects of the training being highlighted that participant have a difficult time in remembering the key concepts or “take aways”. Two of the faculty members had a positive experience in the past using an acronym to help organize their service training (Burkhart-Kriesel, Francis, 2007) but this approach did not match the needs of this unique community. Something different needed to be developed. Doing some research on how other trainings were organized led them to the framework of “on stage” and “off stage”. It would allow the training to include not only standard service concepts but offer a way to incorporate post Covid customer expectations and share the responsibilities with both the employee and employer. This framework allows the trainer and participant to cluster behaviors around actions and behaviors you need to do while you are with the customer or “on stage” and what needs to happen “off stage” to prepare for the customer, with both aspects being equally important.

The curriculum content taps into specific needs and requests of the business owners such as how to handle a difficult situation and some general service reminders such as smiling and creating a good impression of the business as people enter. Opportunities for participants to share actions that work well across a variety of retail situations will be offered so that a broad look at service can be appreciated and acknowledged, allowing the front-line employee to be lifted up for the important role they play in the success of the business. In addition, some key new business trends which emerged from the Covid pandemic will be shared such as the customer expectation of cleanliness, curbside delivery, and touchless business transactions. A cultural lens will also be integrated into examples, for instance, the need for menu photos or detailed explanations by the server to help apprehensive first-time diners who come into an ethnic restaurant. When customers see new products and services, they have questions so having informed front-line staff is critical in making the sale and ultimately creating a safe and friendly environment for the customer so that they will return often and do referrals to family and friends. The program evaluation would include asking the participants to list and then share, “what is one thing that you are going to do differently as a result of what you learned today?” as well as following up with

one-one-one conversations with business owners on what they did as employers or saw from their employees as changes.

The specifics of how the program would be delivered also was discussed in detail. There are always a lot of trade-offs to make in program planning and this situation was no different. Ultimately it was decided that a 90-minute session would be developed, and it would be initially offered in the early afternoon. There would be both an English and a separate Spanish version of the training to increase the participants level of interaction with the content of the program. While it would be focused on the specific needs of the multi-cultural location, invitations would be extended to the broader retail sector to connect to the entire community. Extending the invitation broadly was seen by many of the 4th street businesses as a way to reach out and start the process to become a part of the larger retail area.

Marketing the program would happen through traditional channels such as the Chamber of Commerce calendar, media, flyers, and word-of-mouth in both English and Spanish and through the personal contacts and social media used by both the 4th street businesses and the larger retail community.

It was anticipated that the pilot effort would start small and then grow. If there were 10 to 20 participants at both the English and Spanish speaking programs, the effort would be considered a success. A pilot of that size would allow for some diversity of business perspectives and candid program feedback not only on content but on delivery and program participation across the community. Once the program would move from the pilot status, a more formalized program effort would be developed which would include website promotion by Extension and cross-training of both Extension and non-Extension partners.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

As educators, it is easy to make assumptions about what you think people may need to know about a subject. This is especially true if you have taught the material for many years and worked in a variety of both student and community environments. But the minute you get complacent in program planning is when an entirely new situation can present itself, as it did in this experience. Two new aspects converged at the same time, the multi-cultural nature of the audience as well as new trends and expectations of customers due to the Covid pandemic. To be responsive to these unique opportunities, a new approach was needed.

One of the huge assets in identifying unique needs and expectations of the business owners in this situation was the linkage to a local extension educator who had developed an excellent repour over time with the owners.

She had worked closely with the businesses and her bilingual skills set the stage for honest communication. It opened the door for this kind of training to occur and allowed cross cultural concerns to be addressed. Listening to experiences with an ear toward understanding takes time and sometimes requires asking hard questions. As you develop a program it may seem like the planning conversations are not making any progress or going too slow. But the phrase, “you need to go slow to go fast”, could not be more true. As an educator, it is very rewarding and gratifying to rethink assumptions and reformulate the learning experience for a new, unique audience! With “We Serve”, extension faculty approached the traditional topic of customer service through a new lens to meet the changing needs of the Extension customer in rural Nebraska.

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Developing Awesome Customer Service for Agritourism Businesses

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to keep up with changing environment of customer service, but it is vital to the sustainability of the business. Every contact with a customer defines the farm brand and affects the future of the agritourism business. Customer experiences, both positive and negative, are shared more frequently in the age of social media, influencing customer decisions (Dimensional Research, 2013).

Research studies in the business sector have shown the importance of quality service in enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. However, while most businesses think they excel in customer service, most fall short of the mark set by their customers. In a study by Bain & Company, 80% of businesses surveyed said they delivered superior customer service experience. However, when their customers were surveyed only 8% said they had received superior customer service (Allen et al., 2005). Customers of agritourism businesses will likely have both positive and negative experiences, but with this magnitude of disagreement it is more likely that customer service delivery is not in line with customer expectations.

Why do we see this kind of variation in the perception of great customer service? Is it because the businesses are not trying? Is it because the employees are not trained? We suggest it is due to the lack of a well-designed system for customer service based on the individual business. It is important that businesses know the wants and needs of their customers, but it is even more important to know what customers expect while interacting with the business.

IMPLEMENTING A SYSTEM FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

To tackle the challenges of today's customer service environment, we worked with agritourism businesses to develop a system to help operators focus on consistent customer engagement and high-quality customer service. This

focus enables the farm team to deliver consistent service that improves the customer experience.

This innovative system for customer service starts with having the business examine current stereotypes, expectations, and enable the agritourism business to develop an improved customer service plan. This system includes four steps to providing excellent, awesome customer service. These steps are: 1. Prepare – examine current expectations and stereotypes of the business; develop a plan including all possible interactions 2. Respond- Empower all employees to assist, provide trainings and incentives, align performance assessment with customer experience. 3. Recover – Things will go wrong; have a plan for potential customer service fails. Designate who is in charge. Communicate, understand it is a long-term relationship, not just about the issue at hand. Fix things with the relationship mind. 4. Improve Practices – Update the plan, prepare for next time, Anticipate future customer service issues.

1. Prepare

Quality customer service can change with business sector and customer base, but it all starts with knowing the product and values of the business. To position the business to provide consistent awesome customer service it is important to keep focused on the core product, mission, values and the “Why” of the agritourism business. Starting with an internal focus, the agritourism business will know their product, how to position themselves in the market, and how to communicate the company brand to customers. This will help the agritourism business set realistic expectations of their customers. One business cannot be all things to all people. Trying to do so invites negative customer experiences.

Once a business has defined itself, the business needs to operationalize their values. They need to define how an employee will behave to reflect a certain value. How a value will look to the customer, and most of all how that behavior, will make the customer feel. It is vital for employee hiring and training for an agritourism business to build their operational processes from their values. This will help the business hire the right people and develop training to help them succeed.

2. Respond

The employee interview process is a vital start to awesome customer service. Agritourism businesses need to ensure they select employees that will reflect the organizational culture through their behaviors. To do this the interview process must reflect the customer service organizational culture of the

business. This will give the business a chance to assess how well a candidate exhibits behaviors connected with values. This will also allow the perspective employee to assess if the business is some where they would like to work. The interview should be conducted to allow both parties to get to know the other. Ideally, when hiring employees, the business should hire people that display the desired behaviors with the desired skills, however this is not always possible. It is important the business gets the best fit. Much of the time a better fit for the business may be a candidate that exhibits the desired organizational behaviors but maybe lacking in some technical skills. However, organizational behaviors are more difficult to assess.

Employees are the front line, interacting with customers every day, and impacting all aspects of customer service. One recent study showed that 96% of customers are somewhat willing to extremely willing to switch for a better customer service experience (Hyken 2020). This data highlights the necessity for proper training in the area of customer service. Moreover, this need is for employees to be trained with specific expectations based on the businesses core values and be empowered to take quick action in customer service situations. Employees who are not trained will improvise. This may lead to them either not acting at all or acting in an incorrect manner. Neither option will not help the situation. All customer service interactions need to be intentional and in line with business values. If an employee is well trained, they will know what the business expects of them and what they can and cannot do to help remedy the situation. This puts pressure on the managers of the business to not only train employees in consistent procedures but to also constructively coach in a manner that encourages the employee to keep trying, even if they make a mistake. Most employees want to help the business. It is a manager's job to train them and let them shine.

3. Recover

Things will go wrong. It happens in every business. This is why every business must have a plan for potential customer service failures. Recovering is defined as fixing the problem. Recovering is not waiting until after the customer service failure to learn from it.

When a customer service issue is handled well it can lead to an increase in customer loyalty and satisfaction. This customer loyalty is key to building long term relationships, making it easier for customers to forgive the occasional customer service failure (Hess, et. al, 2003). The key to keeping customer loyalty and satisfaction high is to train employees and empower them to address the issue directly and try to resolve the issue as quickly as possible. Employees need to have the freedom to act and to solve customer problems.

Employees need to be trained on active listening. When actively listening, employees must listen to understand the issue, ask questions to clarify the issue, and avoid distractions. They must avoid taking things as personal attacks and focus on the problem while thinking of solutions. Employees need to be able to empathize with the customer, expressing a willingness and ability to help. Sometimes the employee is not able to give the customer what they want. In these situations, it is important to ensure employees are well trained and confident in explaining why they cannot provide what the customer wants. It is best to be as open and honest as possible about the issue. Customers are usually happier when presented with a reason vs a simple no. Not all issues will be handled at the front line, so it is important to have a plan in place to escalate the issue. However, customer complaints that require a manager to solve can take more time and add to customer frustration. Its best to empower employees to deal with complaints and provide great customer service.

4. Improve Practices

The customer service plan is not something written in a binder, used once a year at training, and put on the shelf to collect dust. The plan needs to be revisited on a regular basis using examples of actual customer encounters. As customer service issues arise, the plan should be updated with these examples to be used at future employee trainings and help prepare the business for the next time a situation may arise. Thinking through actual customer service issues will also give management and employees more information on how to react and help anticipate future customer service issues because the examples are more meaningful to everyone in the business.

CONCLUSION

The ability to deliver quality customer service changes as we adapt our business operations to deal with changing customer expectations. To keep up with these changes it is important to have a well-designed system for customer service based on the individual business that can evolve with the business. It is important that agritourism businesses are prepared for excellent customer service, know how to respond to customer service failures, can recover to maintain positive relationships with customers, and learn how to improve customer service based on experiences in their own businesses. Awesome customer service is vital in developing and keeping relationships with customers and enhancing the sustainability of the business.

Keywords: Customer Service, Agritourism, Management, Management Systems

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Extension's Role in Expanding & Marketing a Scenic Byway

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*"Our destination is never a place, but a new way of looking at things."
~ Henry Miller*

PROGRAM/PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND

Extension's Role in Expanding & Marketing a Scenic Byway is an overview of how one Community Development Extension Educator coordinated an expansion and renaming of an Ohio scenic byway as well as coordinated a multi-pronged marketing and promotion strategy.

The expanded byway includes a multi-county experience in the Ohio Appalachian region and features connections to another scenic byway and provides a variety of expanded visitor opportunities in portions of five counties.

On the byway, guests experience the natural wonders found only in the Appalachian foothills. The route winds through a region of Ohio rich in history, abundant in natural resources and outdoor recreation and offers old-fashioned food, fairs, and festivals. Guests experience the region's natural and cultural heritage assets through museums, historic landmarks, and arts experiences. The Byway is home to historic farms, orchards, country stores, three rivers, a host of lakes, a state park lodge, and newer hotels.

OBJECTIVES OF PROGRAM/PROJECT

The program provides an overview of the steps Extension used to secure byway expansion stakeholders and partners as well as to develop the corridor management plan and professional traditional and digital marketing and promotion tools and tactics for an award-winning byway.

EXTENSION/RESEARCH METHODS USED

The Extension educator utilized a review of Ohio and national tourism materials and byway resource and marketing tools.

RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM/PROJECT

The proposed expanded multi-county byway was designated by the state department of transportation as an official scenic byway. Professional marketing materials were developed and deployed. The byway has received multiple state, regional and national awards. The byway provides the counties and the region with an additional tourism asset to attract guests and encourage residents to travel.

STRATEGIES USED TO EVALUATE THE PROGRAM/PROJECT

Evaluation of the Extension effort included approval of the corridor management plan by the state department of transportation as an official scenic byway. In addition, being selected by the department of transportation to coordinate an application for national byway designation was an honor.

Promotion evaluation included the planned development of a variety of marketing tools and tactics and partners (utilizing social media, web-based, print, advertising, and award nomination tactics).

CONCLUSIONS/LESSONS LEARNED

The byway project is a public-private partnership with the goal to expand the byway from a one-county byway to a multi-county byway through collaboration. The expansion effort was coordinated by Ohio State University Extension in cooperation with county CVBs, a Parks District and retired Extension volunteers. The leaders saw the value in collaboration and in a regionalized byway in partnership with counties that have some of the state's smallest populations, yet some of its great beauty, rich history, and cultural assets.

One lesson we learned through the application for national byway designation was that we needed to better define our byway story. The marketing tools and tactics are also transferrable to similar byways in the state and nation.

INTRODUCTION

There is a role for Extension partners in supporting a community in developing, expanding, or marketing a scenic byway. Roles might include options for educating about National and Scenic Byways, providing development support for expanding or creating a Byway through collaboration, development of partnerships and event grant writing.

BYWAY DESIGNATION

With the goals to recognize, protect, and promote the nation's most outstanding roads, the National Scenic Byways Program is administered through the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Through state departments of transportation, communities can apply for designation as a State or National Scenic Byway. The National Scenic Byways Program positively impacts local communities and the tourism industry.

In 1991, Congress established the program and strengthened it further with the passage of additional legislation in 1998 and again in 2005. The Scenic Byways program has two principal components including designation and funding. The program helps communities balance economic development and resource conservation. As of 2021, there are 184 federally designated byways (National Scenic Byway Foundation).

State Byway Programs are typically grassroots efforts to heighten awareness of States' historical and intrinsic resources. They are categorized by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) guidelines of cultural, historical, archeological, recreational, natural, and scenic. [FHWA Policy 5.18.95](#)



WHY A SCENIC BYWAY? NATIONAL TRAVEL RESEARCH

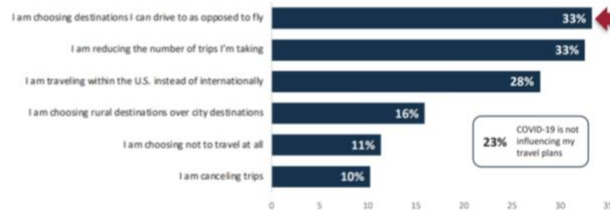
Recent research on travel sentiments, taking into consideration the COVID-19 pandemic, indicate that road trips remain relevant and scenic byways can be an important asset in capturing these guests and overnight visitors. In Ohio, the average spending per person on a day trip is \$106 while the average spending per person for an overnight stay is \$327 (Ohio Tourism 2021 Report)

Consumer Insights

- **Road trips remain relevant**

- 33% of consumers are choosing destinations they can drive to as opposed to fly to

Influence of COVID-19 on Travel Plans in the Next Six Months



Source: Longwoods International & Miles Partnership, Travel Sentiment Study Wave 45

(Longwoods International & Miles Partnership, Travel Sentiment Study Wave 45)

Also, from a national perspective, outdoor recreation available along many scenic byways is an important tourism sector, not to be ignored. In 2019, the value-added contribution of outdoor recreation to the U.S. economy was \$459.8 billion, representing 2.1 percent of GDP (SANB, 2020).











Outdoor recreation is a large contributor to GDP.

The Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) estimates the contribution of outdoor recreation in terms of its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2019 the value-added contribution of outdoor recreation to the U.S. economy was \$459.8 billion, representing 2.1% of GDP.¹

OUTDOOR RECREATION: \$459.8 BILLION VALUE-ADDED CONTRIBUTION TO GDP¹	OIL AND GAS DEVELOPMENT: \$193B² OUTDOOR RECREATION IS 2.4X BIGGER
	MOTOR VEHICLE MANUFACTURING: \$164B² OUTDOOR RECREATION IS 2.8X BIGGER
	AIR TRANSPORTATION: \$147B² OUTDOOR RECREATION IS 3X BIGGER
	MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY: \$88B² OUTDOOR RECREATION IS 5X BIGGER

Outdoor recreation consists of many activities.

Value-added (or GDP) contribution by activity in 2019.¹

 Boating: \$36 billion	 RVing: \$19 billion	 Apparel & Accessories: \$49 billion	 Travel: \$201 billion	 Hunting/Shooting: \$9 billion
 Fishing: \$5 billion	 Game Areas (incl. Golf & Tennis): \$19 billion	 Bicycling: \$2 billion	 Motorcycling/ATVing: \$9 billion	 Snow Activities: \$6 billion

Graphics from the State Outdoor Business Alliance Network 2021 Inspiring the Future of the Outdoor Recreation Economy.

SAMPLE BYWAY DESIGNATION PROCESS (IN OHIO)

The Ohio State University Extension office in Noble County collaborated to expand a single county byway to a multiple county byway. The original byway was coordinated by the county convention and visitor bureau with assistance from Ohio State University Extension. The Noble County Ohio State Community Development educator assisted with a variety of activities in securing the byway renaming and expansion.

- Mapping the byway route and Asset Mapping of Byway Resources
- Creation of the Expanded Corridor Management Plan (sample plan available at <https://tinyurl.com/yr5tkpas>. The Corridor Management Plan is a written strategic plan that outlines how to protect and enhance the intrinsic qualities that define a byway (NSBF Terms & Conditions Fact Sheet)
- Reviewed the Corridor Management Plan with designated Ohio Department of Transportation Byway Consultant
- Presented the Corridor Management Plan to ODOT Scenic Byways Committee for approval
- Serves as the ongoing Byway Coordinator
- Completes annual Ohio Department of Transportation Byway Surveys and attends state byway leader meetings

Byway partners include Ohio Scenic Byways Links (Ohio Association of Byways); Athens, Monroe, Morgan, Noble, & Muskingum County Ohio Convention & Visitor Bureaus; and the Monroe County Parks District, as well as Buckeye Hills Regional Council, the Regional Transportation Planning Organization. The Appalachian Byway is also a member of the [National Scenic Byways Foundation](#), a critical partner in ongoing professional education, advocacy, award opportunities and grants resources.



MARKETING A BYWAY

A variety of sample marketing tools and tactics for scenic byways include development of a brandmark, traditional print-based materials such as a [brochure](#), [maps](#) and a promotional banner for events, [web-based](#), and social media (sample Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/AppalachianBywayofOhio>)

Public relations efforts can promote the byway through placement in targeted tourism publications and regional and state media outlets. This included developing and

writing press releases and story pitch ideas, as well as working to coordinate travel blog writer visits. Magazine placements included:

[American Road Magazine](#); Road Runner Magazine; [Ohio Magazine](#); and the [Bountiful Blessings Travel Blog](#) and [America's Byways focus at IPW](#).

Partnering with the [Ohio Department of Tourism industry listing database](#) and the



regional-specific opportunities, in Ohio's case that included [Ohio's Appalachian Country](#) and the [Governor's Office of Appalachia](#).

Extension also worked to develop a byway video. The educator assisted in script writing, providing guidance on areas for video capture and coordination of video development with a professional consultant. The sample video is online at: <https://tinyurl.com/fpf4aw56>.

Awards also provide an opportunity to promote a byway. Example awards garnered by the Ohio byway include national and regional awards that focus on tourism and economic development. The sample grant program presented included a Toyota Love Our Byways Grant offered through the National Scenic Byways Foundation for a 2021 [Byway Beautification project along the Appalachian byway](#).

NEXT STEPS

Now that the Ohio byway has been extended and initially marketed, Extension is planning a series of Lunch & Learns on the value of tourism for local and regional leaders. They also need to enhance electric car charging stations along the 102+ mile byway as none currently exist. Additional Byway expansion research is also planned to enable visitors to make a full "loop" from the Appalachian Byway to the [Ohio River Scenic Byway](#).

Extension also hopes to include further efforts on interpretation of the Byway and its story. The National Association for Interpretation defines interpretation as "a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interest of the audience and the meaning inherent in the resources."

"Through interpretation understanding, through understanding, appreciation, through appreciation, protection." ~ Freeman Tilden. John Ververka says without interpretation, a byway is just another "pretty road."
(NSBF Organizing Places and Stories Fact Sheet)

Keywords Tourism, Scenic Byways, Appalachia

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Coastal Awareness and Responsible Ecotourism: Building Community to Support Shorebird Conservation

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INTRODUCTION

In addition to important habitat for shorebirds and other wildlife, the Georgia coast is a major draw for both tourists and residents. Nature based tourism is a thriving component of the coastal economy, providing an important opportunity to connect residents and tourists to their environment (Loerzel et al., 2018; Dusenberry, 2020). One of the special attractions of the 100-mile Georgia coastline is remote areas inaccessible without a boat or local knowledge of the waterways, which has prompted a focus on public access to waterways and a subsequent increase in watercraft and boater activity in recent years (Loerzel et al., 2018; GADNR, 2022).

The Georgia coast provides critical habitat to at least 300,000 shorebirds throughout the year and has been recognized as a landscape of hemispheric importance for resident and long-range migrators (WHSRN 2018). From March through August, island beaches and shell rakes are important nesting sites for species such as American Oystercatchers (state threatened) and Wilson's Plovers (state rare). Sandbars, barrier beaches, and marsh edges are important feeding and roosting sites during spring and fall migration, when the Georgia coast supports populations of Arctic-nesting shorebirds such as the federally threatened *rufa* Red Knot, and significant portions of populations of other declining species including Semipalmated Sandpipers and Black-bellied Plovers. During the winter, our coast hosts significant numbers of the federally endangered Great Lakes nesting population of Piping Plovers. These species depend on low disturbance areas to feed and roost.

The creation of the Coastal Awareness and Responsible Ecotourism (CARE) certification initiative is an ongoing collaborative project among UGA Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant, Manomet, and Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GA DNR). The objectives of the program are to increase buy-in for businesses by providing a marketable credential, increasing communication between businesses and the agencies trying to reduce

recreational disturbance, and creating a standard level of information that businesses convey to their customers, thereby enhancing understanding among constituents. Habitat protection, including disturbance reduction, is an important strategy to mitigate shorebird population declines (AFSI 2015, GADNR 2015). Ecotourism provides an opportunity to build support for such conservation actions by empowering tour guides to play a role as beach stewards through educating guests about shorebirds and other sensitive wildlife.

The overall goals of the pilot certification program, launched in 2021, were to implement a program with appropriate content to achieve the aforementioned objectives; an accessible format which could be logistically achievable for the target audience; enough social interaction among participants to allow for the development of networking opportunities; and the design of appropriate evaluation tools necessary to justify the infrastructure needed to support a sustainable program.

METHODS

The process of creating the CARE certification began by forming a steering committee composed of a diverse group of stakeholders, building a database of ecotour providers located along the Georgia coast, and researching similar initiatives in other geographic regions. After an initial database of ecotour providers was established, a survey tool was designed and distributed to providers to determine interest level, format and content of such a program.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a halt to in-person programming during these initial stages of program planning. All steering committee meetings shifted to a virtual format using teleconference software. Other program tasks were also shifted to the virtual format including planned public programs and presentations to colleagues to introduce the certification.

A webinar event in May 2020 took the place of multiple public programs planned throughout the Georgia coast and resulted in participation of an audience from a broader geography than initially planned, including from states outside of Georgia and internationally. Participant polling (using Poll Everywhere) was used to gather information about dependence on water-based ecotour guides, how guides were identified, and what participants wanted from a guided tour. The virtual format for this event allowed gathering polling information by creating an interactive element as part of content delivery.

The bulk of the course content for guides was also translated to an online platform allowing the course to be delivered in a blended format of self-

paced work and live teleconference sessions. Research into online learning resources available through the University of Georgia (UGA) revealed several possible software platforms. After weighing the complexity of building content, ease of use, and accessibility to users from the general public, we decided to use the Learn Dash platform, a Word Press-based program, hosted by a server at the UGA Griffin campus and licensed to the Center for Urban Agriculture and Cooperative Extension. Colleagues from the Center helped to establish a subdomain for Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant to use and gave support for learning the basics of the Learn Dash program. Once the subdomain was established, co-PIs for the project were then responsible for design, content creation, and end-user technical support for the certification course.

A branding process was completed by a Brunswick, GA-based creative company and guided by the steering committee. A logo and name for the certification were established in May 2020 in time for the first webinar-style public program. The logo was added to a landing site for the certification (<https://gacoast.uga.edu/care>) and printed on buffs and decals for certified guides to use as promotional materials.

The newly branded Coastal Awareness and Responsible Ecotourism (CARE) initiative was then presented to the larger database of ecotour providers, and a survey tool was distributed to over 50 contacts. Using the online Qualtrics software, a survey link was sent to contacts, follow up phone calls were made to key providers (defined as those who were well known or employ multiple guides) and reminder emails were sent (two-weeks after the initial contact) to all contacts to complete the survey. The objectives of the survey was to collect data on overall interest, course format, content and the best time (seasonality, time of day, day of week) for holding the course. Stakeholders were also asked to indicate what benefits they would hope to gain from a certificate program in ecotourism and what resources may be most useful to them as guides. Survey results were reviewed by the steering committee and used as a guide to design the course.

Online content was then designed to meet the needs identified by stakeholders. The course was divided into four lessons: Coastal Ecology, Shorebird Conservation, Human Connections to the Coast, and Responsible Ecotourism. Each Lesson was composed of 4 work-at-your-own-pace Topics and a weekly Live Zoom Discussion session. Each Topic was written by a CoPI and reviewed by topic experts. Each Live Zoom Discussion featured two content expert presenters and included a question-and-answer session.

Registration was opened in January 2021 and invitations to participate were sent out via email to over 50 contacts on our ecotour guide database. As participants registered, they were added to the online Learn Dash platform

and asked to complete the introductory lesson consisting of the completion of a pre-course evaluation and recording a short video introduction using the Flipgrid online application. Flipgrid videos were used throughout the course to gather qualitative evaluation data on participant expectations, satisfaction and attitudes.

Pre-course evaluations were collected using Qualtrics software and was set up in 3 sections. The first section collected information on the participant including name of tour outfitter, number of years' experience in the guiding business, geographic location on the coast, and approximate number of tourists guided annually. If the guide reported themselves to be the owner of their tour company, they were asked to quantify how many people they employ. Behavior of each participant regarding actions with potential conservation impacts on shorebirds (taking dogs to the beach, walking in the dunes, disturbing resting or feeding birds) was measured using a series of five questions with Likert-scale questions. And baseline knowledge was measured using a series of questions specifically aligned with course content.

Post-course evaluations were collected similarly to pre-course evaluations: using Qualtrics software. The evaluation tool closely followed the pre-course evaluation except that the first section was replaced with questions designed to evaluate participant satisfaction with content, delivery and format of the course. Furthermore, to help in the establishment of a fee-based option for future trainings, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to and amount that they would pay for similar training or recertification. The post-course evaluation was paired with pre-course results to determine how closely learning objectives were accomplished.

FINDINGS

Audience

Of the 19 participants who took the course, 17 completed all the requirements to become certified CARE guides. The 19 participants represented a diverse cross-section of the water-based guide community, including eleven different businesses/organizations. Nine participants indicated they were the owners of their business, and most employed at least 1-2 guides in addition to themselves. The experience level of the guides ranged from veterans of the trade to initiates. For the first iteration of the CARE certification course, leaders in the community were encouraged to participate in the hopes that they could set the standard for their employees and other early career guides.

Behavioral Change

We measured behavior in reference to shorebird habitat sensitivity by asking participants to self-report on how often they did a particular action before beginning the CARE course and then how often they believe they would do that same action after taking the CARE course. These questions were built on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “nearly all of the time = 100%” to “none of the time =0%. Analysis was performed only on data collected from participants who completed both the pre and the post survey questions (n=13).

We saw the greatest change in behavior when asked if participants provide guidance to their guests about where guests should refrain from walking (question 3, Table 1) when out on excursions. We also saw a decrease in the number of guides reporting that they allowed dogs on excursions- a shift from 12% of guides to 0% (question 4, Table 1).

However, we saw an increase in self-reported excursions to areas with both nesting or roosting shorebirds by guides following the completion of the course (questions 1 & 2, Table 1). This may seem to be contrary to the educational efforts for reducing disturbance to these animals. Another explanation may be due to increased confidence in identification skills and appreciation of coastal species by participants rather than an increased intention to disturb the birds. The decision was made to refine the questions in future iterations to better capture the intended result. Results for each question are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Behavior questions were set up in a 5-point Likert-style question table. Actions related to shorebird disturbance were analyzed for change in participant self-reported behavior and intent to change behavior before and after the CARE course.

Action	Pre	Post	Change	Suggested replacement question
1. lead tours or groups to areas with nesting shorebirds	*23%	*29%	6%	When I take my guests to areas where there are nesting shorebirds, we stay below the high tide line.
2. lead tours or groups to areas with feeding or roosting shorebirds	*39%	48%	12%	When I take guests to areas with feeding and roosting birds we avoid walking through the flocks.
3. when guests are exploring on their own, provide guidance about places they should or should not go	*73%	100%	27%	----
4. allow guests to bring dogs on tours	*12%	*0%	-12%	----
5. I bring my own dog on tours	0%	0%	0%	----

*answers of “unknown” were counted as 0% for the sake of analysis.

Knowledge gain

Knowledge gain was measured via 14 knowledge questions in the pre- and post- course assessment based on each of the four course units. For analysis purposes, scores were compared from 12 participants who completed both

the pre- and post- course knowledge assessment. The answers were coded and a two-tailed t-test was used to look for a significant change in knowledge.

Overall, a significant increase in knowledge among our participants was detected, where the average score increased from 77% to 85% ($p=.0004$) (Table 2). Changes in score for each unit was analyzed and indicated increases for each. The greatest increase in knowledge was in the fourth unit which focused on responsible ecotourism, an increase from 57% to 76% was measured. This indicates that for many of our participants, understanding what ecotourism is and how it impacts the community of kayak guides is a subject area in which they may not have had as much exposure.

Table 2. Overall knowledge gain for CARE participants as measured via pre and post course evaluation was significant as was the gain in knowledge about responsible ecotourism.

Unit	Subject matter	Pre-course	Post-course	P value
1	Coastal Ecology	77%	85%	.5863
2	Shorebirds	88%	92%	.2410
3	Cultural History	83%	88%	.1661
4	Responsible Ecotourism	57%	76%	.0674
Overall		77%	85%	.0004

DISCUSSION

Grant funding provided the opportunity for partner organizations to address a need supporting both the conservation of sensitive habitat and the wildlife that depends on it while lending support to the local ecotourism economy. While in the early stages of establishment, this program shows promise as a means to raise awareness about conservation concerns as seen in an increase in knowledge and positive shift in reported behaviors by participants. Additionally, qualitative benefits of initializing a community of CARE certified guides has resulted in participation in community events including clean-ups

of local waterways and increased communication with state managers about the protection of sensitive sites for shorebirds.

Since the launch of this program, there has been widespread interest in adopting similar certification frameworks in other industries, such as the guided fishing industry, and in other geographies including other states in the Southeast and the Gulf region. Similar Sea Grant led initiatives in Florida (Friendly Fisherman), Oregon (GORP) and strong interest in expanding these programs into South Carolina all indicate that building a marketable educational certification program within the ecotourism industry has the potential to have significant conservation impacts. It is especially important to design such programs with specific audiences in mind to ensure that objectives and logistics are appealing to ensure adoption, and that conservation goals are feasible, transparent, and clear from the outset. With these caveats in mind, programs such as the CARE certification have the potential to ensure that ecotourism provides benefits for wildlife, local economies, and larger conservation initiatives.

Future iterations of the CARE certification program will expand on the cultural aspects of ecotourism including an expanded Field Day to visit local cultural centers such as the Pin Point Heritage Museum in Savannah. Furthermore, a re-certification course is currently under development which will require guides to participate in 16 hours of professional development and/or volunteer service over a the 2-year certification period. Participation in associated training programs such as Oregon Sea Grant's GORP certification will count towards this requirement. By intentionally designing recertification through promoting partners, supporting collaborators, and requiring professional development and volunteerism, the goal for the CARE program is to grow and foster a sustainable ecotour guide community of engaged and active coastal stewards.

Keywords: ecotourism, shorebird, conservation, professional development

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