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Carter Bermingham
University of Montana - Missoula

Norma P. Nickerson
University of Montana - Missoula

Megan Schultz
The University of Montana - Missoula

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Tourism & Its Impacts on Rural Communities: Thompson Falls 2018

Thompson Falls, Montana

Carter Bermingham

Norma Nickerson, Ph.D.

Megan Tanner Schultz, M.S.

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Prepared by

Carter Bermingham

Norma Nickerson, Ph.D.

Megan Tanner Schultz, M.S.

Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research

College of Forestry and Conservation

The University of Montana

Missoula, MT 59812

www.itrr.umt.edu

Case Study Report 2019-2

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Abstract

This study was a collaborative effort between the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research and the community of Thompson Falls, Montana to provide insight into the impacts tourism has on rural communities. Paper surveys on site were completed by 122 visitors. Results show that 34% of respondents were residents of Montana. Of those Montana residents, 95% were from outside of Sanders County. Visitors spent an average of 5.66 nights away from home and 2.01 of those nights were in the town of Thompson Falls. Most spending in Thompson Falls was on hotel/motel/B&B/cabin rental (\$7,062). Respondents to the survey reported a total spending of \$26,321 in the Thompson Falls area. Most visitors stayed in Thompson Falls because it was their destination for vacation, recreation, or pleasure but agreed that they visited Thompson Falls because it is relaxing, quiet, and a scenic drive. Results provide the Thompson Falls community with useful data for future planning, marketing/promotion, and understanding the visitor spending associated with visitation.

Executive Summary

Overnight visitors to Thompson Falls were surveyed at motels and the local state park. The respondents represented out-of-county Montana residents (33%) and out-of-state (66%) visitors to the Thompson Falls area. The visitors, upon arrival, make important economic contributions to the Thompson Falls area. The results of the study are worth considering for future planning within the Thompson Falls community.

- 100% of respondents who reside outside of Sanders County spent at least one night away from home. The mean number of nights spent in Montana was 3.99 nights; mean number of nights in Thompson Falls was 2.01.
- 53% of the respondents who stayed in Thompson Falls reported staying at a public campground followed by 42% staying at a hotel/motel/b&b/rental.
- More money was spent by these out-of-county visitors in hotel/motel/b&b/rental (\$7,062), gas (\$5,253), and restaurant/bar (\$3,979) than other spending categories.
- 86% of respondents reported that they were spending for a travel group size of at least two or more people (including respondent). The average travel group size was 2.63 people (travel group spending size).
- Visitors were mostly traveling as a couple (46%). Other group types with high response were: immediate family (22%) & self (14%).
- Respondents traveled with a variety of age categories in their group – the highest percentages were 55-64 years old (40%), 65-74 year olds (33%), and 35-44 year olds (25%).
- Visitors, whether on this trip or in past trips, were mostly in the area for camping (61%). Other activities with high response rates were: hiking (41%) & scenic driving (34%).
- 29% of respondents indicated they planned to visit 1-6 months before arriving, while 26% made plans to attend 1-4 weeks before arriving.
- Visitors, whether on this trip or in past trips, were mostly in the area to visit or had visited the Noxon or Thompson Falls Reservoir (29%). Other places that were frequently visited were the National Bison Range (23%) and adjacent forest lands (23%).
- Overall, 65 percent (75 people) of respondents indicated that they were very likely to return to Thompson Falls, with another 30 percent (35 people) of respondents indicating they were somewhat likely to return.

Study Implications

Current overnight visitors are mostly in the area for vacation, recreation, or pleasure, but in terms of activities, many are involved in camping, hiking, scenic driving, wildlife watching and fishing. These are good indicators of an outdoor recreation visitor to Thompson Falls which is a good segment to continue to serve. In addition, visitors wrote that Thompson Falls was beautiful, clean, friendly and quiet which, along with the outdoor recreation activities, are excellent marketing topics for the area. If Thompson Falls were able to meet the demands of those visitors while maintaining their relaxing, quiet and less crowded charm it might encourage these active travelers to stay a bit longer in town or visit at a more frequent rate. It is recommended that the citizens of Thompson Falls review the respondents' comments from Appendix B to gain more insight into people's likes and dislikes of Thompson Falls.

Introduction

Thompson Falls, MT, the county seat for Sanders County, features millions of acres of national forest that offer recreational possibilities including hiking, fishing, camping, and hunting to name a few. Winter provides backcountry and cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. Sightseeing adventures include old growth timber, wildflowers, waterfalls, mountain lakes, creek, rivers, and wildlife such as deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, bears and many varieties of birds.

The purpose of this study was to provide an understanding of the characteristics of visitors to Thompson Falls, visitor spending in Thompson Falls, and levels of satisfaction with different aspects of visiting the area.

Methods

A community leader of Thompson Falls took on the responsibility to coordinate the survey efforts with the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR). The survey instrument was designed cooperatively with Thompson Falls, printed by ITRR, and distributed in Thompson Falls by the community coordinator. Surveys were provided to the Rimrock Lodge and the Falls Motel, as well as the Thompson Falls State Park. State Park hosts and front desk personnel were responsible for asking visitors if they would complete the survey. Surveys were dispersed from June through September 2018. One hundred and twenty-two completed surveys were obtained. No documentation of the number of refusals was recorded.

Limitations

As in all research, there are limitations to the study. Limitations for the Thompson Falls study included the dependence on business owners, business personnel, and State Park hosts to ask visitors to complete the survey. Business owners are busy and distributing surveys is not their main focus, therefore a random sampling did not occur. In addition, ITRR personnel were not present during the data collection for quality control.

Results

Of the 122 valid responses to the residence questions, 34 percent (42 people) were from Montana and 66 percent (80 people) were from out-of-state (see Tables 1 and 2). Of all Montana respondents, 5 percent (2 people) were from Sanders County while 95 percent (39 people) were from other Montana counties. Of respondents from out-of-state, 28 percent (21 people) were from Washington, 14 percent (11 people) were from Idaho, and 12 percent (9 people) were from Oregon (see Table 2).

Table 1: Residence of all Respondents

Place of Residence	# of total	% of total
Sanders County	2	2%
Other MT County	39	32%
Unknown MT County	1	1%
Montana=42		
U.S. State	66	54%
Canada	8	7%
International	2	2%
Unknown	4	3%
Total all Residences	122	

Table 2: Out-of-State, Canadian, and International Residences

Place of Residence	# of total
Alberta, Canada	7
Arizona	4
Australia	1
British Columbia, Canada	1
California	6
Colorado	1
Germany	1
Idaho	11
Illinois	1
Iowa	1
Minnesota	2
Missouri	1
Nevada	3
New Jersey	1
North Dakota	1
Oregon	9
South Dakota	1
Texas	1
Utah	1
Virginia	1
Washington	21

The mean age of respondents was 54 years old. Of those who were from outside Sanders County and responded to the survey, 119 people (100%) reported that they spent at least one night away from home. Of those nights spent away from home, the greatest percent of respondents (24%) spent two nights in Montana. The mean number of nights spent in Montana was 3.99 nights. The mean number of nights spent in Thompson Falls was 2.01 nights. A full breakdown of nights spent as well as results of all other questions in this survey can be found in Appendix A.

Expenditures

Spending information was asked of visitors who reside outside of Sanders County. The survey asked that they report their best estimate of the total amount of money they and their family/travel group (if applicable) spent in the Thompson Falls area in the following categories: accommodations, restaurant or bar, groceries or snacks, gasoline, guides or outfitters, shuttles or taxis, retail goods and services, and entertainment or recreation.

Table 3 presents the expenditure data of only the non-resident respondents (those who reside outside of Sanders County) who reported spending money in the categories. The mean expenditure of those who spent money for each category can be found along with the percentage of people who reported that they spent money in that category. The last column provides the total dollars spent by those respondents in each category. The total reported expenditure for respondents who spent was \$26,321.

Table 3: Expenditure Data: Expenditures calculated using only non-residents (those who live outside of Sanders County) who spent.

Expenditure Category	Mean expenditures of non-residents who reported that they spent money in these categories	% of respondents who reported spending money in each category	Total dollars spent in each category by respondents who spent
Hotel/motel/B&B/rental	\$147.13 (n=48)	40%	\$7,062.00
Gas	\$76.13 (n=69)	58%	\$5,253.00
Restaurant/bar	\$64.18 (n=62)	52%	\$3,979.00
Groceries/snacks	\$57.66 (n=59)	50%	\$3,402.00
Campground	\$51 (n=61)	51%	\$3,111.00
Retail goods & services	\$70.24 (n=23)	19%	\$1,615.00
Rented home/cabin/room	\$171.43 (n=7)	6%	\$1,200.00
Entertainment/recreation	\$51.73 (n=11)	9%	\$569.00
Guide/Outfitter	\$26 (n=5)	4%	\$130.00
Shuttle/Taxi	\$0 (n=0)	0%	\$0.00
		TOTAL	\$26,321.00

Appendix A- Results

Q1. Are you a resident of Montana? n=122

34% Yes 66% No (skip to Q3.)

Q2. Do you reside in Sanders County? n=41

5% Yes (Skip to Q12. on back) 95% No (Skip to Q4.)

Q3. In what state, province, or foreign country do you reside?

See Tables 1 and 2.

Q4. Is this your first time visiting Thompson Falls? n=118

54% Yes 46% No

Q5. What reasons are you visiting the Thompson Falls area? (Check all that apply.) n=118

63% Vacation/recreation/pleasure 32% Just passing through 8% Business/convention/meeting

19% Visiting friends/relatives 0% Shopping

Q6. For this trip, how many nights will you spend away from home? n=119, mean=5.66

0% 0 (Skip to Q.10)	9% 1	14% 3	3% 5	7% 7	0% 9
	18% 2	8% 4	4% 6	2% 8	34% 10 or more

Q7. How many of those nights are in Montana? n=115, mean=3.99

0% 0	24% 2	12% 4	4% 6	2% 8	10% 10 or more
16% 1	17% 3	6% 5	8% 7	2% 9	

Q8. Of your nights in Montana, how many will you stay in Thompson Falls on this trip? n=118, mean=2.01

0% 0 (Go to Q.10)	50% 1	11% 3	3% 5	0% 7	1% 9
	28% 2	5% 4	0% 6	0% 8	2% 10 or more

Q9. While in Thompson Falls in which types of accommodation(s) did you stay ON THIS TRIP? (Check all that apply.) n=115

41% Hotel/motel/B&B	6% Private campground	0% Resort/condominium
2% Rental cabin/home	3% Home of friend/relative	0% Guest ranch
53% Public land camping	0% Second home/cabin/condo	0% Vehicle in parking lot

Q10. Please enter your best estimate of the TOTAL amount of money in US dollars you (and your family/travel group, if applicable) spent/will spend in Thompson Falls on THIS TRIP. If you did not spend money in a category, please leave it blank. (See Table 3 for expenditures)

ACCOMMODATIONS in Thompson Falls

Hotel/motel/bed & breakfast

\$

Campground

\$

Rented home/cabin or room

\$

FOOD in Thompson Falls

Restaurant/bar

\$

Groceries/snacks

\$

TRANSPORTATION in Thompson Falls

Gasoline/diesel

\$

Shuttle/taxi

\$

RETAIL/SERVICES in Thompson Falls

Retail goods/services

\$

Entertainment/recreation

\$

Guide/outfitting trip

\$

Q11. How many people does the above spending represent (including yourself, i.e., your travel group/family size)? n=117; mean= 2.63

14% 1	11% 3	3% 5	2% 7	0% 9	1% more than 10
57% 2	7% 4	3% 6	3% 8	0% 10	

Q12. What option best describes your travel group? n=118

14% Self	22% Immediate family	11% Family/friends	1% Business associates
46% Couple	3% Extended family	2% Friends	2% Organized group/club

Q13. Please select all the ages represented in your group: n=115 for each age category

10% 0-5 yrs.	7% 11-17 yrs.	14% 25-34 yrs.	20% 45-54 yrs.	33% 65-74 yrs.
13% 6-10 yrs.	5% 18-24 yrs.	25% 35-44 yrs.	40% 55-64 yrs.	6% 75 and over

Q14. How long before this trip did you make plans to spend time in Thompson Falls? n=110

21% The day I arrived	26% 1-4 weeks before arriving	9% Over 6 months before arriving
16% 1-7 days before arriving	29% 1-6 months before arriving	

Q15. Please select the option that best corresponds with your level of agreement with each statement below.

I visit Thompson Falls because it has or is....	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Total respondents
A scenic drive	2%	0%	12%	21%	65%	4.47	n=94
Relaxing	1%	1%	15%	21%	62%	4.41	n=81
Quiet	0%	5%	18%	24%	53%	4.25	n=87
Less crowded	1%	2%	20%	26%	51%	4.23	n=87
Outdoor Recreation	5%	3%	15%	21%	56%	4.21	n=78
A charming small town	3%	4%	27%	28%	38%	3.96	n=81
Close to public lands	9%	1%	23%	18%	48%	3.95	n=77
On my route	17%	4%	9%	8%	62%	3.94	n=93
Close to attractions I'm visiting	14%	10%	26%	13%	37%	3.49	n=70
A vibrant small town	7%	19%	32%	22%	20%	3.29	n=69
Where family/friends live	53%	7%	15%	1%	24%	2.38	n=74
Special places to eat	31%	25%	31%	7%	6%	2.32	n=68
Shopping	46%	21%	24%	8%	2%	1.98	n=66

Q16. On this trip as well as past visits, what places have you visited in the Thompson Falls area (check all that apply). n=122

21% Ross Creek Cedar Trail 11% Thompson Falls in-town trail system 13% Hot Springs
 23% Adjacent forest lands 4% Sanders County Old Jail Mueseum 23% Nat'l Bison Range
 29% Noxon or T. Falls Reservoir 14% Island Park/Fish Ladder/Thompson Falls Dam

Q17. On this as well as past trips, what activities have you participated in during your visit to the Thompson Falls area (check all that apply). n=122 (top five highlighted in yellow)

61% Camping 2% Horseback riding 4% Motorcycle touring 5% Motorboating
 41% Hiking 1% Guided trip 30% Wildlife watching 34% Scenic Driving
 27% Fishing 3% Hunting 14% Bird watching 7% Foraging
 3% OHV/ATV riding 3% Bicycle touring 10% Canoe/kayaking 1% Snowmobiling
 0% XC skiing 1% Cabinet Ridge ATV Rally 0% Sanders County Yard Saleing
 0% BOW workshop 0% Iron Daisy Enduro 9% Huckleberry Festival

Q18. What is your age? n=109; Range=21-80, mean=53.62

Q19. What is your gender? n=111

38% Male 62% Female

Q20. How likely are you to visit Thompson Falls again? n=116

65% Very likely 30% Somewhat likely 5% Unlikely

Q21. Please tell us what you liked about Thompson Falls.

See Appendix B

Q22. Please tell us what you did not like about Thompson Falls.

See Appendix B

Appendix B: Open-ended Responses

Q21. Please tell us what you liked about Thompson Falls.

Amazing views, sites that back up to the river. Nearby pond. Kid friendly. Friendly, helpful site hosts. Clean restroom.
Awesome scenery- quietness. Visiting family- nice campground!
Beautiful
Beautiful and relaxing
Beautiful setting. great campground. clean facilities. roomy camping spots. great camp hosts we dealt with camp host (Sharon) Wonderful! Love the American flag on the site posts.
Beautiful, friendly, lots of huckleberries
Beautiful, friendly.
Big Eddy's
Big eddy's bridge over the water.
Campground was quiet, folks in town were friendly. Camp hosts were wonderful!
Clean and modern looking small town. Great food awesome grocery store. cute parks, Nice walking path.
Clean facilities, friendly staff, #17 is great site.
Clean park and bathrooms. You do a great job! Thank you for all your hard work!
Clean! love the cute man street. Eddy's was delicious!
Clean, friendly town.
Cozy little village, reminds me of "old times". Nice restaurant- music on the river.
Everything
Falls Motel
Falls Motel very close to walking trail. Catholic church in town. Kind people all around enjoyed dinner and music at Eddy's.
Family and pretty
Family history, friendly people Thompson Falls rec area- clean, restrooms always clean, host friendly. Great trip!
Favorite camp and fishing place.
Fishing
Have not visited the town yet as into the campground from the north.
Host, Bathrooms were immaculate, quiet, close to the river, scenic!
I love that it is a quiet, friendly small town.
I love the people here and food.
It is a cute little town. it seems safe. Low crime rate.
It's beautiful, the river is amazing, it's off the main road.
Its beauty
It's where I live
Loved the river & falls & State Park & places to visit nearby.
Lovely small town
My hometown for 33 years (left 47 years ago). Lots of changes since I left but fun to look around and remember. Family is buried in Wild Rose and Fraternal Cemeteries.
My wife
N/A
Natural setting, river.
Nearby forest trails, state park/community trails, Island park, scenic river, clean parks. Big Eddy's Restaurant- good food.
Nice campground, state park. Friendly, helpful hosts. Location fit our trip.

Nice campground, very quiet.
Nice campgrounds
Nice people, good huckleberry picking, clean room at Falls Motel.
Nice, friendly place and fun to visit. Family friendly. Good food and good motel.
Our family
Out of the city hustle bustle
Peaceful and beautiful
Perfect spot to camp for a family vacation. Quiet yet not far from retail. Montana is gorgeous and very welcoming.
Pretty drive over thompson pass, good food, casino.
Proximity to river, clean bathrooms, maintained campsite.
Quaint, laid back, quiet.
Quiet
Quiet
Quiet camping, beautiful scenery, river
Quiet, clean restrooms.
Quiet, clean, well maintained, the views, our host Sharon providing info and maps, wildlife, swimming, trail system, lovely town and people.
Quiet, friendly. On the way to next destination.
quiet, no real crowds, friendly folk, dog friendly, cabin lake.
Quiet, not crowded.
Relaxing; Beautiful.
River and Scenery
Riverside campground, stayed at state park, grocery, trails to town, river, good local auto shop on easy street.
Scenic
Seems like a nice place, pleasant interactions with people.
Small town, less traffic, quiet.
Small. Had place to stay
Some of my family i got to see.
The beautiful views.
The campground was easy access, quiet, beautiful, loved the river. Hosts were very nice and personable. Made rounds regularly. Allowed generators.
The friendly people, Falls Motel (Katrina and Mark, the owners are great!), the gift shops and eateries, the wildlife, deer, Thompson Falls trails, the convenient Exxon station, Eddy's restaurant, little bear cafe, Pentecostal church of god.
The general area is more small town Montana with beautiful surroundings.
the hosts were exceptionally friendly, helpful, knowledgeable about sites to visit and very engaged.
the possibility to entertain Texas holdem poker.
The river
The river access.
The river and the sawmill. The park is real nice.
The small town along the river.
The trails and outdoor activities we enjoy are less crowded. We love the river.
The wildlife around town.
the young lady that checked us in at the Falls Motel was extremely pleasant and helpful. Also our server at Big Eddy's (young man going to Bozeman in the fall for mechanical engineering) was excellent! No complaints on our stop over in Thompson Falls!

Used to live here and love and miss it!
Very Clean, Campground hostess wonderful, vault toilets were amazingly clean
very green, nice bathroom.
Very nice, clean, well maintained sites. Host couple very helpful and accommodating.
Very scenic, beautiful little spot.
Visited Thompson Falls for a wedding.
We love the quiet state park and the friendly and helpful staff. Also we love the Thompson and Clark Fork Rivers.

Q22. Please tell us what you did not like about Thompson Falls.

All good!
All OK
Because it is a small town, business hours are often less desirable (especially when we need something in a pinch) but that's it.
Bees
BEES but I know it is what it is! :)
BEES!!
GPS took us 40 miles out of our way using post office address off ID state parks website.
Hot- Over 100
I wish Harvest Foods carried "Amy's" T.V. Dinners and that Minnie's cafe had gluten free menu options (I am vegetarian and have celiac disease so cannot eat wheat, rye, or barley) I wish there were professional caregivers in town that could check on my mother if or when needed. But she's fairing alright so far with the help of friends, her pastor, "small town" kindness!
It's too bad the mainline rail runs right through but one gets used to the noise.
Just the trains, ground was pretty bumpy.
Loud generators in state park
Miss going up Prospect, Cherry, Dry and Clear Creeks via the high bridge. It's wonderful it's somewhat restored- just not drive-able.
My wife
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
Needs an RV dump station and propane refill station.
Neighbors started fire :(

No easy access to river (clark fork) from where we are staying.
No little shops
No Texas Holdem
No trailer dump station. Trains a little loud.
Noisy train, noisy road.
Not a big deal, but rail road traffic/ noise, but oh well!
Not full hookups.
Not much
Not much privacy in between campsites.
Nothing
Nothing.
Nothing.
Nothing. We love it here.
nowhere to play poker.
Only dislike but manageable concern is the trains at night. Maybe include in camping description that trains are nearby to bring earplugs. We got some and it wasn't as bad. Thanks for having us!
Restaurants
Restaurants
Site not quite long enough for big trailer. Train is a bit loud, if it is not all night, no problem :)
So quiet
The heat. 104
The only improvement would be to upgrade to flushing toilets/showers.
The train is loud at night.
The train tracks near campground.
The train. It wasn't that loud during the day but was extremely loud at night. I also didn't like the street lights.
The trains
The Trains!!!
There is nothing we have disliked.
Thompson Falls needs an urgent care facility urgently. Camp host needs maps to hospital in Plains- Hospital needs better identification on highway.
Too hot- not your fault
Town Pump
Train traffic at night
Trains at night. No maps of forest trails nearby- (Weber gulch and Munson Creek). No dump station/ trailer water fill area at state park. Didn't find out until morning we were leaving where the waterfalls were- found out from a fellow camper. Need better maps, signs, info.
Trains, hard ground.
Unorganized court house. No microfilm for who we were looking for.
Very hot!!
Was expecting falls- didn't know about the dam. Not much to see wandering around town
well-kept campground

Appendix C: Letter to Thompson Falls Business Owners

INSTITUTE FOR TOURISM & RECREATION RESEARCH

To: Thompson Falls business owners
From: Norma Nickerson, Director, Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research
RE: Thompson Falls visitor survey
Date: 6/19/18

The Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) was approved by the Governor's Tourism Advisory Council to utilize our survey kit for five small towns in Montana. Thompson Falls, through the efforts of the community coordinator*, has been selected to participate in this project. The other communities participating in the project are Lima, Deer Lodge, White Sulphur Springs, and Shelby.

The purpose of the project is to assist five small communities with their visitor data through conducting the survey kit customized to their community.

Objectives

- To assist communities in understanding their local visitor by waiving the \$700 fee for up to five communities;
- To understand the visitor demographics, trip characteristics, activities, attractions to the community, and visitor planning time frame, and;
- To assess the spending patterns of visitors to the community.

The survey kit is conducted as follows:

1. ITRR develops the survey instrument template
2. ITRR works with a community leader to determine the survey methods best suited for the community
3. ITRR prints ~200 surveys and mails them to the community leader
4. The community collects the data based on the methods and time frame chosen
5. Upon completion of data collection, surveys are mailed back to ITRR
6. ITRR conducts data entry, analysis, and report for the community

After discussion with the community coordinator*, we decided the most efficient and useful way to collect data is to ask accommodation owners (motels, cabins, rented rooms, campgrounds) to assist by asking each guest all summer long and possibly through September, to complete the questionnaire before they leave Thompson Falls. In addition, one or two restaurants in town could ask patrons to complete the survey while waiting for their meal (but these folks cannot reside in Sanders County). Finally, if time allows for some community members to survey visitors at other attractions like the museum or the dam, that would give us an idea of who stops in town, but doesn't necessarily spend the night.

***** All community names have been changed for purposes of anonymity*****