

CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight and discuss the most important findings of this study and to draw implications from those findings. It is divided into four sections which address the wide array of benefits provided by these rail-trails, the differences in the levels of economic impacts across the three trails, the dedication of the users, and the effects on adjacent and nearby landowners.

Wide Range of Benefits Provided

The rail-trails studied, like many recreation resources, were found to provide a wide range of benefits to users, nearby landowners, and local communities. When asked why they had visited the trails and what they liked best about them, users emphasized benefits related to exercise, safe/automobile-free recreation, peace and quiet, health, social interaction, family togetherness, transportation for adults and children, nature, and wildlife appreciation. The majority of trail landowners presumably benefit in similar ways since ninety percent of all the landowners surveyed reported that they too were trail users. Many landowners also felt the trails would benefit them economically if they chose to sell their properties. The majority felt the trails would make their properties easier to sell and a third predicted that the trails would make their properties more valuable.

In addition to the trails' benefits to users and nearby property owners, this study found that local communities also benefitted in important ways from the presence of the trails. The local economies through which the trails pass each realized well over half a million dollars in annual direct expenditures made by trail users during their visits as well as significant additional expenditures made on durable goods related to trail use. Trail landowners reported, on average, that

the trails had improved the quality of their neighborhoods and trail users and landowners alike also felt that the trails were important in providing the following benefits to the surrounding communities: health and fitness, recreation opportunities, undeveloped open space, aesthetic beauty, community pride, and access for persons with disabilities.

The finding that users and nearby landowners felt rail-trails provide a wide range of benefits to both individuals and the community as a whole has implications for how new and existing rail-trails are presented to and discussed with their various constituencies. Rail-trails do more than provide a single type of benefit to a particular special interest group. Rather, they have the potential to satisfy many needs and provide many benefits. When attempting to build support for a new trail proposal or an existing trail, there are potential benefits that even very diverse groups would find appealing: recreation opportunities for potential users, safe play and transportation for families with children, economic development for local businesses, increased property values and a strengthened sense of community for nearby residents, transportation networks for regional planners, protected open space for conservationists and nature lovers, and so on. Rail-trails are much more than tourist attractions or wildlife habitat and the entire spectrum of potential benefits should be emphasized when promoting and building support for them.

Differences in Levels of Economic Impact Across the Three Trails

Average trip-related expenditures per person and new money generated for the local counties were higher for the Heritage and St. Marks Trails than for the Lafayette/Moraga Trail.

This is due primarily to the fact that the Lafayette/Moraga draws far fewer visitors from outside the local county than do the other two trails and its visitors stay for shorter periods of time. Because these longer travel distances and longer trail stays involve higher costs (particularly when an overnight stay is involved), the higher expenditures of these "tourist" visitors increase the expenditure averages on the Heritage and St. Marks Trails and the amounts of new money generated for the host counties.

The finding that the Heritage and St. Marks Trails generate more visits from out-of-county users and that these tourists spend more than their local counterparts has several implications for trail planners and managers. If increasing or maximizing a trail's economic impact is an objective, the trail must be designed, managed and marketed to attract visitors from outside the local area and to convince them to spend at least one night in the area and return often. Several things can help in this regard. The trail should be long enough and scenic enough to entice out-of-town visitors to travel there. Although this study's sample of trails was not large, it is significant that the Heritage Trail was the longest and perhaps most scenic of the three and also attracted the highest proportion of out-of-county visitors, while the Lafayette/Moraga was the shortest and most urban of the three. There should be amenities such as restaurants, camping areas, motels, and food stores available and conveniently located for trail users. Trails which can be marketed in conjunction with other area trails, attractions, and points of interest have the potential of being a bigger draw for visitors and may entice others to extend their stays in the area. The community must also be supportive of trail tourism and economic development objectives. A positive "host" attitude on the part of local businesses and residents can be instrumental in a visitor's decision to return or not. And, finally, the trail and its nearby support facilities need to be marketed. At a minimum, potential users need to be aware of the existence of the trail

and the facilities that are available to make their trips convenient. These factors are all present in the case of Wisconsin's Elroy-Sparta Trail and its economic benefits to its surrounding communities have been found to be substantial. I should also be noted that there is nothing in this study which indicates that the factors leading to the greater economic impact realized on the Heritage and St. Marks Trails have had a negative impact on the other benefits the trails produce.

Dedicated Users

One of the most striking findings from the surveys of the trail users was how frequently they visited the trails, particularly in the case of the Lafayette/Moraga. Half of the users reported visiting the trail on over 100 different days during the past twelve months for an average of 132 days annually. Although considerably less than that found for the Lafayette/Moraga, the average trail use of 31 and 46 days annually for the Heritage and St. Marks Trails was still remarkably high. Each trail appears to have a core of very dedicated regular users. In the case of the Lafayette/Moraga many users reported using the trail twice a day for "fresh air" or walking their dogs. Not surprisingly, these regular users were attached to the trails both as favorite places to participate in their activities and because they liked the trails themselves.

The finding that there is a core of dedicated users that visit the trails frequently has several implications for trail planners and managers. Where it has not already occurred, trail managers should consider involving these dedicated users in trail management. Many could be recruited as trail volunteers or partners in trail management about needed changes and improvements. At a minimum, the information of these trail experts should be sought before major trail or management changes are undertaken. Similarly, input from residents

proposed trail projects should be sought since these are the people most likely to become the trail's most frequent users.

Related to the high frequency of use found for the users of the three sample trails was the fact that most users lived close to the trails. Thus, the demographic characteristics of users mirrored the local population. This study did not indicate that rail-trails attract any particular ethnic or socio-demographic group.

Effects on Adjacent and Nearby Landowners

The survey of property owners living adjacent to and near the study trails produced several important results that have implications for planners and managers. While acknowledging that there are disadvantages experienced by some adjacent owners, most reported advantages and relatively low rates of occurrence for trail-related problems. Overall, neighboring landowners were satisfied with having the trails as neighbors. Landowners generally felt that the trails had improved the quality of their neighborhoods, would make their properties sell easier and would either increase or have no effect on their property values.

The findings regarding how neighboring landowners' attitudes and experiences with the trails changed over time were also significant. Overall, landowners reported that there was either no change or a decrease in the number of problems they experienced once the trail was established and, on average, landowners at all three trails reported that the trail was a more desirable neighbor than the unused railroad line had been before it.

These findings should be encouraging for trail advocates and landowners living along proposed trails. Certainly, the effect on any particular property will depend on the specifics of the situation; however, landowners' fears of increased crime and other problems and decreased property values were not supported by this study. These findings imply that trail advocates and

planners should be proactive when addressing landowner concerns. Landowners' concerns are legitimate but their fears may be overblown. Facts from studies like this should be available at the first contact with landowners along proposed trails. Better yet, landowners near proposed trails should be put in contact with owners along existing trails to hear first-hand about what they can really expect if a new rail-trail is established near them.

Summary

The results of this study indicate that rail-trails are valuable recreation resources that provide a wide array of benefits to users, neighboring landowners, and local communities. They attract and keep a core of very dedicated users, and in many instances, attract visitors from outside the local communities. These non-local visitors are the most important source of economic benefits generated by the trails. And, while there can be disadvantages to living adjacent to a rail-trail and these legitimate concerns need to be addressed, most landowners were satisfied with living near the rail-trails examined in this study.

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