

The Voices of the Beartooth Highway: Destination Image, Economic Impacts, and Place Attachment along a Scenic Byway.

Jake Jorgenson
Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, University of Montana
Missoula, MT, USA

and

Norma P. Nickerson
Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, University of Montana
Missoula, MT, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the destination image, economic impacts, and degree of place attachment of visitors on a nationally designated scenic byway: The Beartooth Highway. The study employed both qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires. Results indicated that visitors to the Beartooth Highway contribute over \$53 million in combined impacts. Furthermore, the Beartooth Region is perceived as a vibrant, natural landscape that caters to many different recreational uses. However, there does not appear to be a high degree of attachment among winter recreationists to the location. Further research must be conducted to understand byway visitors.

Key Words: Beartooth Highway, destination image, economic impacts, tourism, place attachment

INTRODUCTION

The Beartooth All-American Road is a 68-mile scenic and cultural travel corridor between just outside Red Lodge, MT and ending at the northeastern entrance of Yellowstone National Park. Designated as an “All-American Road,” the Beartooth Highway joins 30 other federal highways with the highest level of recognition by the Federal Highway Administration. The highway typically has two primary seasons: summer season from late May to mid-October, and winter season from mid-December to early-April. During each season, the Beartooth Highway caters to several different types of groups - recreationists, general travelers, and local residents. National Scenic Byways, in the tourism literature, have been scarcely researched and little information is known about those who travel or recreate around the corridors. Until now, this gap in the tourism literature has not been fully addressed.

Initially built to develop tourism from Red Lodge, MT to Yellowstone National Park, the Beartooth Highway opened in 1936 due to the passing of the National Park Approach Act (Kulbacki, McCauley, & Moler, 2006). Since then, the highway has become a staple for tourists visiting the surrounding gateway communities of Red Lodge and Cooke City, MT and Cody, WY. Activities range from backcountry skiing to road cycling, but many tourists simply drive the highway to take in the views at nearly 11,000 feet. However, stakeholders of the local communities were unaware of the benefits, perceptions, or use of the highway. In order to justify decisions, improvements and spending, regional managers and local businesses were drawn to the idea of quantifying the impact of tourism along the highway, specifically in understanding how much monetary benefit is seen from nonresident visitors. Thus, the study was exploratory in nature in hopes to capture a wide variety of relevant information about tourism along the popular national scenic byway.

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceived destination image, economic impacts, and degree of place attachment of visitors who travel along the designated portion of the highway. These specific topical issues are covered in-depth in the tourism literature, in which many were used to guide questionnaire design. Echtner & Ritchie (1991, 1993), Baloglu & McCleary (1999), and San Martin & Rodriguez del Bosque (2008) were primarily used for development of the destination image portion of the study including questionnaire and construct design. Stynes (1997), Wilton & Nickerson (2005), and various studies from the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research were employed for development of the economic impact research including spending categories and economic models. Furthermore, place attachment was investigated by using previous research including Stokols & Shumaker (1981), Williams & Roggenbuck (1989), and Jacob & Schreyer (1980) among others such as Tuan (1975).

The following section provides a brief overview of destination image, economic impacts, and place attachment literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination image

Destination image, as a concept, has existed in the tourism literature and is not a particularly new topic. Research on destination image began in the 1970's with Hunt's (1975) seminal study which examined people's perceptions of Rocky Mountain States. Prior to Hunt's investigation, image studies were primarily situated in marketing and product literature where consumer's images were explored. In turn, tourism scholars drew on consumer product literature to apply the brand or product image towards destinations themselves, defining this as destination image. Crompton (1979, p. 18) defined destination image as "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination." However, multiple definitions have formulated since then, most of which are similar in nature or increasing in intricacy. As noted, the mental constructs of image tend to be filled with complexity where the visitor must choose from an overwhelming flood of information prior to their purchase or, in this case, their trip (Reynolds 1965). Echtner & Ritchie (1991, p. 38) state this "flood of information has many sources including: promotional literature, the opinion of others, and the general media." Thus, it can be cumbersome for visitors to assess how they perceive a potential destination until they are able to fully experience it for themselves.

As researchers began to develop methods for understanding image, progression of the concept has been steady since Echtner & Ritchie's (1991) work (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; San Martin & Rodriguez, 2008). Specific factors, such as number of visits and positive emotions, influencing a visitor's perceived destination image have become an interest in recent research (Beerli & Martin, 2004; San Martin & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008; Wang & Hsu, 2010). Generally, the scope of image studies ranges from a macro-scale such as a country, state or city, down to a micro-scale, for example a specific attraction or resort (Pike, 2002). Thus, there appeared to be room for examining alternative destinations, such as a scenic byway, to add to the existing literature. For a destination, projecting a positive image can reaffirm or increase a traveler's likelihood to return at a later date and may propel the destination into the future. As Butler's (1980) influential work on the tourism life-cycle stresses, it is necessary to seek alternative methods to push past the stagnation phase for the destination. Hence, exploring alternative areas such as scenic byways could provide a fresh spin on an area viewed as a travel route instead of a destination.

In terms of conceptualization, image is thought of as containing two key constructs: cognitive and affective. The cognitive construct pertains a person's beliefs about a location while the affective is understood through the evocation of emotional feelings. San Martin & Rodriguez (2008) state:

"Image should be considered a multi-dimensional phenomenon integrated by several cognitive and affective dimensions. In this sense, the mental representation of a tourist destination is formed on the basis of individuals' beliefs about the place (cognitive image), as well as their feelings toward it (affective image). The cognitive component of destination image is related to the tourist destination's attributes, which can be functional/tangible...and psychological/abstract. The affective component is related to emotions that a tourist is able to evoke (p. 274)."

Prior to Baloglu & McCleary's (1999) investigation into image, the affective construct was underdeveloped. Now, tourism researchers have identified that emotions are crucial to the understanding of tourism experiences and visitor perceptions (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Thus, identifying key cognitive beliefs as well as the emotional feelings that visitors have of a destination is of importance.

Economic Impacts

To define economic impact analyses, Stynes's (1997) handbook for economic impacts of tourism provides useful tools and background into this popular subject. In this, he states:

"What is the contribution of tourism activity to the economy of the region? An *economic impact analysis* traces the flows of spending associated with tourism activity in a region to identify changes in sales, tax revenues, income, and jobs due to tourism activity (p. 5)."

The associated impacts are classified into three types of effects: direct, indirect, and induced. Direct effects are "production changes associated with the immediate effects of changes in tourism expenditures (p. 12)." Indirect

effects are production changes resulting from various rounds of re-spending of the tourism industry's receipts in backward-linking industries (p. 12)." Finally, induced effects are "changes in economic activity resulting from household spending of income earned directly or indirectly as a result of tourism spending (p. 12)." The combined impact is simply all effects and their overall contribution. Many economic modeling software packages (RIMS, IMPLAN, MGM2) provide the researcher with the tools to directly trace the economic flows through a model of their local economy. Upon completion of the survey, visitor spending data is input through the model, where then an output of the economic activity is produced.

Practically, tourism destinations rely on the ability to quantify the economic benefits from visitor spending. However as Crompton (2006) discusses, this has become such a popular topic that misuse of results is possible if carried out haphazardly. Dwyer, Forsyth, Madden, & Spurr (2000) discuss economic impacts as 'new money' coming into the region. Moreover, nonresident spending affects the economy in a much different way than resident spending. Nonresident spending can provide growth by bringing monies generated outside of the local economy, whereas resident spending is recirculation of current holdings. Methodologically, the approach for determining impacts must be robust and capture a representative sample of the population. A number of methods are available for assessing this impact, but visitor surveys are most common and, typically, the most reliable (Fretchling, 1994). One concern is the possibility of biases introduced into spending figures. Wilton & Nickerson's (2006) article highlights the concern of recall bias where visitors cannot accurately recollect accurate spending data after a given amount of time. Thus, they suggest asking respondents to report their expenditures for a 24 hour period in a trip diary, which they record during the trip. This method limits the potential for recall bias as visitors can capture spending at the time it occurs.

Place Attachment

The study of space and place has been an ongoing topic for geographers with its revitalization in the early 1970's. Tuan (1975, p. 152) defines place as a "center of meaning constructed through experience". Moreover, Cresswell (2009, p. 1) describes place as a "meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place." People place meaning onto a location, which in turn allows them to understand, process, and form connections with the place. In turn, place *attachment* can be seen as the "affective bond or link between people and specific places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001, p. 274)." Thus, it is recognized that humans form a connection with a place due to emotional responses or beliefs that become seeded within them. Researchers for years have been debating whether to use quantitative or qualitative methods to capture this information with no real consensus on the best methods to use.

Place attachment is typically studied through two primary dimensions: place dependence and place identity (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981; Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989). Place dependence is defined as "when occupants of a setting perceive that it supports their behavioral goals better than an alternative (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981)." Place identity is defined as "the importance a person attaches to the place because of what the setting symbolizes or stands for (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989, p. 20)." Exploring these two domains of place attachment can lead towards facilitation of management decisions based on the user's connection to a location. Thus in a tourism context, it further informs about the nuances and associations that a person has with the destination.

Complimenting place attachment in a recreation context, Jacob & Shreyer's (1980) work on conflict among recreationists play into the discussion of how users become attached to a site or setting. They argue that different types of recreationists, in regards to their mode of activity or specialization, require varying needs and when the need is not satisfied, conflict may develop. Goal interference then creates conflict if one user's recreational needs cannot be fulfilled because of a variety of influences, including other people. For instance, if a recreationists is more experienced or specialized than others using the area, they may have a negative opinion about novice users. This applies to the modality of the user such as motorized vs. non-motorized users. Thus, the connectedness to place to meet the user's recreational needs at a destination may be affected by the behavior of others.

METHODOLOGY

To capture the depth and breadth of information needed, a mixed-method approach was used to understand the diverse issues of tourism on the Beartooth Highway. The study region was defined as including the gateway communities of Red Lodge, MT, Cooke City/Silver Gate, MT, Cody, WY and the highway itself. Data collection took place in the summer season of 2012 along with the winter season of 2012/2013. The total population of travelers was represented as those who were currently on the Beartooth Highway at the time of the respective survey timeframes.

Summer season data collection was conducted via a quantitative on-site and mail-back survey at three exit points along the highway: northeast entrance of Yellowstone National Park, Rock Creek Vista Point, and the junction of the Chief Joseph Highway/Beartooth Highway. The sample period consisted of 35 full days, varying between each location. Travelers along the highway were flagged over in convenient “pull-overs” in their vehicles, asked 7-10 on-site questions, and were given a mail-back questionnaire if they were a nonresident. Nonresidents were considered any travelers who did not live in the surrounding counties of Park County, MT, Carbon County, MT or Park County, WY. In total, 1,473 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 45%. Upon return, data was entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. An IMPLAN model of the local counties was built to best represent economic activity due to tourism spending.

Winter season data collection was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. An on-site questionnaire consisting of 7-10 questions was conducted with travelers but only nonresidents were given mail-back surveys to return at a later date. Travelers were intercepted at the two entry points to the Beartooth Highway during the winter season: junction of WY 120/296, and the northeastern entrance of Yellowstone National Park. In total, 289 questionnaires were received for a response rate of 26%. Furthermore, 20 in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with winter recreationists, primarily snowmobilers, in Cooke City, MT during January of 2013. The qualitative interviews explore the concept of place attachment to the winter season of the Beartooth Region. Quantitative data was entered via SPSS for analysis and IMPLAN for economic impact figures. Qualitative interviews were professionally transcribed and entered into NVivo software for analysis purposes.

RESULTS

Destination Image - Summer Season

Visitors along the Beartooth Highway were asked with a 4-point Likert scale to rate their primary reason for traveling along the corridor. Interestingly, 32 percent of visitors stated their primary reason for traveling the BTH was because of its federal scenic highway designation. Twenty-three percent of visitors stated their primary reason was because they had heard it was a pretty drive, followed by because it was recommended (14%) and because it is the road to Yellowstone National park (13%) (Table 1).

Table 2 displays the mean agreement levels of summer Beartooth visitors’ and image statements about the characteristics of the highway. The cleanliness of the Beartooth Highway was rated as the top characteristics (3.45) of all visitors, followed by the physical quality (3.37), ease of navigation (3.26), and safety and security of driving conditions (3.23). However, all characteristics rated higher than a 3.0 with the exception of interpretive signage (2.96).

Table 1: Primary Reasons for Traveling the Beartooth Highway

Primary Reason for traveling the BTH	Frequency	Percentage
“It is a designated scenic road.”	445	32%
“I heard it was a pretty drive.”	332	23%
“It was recommend to me.”	193	14%
“It is the road to Yellowstone National Park.”	181	13%
“It was the shortest route to my destination.”	144	10%
“It was my access to recreation along the highway.”	101	7%
“An electronic map suggested the route.” (i.e. Google Maps)	13	1%

Table 2: Characteristics of the Beartooth Highway

“The Beartooth Highway is/has...”	First-time Visitor’s Mean	Repeat Visitor’s Mean	All Visitor’s Mean
...free of debris and litter.	3.49	3.43	3.45
... of good physical quality	3.35	3.38	3.37
...easy to navigate.	3.22	3.29	3.26
...safe and secure to drive on.	3.19	3.26	3.23
...a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities	3.03	3.14	3.09
...ample number of pullouts.	3.06	3.03	3.04
...good interpretive signs.	3.00	2.93	2.96
...too crowded.	1.83	1.96	1.90

Scale: 1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 4 = ‘strongly agree’.

To gauge the affective construct of destination image, a sliding scale of emotional feelings were asked of visitors during their travels along the highway. Because the highway has limited guard rails and steep drop offs, it was unknown how visitors felt while traveling the highway. In general, visitors tended to feel “excited (95%)”, “comfortable (83%)”, and “adventurous (80.4%)”. Furthermore, the sensory feelings of smelling the fresh air (85%) and connected to nature (91%) indicate that there may be importance into understanding how these feelings influence other factors of the experience. Visitors tended to have very positive feelings while traveling the highway, with the exception of some visitors having a sense of fear because of the nature of the highway.

Destination Image – Winter Season

Table 3 displays the primary reasons for traveling to the Beartooth Region during the winter season. Contrary to popular opinion, wildlife viewing was identified as most frequent primary reason for traveling to the Beartooth Region (62%), followed by the best snow for my outdoor recreation (20%), and great terrain for outdoor recreation (12%). Popular belief is that snowmobiling was the primary reason for visitors in the area, but it appears that wildlife watching is one of the most prominent activities in the region.

Table 3: Primary reasons for visiting the Beartooth Region during winter season

Primary Reason for Traveling	Frequency	Percentage
It is close to wildlife viewing in Yellowstone.	174	62%
It has the best snow for my outdoor recreation.	56	20%
It has great terrain for my outdoor recreation.	33	12%
It has good trails for my outdoor recreation.	9	3%
It has convenient access to winter trails.	8	3%

Open-ended questions lead to the understanding that visitors tend to enjoy the solitude and uncrowded nature of the region during the winter season. However, there appears to be conflict that is present between non-motorized and motorized recreationists. Non-motorized users tended to state that they would prefer to see stricter regulations applied to motorized users. Conversely, motorized users do not appear to have any conflict with non-motorized users.

Economic Impacts

Beartooth visitors were asked to state their overall trip spending in various categories related to the gateway communities of Red Lodge, MT, Cooke City, MT and Cody, WY. Once visitor spending data was cleaned, delimitations were made to account for outlying results. Thus, the delimited means were used to calculate the following economic impact figures of the combined impact to the local counties from tourism (Table 4). As the results indicate, Park County, WY (\$23.26 million) sees the highest economic contribution yearly compared to Park County, MT (\$16.32 million) and Carbon County, MT (13.63 million). Furthermore, Park County, WY has the highest employment contribution due to tourism spending with 265 combined jobs. The economic impact analysis allows stakeholders to place a value on tourism in the region, which can be beneficial for decision-making processes. These figures indicate that the Beartooth Region is a viable tourism destination contributing millions to the local economies.

Table 4: Economic Impact Assessment of Summer and Winter Tourism

County	Direct Impact	Combined Impact	Combined Employment
Park County, WY	\$15,532,000	\$23,263,000	265
Park County, MT	\$11,460,000	\$16,323,000	213
Carbon County, MT	\$9,687,000	\$13,663,000	176
TOTAL	\$36,679,000	\$53,249,000	654

Place Attachment

Results from the qualitative, in-depth interviews identified a number of key themes related to winter recreation in the Beartooth Region. First, it appears that visitors are not connected to the destination itself, but more so to the conditions that allow them to have an enjoyable, recreational experience. For instance, one interviewee stated:

“Snow. They said they had the best snow probably for where we like to go for now. Last year we came because a friend of mine had another friend that had been coming here for years and said, hey, this is a good place to check out.” [Asked if snow makes a difference in their destination choice] “Yeah. If there was better snow somewhere else, we’d probably go there. If Steamboat would have just got a big storm and a bunch of snow, we’d have gone there.”

Furthermore, one interviewee responded as such when asked if the Beartooth Region is substitutable:

“If Cooke [City] did not exist; we’d be riding in the Big Horns. But, as long as Cooke’s here, we will, just see whoever has the most snow and that’s the place where we’ll probably go. If they had equal snow, I’d probably pick Cooke over the Big Horns.”

Another stressed a different opinion based on available areas in their home state:

“This is the ultimate place for us. There’s only maybe one place in California that compares to this. This place is the ultimate for us. The snow is really good and just so many – you can drive all day and not see the same thing. It’s different than California. [When asked if any other place would provide the same experience] No. There wouldn’t be any other place you guys would go that would be like this, would there? No. Other places are a lot more commercialized. This town is more rustic and real.”

It appears that for those who are traveling very long distances (1500+ miles) to reach the Beartooth Region that there is an apparent draw to the area. However, visitors who live closer to the area see their choice of destination as being very much dependent on snow. They tend to prefer the Beartooth Region, but only if the quality of the snow is up to their liking. The idea that Cooke City, MT is “more rustic and real” provides unique insights into how the town is perceived. As of now, Cooke City, MT appears to have a community of visitors during the winter that appreciate it the way it currently exists.

Another common theme was related to the conflict of opening the road from the east into Cooke City, MT during the winter. As of now, Cooke City is only accessible via Yellowstone National Park or by snowmobile from the east. An 8-mile stretch of the highway is left unplowed for the winter season east of Cooke City, MT. In past years, community forums and votes have been cast to decide whether to use snowplows to open the highway to traffic during the winter season. As of now, local residents have narrowly decided to maintain the highway in its current state, unplowed. It appeared as though the majority of interviewees enjoyed the town as a “one-way-in, one-way-out” type of scenario. One interviewee stated:

“[When asked if that would change their travel] It would. If they plow that road, the party would be over. Be too many people in here. All these guys right here – You can only fit so many people in town. You know this area well? They all ride in from the parking lot. That’s one of the experiences riding in, taking all your stuff – how cool is that, you’re riding with all your gear. If they plowed the road, they’re going to have a disaster.”

A second group stated:

“I would leave it how it is. For a lot of reasons. I mean, first of all, it’s kind of ridiculous to try to plow it all winter. And, I mean, unless you have money growing on a tree, whatever. That’s one aspect of it.

Otherwise, you know, I mean you can snowmobile on it and stuff, right, I think that would be a super cool experience. And if it was open for traffic that, obviously, wouldn't exist.”

Results of the place attachment portion of the study revealed that the Beartooth Region is very suitable for winter recreationists needs, but it is substitutable. This has direct implications towards marketing the region and ensuring the viability of winter recreation. Furthermore, it appears that the visitors who frequent the area prefer to leave it just as it is today. Changes in the management of the region may affect the perception of the region, which may lead to future issues.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Beartooth Highway appears to be an economically viable, diverse, and exciting place for visitors of all backgrounds to explore. Image results indicated that the region is thought of as scenic, wild, and possessing valuable natural areas. The fact that nearly all image statements were rated in overwhelming agreement indicates that stakeholders in the area are currently providing a sufficient visitor experience. While concern from visitors pertaining to a variety of issues did surface, it does indicate an overall positive image. Interpretive signing appears to be one area that should be considered for improvement, but it is not an immediate cause for concern. Moreover, the affective construct of image during the summer season tends to be very positive, in which positive feelings are experienced by the large majority of travelers.

Winter season image results indicate that there may be a different type of user that more commonly frequents the area than conventionally thought. Wildlife watching in Yellowstone, because of its proximity to the Beartooth Region, may continue to be a large draw for the majority of visitors. Snowmobiling will continue to be popular in Cooke City, MT itself because of the great terrain and conditions, but local stakeholders may need to be more inclusive of visitors who are participating in non-motorized recreation, such as wildlife watching and cross-country skiing. Furthermore, the apparent conflict between non-motorized and motorized users may become a growing issue at a later date. Without inclusion of non-motorized users into the local culture, the apparent goal interference may continue. Unfortunately, much of these debates are generally value-laden without strong potential for change.

Economically, the Beartooth Region is a viable tourism destination. Because of the small size of each gateway community where Cody, WY is the largest town with only 9,520 people, the \$53 million in economic contribution each year is substantial. The overall employment from tourism in the Beartooth Region (654 jobs) is an important contribution to these communities. Stakeholders in the region must consider the economic impact that tourism has to these local economies in their decision-making processes. For instance, plowing the 8-mile stretch of highway during winter season may increase traffic through the area, but loyal visitors voiced a displeasure towards that action. Thus, the risk of losing loyal visitors for hopes of increased “new” travel may outweigh potential economic contributions.

Finally, the place attachment investigation identified a number of key themes that arose during analysis. Many snowmobilers appear to perceive the Beartooth Region as substitutable, in which other areas can still fulfill their recreational needs. However when snow conditions are ideal, there appears to be enough of a draw for visitors to return. This appears to be especially true of those who travel long distances to reach the destination. However, it may be concerning to stakeholders that there is some degree of substitutability for the region. Furthermore, it appears that visitors do feel Cooke City has unique characteristics such as its solitude and scenic qualities. Unfortunately for snowmobilers, the solitude is lacking on the trail systems themselves. The riding area provided for users does not appear to be adequate, which tends to leave some users wanting more. Thus, there may need to be further consideration of the number of trail users in order to meet the expectations of those who visit.

In general, the attachment to place appears to be more reliant on the conditions and terrain of the area given adequate snow for their activities. Promotional agencies and local businesses should take this into consideration by providing up-to-date conditions and marketing the ability to fulfill recreational goals, rather than the community itself. In turn, this appears to be more important to those visiting whereas the community already provides their basic amenities needed. Further research into place attachment among snow-dependent activity groups may provide a better understanding how the environment plays a role into their level of connectedness.

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