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Research Paper

Using a community tourism development model to explore equestrian trail tourism potential in Virginia

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ABSTRACT

As the tourism industry grows so does the demand by tourists for specialized travel alternatives. One niche market that is growing but has received very little attention in the tourism literature is equestrian tourism. Increased demand makes the development and planning of equestrian tourism critical to minimize conflict among stakeholders, and provide necessary infrastructure for patrons. The purpose of this study was to assess equestrian trail riders' perceptions and attitudes about the viability of and need for equestrian trail tourism development in their community. An online survey was conducted with members of the Virginia Horse Council. According to the findings, not only was equestrian trail tourism viewed as a viable industry for the county, current resource users voiced their support for expanding the market, which would result in retention and growth among related businesses and facilities. Trail riders felt that the greatest needs in developing equestrian tourism lay in the areas of marketing, support from officials, educating local officials about the economic importance of the horse industry, organization within the horse community, and developing additional trails. Results from this study will be useful in a general sense for rural tourism planners within and outside of the community wishing to increase equestrian trail tourism.

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1. Equestrian trail tourism: trail riders perspective on blazing new trails in Virginia

Outdoor recreation activities such as hiking, walking, paddling, bird watching and horseback riding are key travel motivators, occur in a variety of settings, are intricately linked to the tourism development process, and are often developed by entrepreneurs within the community. However, existing models of community-based tourism development and other relevant literature often do not consider the unique attributes of outdoor recreation activities that are studied far less than others – for example, equestrian trail tourism (ETT).

Two of the most popular forms of outdoor recreation activities are walking and hiking (Oh & Hammitt, 2010) and both have received extensive attention in the tourism literature (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2004; Marion & Leung, 2001). Comparatively little has been written about equestrian tourism or horse tourism (Newsome, Smith, & Moore, 2008). Much of the limited research that has been conducted has concentrated on the negative environmental impacts that horses

create on trails such as degradation of existing trails (Deluca, Patterson, Freimund, & Cole, 1998; Törn, Tolvanen, Norokorpi, Tervo, & Siikamäki, 2009), loss of flora and fauna (Phillips & Newsome, 2002) and introduction of foreign material (Marion, Cole, & Bratton, 1986). Management strategies have been developed to help minimize many of these impacts, including zoning, trail reconstruction, and altering visitor behavior (Landsberg, Logan, & Shorthouse, 2001; Newsome, Milewski, Phillips, & Annear, 2002; Royce, 1983), but little attention has been given to appropriate planning and development strategies for ETT.

A few studies written about the social impacts of horse riding have focused on user conflict in multiple use areas (Newsome et al., 2002) or crisis management (Beeton, 2001). A study conducted by Watson, Niccolucci, and Williams (1994) in the John Muir Wilderness Area found that 44% of hikers disliked encounters with horseback riders, while only 4% of horseback riders disliked their encounter with hikers. Hikers indicated that they disliked the manure on the trails, noise from the group, and rudeness of the horseback riders. Beeton's (1999a, 1999b) study mirrored those sentiments. Conducted in Australia, her work assessed the different attitudes between bushwalkers (hikers) and horseback riders. Results indicated that there was a very strong dislike for the horseback riding groups. Bushwalkers perceived the groups as environmentally disrespectful and the majority (54%) went so far as to move camp if horse riding groups were present. Echoing

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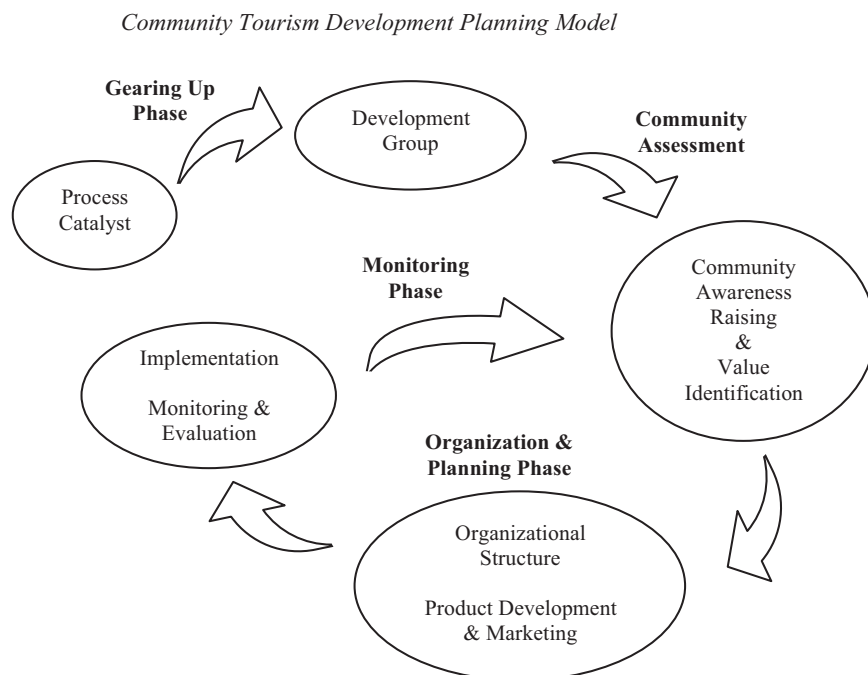
this finding is a National Park Service study conducted by Marion, Roggenbuck, and Manning (1993). They reported that conflicts between horseback riders and hikers were a problem in 9% of the participating U.S. parks. Mulders (2006) conducted one of the most recent studies to assess riders' perceptions of the environmental impacts created by riding. Results indicated that riders felt they created minimal environmental impacts, especially if they stay on trails. One of the key findings was the need for additional trail development. It was pointed out that lack of management and limited tracks and trails could result in injury not only to horses, but to riders and other users as well, which agrees with more recent studies of Beeton (2001) and Rabinä (2010).

As illustrated above, most research is outdated with limited implications on the sustainable tourism planning and development process. Yet, the horse industry is growing and represents a large segment of the travel market with significant economic impact on local communities (Daniels & Norman, 2005; Hackbert & Lin, 2009; Helgadóttir, 2006; Helgadóttir & Sigurdardóttir, 2008; Ollenburg, 2005; Rabinä, 2010). The American Horse Council (AHC) reported that there are over 2 million horse owners and 9.2 million horses in the United States. Overall the industry has an economic impact (direct and indirect) in the US of \$101 billion and employees over 1.4 million people. The AHC (n.d.) states that recreation accounts for almost one-third of the economic impact (\$32 billion) and employees (435,082 people). In North Carolina alone the total economic impact is \$1.9 billion and supports over 19,000 jobs (N.C. Center for Rural Economic Development, 2009). In what can be considered more horse-centric states, the economic effects of the equine industry are much higher, as is the case in Kentucky – home to over 242,000 horses. Kentucky's equine industry has been estimated at \$23.4 billion (Blood-Horse Magazine, 2013). It is anticipated that economic impact numbers will increase both in the United States and around the world as indicated by the steady growth of membership numbers in equestrian horse clubs (Helgadóttir & Sigurdardóttir, 2008).

There is a dearth of research specific to equestrian tourism trail development, however a great deal has been written about greenway and trail development for other outdoor recreation activities. Data and

recommendations from previous studies provide useful information and insight into new infrastructure options (Boers & Cottrell, 2007), attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders (Kline, Cardenas, Duffy, & Swanson, 2012), targeted marketing techniques (Biches-Lupas & Moisey, 2001) and evaluation methods (Newsome & Davies, 2009). An example of previous research includes a study by Ivy and Moore (2007) and focused on the differences between adjacent and nearby property owners' attitudes toward proposed trail development near their neighborhood. Overall they found that both groups were supportive of the development; however adjacent landowners were less supportive because of concerns of potential property value decreasing. They recommend that development projects should include education as a core requirement for all stakeholders. In addition, Kline et al. (2012) conducted a study to examine the different funding options that may assist in the development and maintenance of paddle trails. Results indicated that females and recreational paddlers were more likely to support funding mechanisms; in addition, willingness-to-pay increased in participants who perceived trails as an economic generation tool. A 2001 special edition of Journal of Parks and Recreation Administration that focused specifically on trails and greenways highlighted the need for more research on planning and development (Moore & Shafer, 2001).

In light of the growth of equestrian tourism, it is critical that research is conducted to determine how to properly plan and help ensure this product is a sustainable option for the local community. One critical tenant of sustainability is the concept of stakeholder involvement and education (Byrd, Cardenas, & Greenwood, 2008). Stakeholders can be defined as, "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organizations objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Stakeholder theory is entrenched in the business and management literature, with the basic premise that if there is interest in the product or organization, they should have the right to be involved (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). In the realm of tourism, stakeholders are classified as tourists, business owners or entrepreneurs, government officials, and the local community (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). Studies show that when stakeholders collaborate and participate in the planning and development process it assists in minimizing



Adapted from Reid, Fuller, Haywood & Bryden (1993).

Fig. 1. Community Tourism Development Planning Model. Adapted from Reid et al. (1993).

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