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# **Crisis and Revitalization of Rural Tourism in the Appalachian Region in Ohio In the Midst of the Pandemic: The Perspective of Key Stakeholders**

## **Introduction**

Rural tourism development (RTD) has become a priority to achieve economic growth (Aref & Gill, 2009) and its increasing importance is due to the possibility of achieving economic growth, increase employment, provide income and diversification to rural communities with less barriers than increasing industrial development (Dimitrovski et al., 2012; USDA, 2008). Moreover, there are new tendencies that support RTD such as the reduced environmental negative impact, the changes in tourists' profiles, the growing support of sustainable practices and tourists' need to establish a connection between rural areas and their cultural, historic, ethnic and geographical roots (Dimitrovski et al., 2012; Özçatalbaş et al., 2010).

Since rural areas in the United States have a lot to offer in terms of tourism (USDA, n.d.), rural tourism could become one of the most important means to achieve economic growth and improve the current situation of rural Appalachia. Attributes like the magnificent Appalachian landscape, rich history, culture and welcoming people, provide a high potential for RTD (Athens County Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2020).

Furthermore, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2020), RTD can be used to start economic recovery in rural areas affected by COVID-19; with recent studies suggesting that the response to COVID-19 has had a positive impact on tourism (Vaishar & Štastná, 2020). These possible beneficial implications are due to the increased demand of tourists who want to visit a low-risk destination with scarcely populated areas (Silva, 2021). Moreover, since the pandemic continues to limit tourism in terms of revenue, demand and increasing operation costs (Silva, 2021), RTD is seen as a light of hope since it offers safety and allows people to follow the guidance of social distancing and the use of open spaces (Ives, 2020; Anderson, 2020).

Nonetheless, even though rural tourism is increasing in popularity, and it is seen as an opportunity, there has been limited research about its status in the United States and more specifically in the Appalachian region of Ohio. For that reason, this paper will address the current state of RTD by gathering experiences of business owners and policy makers involved in RTD in the Appalachian region of Ohio. This study aims to understand the core challenges and opportunities business owners and policy makers face, and the strategies, policies, regulations, and marketing activities have been proposed to develop rural tourism to survive and/or thrive during and after the COVID-19.

## **Literature Review**

### **The pandemic influence in rural tourism**

Unlike other forms of tourism, rural tourism experienced a lower impact and even increased in some areas. Zhu and Deng (2020) mention that rural tourism shows advantages that allow faster recovery compared to other forms of tourism, including low travel cost, short time consumption and low flow density, possibly fulfilling the psychological requirements of people to enjoy natural landscapes and feel safety while travelling. In addition, Mugauina et al. (2020) mentions that before the pandemic, rural tourism played a key role in removing stress often experienced by urban residents, which increased during the pandemic, where people have been required to isolate in big cities, with no opportunity to go for a walk or other outdoor activities. Vaishar and Šťastná (2021) concluded that accommodation businesses presented lower losses and that occupancy rates even increased during 2020.

On the other hand, a negative implication of COVID19 of concern to tourism, has been an increase in unemployment; many companies were forced to let employees go on furlough or fired them (Baum & Nguyen, 2020). Furthermore, RT business have access to some kind of support from federal or local governments, but as the recession started the access for financial aid took a long period of time, making it difficult for businesses to stay afloat and survive the hardest months for the industry (Vaishar & Šťastná, 2021).

Likewise, rural tourism businesses found it necessary to modify their products and adopt new technologic strategies such as digitalization and social media management to be able to survive and attract customers (Mugauina et al. 2020). This research seeks to analyze these consequences of the pandemic and determinate the positive or negative long-term impact that COVID19 has in rural tourism. As mentioned previously, COVID-19 might have both positive and negative implications to rural tourism, it is also an opportunity to rethink exactly what tourism will look like in the future and emphasize the importance of developing sustainable tourism practices. (Brouder 2020; Zenker & Kock 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020).

### **Methodology**

The present research followed a qualitative methodology using an interpretivist paradigm, stakeholders were asked to provide their perspectives and realities. Thus, accessing the perspectives of several stakeholders, allowed us to understand the reality that they face in RTD. At the same time this approach permits a contextualization, and interpretation of the current situation of RTD in order to understand it better and identify cultural patterns of thought and actions for the group that contributes to RTD (Glesne, 2011).

The method utilized in the study was open-ended semi-structured interviews. In the present study, the researcher initially contacted several participants using information provided by Athens Visitors Bureau Tour Guide. Subsequently, the study used a purposeful snowball sample to gather the expertise and experiences of the stakeholders involved in RTD in Appalachian Ohio, who have the experience needed to answer the research questions and were willing to participate because they were referred by a peer. The final interviews were performed in Zoom and Microsoft Teams due to social distancing and availability of the participants.

Data analysis started with data collection and involved organization of all the information the researcher collected, to create an explanation and make sense of the studied problem. Afterwards codes were developed and allowed the researcher to create a framework of relational

categories of data (Glesne, 2011). This study used a thematic analysis to find themes or patterns in the responses provided during the interviews.

In order to elaborate the interview questions and arrange the data obtained, the present study used the CAR (Challenge, Action, Result) technique, where the participant first elaborated on the context of the problems they faced, mentioning the role they have, the business situation and what made the challenge important. Then they explained how they overcame the challenges and finally the results obtained from the actions.

## **Results**

### **Demographics**

The selected participants were people working in the tourism industry. This group consist of males, females with an age range between 26 and over 50 years old, and all of them identify as white. The participants have vast experience in their roles, with an average of 35 years of experience between all of them. Their main responsibilities in their current roles include are promoting tourism and events, analyzing demand and customer or visitor profiles, managing establishments and staff, budgeting and funding, planning, strategy development, building relationships and carrying political charged conversations, purchasing from suppliers, and managing websites, social media and other marketing strategies among other functions.

### **Challenges during COVID -19 outbreak**

A common challenge policy makers mentioned is that COVID-19 made the disparity of investment between rural and urban areas more visible. A historical challenge is that many people do not know about the destinations and places they can visit in rural areas. Pandemic specific challenges were due to stay-at-home and the closure of businesses orders. This generated lack of visitors, and loss of income not only for the tourism related businesses but also for other types of jobs that are indirectly related such as cleaning services or maintenance.

Moreover, people were afraid to go out and did not feel comfortable visiting new places and the constant update of guidelines created an environment of uncertainty for visitors and businesses. In addition, the lack of visitors, customers and revenue made it necessary that business and policymakers have a representative cut on their budgets and required a new plan for the allocation of funds and activities while still investing of maintenance and some of their operations.

Financial challenges were also related to suppliers. Businesses and people who provide operation materials, such as cleaning products, office supplies and food among others, increased their prices, were shut down or faced problems with their channels of distribution occasioning delays. For businesses and tourism promoters, operation costs increased during the pandemic, especially in sanitizing and cleaning products. The budget for these products increased during the pandemic since the items used were in higher demand, which led to higher prices and at the same time the frequency with they were used was higher as well.

### **Strategies**

Participants mentioned that they had to be creative in order to keep their businesses going and generate as much revenue as possible. In order to keep working business owners and managers were eager to follow the guidelines proposed by the local government, such as the use of masks, social distancing and analyze their facilities capacity and operation times. This compliancy also created a sense of safety for customers. In terms of revenue, businesses decided to capture different markets and new products in order to attract more customers. For instance, hotels offered

accommodations for construction workers who were not part of their initial target market and restaurants started to offer customers carryout and delivery options, and once that dine-in was allowed, they managed having reservation only.

Digitalization was also one of the main strategies that business owners, managers and policymakers used during the pandemic. For restaurants, participants mentioned that they implemented software to facilitate delivery and hotels transformed their check-in, check-out and requests procedures to a more technologic friendly one. Finally, another strategy used was providing discounted rates. This strategy was mostly used by hotels to encourage a higher number of stay days.

Businesses and organizations needed to create strategies that guarantee raw materials for their services and products and guarantee the safety of their staff and customers. One of the strategies for businesses was to change their menus to include seasonal products. Another strategy was to negotiate with suppliers on prices of the main ingredients that they use and in the also negotiate the price of utilities based on the frequency that services are provided.

Businesses managers and owners stated that keeping communication with their suppliers was important to guarantee receiving products. Moreover, most businesses decided to reduce the amount of products that they did not require and changed or switched their suppliers, in order to achieve options that were more cost effective and that were locally owned.

Interview participants mentioned that they provided protection equipment for their employees such as facemasks and hand sanitizer. At the same time, businesses had constant communication in order to discuss their mental health. Furthermore, they provided information to get tested and encourage employees to stay at home if they had symptoms or were in contact with people who had been tested positive for COVID-19, nonetheless, paid sick days was an unusual practice.

Another strategy was to avoid physical interaction with customers as much as possible, and make sure that they were complying with the health policies that were taking place. Furthermore, they implemented work in shifts and remote work. Unfortunately, as many of the establishments needed to shut down and were not operating, another strategy was to furlough people, and in more extreme cases laying off employees.

More recently, after most restrictions were lifted, people who were in furlough were able to come back to their previous positions. In addition, participants mentioned that they are not requiring staff to be vaccinated. Nonetheless, they are highly encouraging their employees to receive the vaccine, setting an example with themselves and in some cases managing vaccination in their workplaces.

Participants shared the sanitization procedures they have implemented or modified, posted resources from the health department in their social media and websites. Another strategy that hotels and CVBs stated was their change of focus to emphasize the opportunities to perform outdoor recreation activities. Participants said that visitors are more interested in this kind of activities because they allow them to follow the guidelines established, visit different places and enjoy being outside. For the CVB, this change of focus has encouraged them to change their budgets to allocate more funds to this kind of activities.

On the other hand, another strategy that has been proven successful, even before the pandemic, has been the use of social media and other online presence. The most common platforms

have been Instagram and Facebook, where people who managed them to post their products, updates on operation times and requirements for customers to see. Additionally, CVBs mentioned they still rely on their websites newspapers, magazines and radio to promote their cities.

One of the strategies was to contact their partners or reach out to new organizations that could provide them with facemasks, hand sanitizer and other protection items. Moreover, participants mentioned they applied for funding through several options, the most common being the payroll protection program or PPP FOR funds to pay salaries. The other source that people heavily relied on was their personal stimulus checks. This financial aid provided by the federal government was useful especially for small business owners who did not have a high number of employees and could not apply to the PPP. In this case, the funds allow them to pay for their operation costs and supplies.

## **Opportunities**

The outbreak of the virus has also presented opportunities for both the short and long term. These opportunities can be seen in different areas and will play an important role in the development of rural tourism in the future. The immediate opportunity that was seen in rural tourism was the increase in the demand for outdoor activities. The current situation has allowed people to rethink their quality of life and think more about the recreation options that they have around them. Participants stated that outdoor activities allow people to enjoy tourism and respect the guidelines. Furthermore, visitors are more interested in places that offer these kinds of activities and staycations. At the same time, this has shed light on what businesses can do to focus more an outdoor recreation.

COVID- 19 has also highlighted challenges in rural tourism that required immediate action even before the pandemic; these challenges include being understaffed and the lack of funding an innovation in the industry and rural areas in general. In addition, COVID-19 has highlighted the need of partnerships and alliances between the private and public sectors to achieve a successful development of rural tourism.

For long-term opportunities, participants mentioned that they plan to keep some of their strategies indefinitely. One example of this is the use of contactless systems and the diversification of their products, in many cases business owners plan to keep offering the services that they did not have before the pandemic such as carryout and delivery for restaurants or hotels. Additionally, COVID-19 has raised awareness of the importance of mental health and the positive implications that performing outdoor activities has on people. At the same time, this would set the ground for leaders to support more rural tourism initiatives and local businesses.

Moreover, tourism businesses and organizations have the opportunity to perform more research about the new options for visitors. On the other hand, tourists are more open to select rural destinations for their vacations, which participants expect becomes a long-term tendency. In addition, there has been a tendency of people being more interested in supporting local businesses, which are the core of rural tourism. Another opportunity, for service providers is the improvement of their cleaning practices. Finally, there is the possibility to have more flexibility in terms of working from home. This opportunity also has an impact in the way that people spend time at work, with family and on their free time.

## Conclusion and Discussion

We could conclude that outdoor activities have been the option for people who want to travel during the pandemic and allowed them to support tourism and comply with the necessary guidelines that were created to reduce the spread of the virus. The rural areas in Ohio have the potential to promote outdoor activities that are related with the development of rural tourism. Those outdoor activities are already being marketed by CVBs and by hotels, but participants mentioned that they require more support from local and federal governments.

Moreover, as previous studies have suggested, rural tourism is a viable option for communities and local businesses to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and nowadays there is a higher demand of rural tourism activities. Participants are expectant that this tendency continues long term, similarly to the tendency of people supporting local business.

The industry is facing new challenges constantly, even after most of the measures have been lifted. One example is the lack of people interested in working in a hotel or a restaurant. Mainly, due to the more appealing benefits of unemployment and remote positions. The data collected suggests that people in leader positions are aware of the importance of keeping and protecting their employees and visitors, and even though COVID-19 has influenced the tourism industry greatly, it can also be seen as a source of opportunities. Particularly, since it highlights the problems that need to be addressed and it showcased the importance of innovation and digitalization.

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