ANALYSIS OF VISITOR PREFERENCES OF THE HATFIELD-MCCOY TRAILS

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Abstract  
The Hatfield-McCoy Trail System has become a major tourism attraction and an economic boon for the southwestern area of West Virginia. Communities there are seeking to sustainably develop the area to provide services for Hatfield-McCoy Trail visitors. Managers and planners must anticipate the unique demands from this group of recreationists. Analyzing visitor preferences will allow these communities to plan effectively.

Preliminary findings indicate that Hatfield-McCoy users are highly specialized, experienced riders that plan multiple day trips to the system. Initial analysis shows visitors average over 14 years of riding experience and spend over $1300 per year on off-highway vehicle (OHV) equipment. Initial data also suggest that 88% of trail users will return within the next 12 months.

Survey collection is ongoing as of June, 2012, and additional study will include importance performance analysis of Hatfield-McCoy trail features, lodging preferences, and sources of information used for trip planning.

1.0 Introduction  
Outdoor recreation is one of the fastest growing economic activities in the nation. Last year over $33 billion was spent on outdoor recreation equipment. Over 159 million individuals in the U.S. participated in 18.3 billion outdoor recreation experiences (CBER, 2006). An important element of outdoor recreation is activity that takes place on trails. A recent study (Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2006) estimated that 72% of Americans aged 16 and older participated in an outdoor activity in 2005, with hiking, running and bicycling on trails being three of the most frequently reported activities, however, OHV recreational use on trails is also growing in popularity.

In the first nationwide recreational study in 1960 by the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment off highway vehicle recreation was not included because levels of OHV use were so low (Hammit and Cole, 1998). OHV use first entered the recreational scene in the 1970s with 5.3 million user days being recorded on U.S.D.A Forest Service land (Feuchter, 1980, as cited in Silberman and Anderek, 2006). Cordell (1999) reported that in 1994/95 14% of Americans 16 years and older, 27.9 million participates engaged in off-road driving. The Specialty Vehicle Institute of America (SVIA) estimates that ATV sales have increased over 280% nationwide in the US since 1994 (SVIA, 2006). Participation in ATV recreation is expected to continue to increase across the US through 2015 (Cordell, et al, 2005). This sort of recreational participation assures future demand for off-highway trail systems, with OHV recreation being recognized as one of the faster growing outdoor activities, the National Survey of Recreation in the Environment (NSRE) (Cordell et al., 2008).

Although off-highway vehicle recreation is becoming a favorite pastime it comes with its share of environmental issues like noise pollution, air pollution, and soil erosion. With such rapid growth, the necessity for available riding facilities becomes apparent. It has been a challenge for many public land management agencies to provide adequate areas for OHV use. Conflict emerges between OHV users, and other types of outdoor recreationists (hikers, birdwatchers, wildlife hunters, etc.) who feel that the land should be preserved. While the positions of the interest groups may differ, they typically share the concern that OHV use be carried out responsibly (Cordell et al., 2008). Trail systems like the Hatfield-McCoy trails in West Virginia are an important component when it comes to management of off-highway vehicle recreation.

The overall goal of the Hatfield-McCoy Trails is to establish a world class OHV trail system while focusing on safety by providing discipline and structure for the sport (Lusk, 2006). An expansion plan for the trail system calls for 2,000 miles of trails with appropriate facilities and an Off-Highway Vehicle Park located in Kanawha County (CBER 2006). Local communities are seeking to sustainably develop the area to provide services for Hatfield-McCoy visitors. Studying tourist preferences will allow these communities to plan successfully for these inherently specialized recreationists.

The concept of specialization is used by recreation researchers to describe the way in which participants incorporate an activity into their life. Specialization is defined by Bryan (1977, as cited in Manning, 1999) as “a continuum of behavior from the...
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general to the particular, reflected by equipment and skills used in the sport and activity setting preferences”. Manning (1999) also states that specialization can consist of a number of elements, such as experience level, skill/ expertise, involvement/ commitment, and centrality to lifestyle. This study looks at the visitor preferences of lodging, trail facilities, and information sources, as well as, frequency of participation, years of participation, and participation at selected trails to help determine specialization. Highly specialized participants will have different goals, participation habits and spending levels than less specialized participants. OHV recreation is a significant part of many participants’ life style. It is believed that OHV riding offers opportunities for the participants to connect with friends and family, reduce stress, and enjoy nature (Baker, 2007). This study will help recreation managers and entrepreneurs understand the OHV tourism market.

2.0 Background
The Hatfield-McCoy Trail System (HMTS) was opened in the year 2000 by the West Virginia legislature to generate economic development through tourism for the counties of Logan, Kanawha, Wyoming, McDowell, Mercer, Wayne, Lincoln, Mingo, and Boone (CBER 2006). The area served by the trail system is one of most poverty stricken regions in the U.S. with incomes, wages and earnings well below the national and West Virginia averages. In 2004, while West Virginia’s per capita income was only 78% of the national average, the Hatfield-McCoy region’s was only 63%. For earnings, West Virginia was only 68% of the national average and the study region’s was only 48% (CBER 2006). The Hatfield-McCoy Trails are a major factor in improving the economic conditions of the area.

The trail system is a multi-use system that provides recreation opportunities for many different types of OHVs such as all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), side by side utility vehicles (UTVs), and dirt bikes, however trails are open for mountain bikers, horseback riders, and hikers to use as well. The trails create the biggest system of its kind on the East Coast and the second largest in the nation (Wilcox, 2011) with visitors arriving from surrounding states such as Kentucky, Virginia, and Ohio. Some visitors travel as far as Canada.

Currently there are five of the nine WV counties (Wyoming, McDowell, Mingo, Logan, and Boone) with over 600 miles of off-highway vehicle trails. The HMTS has become a major service sector creating a financial advantage for these counties and for the state of West Virginia. An IMPLAN analysis of the economic impact of the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System on West Virginia showed an increase in income of $2,789,036 and the generation of 146 new jobs (CBER 2006). These increases would not have happened in the absence of the trail system.

3.0 Methods
To date, 140 surveys have been administered and collection will continue through 2012. The sample used consisted of 140 Hatfield-McCoy Trail visitors (98 males and 42 females). The trail users come from various locations with travel times ranging from less than one hour to more than eight hours away. They are highly specialized and experienced with over 67% being repeat visitors. Approximately 90% of respondents were surveyed at the 2011 Hatfield-McCoy Trail Festival in Gilbert, WV, which may cause selection biases. Future data collection at system trail heads will be compared to festival goers to see if they are properly represent all HMTS users. Surveys were administered on-site. Data generated from surveys was checked to eliminate any entry errors, and then analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) data analysis software and Microsoft Excel. The results were then analyzed and served as the basis for the study. The survey was designed to gather information about Hatfield-McCoy Trail visitors, their recreational experiences and their travel expenditures.

4.0 Results
Out of 128 valid surveys 98 respondents were male and 42 were female. Data shows the age of respondents range from 13 to 74 with a mean of 38. Respondents reported a mean of 15.8 years of experience with OHV riding. Analysis indicates 8.7% were with organized groups while 6.3% reported being guided by a local outfitter.
4.1 *HMTS Visits within the Next 12 months*

Plans to Visit the HMTS within the Next 12 Months

4.2 *Information Sources Most Used*

Preferred Information Source (Mean Score for preference on a 7 point scale)
4.3 Lodging Preferences

Lodging Preference by Percentage

4.4 Hours Traveled

Hours Traveled
4.5 Experience
Self-Reported Level of Experience

4.6 Expenditures
Self Report Spending Measures

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5.0 Discussion and Conclusions
OHV riders represent a vast and growing economic resource for the state of West Virginia. The economic impact of this recreational sport will continue to grow as trails and recreation opportunities are made available. This growth can contribute to job development and drive entrepreneurship opportunities while making West Virginia a premier destination for OHV Tourism.
The primary intention of this study is to establish data on the lodging preferences and travel expenditures of Hatfield–McCoy Trail users so that managers of the leisure and hospitality sector can better understand how to plan and provide services. Being more responsive to users will allow for the trail system to grow and increase the number of annual visitors. Preliminary analysis shows that over 67% of trail users are repeat visitors. Initial data shows that this group is 70% male and 30% female. Their goals are different than typical OHV operators with 33% of users indicating receptiveness toward off season use. Findings also indicate that Hatfield-McCoy users are highly specialized and experienced, likely to travel in groups of two to six people and plan multi-day trips to the system. Initial analysis shows visitors average over 14 years experience and spend over $1300 per year on OHV equipment. Preliminary findings also indicate that 88% of trail users will return within the next 12 months with participants’ spending ranging from $0 to $3000 dollars per trip with the mean being $456.18. More than 80% of participants plan for overnight stays, and roughly 70% of visitors surveyed preferred Primitive or Modern Campgrounds and Rustic or Modern Cabins, over Hotels, Bed & Breakfast, Lodges, and friends and family.

The analysis of information collection by trail system visitors indicates that visitors rely heavily on the Hatfield-McCoy website and information from their friends when planning visits to the trail system. Other Hatfield-McCoy materials like those provided by visitors bureaus ranked third in visitor reliance. Traditional tourism information channels, such as websites by the state’s division of tourism, local convention and visitors bureaus and advertising on radio and television are used by only small percentages of Hatfield-McCoy visitors. The Hatfield-McCoy website is a comprehensive guide to the area and offers links to some lodging and amenities, thus making heavy reliance on a single site more understandable. The reliance on friends as an information source is a traditional problem in outdoor recreation settings, as information from such informal sources may vary widely in accuracy and reliability. Word-of-mouth sources are also inaccessible to managers trying to send critical information to potential visitors.

This study is ongoing and survey administration will continue throughout 2012. Additional study will include importance-performance analysis of Hatfield-McCoy trail features, lodging preferences, and sources of information used for trip planning. Hatfield-McCoy users are experienced and inherently specialized recreationists whose goals are different than typical OHV users. Managers and planners must anticipate the unique demands of this group. Findings from this study are useful planning tools for HMTS administrators as well as for entrepreneurs planning complementary business development.

6.0 Citations


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