

Montana Resident Attitudes Toward Tourism: Update 1991 - 1998

Research Note 25

June 1999

**Montana Resident Attitudes
Toward Tourism:
Update 1991 - 1998**

By Kim McMahon

Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research
The School of Forestry
The University of Montana
Science Complex 442
Missoula, MT 59812
(406) 243-5686
www.forestry.umt.edu/itr

This project was funded by
The Lodging Facility Use Tax

Research Note 25
June 1999

Introduction

One goal of Montana's 1998-2002 Strategic Plan for Travel and Tourism is to monitor resident attitudes toward tourism. The Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) is a stakeholder in this goal.

The Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER) conducts its poll of Montana residents three times per year (in May, September, and December). ITRR commissioned BBER to add three tourism-related questions to those polls. These questions relate to resident perceptions of tourism and attitudes/opinions about tourism in the state.

From 1991 through 1995, the attitude questions were included in all three polls each year. In 1995, December was chosen as the best time to ask tourism-related questions because it resulted in the most objective answer. In May, residents appeared to respond to questions in a more positive manner perhaps due to the economic stress of the shoulder season or the lack of visitors seen over the preceding months. September respondents may have been tired and weary of visitors from the summer tourism season, and those feelings could have biased the responses negatively. As a result, December was selected as the most unbiased timeframe for the questions to be added to the survey.

Results

Residents were asked their level of agreement with three statements. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from -2 (strongly disagree) to 0 (unsure) to +2 (strongly agree). A score of -1 could be interpreted as disagree, and a score of +1 could be interpreted as agree. The following section outlines the average responses of participants interviewed during December of each year. Figure 1 is a graphical illustration of responses. Refer to tables 1, 2, and 3 at the end of this document for a summary of responses.

Q1: The overall benefits of tourism outweigh the negative impacts.

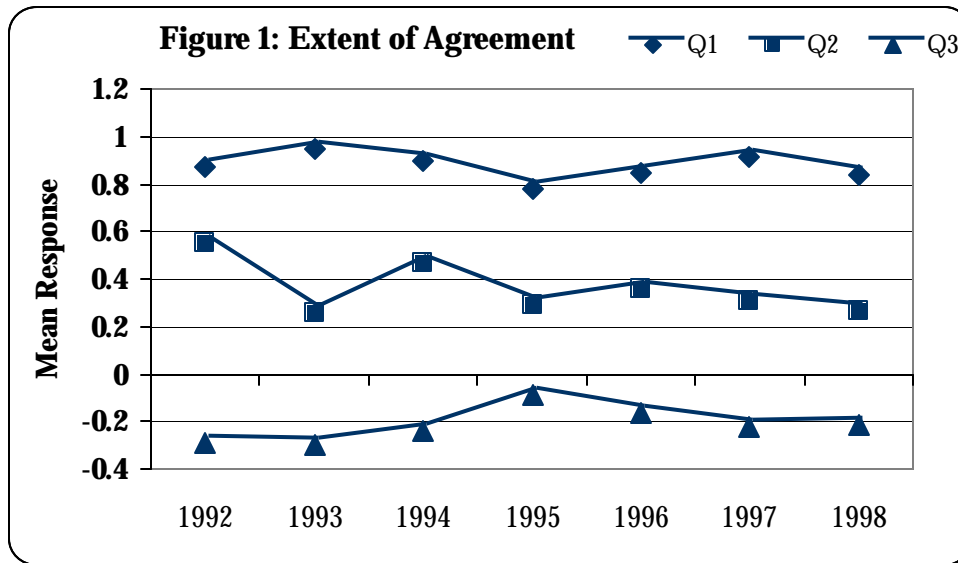
Responses to this question have remained the most stable of all three questions. It appears that Montana residents have agreed with that statement since 1992. The mean response has remained close to 1, with the only noticeable dip in the strength of agreement occurring in 1995 following years of rapid growth in nonresident visitation to Montana. Residents seem to feel tourism is an overall benefit to Montana. However, 1998 responses resulted in the first decline since 1995.

Q2: If tourism increases in Montana, the overall quality of life for Montana residents will improve.

Responses have been less positive to this question as compared to question one. Although still slightly positive, the mean responses have been closer to 0 (unsure). While there was great variation in responses to this question early in the study period, opinions about tourism's effect on residents' quality of life seem to have stabilized in recent years. However, 1998 responses tied with 1993 at the lowest level of agreement. The overall downward trend observed during the study period and the clearly downward trend observed in recent years should alert policy makers and tourism planners to the perceived effects of tourism on quality of life.

Q3: In recent years, the state is becoming overcrowded because of more tourists.

Responses since December 1993 have remained relatively stable, but 1995 responses were noticeably different from preceding years. In this case, a negative response is a positive perception. Respondents have indicated slight disagreement with this statement since the 1995 dip, but the mean answers have been close to 0 (unsure). The stability of responses to this question during 1997 and 1998 indicate that overcrowding has become no more or no less a problem during the past couple of years.



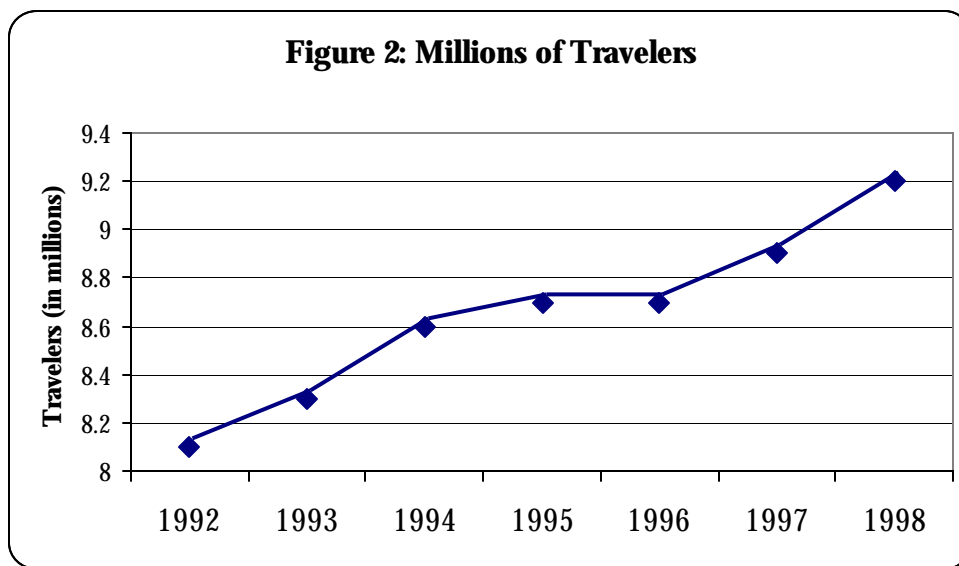
Summary

Overall, respondents have generally agreed with the statement that the overall benefits of tourism outweigh the negative impacts. Respondents slightly agree that increases in tourism will improve the overall quality of life for Montana residents, and they slightly disagree that the state is becoming overcrowded because of more tourists.

In general, responses have remained relatively stable through the 6-year period. The main exception was 1995 when responses for questions one and two were less positive, and responses for question three were less supportive. These results indicate that something happened in 1995 that caused respondents to view tourism more negatively than in the past and in the years beyond.

A Benchmark

By looking at the history of nonresident visitation, perhaps an explanation can be found and applied to future planning. There was a 7.5 percent increase in visitation numbers from 1991 to 1995 (Figure 2). By 1995, five years of visitation increases had been observed. This apparently started to wear on the residents. Most people would have difficulty adjusting to such a rapid change in visitor numbers. Therefore, when residents were queried in December 1995, their responses showed frustration with what appeared to be uncontrollable growth. It is possible that residents were not able to utilize resources in traditional ways due to higher tourist numbers. Perhaps there was difficulty finding campsites or motel rooms, or the roads seemed too crowded. Respondents had more opportunities to run into visitors, and thus may have had more negative experiences. Therefore, 1995 could be viewed as a benchmark year demonstrating what residents are able to tolerate in terms of tourism growth over a five-year period.



Following 1995, there was one year of no tourism growth, followed by two more years of growth. The year of no growth experienced in 1996 gave residents some relief from the rapid growth they had been experiencing, and allowed them to adjust to the new level of tourism in the state. As a result, attitudes toward tourism became more positive. Tourism in Montana increased 5.7 percent between 1995 and 1998. Therefore, policy makers need to be aware that resident attitudes could again be gearing up for a plunge.

With this in mind, the Montana tourism industry needs to be aware of the growth patterns occurring in the state. Many residents use campgrounds, lakes, and fishing areas in the summer. When lack of available recreation amenities results in competition between residents and nonresidents, resident attitudes toward tourism are negatively affected.

Increased demand for a product, recreation amenities in this case, requires a response of increased supply or capacity level monitoring. While some amenities can be increased (e.g. camping areas, motels, and restaurants), others can only be managed through monitoring of visitor capacity (e.g. lakes, rivers, and fishing areas).

Recommendations

If the Montana tourism industry desires continued support from the residents of Montana, there needs to be consistent monitoring of where conflicts occur, and the state must continue to assess needs for accommodating demands for recreation amenities. For example, if campgrounds are too full on Forest Service lands, the tourism industry should assist the Forest Service in developing new campgrounds or expanding current ones. If the Park Service is closing campgrounds, then the tourism industry should assist with the re-opening of high-demand areas. Such efforts could be as simple as providing support at the national level through letters to Congress or as difficult as allocating dollars in areas experiencing growth.

Similarly, there needs to be an in-depth analysis of what elements of residents' quality of life are most affected by tourism in Montana. As noted earlier, resident agreement that tourism increases quality of life is falling. This phenomenon needs to be further explored.

Also, state tourism planners should be advised that if what we've seen during the past two years is just the beginning of another "growth spurt" that lasts a number of years, attitudes toward tourism may very well fall again if conflicts increase. Considering the up-coming Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commemoration, visitation to Montana is probably going to increase, and thus the point is even more justified.

Further research would aid in determining the exact reasons why attitudes fall during years of visitation growth. The research should answer specific questions concerning outdoor recreation opportunities in the state and degree of satisfaction with each type of recreation activity. It may be possible to then pinpoint the type of recreation creating dissatisfaction. This would give guidance for accommodating increased visitation and relieving resident dissatisfaction.

Table 1. Extent of agreement that “the overall benefits of tourism outweigh its negatives” among Montana adults by monitoring period, in percent.

	Dec-92	Dec-93	Dec-94	Dec-95	Dec-96	Dec-97	Dec-98
Strongly Disagree	3.8%	9.7%	7.4%	9.5%	8.4%	7.7%	4.5%
Disagree	17.2	7.7	11.9	12	11.3	11.2	13
Don't Know	6.4	7	6.4	8.5	8.4	6	10.1
Agree	33.1	29	32.1	30.7	31.2	32.3	39.2
Strongly Agree	39.5	46.6	42.2	39.3	40.8	42.9	33.2
Mean Response *	0.87	0.95	0.90	0.78	0.85	0.92	0.84
Sample Size	396	414	405	410	407	403	404
*Mean responses to the 5-point Likert-type scale. Responses range from -2=strongly disagree, 0=unsure, 2=strongly agree							

Table 2. Extent of agreement that “increases in tourism will increase the quality of life” among Montana adults by monitoring period, in percent.

	Dec-92	Dec-93	Dec-94	Dec-95	Dec-96	Dec-97	Dec-98
Strongly Disagree	13.1%	22.2%	10.6%	18.5%	15.9%	17.1%	11.5%
Disagree	14.1	16.4	22	16.3	17.8	18.3	21.6
Don't Know	9.3	5.3	4.2	8.8	7.6	6.3	13
Agree	31.4	24.9	36.5	30.5	32.3	33.2	36.6
Strongly Agree	32.1	31.2	26.7	25.9	26.4	25.1	17.2
Mean Response *	0.55	0.26	0.47	0.29	0.36	0.31	0.26
Sample Size	396	414	405	410	409	398	404
*Mean responses to the 5-point Likert-type scale. Responses range from -2=strongly disagree, 0=unsure, 2=strongly agree							

Table 3. Extent of agreement that “the state is more crowded because of tourists” among Montana adults by monitoring period, in percent.

	Dec-92	Dec-93	Dec-94	Dec-95	Dec-96	Dec-97	Dec-98
Strongly Disagree	24.9%	34.3%	27.7%	20.7%	27.4%	21.5%	18%
Disagree	34.1	22.7	27.2	24.4	24.2	32.9	32.2
Don't Know	2.8	4.8	3	4.9	7.1	6.2	163.9
Agree	20.8	15	25.9	25.1	20.3	25	25.4
Strongly Agree	17.4	23.2	16.3	24.9	21	14.4	10.5
Mean Response *	-0.29	-0.30	-0.24	-0.09	-0.17	-0.22	-0.22
Sample Size	396	414	405	410	409	404	404
*Mean responses to the 5-point Likert-type scale. Responses range from -2=strongly disagree, 0=unsure, 2=strongly agree							

