

VISITORS' PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN WEST VIRGINIA

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Abstract.—Previous studies indicate that tourists' destination choices are increasingly influenced by perceptions of sustainability but research into tourists' insights and sensitivities about sustainability is lacking. This study examines how visitors to West Virginia perceive tourism development in the state. Findings indicate that visitors' perceptions are basically homogeneous and that they are more concerned about environmental and socio-cultural sustainability than about economic sustainability. Males are not significantly different from females in their perceptions of all seven subcategories of tourism sustainability. However, visitors' lengths of stay are positively related ($p < .05$) to their perceptions of environmental protection and their satisfaction is positively related ($p < .05$) to frequency of visits. Finally, local visitors are more willing than nonlocal visitors to pay bed taxes and more for higher quality services.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

While it is generally recognized that tourism, regardless of its form or location, should be planned, developed, and implemented to be environmentally, economically, and socio-culturally sustainable, sustainable tourism development still means different things to different people in different places. Although people tend to relate the concept of sustainability to its ecological dimension, economic achievement is often more valued than environmental and socio-

cultural sustainability (Ratz, 2000; Tosun, 2002). This is particularly true in developing countries and in less developed regions of developed countries where tourism is viewed as an important component of local or regional economic development. In addition, for entrepreneurs, investors, regional planners, developers, and politicians, economic sustainability may be a more immediate priority than environmental and social sustainability. The opposite may be true for environmental interest groups who are especially concerned about the environmental consequences of tourism development. Moreover, local residents may perceive different aspects of tourism sustainability differently than visitors (Cottrell et al., 2004; Gezici, 2006).

Past research has looked at tourism sustainability from the perspective of local residents but studies on visitors' perceptions of sustainable tourism development are relatively scarce. According to Cottrell et al. (2004), less attention has been paid to visitors' views in part because "tourism producers... [claim] that tourists 'do not care' [about sustainability] and if they do care, this concern for the environment is not shown in practice" (p. 410). However, outsiders may be able to see things that insiders cannot, and may have different perceptions of and opinions about tourism development for an area than local residents and politicians. To address this gap in the literature, this study examines how visitors perceive tourism development in West Virginia.

West Virginia, nicknamed the "Mountain State", is the second most rural state in the nation; 20 of the state's 55 counties are 100 percent rural and an additional 14 are >75 percent rural, according to the U.S. Census Bureau definition (West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, 2007). West Virginia has rich and abundant natural resources and has great potential for environment-based tourism development. Tourism is the second largest industry in the state in terms of

total economic impact and employment, second to coal mining, and followed by forestry (West Virginia Division of Forestry, 2006).

In recent decades, tourism has been playing an increasingly significant role in promoting rural economic development and diversification in West Virginia. A 2005 study by the Dean Runyan Associates found that the size of the travel industry in relation to the total economy of a locale is more significant in some smaller communities and rural areas of the state than in the state's most urban area (the Charleston metropolitan area). For rural Fayette, Greenbrier, Tucker, and Pocahontas counties, the travel industry is an extremely significant component of the total local economy (Dean Runyan Associates, 2005). Rural areas also offer different tourism experiences than urban areas; while Charleston has a variety of commercial lodging accommodations and entertainment facilities, smaller communities and rural areas offer unique scenic and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Despite its significant contribution to the West Virginia state economy, tourism development may pose a long-term sustainability threat by modifying the natural appearance and rural atmosphere upon which the tourism industry is largely dependent. Pressure to protect the state's natural resources is likely to increase in the coming decades given that the state is less developed compared to other states in the U.S. and first priority is placed on economic development, as reflected by the state slogan being changed from "Wild and Wonderful" to "Open for Business."

The objectives of this study are: 1) to better understand visitor perceptions of West Virginia; 2) to examine visitor perceptions of tourism development in the state; 3) to compare similarities and differences in perceptions between local visitors (i.e., visitors from West Virginia itself) and nonlocal visitors (i.e., visitors from other states/countries); and 4) to use this information to explore management and development implications for decisionmakers.

2.0 METHODS

The authors of this study created a questionnaire consisting of three sections (visitors' perceptions, trip characteristics, and background information). The questionnaire was then reviewed and approved by the WV Division of Tourism. Twenty statements designed to elicit visitors' perceptions were developed by drawing upon findings from the literature. These statements involve three general dimensions of tourism sustainability (environmental, social, and economic). The visitor survey was distributed at two welcome centers (I-79 Southbound and I-68 Westbound Welcome Centers, see Figure 1) near Morgantown, WV on weekends in October, 2006, by students taking a sustainable tourism development course taught by the lead author. All 20 items on the questionnaire were further grouped into seven categories: environmental protection, environmental learning, nature tourism, social impact, economic impact, willingness to pay, and satisfaction (for subcategory and associated items, please refer to Tables 1 and 2). Visitors' perceptions of sustainable tourism development were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Data were analyzed by multiple regression, ANOVA, *t*-test, and Chi-square using SPSS 11.5 for Windows.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Visitor profiles

A total of 222 participants were involved in this study. Male participants (54.1 percent) numbered slightly more than females (45.9 percent). Most participants were older with 41 percent between the ages of 45 and 64 and another 12 percent beyond the age 65, indicating that participants were largely baby boomers. The majority of participants were well educated (65.6 percent of participants had a postsecondary degree or postgraduate degree) and affluent (58.6 percent had a family income of \$50,000 or more). Their four most common home states were West Virginia (24.1 percent), Pennsylvania (18.6 percent), Massachusetts (11.4 percent), and Virginia (9.1 percent).

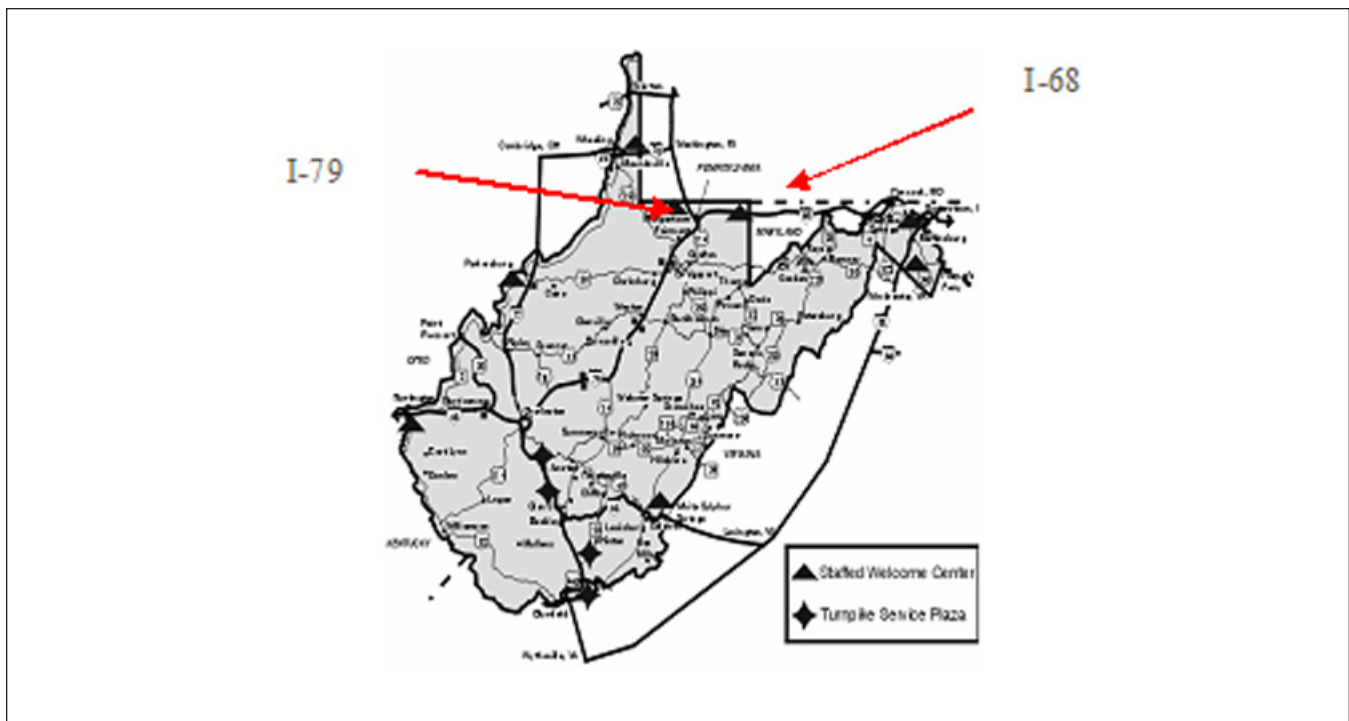


Figure 1.—Locations of the I-79 and I-68 Welcome Centers.

About 35 percent of respondents reported their main reason for traveling to West Virginia was to visit family and another 33 percent were visiting for leisure (vacation). The most popular destination type was small towns (23 percent), followed by forests (13.2 percent). In addition, the majority of participants (57.7 percent) had visited the state 10 times or more, and most of them had stayed or planned to stay for at least one night (18.3 percent one night, 30.3 percent 2 to 5 nights, and 27.4 percent more than 5 nights) during the current trip. Finally, most of them traveled with one (40.7 percent) or two to five other persons (32.5 percent).

3.2 Perceptions of Tourism Development

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of tourism development in West Virginia. Of the 20 items relating to the three dimensions of tourism sustainability, over 70 percent of respondents either mildly or strongly agreed with 11 of them. The item "Overall, I am satisfied with my trip(s) in West Virginia" had the highest percentage of responses (93.0 percent) in the category "mildly agree" and "strongly agree" combined, with the mean of 4.5. The item "Tourists should pay a special tax on hotel and motel fees"

received the highest negative percentage of responses (i.e., 53.9 percent of respondents either mildly or strongly disagreed with the statement), followed by "West Virginia appears to be competitive with surrounding states in tourism development" (17.3 percent) and "I am willing to pay more for higher quality services" (15.8 percent).

The mean for each dimension is 4.04 (environmental), 4.13 (social/cultural) and 3.63 (economic). Paired *t*-test found that visitors' perceptions of the three dimensions were significantly different from one another ($p < .05$). That is, visitors were most concerned about the social-cultural dimension of sustainability and least concerned about the economic sustainability. Each general dimension was then regressed on socio-economic variables (i.e., sex, age, education, and income), and trip characteristics (i.e., frequency of visits and lengths of stay). Results indicate that length of stay and frequency of visits are significantly related to the environmental and socio-cultural dimensions ($p < .05$), respectively, while none of these independent variables are significantly related to the economic dimension ($p > 0.5$).

Table 1.—Percents, means, and standard deviations for visitors' perceptions

	Percents of respondents					Descriptive statistics	
	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Neutral	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Environmental dimension							
1. The natural beauty of West Virginia is well protected	4.2	8.4	16.4	44.9	26.2	3.8	1.1
2. West Virginia is a place to experience the rural atmosphere	0.5	3.0	11.2	29.9	55.3	4.4	0.8
3. West Virginia is a place to learn about nature	1.9	0.5	13.4	38.4	45.8	4.3	0.9
4. Tourism development in West Virginia should take into account the environmental protection	3.3	1.4	9.9	28.2	57.3	4.4	1.0
5. West Virginia should place priority on nature-based tourism or rural tourism development	1.8	3.7	16.6	36.4	41.5	4.1	0.9
6. Small towns and historical sites/buildings are appropriately protected	3.0	8.4	38.9	35.0	14.8	3.5	1.0
7. Touring around West Virginia increases environmental awareness	1.4	3.2	28.6	42.4	24.4	3.9	0.9
Economic dimension							
8. Tourism attracts investment and spending to West Virginia	1.9	3.3	7.6	39.0	48.1	4.3	0.9
9. West Virginia appears to be competitive with surrounding states in tourism development	4.7	12.6	27.0	37.2	18.6	3.5	1.1
10. Tourism is a means of economic diversification for farmers	4.3	11.1	40.4	30.3	13.9	3.4	1.0
11. Tourists should pay a special tax on hotel and motel room fees	26.7	27.2	23.0	15.2	7.8	2.5	1.3
12. I am willing to pay more for higher quality services	4.8	11.0	24.9	38.3	21.1	3.6	1.1
13. West Virginia should put more efforts on marketing its nature-based assets	1.4	1.9	22.6	42.0	32.1	4.0	0.9
14. Tourism development contributes to regional economic development	1.4	1.9	19.1	48.8	28.8	4.0	0.8
Socio-cultural dimension							
15. Tourism development improves the appearance of West Virginia	2.4	9.1	21.2	40.4	26.9	3.8	1.0
16. Tourism contributes to the conservation of traditional culture	1.9	10.2	25.9	43.1	19.0	3.7	1.0
17. Local residents will benefit from living in a tourism destination area	2.3	5.6	25.9	48.6	17.6	3.7	0.9
18. West Virginia is a place worthy of visiting again	1.4	0.5	7.2	22.0	68.9	4.6	0.8
19. I will recommend West Virginia to my friends	1.4	0.9	6.9	26.3	64.5	4.5	0.8
20. Overall, I am satisfied with my trip(s) in West Virginia	1.4	0.5	5.1	30.4	62.6	4.5	0.7

Note: Participants were instructed: "Listed below are statements about your perceptions of tourism development in West Virginia. Please use the following scale to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement by circling your response." Items are measured using a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, SD; 2 = mildly disagree, MD; 3 = neutral, N; 4 = mildly agree, MA; 5 = strongly agree, SA).

Table 2.—Comparison of perceptions of tourism sustainability between local visitors and nonlocal visitors

Subcategory and associated items	Local visitors		Outside Visitors		ANOVA	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>
Environmental protection Items 1, 4, and 6	3.88	0.73	3.89	0.66	1, 199	0.00
Environmental learning Items 3 and 7	4.15	0.68	4.21	0.61	1, 194	0.26
Nature tourism Items 2 and 5	3.85	0.65	3.97	.075	1, 208	1.18
Social impact Items 15, 16 and 17	3.70	0.73	3.87	0.83	1, 205	1.78
Economic impact Items 8, 9, 10, 13, and 14	3.72	0.71	3.72	0.83	1, 204	0.00
Willingness to pay Items 11 and 12	2.97	0.87	3.32	1.10	1, 207	5.52*
Satisfaction Items 18, 19, and 20	4.48	0.77	4.68	0.60	1, 206	2.75

* $p < .05$.

Further analysis was conducted based on the each subcategory. Specifically, Chi-square tests show no difference in perceptions of the state's tourism development between male and female respondents ($p > .05$). Several multi-regression analyses indicate that length of stay is the only variable that is positively and significantly related to environmental learning ($p < .05$), suggesting that the longer they stayed, the more they learned about West Virginia's nature and environment. Likewise, income was the only variable that was positively related to willingness to pay ($p < .05$). This suggests that the more affluent a visitor is, the more willing he or she is to pay more. However, this relationship is only marginally significant ($p = .061$). Finally, satisfaction is found to be significantly related to frequency of visits ($p < .05$), suggesting that the more satisfied visitors would visit or had visited more frequently.

3.3 Comparison between West Virginia (WV) Respondents and Out-of-State Visitors

ANOVA indicates that there is no significant difference in perceptions of the three dimensions of sustainability between the two groups ($p > .05$) (see Table 2). However, WV respondents ($M = 3.32$) were more

likely than nonlocal visitors ($M = 2.97$) to be willing to pay more for higher quality services and to be willing to pay bed taxes ($p < .05$) when they were compared by each subcategory of tourism sustainability. However, these groups were not significantly different from each other with regards to perceptions of the other six aspects of sustainable tourism development in the state.

4.0 DISCUSSION

West Virginia, one of the most forested states in the United States, is still a wild and wonderful destination to visit. However, this situation may change in the coming decades due to tourism development related to theme parks and gambling activities. For example, a hot topic in West Virginia has been the new Volcano Island water park to be opened in the summer of 2008 in Fairmont. In addition, planning for several gambling centers is under way. There have been questions about the environmental, economic and social sustainability of such initiatives which could change the state image from wild and wonderful to wild development. Thus, a major challenge for the state is to determine how to promote economic development through tourism, while maintaining the rural character and preserving the natural features that attract tourists today.

This research indicates that the state's natural features are very important to current tourists. Forests, mountains, lakes, small towns – and associated cultural and historical values – are the state's biggest tourist attractions and decisionmakers need to plan carefully for their conservation. Most survey respondents in this study perceived West Virginia as well protected and think of the state as an ideal place to experience nature and rural landscapes. However, one area of deficit was the preservation of small towns and historical sites; a large number of respondents did not think the state has done a satisfactory job in protecting these resources.

As Swarbrooke (2005) pointed out, “sustainable tourism is not just about protecting the environment; it is also concerned with long-term economic viability and social justice” (preface). Tourism as a business first needs to be economically sustainable. Thus, sustainable tourism development should first meet the needs of tourists. This study found that 90.9 percent of respondents reported that West Virginia is a place worth visiting again and 90.8 percent of respondents would recommend the state to their friends. Furthermore, 93.0 percent of respondents felt satisfied with their visit. This is a very promising for the state but the high percentage of responses on these three items may be partially due to the fact that a large number of visitors live in the state (24.1 percent in this survey) or used to live in the state. Another recent survey of visitors to the same two welcome centers (conducted by the lead author for *Wonderful West Virginia* magazine) found that 23.6 percent of respondents were from the state, 32.1 percent have lived in the state and 37.6 percent had family living in the state. Therefore, the high percentage of responses on these items may have something to do with place attachment, and hence may not reflect the real situation of tourism services in the state.

It is said that the triple bottom line of tourism sustainability is built upon tourism experience and satisfaction. Thus, high quality tourism experiences and satisfaction should correspond to a highly positive response to each dimension of tourism sustainability. However, that was not the finding in this study. That is, visitors' perceptions of tourism sustainability are

not as high as their perceptions of tourism satisfaction. For example, the percentage of positive responses (mildly agree or strongly agree) on three items related to tourism experience and satisfactions is as high as 91.6 percent on average, while the percentage for environmental, economic and socio-cultural dimensions (note: the three tourism experience and satisfaction items are excluded from socio-cultural dimension for such comparison) are 74.3 percent, 60.2 percent, and 65.2 percent, respectively.

It should also be noted that visitors' perceptions of the three general dimensions were not consistent, in that they were more concerned about environmental and social aspects than economic aspects. This is true for both local and nonlocal visitors. Previous studies also found that tourists consider environmental attributes more significant than social and economic attributes (Gezici, 2006). Also, this implies that visitors are more concerned with what they can experience and less concerned with economic benefits for local communities, which is the major concern of most local residents and developers.

While local and nonlocal visitors were not significantly different from each other in most perceptions of tourism sustainability, they did exhibit a significant difference in willingness to pay, with locals being more likely than nonlocals to be willing to pay special taxes and to be willing to pay more for higher quality services. There are two possible explanations for this. First, locals are more concerned about the economic well-being of their home state than nonlocals, because such benefits are directly related to the improvement of quality of life for them and other West Virginians. Second, locals may think that they are not required to pay such special taxes while visitors from other states are required to do so. Thus, there is no perceived risk for them to express a more positive response.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how visitors to West Virginia perceive tourism development in the state. Findings indicate that visitors' lengths of stay are significantly and positively related to their perception of

environmental protection ($p < .05$). Similarly, their satisfaction explicitly relates to their perceptions of frequency of visits ($p < .05$). In addition, males are not significantly different from females in their perceptions of all seven subcategories. Finally, local visitors are more likely than nonlocal visitors to pay for bed taxes and higher quality services.

Participants cared very much about sustainable tourism development in West Virginia. They were specifically interested in the protection of the rural character and natural beauty of the state and, for example, had misgivings about the visual disturbance of scenery by mining activities. They were also apprehensive about the change in the state's slogan from "Wild and Wonderful" to "Open for Business." A number of respondents expressed their concerns that this change has compromised West Virginia's true value and image as a place full of recreation, beautiful scenery, and historic landmarks. There are many indications that the future of tourism in West Virginia depends on the authenticity of natural features and rural character.

This study is not without limitations. First, survey respondents from the two welcome centers may not be representative of visitors to the state. Second, the two welcome centers are at the northern end of the state and are not close to the state's major tourism destinations. Future surveys should be replicated at other visitor centers closer to the major tourism destinations. Also, a long-term study is needed to monitor the perceptual and attitudinal changes of visitors to the state over time.

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