

Outfitting and Guiding as Sustainable Tourism

Norma Nickerson

Contact: norma.nickerson@umontana.edu

Introduction

The antecedents of the modern outfitter are numerous and varied, reaching far back into mythology, allegoric literature, history, and geographic exploration. Throughout history, guides have played two distinct roles, the pathfinder and the mentor (Oschell 2004). The outfitters and guides of today possess and expand on both of these roles. Outfitted trips tend to fit the realm of sustainable tourism and ecotourism in its true form.

The purpose of this study was to assess the current and future of the outfitting and guiding industry in Montana through an analysis of the economic contribution, a supply side inventory, and an analysis of the client-guide experiences.

Methodology

Two separate surveys were conducted – one of the outfitter business owner and one of the clients. **Business Survey** – Through analysis of all possible lists of outfitter names in MT, (United States Forest Service; Bureau of Land Management; National Park Service; Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks; MT Board of Outfitters; Travel Montana; Montana Outfitters and Guides Association; & Fishing Outfitter Association of Montana) 998 active outfitters in Montana were identified. The business survey resulted in a 33 percent response rate of outfitters. Phone surveys to 70 non-respondents found no difference between respondent/non-respondent outfitters. **Client Survey** – Clients on outfitted trips were either intercepted by researchers or given a survey by the guides and returned by mail. Surveys were returned by 238 clients. Client surveys were weighted according to the number and type of clients reported by outfitters to accurately represent all types of outfitted clients.

Results

Business survey results showed there were 998 known outfitters in the state of Montana and approximately 4,300 guides. On average outfitters had been in business 18 years and expect to continue in business for an average of 21 more years. The “average” outfitter took 323 clients on outfitted trips in 2005 for a total of 318,670 guided individuals. The outfitting business consists of

small entrepreneurs. Twenty-four percent do not have any employees and only 42 percent of those have some contract labor indicating that nearly one-fourth of all outfitters are self-employed with no help. Of the 48 percent of outfitters who have full-time employees, most have one or two full time staff. Seventy-one percent of the outfitters hire part-time staff with an average of nearly five part-time workers per outfitting business. Most of the part-time staff function as guides for the outfitter.

Fifty-five percent guided trips on United States Forest Service lands, 38 percent on state lands, and 32 percent on Bureau of Land Management lands. Up to 48 percent of outfitters guided on private property. Seventy-six percent of all outfitter revenues are generated through hunting and fishing activities.

Client surveys

Eighty-five percent of all guided clients were involved in five activities: hunting (6%), angling (20%), rafting/floating (39%), horseback riding (14%), or hiking/backpacking (6%). The remaining 15 percent were involved in guided trips such as birding, photography, snowmobiling, tours, wagon trains, and wildlife watching. These clients spent \$110.4 million directly in Montana with a combined economic impact of \$167.6 million. Clients identified the recreation outcomes experienced on their trip. The top three experiences within the four main groups of clients (hunting, fishing, rafting/canoeing/kayaking, and backpacking/hiking) were the same albeit in different order. These were: feeling close to nature, enjoying the smells and sounds of nature, and experiencing excitement. Variables representing their experience in nature had the highest mean scores followed by those having a learning experience on their guided trip.

Summary and Discussion Points

Outfitted trips tend to represent Montana's sustainable tourism industry. It is a segment within the tourism industry that is locally owned and operated. Most outfitters are small entrepreneurs with few, if any employees, and make a living from their outfitting business. Their purchases for supplies are generally made within the state and their salaries stay in the state. Their desire is to keep working as an outfitter and therefore they share their conservation ethics with their clients to assure a viable natural environment for the future.

High value, low impact: This theme is stressed by Montana's strategic plan for tourism and recreation and outfitting fits this theme extremely well. Nonresidents who partake in an outfitted trip

spent more time and money in Montana than other vacationers and learn about sustaining the resource from their guide so as to maintain a low impact on the land..

Tourism Industry support: The outfitting industry provides a reason for nonresidents to visit Montana. Outfitting is a value-added commodity to Montana tourism and therefore the tourism industry should be a voice for outfitters.

Fish, Wildlife and Tourism: Strong cooperation and communication between outfitters, Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP), and Montana's tourism promotion office will create a sustainable outfitting industry in Montana. Tourism needs outfitters, outfitters need the natural resources, but fish and wildlife do not necessarily need outfitters or tourism. It is important that the fish and wildlife segments of FWP understand the outfitting and tourism issues and vice versa. This can only occur when there are strong allies in each of these segments.

Tourism and access: Maintaining access to public lands is a must for the sustainability of the outfitting business which in turn sustains an important aspect of tourism and resident quality of life. The outfitting associations, tourism industry, and conservation groups should always be working together on issues of county land planning.

Forest Service lands and outfitting opportunities: Outfitters are dependent on the US Forest Service for much of their outfitting business. State tourism policy makers and tourism marketing entities need to work with the forest service and encourage them to look at all forms of outfitting as a priority in their management plans.

The nature experience: Individuals on outfitted trips tended to rate highest their connection to nature as a part of their experience. Montana is blessed with abundant and beautiful natural resources that need to be cared for. Policy makers in Montana might adopt a similar statement and governing creed as the National Park Service "Preserve, protect, and share, the legacies of this land."