

Case Studies of Water Trail Impacts on Rural Communities

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Executive Summary

Water trail development causes economic and social and impacts on rural communities. Chronicles of water trail communities convey values influencing the sustainability of paddle trail projects. Water trails are not a panacea for rural development, however, water trail development can help achieve goals of economic diversification and improved quality of life in communities. Paddle trails are an effective approach to rural economic development and recreational access while enhancing natural and cultural qualities of a community.

Travel and tourism is one of the largest industries in many state economies.

Water trails are a rapidly growing element of the marine recreation and tourism industry. Innovative communities managing water trails within a dynamic local economy will be rewarded. Case study community trends indicate paddlers will spend between \$27 and \$63 per day. A destination paddler on a multiple day water trail trip will spend about \$88 in a community. Eating and drinking establishments, lodging and camping businesses, retail sales and recreational service industries will see direct economic impacts from water trail paddlers.

Case study communities are witnessing between 2,200 and 16,000 paddle outings annually. Canoeists on the Kickapoo spend over \$1.2 million in rural southwest Wisconsin. Total economic impact of paddle trails includes both direct and induced spending. In the eastern North Carolina region the coastal plains water trail system produces 2.4 percent (\$55.14 million) of tourism economic impact. When combining local and non-local expenditures, North Carolina's coastal paddling experiences produced \$103.9 million (Thigpen, 2001).

Water trails are beneficial components of rural communities. In water trail communities a sense of stewardship is fostered and the number and success of retail and service businesses increase as the community builds a reputation as a paddling destination. Case study water trails have impressive paddler profiles (well educated, high income), increasing use rates and paddlers desiring a quality natural environment. Case study communities capture profits from paddlers by offering overnight lodging opportunities and access to downtowns from the water trail within an assortment of activities for travelers. A shared vision for the water trail and existing tourism support facilities are important community considerations. Events, regional and state level coordination and the quality of local support including strong volunteer groups and management partnerships influence the water trail's success.

A water trail offers economic development potential for a small rural community, but highly specialized recreation can have serious impacts. A local water trail will play a role in community life. Rural residents will have to share their outdoor experiences with visitors, there will be lines for services, and land values may increase. Landowners along case study water trails are unaffected and trespassing has not become an issue because legal access points and public land is designated and clearly signed and mapped. A water trail must be advocated and maintained locally if the community will reap economic and social benefits. With no retail, service or lodging sites accessible canoeists will not spend much money. As facilities emerge, more people will opt to use the available bed and breakfasts, restaurants, shops and campgrounds. Environmental impacts occur because of improperly disposed human waste, large groups and littering. Potential drawbacks of water trails can be mitigated if the community is supportive of tourism and there is a dedicated management partnership for the trail.

Note by Fred Couch, Founder of the Alabama Scenic River Trail – the above 2 page Summary is from the 132 page report located on the National Park Service website.