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Shuangyu Xu

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management North Carolina State University

Dr. Samantha Rozier Rich

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management North Carolina State University

Dr. Michelle Gacio Harrolle

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management North Carolina State University

Katherine Kelley

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management North Carolina State University

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Xu, Shuangyu; Rozier Rich, Dr. Samantha; Gacio Harrolle, Dr. Michelle; and Kelley, Katherine, "Impact of Summer Residential Camps on the Tourism System" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 5.
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Impact of Summer Residential Camps on the Tourism System

Shuangyu Xu

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management
North Carolina State University

Samantha Rozier Rich, PhD

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management
North Carolina State University

Michelle Gacio Harrolle, PhD

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management
North Carolina State University

Katharine Kelley

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management
North Carolina State University

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to understand the contributions of organized summer camps to the tourism system, as well as their contributions to the local economy. The sources of information families used for trip planning were also explored. Results revealed that summer residential camps in Western North Carolina can be a catalyst for the travel and tourism industry. In addition to the generation of considerable economic impact and substantial tax revenues, summer camps also draw the majority of camp families and staff to travel great distances to local areas, spend large amounts of money there, and actively participate in tourist opportunities.

Keywords: *summer residential camp, contributions to tourism*

INTRODUCTION

Organized camps have been a part of American culture for almost 150 years. During this celebrated history, summer residential camps have been widely acknowledged for their positive influence on youth development (Allen, Cox, & Cooper, 2006; Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2009; Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007). However, summer camps can also have positive impacts on the surrounding community and economy due to the influx of camp families traveling to the area (Gunderson, 1989; Lewis & Deller, 1993).

Within these tough economic times, many camp directors feel the need to justify their value to local policy makers and community leaders. Previous research has suggested that summer camps could contribute to an area's economic impact due to the influx of camp families traveling to the area (Gunderson, 1989; Lewis & Deller, 1993). However, little research has been conducted looking at the impact of summer residential camps on the travel and tourism industry, from the perspectives of both camp families and camp staff.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to better understand the contributions of organized summer camps to the tourism system, as well as their contributions to the local economy. In addition, the sources of information families used to learn about camps and to plan their travels

were also explored in the study, in hopes of better communicating and marketing to camp families in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a group of summer residential camps in Western North Carolina (WNC), specifically within four counties (Buncombe, Henderson, Jackson, and Transylvania) during the summer of 2010. Data were collected using an online survey instrument. Emails were sent out to camps/camp directors (via the North Carolina Youth Camp Association - NCYCA), camp staff (via camp directors), and camp families (via camp directors), asking for participation. Altogether, 40 surveys from camp/camp directors, 540 from camp staff, and 4,600 from camp families were valid for analysis.

IMPLAN software was used to accurately estimate the economic impact of residential summer camps in WNC. IMPLAN is a computer modeling system that builds its results with secondary data collected from multiple federal government agencies to precisely calculate an economic impact for a particular region.

In addition to demographic data, both camp staff and camp families were asked to indicate activities during their travel, the influence of camp on visits/travels around NC, sources of information used for trip planning, and the days and money they spent in WNC before/after camp.

RESULTS

Results of this study illustrate a strong connection between camp families and the tourism industry. For example:

- Large majority (93%) lived outside of the four county region
- Majority (82%) traveled to camp by car an average of 500 miles
- Visited the camps an average of 2.80 times staying an average of 4 nights (for all trips) primarily in hotels
- Spent an average of \$2,096 during their multiple stays in the four county region
- 76% said they would NOT have visited NC if it were not for camps
- Top 4 activities during travel: Shopping, visiting a scenic area, hiking, and visiting historical site/museum
- Majority (69%) sometimes or always considered themselves tourists

Internet and word-of-mouth appear to be the two most important sources of information used by camp families. For example:

- Top four sources of information used for trip planning: Internet/website, previous experience, friends, and information from camp.
- Top five ways families learned about camps: Friends, Internet/Website, Relatives, Previous Experience, and Information from Camps.
- Top three social media outlets: Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

The study also illustrated a strong connection between camp staff and the tourism industry. For example:

- Majority (68%) visited the area because of working at camps
- Almost half (48%) indicated working at camp influenced them to visit the NC area
- Spent an average of 5.5 days and approximately \$300 in the WNC region before working at camp, and an average of 4.5 days and around \$220 after working at camp

- Top 4 activities during travel: shopping, visiting a scenic area, hiking, and camping on own
- A majority indicated their camp employment had a strong influence on their family/friends decision to visit NC additional times during the year

With regards to economic impact, the total economic impact on the four counties in WNC from residential summer camps and their operations was approximately \$365 million and \$33 million in new tax revenues.

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

Results revealed that summer residential camps in WNC can be a catalyst for the travel and tourism industry. In addition to the generation of considerable economic impact and substantial tax revenues, summer camps also draw the majority of camp families and staff to travel great distances to the local area, spend large amounts of money in the area, and actively participate in tourist opportunities.

Camps should communicate the positive impacts they are having on the travel and tourism industry and on the surrounding communities to local, regional, and state legislators and policy makers. Camps should also seek out opportunities to highlight their roles to the increased visitation and economy in the local region. Results also suggest an opportunity to develop partnerships between camps, local tourist attractions, and tourism agencies, to tap into a tourist group, roughly 50,000 camp families, who are looking for things to do in the area. Well-developed cross-marketing campaigns could create a win-win situation for residential camps and other tourist-related businesses in the area. Both camps and tourism-related businesses can maximize their revenue and awareness among various tourist groups to the area, including camp families and staff.

Overall, as results implied, active use of social media and the Internet/website, and bundling packages among different related business (such as tourist attractions and hotels) may help increase awareness and establish a partnership among businesses and agencies.

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