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### "The Steep and Deep": An exploration of winter tourism along the Beartooth Highway

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## **“The Steep and Deep”: An exploration of winter tourism along the Beartooth Highway.**

The Beartooth Highway (BTH), located in south-central Montana and north-central Wyoming, is one of 31 highways with the highest federal designation of “All-American Road” (Kulbacki, McCauley, & Moler, 2006). Each summer, the highway caters thousands of tourists interested in experiencing the sweeping mountain vistas, participating in a variety of outdoor activities, and visiting bordering Yellowstone National Park. During winter, a transformation takes place and the region turns into a winter recreation mecca.

The communities of Cooke City, MT and Cody, WY serve as gateways to the BTH during the winter season. From October to April, the highway contains only two entry/exit points, separated by 8-miles of unplowed road for use by motorized recreational vehicles. Red Lodge, MT, located on the eastern end of Beartooth Highway, is considered a gateway community only during summer season because of the highway closure. But why do these travelers come from hours away to experience this region? Is there something about this area that makes it special? These were the types of questions that were to be answered.

The purpose of this study was to understand the characteristics, economic impacts, and degree of place attachment winter visitors have towards the Beartooth Region. Because of the lack of information about travelers to the BTH, the study was exploratory in nature and looked address a number of key aspects. In tourism and outdoor recreation literature, economic impact and place attachment studies have become very popular (Stokhols & Shumaker, 1981; Crompton, 2006). Place attachment is defined as the “affective bond or link between people and specific places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001, p. 274).” Moreover, economic impact studies are used to identify the monetary benefits from tourists and to justify management decisions (Stynes, 1997).

To capture the variety of information, a mixed-method approach was employed. Quantitative surveys were given to visitors at each exit point of the highway from December 2012 through April 2013. Furthermore, qualitative in-depth interviews of snowmobilers were conducted in Cooke City, MT during January 2013. In total, over 280 questionnaires and 20 interviews were useable for analysis.

Results from the quantitative survey indicated that Cooke City, MT saw over \$3 million in economic contribution from winter visitors, while Cody, WY saw \$214,000. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of visitors (62%) were attracted to the area because of the proximity of wildlife viewing in Yellowstone National Park. For comparison, visitors were grouped into three activity groups: “snowmobilers”, “passive users” (nature photography, sightseeing, wildlife watching, and eating at a restaurant/getting fuel only), and “active users” (XC skiing, backcountry skiers, snowshoeing, and day hiking). Open-ended responses indicated that conflict might exist between activity groups.

Results from qualitative interviews indicated that snowmobilers do not appear to be strongly connected with the Beartooth Region itself, but more so with the snow conditions and opportunity for fulfilling recreational needs. Thus, marketing of the Beartooth Region may need less focus on the location and more

focus on the snow conditions. Furthermore, some visitors drove 8 or more hours to recreate, which stresses that marketing must be up-to-date and accurately represent the current snow conditions.

In conclusion, it appears that winter season along the BTH is a dynamic, vibrant destination that serves a multiplicity of visitors. This study provides insights into a variety of disciplines including natural resource management, marketing, economics, tourism, and geography. Stakeholders should consider the changing demographics and visitors' degree of attachment to trumps all, wildlife watching appears to be a large draw for the majority of visitors. Further research should be conducted on understanding tourism along national scenic byways.