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Tourism in Wallowa County and the Zumwalt Prairie:

In-Person Survey Results Summer 2012

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Introduction

Wallowa County, Oregon, located in Northeast Oregon, is known for its natural amenities and, as the USDA Economic Research Service describes it, “landscape and climate have shaped the geography of rural growth and decline over the past 40 years. The rural outdoors has become a major asset for rural communities.”¹ One of the notable natural amenities in the County is the Zumwalt Prairie (Prairie). “Its rolling hills run from bright green in the spring and early summer to shades of yellow and brown as the season progresses. With little sign of human habitation other than a few cattle ranches and plenty of abandoned farmsteads, the place is alive with wildlife including 3,000 elk, black bears, wolves, cougars, bighorn sheep and over 48 varieties of butterflies. The prairie is home to one of North America’s highest concentrations of breeding raptors (golden eagles, prairie falcons, northern harriers, kestrels and numerous varieties of hawks) as well as grassland songbirds.”²

Question

The County has long been a tourist destination. However, as the wood products industry has contracted in the County, tourism’s relative importance to the local economy has been growing. The purpose of this study is to identify how tourists affect the Wallowa County economy and the extent to which the Nature Conservancy’s Zumwalt Prairie Preserve (Preserve) contributes to tourism in Wallowa County. To understand what tourists do in the County and estimate their expenditures, we conducted in-person surveys of tourists during the summer of 2012. The survey can be found in Appendix A. We asked interviewees where they lived, what they most liked doing during their visits to Wallowa County and how they spent their money while visiting. Ultimately, the survey results can be used in concert with a larger unpublished economic report to inform economic development planning and Nature Conservancy decisions.

¹ 2011. USDA Economic Research Service-Natural Amenities
www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy.../natural-amenities by

²Destinations Northwest 2012. <http://destinations-northwest.blogspot.com/2012/01/zumwalt-prairie-high-wide-and-lonesome.html>

Background

In “1872 (the) first permanent white resident of the Wallowa (then part of Union County), William McCormack, builds cabin on Hurricane Creek. First homestead filings made. A.B. Findley family, first white family, arrives in valley.”³ One hundred and twenty eight years later in 2000, “studying the prairie's ecosystem for nearly 20 years led The Nature Conservancy to protect this great place — because of its size, intact bunch grass habitats and incredible concentrations of wildlife...33,000 acres (51 square miles).”⁴ The Nature Conservancy Preserve covers approximately one tenth of the total area of the Prairie. The Prairie is used for many purposes including cattle ranching, hay production, tourist visits, scientific research etc. The Conservancy, unlike many groups that seek to preserve natural resources, uses a market based approach – it purchases land to protect and often continues some of the private uses for which the land was used prior to its purchase by the Conservancy.

Methods – Qualitative Research

The surveys were conducted by the student co-authors of this report. They set out on various weekends during the summer of 2012 to interview tourists. The days that tourists were interviewed included the events of Chief Joseph Days, the Maxville Gathering, and Mule Days, as well as days in which no events were taking place.

Locations where visitors were interviewed included: downtown Joseph, Oregon; downtown Enterprise, Oregon; the campground at Wallowa Lake State Park; the day use parks on the north and south ends of Wallowa Lake; the parking lot for the Mule Days event in Enterprise; and at the Maxville Gathering out of Wallowa, Oregon. These locations were chosen because they had a high concentration of nonresidents attending or using the area.

Results

Fifty one percent of the interviewees were women and forty nine percent were men. We cannot be sure, however, by our informal observations the sample percentage by age and gender are representative of the adult population of visitors. Our protocol for the survey specifically avoided interviewing minors. Table 1 provides the detailed percentages.

³ Wallow.com, January 26, 2012. The Wallowa Chieftain, Enterprise, Oregon. http://wallowa.com/special_sections/out_of_the_past/local-history-timeline/article_54c1f2d8-4848-11e1-a634-001871e3ce6c.html

⁴The Nature Conservancy 2013. <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/oregon/placesweprotect/zumwalt-prairie.xml>

Table 1. Interviewees by age and gender

Age	Women	Men	Total
18-35	14.2%	11.7%	25.8%
36-55	17.5%	18.3%	35.8%
55+	19.2%	19.2%	38.3%
Total	50.8%	49.2%	100.0%

The interviewees' educational attainment, which can serve as a proxy for income level, included a reasonable balance of people whose highest educational attainment was high school and those who had some type of advance training or education. The detailed percentages are shown in Table 2. We included people who offered that they had advanced technical training beyond high school in the Associate degree or higher category.

Table 2. Educational attainment by gender and age

Level	Women			Men			Total	
	18-35	36-55	55+	18-35	36-55	55+	#	%
Less than H.S. diploma	2	3	2	2	3	3	15	12.61
H.S. Diploma	5	7	7	4	5	9	37	31.09
Greater than H.S. diploma	10	11	12	7	14	13	67	56.30

Tourists visiting Wallowa County came from far and wide. Overnight visitors tend to spend more on a per visit basis than day visitors so place of residence or distance from Wallowa County can indicate their expected level of expenditures. We asked people for their residence zip code and then separated them into three categories: less than 175 miles (e.g. LaGrande and Pasco) or "Day Trippers", more than 175 miles though within the Pacific Northwest (e.g. Portland and Seattle), or "PNW" and beyond the Pacific Northwest (e.g. Harrisburg, PA and Europe) or "Beyond." Forty percent were Day Trippers, forty nine percent PNW and eleven percent from Beyond. Thus, 60% of visitors came from further than 175 miles. The average visitor stay was five days. Visitors typically came in parties of four and on the average the parties were 80% adult.

People’s reasons for visiting Wallowa County varied by age and gender. However, sightseeing while driving was the primary or secondary reason across ages and genders. Hiking and then hunting/fishing ranked highly for younger people. Visiting friends and relatives ranked highly for 18-35 year olds and those over 55 though not very highly for 36-55 year olds.

As expected, when we conducted our interviews at the Maxville Gathering, the cultural events reason ranked higher. Women over 55 rated birding high. More specifically, of the 120 people interviewed in the six different categories, males ages 36 and up and females ages 36 and up chose more often on average "wildlife and natural environment viewing" as their most important reason for visiting (as shown in tables 2 and 3). Out of the 59 male tourists who were interviewed, 8% responded saying that they planned on visiting the Zumwalt Prairie during their vacation. Women, also at an 8% rate, responded with the same.

Most of the people who were interviewed had not heard of the Zumwalt Prairie and especially the Preserve prior to the interview. Brittany Heller went to the Zumwalt and parked from 2pm to 5pm on Saturday, September 8, 2012. She observed four cars that did not appear to be local ranchers. She recognized people in two of the cars as people she had interviewed and who learned about the Zumwalt from her. The four cars represented 17% of the unique trips and 11% of the total trips that Brittany counted. Most of the trips appeared to be local ranchers and contractors providing them services.

Table 3. Reasons for men visiting by age

	18-35	36-55	56+	Total
Number/Question	14	22	23	59
Most popular reason for visiting	Visiting friends/ relatives	Wildlife or Natural Environment Viewing	Wildlife or Natural Environment Viewing	
Least popular reason for visiting	Shopping/ Dining	Shopping/ Dining	Hunting/Fishing/ Cultural Events	
Plan to visit the Zumwalt Prairie	1	4	0	5
Don't plan to visit the Zumwalt Prairie	13	18	23	54

Table 4. Reasons for women visiting by age

	18-35	36-55	56+	Total
Number/Question	17	21	23	61
Most popular reason for visiting	Wildlife or Natural Environment Viewing	Wildlife or Natural Environment Viewing	Wildlife or Natural Environment Viewing	
Least popular reason for visiting	Cultural Events	Cultural Events/Visiting Friends/Family	Hunting/Fishing	
Plan to visit the Zumwalt Prairie	1	3	1	5
Don't plan to visit the Zumwalt Prairie	16	18	22	56

Visitors spent the most amount of money on their lodging and the least on camping fees and food supplies. The highest average of all the spending categories was for lodging. However, the largest average amount spent by most people was for dining. Table 4 provides the average spending by type of expenditure.

Table 5. Average visitor spending per day by type of expenditure

Expenditure	\$
Lodging	38.96
Dining	28.33
Retail	16.47
Fuel	14.10
Entertainment	12.94
Food supplies	9.16
Camping fees	8.31
Other	1.52
Total	129.80

Dean Runyan Associates estimates \$133 per day per travel party for Wallowa County.⁵ Our estimate of \$129.30 seems high for an individual and would probably have been less than \$100 if we had done more follow-up questioning to help the interviewees isolate the spending to just one person.

Forty three percent of the visitors who were interviewed were visiting Wallowa County for their first or second time in the last five years. Nine percent were visiting for their third or fourth time in the last five years, and 48% were visiting for their fifth or greater time in the last five years.

The final question of the survey was "is there anything Wallowa County could do that would cause you to extend your stay or visit more frequently?" Many of the comments included statements such as Wallowa County is "my favorite place in the world" and that they "wouldn't change a thing". Many of those who answered said that their vacation would have improved if the County was easier to get to. However, some of the comments provided many helpful suggestions on how tourism in the County could be improved.

Some of the comments were specific to the accommodations and availability. Two interviewees requested "less rowdiness" in the camping areas, as well as handicap facilities in the restrooms. Some people requested more campgrounds around the lake and RV camping in Enterprise. Others also requested that there be a larger airport closer to Joseph and Enterprise, and that their experience would be improved by more public transportation.

Many of the people who learned of the Zumwalt Prairie during the interview requested more maps and signs of the area. Tourism packages were requested that would include a variety of the different events and activities in the area to give people a better idea of what there is to do during their vacation.

Discussion

The interviewers' experiences visiting the Zumwalt Prairie indicated that it was very difficult to find it and navigate through. The sign pointing towards Zumwalt Road had fallen on one side at some point in the past, and thus proved difficult to locate. While driving down the dirt road, there were no signs to point out that a visitor was indeed on the Zumwalt Prairie or the Preserve, and what to look for while visiting.

⁵ Dean Runyan Associates 2012. Oregon Travel Impacts 1991-2011p.Oregon Tourism Commission 670 Hawthorne Avenue S.E.Suite 240Salem, Oregon 97301503/986-0000.www.traveloregon.com

After interviewing many tourists and visiting the area, the best suggestion would be to provide more maps to the tourists and signs to show what is happening in the area. There is an information booth in downtown Joseph, Oregon that could be advertised better around town and be a good resource for visitors to learn what is available to them. The visitors we interviewed were genuinely interested in learning more about the Zumwalt Prairie and all of the wildlife viewing it has to offer. A kiosk or some permanent signs along Zumwalt Road showing the wildlife to look for, as well as advertising within the towns, could possibly be another valuable source of visitors for the county, at a relatively low cost. Maps and handouts could include: a bird watching guide, a wildflower guide, a wildlife scavenger hunt for kids, and maps of the trails to which the public has access.

Tourism packages within Wallowa County could greatly increase the tourism revenue in the area. Bringing together the different attractions such as Wallowa Lake and the Tram Ride, as well as some local businesses would give visitors more ideas about what to expect and look for during their visits. There seems to be a split in the type of visitors who go to Wallowa County. Some of them are looking for a vacation to try new things and go shopping, while others would like to just get away from more congested areas.

Currently, the Preserve has an episodic impact on the local economy, particularly when groups visit it. However, the group visits and the minimal individual visits have a very modest single digit percentage impact on the economic sectors related to tourism. Interviewees in this study had a strong preference for scenic auto tours. If the Preserve is to contribute in a significant way to tourism spending in Wallowa County and also address its educational mission, it could first capitalize on the existing preferences of tourists and facilities at the Preserve and in adjacent communities to better accommodate that type of activity. Then, the Conservancy could consider constructing new facilities, which might include mobile and remotely programmable kiosks and eventually a visitors' center.

Opportunities for future research include similar surveys at different times of the year. We would expect quite a difference by season, especially in terms of the tourists' reasons for visiting and expenditure levels. The "distance" to Wallowa County may be measured by tourists more in time and ease of travel than miles so almost any activities that improve the roads and information about the roads would seem to be an important investment. Since the economic impact of tourism can be significantly increased by increasing the tourists' length of stay, it may be useful to consider the alternatives that Wallowa County uses to encourage tourism. As an example, comparing the economic effects of events to activities that are available most of the time like auto touring and sightseeing may help the County maximize the effectiveness of its efforts and resources.

References

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