

THE RURAL SOUTH: Preparing for the Challenges of the

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Diversifying the rural economy: Tourism development

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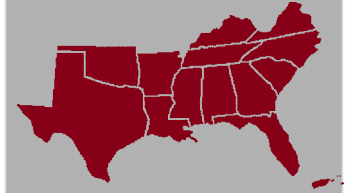
Businesses and communities in the rural South have dealt with many challenges as our national and regional economy has evolved. Traditional sources of jobs and income such as agriculture, mining, forestry, and other extractive industry have suffered low commodity prices. Low-wage based manufacturing has continued the migration further South (beyond U.S. borders) as the search for even cheaper labor continues. Small-town main street merchants struggle with evolving demographics such as more two-wage earning families and higher consumer expectations while, at the same time, competing with large discount merchants and corporations with substantial price advantages. In addition, e-commerce has created a new challenge to be faced by these local merchants.

Amid these rapidly evolving trends, local communities in the South are searching for opportunities to diversify the local economy. One possibility often identified is the travel and tourism industry. Many communities feel they have the resource base, the potential attractions, and the opportunity to exploit the growing tourism industry.

Rural areas and small Southern communities often have natural resources, authentic agricultural or ecological-based activities, scenic beauty, history, and “small-town charm” which may appeal to urbanites caught up in today’s fast-paced lifestyle. However, simply possessing these attributes is not sufficient. Local leaders and business persons must engage in successful product development, marketing, management, and provision of adequate infrastructure. Sound business decisions and informed local leadership is necessary to successfully diversify local economies through tourism development.

This policy brief is devoted to the aspect of local economic development related to tourism. First, the current situation in the Southern states will be briefly assessed, focusing on some of the amenity-based and natural resource-related opportunities in rural areas. Then opportunities and challenges related to

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the tourism industry will be addressed. Some of the pros and cons of local tourism development will be reviewed with a special focus on anticipating potential impacts of growth in tourism. Options for tourism with a rural focus will be summarized and include recreation and natural attractions, cultural/heritage tourism, agritourism, and ecotourism. Finally, steps toward local tourism development will be reviewed focusing on potential public policy and technical assistance programs.

Current Situation and Trends

The region has experienced varied levels of population change during the past decade. The largest states in the region, (Texas, Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina) all experienced double digit population growth rates (Table 1). Other states such as Louisiana and Oklahoma experienced more modest growth. The growth rates over the time period 1990 to 1997 ranged from 3.6 percent in Louisiana to over 20 percent in Georgia. Clearly, there are varied economic experiences in the Southern region. Per capita income in 1997 ranged from \$26,109 in Virginia to \$18,098 in Mississippi.

Table 1. Southern Region States, Population, and Per Capita Income, 1990, 1997.

	Population			Per Capita Income		
	1990	1997	% change	1990	1997	% change
Alabama	4,040,389	4,369,862	8.2	15,213	20,672	35.9
Arkansas	2,350,624	2,551,373	8.5	14,025	19,595	39.7
Florida	12,938,624	15,111,244	16.8	19,127	24,799	29.7
Georgia	6,478,149	7,788,240	20.2	17,385	23,882	37.4
Kentucky	3,686,892	3,960,825	7.4	15,085	20,570	36.4
Louisiana	4,221,826	4,372,035	3.6	14,773	20,458	38.5
Mississippi	2,575,475	2,768,619	7.5	12,706	18,098	42.4
North Carolina	6,632,448	7,650,789	15.4	16,649	23,168	39.2
Oklahoma	3,145,576	3,358,044	6.8	15,613	20,305	30.1
South Carolina	3,486,310	3,885,736	11.5	15,427	20,508	32.9
Tennessee	4,877,203	5,483,535	12.4	16,309	22,699	39.2
Texas	16,986,335	20,044,141	18.0	17,290	23,707	37.1
Virginia	6,189,197	6,872,912	11.0	20,021	26,109	30.4
Region Total	77,608,495	88,217,355	13.7			

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service has utilized a classification system for nonmetropolitan counties which further emphasizes the variation of economic/demographic characteristics over the South. The classification includes economic types based on farming, mining, manufacturing, government, services, and a category defined as non-specialized. The 955 nonmetropolitan counties in the Southern states fall into the following economic types: farming 172 or 18 percent; mining 64 or 7 percent; manufacturing 300 or 31 percent; government 94 or 10 percent; services 94 or 10 percent; and nonspecialized 231 or 24 percent. Many of the farming dependent and manufacturing dependent counties fall in rural areas. As noted earlier, these basic industries have struggled in the past decade and local economies depending on these industries are in need of diversification.

There are several states in the Southern region with national or international tourism destinations. States such as Florida (home of Disney World), Kentucky (Churchill Downs), and Tennessee (music) are home to these destinations. The intent of this report is not to focus on major commercial destinations but to assess the opportunities for small towns and rural communities. Many of the counties with declining income or population are searching for economic options. As noted, counties frequently have depended on agriculture or traditional manufacturing. These counties and communities are the focus of this report.

Opportunities and Challenges

There are many arguments that have been presented to support or oppose tourism development. Both pros and cons need to be carefully considered by local leaders when considering tourism as an economic diversification strategy. Arguments in support of tourism include the focus on new jobs and additional income being injected into the local economy. Tourism attracts outsiders who bring dollars to spend. These dollars are circulated in the local economy and can potentially expand the local economic base. Tourism development can also enhance the quality of life for local residents. New restaurants, enhanced recreational opportunities, and entertainment will be available which otherwise might not have existed. A more vibrant and diverse local economy offers more employment and entertainment opportunities for the local residents.

The Travel Industry Association of America [1] reports estimates of U.S. travel expenditures in 1998 to be \$495 billion including such categories as public transportation, auto transportation, lodging, food service, amusement/recreation, and general retail expenditures. The U.S. travel and tourism industry directly employs over 7 million people. Travel expenditures in the 13 Southern states are estimated to total \$136 billion in 1997 [1]. When these dollars are brought into a local region from outside travelers, the expenditures represent economic impacts supporting wages and salaries that might not otherwise exist.

Opponents of tourism development often raise several concerns. With the new economic activities, outsiders come to the community. There may be more traffic, more demand or competition for services, and sometimes more crime. The newcomers can often times be like guests in a

The Issues

- Traditional sources of jobs and income in the rural South have suffered.
- Rural areas and small communities often have natural resources and “small-town charm” that appeal to urbanites caught up in today’s fast-paced lifestyle.

The Trends

- The region has experienced varied levels of population change during the past decade.
- There are varied economic experiences in the Southern region with a need to diversify local economies.
- Many of the counties with declining income or population are searching for economic options to replace the agricultural and manufacturing economy.

Opportunities and Challenges

- Travel expenditures in the 13 Southern states are estimated to total \$136 billion in 1997.
- Tourism and travel offer potential for the diversification of the rural economy.
- With tourism, there may come more traffic, more demand on competition for services, and sometimes more crime.
- The challenge for local communities is to anticipate both positive and negative impacts and plan to enhance the positive.

Potential Rural Tourism Options

- Recreation and Natural Attractions
- Agritourism
- Cultural/Heritage Tourism
- Ecotourism
- Retiree Recruitment

Steps to Assist Tourism Development

- Establish clearly-defined goals the entire community can support
- Community-wide involvement
- Build on existing and potential strengths of the community
- Develop a strategic plan so all local resources are utilized in the most effective manner
- Make use of all available internal and external resources that can provide educational and technical assistance, help build collaborative efforts, and offer funding support

“Informed local leadership is essential if communities are to successfully consider tourism development.”

home—they overstay their visit! The fact is, after the arrival of tourism and visitors, the community and region will not be the same place as in the past. The challenge for local communities is to anticipate both negative and positive impacts and plan to enhance the positive.

Informed local leadership is essential if communities are to successfully consider tourism development. The pros and cons of tourism should be evaluated and fully understood. Community-wide involvement will enhance citizen responses to the tourism option. Techniques such as impact reports, public hearings or surveys, and media coverage will allow the local residents to air concerns, and hopefully, buy into the effort. Ultimately, the private sector will have to determine if viable options for tourism exist. The community can provide either a positive or negative environment for growth.

The Travel Industry Association of America reports on activities participated in by U.S. resident travelers in 1998. For trips of 50 miles or more, survey results indicate shopping tops the list of activities with 33 percent of the respondents selecting this category [1]. Outdoor activity follows with 17 percent. Other activities and the corresponding percentages are: historical/museum (15 percent); beach (11 percent); cultural event/festival (10 percent); national/state park (9 percent); theme/amusement park (8 percent); night life/dancing (8 percent); gambling (7 percent); sports events (6 percent); and golf/tennis/skiing (4 percent). Clearly, rural areas and small towns have potential related to history, natural resources, cultural events, or proximity to National/State Parks. The same source from the Travel Industry Association of America [1] also reported on leisure/recreational activities by overseas travelers to the U.S. in 1998. Activities such as visiting historical places, visiting small towns, and touring the countryside all tended to attract foreign visitors.

Rural Tourism Options

There are several tourism options which relate to the strengths and resources of rural Southern places. The terms utilized for these options are varied and sometimes interrelated. There are four tourism concepts which stand out: recreation and natural attractions, cultural/heritage tourism, agritourism, and eco-tourism. Each of the four will be briefly discussed.

Recreation and Natural Attractions include lakes, forestry, parks, beaches, and other outdoor activities. Families are searching for “fun” activities in a warm and sunny climate. The South has much to offer in these areas. A critical issue will be to develop the needed infrastructure (public and private) such as rest stops, lodging, restaurants, etc. which is necessary to offer complete services to tourists and travelers.

Agritourism is helping many farmers to survive in today’s marketplace. Diversification strategies may include attracting visitors and incorporating a tourism element into the farm operation. According to a recent publication [2] by the New York Sea Grant Program, agritourism basically combines agriculture with another existing industry—tourism. Diane Kuehn and others argue that “agritourism works to expand existing businesses, create new festivals and farm markets, and tie this all together regionally to attract visitors.”

For agritourism to be successful, regional planning and cooperation are critical. Careful consideration of attractions in the region will lead to enhanced success in marketing. Visitors desire to see “real” farm activity and often this means additional considerations for safety, environmental concerns, adequate rest stops, and other needed facilities.

Cultural/Heritage Tourism has been described as “the marketing of cultural heritage [3].” Opportunities abound and include historic reenactments, ethnic communities, Native American experiences, “Old West” towns and others. Tourists are very eager to experience “real” cultural activities and to learn or enhance their awareness. The emphasis should be on realistic and accurate representation. For example, a replica of a Swiss Alps village in the rural South might not be as desirable as an accurate depiction of a rural Ozarks village and related culture.

Ecotourism is purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources financially beneficial to local citizens [4]. Generally, this involves small scale travel with 10 to 15 ecotourists per ecotour. Protection of the existing environment is key for this type of tourism.

An example of an ecotour is described in the *Ecotourism Development Manual* prepared by the Northwest Arkansas Resource Conservation and Development Council [4]. Northwest Arkansas is home to Ozark Ecotourism, a community-based ecotour. Newton County, Arkansas, offers tours including caving, hikes, Native American sites, rocks, nature, river trails, etc. Packaging, marketing, policies, and personnel training are all critical issues that must be addressed and are described in the manual.

Outdoor tourism and recreation, cultural attractions, history, and ecological sites all can attract visitors. Often these visits turn into repeat events. Tourists can even lead to another source of economic development—retirees—and this possibility is discussed in the next section.

Retirees and Tourism Development

Research discovered that some tourism programs have a silver lining—people who enjoyed vacationing in certain areas so much that they migrate to those areas after retirement. Some communities have decided to develop this silver lining because retirees are valuable citizens as well as tourists.

Research has found that retirees are seeking mild climate, lower cost of living, quality housing at comparatively low cost, medical facilities, cultural and recreational opportunities, and services for seniors such as public transportation or home health care. But, just as different tourism markets seek different tourism experiences, some retirees demand facilities like those along the Florida coast; others are seeking something different. Some retirees may enjoy distinct weather seasons and the changes of fall or spring may be a plus. Other retirees may be seeking a central location with easy access to either coast. A community needs to understand the market and understand what retirees are seeking.

How would a community go about organizing to understand the market? First, a local organization takes the lead, providing stability, and accepting responsibility for leadership. This could be a new organization or part of an existing organization. Then, the organization conducts a community inventory to understand the community’s strengths and weaknesses. A key point learned from conversations with migrating retirees is that resettlement was not a decision that was made two months before they moved. This was a decision that was made over a 10-15 year period. The husband and wife often did a tremendous amount of research to decide where they wanted to locate, viewing this as a very important life decision or business decision. They started shopping around 15 years prior to retiring. A 45-year-old tourist coming through with a couple of kids in tow is a dual opportunity: profitable now for tourism dollars and possibly profitable 10-15 years from now as a new resident. A community must start planting that seed early because prospects are shopping around and thinking about it now. Each community must be aware of this opportunity. Local awareness and support are very critical. Safe living conditions must be part of the whole experience as well.

One method of recruiting retirees might be to offer free retirement vacation specials. A local chamber of commerce, through a tourism recruitment activity, could offer free pre-retirement vacation specials for potential retirees. Develop an appropriate image for the community. Begin to develop the needed tools: brochures, videos, and ads. This requires an adequate budget. Projects such as these, finding out who the people are and then directly recruiting them, cost money. One western Oklahoma community developed a brochure to market to Oklahomans who had moved out west, especially to California. “Come home to Oklahoma” suggested a return to the home state to retire. Targeting those attending high school class reunions can help with this type of strategy. The theme was (or could be) advertised in California publications, and in magazines read by retirees such as *Modern Maturity*. Another community targeted New York City police officers. It was felt that some of these officers might be interested in a slower paced retirement and there were local contacts available. The community went to New York and worked directly with a retirement group—and they were successful.

It should be clearly noted, retirees can bring costs to communities as well. There will be needed infrastructure such as roads and streets and services such as health care or crime prevention. Investments in the appropriate physical/social infrastructure will be necessary.

Internet Opportunities

Recent estimates indicate that over 50 million U.S. travelers planned or booked trips using the internet in 1999 [5]. This is a 54 percent increase over internet use in 1998. Additional information in the report prepared by the Travel Industry Association of America indicated 90 percent of travelers who utilized the internet for travel plans or reservations expressed satisfaction. According to e-markets, in 1999, travel passed computers as the leading on-line retail category.

Technology is evolving rapidly and has changed the business landscape. Travel and tourism businesses are no exception. Smith [6] lists several advantages of online marketing including low barriers to entry and removal of geographic limitations. Even small fledgling businesses can try the internet as a marketing tool with relatively low investment. Disadvantages include the fact that for now, the internet does not reach everyone. Effective marketing on the internet requires some skill and expertise and interested tourism related businesses will have to do their homework. Holleman [7] however, notes that electronic commerce is already a reality and can be a tremendous tool in some cases.

Steps to Assist Tourism Development

Community leaders are asking if capturing some of these travel expenditures represents a potential strategy for economic development. As noted, potential benefits include new job creation, the capture of outside income for the local economy, and growth in local tax revenue. Ultimately, each community will have to decide if tourism is a viable option. The experts do note you cannot “play” with a tourism strategy. The market is highly competitive, and communities must have a commitment to sound product development and a solid marketing plan. The following steps are crucial:

STEP 1

The first step for a community interested in the tourism and travel industry is to establish clearly-defined goals the entire community can support. Common goals include attracting and stopping visitors in your area; extending their stay to maximize expenditures; and finally, extending your season so a steady flow of tourists exists. Groups involved should include city and county officials, civic organizations, business persons, educational institutions, and religious leaders.

STEP 2

A good community-wide effort could include the formation of several subcommittees, including **promotion** to centralize and coordinate the targeted market effort for your tourism attraction; **special events** to develop and carry out events such as festivals, fairs, downtown sales, homecom-

ings, etc.; **finance** to focus on funds raising since this effort will not succeed without adequate resources; **hospitality** to create awareness of the importance of good customer service for out-of-town visitors; and a **visitor information center** to provide a one-stop center for tourist information in the community in order to make it easier for your out-of-town guests to enjoy their stay and spend more money.

STEP 3

It is critical that quality community attractions are at the foundation of a tourism program. A community or region should take inventory of existing (or potential) attractions and rate the quality of their attractions. Options to consider include festivals and events, natural resources, historical attractions, and recreation opportunities. Remember, this is a highly competitive business, so do not try to be something you are not. Successful community tourism efforts build on existing strengths. Also, take stock of your visitor facilities. Do you have adequate restaurants, hotels, restrooms, etc.? Finally, consider a local clean up, fix up campaign. Outward appearances will say a lot to travelers and potential tourists.

STEP 4

There are many options available for those who care to work with local economies [8]. In fact, the term “CARE” provides another useful approach and summary for economic development options:

- ♦ **C**reate new jobs,
- ♦ **A**tttract new business,
- ♦ **R**etain existing firms, and
- ♦ **E**xpand existing firms.

Creation refers to all local efforts to encourage the formation of new business. In the “age of the entrepreneur” any concern with creating a local climate helpful for new job formation may lead to future dividends.

New tourism-related businesses often need support in several areas including capital financing, labor supply, technology and assistance, and management assistance. A healthy climate for new business formation addresses all these elements. Resulting new businesses capture additional income for the local economy and provide the often-needed diversification.

Attraction refers to the traditional business recruitment efforts many Southern states have pursued. Community preparation, tax incentives, and other attraction strategies are very familiar tools. Industry and business recruitment is perhaps the best-known economic development option. At the state level, this effort receives a great deal of attention. New business recruitment is a viable option. Some communities or regions focus on attracting a large-scale tourism facility or even a smaller tourism related business. However, local communities should realistically assess their chances of recruiting a basic employer and set appropriate goals. Major metropolitan areas will attract the bulk of larger employers. Factors that influence larger employers include labor supply, transportation, location of related businesses, water or other resource constraints, and community attitude and/or preparedness.

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“The CARE model refers to creation, attraction, retention, and expansion of local jobs.”

Retention and Expansion are concerned with targeting existing firms. Most consumers spend money for basic goods and services in more than one community. Because of perceived differences in prices, quality, selection, or service, shopping habits will vary. Leakage occurs in a community or area when local residents purchase items outside the community or area. This is loss of potential income. Steps can be taken by local merchants to capture more (not necessarily all) existing income. Surveys of consumer shopping habits can identify potential areas for improvements. Special events and promotions can lead to more local shopping to retain more income. This is one strategy in which most existing local merchants are interested. Careful analysis of various techniques would guide these merchants in determining the “best” approach. The emphasis should be on aiding communities and regions in becoming more competitive.

Much new job growth comes from the expansion of existing firms. If existing small businesses expand, new jobs and additional income result. Retention of existing small businesses also insures a more stable local economy. Training programs, financial assistance, and a supportive local attitude can greatly aid these existing firms. Training programs are available from universities, the Cooperative Extension Service, Small Business Development Centers, and other sources regarding such topics as financial analysis (for example, cash flow or profit forecasting), personnel management, how to develop a business plan and other management or marketing concerns. The goal of these programs is to increase efficiency of resource use in existing firms so they become more competitive.

There you have it: the CARE model refers to creation, attraction, retention, and expansion of local jobs. These are the principal methods or avenues for bringing new jobs to a locality. Communities have limited resources (both volunteer/professional time and funds). It is critical that some form of strategic planning be utilized so these resources are utilized in the most effective manner. The CARE model offers alternatives; the community must decide which alternative(s) provides the greatest opportunity.

Public Policy Options for Supporting Rural Tourism

There are several public policy opportunities available to assist in rural tourism development efforts. These fall in three general areas—education and technical assistance, collaborative efforts, and funding support. Each will be discussed in turn.

Educational and technical assistance is critical for small towns and rural areas. They have smaller budgets and usually have little paid professional staff, instead relying on volunteer leadership. Educational programs can provide valuable assistance in strategic planning, identification of available and needed resources, and management guidance of new or expanding tourism-related firms. This investment in business capital will pay great dividends through more successful local efforts. Technical assistance can take the form of feasibility studies for specific tourism-related business or impact assessments measuring the potential impacts on a local economy as tourism develops. Examples of technical assistance include a guide to designing and conducting visitor surveys by Julie Leones [9] and a handbook to measure the economic impact of visitor expenditures on local revenues by George Goldman and others

[10]. These types of educational or technical assistance programs are offered through several sources including local universities, Cooperative Extension Service Offices, Small Business Development Centers, state tourism or economic development agencies, and others.

Collaborative efforts are critical in these days of tight budgets and decreased tax revenues. The agencies and groups mentioned above are a prime example. Service providers often can bring a specific strength “to the table” when trying to help. For example, one agency may offer training on business management principles, while another agency offers or knows of funding sources. Still another agency or group is familiar with the tourism industry and specific marketing opportunities. The small business or local community concerned with succeeding in tourism development needs all that help and more! Collaborative service provision by all providers makes good public policy sense and will enhance the opportunities for those being served. Successful statewide efforts in tourism exhibit this collaborative spirit in addressing tourism development needs.

Funding support is necessary in many cases. State governments have a history of supporting industrial development through tax incentives and marketing efforts. Similar efforts may be necessary for tourism to grow. Some states do have relatively large marketing budgets for tourism. Even so, many dollars are allocated for product development and technical assistance to aid, local businesses or communities? In this highly competitive arena, rural areas will need all the assistance public officials can muster.

The Tourism Policy Council (TPC) identified travel and tourism as an important source of job creation [11]. The report by the TPC identified a federal role for tourism development including the coordination of federal activities, allocating resources to states, encouraging collaboration, and setting standards to measure performance. Barriers to expanded tourism development include lack of information, access to international travelers and the disabled, safety and security concerns, and adequate roads.

States can play an active role in tourism development as well. A recent effort in Montana produced a five-year strategic plan for travel and tourism [12]. Themes identified included encouragement of sustainable tourism, development of quality infrastructure, securing funding sources, and striving for quality visitor experiences. Emphasis was placed on collaborative efforts by the many interested parties in both the private and public sectors.

Ultimately, the success of travel and tourism efforts will depend upon the quality of destinations and infrastructure offered in local areas. Local communities can do much to enhance the potential locally. Having a sound vision of what the area has to offer is a start. Offering “real” experiences in a safe and comfortable setting will enhance the potential economic benefits. Local communities should consider travel and tourism as one viable option for diversifying the local economy.

Summary

Tourism and travel offers one potential for diversification in the rural South. Dollars spent by tourists can enhance the local economy. Local communities and potential entrepreneurs must assess their market

“Local communities should consider travel and tourism as one viable option for diversifying the local economy.”

potential and realistically evaluate potential opportunities. Outdoor attractions, natural resources, a rich cultural history, and agricultural resources all offer potential. Services such as lodging, food, and retail are needed to fully enhance tourism efforts. Concern for the environment, sometimes fragile, must be balanced with business opportunities. Conditions for successful tourism include a clearly competitive market niche, regional cooperation, local community support, financial resources, and a well thought out regional plan.

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