

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This summary of findings is presented for each research questions separately. The conclusions of this research are provided in the next chapter following this summary.

Findings Related to Research Question 1: Are the Internet Web Hosting Businesses (ICB) Proximate to the Actual Location of the Nature Tourism Internet Content Sponsors (ICS)?

The original hypothesis for this question was that the ICB and ICS would be proximate to each other. It was expected that, because nature tourism operations tend to be small; they would more often rely on local ICB for services to establish an Internet presence.

The results of the distance analysis showed that the hypothesis was moderately supported. The range of distances between ICS and ICB was from 0 – 4714 miles. Just over half (52 percent) of the ICS were found to have their ICB within 50 miles of their business location. Fifty miles in this research was considered proximate. These results suggest that nature tourism business owners are nearly as likely to get their Web hosting services many miles from their business location as they are to use services nearby.

Findings Related to Research Question 2: What is the Geography of the Nature Tourism Sponsors (ICSs) – Are They Urban, Urban Fringe, or Rural?

The original hypothesis for this question predicted that the ICS would be located in rural areas and associated with rural communities. This is because urban areas do not have the extent of natural amenities necessary for nature tourism. The results of this research strongly support the original hypothesis. The spatial analysis of the locations of ICS in relation to urban areas, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, showed that 93 percent of the businesses surveyed were in rural areas. Only 6 percent of the respondents were associated with urban areas, and 1.6 percent of them were identified as being located in an urban fringe.

Findings Related to Research Question 3: Are the Nature Tourism ICS Located in States That Have Policies or Programs Aimed at Promoting Nature Tourism Development and Facilitation of the Use of the Web?

The original hypothesis was that nature tourism businesses found from the Web searches would most often be located in states that have programs promoting or supporting nature tourism development and the use of the Web.

The results of this research strongly support the original hypothesis. Searching and reviewing the Web sites for the state agencies in the U.S. revealed that five states, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, South Carolina, and Texas, unquestionably had nature tourism programs. An additional four states, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, and Montana, were placed in a group of states that had some evidence of nature tourism programs.

The results of this research show that 64 percent of the nature tourism businesses identified were located in the five states with definite nature tourism programs. An

additional 7 percent of the ICS were located in the four states with possible nature tourism programs, yielding a total coincidence of 71 percent.

The Hot Spot (nearest neighbor) analysis revealed that five of the seven Hot Spots (Figure 4) were located in the five states that have nature tourism programs. One of the remaining Hot Spots was on the state of Florida, which was one of the states with a potential nature tourism program. The K-means cluster (Figure 5) analysis showed a similar pattern as the Hot Spot analysis but with only five clusters. These five clusters coincided with the five states with nature tourism programs.

Findings Related to Research Question 4: What are the Characteristics of the Nature Tourism Businesses/ Organizations and How Have/Do They Use the Web?

What are the Characteristics of the Nature Tourism Business/Organization?

A diverse group of businesses is represented in this research. Businesses who responded to the online survey were from eighteen states in the U.S., however, the majority were from Texas, Hawaii, South Carolina, Maryland, Florida and New Mexico. It might at first appear that Texas was over represented in this research. There was no geographical bias in searches of the Internet to locate these businesses. In terms of geographical representation, Texas is a significantly larger area. Thus, when compared to the responses for other smaller states such as Hawaii or South Carolina the response rate for Texas is appropriate. In addition, Texas is recognized as a leader in nature tourism in the U.S. (Var 1997), so it is likely that the programs supporting nature tourism have effectively stimulated “active” nature tourism businesses.

Generally, these are “mature” businesses with over 61 percent being in business for five or more years. The most common reason given for these businesses to get started was previous interest in the activities being provided.

Forty-nine percent of these businesses have written business plans. Eighty-one percent of these respondents stated that they had ways to determine how their customers found out about their businesses. The most common way was through informal conversations with the customer.

Generally, these businesses are fairly small with 60 percent having between two to six employees. Twenty-one percent of the businesses had ten employees or more. Only 35 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the size of their businesses.

The respondents to this survey were primarily sole-owners (43 percent) or joint-owners (33 percent). Generally, these businesses are fairly dependent on their nature tourism activities with over 57 percent saying that it represented 50 percent or more of their gross income.

There is a broad diversity of activities being offered at these businesses. The most common activities are birdwatching/wildlife viewing, hiking/exploring, educational tours, photography, boating/canoeing, and historical activities. The average number of different activities offered at these businesses is seven with the range of one to fourteen activities per business.

Descriptive Information about the Businesses/Organizations’ Web Site

Eighty percent of these business owners/managers knew where their Web site was being hosted. Eighty percent of the Web sites have been online for two years or more.

Using any type of formal survey was not a common practice with these nature tourism businesses. Ninety-one percent reported that they did not use online surveys. Seventy-eight percent did not use on-site surveys after their customers visit their business.

Primarily, the nature tourism business owners in this research use their Web sites for two purposes: marketing and providing general information to their customers. Fifty-four percent of the businesses used their Web sites for marketing, and 42 percent used the Web to provide general information to their customers.

What was the Process of Developing the Web Site, from Initial Motivations to Ultimate Implementation?

What motivated these nature tourism businesses to develop Web sites for their businesses was the low cost associated with maintaining a Web site. These businesses most commonly (79 percent) believed that the Web was a cost effective way to promote their business.

Sixty-five percent of these businesses have someone on-staff that is knowledgeable about the Web site design and development. Developing the businesses' Web sites were most often done by Web development companies (40 percent), or by the owners of the businesses (32 percent). Of the respondents who did not develop the Web site themselves, 93 percent informed their Web developers specifically what they wanted and 3 percent did not.

How Well is the Web Site Performing – Is It Worth Their Time and Money?

Based on the results of these questions, it is apparent that the Web, for the most part, has had a positive impact on these nature tourism businesses. Eighty-four percent of

the participants in this research were satisfied with their Web sites. Overall, 70 percent of the respondents believed that developing the Web sites for their businesses had fulfilled their expectations.

Eighty-five percent of these business owners felt that their Web site had helped their businesses' grow. Ninety-four percent of the respondents saw their Web sites as a cost effective way to promote their businesses. These respondents, generally, (58 percent) have not had difficulty getting their Web sites revised or updated. Finally, 99 percent of these respondents indicated they wanted to keep their Web sites online.

What Do They Wish the Site Would Do that It Doesn't Do Now?

In general it appears that these nature tourism businesses owners or managers have mixed feelings about redesigning their Web sites. Only 46 percent of them indicated that they would like to redesign their Web sites. However, 78 percent of the respondents were interested in adding new features to their Web sites, and 56 percent wanted to expand the use of their Web site for other purposes.

How Much Does the Web Site Cost in Terms of Monthly Maintenance?

The responses to this question indicate that the businesses were able to keep the cost low in maintaining their Web sites. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that they spend less than one hundred dollars a month to maintain their Web sites. There also appears to be a trend towards managing these Web sites in-house.

Thirty-nine percent of the responses from nine response categories were for in-house management.

Are These Nature Tourism ICSs Attempting to Depict Place on Their Web Site, and if so, How?

Apparently “place” is an important feature for these nature tourism business owners or managers to promote their businesses on their Web sites. Ninety-one percent of the survey respondents indicated they attempt to depict a specific “place” on their Web sites. Ninety-one percent also indicated providing this information makes a Web site more effective. Respondents of the case studies clearly emphasized the importance of creating an impression of the experiences that they provide at their places on their Web sites. They depicted the character of their place and the experiences provided at these places using a combination of text and images.

Do these ICSs Perceive that they are Part of a Nature Tourism Community, Either on the Internet or in the “Real World?”

Forty-three percent of the survey participants said they were involved with a nature tourism community/association. Of this group, 93 percent indicated that the community/association was tied to a specific place. Ninety percent of the survey respondents also indicated that they use the Internet to communicate with their community/association. The frequency of their communication with this community varies significantly from “once a week” to “irregularly/other.” Eighty-six percent of the survey respondents that are involved in a community responded that being a part of it was

important to them. For the respondents who were not a part of an Internet nature tourism community 55 percent of them said they would like to be a part of one.

Sixty-nine percent of the survey respondents indicated that they are part of a nature tourism community/association outside the Internet. The frequency of their participation with this community/association varies significantly. The category with the most respondents (32 percent) that indicated “Irregularly/other.”

The most common forms of communications were phone conversations, formal meetings, other meetings or gatherings, and email. Thirty-three percent of the respondents use email to correspond with other people in the nature tourism industry daily, and 24 percent weekly.

What are the ICSs Perceptions and Experience with the World Wide Web?

The participants in this research are frequent users of the Internet. For the quantitative survey 78 percent responded they use the Internet daily for personal reasons. For business reasons 90 percent indicated they use it on a daily basis.

Almost all of the respondents (97 percent) to the online survey believed that the Internet would grow. The same percentage (97 percent) of respondents also believed the Internet is a good thing. The case study respondents’ attitude towards the Web re-emphasized the survey results. They thought their Web sites were crucial to the success of their businesses. Almost all of the case study participants were positive about using the Web to market their businesses in the future.

There appears to be moderate concern about security on the Internet for these survey respondents. Sixty-two percent indicated that they were concerned about the security of the Internet.

Other Findings

How nature tourism businesses define their businesses

What constitutes nature tourism? What do people call their nature tourism businesses? This is a reoccurring issue in the nature tourism literature. It also arose during this research. In order to clarify the types of businesses that were investigated in this research, the first question of the survey asked respondents to identify their business from a list of 12 broad “nature tourism” terms. The survey results revealed that these businesses had difficulty in selecting a term or a phrase to describe their business. This research has discovered that the variety of activities and services provided in this industry has created too many variations on a theme to describe it in a single term/phase.

One impression from the conversations with the people in the case studies is that developing clear terms may not be necessary. Most of the case study respondents suggested that they need at least a couple of sentences to describe what they offered. These businesses used text (sentences) and pictures on their Web sites to inform people about their businesses.

Marketing

The major points discovered from the case studies related to marketing include (1) marketing is important, (2) the Internet is an integral part of these businesses’ marketing

strategies, and (3) marketing is expensive. The assistance needed most often mentioned by these business owners/managers were: (1) information about how to understand their target markets, (2) marketing “how-to’s”, and (3) how to develop collaborative relationships with other businesses, such as marketing cooperatives.

Areas of assistance needed

The case studies revealed that there are varying levels of needs among these nature tourism businesses. Some businesses seem to need considerable assistance. Other respondents did not need any help at all. The most prominent needs expressed were for assistance with: (1) general marketing, (2) Web site marketing, (3) financial assistance, and (4) developing collaborative relationships with other nature tourism businesses.