

# Tourism Extension: Helping Communities Develop Healthy, Prosperous, and Enduring Tourism Enterprises

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## Executive Summary

Changes in the economy are affecting communities across the nation and throughout the state of North Carolina. The continued decrease in manufacturing combined with the decrease in open space, the increase in urbanization, and the changing economy has placed pressure on communities throughout North Carolina to examine alternative economic opportunities. As the positive impact of tourism continues to increase throughout the state, interest in tourism as a tool for economic development has dramatically increased over the past decade for many of North Carolina's more rural communities. Over 90 extension field faculty members have reported they are involved in tourism-related issues in their counties and are seeking additional resources and information to better assist their clientele. In response, NC State University (through North Carolina Cooperative Extension, the College of Natural Resources, and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management) has led to the implementation of the Tourism Extension program, which strives to assist tourism development across the state. Tourism Extension houses two tenure-track sustainable tourism extension specialists, who also have academic appointments in the College of Natural Resources and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management. Both specialists work to assist extension field faculty with developing prosperous tourism enterprises across the state by providing applicable programs, resources, and research. Over the past few years, Tourism Extension has successfully implemented a variety of programs and initiatives, each aimed at fostering collaborative relationships and at furthering sustainable tourism developments across the state of North Carolina.

## State of the Science

Changes in the United State's economy are affecting communities across the nation. For example, the outsourcing of jobs and industries is changing the nation's economic landscape, which in turn, is leading communities, businesses, and individuals to rethink economic development. As a result, many people are turning towards tourism to act as a driving economic force. The U.S. Department of Commerce estimates that the travel and tourism industry is worth \$1.2 trillion annually, and generates a trade surplus that has lasted 19 consecutive years in the United States. The travel and tourism industry continues to be a major employer in the U.S., employing 8.5 million workers, more than other major industries (e.g., construction; business and financial services; agriculture; and education). Moreover, in 2007, the nation enjoyed the largest travel surplus in a decade, equaling \$17.8 billion, which represents a 113% increase over the previous year ([http://www.commerce.gov/NewsRoom/PressReleases\\_FactSheets/](http://www.commerce.gov/NewsRoom/PressReleases_FactSheets/)). Partially due to the various economic opportunities often associated with tourism, many states, cities, and communities are exploring new tourism opportunities as means of diversifying their economic base.

Within US land-grant universities, attention is given to economic development in all states through Cooperative Extension. However, only a few state Cooperative Extension programs focus strategically on tourism development as part of their economic development strategies. A prime example of a program that has successfully responded to the growing impact of tourism and the need for new economic development initiatives is North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE). NCCE has placed emphasis on tourism as a tool for community and economic development across the state and has dedicated resources to the study of tourism development. Over the past five years, NCCE has hired two tenure-track sustainable tourism extension specialists, who also have academic appointments in the College of Natural Resources and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management. These specialists work to assist extension field faculty with developing prosperous tourism enterprises across the state by providing programs, resources, research, and collaboration. Thus, with the increasing interest throughout North Carolina regarding tourism development and the provision of resources dedicated to this endeavor from NCCE and the College of Natural Resources, Tourism Extension is poised to become a leader in tourism-related extension initiatives as well as the provision of applied tourism development resources and research.

## Impact on North Carolina

Manufacturing has seen a continued decline over the past three decades, leading to a dramatic shift in the North Carolina economy. The combination of a 27% manufacturing decrease in rural counties from 1990 to 2003, along with more than 70,000 layoffs in rural areas, (60,000 of which were directly related to manufacturing), has left North Carolina's rural areas significantly and negatively impacted ([www.ncruralcenter.org](http://www.ncruralcenter.org)). While North Carolina used to be a leading goods-producing state, by 2003, the service sector had replaced the goods-producing sector as the leading employer in North Carolina. With the decline in manufacturing and the rise of the

service sector, North Carolina is in the process of exploring more opportunities to build its economy.

In addition to the changing economy in North Carolina, the physical landscape of the state is also transforming. According to the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, North Carolina is one of the fastest urbanizing states in the country, losing an average of 383 acres a day to development (<http://www.enr.state.nc.us/newsrels/workinglandconference.pdf>). Additionally, the number of farms in North Carolina has suffered a dramatic decline. According to the NC Rural Center, the state has less than 17% of the farms it had in the late 1940s. This decrease in open space coupled with the increase in urbanization and the changing economy has placed pressure on communities throughout North Carolina to examine alternative economic opportunities and creative ways to preserve the rural landscape of the state.

While the more traditional sectors of the state's economy have experienced a decline or shift, tourism in North Carolina continues to grow. For example, according to the NC Division of Tourism, North Carolina is the 8<sup>th</sup> most visited state in the country, and experienced \$16.5 billion in visitor spending across the state in 2007. This represented a 7.2% increase in spending over 2006. In addition, visitor spending supported over 190,000 jobs in North Carolina, and generated over \$2.5 billion in tax receipts (<http://www.nccommerce.com/en/TourismServices/>). Thus, one promising alternative for many communities includes the incorporation of various tourism-related initiatives as part of their economic development strategies.

Given this, interest in tourism as a tool for economic development has dramatically increased in North Carolina over the past decade. For example, numerous landowners are seeking to diversify their incomes by exploring rural tourism opportunities, while area entrepreneurs continue to explore tourism enterprises as business options. Additionally, over 90 extension field faculty members have reported they are involved in tourism-related issues in their counties and they are seeking additional resources and information to better assist their clientele. In response, a concerted effort at NC State University (through NCCE and the College of Natural Resources) has led to the implementation of the Tourism Extension program, which strives to assist tourism development across the state. The goal of the Tourism Extension program is to improve the quality of tourism provision across rural North Carolina through helping individuals and communities develop healthy, prosperous, and enduring tourism enterprises that will boost economic and community development efforts. The Tourism Extension program works collaboratively with Cooperative Extension field faculty, other NC State University faculty and programs, other universities, and state and regional agencies and organizations to create research and resources that assist tourism development throughout North Carolina.

## Tourism Extension Initiatives

While no extension field faculty member has formal responsibilities in tourism, more than 90 extension field faculty members have identified themselves as engaged in some sort of tourism-related initiative. In an effort to contribute to NCCE's mission of fostering economic and community development, Tourism Extension has implemented the following programs and initiatives: NC Hospitality Customer Service Training Program and NC Birding Trail and Birder Friendly Training Program.

### ***NC Hospitality Customer Service Training Program***

North Carolina Hospitality is a state-wide extension-based train-the-trainer program which offers extension field faculty the opportunity to train businesses and front-line employees in their community on customer service skills. NC Hospitality is an 8-hour training program centered around 7 Hospitality Habits. The curriculum consists of 8 hours of training on customer service, and includes a manual, handouts, activities, homework, and role-playing.

NC Hospitality was modeled after Texas Cooperative Extension's "Texas Friendly" program, but is a distinctly unique program, particularly in that it is offered directly in counties by NCCE field faculty. NC Hospitality was developed by a team comprised of 11 field faculty and one tourism extension specialist. The team began building the curriculum in November of 2005 and met monthly until the curriculum was developed, the training materials were created, and the trainer manual was constructed. The NC Hospitality steering committee has developed into a unified leadership group comprised of agents from 7 counties and from various disciplines, all guided by Tourism Extension.

In late 2006 and early 2007, the NC Hospitality steering committee conducted four pilot trainings to test the curriculum. Approximately 100 people attended the pilot trainings in Davidson Co., Ashe Co., Surry Co. and Wilkes Co. Response to the training was overwhelmingly positive. The pilot trainings sparked interest in further trainings within the region. Of the nearly 100 participants who attended the pilots, over 90% had never attended training offered by NCCE. This positive response indicated the program's potential to reach a new client base for NCCE. After the successful pilot trainings were completed, the program was launched state-wide. Several agent training sessions were held across the state and over 75 extension field faculty members have been trained as instructors in this curriculum. Field faculty acting as trainers then work in regional teams to collaboratively deliver the curriculum across the state.



As of October 2008, nearly 500 individuals have been trained in NC Hospitality across the state, and more trainings are planned. Feedback from participants has been very positive, and extension field faculties have successfully modified the curriculum to fit specific training needs. For example, the training, which is intended for front-line employees in the tourism sector, has been modified and used to train county employees, city library employees, and high school students.

NC Hospitality is a unique programming initiative and has been successful for Tourism Extension for a number of reasons. First, it was developed by a strong leadership team comprised of field faculty and extension campus faculty, thus ensuring county buy-in and support. Second, the steering committee and the field faculty trained in this curriculum represent a wide variety of specialties: family and consumer science, agriculture, horticulture, livestock, county extension directors, aquaculture, community development, and two extension district directors. By incorporating their diverse backgrounds and specialties, field faculty work collaboratively to deliver the curriculum to a number of varied audiences. Third, regional teams have been created to deliver the curriculum state-wide, providing an opportunity for agents to cross county lines to deliver the programming. This type of delivery helps to emphasize a state-wide presence for NCCE. Fourth, the steering committee met numerous times with representatives from the NC Division of Tourism. From these meetings a collaborative and supportive relationship was fostered. In fact, not only does the NC Division of Tourism support NC Hospitality, but it has agreed to promote the program as an educational resource across the state. Additionally, the Division of Tourism has developed a portion of the curriculum on the economic impact of tourism to North Carolina. Fifth, this curriculum has allowed NCCE to reach new client bases (approximately 90% of participants had never attended a training offered by extension) and has enhanced their position within their respective county governments as a key player in tourism development. Lastly, with program costs of only \$25.00 to the participants, the NC Hospitality curriculum is financially affordable to all interested participants.

### ***NC Birding Trail and Birder Friendly Training Program***

An important component of the tourism industry in North Carolina is nature-based tourism, which is also one of the fastest growing segments of global travel. North Carolina alone is home to 29 state parks, four state recreation areas, 62 state game lands, four forest service game lands, one national park, four national forests, ten national wildlife refuges, two national seashores, and ten designated wilderness areas. According to the U.S. Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, “it is estimated that over 900 million visitors spend billions of dollars annually on trips to national forests, parks, monuments, historic sites, recreation areas, protected areas and wildlife refuges, reserves, and management areas.” As travel and outdoor recreation continue to gain popularity, a continued challenge and need exist to find a balance between economic growth and the protection of natural resources. In response to this challenge

and need, tourism extension has been actively involved in the development and implementation of the NC Birding Trail.

The North Carolina Birding Trail initiative started in 2003, and was prompted by Tourism Extension. Since its inception, the NC Birding Trail initiative has been guided by a steering committee consisting of representatives from six agencies: NCCE, NC Wildlife Resources Commission, NC State Parks, US Fish and Wildlife Service, NC Audubon, NC Sea Grant. The state-wide trail is divided into three segments: coastal plain, piedmont, and mountains. The coastal section of the trail was officially launched in June 2007 and consists of 102 bird watching sites east of Interstate 95. The piedmont section of the trail was officially launched in May 2008 and consists of 103 bird watching sites located between Interstate 95 and Interstate 77. The mountains section of the trail will be launched in the spring of 2009 and will consist of 105 bird watching sites west of Interstate 77. The mission of the NC Birding Trail is “to conserve and enhance North Carolina's bird habitat by promoting sustainable bird watching activities, economic opportunities and conservation education” (<http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/>). The NC Birding Trail initiative has developed trail guide books to guide birdwatchers along the trail from site to site, as well as to direct them to other tourism points of interests across rural NC. The NC Birding Trail guide books were funded primarily through two GoldenLEAF Foundation grants, written by Tourism Extension.



An additional outgrowth of the NC Birding Trail endeavor was the creation of the Birder Friendly Business and Birder Friendly Community training program. This training program was co-developed and is co-taught by Tourism Extension and Audubon NC, and was funded by the GoldenLEAF Foundation (grant awarded to Tourism Extension). This program was created to complement the NC Birding Trail effort and to help businesses and communities realize economic benefits from travelers along the trail. Trainings have occurred across the state, from the coast to the mountains. Each six-hour training session has approximately 15-30 participants. As of October 2008, nearly 300 businesses and communities have participated in the training. The goal of the training is to build communication and knowledge of resources to help businesses and communities reach bird watchers and to provide ideas for cooperative marketing strategies. The training aims to provide tools and resources for businesses and communities to use to reach the niche market of bird watchers. The training covers the following topics: (1) birders as clients; (2) enhancing your business and community for birders; (3) knowing your community and its resources; (4) enhancing your business and community for birds; (5) expanding your business horizons; and (6) developing a plan of action and community resource list. The cost of training is \$20.00 and includes a resource manual and lunch (training costs were offset by grant funds).

To date, nearly 300 people and communities have participated in the training. These trainings have not only generated favorable evaluations but have also created several impacts leading to community collaborations. For example, several businesses are working together in numerous portions of the state to develop vacation packages that incorporate birding. Additionally, several businesses and communities in various parts of the state are working together to develop cooperative marketing materials to better promote their regions to birders.



Additionally, Tourism Extension is in the process of developing a searchable database for the NC Birding Trail. This database will include the coastal section of the trail and will progress westward to include each section of the trail as they are completed. The searchable database will allow travelers along the trail to create customized birding lists. These lists will be created using an organized listing of types of birds found at a particular trail site during a particular season and by using an organized listing of the various birding sites. The incorporation of both a training program and a searchable database make NC Birding Trail the first state-wide birding trail initiative to develop such endeavors.

A list of Birder Friendly Businesses and Communities as well as more information about the program can be found at the following address: [http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/birder\\_friendly\\_training.asp](http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/birder_friendly_training.asp).

### **Grants and Contracts**

Since 2004, Tourism Extension has received over \$388,000 in grants to further its programs and initiatives. This includes \$194,000 from the GoldenLEAF Foundation to further the initiatives associated with the North Carolina Birding Trail, and \$166,667 for the US Forest Service to assist rural tourism development endeavors throughout northwest North Carolina. Additionally, Tourism Extension has had success acquiring contracts from agencies and organizations such as NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the Fayetteville Convention and Visitors Bureau.

### **Potential for the Next 5-10 Years**

In 2006, Tourism Extension conducted a needs assessment to better determine the interests and needs of North Carolina extension field faculty, our primary clientele. A total of 57 extension faculty (both field and campus faculty) responded and shared their opinions. Additionally, in 2007, Tourism Extension conducted seven strategic planning workshops (one in each extension district) with extension field faculty who were working on or interested in tourism-related issues. Based on the needs assessment findings, Tourism Extension identified and prioritized several needs relevant to future tourism programming. For example, extension field faculty noted the need for a centralized database to provide tourism-related resources such as, research and

statistics; contact information for faculty and extension field faculty with tourism-related knowledge; and tourism research and statistics. Additionally, extension field faculty consistently ranked marketing as an important issue that needs to be addressed by the Tourism Extension program. The results of the needs assessment and strategic planning workshops have helped provide direction for Tourism Extension's efforts.

While there are numerous opportunities and trends to capitalize on, future projects will seek to incorporate the use of sustainable tourism practices as a tool to better communicate with local governments, landowners, and communities the importance of maintaining local forests, natural resources, and rural entrepreneurship. Over the next 5-10 years, Tourism Extension will focus much of its efforts to include the development and implementation of an online centralized tourism database, the development of various nature-based tourism initiatives, and the development of resources and workshops aimed to address general marketing-related issues.

### ***NCSU Tourism Extension Website***

Tourism Extension is in the process of building and launching a new Tourism Extension website. The Tourism Extension website is being created and designed with the goal of benefiting extension field faculty and other professionals working throughout rural North Carolina. The overall purpose of the website is to provide useful information on a variety of tourism-related topics, to identify additional resources, and to provide a forum to share current news, information and research related to tourism and extension within North Carolina and beyond. Moreover, the content of the website will seek to meet some of the specific needs identified in the 2006 Tourism Extension Needs Assessment and strategic planning workshops. For example, an inventory of 'Who's Who' in NC Tourism Extension (a listing of NCCE field faculty engaged in tourism related initiatives); tourism trends and statistics; extension programs and tools; an inventory of related journals and resources; funding opportunities; and case studies. The development of a Tourism Extension website will provide resources and opportunities for a large number of individuals and organizations for years to come. Once the website is officially launched, it will be located at [www.tourismextension.ncsu.edu](http://www.tourismextension.ncsu.edu).

### ***Nature-Based Tourism Initiatives***

As mentioned previously, there is a growing interest in protecting North Carolina's natural resources. Additionally, trends relating to nature-based tourism continue to increase. In response, Tourism Extension's focus will aim to generate sustainable tourism activity around North Carolina's natural resources, while simultaneously striving to increase environmental awareness and support for natural resources conservation. From an economic standpoint, the nature-based programs have the potential to diversify and improve the North Carolina economy with little capital investment. Nature-based tourists who travel to experience North Carolina's natural resources will utilize goods and services throughout North Carolina, bringing additional revenue to business owners. With the influx of nature-based tourists, opportunities may arise for

new business start-ups or value-added opportunities for existing businesses. Nature-based programs and associated environmental education opportunities help to create a powerful economic engine that serves to benefit communities, while also protecting the natural environment.

The creation of further nature-based tourism initiatives will be an extension of the current Birder Friendly Training program and will likely be similar in structure to the successful NC Hospitality program. The goal of the training initiatives will be to provide resources and research to enable extension field faculty to better guide their clients and interested stakeholders on nature-based tourism initiatives. Furthermore, these nature-based tourism program initiatives will seek to extend focus beyond birds and birding to include additional aspects and types of wildlife and natural resources. The nature-based tourism initiatives will potentially develop curriculum and resources to assist extension agents in working collaboratively within their communities to increase awareness of local nature-based tourism initiatives and to increase community pride and participation. More specifically, this initiative will seek to produce and distribute educational materials and resources to landowners and local governments that will assist in helping them identify the importance of natural resources from a tourism standpoint and various aspects of nature-based tourism in providing economic development. Additionally, the new initiative will assist businesses and communities learn how to better direct tourists to their region; in turn, helping to further stimulate sustainable economic growth.

### **General Marketing-related Issues**

As previously noted, a finding from the 2006 Tourism Extension needs assessment and strategic planning sessions was the importance of tourism-related marketing initiatives to extension field faculty. More specifically, when asked to identify which issues should be addressed by Tourism Extension, marketing was rated as the most important issue for 86% of the extension field faculty and was listed most often as a top county priority. In an attempt to address this need, Tourism Extension will seek to develop and share a variety of workshops, programs, and resources that aim to address marketing-related issues. For example, with rising gas prices many travelers are opting for ‘staycations’ or vacations and travel that do not take them far from home. According to a survey from AOL Travel and Zogby International, 57% of Americans feel they have less money to spend this year on summer vacations than they did in 2007 ([www.zogby.com](http://www.zogby.com)).

Taking into account this estimate and the fact that 1/3 of North Carolina’s visitors are from within the state and 2/3 are from drive markets in a radius that reaches Atlanta and Washington, D.C. metro areas (NC Division of Tourism), opportunities for rural communities to capitalize on ‘staycations’ exist. Tourism Extension will continue to examine how extension field faculty and rural communities can benefit from this type of travel. Furthermore, in seeking to assist extension field faculty and rural communities in marketing and promoting their destinations as a travel options, Tourism Extension plans to develop programming that will seek to address issues such as: working with media, selling the tourism experience, visitor profiling, and pricing.

In summary, Tourism Extension will continue to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding tourism development by producing relevant tourism-related research and peer-reviewed publications. Additionally, Tourism Extension will continue to pursue grants and contracts to further tourism development throughout North Carolina. By continuing to develop and foster working relationships with others, Tourism Extension will contribute to the creation of collaborative solutions for rural North Carolina.



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