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THE MICHIGAN TRAVEL, TOURISM AND RECREATION RESOURCE CENTER:  
PERSPECTIVES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The Michigan Travel, Tourism and Recreation Resource Center (TTRRC) was established at Michigan State University (MSU) in 1985. From a subunit within the Department of Park and Recreation Resources (PRR) it has grown to be an autonomous unit with extensive ties across campus as well as to both the public and private sectors of this Michigan growth industry.

TTRRC's quick success in providing a wide range of research and technical assistance services is due to the sound base of support upon which to build provided by PRR faculty and long term recurring budget from the university. Relationships both on and off campus have been crucial in our success to date and receive on-going attention due to their importance to our mission and future.

The future for centers such as ours appears bright given projected growth of the industry they were designed to support. The probability of success will grow with the: 1) availability of adequate recurring base budget support; 2) integration of the centers both on and off campus, 3) maintenance of an on-going effective communications program, and 4) recruiting of quality and adaptable personnel.

HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Tourism in Michigan is big business. It follows manufacturing and

vies with agriculture as the second most economically significant industry in the state, employing 316,000 people and generating more than \$15 billion per year in spending.

Michigan State University (MSU) has been involved in the support of this industry since 1925 when the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Michigan Agricultural College published a bulletin called Tourist Camps, which provided guidance in planning a public or private campground to meet demand due to "the rapid rise in popularity of touring and camping"(1) In 1969, the department of Park and Recreation Resources started a Recreation and Research Planning unit to provide site analysis for potential tourist businesses.

When Michigan experienced a serious economic downturn in the late seventies and early eighties, tourism reached greater importance as one of the state's mainstay industries. In 1981, the department of Park and Recreation Resources (PRR) co-sponsored a symposium called Michigan Tourism: How Can Research Help? which brought together many of the agencies, organizations and individuals that make up this diverse industry. It is largely due to this symposium that the Michigan Travel, Tourism and Recreation Resource Center (TTRRC) received its original funding.

Among the five major recommendations that arose from the symposium are three that are now directly addressed by TTRRC:

1. Expand educational and technical assistance programs for the tourism industry;
2. Develop and maintain a Michigan tourism data/information bank;
3. Develop a comprehensive funding program to support tourism research, planning and educational/technical assistance.

Although the symposium was a landmark effort in its attempt to bring together many of the prime actors in Michigan's tourism industry, it took special effort on the part of the Michigan legislature to make the jump from recommendations to reality. That support came from Senator Connie Binsfeld (R-Maple City) who organized a meeting with members of the appropriations committee and staff from MSU at which MSU presented its case to be the home of Michigan's tourism data/information bank, provider of educational/technical assistance, and lead institution for tourism research in the state. At this meeting, support for this proposal came from the Agricultural Experiment Station, Cooperative Extension Service and state departments of Commerce, Natural Resources, and Transportation. In its appropriation to MSU in 1984-85, the legislature approved a budget line item of \$100,000 each to the Agricultural Experiment Station (AES) and Cooperative Extension Service (CES) to support tourism research and educational programs.

In the fall of 1984, AES and CES appropriated \$25,000 each to develop a plan for TTRRC and to initiate tourism research and extension programs. The balance of the total appropriation was offered as one to three year grants in support of tourism programs. This \$150,000 was divided among faculty in Park and Recreation Resource, Resource

Development, Forestry, and Human Ecology.

TTRRC was initially established in July, 1985, as a sub-unit of the department of Park and Recreation Resources. With a start-up budget of \$50,000 and a 7' x 12' modular cubicle assigned by the department, a national search was initiated for a data systems specialist to coordinate the proposed data bank. The original staffing proposal called for hiring a part time clerical worker and the data systems specialist in the first year, and to fill other personnel needs by supporting masters and Ph.D. students. Because TTRRC was a new effort that needed exposure in a hurry, it was soon realized that a communications specialist who could also do some typing and filing would be more valuable than an expert typist who did not possess news writing and graphic skills. The first TTRRC employee was Susan DeRosa, who had education and experience in journalism, telecommunication, community development, and word-processing. In February 1985, TTRRC hired Thord Sundstrom, a Swedish citizen who was on a Fulbright study program at the University of Wyoming. Sundstrom's computer expertise ran more to mainframe computing than the personal computers that are more accessible for tourism businesses, but he was eager to begin the task of organizing a tourism data bank.

The TTRRC proposal was officially accepted on July 1, 1985, with the initial mission to provide expanded information support for the travel, tourism and recreation industry. Center staff were encouraged to seek outside grant support from state agencies, tourism organizations and private businesses to augment the base budget.

The first major grant pursued by TTRRC led to the publication of Travel and Tourism in Michigan: A Statistical Profile, the first of its scope in the nation. Daniel M. Spotts, assistant professor in Park and Recreation Resources, edited the 319 page volume which was funded by the Michigan Department of Commerce Travel Bureau. Over 2000 copies of the book are in circulation in Michigan, around the US and Canada, and in Japan and Taiwan. This volume formed the cornerstone of the Michigan travel monitoring system, also edited by Spotts, which involves review of selected tourism industry growth indicators in monthly, seasonal and annual reports.

Production of the statistical profile kept TTRRC's single microcomputer in constant use by six part-time clerical assistants. Sundstrom, DeRosa, another part time research associate, microcomputer and printer stressed the 7' x 12' cubicle to its upper limits. The dean of the college of agriculture and natural resources acquired funds from the university provost to remodel and furnish former laboratory space into a suite of faculty offices, data preparation room, communications workroom and reading room. Construction of the area was completed in September 1986, and furnishings and faculty moved in on May 1, 1987.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

With its small first year operating budget, lack of equipment, and need for support staff, TTRRC depended on the department of PRR for its

early survival. Initially, The Center Director reported on TTRRC activities to the department chairperson, who then reported to the dean of the college. This chain of communication soon became cumbersome, and left the director with reduced control over budget and programming activities. Misunderstandings about "who actually controls the \$200,000 in tourism money" led to some strained relationships among the faculty. Faculty members who had done tourism or travel research for many years felt that the center concept added one more obstacle to overcome in reaching funds for proposed research. Some faculty aligned themselves with center projects as they became available and thus became associated faculty. Others felt excluded from what they perceived as "TTRRC equipment," "TTRRC projects," and "TTRRC support staff assistance." What was conceived as an opportunity to concentrate funds in cooperative programs to support tourism development in Michigan began in some instances a "Have" (TTRRC) VS. "Have Not" (faculty who felt excluded) situation. Fortunately, most faculty members who first viewed TTRRC as an obstacle now see it as an opportunity to secure limited funding for research that might not be funded elsewhere.

In part due to dissatisfaction among faculty as to how the "tourism funds" are spent, the dean of the college decided that TTRRC should behave more as an autonomous unit than as a PRR sub-unit. This clarification of authority has led to more streamlined communication between the TTRRC director and college administrators. Although TTRRC funding has grown to the full \$200,000 annually, the center still depends on cooperation from PRR. The space occupied by TTRRC belongs to PRR, and should the University decide to dissolve the center, all equipment would revert to PRR.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS TO MICHIGAN'S TOURISM INDUSTRY

Travel and Tourism in Michigan: A Statistical Profile and the "Michigan Travel Activity Monitor" mentioned in the introductory section are very visible contributions to the Michigan tourism industry. These research instruments include data collected by the Michigan departments of Commerce, Transportation, Agriculture and Treasury as well as MSU scientists. Many key indicators of the health and growth of travel and tourism in the state were brought together for the first time in this publication. The first edition of the statistical profile was published in 1986 and TTRRC is currently attempting to secure funds to publish a second edition. The department of Commerce Travel Bureau has annually contributed the major portion of outside funds to support the Travel Activity Reports.

TOURISM DATA BASES. TTRRC periodically receives computer data from the Michigan Department of Treasury regarding sales and use tax collections by county for selected types of businesses patronized by travelers in Michigan. Through the department of Commerce Travel Bureau, TTRRC has access to results of the Great Lakes Travel Monitor, a three year survey of travelers in the Great Lakes region. This information is available on a county level. The access TTRRC provides to data such as these in becoming widely known, and requests for specific information have grown rapidly. Well over 100 requests for data were received in

1987.

**BUILDING TOURISM LEADERSHIP.** TTRRC staff assisted the department of PRR in administering a year-long series of educational seminars, trips and workshops for a select group of tourism professionals. This group visited state travel offices in eight states and the Canadian province of Ontario to examine tourism assistance delivery systems. Due to the expense of running this program, it was discontinued after the first year, but alumni of the program remain among the most vocal and visible in Michigan's tourism organizations.

**TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MICHIGAN.** Each year since 1980, PRR and then TTRRC have sponsored a day-long seminar on tourism development as part of MSU's Agriculture and Natural Resources Week. Content of the program changes with whatever tourism related issues are timely.

**EDUCATIONAL SEMINARS AND WORKSHOPS.** One of the distinct advantages of a discretionary operating budget is that TTRRC can respond to exigencies faced by the travel and tourism industry. Several years ago, when liability insurance costs skyrocketed in the tourism and recreation industry, TTRRC and PRR brought together legislators, insurance company representatives, state regulation analysts, attorneys and representatives of public and private recreation businesses to discuss the current state of liability insurance and to offer a forum for proposed action. The entire conference was videotaped and edited into a series of six topical programs which can be used by local communities to conduct educational workshops.

TTRRC has co-sponsored statewide conferences on Agricultural Tourism and on rural economic development. When Michigan hosted the CenStates Chapter of the Travel and Tourism Research Association, TTRRC handled registration and provided financial support for several conference functions. In December 1988, TTRRC co-sponsored a national conference with the USDA Forest Service on marketing for natural resources professionals.

**VIDEOTAPE EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE.** Because the size of our staff limits the number of personal appearances that are possible, TTRRC has begun to rely on video technology to reach a broader, more dispersed audience. With a videotape and some written instruction, Cooperative Extension Service agents, Chambers of Commerce or other local tourism development groups can present educational workshops when it is most convenient for them.

"Recreation and Tourism Marketing" is the topic of a 45-minute videotape in part underwritten by TTRRC. Michigan Bell provided grant funds to produce the program which has allowed us to offer the tape for sale at a fraction of its actual cost. More than 150 copies have been sold.

Michigan AAA, Consumers Power Company, and the state Chamber of Commerce are providing financial assistance to TTRRC and PRR to produce a videotape on customer relations. A workbook will be developed to complement the videotape. The program will be "premiered" by a PRR faculty member at workshops in five sites around the state, then will be

available for distribution.

Outside agencies and organizations have been willing to work cooperatively with TTRRC on several major projects. Funding through gifts and grants, use of equipment and technical assistance are means of support that TTRRC alternately contributes to or accepts from project co-sponsors outside MSU.

#### INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

A wide range of relationships have been and will continue to be essential to our center. We have established crucial relationships with both on-campus (internal) and off-campus (external) organizations. Examples are noted below but first it is helpful to step back for a moment and focus on the travel and tourism industry "then" and "now."

In our state a decade ago the industry was far less organized, had fewer and weaker leaders, and was at or near the bottom of most people's list of interests and priorities. To exacerbate an already stifling travel and tourism industry environment, many of the relationships which existed between the components in the industry were negative rather than positive in nature. For example, neighboring communities typically perceived each other as competition rather than as potential cooperators. Most organizations whose mission involved providing services to the industry appeared far more inclined to pursue a diverging rather than a converging agenda. Indeed, the industry really had no common agenda to rally around and anyone advancing one was viewed with considerable suspicion. Existing relationships clearly appeared to be hindrances to the programs we planned to launch with establishment of our center.

Having recognized existing relationships as one of the challenges with which we would have to deal, we have placed much emphasis on relationship building as we have developed. Building relationships has been the sole objective of some of our major programs such as our Building Tourism Leadership. Indeed, the development of much improved working relationships with key state agencies and legislators was what resulted in the financial support for our center concept. It was the endorsement of the center concept by these key agencies and university officials at a luncheon with bipartisan leadership of the Michigan Legislature which shortly thereafter produced a recurring budget for our center. At the time, we felt that we had developed a very strong and polished proposal to create our center; however, looking back it appears probable that the years invested in improving relationships was more of a factor in obtaining necessary funding than was the quality of our proposal.

Our current relationships are quite extensive. All of them and their implications cannot be detailed here. Several will be discussed to illustrate the patterns which have emerged in our working relationships. As part of our original proposal to create the center, we included a provision for establishing both internal and external advisory committees. In addition to serving as "sounding boards", these committees have been structured to strengthen relationships with

organizations we deem important to our mission. Our external committee includes representatives from our departments of Commerce, Transportation, and Natural Resources, all of which play major roles in our travel and tourism industry. It also includes members from key organizations like our state Chamber of Commerce and Michigan AAA. We have sought to include members on the committee who can represent all regions of our state. The membership on the external advisory committee numbers about 15. We devote considerable thought to selecting each member.

The internal and campus-based advisory committee is structured to establish liaisons to all existing or potential travel and tourism oriented units on our campus. These include our natural resources departments, selected College of Business units, a number of other centers like ours which don't have formal teaching missions, and selected individuals with special expertise. While building relationships has been a focus of our work with the internal committee, a serendipitous result has been the neutralization of much of the concern creation of the center spawned concerning "turf" issues. The nomination of representatives from potentially competing units to the committee seems to have satisfied the concerns about program encroachment which some of these units had when we were established.

Although both of the above committees have contributed materially to the relationships we have developed to date, our relationship with MSU's department of Park and Recreation Resources is essential to our very survival. Faculty in PRR laid the foundation for our center including developing and shepherding of the concept to fruition. As noted earlier, we were initially established as a program within PRR but have evolved to become an autonomous unit. While we are an autonomous organization, we are housed in facilities provided by PRR. We also share equipment and support staff. Department of PRR faculty provide leadership for and are cooperators on many of our major programs. Similar arrangements have been developed with faculty from other departments, but none approach the extent of those established with PRR faculty.

One external relationship rivals that established with PRR in importance. The Michigan Travel Bureau, a unit within the Michigan Department of Commerce, contributed materially to development of the center concept, was active in advocating its establishment at MSU, and has consistently provided financial support to augment our university provided base budget. The Bureau's financial support began long before the center was formally established and during a time when very few other state travel offices were investing in research, especially in research with longer than a 12 month time horizon. Furthermore, most of these monies were awarded during a time of extreme financial austerity in state agency budgets. Political realities and sometimes differing priorities have at times tested our relationship with the Bureau, but it has remained intact because both organizations remain committed to making it work.

We have also been reasonably successful in developing positive working relationships with tourism industry associations and with major corporate entities directly or indirectly involved with the travel and tourism industry. On occasion these organizations have provided



significant funding toward a cooperative venture such as a jointly sponsored conference or a research program. Most often these relationships involve pooling our collective resources to address a problem opportunity of mutual interest. Few of these relationships, however, have involved long term involvement between personnel or long term cooperative programming. Through an active information program, we attempt to keep all relevant organizations and individuals aware of our activities and planned future programs. More than anything else, our information dissemination activities represent investments in building and maintaining relationships. If we can but keep all appropriate doors open, we believe that our clients and cooperators will come to us when they see need to initiate, renew, or strengthen their relationship with the center.

In summary, external and internal relationships are integral components of our center. Indeed, marshalling resources from across campus and the state is a central part of our mission. We have learned that relationships must be carefully nurtured and that relationships do not run perfectly for prolonged periods of time. With patience, tenacity and a bit of luck, we have been successful in developing relationships with most of the key players in Michigan's travel and tourism industry. We believe the effort pays excellent dividends and plan to continue to invest heavily in relationship building programs.

#### FUTURE

In order to project how tourism centers will likely evolve over the next decade, it is first necessary to consider both internal and external forces which will play significant roles in the evolutionary process. Broad external forces worthy of attention include those influencing the direction of the travel and tourism industry, our universities, and our competitors. Internal forces which should be included will vary considerably across universities, but quality of employees and adaptability of programs are two which should be important to all. Ultimately, of course, availability of funds will have a profound influence on the process. Projecting budgets for centers is basically equivalent to projecting the future of the institutions themselves. Let us summarize the task of projecting the evolution of centers as follows: Center Evolution = f (internal and external forces). Center budget evolution could be substituted in the above expression for center evolution since it is the single most quantifiable variable which best captures how well a center is performing over time. With this crude model in mind, let us consider trends in key internal and external forces and where these might carry tourism centers.

Neither space nor time permit us to detail or document our perceptions of the future. Excluding the possibility of a major national or international man-made or natural disaster (e.g. World War III), most futurists see continued growth for the travel and tourism industry. In the U.S., however, immense federal budget and international trade deficits continue to threaten our near term economic future. Even a weaker economy may not restrict travel industry growth significantly since large declines in domestic business travel volume could be

partially offset by, for example, weaker dollar induced import of foreign travelers to the U.S. Furthermore, tourism as an economic development option tends to attract more attention and financial support during threatening economic times. While sources of funding will likely shift as will program priorities, the growing recognition of the significance of the travel industry bodes well for centers regardless of the direction the overall economy might take so long as the shifts are appropriately moderated through application of monetary and fiscal policy initiatives.

Given a reasonably well functioning economy over the next decade, possibly the next most significant factor which might impact the travel and tourism industry is energy prices, and more significantly, energy availability. Although air travel volume continues to grow, our most important domestic travel mode still is the privately owned vehicle whether it be car, truck, van, recreational vehicle, etc. Obviously, availability of reasonably affordable fuel for this fleet of vehicles is highly significant to the future of our travel industry. With each passing year, it seems less and less likely that the world will experience an energy crisis of the proportions faced in the 1970's. Unless geologists' estimates of the world's fuel reserves prove to be overly optimistic, we will have adequate fossil fuels to meet our projected needs well into the next century. It also appears less and less likely that access to these reserves will be constrained via political or other artificial means. We should, however, expect prices to increase as our government turns to fuel tax increases to offset budget shortfalls. In summary, it is difficult to develop a plausible energy scenario which would result in a long term and major disruption in the travel industry's growth trend although the industry will have to remain vigilant to proposals to solve our budget problems via inequitable tax burdens on the travel industry.

While the travel industry's future generally appears bright for the next decade and probably beyond, the universities in which centers are housed may not face equally bright futures. Federal government support for higher education has declined and programs directly or indirectly relevant to travel and tourism centers have suffered harsh reductions (e.g. Sea Grant, Land and Water Conservation Fund, McIntire-Stennis Forestry Research Program, etc.). Not only have these reductions impacted funds available at our institutions for base budget, but they also limit opportunities to attract outside grants because similar budget problems exist within many federal agencies (Park Service, Forest Service, etc.) which often provide grants and cooperative research opportunities for travel, tourism and recreation related programs. Reduced funding has also resulted in a greatly diminished pool of secondary data which centers require to be most effective. For example, the last U.S. Travel Census was conducted in 1977; very few industries can operate efficiently using data over ten years old. As in the case of many social programs, the state have attempted to fill budget vacuums created by withdrawal of federal support. Although many states have dramatically increased their spending on travel and tourism programs, most of these new monies have gone into travel promotion programs; little has trickled down to support research and technical assistance programs of the types centers currently offer. The situation is exacerbated by the extreme difficulty of attracting state agency support for longer term programs such as developing base line data on travelers. On the other

hand, the increased appreciation of the importance of tourism at state government level is a very positive development which, if it can be exploited, may prove crucial to many centers' success if not their very survival. Beyond the need for individual center to be persistent but patient in developing close working relationships with relevant agencies in their states, there is a need for interstate cooperation in efforts to sensitize key legislative and agency officials to the inherent value and needs of our research and technical assistance programs.

Continuing budget shortfalls will force universities to curtail some programs. Trends in student enrollment will influence program retrenchment decisions which in turn are correlated with student perceptions of job opportunities. Job opportunities will increase in tandem with expected growth in the travel and tourism industry. If the above statements hold, universities are likely to expand their tourism related programs even if budgets remain tight. Furthermore, if the foreign trade and budget deficits produce the economic slow-down many economists expect to occur over the next few years, universities are likely to expand efforts to contribute to the economic revitalization of their client region. Many will diversify beyond the currently fashionable programs in biotechnology and high technology into tourism and other often underrated economic development options. Overall then it appears that the environment for travel and tourism centers on most university campuses will be reasonably supportive over the next decade.

Possibly the greatest threat to university based travel and tourism centers may come from private for profit competitors. In most regions of the country, the number of "tourism" consultants has been increasing more rapidly than have consulting opportunities. Few such individual or small group consulting businesses pose any serious threat to quality university-based centers. The real private sector threat is likely to come from major, highly capitalized corporations such as the regional telephone companies. Many such corporations have already "discovered" the tourism industry but have not determined how to provide it with research and technical assistance programs at a profit. Nonetheless, few centers will survive for long if one or more of these industry giants decides to seriously pursue our clientele.

Finally, the future of centers will not be completely decided by external forces. We are not aware of the national average life expectancy for centers on university campuses, but many surely don't remain viable very long after initiating grant monies have been exhausted (Why do some survive were others fail?). Quality of personnel employed is surely an important ingredient in a center's success. It is crucial that center staff be selected with its short and longer term missions clearly in mind. We will provide more specific recommendations concerning personnel as other factors important to center survival are reviewed.

One of these ingredients to success is to be adaptable. Centers such as ours were developed to fill a specific need or set of needs. For example, our center is involved in providing off-campus education to tourist oriented businesses. Since we initiated our off-campus educational programs, several other private and public organizations have fielded similar programs. Having recognized that this market is

saturated with suppliers of educational services, we are now in the process of adapting our programs to our new off-campus environment. A couple of points merit mention here. First, an organization can't adapt to changes if those changes aren't identified quickly. Second, certain people do not function as efficiently as others in changing environments. Thus, center personnel, especially those in leadership positions, should be reasonably comfortable with change and effective in the identification of changes which offer opportunities for their organizations.

Individuals and organizations, such as centers, which are well integrated are not only generally more productive but also tend to survive longer. For example, during retrenchments at our universities, it is common to see nationally ranked departments being eliminated before less prestigious departments which provide broader services across campuses or across a given state or region. The integration process must be a high priority, on-going effort to be successful. It may be too late to mount an effective integration campaign after learning that your budget has been targeted for a substantial reduction.

Another controllable key to a center's future is to mount an effective program to promote what it accomplishes. An effective promotion program serves the higher social purpose of educating our clientele while contributing to how others perceive our programs. One simply can't count on all key individuals reading a published article in a professional journal; we must make a special effort to communicate our accomplishments via messages in media which reach more of those who we need to reach. This can be a time consuming process and a distraction for the scientist who normally publishes outputs in professional journals. Individuals who prefer to concentrate on publishing their works in scientific journals or who must do so to achieve some institutional requirements (e.g. to earn tenure) will be less inclined to devote energy to promoting their works. Such individuals should not dominate the staff of a center, and a strategy for effectively promoting their products should be developed. We have been reasonably successful in employing a professional communications specialist to assist our scientists in the production of "user friendly" versions of their journal articles.

The last and probably most significant element in the future of a center is for it to start with a recurring base budget which is large enough to support some quality programs without additional resources. Such a budget will permit recruiting and retaining quality personnel. It will also permit one to match outside grant funds and/or to leverage grants from otherwise reluctant sources. A base budget provides the underlying support necessary to maintain a core staff between major outside grants. It permits pilot studies to establish one's credentials before pursuing outside grant funds. Base budget support allows one to address long term needs which are often difficult to support through outside grant funds. Finally, these funds permit a center to be independent to the degree necessary to achieve external and internal credibility.

## REFERENCE

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