

RURAL INFLUENTIALS' PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY¹

Steven W. Burr

Assistant Professor, Recreation, Park and Tourism
Administration, Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL 61455

Rural residents' perceptions of tourism and its associated impacts are likely to be important in planning, development, marketing, and operation of existing and future tourism projects. This study examines rural influentials' perceptions of tourism as a tool for economic revitalization in Pennsylvania's rural counties, its present impact, and its potential for rural economic development in the future.

Introduction

Tourism significantly contributes to the economy and consequently has become an important element in the economic bases of many states and their local communities. Whether the tourism industry prospers or declines is of great concern to these states and communities (Economic Research Associates 1989; Federal Task Force on Rural Tourism 1989; Long 1991) and this concern is especially strong in rural communities that continue to lag behind urban areas in terms of higher education and health care (LeDuc 1991), employment rates, job growth, median family income, and equality of housing (Flora and Christenson 1991), and many other public services (Willits, Bealer and Crider 1982).

Tourism development is presently being endorsed as a viable economic development strategy to diversify a rural community's economic base and therefore potentially contribute to economic stability (Hunt 1992; LeDuc 1991; Long and Nuckolls 1992). Such a strategy can help rural communities address the multitude of problems facing them in the modern world (Brown 1992; Stokowski 1992). Tourism as a development industry can create recreational uses for the natural and man-made amenity resources of a rural community and convert these into income producing assets (Siehl 1990; Willits 1992). Visitors from outside the immediate community, county, or state can introduce outside money into rural areas through tourism-related spending. Tourism is a source of jobs, income, and tax revenues. Tourism can employ both managers and unskilled, entry-level workers, provide opportunities for small business development, and support a variety of service-related businesses. Through tourism, income is redistributed, often from affluent urban and suburban residents to service providers in rural communities. Tourism is generally perceived as being a "clean" industry with few serious environmental impacts, especially when compared to the resource extractive industries on which rural communities have been traditionally and often solely dependent (Grambling and Freudenburg 1990; Marchak 1990; McCool 1992; Robinson

1984; Weeks 1990). Furthermore, when a community refurbishes to attract tourists and focuses visitors' attention on the unique features of local heritage, architecture and scenery, a new sense of community pride on the part of local residents may result (Willits 1992). Rural tourism development can play an important part in the process of community development. Ideally, rural tourism development involves community action. Community members' support and involvement are important components for sustainable rural tourism development, for these local actions and interactions help ensure the protection and preservation of environmental and community amenities which are the foundation of tourism (McCool 1987). From an interactional perspective, local action in tourism development offers key opportunities for developing contacts within the community, leading to relationships between and among community members, and allowing for the natural emergence of other community networks (Burr and Walsh 1994; Wilkinson 1992).

There can be many benefits for rural communities and areas involved in tourism development initiatives and efforts. Tourism can help stabilize, diversify, and improve the local economies of struggling rural communities, help improve the quality of life in rural societies, and contribute to the overall process of community development. Because of the potential benefits, utilizing tourism as part of an economic development strategy for rural communities may make a lot of sense from the planner's and developer's point of view. However, consideration of resident perceptions of tourism and its potential for economic development are just as important.

Over the past twenty years, research has increasingly focused on the impacts of tourism on "host" communities. Most of the early studies focused on the economic aspects of tourism (Pizam 1978). This approach is still ongoing, especially with regard to rural tourism. As a rural economic development strategy, tourism is widely perceived as a potential basic industry, which brings in outside dollars to local communities and provides local employment opportunities, tax revenues, and economic diversity for rural communities (Perdue, Long and Allen 1990). More recent research attention has been given to the social effects of tourism (Ap 1990). The main reason for this attention is that residents' perceptions of tourism and its associated impacts are likely to be important in planning, development, marketing, and operation of existing and future tourism programs and projects (Ap 1992). Concerns about the impacts of tourism development on rural quality of life and the environment have created a significant demand for comprehensive planning, including assessments of local resident support for tourism development (Perdue et al. 1990). As a result, research has been generated which focuses on increasing understanding of local resident perceptions of tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts. Overall, findings from this research suggest that there is very little difference in perceived tourism impacts by socio-demographic characteristics, that perceived impacts of tourism decrease as the distance between the individual's home and the tourism core of the community increases, and that the overall favorability of tourism impact perceptions increases with the individual's economic dependency on tourism (Milman and Pizam 1988; Murphy 1983; Perdue et al. 1990; Pizam 1978). It has also been suggested that resident attitudes of support for tourism development often emerge in response to the perception that local economic conditions are deteriorating (Perdue, Long and Gustke 1991).

Although our knowledge base of resident perceptions of tourism and its potential for economic development is developing, it is still limited. This is especially true for a sub-group of rural residents who may be identified as rural influentials. These rural residents are the leaders in rural communities, actively involved in decision-making and problem solving, and influential in the planning, development, and implementation of local policies, initiatives, and projects. Consequently, these rural influentials can affect the general perceptions of all rural residents.

¹/ This particular study is part of a larger, ongoing research project made possible in part by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania and a grant from the Intercollegiate Research Competition Grant Program of the College of Agriculture with Penn State's Agricultural Experiment Station, known as Research Project #3208. The author wishes to acknowledge Ms. Lisa Bourke and Mr. Steve Jacob for their assistance with the data collection and, along with Dr. Richard Gitelson and Dr. Al Luloff, for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this particular study is to examine rural influentials' perceptions of 1) the extent to which tourism has played a role in the economic revitalization of Pennsylvania's rural counties, 2) the impact tourism has had on rural residents, communities, and the environment, and 3) the potential of tourism for rural economic development in the future.

Methodology and Research Design

Four Pennsylvania counties, each having a 1990 population that was over fifty percent rural, were selected from different geographic regions of the state for in-depth case studies of tourism's role as an economic development tool. Although geographic distribution across the state was an important factor in

the selection of the counties, other variables were also of importance. These included some variation among the four counties in total land area, population, population density, population change, percent of the population considered to be rural, age composition of residents, per capita and median income, education, and current unemployment. Descriptive data for the four case study counties are displayed in Table 1. Also of interest were county variations in past and present dependence on tourism, current levels of tourism development efforts, different types of tourism present (e.g., natural resource, outdoor recreation, historical heritage, cultural heritage, special event), and both tourism-related and non-tourism-related economic development activity.

Table 1. Descriptive data for the four case study counties.

COUNTY ^a	County B	County G	County C	County S	PA TOTAL
Population	47,919	39,550	5,913	152,585	
County Seat	B-ville	G-ville	C-ville	S-ville	
Population	3,137	4,270	2,513	16,603	
Total Square Miles	1,017	577	398	782	
Population per Square Mile	46.0	70.2	16.8	205.5	264.3
% Population Change 1980-1990	2.4	-2.3	-11.4	-5.2	
% Population Rural	91.3	89.2	57.5	58.3	31.0
% Age Composition					
0-17 years	25.1	25.6	25.6	22.1	23.5
18-64 years	59.6	57.9	55.9	57.9	61.1
65+ years	15.3	16.5	18.5	20.0	15.4
% Female Pop.	51.1	52.5	51.1	51.8	52.1
% White Pop.	99.3	98.5	99.4	98.9	88.5
Per Capita Income	9,954	10,005	10,190	11,193	14,068
Median Income	25,335	25,284	24,006	29,041	34,856
% High School Degree	68.5	68.0	73.1	68.4	74.7
% College Degree	7.8	11.3	9.8	8.1	17.9
% Unemployment (4/93)	13.2	14.5	10.1	11.3	8.6

^aData are from the 1990 U.S. Census. Unemployment figures are from the Pennsylvania Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Within each county, key informant interviews were conducted with a wide variety of individuals who could be characterized as rural influentials. These individuals represented county, city, borough and township government, governmental agencies, and other public and private agencies and organizations. Other key informants represented certain media-oriented businesses, such as newspapers and radio. Although some of these individuals were professionally associated with tourism-related efforts and initiatives, such as an Executive Director of a Tourism Promotion Agency, most were not. Additionally, a modified "snowball" technique was employed through these key informant interviews to identify other individuals for further contact about local tourism-related efforts.

An instrument was developed for the purpose of interviewing key informants in the four counties. The interview instrument design was semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions related to topics of interest. This was pilot tested in one rural county and after some minor modification of format was subsequently used in the three other counties. Overall, 53 key informant interviews were conducted in the four counties over a sampling time frame of approximately five months during the first half of 1993. Key informants considered to be rural influentials and interviewed for the study are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Key informants interviewed in the four case study counties. (N=53 for all key informants.)

County B Key Informants (N=14)

Executive Director, Office of Economic Development
Senior Planner, Office of Economic Development
Medical Professional and Community Activist
Borough Manager
Editor, Community Newspaper
Director of Planning, Office of Economic Development
Member, County Historical Society
Director, Chamber of Commerce
County Commissioners (2)
Director of Tourism Promotion Agency
Mayor, Small Town in County
Past President, Federal Retired Employees Association
Director, Retired Senior Volunteer Program

County C Key Informants (N=13)

County Commissioners (3)
Executive Director, County Chamber of Commerce
Executive Director, County Economic Development Office
Case Supervisor, Office of Human Services
Executive Director, County Tourism Promotion Agency
Marketing Director, Tourism Promotion Agency
Owner, Campground and Motel
State Park Manager
Owner, Local Radio Station
Publisher and Editor, County Newspaper
Executive Director, Community Action Corporation

County G Key Informants (N=15)

Director, Industrial Development, Inc.
Director, County United Way
Administrator, County Historical Society
Director of Health and Human Services
Director, County Parks and Recreation
Director, County Planning Commission
Editor and Publisher, County Newspaper
County Commissioner
Supervisor, Area Agency on Aging
State Park Manager
Owner and Artist, Art Gallery
Executive Secretary, Chamber of Commerce
President, Area Tourism Promotion Agency
Professor of Sociology in Higher Education
Borough Council Member

County S Key Informants (N=11)

Executive Director, County Visitors Bureau
Executive Director, Chamber of Commerce
County Commissioners (3)
Director, Economic Opportunity Cabinet
President, Economic Development Corporation
President, County Historical Society
Member, Community Betterment Association
State Park Supervisor
City Administrator

The raw data for this study are the field notes and tape records compiled from the key informant interviews conducted in the four rural counties. All field notes and tape records were transcribed into a standardized format in order to facilitate data analysis. The content of these transcribed interviews was then qualitatively analyzed by noting certain recurring themes, similarities, and differences which were evident.

Findings²

The study found rural influentials' perceptions of tourism and its potential for economic development to be extremely varied and mixed, although some common themes emerged. First and foremost, tourism was not recognized as being a major element in each county's economic base. When asked about the major elements and employers in the county's economy, the vast majority of the 53 key informants (72%) did not identify tourism or tourism-related businesses as major players. Key informants mentioning tourism as being a major element (28%) were for the most part professionally associated with tourism-related development and promotion efforts. However, ten of the fourteen key informants in County B mentioned tourism as being a major element in their county's economic base. In this particular county, the County Office of Economic Development and Tourism Promotion Agency were very active in heritage tourism development and promotion efforts as a result of substantial outside funding supporting regional tourism development projects. Although these efforts certainly contributed to a greater awareness of tourism among many key informants, these individuals were also aware that their perceptions of tourism and tourism development were of particular interest to the research project, having been notified of this fact by telephone and letter prior to their actual interview.

This methodology was changed for the remaining three rural counties where the key informants were informed that the research interviewer was interested in their perceptions of general strategies for rural economic development. Out of 39 key informants interviewed in these three counties, only five individuals (13%) mentioned tourism as being a major element in their county's economic base.

When specifically asked about the role of tourism in their county's economy, the vast majority of key informants (87%) felt that it did play a role, although perceptions about its economic importance ranged from tourism playing some role and being a viable force (45%) to tourism playing an extremely significant and increasingly important role (42%). Only 13% of the key informants felt that tourism played an unimportant or insignificant role. Additionally, tourism was often mentioned as being the basis for some local economic development and impact. Consequently, tourism was perceived by some as having a much more raised profile in terms of its actual economic impact and generating more economic development and activity in the future. However, as one informant stated, "We know it's here; we just don't know what the real impact is for our local economy." This appeared to be a recurring theme as several key informants mentioned the fact that it was difficult to actually measure and quantify tourism's impact and that there was a definite lack of supportive data. Although some informants were unsure about tourism's growth and a few perceived tourism as not being a future growth industry, the perception was evident that there is significant potential for future economic impact through tourism if certain resource and development constraints can be overcome. Some informants felt that rural residents were becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of tourism and consequently were much more supportive of tourism-related development. Other informants noted that it was difficult to make residents aware of potential benefits.

Key informant perceptions of tourism impacts on the county's residents, communities, and environment were again varied and mixed. Although more informants perceived tourism as making an important impact with positive economic benefits (24 responses), quite a few informants perceived tourism as having minimal or no impact (18 responses). Mentioned were the

² Due to the constraint of space, tables which detail summary themes and frequency of key informant responses are not included in this paper. These tables are available from the author by request.

opinions that tourism was not large-scale, that the numbers of tourists were insignificant, and that there was no tourism in the county. However, mentioned more frequently were feelings that people wanted tourism for economic development, that tourism brought new businesses to the area, increased the number of jobs and provided entry-level jobs for the unemployed and under-employed, and that construction of vacation homes provided work for local tradesmen. Of further interest were perceptions associated with tourism's contribution to the quality of life for rural residents. Because tourists are interested in visiting and are attracted to the resource amenities of these rural counties, local residents have become more aware of what they have and who they are. Thus, tourism is perceived as contributing to a positive self-awareness and self-image and has helped to develop local enthusiasm and pride. Many rural people want to keep their history and way of life going, see the potential for tourism to help them accomplish these, and consequently are willing to share these with visitors. One informant even mentioned that contact with outside visitors had stimulated the thought processes of the local residents. Additionally, tourism has resulted in more environmental awareness among rural residents, since a quality environment is the product of rural tourism. This has also resulted in better sites, attractions and tourism-related products.

Although eight informants responded that the results or impacts of tourism in the county had been all positive, other informants identified some negative impacts. Negative impacts ranged from increased litter and traffic to increased demands on the infrastructure and demands for services to some hard feelings existing between locals and visitors. However, these were all considered by the informants to be relatively minor as the scale of tourism in each county was relatively small. However, there was some concern that these could become more problematic for residents with future tourism development and the presence of increased numbers of tourists.

When asked what the future role of tourism is in the county's economy, key informant responses ranged through different levels of optimism, to being optimistic but dependent upon certain conditions being realized, to being pessimistic/negative, to not knowing or being unsure of the future. The vast majority of informants perceived the future role of tourism with optimism. Three-quarters of informant responses were optimistic. Strong proponents perceived tourism playing a very important, key role in the future and being perhaps the biggest contributor to the county's economy. Two informants in County C were strong in their opinion that tourism is the future of the county. Tourism was perceived as being a growth industry which will grow stronger in the future and provide good opportunities for businesses to grow and develop. Tourism was also perceived as being a complementary strategy for economic development which could help diversify the county's economic base. One-quarter of informant responses were pessimistic in nature and were related to perceptions that there were very few or no major attractions in the county to bring in tourists, that with respect to tourism, local residents were apathetic, lacked enthusiasm, and were resistant to change, and that there was a greater preference for the higher-paying jobs in manufacturing rather than low-pay tourism jobs. Two informants, one in County C and one in County S, did not know or were unsure about the future role of tourism.

Of the informants that were optimistic and/or hopeful about the future role of tourism in the county's economy, many of these opinions were dependent upon certain conditions being realized or certain barriers or constraints being overcome. Several themes are evident here. First, increased efforts must be directed to developing a more broad and diverse mix of attractions and activities for tourists, along with developing the necessary infrastructure and services to support increased numbers of tourists. Second, efforts must continually be made to increase both resident and government interest, support and involvement in tourism development at both county and local levels. This involves the development of better organization, leadership, and cooperation among interested and active parties, and more efforts to increase awareness among local residents about tourism's

value, importance, and real and potential benefits. Two constraints identified were lack of available funding (or dependence on outside funding) and lack of available local knowledge and expertise to develop tourism successfully. Third, there is the important question of whether or not tourism development can be realized; of whether or not the rural county and its residents can capitalize on tourism based on available amenities which might be attractive to tourists. Fourth, it's important that tourism produces jobs for local people, but tourism development should be balanced, not over-commercialized, nor negatively affect the quality of life for rural residents. This is related to the fifth theme, that there is a need for effective planning for tourism and associated development and that this planning and development should not be imposed from outside the county so that local control can be maintained.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this study have some implications not only for professional planners and developers involved in economic development and rural tourism, but for rural community leaders interested in developmental strategies which will help stabilize, diversify, and improve local economies, improve quality of life, and contribute to community development. It's important to be aware of rural influentials' perceptions of tourism and tourism-related development. As leaders in rural communities, these individuals are actively involved in decision-making and problem solving, and influential in the planning, development, and implementation of local policies, initiatives, and projects. Consequently, these rural influentials can affect the general perceptions of all rural residents. As this study has demonstrated, these individuals are sophisticated, perceptive and astute, and have strongly-held opinions and viewpoints about tourism. In order for tourism development initiatives and efforts to be successful, it's important to seek out and actively involve supportive rural influentials who are proponents and promoters of such development on the local level.

If tourism development is a viable economic development strategy helpful in diversifying a community's economic base and contributing to economic stability, it must be more readily recognized as being important and present by rural influentials and other rural residents. This requires more readily available supportive data about tourism's impact and real benefits at the local level and the development and implementation of strategies to diffuse such information throughout the rural populace in order to gain local support. Key informants who were the strong proponents of tourism perceived a great need to not only "educate" workers in the service industry about the importance of tourism, but to educate all rural residents about both the realized and potential benefits of tourism. Many informants felt that increased resident awareness would generate greater support for tourism and be manifested in greater hospitality extended to visitors and a willingness to absorb certain tourism-related costs or inconveniences.

The vast majority of informants perceived the future role of tourism with optimism and believed that there is a great potential for future tourism development. However, there were mixed perceptions about whether or not the potential would be realized or if tourism can be a major growth industry. It is obvious that increased efforts must be directed to identifying and developing a more broad and diverse mix or "cluster" of attractions and activities for tourists. This mix must then be effectively packaged and marketed to the tourists. Increased visitation will require the development and maintenance of the necessary infrastructure and services to support increased numbers of tourists. In addition to the need for more funding to support tourism development, one perceived problem seemed to be that even though some interest groups were active in certain tourism-related efforts, overall coordination and cooperation were lacking. Furthermore, volunteers were perceived to be the main participants in such efforts and consequently a lack of professionalism, limited progress, and difficulty in county-wide promotional efforts were all identified by informants as constraints. Also recognized were the need for professional

knowledge and expertise in tourism development and the need to include tourism as a component in any county-wide planning efforts in the future.

If federal, state, and local governments are concerned about improving and sustaining rural economies, improving the quality of life for rural residents, and making a viable contribution to the process of rural community development, resources should and could be allocated for rural tourism development where reasonable, perhaps as one component of a larger developmental strategy, and be directed to addressing the perceived constraints and barriers identified by these rural influentials. Rural influentials' support and involvement are important and vital components of rural tourism development, and their perceptions and efforts affect the more general perceptions and efforts of all rural residents. A greater recognition and understanding of these perceptions can help tourism-related planning and development initiatives be more effective in attaining set goals and in the process, benefit rural communities and their residents.

Literature Cited

- Ap, J. 1990. Residents' perceptions research on the social impacts of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 17(4): 610-616.
- Ap, J. 1992. Resident perceptions on tourism impacts. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(4): 665-690.
- Brown, R. L. 1992. Tourism as a tool in rural economic regeneration. In: *Proceedings, Tourism in Europe: The 1992 Conference*; Tyne and Wear, Great Britain, United Kingdom: The Center for Travel and Tourism Publications Office: B39-B43.
- Burr, S.W. and J.A. Walsh. 1994. A hidden value of sustainable rural tourism development. *Trends*, 31(1): 9-13.
- Economic Research Associates. 1989. National policy study on rural tourism and small business development. Washington, D.C.: United States Travel and Tourism Administration.
- Federal Task Force on Rural Tourism. 1989. Report of the federal task force on rural tourism to the tourism policy council. Washington, D.C.: Federal Task Force on Rural Tourism.
- Flora, C. B. and J. A. Christenson. 1991. Critical Times for Rural America: The Challenge for Rural Policy in the 1990s. In C. B. Flora and J. A. Christenson (Eds.), *Rural Policies for the 1990s*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Granbling, R. and W. R. Freudenburg. 1990. A closer look at "local control": Communities, commodities, and the collapse of the coast. *Rural Sociology*, 55(4): 541-558.
- Hunt, J. D. 1992. Rural tourism: New focus on a traditional industry. *Western Wildlands*, 18(2): 2-3.
- LeDuc, K. 1991. Tourism as a tool for rural development. In: *Proceedings, Tourism: Building Credibility for a Credible Industry, 1991 Travel and Tourism Research Conference*; 1991; Long Beach, CA: 409-413.
- Long, P. T. 1991. Tourism on our terms: rural community tourism development impacts and policies. Report prepared for the Western Governors' Association, College of Business Administration, University of Colorado at Boulder.
- Long, P. T.; J. Nuckolls. 1992. Rural tourism development: Balancing benefits and costs. *Western Wildlands*, 18(3): 9-13.
- Marchak, P. 1990. Forest Industry Towns in British Columbia. In: R. G. Lee & W. R. Burch (Eds.), *Community & Forestry: Continuities in the Sociology of Natural Resources* (pp. 95-106). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- McCool, S. F. 1987. Tourist and tourism in Montana: The basics of a viable industry. *Western Wildlands*, 13(2): 7-11.
- McCool, S. F. 1992. Tourism in the northern Rockies: Preserving the product, protecting the future. *Western Wildlands*, 18(3): 4-8.
- Milman, A.; Pizam, A. 1988. Social impacts of tourism on central Florida. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(2): 191-204.
- Murphy, P. E. 1983. Perceptions and attitudes of decision making groups in tourism centers. *Journal of Travel Research*, 21(3): 8-12.
- Perdue, R.; P. Long and L. Allen. 1990. Resident support for tourism development. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 17: 586-599.
- Perdue, R. R.; P. Long and L. Gustke. 1991. The effects of tourism development on objective indicators of local quality of life. In: *Proceedings, Tourism: Building Credibility for a Credible Industry, 1991 Travel and Tourism Research Conference*; 1991; Long Beach, CA.
- Pizam, A. 1978. Tourist impacts: The social costs to the destination community as perceived by its residents. *Journal of Travel Research*, 16: 8-12.
- Robinson, I. M. 1984. New resource towns on Canada's frontier: Selected contemporary issues. In D. D. Detomasi & J. W. Gartrell (Eds.), *Resource Communities: A Decade of Disruption* (pp. 1-22). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Siehl, G.H. 1990. Amenity resources and rural economic growth: Report on a national policy symposium. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress.
- Stokowski, P. A. 1992. The Colorado gambling boom: An experiment in rural community development. *Small Town*, 6(4): 12-19.
- Weeks, E. C. 1990. Mill closures in the Pacific Northwest: The consequences of economic decline in rural industrial communities. In: R. G. Lee & W. R. Burch (Eds.), *Community & Forestry: Continuities in the Sociology of Natural Resources* (pp. 125-140). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Wilkinson, K. P. 1992. Rurality and community interaction. Paper presented at the 55th Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society. The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.
- Willits, F. K. 1992. The rural mystique, rural development, and tourism. *Farm Economics* (November/December).
- Willits, F. K.; R. C. Bealer; and D. M. Crider. 1982. Persistence of rural/urban differences. In D. A. Dillman & D. J. Hobbs (Eds.), *Rural Society in the U.S.: Issues for the 1980s* (pp. 69-84). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.