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Drive Tourism in Rural Destination Development: Dual Perspectives from Industry Stakeholders and Potential Visitors

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ABSTRACT

The research looked into the rural tourism development through drive tourism by examining both the industry stakeholders and drive tourists perspectives. Specifically, the research explored the constraints and barriers that prevent drive tourists from visiting rural areas along the travel route, and provided insights of drive tourist' behavior and intention to visit a bypass or "stop-over" rural destination based on a short image formation process. Mixed method was employed, which included focus groups of tourism industry stakeholders and self-administered surveys for drive tourists. Recommendations were made to tourism stakeholders in rural areas as to how they can attract drive tourists.

Keywords: *drive tourism, rural destination, industry stakeholder, drive tourist*

INTRODUCTION

Given the significance of drive tourism in many parts of the world, it is perhaps surprising that very little research has been conducted on this subject – particularly in the U.S (Timothy, 2011). Drive tourism in the U.S. is both enormous and complex, and forms the backbone of domestic tourism in the country. The extensive road and highway network in the country is conducive to automobile travel, and the number of miles traveled by car has seen a steady growth over the last few decades (Timothy, 2011). Drive tourism, more than any other form of travel, is more inclined to spread the economic benefits of tourism to more communities and sectors, than all travel undertaken by coach, air, train or sea. The spatial relationship between origins and destinations, along with the necessary infrastructures, attractions, and management/marketing activities, are fundamental components in drive tourism framework (Prideaux & Carson, 2011). In drive tourism, tours from origins to destinations can take various forms, in which highway and highway-located attractions could be important focus of the journey and the destination itself (Connell & Page, 2008). Fundamentally market-driven, drive tourism's demand and supply is a function of price and time and the push and pull factors are applied in drive tourism system. In particular, the demand for drive tourism in a certain area will rely on the area's ability to supply the required infrastructure and services, as well as landscape and other attractions/activities (Prideaux & Carson, 2011).

Rural tourism in particular, is heavily dependent on drive tourism, and rural and regional areas around the world are increasingly recognizing self-drive tourism markets as their most important markets (Carson, Waller, & Scott, 2002). But drive tourists are not necessarily an

'easy' market to attract, and maintaining effective collaboration among geographically dispersed, small and micro tourism businesses is notoriously difficult (Carson & Cartan, 2011). Therefore, it is important to examine potential drive tourists and their travel decision-making, including destination image, interest, perceived barriers, and information sources used before visiting rural destinations by car. In addition to the demand side, any study of drive tourism in rural areas should include a tourism industry stakeholder perspective on rural tourism development and cooperation with surrounding areas and major destinations.

Destination choice behavior such as intention/likelihood to visit/revisit is heavily influenced by destination image (Um & Crompton 1990; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Destination image, starting from Echtner and Ritchie's study in 1993, has been defined to comprise both cognitive (perceptual) and affective (evaluation) domains (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Beerli & Martin, 2004). Consumers' choice process are impacted by internal psychological factors, external destination factors (most importantly, destination image), and situational constraints (Perdue & Meng, 2006; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Despite the numerous studies on destination image and future travel intention, scarce research has examined drive tourists and their desire to visit a bypass destination based on a short image formation process, and little is known about their barriers and constraints to visit a stop-over destination.

Therefore, using existing theories on drive tourism and destination image as a foundation, this study aims to look at the fledging rural Pee Dee region of South Carolina and its potential to capitalize on the millions of drive tourists that come through every year on their way to coastal destinations like Myrtle Beach and Charleston. Specifically, the research objectives are threefold: 1) to explore the barriers that prevent drive tourists from visiting rural areas when they drive to the coast; 2) to understand what rural tourism attractions might tempt drive tourists off the highways; and 3) to make recommendations to tourism stakeholders in rural areas as to how they can attract drive tourists.

METHOD

Data used in this study comes from a larger project examining the tourism development in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. In this study, three focus groups of tourism industry stakeholders preceded a consumer survey. The focus groups probed the perceived constraints and opportunities for tourism development in Pee Dee. Each session included 10-12 participants and lasted for at least one hour. The discussions were all recorded and transcribed for analysis. The target population of the consumer survey consists of potential adult visitors who had never visited the region, but who were staying in tourist destinations within a three hour driving distance to the area. Data collection took place in September 2011. Self-administered surveys were distributed with an intercept approach at various tourist locations in Myrtle Beach and Charleston. All respondents were given an official travel brochure with very detailed tourism resource information of the Pee Dee region before they took the survey. A total 246 usable surveys were collected.

The potential visitor survey included four sections. The first section asked about respondents' awareness of this region as a tourist destination and attractions / activities this area provides. Questions about general interest in this destination were also included, such as distance they were willing to drive, preferred length of stay, and interest in the features and activities in the region. Visitor barriers (16 items) were also included in this section (Nyaupane & Andereck, 2008; McKercher, 2009; Haukeland, 1990). In the second section, respondents were asked about their cognitive image (17 likert-type items), affective image (10 semantic differential items), future visit intention, and overall perception of the destination (Gartner, 1993, 1996; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Pike, 2002; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Russel & Pratt, 1980). Questions about auto travel behavior in general, for example, information search, travel party,

and side-trip along driving, were included in the third section, and the last section asked about demographic characteristics of the respondents.

RESULTS

Focus group discussions revealed major constraints to tourism development in the Pee Dee as perceived by industry stakeholders. These included the lack of a clear brand, poor accessibility, limited cooperation between regions in Pee Dee, lack of cooperation between Pee Dee and the coast region, limited infrastructure and tourism product, very poor signage, and limited marketing funds. But opportunities for tourism development in this rural area as a drive tourism destination were also recognized, such as the unique historic and nature-based tourism products, and there was a general recognition of the importance of tourism, and a willingness to collaborate among stakeholders and regions.

The survey respondents reported a very low awareness of the Pee Dee region. The majority had no idea that the Pee Dee was a tourist destination (mean=1.42 out of 5), and what it offered tourists (mean=1.38). They had a low interest in visiting Pee Dee (mean=2.61) and taking themed driving tours (mean scores ranged from 2.73 to 3.59). Despite the limited interest, culinary tourism and festivals and events are more likely to attract drive tourists to the Pee Dee than other types of tourism.

Factor analyses were conducted on the visitation barriers and three factors were generated and labeled as: negative impression, unawareness/limited information, and time/budget and interest. They explained 62.6 percent of the total variance, with a reliability value (Cronbach's alpha) of .84, .80, and .79 respectively. Three factors were also generated on the image of destination attributes (cognitive image) as Activity and Service/Cost, Accessibility and Natural Features, and Non-touristy Features. The three factors explained 61.6 percent of the total variance with reliability values of .92, .80, and .62 respectively. Multiple regression analysis was then used to examine the important factors that would influence future visitation to the Pee Dee. The results revealed that future visit intention of the potential visitors to this area would be determined by three major factors: time/budget and interest, affective image, and overall perception of the destination.

DISCUSSION

The results contribute to the knowledge body of destination image in the drive tourism context. They support the notion that drive tourists are not an 'easy' market to attract, and that maintaining effective collaboration among geographically dispersed tourism businesses is notoriously difficult (Carson & Cartan, 2011). The study also revealed that the future visit intentions of drive tourists are influenced by both internal and external factors such as time/budget and self-interest, affective image, and overall perception of the destination. In the drive tourism context, with limited prior knowledge of the destination, potential tourists' affective image and overall perception of the destination are formed shortly after exposure to advertising travel brochures, and this becomes the key determinants of visit intention.

From a practical perspective, it is clear from the results of this study that the Pee Dee region has very little brand recognition, a fact acknowledged by tourists and industry stakeholders. There is clearly a need for improved relationships between tourism stakeholders in the region, and between tourism stakeholders in the Pee Dee and the popular coastal regions. Marketers in the Pee Dee will have to reconcile a range of local and regional interests and promote a clear identity acceptable to a range of constituencies. Cooperative strategies can create marketing bridges between local DMOs and individual operators in the tourism industry, and between 'umbrella' campaigns and industry marketing expenditure. Stakeholders in the Pee

Dee region need to form partnerships with travel, recreational, and other businesses on joint promotional efforts.

There is potential for daytrips and bus tours from the coast, especially if the Pee Dee can offer attractive packages. Packaging destinations either for the general mass tourism market or for niche specialist markets can significantly increase a destination's appeal. But this would require upgrading the basic tourism infrastructure in the area such as accommodations, restaurants and attractions. Culinary tourism has the potential to pull tourists from the highway, and festivals and events could also act as a draw for the Pee Dee. The region already experiences moderate success with festivals such as the South Carolina Pecan festival, Arts International Festival, and the Pee Dee Airshow. Resources to stage and promote festivals that would attract a national audience are currently lacking.

A lack of accessibility also hampers the area's development as a tourism region. There is no national airport in the Pee Dee, and there is very limited 'connectivity' between Myrtle Beach and the rural areas in terms of public ground transportation. Driving from the beach is also problematic with limited road access and frequent traffic jams in peak seasons. The poor signage in the Pee Dee also hampers tourism development in the area, a problem identified in previous studies (TDI, 2010). Good directional signage is critical to the success of drive tourism routes (Carson & Cartan, 2011).

Finally, tourism marketers in the Pee Dee should keep a close eye on changes in technology. Digital communications and information technology will play a crucial role in the future of drive tourism (Ali & Carson, 2011). Mobile technology, social media platforms and downloadable applications have changed the way tourists are making decisions, and this will certainly impact the drive tourism market. Travelers are increasingly using apps to create digital itineraries based on their specific interests, and built-in technology in cars continues to evolve.

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