

## Promoting Economic Development with Tourism in Rural Communities: Destination Image and Motivation to Return or Recommend

### Abstract

Improving tourism is one means Extension professionals and other community stakeholders can use to build rural economic resiliency. The research reported in this article evaluates what motivates tourists to visit and how they perceive of Wisconsin's Kickapoo Valley as a destination. Data are drawn from surveys collected from out-of-town visitors. Results show the motivation to find excitement and adventure, the perception that the area is clean and hospitable, and whether visitors have been to the area more than once significantly affect their likelihood of returning to or recommending the area. Recommendations for how Extension professionals might use these findings are discussed.

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## Introduction

Recent societal changes and the chronic struggles of rural communities (e.g., changes to the agricultural and timber industries) have negatively affected rural economies (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & Van Es, 2001). At the same time, those dwelling in urban and suburban areas are increasingly drawn to rural areas, often because they perceive that rural communities have a unique charm and provide respite from a faster-paced urban lifestyle. As a potential solution for struggling rural economies, Extension professionals may consider developing tourism opportunities, often based around natural resources, outdoor sports and recreation, agriculture, and unique cultural features. While communities may welcome the economic boost of tourism, they may also aim to preserve valued rural landscapes and the quality of life associated with rural areas.

Tourism offers many advantages to rural communities. It places less of a cost-burden on local economies than building entirely new industries (e.g., manufacturing), and it is not necessarily

dependent on investment support from outside the community. Tourism also provides a boost to travel-oriented businesses and businesses whose focus is not directly related to tourism, such as gas stations or grocery stores (Wilson et al., 2001). Perhaps most important, increased tourism can inject much needed tourist dollars into struggling communities and can be developed into a sustainable means of economic development, bringing a potential year-round flow of income to the area (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

Travel to rural areas also provides benefits to tourists. They can develop an appreciation and understanding of an area's natural beauty, ecosystem, and cultural value; benefit from outdoor educational experiences; and acquire skills that help them to live a more sustainable lifestyle that may come from visiting ecotourism attractions. Urbanites may particularly desire to experience rural cultures and landscapes, to experience food and "local food" culture and ecotourism (Dougherty & Green, 2011; Fennell, 2008; Norby & Retallick, 2012).

There are also downsides to growing rural tourism. Increased tourism can pit communities against others if they feel they are marketing to the same audience. Tourism can also be variable throughout the year or in times of economic decline, and tourism-related employee wages can be low. In addition, some research has noted there can be inherent conflicts between the ecotourism and agricultural communities in some rural areas (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Kline, Cardenas, Leung, & Sanders, 2007), though this could be attenuated by increased collaboration between stakeholders. A robust tourism destination could provide multiple points of interaction, combining sites of agri-tourism (e.g., wineries, orchards), ecotourism, cultural tourism (e.g., historical landmarks or events featuring regional customs), and outdoor sports and recreation opportunities (Burrows, Fennell, Redlin, & Verschoor, 2007; Smith, Davis, & Pike, 2010).

Tourism development can be a useful strategy for Extension programming focused on rural economic development. As Honadle (1990) notes, tourism development offers an opportunity for Extension personnel to implement interdisciplinary programming, including topics such as agriculture and natural resources, small business and home-based business development skills, community resource development, or youth programming, depending on a given community's needs.

Should a community aspire to develop or improve tourism in their region, research has suggested that the venture will be most successful if several of the following conditions are met: an available complete tourism package, strong community leadership, support from local government, funding for tourism development, strategic planning efforts, coordination between local government and local businesses, cooperation among tourism entrepreneurs, the capability to promote and distribute information about the area, and broad, community-wide support (Wilson et al., 2001). Some communities may also aim to improve tourism in the "off-peak" season or "shoulder months" to increase tourism revenue and build a sustainable, year-round tourism economy.

Given the economic opportunities that expanded tourism can provide to rural communities, the purpose of the research reported in this article is to evaluate what motivates tourists to visit a rural area, how they perceive of the area as a tourist destination, and what factors are empirically associated with returning to a rural area during the off season. These findings will be particularly relevant to Extension professionals and other stakeholders who are interested in expanding the

tourism economy in rural areas in general and who are interested in expanding tourism year-round.

## Literature Review

Tourism can be economically inconsistent and seasonally variable. Understanding what tourists are looking for by examining what visitors think about a specific area helps begin to address this issue. More specifically, scholarship in tourism has found that understanding how visitors' construct an image of a destination can help tourism professionals determine whether visitors are likely to visit or return to a tourist destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004a). A conceptual framework for assessing tourists' "destination image" has been empirically tested in the tourism literature and found to be shaped by a composite of individuals' cognitive image of a place (the concrete assessments such as what they think about the people, the landscape, the infrastructure) and more abstract attributes such as how pleasant or relaxing they find the area (Beerli & Martin, 2004a; Hosany, Ekinici, & Uysal, 2006).

Scholars theorize that the cognitive perceptions of a tourist destination precede tourists' affective perceptions, and each of these types of perceptions are affected by attributes of the individual and the information sources from which they have received information about a destination. It is also important to understand how the destination image is constructed. Researchers suggest that information sources, previous travel experiences, and personal factors (including motivations for visiting an area, travel experience, and socio-demographic characteristics) each contribute to the formation of one's image of a destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004a, 2004b).

Destination image can be linked to travel-related behavior, specifically whether tourists will revisit a destination and whether they might recommend the destination to others (Chi & Qu, 2008).

Destination image measures typically assess what people know about a place, how they feel about it, and how they plan to act on those thoughts and feelings (Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007). Gallarza, Saura, and García (2002) note that such subjective perceptions and assessments are even more influential on tourists' decision-making about travel than tangible resources, like a destination's infrastructure or weather. Chi and Qu (2008) make an explicit connection between destination image and tourist satisfaction, which in turn influences visitor "loyalty" or likelihood of returning to a destination.

To contextualize the study area, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve is located in the un-glaciated bluff country of southwest Wisconsin. This section of the state, part of the so-called Driftless Area due to its lack of prehistoric glacial drift, has more dramatic topography than its Upper Midwest regional surroundings. Visually distinctive limestone bluffs with river valleys and fertile trout streams mark the area as appealing for a wide variety of outdoor recreation and tourist activities, including hiking, paddle sports, photography, hunting, and fly-fishing. Visitor spending in Wisconsin's Driftless region was estimated at \$52.6 million in 2013. A total of 812 jobs were sustained through this spending with income of \$16.0 million, generating \$6.2 million in state and local taxes and \$3.3 million in Federal taxes (Tourism Economics, 2014).

## Research Questions

The research reported in this article evaluates visitors' composite destination image of a rural area, in this case Wisconsin's Kickapoo Valley region, in relation to visitors' likelihood of returning to or

recommending the area to others. As such, we pose the following research questions:

*Research Question 1 (RQ1):* What is the composite destination image among visitors to the Kickapoo Valley? Including:

*RQ1a:* What are tourists' cognitive assessments of the Kickapoo Valley as a destination?

*RQ1b:* What are tourists' affective assessments of the Kickapoo Valley as a destination?

*RQ1c:* What motivates tourists to visit the Kickapoo Valley?

*Research Question 2 (RQ2):* What themes in visitors' image of the Kickapoo Valley as a destination and motivations for visiting are associated with their likelihood of returning to or recommending the Kickapoo Valley?

The research reported here also evaluates what types of events and services would attract tourists back to a rural area in the shoulder months, between Labor Day and Memorial Day, when tourism revenue tends to drop. Increasing tourism in the shoulder months is a means to bring more dollars to rural areas year-round, rather than being overly dependent on the high season for revenue. Area stakeholders were interested in boosting the potential for a more resilient four-season tourism economy. An effective marketing campaign and market research to measure tourists' interests and motivations for traveling to the Kickapoo Valley may draw them back to the area in the off season and increase year-round tourism revenue.

## Methods

In order to address the research questions, a survey was constructed taking into account tourism and rural economic scholarship and feedback from tourism business leaders and other Kickapoo Valley stakeholders. The survey was distributed between July and December of 2012 using both paper and electronic formats. Paper surveys were distributed at locations within the Kickapoo Valley Reserve during July and August of 2012. Only non-residents (those not residing within the Kickapoo Valley) were invited to participate in the study. Sixty paper surveys were collected during this period. In November 2012, an electronic survey was also distributed to the Kickapoo Valley Reserve's database of people who had signed up to receive emails, and participation was requested from non-residents who had not filled out the previously administered paper survey. A filter question was used at the beginning of the survey to ensure that respondents had visited the Kickapoo Valley. After a reminder email in December, the electronic version yielded 65 total responses. The combined paper and electronic surveys yielded a total of 125 respondents, for a total response rate of 57%. Both paper and electronic surveys addressed eight distinct concepts using a total of 68 questions. Most respondents required 15-20 minutes to complete the survey.

Demographic questions were included in order to assess the basic characteristics of "typical" visitors to the area, including gender, age, state of residence, income, and urbanity (i.e., an urban, suburban, or rural resident). In order to understand how previous travel experience in the Kickapoo Valley affected respondents' destination image, respondents were also asked how many times, if any, they had previously visited the area.

To assess visitor perceptions of the Kickapoo Valley, we chose measures of destination image that have been measured and tested empirically (Beerli & Martin, 2004a, 2004b), including *cognitive image* and *affective image* dimensions and *motivations* for visiting.

Cognitive image was measured by asking respondents to "please rate the Kickapoo Valley on the following statements" on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = "Does Not Describe the Kickapoo Valley," 7 = "Completely Describes the Kickapoo Valley") followed by a list of 19 items (exact wording of these items is provided in the results). Affective image was measured by two items asking how "pleasant" and "relaxing" the Kickapoo Valley is, using 7-point Likert-type scales, which were significantly correlated (Pearson correlation=.619, p. <.001) and combined into an index of *affective image*. Thirteen items measuring motivations for visiting the Kickapoo Valley were adapted from Beerli and Martin (2004a) and were measured by asking respondents "how would you rate your motivations for visiting the Kickapoo Valley" on a 7-point scale (1 = "Not a Reason at All," 7 = "Definitely a reason")." Exact wording of the 13 statements following this question is provided in the results.

To understand how tourists' personal characteristics and destination image contribute to their decisions about returning to the Kickapoo Valley during the peak or off-peak season, or recommending the area to others, we used three items to measure visitors' *likelihood to return or recommend* the Kickapoo Valley. The three items were measured on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 ('Very unlikely') to 7 ('Very likely') and were averaged to make an index of *likelihood to return or recommend* (Cronbach's alpha=.55).

The statistical technique of factor analysis was used to condense the 13 items measuring tourists' motivations and 19 items measuring tourists' cognitive assessments of the Kickapoo Valley into a more manageable set of items. This analysis groups statistically related items drawn from survey questions about respondents' motivations for visiting and their cognitive assessments of the area as a destination. Data were analyzed using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, which tested the relationship between the independent variables and respondents' likelihood to return to or recommend the area as a tourist destination.

## Results

Tourism research has found that people who have previously visited an area are most likely to return, making them promising individuals to target for promoting tourism in the shoulder or peak tourism season (Farnum, Hall, & Kruger, 2005). Survey results show that both first-time (a subset of respondents who filled out a paper survey) and return visitors (who filled out either the paper or online surveys) report a high likelihood of returning to or recommending others visit the Kickapoo Valley (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

Likelihood of Respondents Recommending or Returning to the Kickapoo Valley (All Respondents, First-time visitors, and Those Who Have Visited More Than Once)

	<i>Mean</i>		
<b>How likely are you to do the following?</b> <i>(1- 'Very unlikely' to 7- 'Very likely')</i>	<b>All</b> <b>(N=125)</b>	<b>First-time</b> <b>Visitors</b>	<b>Return</b> <b>Visitors</b>

		(n=28)	(n=97)
Recommend the Kickapoo Valley to others as a travel destination.	6.3	6.1	6.3
Visit the Kickapoo Valley again in the "peak" months (between Memorial Day and Labor Day).	6.1	5.8	6.2
Visit the Kickapoo Valley again in the "off-peak" months (after Labor Day and before Memorial Day).	6.0	5.2	6.2

Knowing who commonly visits the Kickapoo Valley can help promote tourism by targeting messages more effectively. We first provide descriptive information to understand the basic demographic characteristics of survey respondents, depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

Demographics of Visitors to the Kickapoo Valley (% of Sample in Each Group)

		All Respondents (N= 125)	First-time visitors (n=28)	More than one visit (n=97)
		100.0%	22.4%	77.6%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	41.6	29.6	46.8
	Female	55.2	70.4	53.2
<b>Age</b>	<i>(Average)</i>	49.4	45.2	50.5
<b>State of Residence (most frequent)</b>	Wisconsin	69.6	45.8	81.7
	Illinois	11.2	29.2	7.5
	Minnesota	4.8	4.2	5.4
	Iowa	4.8	12.5	3.2
	Other	6.8	8.3	2.1
<b>Income</b>	Less than \$25,000	7.2	16.7	6.2
	\$25,000 - 49,999	16.0	8.3	22.2
	\$50,000 - 74,999	21.6	25.0	25.9

	\$75,000 - 99,999	20.0	12.5	27.2
	\$100,000 - 124,999	8.8	16.7	8.6
	Over \$125,000	10.4	20.8	9.9
<b>Urbanity</b>	Urban	32.0	39.3	30.5
	Rural	42.4	35.7	45.3
	Suburban	24.0	25.0	24.2
Group totals not adding up to 100% reflect when respondents did not answer or skipped the question.				

RQ1a sought to assess visitors' cognitive image of the area. Respondents were asked to rank attributes of the Kickapoo Valley commonly used to describe a variety of tourist destinations (Table 3). A type of factor analysis, principle component analysis with Varimax rotation, was used to determine what themes emerged from the 19 items measuring visitors' cognitive image of the Kickapoo Valley as a destination. Factors with Eigenvalues (a measure of variance) greater than one were selected for inclusion in the model. The factor analysis indicated four primary components from the set of 19 cognitive aspects of destination image, explaining 63.4% of the variance. Overarching cognitive image themes that were revealed by the factor analysis included: a sense of comfort and quality of the amenities and facilities; perception that the area is clean, safe, and hospitable; that the area is a place of ecological and cultural interest; and that the area has good general infrastructure, sports activities, and is a good value.

**Table 3.**

Means and Factor Solution of Tourists' Cognitive Image of the Kickapoo Valley (N=125)

	Mean	SD	Eigen-value	% of Variance	Rotated Factor Loading			
					1	2	3	4
<b><i>Comfort and quality of the amenities and facilities</i></b>			<b>6.67</b>	<b>35.10</b>				
Fashionable	2.90	1.78			0.84			
A variety of dining options	3.27	1.58			0.84			
Good night-life	3.01	1.87			0.81			
Shopping facilities	3.01	1.56			0.81			
Luxury	3.18	1.77			0.71			
Good options of hotels, cabins, or other	4.34	1.65			0.63			

accommodations								
<b>Area is clean, safe, and hospitable</b>			<b>2.77</b>	<b>14.58</b>				
Clean	5.79	1.16				0.84		
Offers personal safety	5.44	1.41				0.80		
Hospitable, friendly people	6.11	1.06				0.69		
A good quality of life	5.86	1.25				0.67		
Good weather	5.42	1.26				0.60		
A good name and reputation	5.58	1.36				0.53		
<b>Area is a place of ecological and cultural interest</b>			<b>1.59</b>	<b>8.37</b>				
Places of historical and cultural interest	5.40	1.45					0.77	
Great variety of wildlife, plants	6.09	1.07					0.71	
Richness and beauty of landscape	6.69	0.60					0.60	
Interesting cultural activities	4.94	1.45					0.51	
<b>Area has good infrastructure, sports activities, and is a good value</b>			<b>1.02</b>	<b>5.39</b>				
Well-developed general infrastructure	4.50	1.40						0.70
Opportunities for sports activities	5.19	1.67						0.66
A good value	5.84	1.18						0.64
<b>Cumulative Variance</b>				<b>63.43</b>				

RQ1b asked how visitors' feelings about an area—such as how relaxing or pleasant they find it—are likely to contribute to their overall image of the destination. People's concrete evaluations of a place (measured as cognitive image) combines with their emotional perceptions to form a composite destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004b). Researchers believe that visitors' assessments of a place, including those outlined above, precede and contribute to their feelings (Beerli & Martin, 2004b). Below we show how individuals' feel about the Kickapoo Valley, including how all visitors rated these perceptions and looking at first-time and return visitors' feelings (Table 4). Results show that, in general, visitors perceive the Kickapoo Valley as a pleasant and relaxing place. Return visitors rate the area as slightly more relaxing and pleasant than first-time visitors. The two items were combined to form a single index for subsequent analyses.

**Table 4.**  
Visitors' Affective Image of the Kickapoo Valley (Two Items Combined to Form an Averaged Index)

	<i>Mean</i>
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How would you rate the Kickapoo Valley as a tourist destination?	All (N=125)	First-time Visitors (n=28)	Return Visitors (n=97)
Pleasantness (1-'Unpleasant' to 7-'Pleasant')	5.8	5.6	5.9
Relaxing (1-'Distressing' to 7-'Relaxing')	6.1	6.0	6.1
Pearson's $r=62$ , $p < .001$			

Respondents were also asked to indicate what motivated them to travel to the Kickapoo Valley (RQ1c). Factor analysis demonstrated that the themes in motivations for visiting the Kickapoo Valley included experiencing new things and places, for personal improvement, and to share experiences with friends; for relaxation and escape; and for excitement and adventure (Table 5).

**Table 5.**

Means and Factor Solution of Tourists' Motivations for Visiting the Kickapoo Valley (N=125)

	Mean	SD	Eigen-value	% of Variance	Rotated Factor Loading		
					1	2	3
<b><i>To experience new things and places, for personal improvement, and to share experiences with friends</i></b>			<b>5.21</b>	<b>40.09</b>			
To know different ways of life	4.31	2.03			0.79		
To tell friends about your experiences on vacation	4.37	2.20			0.74		
Go to places that friends have not visited	4.66	2.21			0.73		
To know new, different places	5.25	1.67			0.72		
To attend cultural events	3.62	1.85			0.71		
For intellectual improvement	3.97	1.90			0.69		
To go to fashionable places	2.26	1.65			0.59		
<b><i>For relaxation and escape</i></b>			<b>1.87</b>	<b>14.41</b>			
To alleviate stress and tension	6.17	1.11				0.89	
For rest and relaxation	6.18	1.15				0.84	
To escape daily routine	6.31	1.07				0.80	

<b>For excitement and adventure</b>			<b>1.31</b>	<b>10.11</b>			
To do exciting things	5.13	1.55					0.82
To seek diversion and entertainment	4.93	1.66					0.77
To seek adventure	5.77	1.31					0.76
<b>Cumulative variance (%)</b>				<b>64.61</b>			

To address RQ2, we evaluate *which* of those motivations for visiting the region and assessments of the area are significantly related to willingness to revisit the area. While the findings reported above illustrate what visitors think about and how they rate specific aspects of the Kickapoo Valley, regression analysis was employed to evaluate when specific attitudes are associated with potential return visits (Table 6). Results show that two of the themes in destination image and motivations significantly impact how likely visitors are to indicate they will return to the Kickapoo Valley: (1) the image that the area is clean, safe, and has hospitable/friendly people and (2) if they are motivated to visit the area to seek adventure and excitement. Whether the respondent was a first-time visitor or had been there more than once also significantly impacted their indication of whether they would return to or recommend the area.

**Table 6.**

Regression Table: Predictors of Tourists' Visits, Motivations, and Destination Image Factors on Likelihood of Returning to and Recommending the Kickapoo Valley

	<b>β</b>
<i>(Constant)</i>	5.34
Age	0.00
Gender (female=high)	0.08
Income	0.06
First-time or repeat visitor (repeat visitor=high)	0.51*
<b><i>Destination Image Indices</i></b>	
Affective Destination Image	-0.05
Comfort and quality of the amenities and facilities	0.03
Area is clean, safe, hospitable	0.23*
Area is a place of ecological and cultural interest	0.08
Area has good infrastructure, sports activities, and is a good value	0.05
<b><i>Motivation Indices</i></b>	
To experience new things and places, for personal improvement, and	0.15

to share experiences with friends	
For relaxation and escape	0.08
For excitement and adventure	0.43*
	$R^2 = 29.6\%$
Coefficients in table are unstandardized Betas. * $p < .05$	

## Discussion and Recommendations

The goal of the research analyzed in this article was to better understand the characteristics of tourists who travel to rural areas, to understand perceptions of a given area as a destination (assessing both cognitive and affective dimensions), and to see what motivates people to visit the area. In addition, we also sought to determine which of the factors, specifically in terms of cognitive and affective images and motivations, are significantly associated with tourists' likelihood of saying they would recommend the destination to others and return to the area. We are particularly interested in how this might serve as a catalyst to increase tourism during off-peak seasons, which could bring additional and sustainable income to rural areas. Understanding what perceptions would lead tourists to return can help Extension professionals and other stakeholders more effectively improve the tourism economy in other rural areas of the United States. Additionally, identifying these relationships can contribute to the development of marketing materials that yield effective results, that is, by highlighting qualities of rural areas that inspire return visits.

The findings we report here indicate that seeking adventure and excitement is significantly associated with tourists' plans to return to the area. Other motivations—to experience new ways of life and know new places and to relax and escape when visiting the Kickapoo Valley—do not significantly affect tourists' intentions to return. One of the cognitive image factors—perceiving the area as clean, safe, and hospitable—was also significantly associated with visitors' intent to return.

Our results indicate that portraying a rural area such as the Kickapoo Valley as fashionable, emphasizing tourism infrastructure, or depicting it as a place where one can do many types of sporting activities is less likely to have an impact on visitors' intent to return. Promotional materials depicting adventure and excitement more generally, rather than focusing on specific sporting activities, might be more effective in attracting repeat visitors. Similarly, drawing attention toward opportunities to rest and relax might also not provide as much strategic impact in promoting tourism; nor will trying to appeal to tourists' desire to go to novel places that their friends or others have visited. In other words, while visitors often rely on their friends' recommendations for appealing destinations, visitors don't necessarily choose to visit a particular rural area so they can tell their friends about it.

Results of our study also indicate that return visitors are more likely than first-time visitors to say they will come back to an area. Those aspiring to improve tourism to rural areas might leverage the power of this cohort of individuals by encouraging them to use travel websites (e.g., TripAdvisor or Yelp) or other social media to reflect on their own experience in rural areas and provide recommendations to others, or to provide discounts or vouchers to visitors who make a return visit to the area.

While this analysis focuses primarily on one specific rural area, it is our hope that the findings may help Extension professionals promote tourism to enhance economic vitality in similar rural areas. Another way this article can be useful is if Extension professionals use the concepts outlined to conduct similar surveys in their own communities to identify what might promote more tourism. While the findings from our research may be generalizable to other regions, conducting a comparable survey would also be relevant in other communities and may provide insight into tourists' preferences and motivations for visiting areas with other unique characteristics and offerings. Such location-specific data can provide results that are readily applied to Extension professionals' efforts to enhance tourism and promote economic development.

Tourists with other demographics than the sample used in the study reported here may have different motivations and destination images associated with intentions to make repeat visits to a particular rural area. Because of its relative isolation from urban centers, the largest percentage of tourists in the Kickapoo Valley came from rural areas. People living closer to areas with more urban residents may have different reasons for paying repeat visits to a particular destination. Additionally, larger datasets would allow for more segmented analysis empowering communities to generate marketing insights to target audience segments in a more granular fashion such as age cohorts or income levels. Future research should explore these possibilities to help Extension professionals contribute to the economic vitality of their respective rural communities.

Introducing concepts related to destination image and how these may influence repeat visits by tourists builds upon previous Extension scholarship on how to foster economic development in rural communities more generally. Understanding how tourists perceive of destination image in their own unique locations can inform marketing campaigns designed to increase revenue in other areas with their own distinctive characteristics.

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