

Report from a Tourism-Based Development Project in Elkhorn City, Kentucky

A Community-University Collaboration

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Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being here at this early morning hour. My name is Shaunna Scott and I am an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Kentucky. (Also the editor of the Journal of Appalachian Studies.) I am joined here today by two students from my Appalachian Studies and Environmental Sociology class: Rodney Thacker.

The purpose of our panel today is to share with you an ongoing collaborative research and service project, which involves the Elkhorn City Heritage Council and faculty and students from Eastern Kentucky University and the University of Kentucky.

Among the topics that we will cover in this presentation are:

1. An overview of the project, its participants, and purpose;
2. Key components of the post-coal economic development plan that we are all working to support and implement;
3. Some facts about Elkhorn City, and the opportunities and obstacles it faces as it moves forward with this plan; and
4. A report on the research that ECU and UK students have completed in support of the community's plan implementation.
5. A discussion of how the impacts of this project, so far...
 - On the community
 - On the students

We intend to leave plenty of time during our panel for questions and discussion about our project as well as the topic of post-coal economic planning and diversification generally.

We will start with some background and basic information about when, how and why this planning process was initiated and then how ECU and UK became involved in supporting the Elkhorn City community.

EKU-UK-Elkhorn City

Opportunities
& Obstacles

Pros and Cons

Benefits

Achievements & Plans

Collaboration

Basic Info

Today, we will be discussing a small Eastern Kentucky town's plan to diversify their local economy and the role of Eastern Kentucky University and University of Kentucky students and faculty in supporting this community as it seeks an economic future that is more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

Our presentation will cover:

Basic information about Elkhorn City and the Russell Fork adventure and ecotourism plan;

Description of the collaborative relationship between town and the universities

Report on what UK and ECU have done and plan to do to support the community

Outline of the pros and cons of tourism as an economic development strategy, generally

Discussion of the specific opportunities and possible obstacles to implementing the plan in Elkhorn City

Benefits of our collaboration, thus far:

for the community

for the students

Elkhorn City

- POPULATION 982



Source: 2010 US Census, <http://censusviewer.com/city/KY/Elkhorn%20City>

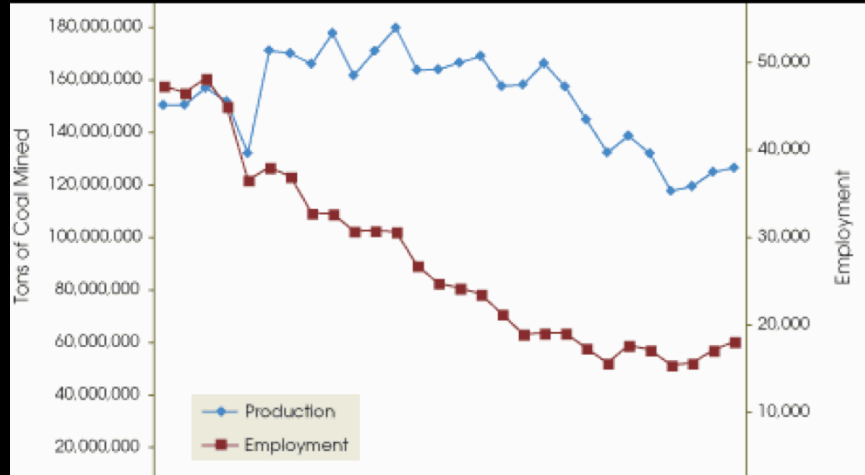
Elkhorn City is a small town located in Pike County, Kentucky, near the Virginia border. It's unemployment rate is about 25 percent and its median household income is \$27,336 per year. The leading employment sector in Elkhorn City is construction (associated with new road construction, mining and building/housing).



Elkhorn City: Transport Hub for Coal Export

Located in the coalfields of Central Appalachia, Elkhorn City was settled in 1810 and incorporated in 1912. Since the early 20th century, Elkhorn City has served as a Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad transportation hub for the export of coal mined from the surrounding area.

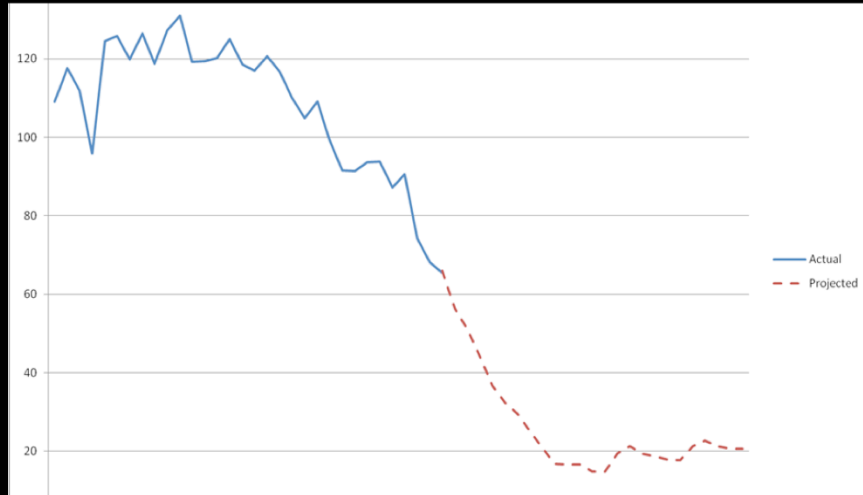
KY Coal Employment (1979-2006)



Source: Mountain Association for Community & Economic Development at <http://www.maced.org/coal/mining-employ.htm>

While coal has formed the basis of the economy in this area throughout the 20th century, it is clear that it will do not so for much longer. Since 1980, as this graph demonstrates, Kentucky's coal employment has been declining.

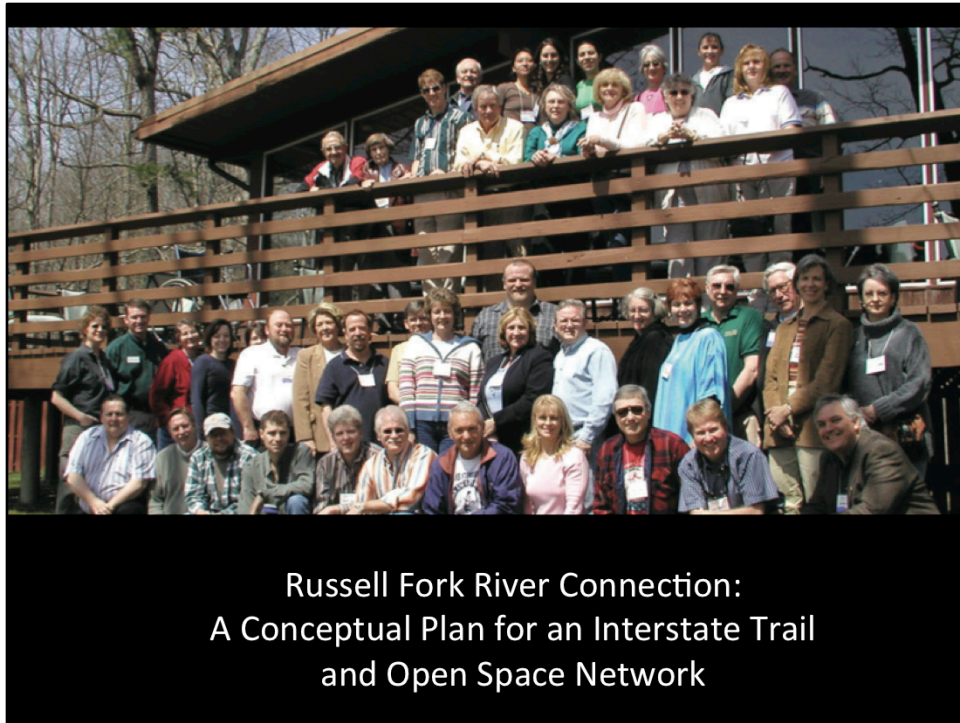
E KY Coal Production (1900 – 2035)



Source: Kentuckians for the Commonwealth at <http://www.kftc.org/campaigns/appalachian-transition/coal-production-and-employment-trends>

Likewise, eastern Kentucky's coal production has been declining as well and is projected to do so for the foreseeable future.

The reasons for these declines in coal production and coal employment include: technologies, such as MTR which are much less labor intensive than underground mining, the exhaustion of coal reserves (or at least of those easily mined by current technology), competition from natural gas, and a reluctance to build new coal-fired plants due to coal's negative impact on human health, water and air quality, and global climate change.



Russell Fork River Connection:
A Conceptual Plan for an Interstate Trail
and Open Space Network

It is in this context that residents of the Russell Fork area near the border of Kentucky and Virginia meet for a weekend planning workshop in 2005 to envision ways to diversify the area's economy, and prepare for a future that is much less dependent upon coal mining. They developed a plan for a future economy based increasingly on the scenic beauty of the area, its many trails, and world-class white water rapids of the Russell Fork.

In 2012, the Elkhorn City Heritage Council, representing one of the communities included in this plan and planning process, approached Eastern Kentucky University's former Appalachian Center for assistance as they seek to implement this plan. Through my colleagues at ECU, I became involved in the project and soon thereafter involved my students.

River Park



Elements of the Elkhorn City part of the plan include:

The development of a river park for inner-tubing and a beach for wading, swimming and picnicking in Elkhorn City

Trails



Construction of riverside trails
Improvement of existing trails and trail signage
Extension of local trails to Pine Mountain Trail
Forest Restoration

Camping



Improving camping facilities, including restoration of abandoned creek-side shotgun houses for lodging

Nature Center



The construction of a Nature Center to hold educational programs for children and to provide tourists information about the area.

Local Food



And the development of a community garden and farmers' market, to provide a more robust local food system.

More water releases



Persuading the Army Corps of Engineers to do additional water releases (besides Oct and April) to extend the white water kayaking / rafting season

Eastern Kentucky University & University of Kentucky

Meet With Local Leaders



Identify Needs &
Collaboration Opportunities

Elkhorn City Heritage Council has been working since 2005 to implement the plan, but found it slow going. Members of the Council approached ECU's Appalachian Center for support, and were connected with my colleague Stephanie McSpirit in Sociology. From there, McSpirit assembled an interdisciplinary team of faculty and students, including myself and Michael Bradley and Ryan Sharp, both faculty in Parks and Recreation at ECU.

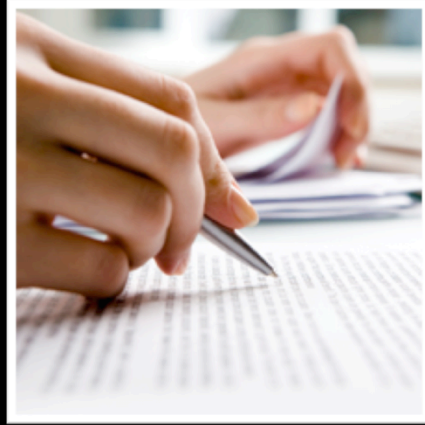
We organized a field trip to the Elkhorn City for us to tour the local area, meet with local leaders, and discuss their needs so that we could identify ways that we could partner to meet those needs and contribute to the implementation of their ecotourism plan.

Goals

- Small business development
- Increase local incomes
- Encourage eco-tourism
- Obtain grants
- Encourage community engagement
- Enhance sustainability



Grant Writing Workshop



Dr. Stephanie McSpirit facilitated a grant writing workshop with local residents to aid in their pursuit of grants for community projects.



Next, Shane Barton and I (both from UK) and Mark Beavin, a student from ECU, conducted interviews with community leaders and activists. And all of the ECU and UK faculty participants and some of the Elkhorn City Heritage Council met with the Kentucky Tourism agency about the possibility of gaining Trail Town certification for Elkhorn City . The area meets the criteria for Trail Town certification, including:



Proximity to a state or national park: Breaks Interstate Park
 Access to trails, including water, hiking, and/or equine
 Integration of cultural and agricultural elements into the plan
 Intent to be a part of the Cross Kentucky Trail System

Once a community receives the Trail Town certification, Communities will also be highlighted on maps, websites, visitor's guides and other state promotional material.

the Tourism, Arts and Heritage Cabinet, the Department of Travel and Tourism and Office of Adventure Tourism will help promote and market these communities and the services being offered.

Visitor Survey



As part of the Trail Town certification process, ECU students surveyed visitors the area in October 2013 to gather information about trail usage and tourist preferences and needs for local facilities and development.

233 surveys collected over 2 weekends in Oct with 20+ students

People from 13 states with 78% being repeat visitors

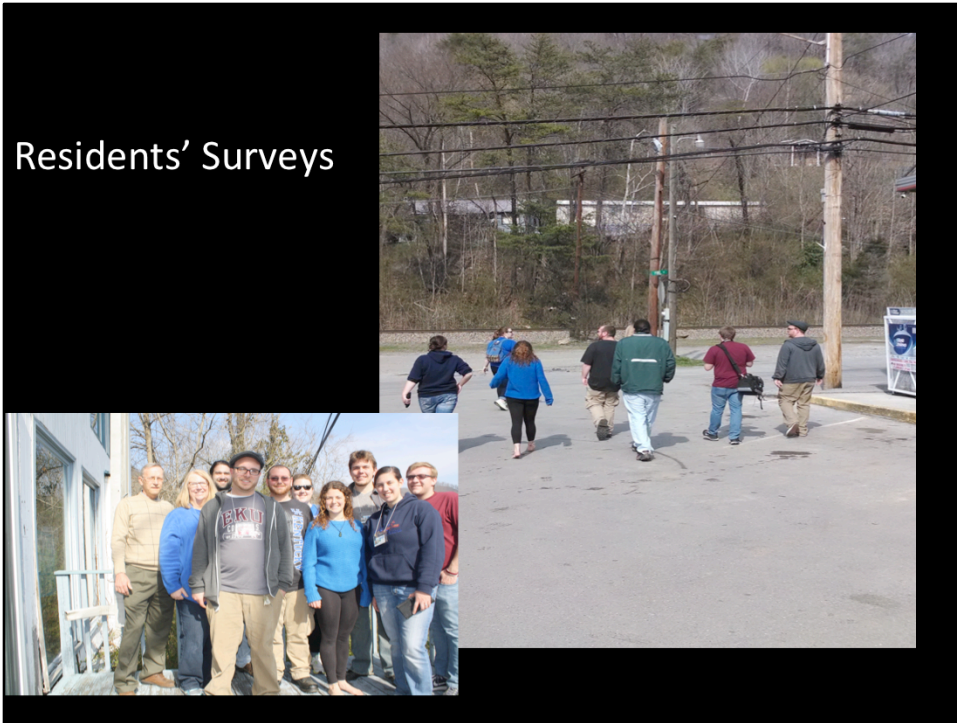
64% male with 84% having some college or higher

60% camped and 44% said they know about the area by way of a friend recommendation

Over 50% said they came to the area to escape crowds (18% said they felt moderately crowded)

84% were there for outdoor rec related activities...mostly boating centric

Residents' Surveys



In March 2014, students from UK and ECU surveyed local residents concerning their knowledge of the ecotourism plan, their view of local assets and obstacles to economic development, and their visions of the economic future of the area. The survey was developed in collaboration with Elkhorn City Heritage Council members and both universities, and financial and administrative support for the survey was provided by the UK Appalachian Center.

Eight students from UK and 2 from ECU went to Elkhorn City on last weekend (Fri, Mar 21 – Sun, Mar 23) to administer the survey to local residents to approximately 525 residences in Elkhorn City. Surveys were delivered on Saturday and completed surveys were collected on Sunday.

We collected just over 90 surveys in those two days. We left stamped, addressed envelopes for those who had not completed the survey by pick-up time (or had not answered their door on Sunday) in the hopes of collecting more in the coming days.

Survey data will be entered in a data base, coded, cleaned and analyzed by students and faculty during Summer 2014. We will share the results from the residents' survey and from the earlier tourist survey with the Elkhorn City Heritage Council and with the Breaks Interstate Park Advisory Committee. The park's advisory committee will be combining our survey reports with input from public meetings with local residents as part of their master planning process this year.

We intend to issue reports from both surveys by June 2014. These surveys will be used by the Elkhorn City Heritage Council and the Breaks Interstate Park, as part of their master planning process.

Different Visions of Tourism



Interviews of leaders show that there is strong support for tourism development, though there are some variations in the vision that they hold.

Some people want to see the town grow in a way similar to the San Antonio Riverwalk, pictured on the left. (building store fronts, restaurants, bars, etc.) This group also envisioned an ATV trails and an RV park which could double as an area for festivals and a “home base” for kayakers.

The other main group of people want to focus on lower impact tourism usages, such as kayaking, biking and hiking, and to focus more systematically on protecting natural resources.

Tourism

Pros:

- Improves employment rates.
- Small business development.
- Economic boosts.
- Cultural sharing with tourists.
- Outdoor activities for better health.

Cons:

- Increase of property values & taxes.
- Increased traffic.
- Loss of privacy.
- Negative environmental impacts.
- Seasonal employment.
- Low paying jobs.
- Unskilled jobs.

Russell Fork



Elkhorn City has many assets and opportunities for eco-tourism development, located as it is at the junction of major hiking and cycling trails, as well as near the the Russell Fork River.

The Russell Fork River is a free-flowing stream with 16 miles of great whitewater between Haysi, VA and Elkhorn City, KY.

The gorge section is usually runnable 9-10 months of the year.

It is rated as one of the top rafting rivers in the country with up to Class V rapids created by drops in elevation of up to 350 ft. forming falls, rapids, pools and twists, every weekend in October.

It has great trout fishing year round.

Breaks Interstate Park



The park is the “Grand Canyon of the South,” with 4,600 acre park on the KY/VA border .

Hiking trails, scenic overlooks, lodge, cottages, biking and camping are all part of the adventure that awaits visitors.

More than 25 miles of hiking trails lace the park, varying from easy to difficult.

The Mountain Bike Trail offers breathtaking scenery. The trail is a stack loop trail system offering up to nearly 12 miles of riding, from moderate to difficult.

For lodging, there is always the Gateway Motel nearer to Elkhorn City (edge of town).

Artists Collaborative Theater, INC.



- ACT was awarded Coal Severance Tax funds to build a \$400,000.00 black box theatre.
- In 2008, the new facility opened to feature year round, balanced season of six productions per year, sixteen performances per production, free educational program serving over fifty children per semester, along with educational outreach.
- Artists Collaborative Theatre is the most awarded community theatre in Kentucky, winning state, regional, and national awards.

Railroad Museum



The Elkhorn City Railroad museum was started in the early 1990's.
All of the artifacts have been donated.
It charges no admission, but does accept donations.
(There is a need for an archivist to organize and caption the collection. There is no interpretation in the museum right now. It is also staffed solely by volunteers so it does not keep regular hours.)

Raging Rapid Art Gallery



A local young man has opened an art gallery which displays and sells his work and that of other local artists.

Dream Cakes Bakery



- It is owned by a local family. Phyllis Johnson and his wife own the shop.
- It is located and connected to the house next door where they have a bed and breakfast.
- You can buy local treats from cookies and cupcakes to ordering custom cakes for weddings and other special events.

Antique Store



Other new businesses include:

An antique shop

A new B & B



Local Festivals

Since 1976, the Apple Blossom Festival in Elkhorn City has celebrated the glory of springtime in the mountains. The town also has many other festivals and river kayaking events, including the New Moon Festival, an annual Bushwacking weekend (Civil War re-enactment), and cycling and kayaking races and workshops.

Alcohol sales



On the other hand, Elkhorn City also has some barriers to tourism development, including the fact that it bans the sale and service of alcohol. In other words, Elkhorn City is a dry town

It is located in Pike Co, which is a Moist county = 1 city (in this case Pikeville) in the county sells or serve alcohol. It is about 30 minutes from Elkhorn City.

Alcohol is also sold just over the border in VA (closest access to alcohol)

Kayakers and other tourists import beer and other alcoholic beverages

Elkhorn City does not profit from the sales or tax base generated by alcohol sales (but must cope with the clean-up)

Beautification & Restoration

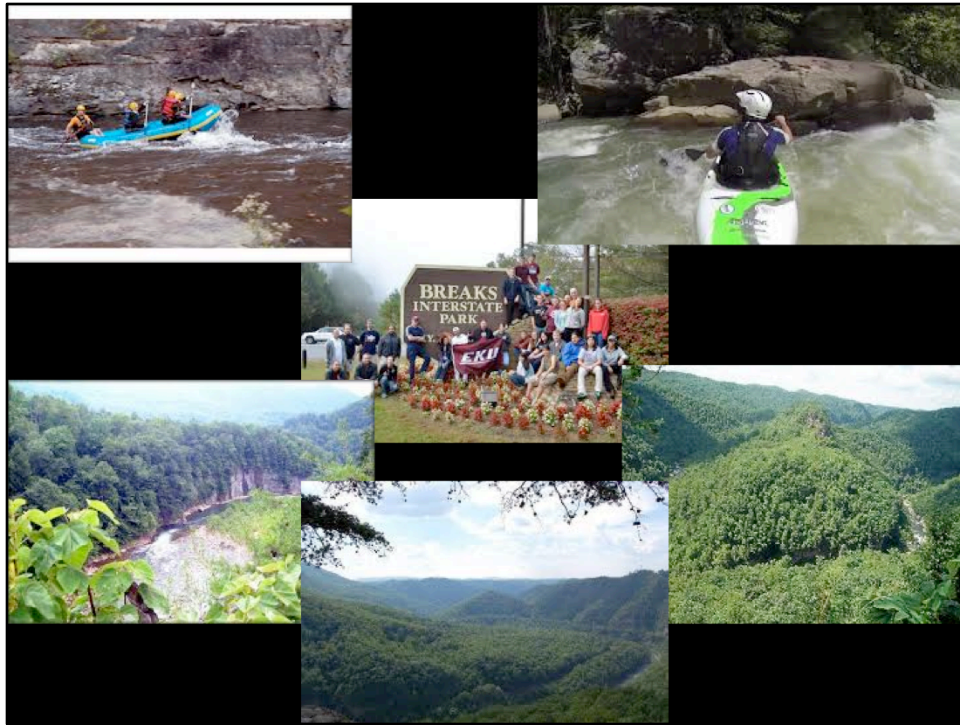


There is also a need for River clean up,
Main street beautification (abandoned buildings, closed storefronts),
including the recent closure of the Rusty Fork restaurant in the town center and a
bar & grill on the edge of town
There are some abandoned boarded up houses in town as well.

Signage



Need for improvement in signage and advertising



TO REVIEW:

Population around 1,000 residents.

Breaks Interstate Park and Russell Fork river holds white water rafting, hiking, cycling.
4 restaurants, 8 churches within 1 mile.

Many local festivals

Coal dependent economy

Dollar General Store, local hardware store, and an art galley (shops)

Local movie theater

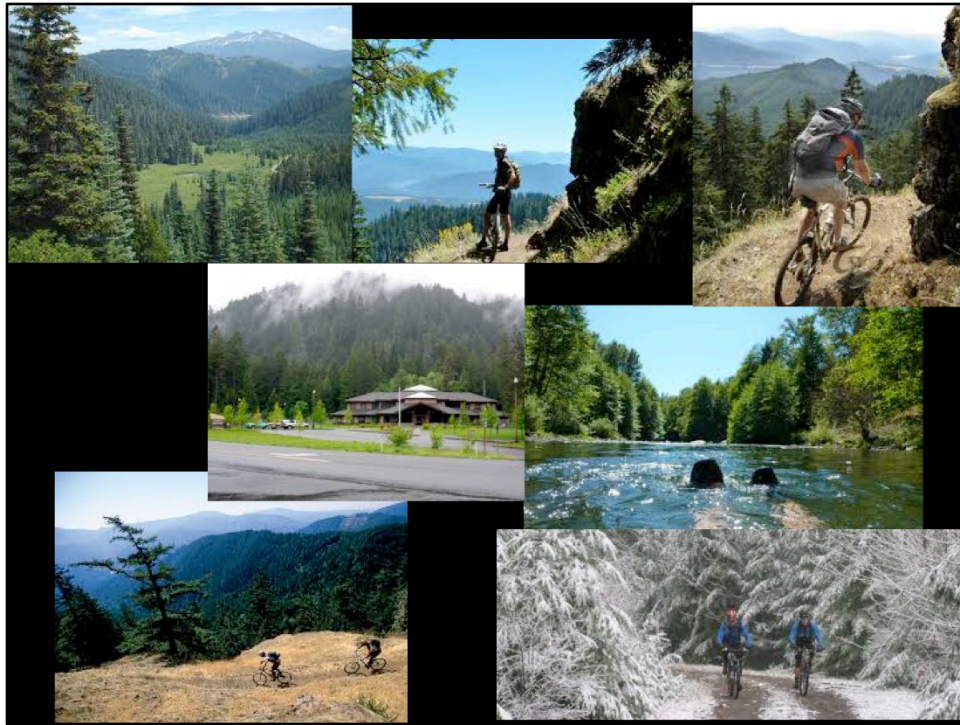


Damascus, VA, pop 832

Post-logging and iron-mining transition

Compared Elkhorn City's unemployment rate of 25%, Damascus has an unemployment rate of 12.2% (2010)

Damascus, Virginia provides an example of how this strategy could work.



Another encouraging example is Oakridge, Oregon

Population: 3,200

Median household income: \$39,427 (compared to \$27,336 in Elkhorn City).

Unemployment rate: 8.4 percent (compared to 25% in Elkhorn City)

By the 1990s, the decline of the Northwest logging industry had left Oakridge, OR, in dire economic straits.

Generating Public Interest



We have made progress on the Trail Town Certification (by applying and collecting tourist data)...

We have inspired Lexington Herald-Leader and UKNOW coverage which has generated several emails from UK alums, kayakers, etc. about the project (and offers to help).

We have collected residents' surveys and plan to write reports by June 2014, which will be shared with the Elkhorn City Heritage Council and with the Breaks Interstate Park Advisory Board to use in their master planning process.

Several local people and environmental and land trust activists have been asked to be put on the email list for research updates.

WMMT (Appalshop) in Whitesburg, KY, audio-recorded this presentation at the 2014 Appalachian Studies Association Conference.

Student Outcomes



Student Outcomes:

Helped me better understand people of different ages abilities cultures or economic backgrounds – 86% agreed (n=29)

Helped me define my personal strengths and weaknesses – 86% agreed (n=29)

Helped me reconsider some of my former attitudes about social problems - 73% agreed (n=29)

UK student surveys (pre- and post-) forthcoming at end of spring semester

[Students at ASA can share and reflect on this]

Take-Away

- Transitional towns
- University-Community collaboration
- Student involvement & experience



This project could be a model for University-community collaboration and partnership.

Gain access to public funds.

Utilize present resources and attractions.

The town's plan and planning process could provide inspiration for other towns considering their post-coal economic transition.

This can make a difference for students' education and for communities we serve.

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