

## **Tourism and Recreational activities and their contribution to the Thunder Basin**

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I'm just going to take a few minutes and talk to you about the role tourism plays in the Thunder Basin. Throughout the state tourism is the second or third largest contributor to the state's economy, of course after energy, which is number one. In the Thunder Basin area we have a difficult time trying to find out and quantify really what tourism does for us.

If you look at all that you have seen and heard today and you put on a different pair of glasses, a different cap so to speak, it's the same landscape that we have been talking about; but a tourist is going to see it in a very different way. There are a lot of positive things, there are a lot of negative things and sometimes they are the same. It all depends on what the tourist likes.

We have a lot of diverse landscapes in the Thunder Basin and it is relatively isolated. You don't have any conveniences; it is very difficult particularly in the study area, to pop into the local convenience store to get gas, fast food, or basically anything else. You can take a trip basically anytime through the Thunder Basin area and see an abundance of wildlife; if you can find your way, and if you don't get stuck in highly changeable road conditions it is a photographer's paradise.

As I mentioned it really depends on whether you are a stereotypical tourist or if you are looking at one of the other type of niche markets that we are beginning to develop. The stereotypical tourist is 2 adults, 1.6 children, 1 dog, and 1 station wagon;

we really don't see much of them anymore but we still have a lot of our tourism products in Wyoming geared towards that old stereotypical market.

We are seeing more and more destination travelers looking for events to go to, sites to look at, and other activities. The types of products, if you will, from a tourism standpoint that are offered in the Thunder Basin area, things like hunting, would be a destination. In the travel industry if you can get people to stay for three days or longer, we consider that to be a destination. Certainly for most hunting experiences people are staying four or five days, sometimes longer than that depending on how good of a shot they are. But for the most part hunting is considered a destination activity.

Another type of tourist that we have is the roaming vagabond. He is out to see the country, may start out in Newcastle and see a road heading off west and that is kind of the direction he is going, so he heads off west. Those kinds of travelers are just sort of hit or miss, if they come through the area you really don't know if they are coming, or in most cases, you don't know that they have been there.

The last type of tourist that I mentioned earlier is the niche market traveler. Wyoming tourism is focusing more and more on attractions and events, what we call the niche market. There are a lot niche markets and it all depends on what segment you are going after. Some tourists are interested in cultural activities, such as museums, old forts, etc. Those interested in agri-tourism, want to see the lifestyles in the agricultural community. We have properties for example, that do working or guest ranches that might fall into this category.

Eco-tourism, people that are just interested in seeing what kind of plants that Wyoming has, watching birds, seeing what kind of wildlife are there.

You also have people that are interested in history, sites like where Jedidiah Smith got his ear chewed off. The trails in Wyoming are also of interest and there are all kinds of sites that recall history and events in Wyoming.

Current tourism activities occurring in the Thunder Basin area such as coal mine tours, hunting, custom hunting destinations, ranch stay opportunities, wilderness type activities, photography and sightseeing to name a few. From the list of what types of activities are offered you can get a sense of how difficult it is to track and find out how much role tourism plays in the Thunder Basin area.

Many tourists enjoy going on a coalmine tour and hunting, either on private or public lands. We do have several properties within the Thunder Basin area that are offering custom hunting experiences, whether that is for prairie dogs or big game animals. You have some ranch stay opportunities, where people experience everyday ranch life. The eco-tourism type of tourist that might just like to come out and spend some time on the public lands in a wilderness type of experience. You have tourists that are mainly coming out to take photos or just to do a little sightseeing.

We are going to look at how these different groups of tourists contribute to the area. It is very difficult to determine what their economic contribution is to the area as you have a high percentage of use not tracked. You can imagine how difficult it would be to determine how many people went sightseeing, or how many went out to take photographs. There is no way really of tracking them. Most of the other tourism activities also fall through the cracks.

Say, if you are hunting for example, for the most part you are not showing up in any of the statistics. You're generally not paying sales tax and you're not paying lodging

tax. If you could break it out from local convenience stores in Gillette, Douglas, Newcastle, Lusk, hunters go in to buy groceries or whatever, but that again is very difficult to identify.

We don't have any studies that focus on the Thunder Basin area that look at the impact from tourism. We really don't have a good feel for the overall travel market. For example, we don't know what type of tourist is coming, how often they come, and how long they stay, any other statistic that you would expect from a statewide survey.

What we do have however, and we can perhaps draw some conclusions from that, for the first time we have a breakdown on a county-by-county basis of what tourists are spending in a specific county. Unfortunately this tracks the stereotypical type of tourist much better than it tracks tourists that are going to be out in the Thunder Basin area. Travel spending in 2000 in Campbell county was \$60.0 million, Converse county \$22.2 million, Weston county \$10.6 million and Niobrara county \$6.5 million dollars. Now again, most of these dollars are not going to be spent from the Thunder Basin area. But you are looking in excess of a hundred million dollars in travel spending in 2000 in the four county areas.

There is a significant impact from tourism spending. I wish that we had more detail that we could break out on the amount of tourism dollars that are contributed from this area. But the absolute economic impact has not been determined. Anecdotal evidence suggests that tourism spending plays an important role in the Thunder Basin area. Additional information needs to be gathered before final conclusions are drawn.

I am the Executive Director for the Bed & Breakfast and Working Guest Ranch Association in Wyoming and serve on various tourism committees within the state. As I

visit with the various operators in the state, some of which are in the Thunder Basin area, I find that tourism spending does play an important role, particularly for those local ranch operators that have tourist activities. In talking to some of the surrounding communities the economic impact from tourism spending is very important in communities like Douglas, Lusk, or Newcastle. Again, we can't really break out what part of tourism spending comes from the Thunder Basin area.

Finally, as I mentioned before, we do have information on a statewide basis, and now broken down to a county basis, but we need additional information before we have an idea of what kind of economic impact comes from tourism within the Thunder Basin area.