

Challenging the Traditional Values of Our River: A Case for Water Trails

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Abstract. Placing value on river recreation can be difficult, and often times our rivers are valued for their “traditional” uses, such as transportation, irrigation, and water supply. However, more and more, economists are offering studies and concrete numbers of the economic benefits and local gains that can come from promoting river recreation in communities. One tool communities can use to promote recreation is a water trail, which is the river equivalent to a greenway. Water trails have been shown to be effective in bringing tourism, getting communities on their local waterways, and promoting conservation. Using non-traditional economic valuations can demonstrate the benefits local communities can receive from already established natural attractions. Rural communities often struggle to find ways to attract new residents and tourists. Several studies have shown that rural areas can benefit from emphasizing their natural amenities both on the tourism sector as well as increasing in-migration to the area. Beyond economic benefits, once the community realizes the economic benefits that the water trail is bringing to their town, the paddlers, residents and local government are much more likely to support the protection and conservation of this resource.

INTRODUCTION

In the past rivers are traditionally valued for extractive benefits and less focus has been put on instream benefits. Communities are now beginning to place more value on ecosystem services and instream benefits, such as recreation and protection of biodiversity. Many studies attempt to quantify the economic value of ecosystems in terms of the services they provide (Daily 1997). Freshwater ecosystem services can be divided into three categories: water supply, supply of goods other than water, and non-extractive or in-stream benefits (Postel and Thompson Jr 2005). I will focus on instream benefits, particularly recreation in this paper. However, promoting river recreation can lead communities to value their local rivers and citizens may be more likely to support conservation efforts, which will protect biodiversity

and other supporting services and well as generally improve water quality, improving many ecosystem services provide by freshwater systems.

PADDLING AS A GROWING SPORT

When referring to river recreation, paddlesports, such as canoeing and kayaking, are one of the ways people enjoy rivers. However people value rivers for swimming holes, fishing, and simply being near the river. Water trails are a way that communities can highlight their local waterway in order to encourage river recreation. Water trails (blueways, canoe trails, paddle trails) are the water equivalent of a greenway, the river is promoted as an established trail with signs, designated access points, websites and maps. Water trails facilitate recreation, and ultimately increase visibility and knowledge about local rivers and watersheds. This newfound enthusiasm about local waters can be turned into advocacy and conservation.

Paddling is an evergrowing type of human-powered outdoor recreation. A study on projections of outdoor recreation found that the number of days spent canoeing, number of participants, and the number of trips taken will all increase significantly by the year 2050 (Bowker et al. 1999). This study also found similar increases in rafting, fishing, and non-pool swimming. Nadel (2005) estimated that approximately 72 million Americans participated in recreational boating in 2003, and found that over \$200 million was spent on purchasing canoes and kayaks in the retail industry. While river-based recreation is predicted to increase, not all communities have placed value on promoting their rivers. The purpose of this paper is to gather information on the value of river recreation and in particular promoting river recreation and tourism within communities through water trails.

RURAL GROWTH AND RIVER RECREATION

Outdoor recreation studies that investigate economic impact have turned focus towards rural areas and the use recreation and tourism as a tool to bring growth to these areas. Often rural areas struggle to find ways to attract new residents and tourists,

especially areas that depend on single industries, such as mining and manufacturing. These areas could benefit from diversifying their economic structure by promoting local outdoor recreation. In some cases, communities surrounded by natural amenities have not experienced the decline in growth compared to other rural areas (Marcouiller et al. 2005). Marcouiller et al. focused specifically on outdoor recreation opportunities that could decrease the income gap between rural and urban communities. The study used a model that examined the change in income inequality compared to the presence of natural amenities. Results determined that more so than other natural amenities, river and lake related natural amenities helped to contribute to the decrease income inequality (Marcouiller et al. 2005). Ultimately equating these results with management and policy decisions, the authors suggested that increasing access to river amenities could help equalize income distribution (Marcouiller et al. 2005). The results from this study can be used to show that providing access to rivers through a water trail could help diversify rural economies and bridge the economic gap that so often occurs between rural and urban areas.

Clearly rural areas are not the only ones that benefit from promoting river recreation in their communities, but often these areas struggle to find draws for tourists and new residents. Even though studies have shown that communities can benefit from promoting river recreation, there are hurdles for watershed groups and other citizens interested in developing a water trail must overcome. One of those hurdles is the perception that investing in infrastructure for access to natural amenities, such as parks, walking trails, and water trails, gives little return to the community. The perception, what has been dubbed the “granola myth,” is that the type of recreationalist attracted by trails and parks will come to the area with what they need, such as granola bars and a water bottle, never spending money in the town (Pollock 2007). This perception has led communities to promote motorized recreation (Omohundro 2002). However the Outdoor Industry Association estimated that non-motorized outdoor product sales reached \$11.3 billion in 2001 (Nadel 2005). A study in 2002 in Ohio found that the registered canoe and kayakers spent an average of \$55 on food and lodging per trip (Ohio Greenways 2004). The Outdoor Industry Foundation found that individual paddlesport participants over a 2 year period spent \$409 on apparel for paddle sports and \$780 for paddle sports equipment (Outdoor Industry Foundation 2002). These studies and numbers can help communities repudiate the granola myth. Groups interested in

bringing a water trail to their community can use this information to show that promoting paddling and investing in river access can bring economic growth to communities.

NORTH FOREST CANOE TRAIL ECONOMIC IMPACT

One of the most well know water trails in the United States is the North Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT), a 740 mile water trail that travels through 4 U.S. states, and 1 Canadian province. An economic impact study of the NFCT was done to calculate the impact of paddlers on regional communities (Pollock 2007). The study looked at six regions that were affected by the water trail, and determined that paddlers infused local communities with \$12 million in economic impact and supported up to 280 jobs. The study also separated paddler spending by local and non-local finding that local paddlers spent \$5 per person per day, and non-locals spent \$46 per person per day (Pollock 2007). Pollock (2007) also looked at guide use of paddling groups, and determined that approximately 12% of paddlers used guide services spending around \$50 per group throughout the six study sites. The conclusion of the study is that the NFCT rather than creating new markets, by bringing paddlers to the area, the canoe trail benefits existing businesses, such as outfitters, restaurants, hotels and other lodging businesses. The study done on the NFCT is perceptibly unique because it spans several states and even international, but the results can be applied to even the smallest of water trails. A smaller water trail of only 10 or so miles may draw mostly local paddlers, but those paddlers will still spend money, buying paddling equipment and apparel, potential utilizing outfitter services, and patronizing local businesses. The economic benefits of water trails can be seen quickly due to the fact that water trails have relatively low overhead compared to other recreational attractions. The river already exists and in many case paddlers already use the river, but you can attract more paddlers by promoting a designated water trail through a few low cost methods such as signs, maps, websites, and providing paddlers with river access points and boat launches.

GEORGIA WATER TRAILS

Georgia is rich in beautiful rivers and paddlers that currently enjoy these resources. In the study by OIF of state-by state participation in outdoor human powered recreation, Georgia came in 37th of overall participation with 62.7% of the population participated in some type of outdoor recreation. However, when it comes to Georgia’s paddling population, Georgia comes in at 25th for canoeing with 656,324 participants, or 10.5% participation per

capita, 13th for recreational kayaking with 206,273, and 11th for whitewater kayaking with 125,014 participants. Even though Georgia is not one of the highest rank states in overall participation; river recreation is clearly a priority among Georgians. Certain communities have already acknowledged the benefits water trails can provide. The 138 mile long Altamaha Canoe Trail provides paddlers access along the Altamaha River (Altamaha River Partnership 2011). The Coastal blueway is a new coastal water trail that spans the entire Georgia coast and will likely be connect to existing trails in Florida and South Carolina(Coastal Regional Commission 2010). The Okefenokee Canoe Trail consists of access points and camping shelters throughout the 400,000 acres wildlife refuge in Okefenokee Swamp (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2011). These water trails were all products of partnerships, where local communities, watershed groups, as well as state and local government officials worked together to build the infrastructure needed to reap the benefits from drawing paddlers to their area. These three successful examples can provide Georgians interested in water trails a template for developing a water trail in there area.

CONCLUSION

Although economic studies on the benefits of water trails are becoming more numerous, there is still a large void in specific numbers of the economic return of water trails. However the numbers provided above show the vast interest in paddle sports throughout the United States and Georgia, as well as, the economic return that promoting paddling can have for local economies. Economic growth is not the only benefit water trails can provide to communities, water trails can feature cultural ties to the community, which can lead to more tourism. In addition, once water trails are established, more protection often ensues such as conservation easements, riparian buffers, flow protections, and higher water quality standards. On occasion water trails have been the driving force for removing dams that are no longer in use, or necessary. Water trails can help build support from the local community of their waterway, once residents begin to see the river as a tool for economic return from recreation, in addition to the traditional values, such as water supply for industry, agriculture, and domestic uses.

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