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Deng, Jinyang; McGill, David; Baxter, Phyllis; and Plaughter, Georgette, "Residents' Perceptions of Tourism Development in Appalachian Forest Heritage Area" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 13.

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ABSTRACT

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) is made up of 18 counties which are located in the central Appalachia, a region rich in natural, historic and heritage resources with great potentials for tourism development. In order to know more about tourism development in the area, a study to understand AFHA community residents' perceptions of tourism opportunities, issues, and potentials was conducted with funding from West Virginia University Extension Service. Results indicated that participants considered people, natural resources, and historical/heritage resources as the most valued assets that their communities can use for tourism development. They were also very positive about the environmental, social, economic, impacts of tourism on their communities. The study recommended that top priorities should be placed on strengthening community leadership; increasing financial investment; and promoting marketing for tourism development in the AFHA communities.

Keywords: *sustainable tourism development, perception, planning, forest heritage.*

INTRODUCTION

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) is made up of 18 counties, of which 16 are located in West Virginia and two in Maryland (Figure 1). The area is geographically situated in central Appalachia, a region that is rural in nature with a high level of poverty. The economy in the region has traditionally depended on extractive activities such as agriculture, mining, timber, and manufacturing. These economic activities, however, have declined since the late 20th century, with tourism and second home developments playing an increasingly important role in much of the region (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010).

The AFHA was initiated with a grant awarded by USDA to West Virginia University with a goal to integrate central Appalachian forest history, culture, natural history, products, and forestry management into a heritage tourism initiative to promote rural community development. Currently the effort is implemented by AFHA Inc., a non-profit organization based on stakeholder partnerships made up of individuals, businesses, non-profit groups and agencies (AFHA, 2010). The rural nature of the area, along with rich historic and heritage resources,

While recognizing findings on residents' attitudes toward tourism vary from site to site, it appears that residents who benefit more from economic gains and sociocultural improvements as a result of tourism development are more likely to support tourism (Choi & Murray, 2010). This phenomenon has been examined and explained based on the social exchange theory (i.e., Choi & Murray, 2010; Gursoy, Jurowski & Uysal, 2002) which "involves the trading and sharing of resources between individuals and groups" (Harrill, 2004, p. 260). This theory has been used in the tourism literature based on the assumption that tourism development comes with economic benefits in exchange from social or environmental impacts (Harrill, 2004). Or in other words, how negative or positive a resident's attitudes are toward tourism largely depends on how many tourism dollars can be generated or remained for the person or community. Thus, those who perceive they can benefit from tourism development are more favorable for tourism development. Usually, less affluent individuals or economically depressed communities are more likely to support tourism development if they can economically benefit from such development. This is true even the economic benefits are gained at the cost of the environmental degradation. For example, Zhong, Deng and Xiang (2008) reported that local residents in Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, located in an economically depressed region in central south China, were very supportive of tourism development due to economic benefits being accrued to them, in spite of the park been considerably transformed biophysically. In another study of the gambling community of Deadwood, South Dakota, Caneday and Zeiger (1991) reported that the more money residents made in tourism-dependent jobs, the less likely they were to identify negative impacts. That being said, not all studies support this theory. For example, Liu, Sheldon, and Var (1987) found that residents were more concerned with tourism's environmental impacts than economic benefits. Bender, Deng, Selin, Arbogast and Hobbs (2008) and Andrada, Dhami, Deng, & Dyre (2010) reported that residents of two small rural towns in southern West Virginia did not support gambling as a tourism activity even though gambling is the major source of tourism revenues in the state and an effective means for rural economic development in the United States (Reeder & Brown, 2005). This suggests that residents in the two communities hope to maintain a pure rural atmosphere without compromise for economic development through tourism. It also implies that the nature of the development influences whether residents support a tourism development or not.

It is evident that residents' perceptions of tourism development in/around their communities are related to the nature of the development and to the importance of such a development to themselves. Thus, it is meaningful to conduct an importance-performance analysis to examine perceived importance of an attribute and the perceived performance on the attribute. The importance-performance analysis framework was introduced by Martilla and James (1977) in marketing research to understand customers' satisfaction by matching their perceptions of attribute importance and performance. Importance and performance data are plotted against one another on a two dimensional grid with importance on the y-axis and performance on the x-axis. The data will fall into one of four quadrants—"concentrate here", "keep up the good work", "possible overkill", and "low priority". An extension of the quadrant approach inserts an upward sloping, 45° line, which is termed the iso-rating or iso-priority line, to distinguish regions of differing priorities. Items on the line imply importance equals performance, with items above the line requiring improvement (Slack, 1994). Bacon (2003) argued that all points on the line have the same priority for improvement with points above the line representing high priorities for improvement.

METHODS

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed by authors of this paper by drawing upon findings from relevant literature (i.e., Lankford & Howard, 1994). This questionnaire consists of five sections: awareness of and knowledge about the AFHA, perceptions of tourism resources assets, perceptions of tourism development benefits and costs, tourism development challenges and opportunities, and background information.

Sample

A list of 10,000 consumer addresses in the area were purchased and randomly generated by GeoSelector.com. Of this number, 35 addresses for each county were then randomly selected using SPSS, resulting in a sample of 630 residents being identified.

Data collection

Data were collected following an adopted Dillman's Total Design Method (2000). Specifically, a pre survey post card was sent to each participant one week prior. Then a mail package containing a copy of the questionnaire, a cover letter and self addressed and stamped envelope was mailed out. A follow-up reminder card was sent to those who had not returned the questionnaire after two weeks, and a complete package with a new cover letter was sent to those who had not responded after four weeks.

RESULTS

Response rate

Data collection, from the pre survey post card to the last questionnaire being received, spanned two and a half months (April 23, 2009 – June 10, 2009). Of 630 pre survey post cards sent out, 68 addresses were undelivered and returned back, resulting in 562 valid addresses. Of this number, 174 residents returned their questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 31.0%.

Perceptions of tourism resource assets

Percents of participants' responses on their perceptions of tourism resources and assets are presented in Table 1. As shown, a majority of participants had very positive responses on tourism resources and assets in their communities. Specifically, the top five most positive responses on the two categories "mildly agree" and "strongly agree" combined are related to people being friendly (83.6%), helpful (82.6%); communities being attractive (76.4%), being rich in natural resources (78.5%) and in historical resources (75.0%) that can attract tourists. In contrast, there are several statements related to tourism businesses, facilities, and organizations that respondents did not agree to some extent. For example, 26.3% of residents did not think that their communities have tourism businesses.

Table 1
Percents of Responses Concerning Perceptions of Tourism Resources and Assets

Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Mildly disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mildly agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Not sure (%)
1. My community is attractive to tourists	4.7	8.7	8.7	33.1	43.3	1.6
2. My community has been visited by a large number of tourists	7.2	12.2	13.7	23.0	42.4	1.4
3. My community is rich in natural resources that can attract tourists	4.4	5.9	7.4	31.1	47.4	3.7
4. My community is rich in cultural resources that can attract tourists	7.2	11.5	17.3	26.6	33.8	3.6
5. My community is rich in historical resources that can attract tourists	2.3	6.3	14.8	32.8	42.2	1.6
6. My community has facilities for tourists to stay overnight	12.4	8.8	8.0	26.3	44.5	0.0
7. My community has facilities for tourists to dine	7.6	11.4	18.2	24.2	39.6	0.0
8. My community has attractions for tourists to see and do	5.8	10.9	16.1	25.5	40.9	0.0
9. My community has a tourism business (es)	12.0	14.3	17.3	19.5	30.8	6.0
10. My community has a tourism organization (s)	10.9	12.4	11.7	21.2	29.2	14.6
11. Architecture and buildings are aesthetically pleasing in my community	6.8	17.4	23.5	29.5	22.0	0.8
12. My community is clean	2.9	6.6	24.8	38.7	27.0	0.0
13. People in my community are friendly	3.0	0.7	12.7	29.1	54.5	0.0
14. People in my community are helpful	1.4	1.4	14.5	32.6	50.0	0.0
15. My community is accessible	3.0	4.4	12.6	37.8	41.5	0.7

Note. Items were measured at a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Perceptions of tourism development benefits and costs

Table 2 presents percents of residents' responses on tourism development benefits and costs. Of the 22 items, 11 had the greatest frequency of responses on the category of "mildly agree" or "strongly agree". The top five most positive responses are related to statements concerning tourists being valuable (80.3%); more jobs being created for locals (78.8%); local availability of restaurants and activities being broadened with an increase in tourism (78.8%); more cultural events being provided with an increase in tourism (75.2%); and the negative impacts of tourism on the environment being controlled with long-term planning (76.7%). In addition, the majority of respondents (67.6%) supported new tourism facilities to attract more tourists to their communities. Most respondents (67.8%) also felt their communities should encourage more intensive development of tourism facilities, and most of them (64.1%) did not consider gambling as a good choice in their communities.

Table 2
Percents of Responses Concerning Perceptions of Tourism Development Benefits and Costs

Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Mildly disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mildly agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Not sure (%)
1. Long-term planning can control the negative impacts of tourism on the environment	2.2	2.9	14.6	33.6	43.1	3.6
2. Increased tourism will raise prices in general	8.4	19.8	32.1	19.8	13.0	6.9
3. Tourists will contribute to conservation efforts in the region	3.0	8.9	28.9	31.1	14.8	13.3
4. The benefits of tourism in my community will outweigh the negative consequences of tourism development	5.5	5.5	15.7	35.4	31.5	6.3
5. There is more litter in my community from tourism	18.2	30.7	26.3	10.9	10.2	3.6
6. Tourism in my community has increased my standard of living	15.9	20.5	34.1	15.9	6.1	7.6
7. Tourism will increase crime in my community	22.5	23.9	30.4	10.1	5.1	8.0
8. An increase in tourism will produce more cultural events	2.3	4.5	12.8	42.1	33.1	5.3
9. Tourism development in my community will provide more jobs for local people	4.4	1.5	8.0	39.4	39.4	7.3

10. The tourism industry will play a major economic role in my community	3.0	5.2	19.4	31.3	33.6	7.5
11. I would not support hotel/motel tax levies for tourism development	14.6	16.1	24.8	9.5	19.7	15.3
12. Tourism causes air pollution in the community	23.1	20.9	29.9	11.2	7.5	7.5
13. The quality of public services will improve due to tourism in my community	1.5	8.0	22.6	38.0	22.6	7.3
14. Many recreation and leisure facilities will become crowded by tourists	12.8	19.5	31.6	23.3	8.3	4.5
15. My community should discourage more intensive development of tourism facilities	40.1	27.7	16.8	4.4	6.6	4.4
16. Gambling as a tourism activity is a good choice for my community	53.7	10.4	17.9	4.5	11.2	2.2
17. Tourists are valuable	2.2	2.9	12.4	30.7	49.6	2.2
18. I am against new tourism facilities, which will attract more tourists to my community	51.1	16.5	18.0	4.5	6.0	3.8
19. My community will benefit from tourism development in the AFHA	3.0	2.2	19.4	26.1	29.1	20.1
20. Tourism has contributed a lot to my community's economy	7.5	6.0	25.4	27.6	24.6	9.0
21. Tourism only produces low-paying service jobs	14.6	24.8	24.8	16.1	10.9	8.8
22. Increase in tourism will broaden local availability of local restaurants and activities	2.9	3.7	11.0	47.1	32.4	2.9

Note. Items were measured at a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Importance-performance analysis

Table 3 presents paired t-tests for mean differences between performance and importance perceived by participants. As shown, performance values are consistently smaller than those for importance items with eight items exhibiting significant differences ($p < .001$). This indicates that the performances of all items were below participants' expectations. This is particularly true

for item 10, community leadership, which had the largest mean difference of -2.57 , followed by item11, financial investment, with a mean difference of -2.37, and item 4, marketing, with a mean difference of -1.57.

Table 3
Paired-Sample t-Tests for Mean Differences between Performance and Importance

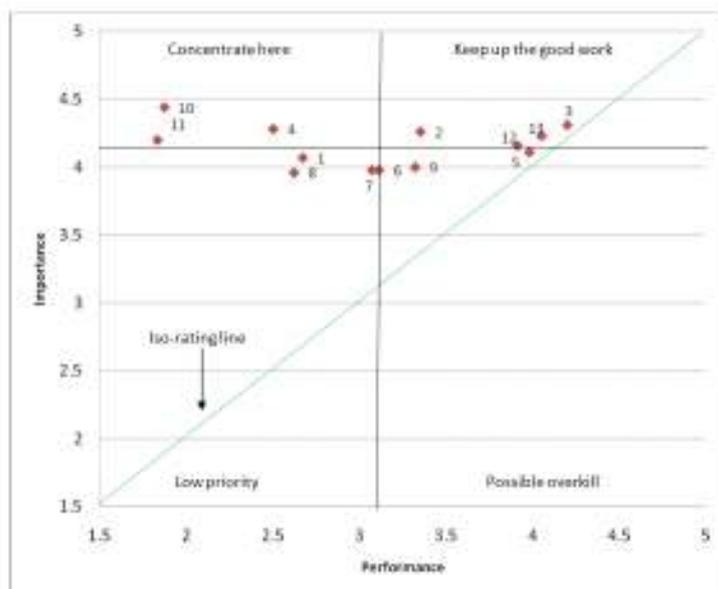
Item	Mean		Mean difference	t value
	Performance	Importance		
1. Collaboration and partnership with surrounding communities	2.67	4.07	-1.4	-10.77*
2. Strong support from local residents	3.35	4.26	-0.91	-7.21*
3. Community beautification	4.20	4.31	-0.11	-1.17
4. Marketing	2.50	4.28	-1.78	-13.87*
5. Skilled local residents	3.98	4.11	-0.13	-0.77
6. Competitive tourism products	3.11	3.98	-0.87	-6.72*
7. Collaboration and partnership with tourism industries	3.07	3.98	-0.91	-7.10*
8. Collaboration and partnership with the AFHA	2.62	3.96	-1.34	-5.51*
9. Collaboration and partnership with government agencies	3.32	4.00	-0.68	-5.37*
10. Community leadership	1.87	4.44	-2.57	-19.81*
11. Financial investment	1.83	4.20	-2.37	-17.48*
12. Tourism resources and assets	3.91	4.16	-0.25	-1.77
13. Rural atmosphere	4.05	4.23	-0.18	-1.56
Overall average	3.11	4.15	-	-

Note. Items were measured at a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

* $p < .001$.

Figure 2 presents the importance-importance grid. As indicated, items 4 (marketing), 10 (community leadership), and 11 (financial investment) are located in the top priority quadrant. Items 2 (support from local residents), 3 (community beautification), 12 (tourism resources/assets), and 13 (rural atmosphere) are distributed in the “keep up the good work” quadrant. Items 5 (skilled local residents), 6 (competitive tourism products) and 9 (collaboration and partnership with government agencies) are located in the “possible overkill” quadrant.

Figure 2 Map of the Importance-Performance Analysis



Finally, items 1 (collaboration and partnership with surrounding communities), 7 (collaboration and partnership with tourism industries), and 8 (collaboration and partnership with the AFHA) fall in the quadrant of “low priority”. Figure 2 also shows that all the scores were above the iso-rating line, suggesting that importance exceeds performance for all items.

CONCLUSION

Many cities and rural communities in the Appalachian region are dependent upon the wise use, control and development of natural and cultural resources. The study found that the most valued resources that can be utilized for tourism development are people, natural resources, and historical resources for the AFHA communities. Moreover, residents had very positive responses on tourism development with the majority focusing more on tourism’s positive impacts than its negative ones. They did not believe those issues that normally come from the increased tourism such as crowding, increased prices or pollution are a problem for their communities. Rather, they were more disposed toward tourism development for local economic development and benefits. This may be explained by the social exchange theory as discussed in the literature review, considering the AFHA is among the most economically depressed areas in the nation. Similar finding was also reported in Andressen and Murphy’s (1986) study of two Canadian communities, where local residents did not think tourism has created social or environmental problems but they preferred an increased share of tourism’s benefits.

While recognizing that the AFHA communities have plentiful of resources/assets to attract tourists, the importance-performance analysis indicates top priorities should be placed on the marketing promotion, financial investment, and community leadership. With this said, other aspects of tourism development such as collaboration and partnership with the AFHA, tourism industries, and surrounding communities should also be improved as one respondent commented

“regional collaboration in promoting tourism is essential”.

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