

NAVAJO TRAILS INITIATIVE

Trails for Visitors: Economic Impacts of Trails

By Mark Flint
Southwest Trail Solutions

Defining the Target Market

Before marketing to visitors, it's important to know what kind of visitors you want to come to use the trails. It's a little like – actually pretty much the same thing as – inviting people to your home. If your invitation invites people to a frat house toga party you're going to get a different group than, say, inviting people to a book discussion group.

The trails community is a diverse group, with widely differing definitions of enjoying the trail experience.

While generalizations are a little like profiling, and exceptions are the rule, some assumptions can guide an ecotourism strategy to minimize unwanted consequences.

For example, the type of mountain biking that falls under the general category of "gravity (or enduro or all-mountain) riding" -- downhill, freeride and dirt jumping) appeals to mountain bikers who (again, this is a generalization) see natural features as opportunities for pushing physical limits and, in a way, "conquering" Nature.

In my experience, both as trails program manager at Pima County Natural Resources, Parks & Recreation and in consultation with other land managers, this subset of mountain bikers is much more likely to go off-trail and create their own illegal trails.

In my discussions with some of these riders, they exhibit a sense of entitlement to pursue their own pleasure with no regard for impacts on natural resources. Still, with all that said, this is a growing segment of the mountain bike tourist market, and if a way can be found to meet that need while managing potential negative impacts it would definitely increase the visitor count. As a priority, we would recommend looking at providing for this type of use as a "Phase II" project because of the more intense (and costly) management challenges. For more information on a facility that provides this type of experience along with cross-country mountain biking, look up Whistler Mountain in Vancouver, BC, which has a highly successful visitor program.

Motorized off-road recreation, despite the best efforts of many responsible operators and advocacy groups, brings with it a small percentage people who demonstrate no concern for (or perhaps awareness of) their destructive activities, and unfortunately the destruction can be highly visible and significant. Again, this use could be managed with careful planning and administration.

We would recommend initially emphasizing more traditional activities – those which emphasize respect for and appreciation of the natural environment – as opposed to the X-Game approach.

That said, there is a place for some activities, such as cross country races and tours, that can, in addition to bringing visitors, serve as an introduction to the allure of Navajo Nation back country.

Zip lines, which provide something of an adrenaline experience, may be acceptable in some areas; rock climbing is another activity that may be appropriate in carefully selected and managed areas. I would recommend looking at these and other opportunities that can provide additional motivation for tourists to come and stay in the Navajo Nation.

Mountain bikers comprise the largest user group, and it's logical to focus on this segment of trail users. One growing subset of mountain bicycling is "bikepacking," or heading out for multiple days with minimalist camping gear.

However, day hikers, backpackers, trail runners and equestrians all should be considered primary target groups as well. In most cases, trails designed for mountain biking work quite well for other user groups.

Economic Benefits

Rather than reprinting lengthy studies, the purpose of this document is to present relevant highlights and direct readers to sources of additional information. The research presented here was selected for its relevance to opportunities on the Navajo Nation.

One point not mentioned in these studies is that Eco tourism is a “clean” business. It does not extract resources – and, properly managed, has minimal impact. People come, spend money on food, lodging and incidentals, and they leave. Mining provides jobs and some income during the life of the project but when the ore is gone you are left with a large hole in the ground, often with toxic residues, that will remain a scar for hundreds of years. Ecotourism is sustainable, with no negative impacts to natural and cultural resources

- In 2013, outdoor recreation contributed nearly triple dollars brought into the state by the mining industry in Arizona; tourism contributed \$11.8 billion and mining came in at \$4.1 billion. (Outdoor Industry Association, 2013 and Arizona State Parks, 2013)
- 81% of the \$646 billion spent on outdoor recreation in the United States was on trips and travel related expenditures – not gear. (Outdoor Industry Association, 2013)
- Communities that spend \$1 in trail development see an average of \$7 in economic return (study on gateway communities, Luther Propst, 2010).
- An economic study released by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) Oct. 20, 2015 shows spending by out-of-state overnight guests to its White Mountains huts and lodges supported \$17.9 million in economic activity throughout the state of New Hampshire during the study period, June 2014 to May 2015. Of that economic activity, 73 percent benefited businesses other than AMC, the study showed. (<http://news.outdoors.org/2015/10/amc-huts-lodges-support-179-million-in.html>)
- Visitors to the San Juan Hut-To-Hut system in Colorado pay outfitters \$700-\$900 each for a week of mountain biking. While we found no specific research on the economic impacts of these systems, they are growing in popularity, and the “Hogan-To-Hogan” concept has an intriguing appeal. <http://www.sanjuanhuts.com/mtb/mountain-bike-trips>
<http://www.hut2hut.info/should-usa-create-more-hut-to-hut-hiking/>
- The Outdoor Industry Foundation published a study in 2006 that reported "Active Outdoor Recreation" contributes \$730 billion annually to the U.S. economy, supports 6.5 million jobs, and generates \$88 billion in annual state and national tax revenue. Active recreation is defined as bicycling, trail activities, paddling,

- snow sports, camping, fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing. (*The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy* by the
- *Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2006*)
<http://www.americantrails.org/resources/economics>

Many online resources exist to guide communities as they seek to develop Eco tourism as an economic development strategy. One of the first we'd recommend visiting is <http://www.trailtowns.org>. Another, closer to home, resource is the Arizona SCORP figures, published annually through AZ State Parks.