

The Socio-economic Contribution of Small and Medium-sized privately Owned Outdoor Recreation Enterprises in Alabama – An Exploratory Investigation

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Abstract

An increasing number of Americans participate in outdoor recreation programs and services for a fee. Approximately 5 million landowners own nearly 190 million acres of forested land in the southern US. In Alabama, ranked fifth in the nation for total biodiversity, more than 90% of the forestland is privately owned. Factors such as the shrinking pulp and paper industry, Alabama's vast natural resources, as well as the growing demand for outdoor recreation services could potentially stimulate the development of small and medium-scale private sector outdoor recreation enterprises. To assess this potential an exploratory study, based on a self-administered mail survey of existing relevant enterprises in 12 counties of Alabama was undertaken. Data analysis included evaluation of the mean and standard deviations. In spite of a low (31%) response rate, data analysis indicated that these enterprises have the potential of contributing significantly to socio-economic development and quality of life in rural Alabama

Keywords: Socio-economic impact, small and medium-sized enterprises, private sector, outdoor recreation, natural resources, Alabama.

1. Introduction

Outdoor recreation is an important economic sub-sector in the USA. Approximately 50% of the US population participated in an outdoor activity at least once in 2013 (The Outdoor Foundation, 2014). In 2012, expenditures on outdoor recreation contributed nearly \$670 billion to the US economy (Southwick Associates, 2013). A large number of Americans participate in recreation programs and services for a fee. These programs and services can be grouped into two broad categories: Activity-oriented or Structured Recreation and Resource-oriented or Non-structured Recreation.

The former category is usually restricted to urban and suburban settings and is very dependent on constructed facilities such as playfields, courts, golf courses, and swimming pools. The latter category is dependent on the presence of natural resources such as forests, lakes, wildlife, and mountains. Recreation which occurs in such natural settings is commonly referred to as outdoor recreation (Sharpe, et al., 1994). The term outdoor recreation can be applied to a range of outdoor activities. The most popular outdoor recreation activities participated in by Americans are running, biking, fishing, camping/backpacking, hiking, hunting, and bird watching/wildlife viewing (The Outdoor Foundation, 2014)

In the southern USA, approximately 5 million landowners own nearly 190 million acres of forested land (Cordell and Tarrant, 2002). In Alabama, more than 90% of the forestland is privately owned. Alabama is also ranked fifth in the nation for total biodiversity (Boyd and Seymour, 2015). The shrinking pulp and paper industry and Alabama's vast array of natural resources, coupled with the growing demand for outdoor recreation services could potentially stimulate and promote the development of small to medium scale private sector outdoor recreation enterprises. This could, in turn, have a positive impact on local employment, wage levels and income generation, entrepreneurship, poverty reduction, improved education and health, and quality of life in rural areas (Reeder and Brown, 2005).

Increased numbers of outdoor recreation enterprises would generate not only direct employment opportunities, but also indirect opportunities in the hospitality, resource management, and various other support sectors (University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, 2015). The local economy would be diversified, offering opportunities for new businesses and also resulting in employment outside of the agricultural setting becoming available (University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, 2015). The increased recreation activities could also lead to improved local services, including health facilities (Reeder and Brown, 2005). Areas with higher levels of recreation activities also have a higher population of individuals with high school diplomas and bachelor's degrees (Reeder and Brown, 2005). All of these elements ultimately impact the quality of life in rural areas.

The development of outdoor recreation enterprises could also have a positive impact on rural tourism and increase the purchase of rural properties by non-farmers (Henderson, 2004). Rural tourism, sometimes known as Ecotourism is the travel to relatively undisturbed areas to study and admire scenery, plants, wildlife, and cultural or historical attractions (University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, 2015). It makes up approximately 10-20% of the world's tourism and is growing at a rate of 10-30% a year (University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, 2015). In 2007, over 22 million people visited the state of Alabama and spent over \$9 billion, a 10% increase from the previous year (Brackett and Briechele, 2009). Additionally, most rural tourism participants have above-average income levels and reside in metro areas away from where outdoor recreation activities generally occur (Henderson, 2004). According to US Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2011 hunters and anglers spent \$38 million on equipment, licenses, and trips nationwide (National Shooting Sports Foundation, 2013).

The conceptual and theoretical frameworks for this exploratory study in Alabama were rooted in accepted principles of socio-economic development and sustainable development concepts. The principles of socio-economic development address the relationship between economics and social development (Szirmai, 2005). In the case of the development of outdoor recreation enterprises, concentration is placed on the social impact of the economic change that the development of such enterprises would bring. Some level of negative impact on biodiversity and natural resources are generally anticipated as society pursues economic development objectives and seeks to satisfy the basic needs of man (Weaver, 1994). Depending on the types of recreation use, the site itself, and level of site management, water resources, soil, vegetation, and animal life will likely be impacted on some level (Cordell and Tarrant, 2002).

Sustainable development, a concept made popular in the 1980s, was more recently defined as "improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems" (IUCN/UNEP/WWF, 1991). Ensuring environmental stability is also one of the development goals of the UN Millennium project whose target, among other things, is to promote environmental sustainability (UN Development Group, 2006). Sustainable development has the potential of addressing the fundamental challenges to humanity, now and into the future (Hopwood et al., 2005). Sustainable development seeks to promote and facilitate the wise use of natural assets for the enhancement of the quality of life of humans on a sustainable basis.

Achievement of the overall goal of sustainable development, either at the community, state, national or international level will require some changes in human behavior and attitude towards the environment, personal consumption patterns, as well as aspects of international trading protocols. The issues of community and social norms as well as collective preferences are also important considerations in sustainable development (Turner, et al., 1998). Sustainable development will be dependent on the encouragement of desirable results and the discouragement of processes and actions contrary to the desired outcomes.

There is a critical linkage and relationship between sustainable livelihoods, human well-being, environmental sustainability, and social equity. However, these objectives or processes are not incompatible with each other. In fact, economic activity and development, if properly planned, managed, and integrated can strengthen the management of biological diversity and environmental resource management (Kim and Weaver, 1994) and promote public participation in the process. When the local community is involved in planning and management and the recreation activity facilitators are local, many negative social and environmental impacts are minimized and economic and social effects are maximized (Schroeder, 2003). The community can direct development according to its values and interests (Johnson, 2010). Jones et al. (2008) found that establishing natural resource enterprises on properties that were difficult to manage for agriculture or timber provided multiple benefits including diversification of family incomes, conservation and stewardship of the land, improved watershed integrity, and sustainable rural development.

A study in Peru indicated that modifications to wildlife areas for the purposes of increased outdoor recreation also benefited certain species by providing clear paths for their movement through the forests (Roe et al., 2007). Stem et al. (2002) compared communities in Costa Rica that were participating in Ecotourism practices to those which were not and found that some respondents claimed to leave their land in forest cover because they recognized its value for tourism opportunities. Local households surveyed in the study which had a household member employed in Ecotourism had, on average, 29% more forest cover on their land than residents who were not involved with Ecotourism (Stem et al., 2002).

Private enterprises are making enormous contributions to outdoor recreation. The number of private sector enterprises has grown steadily for the past 15 years (Cordell and Tarrant, 2002). To assess the future outlook of small and medium sized private sector outdoor recreation enterprises in Alabama, we sought to develop a database of small and medium sized private sector outdoor recreation enterprises in the state and to determine the range of services offered by these enterprises. We also examined the nature of the challenges faced by small and medium sized private sector outdoor recreation enterprises in Alabama.

1.0. Materials and Methods

1.1. Targeted Counties and Population Mix

A sample of 12 counties, distributed in northern and southeastern Alabama, were selected as the study sites for this exploratory study. The counties were selected largely because of their relatively close proximity to the base of operations of the three collaborating researchers and in part because of the rich natural resource base of these counties. The enterprises were identified through literature and report reviews, telephone directories, contacts with knowledgeable individuals and professionals, the internet, and other relevant sources in the targeted counties. The counties included in this exploratory investigation were Limestone, Madison, Jackson Lauderdale, Macon, Montgomery, Bullock, Russell, Lee, Chambers, Elmore, and Tallapoosa (Figure 1). Some of the demographic and household information about the residents of these counties is captured in Table 1 whereas Table 2 captures data about the educational level of residents of study sites.

Caucasians constitute more than 50% of the population of nine of the 12 counties in the sample and over 75% of the population in three counties (Jackson, Lauderdale and Limestone). African-Americans were the dominant ethnic group in three counties (Bullock [70.9%], Macon [80.5%], and Montgomery [54.9%]). Only in two counties namely Bullock (5.7%) and Limestone (5.6%) was the Hispanic population greater than 5% (Table 1). The level of unemployment is relatively high (> 40%) in all the 12 counties surveyed. Madison County experienced the highest level (59.4%) of employment. Associated with the overall low level of employment is high number of persons whose income level was below the national poverty line. Interestingly, in Macon county 59.4% of the residents were in that category.

Whereas overall a relatively high percentage (approximately 67%) of residents in those counties had completed high school education, only a small percentage (38%) of these high school graduates had gone on to complete a bachelor's or more advanced education. Only in Lee, Madison and Montgomery counties 30% or more of the population had completed advanced degrees (Table 2). However, the majority of the counties in the study are blessed with natural resources as well as other nature tourism and outdoor recreation assets such as lakes, beautiful landscapes, and wildlife.

1.2. Survey Instrument

A two-page questionnaire developed and pre-tested by the collaborating researchers, along with a cover letter, were mailed to registered and/or known privately owned small and medium-sized outdoor recreation enterprises in the 12 counties. Follow-up reminders were sent to enterprises which failed to return completed questionnaires within 30 days.

1.3. Data Analysis

Summary data of selected socio-economic attributes of the enterprises surveyed as well as comparison of mean and standard deviations were undertaken and are reported. SPSS (version 18) and MS Excel were used to analyze the data.

2.0. Results and Discussion

The response rate of 31% was somewhat low. However, researchers have generally reported low response rates for mail questionnaire surveys (Joshi et al., 2015; Measells et al., 2005; Jones, 2014). Thus, the relatively low response rate for this study was not entirely surprising. The low response rate to the survey may have been due in part to the fact that most of the targeted enterprises were family owned with few employees. Lack of time or interest by these enterprises could have contributed to the low response rate.

The data analysis revealed that a high percentage (74.2%) of the sample of 31 respondents owned the facilities where outdoor recreation services were being offered, whereas 19.4% operated on leased properties. Interestingly, the initial investment of a large percentage (67.7%) of these enterprises was greater than \$30,000. The initial level of investment of 12.9% of respondents was less than \$10,000 and 13% of enterprises had initial investments in the range of \$10,000 - \$29,999. Considering that most outdoor recreational activities are seasonal, the average employment rate of four full-time and four part-time employees per respondent is an indication of the potential contribution of a well-organized, integrated, and vibrant small or medium-sized outdoor recreation enterprise sub-sector to the socio-economic development of these areas. Furthermore, outdoor recreationists also make use of lodges, hotels and other services which could have a multiplier effect on the local economy. Outdoor recreation trip-related spending in the USA from 2011-2012 was over \$500 billion (Southwick Associates, 2013).

The enterprises surveyed offer a range of services. Camping, fishing, and hunting respectively generated the highest level of demand. For 40.1% of the enterprises which responded to the relevant questionnaire item, hunting was the highest revenue generator. Additionally, 29.6% of respondents reported that fishing and camping contributed approximately the same level of revenue. Clients utilizing these enterprises were predominately Caucasians (92% [0.09 std. err.]) with African Americans (7% [0.08 std. err.]) making-up the second largest group, followed Hispanics (3% [0.01 std.err.]). With the exception of three counties namely Macon, Montgomery, and Bullock, the ethnicity of the clientele of these enterprises reflect the general demographic make-up of the areas surveyed.

As anticipated, small and medium-sized outdoor recreation enterprises, like other small businesses in the country, are experiencing many challenges and therefore would welcome technical and financial assistance. Some of the critical needs identified by respondents include investment capital and operational funds (business loans and grants), advertising and marketing support, customer satisfaction surveys, website development and Wi-Fi service, and management assistance (wildlife, forestry, and environmental), among others.

Some of these problems and challenges could be alleviated through more networking and partnerships among community organizations and cooperative groups (MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003). Federal government initiatives would be helpful in facilitating rural communities gaining access to resources needed for initiating and maintaining recreation enterprises (MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003). The critical and indispensable role of State, county, and municipal authorities in support of small and medium-sized outdoor recreation and related enterprises cannot be ignored.

Omar et al. (2009) found that a major issue for small to medium-sized enterprises was the lack of training and development in management staff and employees. Business owners gaining training in challenging areas and providing for employees to be trained also would offer in house options for fulfilling critical business needs. Better trained personnel would also result in better efficiency, improved customer service, and enhanced profitability and sustainability.

Forming long-term business relationships within ethnically-based networks was also found as option to secure financing for business development (Beck and Kunt, 2006). Opportunities for fostering a climate of peer-to-peer learning among interested and/or new outdoor recreation private sector entrepreneurs should be considered. The potential impact of mentoring of younger entrepreneurs by more experienced and mature entrepreneurs should not be under estimated.

Furthermore, given the high level of poverty and the low level of post-high school education successes in these counties, outdoor recreation enterprises, if properly coordinated, guided and assisted have the potential of making significant contributions to the social and economic welfare of the sub-regions of the State, ultimately resulting in enhanced quality of life of residents.

3.0. Conclusion

In spite of the relatively small sample size, there seems to be some indication that small and medium-sized private sector outdoor recreation enterprises in Alabama have the potential of contributing to job creation and socio-economic development in natural resource rich rural communities in the state. Obviously, much coordinated attention and support will have to be focused on this sub-sector if this perceived potential is to be fully realized. MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) identify a four stage process for the development of Rural Tourism which can be applied to the activities of outdoor recreation. The process involves recognizing opportunities, planning and implementing strategies, developing community partnerships, and long-term planning and marketing. The ability to foster and sustain partnerships and the collaboration of stakeholders will be very critical in this regard. Most importantly, the realization of social and economic benefits and services from Alabama's natural resource base on a long-term basis will depend on the extent to which the concepts of sustainable development are practiced and adhered to by all stakeholders (Teh and Cabanban, 2007).

This exploratory study has identified some of the challenges faced by small and medium-sized nature-based enterprises in Alabama. The low response rate signals the need for a more vigorous effort aimed at expanding the database of such enterprises in the state. Another possible implication is the need for review and possible development of a more effective mail survey strategy, a strategy which is likely to be more effective among the small and medium-sized enterprises in rural communities. Furthermore, this study points to the need for sound public policy initiatives aimed at fostering a structured outreach program and an integrated technical support framework targeted at small and medium-sized outdoor recreation enterprises in the State.

This paper focused on the potential socio-economic contribution of outdoor recreation enterprises in Alabama. However, as has been implied elsewhere in the paper outdoor recreational activities which necessitate travel from home to another state, region or community can be considered as nature tourism. Globally, and in rural communities and developing countries in particular, the tourism sector "...offers one of the most effective and viable tools for poverty alleviation and sustainable development [and] as a leading employment sector..." (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Furthermore, tourism is a unique vehicle for promoting 'greater understanding 'of the world beyond regional and county boundaries (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Nature-based and related privately owned outdoor recreation enterprises can therefore serve as important pillars for community wealth creation as well as for the stimulation of enhanced quality of life in rural Alabama. The challenge is how stakeholders can make this become a reality.

4.0. Acknowledgements

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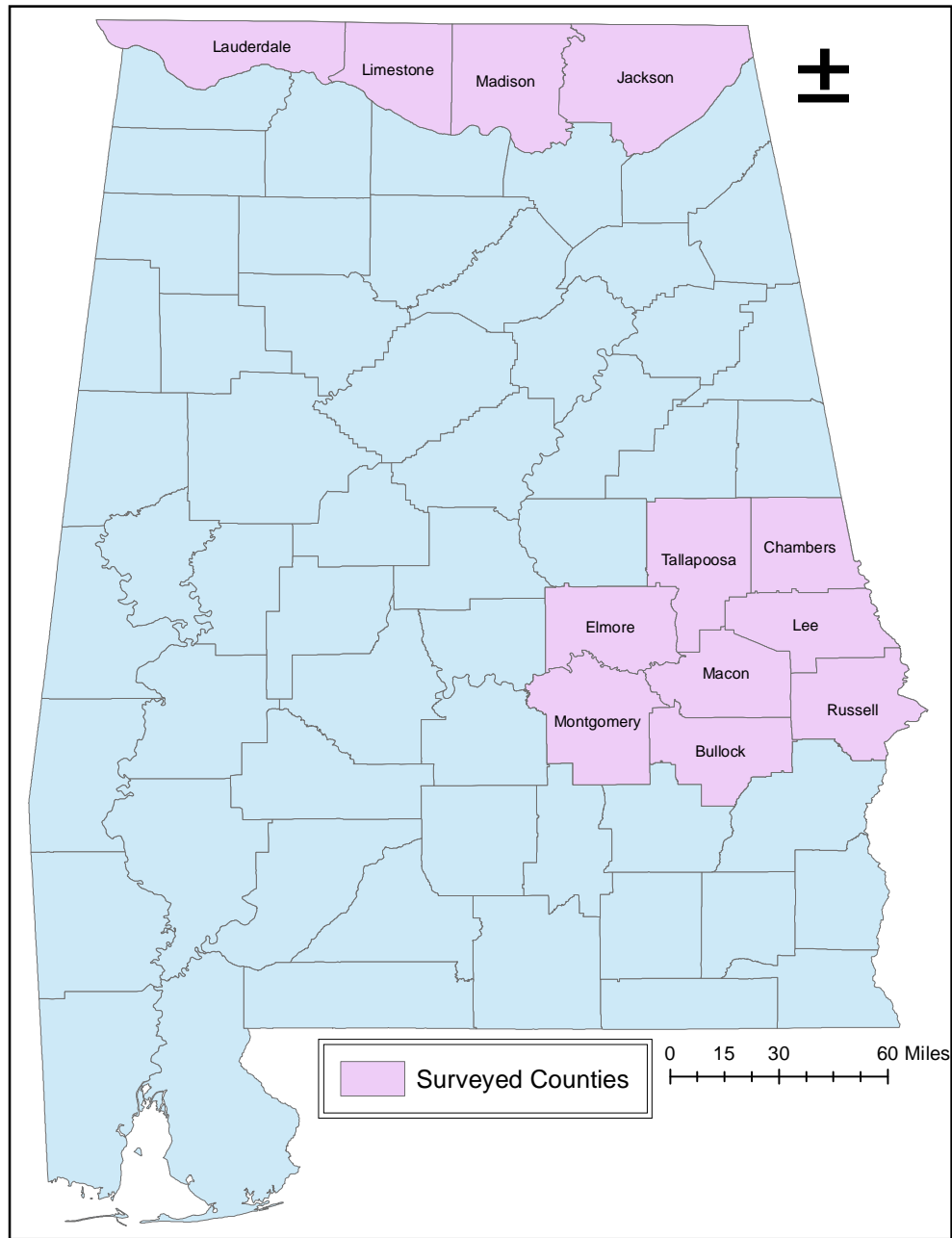


Figure 1: Counties in Alabama where small and medium-sized outdoor recreation enterprises were surveyed.

Table 1: Demographic and household data of counties where outdoor recreation enterprises were surveyed.
(Source: United States Census Bureau's 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates).

County	Population by Main Ethnic Group			Employed* (%)+/- SD	Income Level** (%)+/- SD
	Caucasian (%)+/- SD	African American (%)+/- SD	Hispanic (%)+/- SD		
Bullock	22.2 +/-0.3	70.9 +/-4.8	5.7 +/-4.6	46.9 +/-5.0	21.6 +/-5.0
Chambers	58.0 +/-0.1	40.2 +/-0.4	0.5 +/-0.3	46.6 +/-1.7	24.1 +/-2.1
Elmore	74.3 +/-0.1	20.3 +/-0.3	2.7	53.7 +/-1.7	13.4 +/-1.7
Jackson	89.9 +/-0.1	3.3 +/-0.2	2.6	49.5 +/-1.5	16.0 +/-1.9
Lauderdale	85.3 +/-0.1	10.0 +/-0.2	2.3	52.0 +/-1.2	17.2 +/-1.5
Lee	69.1 +/-0.2	22.7 +/-0.3	3.5	55.9 +/-1.0	22.0 +/-1.3
Limestone	78.2 +/-0.1	12.7 +/-0.2	5.6	53.7 +/-1.8	14.7 +/-1.7
Macon	15.8 +/-0.1	80.5 +/-0.8	1.4	43.9 +/-2.2	59.4 +/-0.6
Madison	66.1 +/-0.1	23.8 +/-0.2	4.6	59.4 +/-0.6	12.8 +/-0.9
Montgomery	37.9 +/-0.1	54.9 +/-0.2	3.5	55.4 +/-0.9	21.2 +/-1.1
Russell	51.2 +/-0.2	41.5 +/-0.5	4.2	51.1 +/-1.7	22.0 +/-2.2
Tallapoosa	69.3 +/-0.1	27.2 +/-0.3	2.5	49.4 +/-1.7	19.8 +/-2.2

*Employed civilians over 16 years of age

**% of people whose income in the past 12 months is below the poverty level

Table 2: Population's educational data of counties where outdoor recreation enterprises were surveyed.
(Source: United States Census Bureau's 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates).

County	High school graduate or higher (%)+/- SD	Bachelor's Degree or higher (%)+/- SD
Bullock	67.8 +/-3.9	12.5 +/-3.4
Chambers	75.1 +/-1.7	11.8 +/-1.4
Elmore	86.6 +/-1.1	21.0 +/-1.2
Jackson	74.6 +/-1.8	13.0 +/-1.2
Lauderdale	83.8 +/-1.0	21.1 +/-1.1
Lee	86.7 +/-0.9	32.5 +/-1.0
Limestone	81.5 +/-1.7	22.7 +/-1.3
Macon	80.0 +/-2.2	19.6 +/-2.1
Madison	90.0 +/-0.5	38.5 +/-0.8
Montgomery	85.6 +/-0.7	31.5 +/-0.9
Russell	80.4 +/-1.7	16.0 +/-1.5
Tallapoosa	79.2 +/-1.8	16.3 +/-1.6