

# T Tourism

With its natural attractions, compelling industrial and cultural history, recently upgraded interstate access, and proximity to the population centers of the Atlantic seaboard and the Ohio Valley, southern West Virginia is poised to take advantage of current trends in visitor behavior.

- The NCHA's natural, historic and cultural resources respond to the interests of an aging population, whose activity preferences are changing from more strenuous to more educational types of visitor experiences and activities.
- The region's natural resources promote "soft adventure" activities and learning experiences, such as birding, that also appeal to a visitor market that is getting older.
- The nature of the region's inventory of attractions necessitates both the thematic and geographic packaging of attractions (and visitor facilities). Packaging is becoming a more prevalent way for travelers to select visitor destinations and is a prerequisite for capturing the group travel market. Group travel is another growth segment of the industry, again based on the changing travel preferences of aging consumers.

- The NCHA is accessible to most residents of the eastern United States, with over 28.8 million people living within an easy days drive (300 miles). NCHA can fulfill this market's need for long weekends, mini vacations, and a variety of destination experiences, all within convenient proximity to their homes.
- Eventually the NCHA may be able to take advantage of international visitors, who now show interest in getting away from their traditional destinations (major cities, national parks and Florida), and experiencing more of the real America.



Growth in visitor expenditures and new private investment attests that southern West Virginia's tourism industry is already doing many things right. However, there is room for improvement and certain issues should be addressed for tourism in the region to reach its full potential:

- Tourism development professionals wear many hats and are strapped for resources. To gain the confidence of these people, the NCHA cannot become a drain on the system.
- Politics can have an unproductive influence on decision-making. The tourism development process therefore must not become subverted by a political agenda.
- Improvements to some marketing practices are warranted, particularly in terms of greater budgetary resources for advertising and promotion, as well as funding to implement an internet strategy.
- The importance of tourism to the regional economy is still not fully understood by the public, the business community, or elected officials. This lack of understanding restricts support for tourism funding and other tourism activities.



*Historic drugstore with soda fountain, Bramwell, Mercer County.*

Lack of a strategic framework impedes product development and often times means that the region's jurisdictions are not able to work in a mutually supportive way.

- Local tourism practitioners often lack the knowledge and tools to do their jobs better; local tourism attractions and businesses need cost-effective research and technical assistance to function more effectively.
- The quality and availability of visitor services—the lodging, restaurants and retail operations that generate most of the economic benefits attributable to tourism—are inconsistent. Three separate issues affect the visitor's experience with tourist-serving enterprises: the quality of the physical plant, the quality of the service provided, and the hospitality offered by employees.

Ensuring that these aspects of the visitor experience do not disappoint is an ongoing battle.

The NCHA can implement programs to address these issues and help others interested in improving the quality of the visitor experience in the region.



## 7.1 Product and Packaging Development

Things to see and do motivate people to choose a destination and then follow through with a visit. Right now, though, the array of visitor activities—the product the NCHA offers, in tourism parlance—is somewhat thin. Moreover, the existing attractions are spread out geographically and, since they are often similar, they fail to reward the visitor sufficiently for making the trip. Visitors typically find such rewards through product differentiation. While communities throughout the NCHA are making sincere efforts to interpret their coal heritage to outsiders and to themselves, and are finding meaning in the process, from a visitor perspective, what's available tends to be a bit repetitive. At the same time, many coal heritage stories remain untold. For example, there exist several small coal museums that rely on similar collections of industry artifacts to tell similar stories, such as scrip or a miner's dinner bucket. These items are evocative and, given community interest in donating artifacts, a cost-effective exhibit technique. The lay visitor, however, who cannot distinguish one variety of scrip from another, thinks these institutions are offering a duplicate experience; boredom and dashed expectations ensue.

The NCHA thus needs to expand the menu of things to see and do with additional product. The themes explored in Chapter 1 represent a good place to start. This strategy recommends a structure that has worked in mature heritage areas that also have complex histories to share.

Tourists visiting the NCHA need to organize their trip around a central location or else the heritage area seems too vast, unwieldy and incoherent. For the NCHA, Beckley makes the most sense because it offers:

- an established coal-themed attraction in the Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine;
- a cluster of visitor services ready to host tourists, including hotels offering different price points, a range of local and national dining establishments, and shopping opportunities;
- attractions geared towards other markets that offer cross-promotional opportunities, such as outdoor recreation, Tamarack and the Youth Museum/Pioneer Village;
- easy interstate access and a central location.



Establishing a major interpretive center at Beckley can fulfill numerous tourism development functions, including developing the NCHA's themes, teaching visitors how to interpret the landscape they'll see while driving to remote locations within the heritage area, and orienting them to places where they can eat, sleep and shop. This interpretive center can also serve as a memorial to the many coal industry veterans who sacrificed their lives so that America could benefit from affordable, reliable energy. The National Coal Museum and Miners Memorial can thus establish itself as, in essence, a shrine that leavens and enlarges a somber experience with insights into the people and the industry.

Using the National Coal Museum and Miners Memorial to orient visitors to the NCHA's interpretive themes frees individual attractions and communities to delve into detail about whatever aspect of coal history and cultural life distinguishes them from one another or strikes the most chords locally. To use a college course catalogue analogy, small towns will no longer need to introduce visitors to Coal History 101 and can instead offer graduate seminars in unusual, evocative and authentic aspects of the past: stories that can only be told on local ground.

While Beckley makes sense as the hub of the NCHA experience, visitors will approach from all directions and will be driving through the heritage area en route. This creates a potential irritant to visitors, who typically dislike any system that results in significant backtracking. Consequently, this strategy recommends

establishing a several gateway orientation centers at locations that already function as visitor entrance points to the NCHA. In many cases, that means supplementing existing visitor centers operated by other organizations (e.g., the State Welcome Centers) with additional coal heritage content, including a brief introduction to the themes explored in detail at the Beckley center. These orientation centers can also help visitors find their way around the NCHA and encourage them to visit the National Coal Museum and Miners Memorial. Perhaps most important, forging these visitor center alliances is a way to introduce other visitor market segments (such as drive-through traffic, or people intent on visiting a different set of attractions) to the existence and pleasures of the NCHA.

NCHA can and should help localities with their plans to create new attractions or to expand and improve existing facilities. NCHA can provide technical and financial assistance to assist with story-telling and interpretation issues, advising localities how to approach their history in compelling ways using a variety of exhibit techniques, including artifact display, immersion, and interactivity. For example, Coalwood's efforts to capitalize on Homer Hickham, Jr's fame offer plentiful opportunities for interpretation and visitation.

Industry trends reveal that travelers want their experiences organized in ways that make intuitive sense—in other words, according to themes or by geographic area. Furthermore, creating packages is a relatively inexpensive means of expanding the available product. Opportunities abound to link existing products together into formal or self-guided package tours, and yet there are few incentives to do so. Moreover, dues-supported tourism promotion organizations often find that their members discourage them from working with partners located beyond their immediate service areas. A major challenge for the NCHA will be to nudge tourism industry partners to work together to create more themed packages and to pursue other joint efforts.

In the early years, the NCHA's inventory of interpreted sites and tourist experiences will not be extensive enough to offer a wide array of themed tours. Themed tours will revolve around the entire coal heritage story, rather than subsets, unless packages are created for specific audiences with special interests or expertise, such as a group of labor activists or historians. However, it is important to think in terms of packaging when strategizing how to market the NCHA experience to group tours (which are



*Enthusiast groups may focus on subsets of the entire coal heritage story.*

principally bus markets.) That means identifying hoteliers and restaurateurs that are willing to deal with bus travelers, as in offering a selection of menu items at a discounted fixed price, reserving room blocks, choosing routes accessible by large vehicles, and accommodating group check-in. The work entailed in establishing the group package often will also produce a marketing piece or a tool that free and independent travelers can also use to structure their trip.



## 7.2 Hospitality Training

Although interpretive themes, attractions, scenery, recreation opportunities, community character, and other things to see and do that are exclusive to a destination motivate most leisure travel (exceptions include outstanding hotels and the presence of friends and relatives), the quality of the hospitality experienced in the region's visitor service establishments influences whether people enjoy their stay and recommend it to others. Surly, unhelpful desk clerks, staffers unable to give proper directions to major attractions, poor restaurant service, bad drivers, and rude encounters with local citizens all detract from the tourist experience and make visitors feel unwelcome. Moreover, visitor services enterprises are where most traveler spending occurs, and hence, are the major determinant of tourist-generated economic impact.

Hospitality training entails providing information to residents as well as the visitor industry workforce. Many people don't realize how important tourism is to their local economy. Others don't realize that their own livelihoods indirectly depend on the tourism industry to keep the local economy balanced; for example, car dealers, pharmacies, or dry cleaning establishments may see few visitors, but their sales still depend in part on the ability of people who deal directly with visitors to spend discretionary income. It is also important to ensure that the negative impacts associated with increased visitation (traffic congestion, real estate inflation, and roadside clutter, for example) remain manageable, so that people do not resort to rudeness.

Hospitality training cannot be approached as a one-time event. Employee turnover and changes in the menu of things to see and do necessitate an ongoing effort.

Hospitality training should include basic skills training associated with the specific enterprise and position, of course, but should also include:

- familiarity with the region's attractions to ensure meaningful activity recommendations;
- familiarity with the region's restaurants, hotels, and shopping districts, again to facilitate meaningful recommendations that meet visitor needs;
- ability to provide directions to major points;
- etiquette and inter-personal skills to encourage friendly, professional interactions.

Hospitality training represents an opportunity for the tourism industry to work together in the NCHA. It is not cost-efficient for each enterprise to provide hospitality training in a formal setting, although it certainly should happen on the job. NCHA can provide hospitality training directly to the region's visitor service industry or, more efficiently, it can develop a curriculum and help Chambers of Commerce and other local partners provide this benefit to members. Outreach to the Travel Industry Management Program at Concord College is a good place to begin.



### 7.3 Entrepreneurship

As tourism increases in the NCHA, opportunities for entrepreneurship will emerge. People who want to take advantage of the visitor market and start new enterprises need to be encouraged in their efforts, because they will improve the quality of the experience and increase the extent to which tourism can generate economic benefits for West Virginia. Entrepreneurs need access to a variety of resources the NCHA can provide, including:

- market data—information about visitors and their needs and spending patterns;
- expert advice, whether provided directly or through referrals to SCORE, state programs and other assistance channels;
- low cost financing;
- low cost real estate to rent, perhaps through a tourist business incubator or shared retail space;
- help with skills that are essential to the enterprise but not the principles' primary area of expertise, perhaps bookkeeping, merchandising, marketing or even window display;
- low cost services and equipment, whether insurance, desks, or display cases. NCHA could, for example, serve as a clearinghouse for cast-off office equipment;
- access to cooperative advertising vehicles.

Perhaps the most significant support NCHA could supply is simply to stay abreast of the myriad local, state and federal programs geared towards helping

young enterprises thrive and then link local entrepreneurs with other assistance providers. NCHA can also provide direct intervention in local community development with an eye towards easing entrepreneurs' start up years, for example by rehabilitating older buildings that evoke coal history and then giving new businesses a break on occupancy costs.

Nurturing entrepreneurs is also an opportunity to enhance local leadership abilities and for NCHA to develop partnerships with traditional economic development organizations and training providers.



## 7.4 *Passport/Multi-Destination Ticketing*

Many heritage destinations broker agreements among a variety of attractions, enabling them to offer a single ticket allowing admission to a group of attractions. Passports often emerge out of an effort to put together a package of area attractions, whether for the group tour market or for independent travelers. In theory, the visitors get a break on the overall admission fees, the attractions can capitalize on each other's markets, and the communities receive increased traffic, resulting in greater economic benefits accruing to area businesses. Passport systems are also said to increase other spending because as the initial ticketing expenditure recedes from memory, making people spend more freely as they move along. Some passport systems allow patrons to choose the attractions they visit (perhaps three out of five possibilities) while others do not.

Passport systems work well when attractions trust each other or a neutral third party handling the nuts and bolts. While some passport systems cost pennies to implement, others can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and care must be taken to not overextend the system. For example, some communities succumb to the temptation to invest in extremely complicated systems, like high tech devices such as bar code readers and dip/swipe cards, to ensure that revenues are split fairly among participating institutions. Investing in these sorts of systems may make sense as a means of learning more about visitor behavior, but for nascent

heritage areas it can mean a significant expense. Moreover, any passport system that encourages attractions to worry about whether their fellow attractions are playing fair only results in unhealthy divisiveness.

NCHA is an ideal regional broker and operator for a passport ticketing system. With a regional mandate, it can also leverage its marketing muscle to benefit participants and ensure that visitors receive proper value. Running the passport operation also gives NCHA license to enforce quality standards to ensure that the visitor experience meets expectations.



### 7.5 Collateral Material Development

“Collateral materials” is simply the tourist industry term of art for brochures, maps and other means of conveying information to visitors. With the advent of the Internet it has come to include content designed for web sites as well. Collateral materials blend the beautiful and intriguing with the utilitarian and the informative. On the one hand, they prompt visitors to make destination decisions, often on the fly; on the other hand, they must communicate basic information about where visitors can go to meet prosaic needs.

In many heritage areas, an abundance of collateral materials serves only to overwhelm and confuse visitors. However, designing a brochure is relatively inexpensive and is a necessary element of running a destination, so the proliferation is likely to continue. Visitors peruse racks full of brochures, either failing to find what they seek or, conversely, selecting a huge pile of materials that will ultimately find their way to the landfill. NCHA can create definitive collateral materials that help visitors understand the coal heritage area and the things it offers to see and do. An intelligently designed set of collateral materials should:

- provide legible, intuitive, attractive maps around the region with properly labeled features;
- describe major attractions and provides contact information for them;
- tell visitors how to get help in case of emergencies;
- outline major interpretive themes and other useful information to enrich visitors' experience.

Ideally, NCHA will set up a hierarchy of collateral materials where visitors can supplement the major pieces with others addressing geographic sub-regions and special interests. Examples include specialty brochures geared towards county groups and, say, bird watchers or railroad buffs. The collateral materials should feature a unifying graphics system and voice so visitors can identify them from a distance. It may make sense for NCHA to partner with other entities such as local tourism promotion organizations and work together to ensure that visitors have easy access to accurate information and that duplication of effort is avoided.



## 7.6 Develop Relationships with Other Tourism Operations

NCHA's effectiveness as a tourism development organization will depend, in large part, on its ability to establish partnerships with others sharing these goals. Although tourism represents a relatively new industry in much of the NCHA region, there are several significant entities devoted to enhancing the visitor experience in the area.

- Visitor Centers run by local, state and federal agencies already introduce travelers to the region's offering as well as providing comfort services. The National Park Service, for example, enhances its offerings at New River Gorge with an attractive visitor center that dovetails nicely with NCHA's mission of interpreting southern West Virginia's coal heritage. NCHA will want to work with existing visitor centers to ensure that travelers are oriented to the coal heritage story and receive information about the NCHA. The goal may be simply to pique the visitors' interest so they return for a future visit.
- Tamarack has established itself as an important visitor attraction that succeeds in drawing people from far afield because it offers quality merchandise and food at affordable prices. Moreover, group tour buses stop religiously as do snowbirds traveling between northern and southern climes. Tamarack provides an opportunity to reach numerous visitors and let them know that there are interesting things to see and do in the coal heritage area.
- The Coal Heritage Trail Association paved the way for inter-county efforts devoted to commemorating the industry. Moreover, the CHTA is currently in charge of defining the term "coal heritage" and has started erecting signs pointing visitors to its route. Visitors will not readily be able to distinguish the NCHA from the CHTA and so it's important that the messages and experience they each deliver be compatible.
- West Virginia's state park system has long been recognized as an important tourism asset. In addition to their scenic beauty, both the day use and the resort parks include important recreational amenities and have developed a devoted following. Moreover, the resort parks offer lodging accommodations that rival or exceed that offered by commercial establishments within the NCHA. Finally, the state parks system includes lands with significance to the coal heritage story.



- The Hatfield-McCoy Trail System is another multi-county effort. It enjoys one of the few imprimaturs recognized by tourist and associated with West Virginia. The famous feud elicits curiosity even today. Moreover, the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System is establishing a series of annual festivals and events that will continue to introduce new generations of visitors to the NCHA. A compelling aspect of the Hatfield-McCoy Trail is its strategy aimed at concentrating trailheads in towns in order to leverage their economic benefits. This strategy provides opportunities for coal heritage to piggyback on trail recreation throughout the NCHA.

NCHA should find ways to work with all of these groups. Furthermore, it needs to demonstrate that it offers economies of scale, data, and other benefits of interest to its potential partners. That in turn means listening to the region's tourism development professionals and identifying ways to be useful to the industry in order to gain its support.

