

Washington County Nature Tourism Survey 2009

Andrea Ednie, Kevin Athearn & Bill Eckart, special thanks to Cassie Craven, Nathaniel Case, and Kelsey Kurz who worked as student interviewers.

In terms of tourism, Washington County is a region of abundant opportunity and little visitation compared to other regions of the Maine coast. Few recent county-specific studies exist to guide the decisions of local business owners, natural resource managers, and local organizations working on sustainable tourism development. This project, funded by the Center for Tourism Research & Outreach (CenTRO) was designed to provide the county's tourism stakeholders with information about travel patterns, the consistency between visitor expectations and their satisfaction, and by identifying tourism promotion needs in the region.

During the summer season of 2009, visitors were surveyed by three UMM students at four locations within the county (Roque Bluffs State Park, Cobscook Bay State Park, Quoddy Head State Park, and Grand Lake Stream). The survey involved two instruments: a short on-site interview and a more extensive mail/email back questionnaire. The survey provided many encouraging findings for the county's tourism community and led to several reflections for the tourism community, such as:

- Visitors are attracted to Washington County for a general experience of being in a natural, scenic area; not for one specific attraction, event, or activity. They come because it is a beautiful, un-crowded, remote place to explore. The majority of the participants (75%) stayed in the county for three or more days, however, participants expressed little familiarity with many of the most common attractions in the county.
- Visitors use the web to find tourism opportunities prior to their visits, but once here, they rely on family & friends, locals, and brochures for further direction. Further developing these outlets would be beneficial as would continued efforts in training front line staff to be effective communicators of tourism opportunities in the county.
- Visitors are attracted here because they appreciate the scenic quality, the remoteness, and the opportunity for solitude. Local residents appreciate this place for the same reasons and don't want to see that change. Promoting tourism for its economic value while maintaining the qualities everyone wants requires a managed balance. It is difficult, with limited resources, to prioritize the development of management and monitoring plans for natural attractions, but these are crucial.
- The most popular type of accommodation in the county was house/cabin rentals. Although most of the comments provided about houses and cabins were positive, others indicated the need to maintain the quality of and enhancement the variety of these accommodations.
- The study provided visitor characteristics and demographics that can be useful for target marketing. Over half (52%) of the participants were above the age of 50, most (61%) did not travel with youth under 16, and the majority (86%) had a 4-year college or graduate degree. Most visitors (72%) were traveling with one other person or in a group of up to 5 people, and the majority (76%) were traveling with family. Participants came from 21 states and 1 province, and the most represented states were ME, CT, NY and NJ.

Further details about the survey or a full version of the report are available from Andrea Ednie at UMM (aednie@maine.edu or 255-1303).