Conservation-Based Economic Development

Overview

The natural and historic amenities that make a community special can be key components of successful an economic development strategy. High quality parks and trails, natural areas, hunting grounds, fisheries, scenic farmland and historic resources can be a significant draw for outdoor recreation enthusiasts and tourists from surrounding regions. These visitors can boost local economies by spending locally on food, accommodations, and recreation-related products. Additionally, local residents are more likely to recreate locally if these heritage features are preserved and enhanced, rather than spend their vacation dollars outside the community. By carefully identifying these resources and taking strategic steps to conserve them, communities can preserve their quality of life while enhancing the local economy.

Conservation-based economic development builds a coordinated program to feature the community’s natural and historic assets through marketing, technical and financial assistance. Some of the more common strategies serving communities in Virginia and across the country are described below and in more detail in this series of fact sheets.

Common Conservation-Based Economic Development Strategies

- **Agritourism** promotes local farms, wineries, and orchards and preserves local farmland character with increased advertising, informational brochures, tour maps and signage.

- **Recreational water uses** promote small water-craft use and preserves scenic rivers and lakes by offering guides and boating amenities.

- **Fishing, hunting and wildlife tourism** diversifies income sources for local farmers and landowners while providing an incentive for them to maintain wildlife habitat and the rural character of their land.

- **Hiking and biking trail programs** promote local hiking and biking trails with minimal local investment by building, extending or enhancing existing networks and providing trail information, maps, special events and amenities.

- **Historic and cultural resources** promote local historic, cultural, and agricultural sites through preservation assistance and funding, educational material and coordinated marketing support.
Agritourism

Overview

Farms, wineries, orchards and related businesses increasingly offer site tours and other services to increase revenues and build awareness of their products. Agriculture-based tourism, or agritourism, emphasizes the promotion of local farms, wineries and orchards. Agritourism strategies can include increased and tailored advertising (e.g., through road signs and web sites), informational brochures and tour maps, event calendars, support and education for farmers interested in becoming agritourism destinations, and more general technical support and incentives to protect farmland.

Agritourism Examples

- Great Country Farms in Bluemont, Virginia includes a pick-your-own berry, vegetable, and flower operation; on-farm market retail store; community supported agriculture; and a range of other activities, including a 60-foot, in-hill tunnel slide, tunnels, and mazes; and a fishing pond, petting farm, and picnic areas for birthdays, business picnics, and family reunions.

- Johnson’s Orchard, located in Bedford, Virginia, has expanded from a farming operation into an agritourism enterprise. Pick-your-own apples, annual festivals, a picnic shelter, a network of hiking trails and a winery offer a variety of activities for tourists and local residents.

- Graves Mountain Lodge, located in Syria, Virginia in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, has accommodations and offers access to hiking, fishing, horseback riding and an educational farm and orchard.
Special Considerations

- Agritourism works well when sites are developed as part of a coordinated local or regional strategy so that visitors can come to several places and enjoy a range of experiences. For example, tourists who visit an apple orchard may spend an entire day – and more money – if they can visit a winery, a greenhouse, a ceramics studio and a café. Strategies with suggested routes and multiple destinations can help to ensure that people return for multiple, longer duration visits.

Agritourism in Virginia

- Agritourism has great potential in Virginia, thanks to the significant number of scenic farms located throughout the state.

- In Central Virginia, vineyards and wineries are making a significant contribution to the state’s agritourism economy. Each year, Virginia’s wine-making industry produces 400,000 cases of wine and generates $35 million in taxes.

- Virginia wine consumption has increased 22 percent since 2000.

Resources

- **Taking the First Step: Farm and Ranch Alternative Enterprise and Agritourism Resource Evaluation Guide**

- **Rural Development Grants**
  - Offers a variety of loans and grants through USDA’s Rural Development program that may be used to support local agritourism efforts.

- **Local farm directories**
  - Helps consumers find local products while building relationships between growers, food artisans, farmers’ markets retailers, restaurants and institutions. The following website is an example for Virginia:
  - [www.buylocalvirginia.org/](www.buylocalvirginia.org/)

- **Great Country Farms, Bluemont, VA**
Overview

A recent study found that in New York in 2003, recreational boating contributed nearly 2 billion dollars to the state’s economy and generated nearly 19,000 jobs. Economic development strategies focused on increasing local boating opportunities can generate jobs and increase spending on equipment, food, hotels and other services.

Recreational boating – canoeing, kayaking and rafting – has demonstrated sustained popularity and can align effectively with community conservation goals, create incentives for protecting water resources, and minimize noise and safety issues associated with motorized boating.

Examples of Recreational Boating

- Lexington, Virginia’s on-line outdoor guide highlights several local whitewater boating opportunities, including descriptions of popular river stretches and contact information for canoe and kayak outfitters.

- Every June for the past 25 years, the Virginia Batteau Festival has delighted citizens along the James River with a re-enactment of the batteau trade that used to ply the waters of the James River. Batteau is a French word referring to the flat bottomed, shallow draft boats that were designed to navigate the rocky Virginia rivers to bring produce and tobacco to market. Each year, the festival of replica boats, poled by volunteers in authentic garb of the time, begin their trip at Lynchburg and make their way toward Richmond. The festival not only promotes the history of the river and its people, but also provides heritage tourism opportunities as it stops at towns along the river where community members come out to celebrate the boats and join in planned festivities. (www.batteau.org/)

Southwest Virginia’s Clinch River is a major destination for recreational boating.
Special Considerations

- Key factors to consider include the regional demand for boating, the suitability of local water resources, and local willingness to address boating-related issues (e.g., increased automobile traffic or a need for additional parking and water entry points).

- Communities can gain additional economic and conservation benefits by linking boating and fishing opportunities.

- Federal, state and local boating regulations should be consulted when developing boating programs and amenities.

Recreational Boating in Virginia

- Virginia has significant inland and coastal water resources that can support recreational boating economic development strategies. Based on the 2006 Virginia Outdoor Survey, the two highest needs for outdoor recreation in the next five years are access to recreational waters of the state and trails close to home.

Resources

- **American Canoe Association**
  - Focuses on “providing education on matters related to paddling, supporting stewardship of the paddling environment, and enabling programs and events to support paddlesport recreation.” ([www.americancanoe.org](http://www.americancanoe.org))

- **Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation**
  - Focuses on enhancing “participation in recreational angling and boating and thereby increase public awareness and appreciation of the need for protecting, conserving and restoring this nation’s aquatic natural resources.” ([www.rbff.org](http://www.rbff.org))


Conservation-Based Economic Development Strategies

Overview

Communities can benefit in multiple ways from providing opportunities for fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing, such as bird watching and nature photography. Landowners can generate supplemental income by offering fee-based recreation activities such as fishing and hunting. Local jurisdictions benefit from increased tax revenues and the local commerce that supports these activities. In turn, fishing and wildlife facilities can support local conservation goals, as enterprising landowners work to ensure that their properties support high-quality habitat for hunting and fishing purposes.

Wildlife Tourism Example

- The Congress Avenue Bridge in Austin, Texas, is home to the largest bat colony in the United States. The emergence of the colony every evening has become a tourist attraction for city residents, who make up a third of bat watching visitors, and tourists to the city. Each evening, the bats are viewed by between 200 and 1,500 people.

  No charge is made to view the bats, but the economic benefits for the local area are significant. Visitor expenditures directly connected to bat watching visits is in excess of $3 million a year.

  (Source: Gail R. Ryser and Roxana Popovici (1999). The Fiscal Impact of the Congress Avenue on the City of Austin, a study for BCI.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Benefits of Hunting and Fishing in West Virginia</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hunting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• $243 million a year in retail sales</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 6,246 jobs supported by the hunting industry generate $108 million annually in workers’ wages</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fishing</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• $304 million a year in retail sales</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 4,450 jobs supported by the fishing industry generate over $71 million in workers’ wages</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wildlife Viewing</strong></td>
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<td>• $115 million a year in retail sales</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 3,466 jobs supported by birding and wildlife recreation industries generate $54 million in workers’ wages</td>
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(Source: Benedict and McMahaon, 2006: 72)
Special Considerations

- Fee-based outdoor recreation opportunities require research to determine local and regional interest in these services, whether a particular property can support proposed activities, and whether applicable state and local regulations can be satisfied.

- Community outreach provides a way to share information about a new facility and to address the potential concerns of adjacent property owners and the larger community.

- Communities can form partnerships with game and waterfowl oriented organizations, and state departments of wildlife or game species to leverage additional support for local hunting, fishing and wildlife tourism initiatives.

Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife Facilities in Virginia

- Several hunting, fishing and birding facilities are located in Virginia. Some are fee-based and some are not. Many farms across the state could potentially accommodate hunting, fishing or wildlife viewing operations.

- Winter Haven Game Farm & Preserve in Fluvanna County, Virginia offers guided and unguided hunting for pheasant, quail, and chukars. (www.winterhavenpreserve.com)

- The Virginia Wildlife Trail links wildlife viewing sites across the state. (www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/)

Hunting and fishing operations may support local conservation goals as enterprising landowners work to ensure these places support wildlife habitat.
Overview

Outdoor recreation has been referred to by the American Hiking Society as “a booming business.” In particular, localities that establish notable hiking and biking trails, or support portions of national or statewide trails within their jurisdiction, can add a valuable component to their economic development strategies and conserve important natural resources with relatively minimal investment.

Community economic benefits of hiking and biking include:

- Visiting hikers and bikers will spend money on a range of goods and services, including equipment, food and accommodations.

- Local residents will be more likely to hike and bike locally, improving public health.

- Increases in visitors can lead to new businesses that reflect the area’s natural and recreational resources.

Hiking and Biking Trail Examples

- Arlington County, Virginia provides links to information on over 75 miles of trails, including lists of local running and hiking sites, suggested bicycle routes, and bike maps. ([www.arlingtonvirginiausa.com/index.cfm/6784](http://www.arlingtonvirginiausa.com/index.cfm/6784))

- Savannah, Georgia invested $8 million to develop a riverwalk on a former levee. The riverwalk has attracted almost $200 million in commercial investments to adjacent properties. ([Source: Benedict and McMahaon, p. 73](#))

- The Virginia Creeper Trail is a 35-mile trail across southwest Virginia that supports mountain biking, hiking, and horseback riding. ([www.vacreepertrail.com](http://www.vacreepertrail.com))

- Along the James River in Virginia’s Tidewater Region, the John Smith Water trail combines heritage tourism with walking trails and recreational boating. ([www.virginia.org/johnsmithtrail/](http://www.virginia.org/johnsmithtrail/))
Special Considerations

- If particular hiking and biking trails become more popular, they may require additional maintenance and management.

- Trail rules and guidelines developed with input from trail users help to ensure that trails are used appropriately and user conflicts are minimized.

- Planning for new trails can require significant coordination and negotiation among multiple localities, state and federal government agencies, and landowners.

Hiking and Biking in Virginia

- Local governments in Virginia can leverage the state’s scenic beauty and the many resources available from private organizations and government agencies to establish new biking and hiking trails, enhance existing trails, or work with other localities to create regional trail networks.

Resources

- **Recreational Trails Fund Program**
  - Supports the development and maintenance of trails and trail facilities in Virginia. ([www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational_planning/trailfnd.shtml](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational_planning/trailfnd.shtml))

- **Land and Water Conservation Fund**
  - Supports the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities in Virginia. ([www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational_planning/vof.shtml](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational_planning/vof.shtml))

- **Virginia Trails**
  - Links to information on hiking and biking trails across Virginia. ([www.americantrails.org/resources/statetrails/VAstate.html](http://www.americantrails.org/resources/statetrails/VAstate.html))

- **Nelson County, Virginia Tourism Strategy**
  - Promotes recreational hiking and biking through provisions in the County’s comprehensive plan. ([http://www.nelsoncounty.com/visit/outdoorrecreation](http://www.nelsoncounty.com/visit/outdoorrecreation))
Conservation-Based Economic Development Strategies

Overview

According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, cultural heritage tourism is defined as “traveling to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present.” Many localities have historic, cultural, and agricultural sites that may support local economic development if preserved and promoted as part of a local tourism strategy.

Cultural Heritage Tourism Examples

- The Blue Ridge Art Craft Trail features a series of trails that showcase local folk artists and craftspeople in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains. ([www.culturalheritagetourism.org/successStories/virginiaSidebarStory.htm](http://www.culturalheritagetourism.org/successStories/virginiaSidebarStory.htm))

- The Crooked Road Heritage Music Trail is a driving route across Virginia that connects notable heritage music venues in the Appalachian region, including the Blue Ridge Music Center. ([www.thecrookedroad.org](http://www.thecrookedroad.org))

- Jonesborough, Tennessee has reinvigorated its local economy through cultural heritage tourism efforts. ([www.culturalheritagetourism.org/successStories/JonesboroughSummary.htm](http://www.culturalheritagetourism.org/successStories/JonesboroughSummary.htm))

Like Staunton, Virginia, pictured above, many localities have historic downtowns that can function as the hub of the local economy if preserved and promoted as part of a local tourism strategy.
Special Considerations

- Cultural heritage tourism efforts may require the upgrading or installation of new infrastructure to accommodate visitor interest.
- Long-term preservation of buildings and landscape features may require investments in planning and funding strategies.

Historic Preservation in Virginia

- Virginia has several unique historical sites the state that date back to the Jamestown Settlement in 1607. As a result, historic preservation is a vitally important economic development component for many communities. The cultural heritage tourism sector is one of the largest employers in Virginia.
- Several organizations and resources are available within Virginia to assist communities with historic preservation and cultural heritage tourism efforts.
- Virginia has enabled localities to create historic districts (section 15.2-2283). These districts enable the placement of specific restrictions to protect historic areas.

Resources

- Toolkit for Heritage Tourism – Provides a range of ideas and resources to support cultural heritage tourism programs in Virginia. (www.tjpdc.org/workforce/tjV_heritageTourism.asp)
- Virginia Main Street Program – Assists community efforts to revitalize their downtowns and other commercial settings. (www.dhcd.virginia.gov/CommunityDevelopmentRevitalization/VirginiaMainStreet.htm)
- Scenic Virginia - Undertakes programs that enhance scenic qualities of rural and urban landscapes and offers examples of model ordinances and project ideas. (www.scenicva.org/)