

DEVELOPMENT OF THE TROUT TRAIL OF THE VIRGINIAS

Radley Edward Miller
Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources
West Virginia University

Chad Pierskalla
West Virginia University

Kenneth Semmens
West Virginia University

Cyril Logar
West Virginia University

Alan Collins
West Virginia University

Abstract

Despite the competitive advantage of trophy trout fishing venues in Virginia and West Virginia, there has historically been little cooperation between vendors. Our West Virginia University team worked with fishing-related tourism providers in the two states to gauge interest in developing a marketing cooperative for the industry. Over 30 tourism providers attended an initial exploratory meeting at Douthat State Park in Virginia and showed overwhelming support for developing a marketing cooperative to increase business and protect their investments in fish and fishing streams. This allied group included trophy trout fishing venues, guide services, lodges, and trout producers. Eight of the meeting participants, five from Virginia and three from West Virginia, agreed to start a cooperative marketing organization. Via electronic surveys (designed and administered using the Delphi process), the core members reached consensus on a name (Trout Trail of the Virginias or TTV), slogan, website address, membership benefits, and organizational structure.

1.0 Introduction

According to the American Sport-fishing Association's economic impact analysis, American anglers spend \$41.5 billion on retail sales and generate \$116 billion in economic benefits for the nation each year. States such as West Virginia receive hundreds of millions of dollars annually for local conservation and recreation from fishing license sales and special taxes on equipment. In West Virginia, there are more than 35 different fee fishing venues that contribute to the development of this industry. However, many fishing-related tourism providers are small and lack the resources to attract out-of-state anglers to their sites as primary destinations. How, then, can the owners of fee fishing-related businesses better satisfy the needs of anglers and develop their businesses in a way that provides the greatest benefit to the rural economy of West Virginia (Mei et al. 2006)?

Despite having opportunities to work together, West Virginia and Virginia currently lack the resources to develop a trophy trout fishing industry. In western North Carolina, in order to serve the needs of visitors seeking fishing opportunities, a trout trail was developed that includes public access to stocked streams for fishing. This paper focuses on the development of a marketing cooperative, eventually named The Trout Trail of the Virginias (TTV), which intends to do the same in Virginia and West Virginia but on a larger scale and for the private industry. A marketing cooperative attempts to make visitors aware of the variety of related goods and services offered at different stores or sites in the region – in this case, with the goal of increasing fishing tourism in Virginia and West Virginia. The hope is that the TTV will eventually serve as an important resource for tourism in the two states, promoting the uniqueness of individual businesses, addressing visitors' different fishing motivations, and highlighting high-quality fishing locations. Current hurdles to raising awareness of the TTV region include the distances between businesses and the lack of marketing with a large geographic reach.

The idea for the TTV stemmed from a previous successful effort to create a new industry in southern West Virginia by uniting rafting outfitters on the New and Gauley Rivers. One idea for the TTV is that planned fishing experiences could be packaged with other activities, lodging, food, and other conveniences. Aquaculture is also a tool in this process. Vendors offering packages and services could work together to enhance development of this region as a fishing destination.

2.0 Methods

Interest in the proposed marketing cooperative organization was gauged through two different survey methods. The first round of data collection took place during a full-day forum at Douthat State Park in Virginia and brought together over 30 stream fishing vendors and tourism providers from Virginia and West Virginia. Attendees represented a specific segment of the fishing market – those involved in stream fishing for trout, especially catch-and-release fly fishing – and included trophy trout fishing venues, guide services, lodges, and trout producers. The purpose of the meeting was to increase awareness of the potential for vendors, fish suppliers, academic players, state tourism agencies, and state economic development agencies to work together to promote fishing. During the forum, an audience response clicker system was used to gather information and opinions from the attendees to understand their motivations to join the proposed cooperative marketing organization.

The next two rounds of data collection involved an online Delphi method survey of those who had attended the trout trail forum and
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others who were interested but could not attend. There are five components to the Delphi survey method: the client, monitor, questionnaire, expert, and census. In the TTV Delphi process, West Virginia University acted as both the client and monitor. That is, the West Virginia University research team developed the questionnaire, collected data, and monitored the development of the TTV.

The goal of the Delphi process is to reach consensus among experts. In this methodology, online questionnaires are used to collect needed information from a panel of experts (key stakeholders) without face-to-face discussions or the opportunity for disagreements between panel members (Brown 1968). In the case of the TTV, nine interested parties who expressed interest in becoming charter members of the cooperative marketing group were the 'experts.' They responded to a two-part questionnaire designed to help them reach consensus on important topics related to the development of the TTV. The first round included open-ended questions asking for suggestions on the organization name, slogan, website address, organizational structure, and preferred meeting frequency, as well as several demographic questions pertaining to the vendors and their businesses. There was also a question about their willingness to pay to join the organization; this question was used to gauge the respondents' interest in belonging to the new organization.

A second online questionnaire subsequently asked the experts to choose their top two or three favorite options for a name for the new organization, a marketing slogan, and a website address based on the suggestions the group had provided in the first round. Responses from both online questionnaires were used in other applications of the TTV development as well.

ArcMap™ Version 9.3.1 was used to create a detailed map showing the locations of the different experts within the two states and to manage the information provided to West Virginia University about the services that each expert's business offers.

3.0 Results

3.1 Preliminary Stakeholder Meeting

The goal of the preliminary meeting was to initiate the creation of a marketing organization that would be a partnership between government agencies and private fishing venues in Virginia and West Virginia and to collect information from stakeholders about how they would like to see the new organization develop. First, it was important to understand if prospective members supported the ideas of a public-private partnership and a joint venture between the two states. Before the meeting began, a series of questions was posed to the audience members who had the opportunity to respond with electronic response clickers. All of the audience members who voted on the first question (22 of 22) were in favor of a public-private partnership; 22 of 23 attendees also supported collaboration between Virginia and West Virginia – one person replied that they were not sure if they supported bi-state collaboration.

In the preliminary meeting, it was also important to capture whether or not the attendees understood and supported the idea of a cooperative trout trail marketing organization. In the pre-forum survey, 22 of 24 respondents said that they understood the concept of a trout trail and 2 were not sure. When asked if a cooperative marketing organization should be created, 16 of 23 respondents were in favor of this idea, 3 were not sure, and 4 said that they needed more information before they could make a decision. When asked about participation in the proposed trout trail organization, 15 of 23 indicated that they would participate, 1 would not participate, 1 was not sure, and 1 said that they needed more information before making a decision.

After the presentations by forum participants and after the expert panel discussion concluded, the same pre-meeting questions were asked again of the remaining individuals at the forum. Of those remaining, 16 of 17 were in favor of the public and private sectors working together and one person opposed the idea. Eleven of 15 respondents understood the concept of the trout trail and 3 were not sure about the concept. When asked whether the cooperative marketing organization should be developed, 16 of 19 were in favor of creating the organization, 1 was not sure, and 2 still needed more information.

The most important question asked after the meeting involved participation in the proposed cooperative marketing organization: 15 of 18 responded that they would participate, 1 would not, and 2 were still not sure. With support for the proposed organization remaining strong after the forum, WVU agreed to work with the stakeholders to help develop such an organization.

3.2 Follow-up Surveys of the 'Experts'

While the Douthat State Park meeting served as a preliminary phase to the overall feasibility study of the TTV idea, it was the follow-up online surveys that provided the most insight for creating the organization. The data were collected from nine stakeholders (considered 'experts' in the Delphi lingo) who self-selected to participate in the survey, thereby expressing their interest in helping to form the organization. These experts needed to reach a consensus on important issues regarding how the TTV would develop under the supervision of WVU.

Among the experts, there was strong support for financial investment in the proposed organization – the mean price respondents were willing to pay for membership was \$392.85 (median=\$250, mode=\$250, and standard deviation=\$283.47). In the first round of the Delphi process follow-up surveys, the panel was asked to suggest a name for the organization. Responses included: West Virginia-Virginia Trout Trail, Appalachian Trout Trail, Appalachian Trout Adventures, Mid-Atlantic Trout Trail, Appalachian Trace Trout Trail, Trout Trail of the Virginias, Virginia-West Virginia Trout Trail, A Trail of Trout Memories, and Appalachian Angler Trail. In the second round of the Delphi process, the panel was asked to pick their top three choices and 5 of 9 selected the name Trout Trail of the Virginias. The slogans suggested for the new organization during the first round included: Fantastic Fishing Fun, Fish the Endless Mountains, Follow the Age-Old Trail to Catch that Which Keeps You Young, and Troutng Around. In the second round, 6 of the 9 experts chose Fish the Endless Mountains.

In addition to the name and slogan of the organization, several parts of the survey focused on managerial issues such as frequency and structure of meetings. When asked how often the organization should meet, 3 of the 9 experts preferred semi-annual meetings and 3 preferred quarterly meetings. For the structure of the meeting, the experts were asked to choose two ways to meet, considering that members are spread across two states, sometimes with considerable distance between them. E-mail discussion was supported by all of the respondents, followed by face-to-face and conference calls, both supported by 6 of the respondents. Not all respondents chose two options, and one opted to suggest a hybrid approach of face-to-face and conference calls.

4.0 Application of Results

We used the name, slogan, and website chosen during the Delphi process surveys in a brochure that invites additional parties to join the new organization. The hope was that achieving consensus on the new organization's basic information (name, slogan, and website) during the survey process would make prospective members more likely to invest in the organization at the levels they had reported in the survey. The brochure was created using Microsoft Publisher software and ArcMap was used to develop a map that showed prospective members' locations in Virginia and West Virginia. Finally, suggestions from the experts that did not receive enough votes to be chosen during the Delphi process were used in minor areas of the brochure so that the people who had made those suggestions would not feel excluded from the development process.

The development of the draft brochure helped maintain the prospective members' interest in the organization and attracted the interest of a professional brochure designer who was willing to partner with the organization. The brochure also serves as a leverage tool as new fishing vendors become aware of the developing TTV. This is important because a critical mass of members is needed in order for marketing organizations such as the TTV to succeed.

After deliberation on the different possible structures and functions of the TTV, the involved stakeholders proposed that the West Virginia Aquaculture Association (WVAA) absorb the TTV into its organization under the role of a cooperative marketing group or committee. The WVAA is a well-established organization of aquaculture businesses in West Virginia and Virginia. Some of the interested members of the TTV are current members of the WVAA and since the WVAA already exists, many of the pitfalls of starting and maintaining a new organization can be avoided and the capital needed for new growth is already available.

5.0 Conclusion

Additional research is still needed on the developing TTV as the organization evolves and new marketing materials are created. One idea is that tourism packages could be developed to serve different market segments of the region's tourists. Wilson et al. (2001) conducted a study to identify and examine factors that have helped rural communities successfully develop tourism and entrepreneurial opportunities. They suggested that four of the most important factors are the development and promotion of complete tourism packages, good community leadership, the support of local government(s), and thoughtful strategic planning. Members of the new TTV have the opportunity to play a leadership role within the tourism industry of Virginia and West Virginia when developing new tourism packages.

There appears to be substantial demand for fishing packages in West Virginia. Logar et al. (2003) conducted a survey of potential West Virginia tourists and found that 26% of the respondents (n=496) had used travel packages in the past but only 9% had used travel packages to visit West Virginia in particular. In addition, 49% of respondents expressed a desire for including fishing or fishing lessons in travel package, 72% traveled with family members, and 85% wanted overnight accommodations in their travel packages. This suggests that family fishing travel packages would meet the needs of a significant market segment of West Virginia tourists and possibly tourists to the whole TTV region now that the multi-state organization exists.

Future research is also needed to evaluate the marketing power of the TTV using on-site interviews and mail-back questionnaires. For example, assessments of the economic benefits of the packaging programs between and within destinations are needed to measure the success of the new organization's marketing.

6.0 Citations

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