Ecotourism in the Mississippi Delta: Insights from Land & Tourism Managers

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Ecotourism in the Delta

“You can’t tell the story of the Delta without telling the story of the environment.”

~Environmental Organization Leader
What is Ecotourism?

Travel to view and experience a region’s natural heritage, typically conducted in a sustainable manner

• Not disruptive or damaging to natural features and processes
• Equitable – supports local people and institutions

Ecotourists take only photos and leave only footprints...

(...and hopefully a few dollars)
The Value of Ecotourism to Mississippi

Estimated Tourism Expenditures for Selected Sectors
Fiscal Year 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Tourism Expenditures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Parks, Federal &amp; Private Outdoor Recreation</td>
<td>$11,208,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensing Fees, Non-resident Hunting &amp; Fishing</td>
<td>7,933,731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Historical Areas</td>
<td>1,117,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquariums/Botanical Gardens</td>
<td>941,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums</td>
<td>2,269,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$5,210,228,390</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mississippi Development Authority/Tourism Division
Fiscal Year 2006 Economic Impact for Tourism in Mississippi
The Value of Tourism to the Delta

Estimated Tourism Expenditures, Employment and Returns for 14 Delta Counties
Fiscal Year 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Tourism Expenditures</th>
<th>Direct Tourism Employment</th>
<th>Taxes Returned to Cities Attributed to Tourism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar</td>
<td>$24,868,555</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>$304,663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carroll</td>
<td>929,945</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8,506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>92,835,819</td>
<td>1,280</td>
<td>271,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmes</td>
<td>3,826,165</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphreys</td>
<td>2,384,159</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24,542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaquena</td>
<td>98,930</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leflore</td>
<td>37,285,371</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>453,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitman</td>
<td>1,250,312</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15,266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharkey</td>
<td>1,157,961</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14,547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>10,650,724</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>129,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tallahatchie</td>
<td>1,826,680</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18,574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>1,143,632,066</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>68,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>75,594,659</td>
<td>1,395</td>
<td>704,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yazoo</td>
<td>9,205,068</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>109,531</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mississippi Development Authority/Tourism Division
Fiscal Year 2006 Economic Impact for Tourism in Mississippi
## Support for Heritage Tourism in 11 Delta Counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Site Type</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Tourism</strong></td>
<td>Blues Museum/Other Site</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Juke Joint</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tourism</strong></td>
<td>Literary Museum/Site</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civil Rights Museum/Site</td>
<td>90.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historic Tourism</strong></td>
<td>Historic Church</td>
<td>84.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historic Cemetery</td>
<td>84.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural History Site</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ecotourism</strong></td>
<td>Mississippi River Site</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private Hunting Club</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State/National Park</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2005 Delta Rural Poll
Themes from the 1996 Study
Proposed Lower Mississippi River National Heritage Area

Natural History

- Geology
- Forests
- Minerals
- Fisheries
- Endangered/Exotic Species
- Mississippi Flyway
- Mississippi River Floods
- New Madrid Fault/Earthquakes

Cultural History

- Delta Agriculture
- Mississippi River Plantations
- Native American Heritage
- African American Heritage
- Underground Railroad
- Civil War
- Delta Blues
- The Delta in the National Economy
Qualitative Interviews

17 interviews with 24 informants

- State & Federal Land Managers
- Private Conservation Land Managers
- Leaders in Environmental Organizations
- Tourism Officials (CVBs, Chambers of Commerce)
- Private Hunt Club Managers
- Wildlife Experts
- Tourism Providers
Natural Heritage Stories & Sites

The River

“When people come here, the River is the number one request and the blues are second. Where someone can take a riverboat cruise is the most asked question.”

~Local Tourism Official
The River

“We could all do a better job of learning the history of the river.”

~Hunt Club Manager

“There is no more significant resource than the River itself. Look inside the levees and there is something of great value.”

~Environmental Organization Leader

“The stories [of the River] are well hidden. It is just a great nature experience. Wildlife is abounding; the river is wild.”

~Tourism Provider
Bottomland Hardwood Forest

“To my knowledge there’s only one true tract of untouched virgin forest in the Delta and that’s on federal property at Dahomey National Wildlife Refuge.”

~Local Wildlife Expert
"Delta National Forest is the largest public holding of bottomland hardwood forest, well in excess of 100,000 acres. What’s the big deal? Well, the big deal is it’s the biggest and there’s just not that many tracts of bottomland hardwood forest left."

~Local Wildlife Expert
Great Delta Bear Affair
Wildlife Observation / Fishing

“We sent out a questionnaire to rank the individual activities as part of the overall experience. Out of nineteen, killing an animal ranked eleventh.”

~Hunt Club Manager

“All over the Delta you have lakes, and most are known for their fisheries and I think that’s a much ignored resource.”

~Public Land Management Official
Birdwatching/Mississippi Flyway

“The Mississippi Delta is one of the top ten shorebird areas in the United States.”

~Land Management Official

http://pelotes.jea.com/AnimalFact/Birds/Woodstor.jpg
Heritage in Unexpected Places

“This little town of Rolling Fork has the bottomland hardwood forest, the Indian mounds, Roosevelt Bear Hunt, the blues, home of Muddy Waters.

“You drive through and you think that there is nothing here but when you really start to examine what is here and start to interpret it properly, people can spend a week here.”

~Public Land Management Official
Sharing the Delta’s Stories

“We now have a base of tourists, and we should create opportunities that will expose these millions of people who are coming to the Delta, who might not otherwise have come here before, to our heritage and our culture.”

~Local Tourism Official
Tourism as Economic Development...

...a tricky business!

“I think you have to be careful in not disrupting the quality of life in a community. You want to enhance the quality of life in a community. We don’t want to lose our authenticity.”

~Tourism Official
Concerns:

(1) Does the Delta have the infrastructure to handle mass ecotourism?

(2) Tourism can exacerbate inequality, making the rich richer and doing little for the rest of the population

(3) Tourism dollars aren’t necessarily spent locally
# Tourism Infrastructure

## Estimated No. of Hotel/Motel Rooms by County

*(June 30 of Fiscal Year)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carroll</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmes</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphreys</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaquena</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leflore</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitman</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharkey</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tallahatchie</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>6,320</td>
<td>6,365</td>
<td>6,323</td>
<td>6,348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>1,163</td>
<td>1,107</td>
<td>1,171</td>
<td>1,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yazoo</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mississippi Development Authority/Tourism Division

*Fiscal Year 2006 Economic Impact for Tourism in Mississippi*
Telling the Delta’s Story...

“The Delta can’t be the Delta unless its poor and downtrodden and it’s all about ‘We’ve got the blues!’ The Delta can’t be the successful Delta. Until the mindset changes from a certain cultural perspective of certain people it isn’t ever going to be successful.”

~Tourism Official
Telling the Delta’s Story...

“I think we have to learn how to package it, talk about it, express it, and promote it. Then have the capacity to take care of the people when they come.”

~Hunt Club Manager
Thanks to...

Jolana Gibbs for assistance on this project

Luther Brown and the Delta Center for Culture and Learning

Sunset on the Mississippi River

Stork & Cork Birding Festival

Further information:
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