



April 2002

NR/RF/10

Evaluating a Special Nature-Based Tourism Event

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Introduction

Special events are a proven way to draw tourists' attention to the attractions that a community has to offer, while at the same time providing an enjoyable experience for local residents. Events as diverse as the Cedar City's Utah Shakespearean Festival, Vernal's Dinosaur Days, and the Sundance Film Festival are important contributors to local economies as they draw visitors from around the state and region. Many of those visitors return year after year, spreading the word among family, friends and neighbors about the enjoyable time they've had.

In Utah, such events often rely heavily on the scenic natural attractions that surround our cities and towns. Events such as Moab's Easter Jeep Safari or the Brian Head Bash Mountain Bike Festival not only bring visitors to enjoy the events as they occur, but also can encourage tourists to return to enjoy our state's natural wonders on their own. Because special events require a lot of extra effort on a community's part, it's nice to know that all the hard work pays off at other times of year, as well as during the event.

Because special events are time-consuming, and can be expensive to arrange and promote, event organizers and community leaders need to know whether an event's benefits outweigh the costs. Evaluations of a special event should consider not only the economic impact of the event itself, in terms of dollars brought into the local community, but also the impact on a community's reputation that can draw visitors throughout the tourist season. If the event isn't having the desired effect, perhaps it would be better to channel the community's energy elsewhere. If the effect is positive, organizers can benefit by knowing what's working

well and what they could do to improve. In other words, communities need to regularly evaluate their special tourism events.

This fact sheet describes a one-page exit survey that can easily be used to evaluate a nature-based tourism event. The survey originally was designed for Davis County's Great Salt Lake Bird Festival, and the results of that evaluation will be used here as an illustration, however the questionnaire can easily be adapted for any sort of nature-based tourism event. In a short survey that takes visitors no more than five minutes to complete, event organizers can learn:

- economic impacts – expenditures in the local community by persons who probably would be spending their money elsewhere if not for the event;
- festival satisfaction – what worked, what didn't, and what improvements would visitors like to see for the next event;
- marketing information – who attended the special event, where they heard about it, and how likely are they to return.

The Great Salt Lake Bird Festival

The inaugural Great Salt Lake Bird Festival took place May 7-9, 1999. It included bird-related seminars, speakers, demonstrations and family activities at the Davis County FairPark in Farmington; and field trips to natural areas such as Antelope Island State Park, the Farmington Bay Wildlife Management Area, and the Nature Conservancy's Layton Marsh wetland preserve. Davis County Tourism facilitated the event, but like most community efforts it required a partnership of many groups and organizations, including state agencies such as the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and Division of Travel Development; the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal agencies; the Nature Conservancy and local Audubon Society chapters; local Chambers of Commerce as well as businesses such as Kennecott Copper and Layton Hills Mall; Utah State University and local schools.

Davis County is Utah’s smallest county in area but is among the largest in terms of population, as it contains the northern suburbs of Salt Lake City as well as Hill Air Force Base. Most of the county’s best-known attractions are man-made rather than natural features, such as the Lagoon amusement park, Layton Hills Mall, and Bountiful LDS temple. Its mountains are very steep, with few roads, and there are no ski resorts as in Weber County to the north or Salt Lake County to the south.

But Davis County is also home to Antelope Island State Park, which hosts nearly 400,000 visitors per year, and it offers visitors the best access to one of Utah’s most impressive but least appreciated natural attractions: the Great Salt Lake. The lake, and the wetlands that surround it, offer a major stopping place for as many as 6 million migratory and nesting shorebirds each year. Its importance to birds is so great that it is one of only 15 places in the Western Hemisphere to be included in a hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network. For persons who enjoy birding – one of America’s fastest-growing recreation activities – the Great Salt Lake is a must-see attraction. So it’s no big surprise that Davis County Tourism would like to capitalize on this major natural draw at the county’s western edge.

Organizers of the Great Salt Lake Bird Festival therefore had several goals for their event, including: to increase the economic contribution of tourism to Davis County and surrounding communities; to increase public awareness and pride for birds found on or near the Great Salt Lake; to educate the public about values of the Great Salt Lake; and to initiate a project that would give something back to the community. These goals put Davis County’s efforts squarely into the category of tourism development known as “sustainable nature-based tourism,” in which communities strive to enjoy economic benefits from their natural surroundings, while maintaining the high environmental quality that visitors are seeking.

Evaluating the Festival

The evaluation method we chose was a one-page, 11-question survey that was developed by Utah State University students enrolled in a graduate class in recreation economics and policy, and reviewed by experts at the Utah Division of Travel Development as well as USU’s Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism. The survey (Table 1) is not copyrighted. Anyone is welcome to use and revise it to meet the needs of their own tourism events.

The festival opened with a Friday evening speech by Gov. Mike Leavitt, but surveys were handed out only on Saturday and Sunday when bird-related activities took place. A table was set up next to the FairPark exit, and a volunteer asked departing visitors to complete the survey either on-site or at their convenience. Only one survey per party was given out, so that expenditures would not be double-counted. An address was provided on the reverse side of the survey so visitors could mail them if they wished, but only three of the 126 completed surveys arrived by mail. If this option is used, postage should be provided (ideally using an event partner’s Business Reply Mail permit to minimize mailing costs).

The next three sections describe some of the results of the Great Salt Lake Bird Festival survey. These are provided to give readers an idea of the kinds of information that a survey like this can provide to special-event organizers.

Who attended the Festival?

Respondents to the survey came from 36 different towns. Except for one visitor from Washington and one from Arizona, all were residents of northern Utah (Table 2), but two-thirds of the visitors came from counties other than Davis. Therefore the festival did attract persons who might otherwise have been spending money elsewhere if the event had not taken place. A typical festival visitor was an adult in a party of 2-4 persons who was already interested in birding. Only 11 respondents (9%) identified birding as their most favorite recreational activity, but half said they consider birding “one of my favorite activities.” Only 4 people said the Festival was the first time they had participated in a birding activity.

Table 1: Residence of respondents

<i>City</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Salt Lake City	32	25.4
Ogden	16	12.7
Layton	12	9.5
Farmington	7	5.6
Clearfield	5	4.0
Centerville	4	3.2
Fruit Heights	4	3.2
Kaysville	4	3.2
Logan	4	3.2
Sandy	4	3.2
Others	34	27.0
<i>County</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Salt Lake	45	35.7
Davis	23	34.1
Weber	23	18.3
Others	15	11.9

Slightly less than one-third of the respondents visited the Festival as part of a larger trip that included visits to other attractions in the area. Of those who reported visiting someplace else, the most commonly named attraction was Antelope Island. Other places that were mentioned by more than one respondent included Farmington Bay, Farmington Canyon, and the Layton Marsh wetlands -- all in Davis County. This suggests that the Festival was responsible for drawing at least a few visitors to other tourist attractions in the county.

Meeting the Festival's goals

The Festival goals were economic (encouraging people to spend money in Davis County) and educational (raising public awareness about the recreation and tourism opportunities offered by the Great Salt Lake). The survey contained questions relating to both. Although we couldn't determine in which county the expenditures were made, all but 21 of our respondents reported spending some money as a result of their Festival attendance. The average reported expenditure level was \$27.93, but that figure is inflated by responses from a few people who spent as much as \$300 on Festival-related items.

Festival entry and trip fees, along with food and "other" expenses, accounted for most of the spending (Table 3). Of 105 persons who reported some kind of Festival-related expenditure, only one paid for lodging. However, 52 respondents spent money on Festival events, with the median expense among that group being \$12, and 51 spent money on food, with a median expenditure was \$7.

To assess the event's effect on public awareness, we asked respondents whether attending the Festival had changed their attitudes concerning the Great Salt Lake. Sixty-two percent of the respondents (62%) said their attitudes had changed after attending the event, and only two of those people said they thought more negatively about the lake than before. Respondents said they had gained new appreciation for the wildlife values (59.3%); scenic values (33.3%); and educational values (39.8%) of the Great Salt Lake.

Planning for future events

One of the main purposes of the survey was to aid in planning future festivals. The first question that needed to be answered, then, was: Should there be another Great Salt Lake Bird Festival? The answer from our respondents was clearly "Yes!" More than 95 percent of those who completed the survey said they would return to another Festival. Only two persons said they would definitely not return, and another two weren't sure.

A second way to evaluate visitor satisfaction is to ask how an event matched visitors' expectations. In the case of the

Great Salt Lake Bird Festival, 41% said it was "everything I wanted." A slightly larger proportion said it was "mostly what I wanted" (44%). Twelve people (10%) said "a few things could have gone better," and 6 people said "only a few things turned out as I wanted." No one checked the lowest rating category: "No, it was nothing like I wanted."

We also asked for suggestions for future Festivals, and 75 people (59.5%) took advantage of that opportunity. Many of the comments were extremely positive. Among the suggestions for improvement that were made more than once: have more items on sale; have more or different tours; use the Internet as an advertising tool; and have more live birds on exhibit at the FairPark.

Several of the comments pertained to promotion of the Festival. We also asked a specific question about promotion in order to help guide future planning. Of the various means used to promote the Festival, newspaper articles and advertisements appear to have been the most effective. The event organizers had arranged for a large advertisement in Ogden's Standard Examiner newspaper, so it's not surprising that newspapers were by far the most frequently listed source of information about the festival (53.2%). Other sources, in descending order of mention, were: friends or acquaintances; schools; environmental organizations; and posters.

Using the evaluation

Results of our evaluation suggest that the first annual Great Salt Lake Bird Festival was a success, and many people feel the Festival should become an annual event. However, the event did not draw many tourists from far away, so there is considerable untapped tourism potential.

Most participants got all or most of what they wanted from their experience despite weather conditions that were less than optimal. The Festival appears to have had at least a short-term positive effect on visitors' attitudes toward the Great Salt Lake as a recreation/tourism destination, and most people spent some money related to the Festival even though the event drew almost entirely from within a 40-mile radius of Davis County.

The secret to improving the Festival's tourist-attraction potential lies in improving the way it's promoted. Newspaper promotion of the event was useful, and the organizers may want to consider spending money on advertisements in papers that have a wider circulation, such as the two daily Salt Lake City papers. Several people said they wished they'd had more information about the Festival, and gotten it sooner. One way to do that is through the World Wide Web, for example, through links with the Utah Division of Travel Development's Utah.com site.

Outside marketing should be targeted mainly to birders or potential birders. There are opportunities to advertise in national and regional publications designed for bird-watchers. Most attendees visited the Festival as a sole destination rather than as part of a longer trip; of those who did visit some other place, most visited another natural setting. Therefore co-promotions with attractions such as Lagoon or Layton Hills Mall may not be very useful, but information should be provided at natural attractions such as Antelope Island and other state parks, Salt Lake City's Red Butte Garden, Thanksgiving Point in Lehi, and other outdoor education centers.

Summary

Through the use of a simple, one-page questionnaire, organizers of the Great Salt Lake Bird Festival were able to gain valuable information about their special event which can be useful in planning future events as well as evaluating whether the costs of producing the Festival are justified by the benefits. Sponsors of nature-based tourism events around Utah can use this simple survey, or a similar one, to evaluate and improve their own tourism activities. For help with design or analysis of an evaluative survey, or to answer other questions about nature-based tourism, call Utah State University's Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at 435-797-1009.

Table 2: Money spent because of the Bird Festival visit

Total expenditures:

Average = \$27.93 Median = \$3

(21 persons, or 16.7%, did not report making any expenditures as a result of the Festival)

Expenditures on lodging: Average = \$0.19 Median = \$0

(One person reported spending \$20; all others reported no expenditure on lodging)

Expenditures on Festival events:

Average = \$8.32 Median = \$2

No Festival expenses N=50 (49%)*

Spent \$1-\$5 N=11 (10.9%)*

Spent \$6-\$10 N=12 (11.9%)*

Spent \$11-\$15 N= 8 (7.9%)*

Spent \$16-\$20 N=11 (10.9%)*

Spent over \$20 N=10 (9.9%)*

Expenditures on gasoline:

Average = \$1.49 Median = \$0

No gasoline expenses N=71 (69.6%)*

Spent \$1-\$5 N=24 (23.5%)*

Spent \$6-\$10 N=7 (6.9%)*

Expenditures on food:

Average = \$4.48 Median = \$1

No food expenses N=51 (50%)*

Spent \$1-\$5 N=22 (21.6%)*

Spent \$6-\$10 N=19 (18.7%)*

Spent over \$10 N=10 (9.9%)*

Other expenditures:

Average = \$13.45 Median = \$0

No other expenses N=57 (54.8%)*

Spent \$1-\$5 N=11 (10.9%)*

Spent \$6-\$10 N= 7 (6.9%)*

Spent \$11-\$20 N= 8 (7.9%)*

Spent \$21-\$40 N=11 (10.9%)*

Spent \$40-\$100 N= 5 (5.0%)*

Spent over \$100 N= 3 (3.0%)*

*Percent of those reporting some overall expenditure

Contributors:

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The Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (IORT) is affiliated with Utah State University's Department of Natural Resources and Extensions. For more information about IORT see our website at www.cnr.usu.edu/iort.

Great Salt Lake Bird Festival

Thank you for taking time to fill out this short survey. We'll use it in planning future festivals.

1. Where are you from? City _____ State _____

2. How many days are you planning to spend at the Bird Festival? _____ days

3. How did you hear about the Bird Festival?

Newspaper Friends Other (_____)
 School Posters around town

4. How many people are there in your party? _____ people

How many of those people are over 18? _____ people over 18

5. How much have you spent, or do you plan to spend, because of your visit to the Bird Festival?

\$ _____ Lodging \$ _____ Gas and oil \$ _____ Other festival-
\$ _____ Festival events \$ _____ Food related expenses

6. What, if any, other attractions do you plan to visit during this trip?

7. Has attending the Bird Festival changed your attitudes toward the Great Salt Lake? (Please check all that apply.)

My attitude toward the Great Salt Lake hasn't changed
 I have a new appreciation for the wildlife values of the Great Salt Lake
 I have a new appreciation for the scenic values of the Great Salt Lake
 I have a new appreciation for the educational values of the Great Salt Lake
 Now that I know more about the lake, I feel more negatively toward it than before

8. How important is bird-watching to you as a recreational activity?

It is my favorite activity Somewhat important, I like other things more
 It is one of my favorite activities It isn't important to me

9. Would you return to another Bird Festival? Yes No

10. Was your overall experience at the Bird Festival what you wanted it to be?

Yes, it was everything I wanted Only a few things turned out as I wanted
 Yes, it was mostly what I wanted No, it was nothing like I wanted
 Somewhat, a few things could have gone better

11. Do you have any suggestions for what we could do at next year's Bird Festival?
