

## Attitudes and Perceptions of Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta

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*Deltans strongly support heritage tourists visiting a variety of cultural, historic and natural sites in their communities. The vast majority of Deltans also believe that it is important for the children in their community to understand local cultural traditions and natural history, but most think children do not understand local heritage. A heritage area in the Mississippi Delta region could address all of these concerns, by educating Delta residents on Delta heritage to close the gap between desired and actual understanding, and by providing technical and financial assistance to develop a heritage tourism infrastructure.*

Center for Community and Economic Development



Delta State University

Respondent Characteristics	Response Category	Cultural History		Natural History	
		Children Understand <sup>1</sup>	Important to Understand <sup>2</sup>	Children Understand <sup>1</sup>	Important to Understand <sup>2</sup>
	All Respondents	29.4	95.2	41.2	96.0
Age	18 - 34	26.8	97.7	43.2	99.1
	35 - 54	27.7	94.1	35.6	96.5
	55 & Older	33.2	94.5	46.6	93.7
	Significance	**		**	*
Race	White	33.3	93.9	42.2	96.4
	Black	26.9	96.2	40.3	95.8
	Significance	**	*		
Educational Attainment	H.S. or Less	33.4	94.7	46.8	94.9
	Some College	25.4	95.5	35.7	96.9
	Significance	**		**	

Significance: \*  $p \leq 0.05$  \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

Source: 2005 Delta Rural Poll

**Table 1:  
Perceptions and  
Attitudes of Respondents  
Regarding Cultural and  
Natural History  
(Percent)**

<sup>1</sup>The children in respondent's community understand local heritage.

<sup>2</sup>It is important for children to understand local heritage.

### Heritage Tourism as a Community Development Strategy

Heritage tourism offers opportunities for community and economic development to rural areas. An impoverished area like the Mississippi Delta can capitalize on the growing interest in heritage tourism to attract income and jobs. Promoting local heritage also builds community pride by educating local residents about the traditions and history of their own region. Greater pride in local history creates a shared sense of community, and could be a first step in slowing the Delta's long-standing trend of net outmigration.

The Delta has a unique and fascinating cultural, historic and natural heritage that offers tourists a variety of unique stories and experiences. Tourists interested in the blues want to visit blues clubs and festivals, blues museums, and perhaps a genuine juke joint. Cultural tourists want to see a home or site tied to one of the Delta's famous literary figures. Visitors with an interest in history want to see a location connected to the civil rights movement, a historic church, or a historic cemetery. Agritourists want to visit a museum to learn about the history of cotton production, or experience a local fair or agricultural festival. The Mississippi River draws many tourists fascinated by its stories. Sportsmen visit the Delta to hunt at a private club or wildlife refuge, while birdwatchers, photographers, fishermen and other outdoor recreationists find numerous opportunities in the Delta's parks and wildlands.

Catering to tourists' many desires requires a coordinated effort among state and local tourism planners, educators, tourism providers, public safety officials, and local, state and federal government. Expertise from agencies like the Mississippi Division of Tourism Development and the National Park Service can assist in forming a marketing strategy and in preparing maps and signage. Chambers of Commerce and local businesses can develop promotional campaigns. But, before the Delta embarks on a path to attract heritage tourists, it is important to know that local residents support the effort. If local residents are not on board and ready to welcome visitors to their communities, the chances for successful heritage tourism are slim.

### Local Knowledge of Heritage

A minority of Delta residents believe that local youth understand the region's cultural traditions and natural history. Yet, the vast majority believe that it is important for local children to understand the Delta's natural and cultural heritage.

As shown in Table 1, only 29.4% of Delta residents believe that local youth understand the region's cultural traditions. A higher percentage – 41.2% – believe children know about nature in the Delta. When asked if they believe it is important for children in their community to understand Delta heritage, 95.2% agree that children should understand the Delta's cultural traditions, and 96% believe it is important for children to know about the region's natural heritage.

*The vast majority of Delta residents believe that it is important for local children to understand the Delta's natural and cultural heritage*

Perceptions and attitudes about local heritage vary by the age, race and educational attainment of the respondent. Generally, a higher percentage of older residents (age 55 & up) express confidence that local youth understand heritage, while more younger residents (age 18 to 34)

believe it is important for local youth to understand the Delta's culture and nature. Whites believe children understand local heritage at a higher rate than blacks, but a slightly higher percentage of African Americans say it is important for children to understand local culture, while whites and blacks agree it is important to understand nature. A higher percentage of those with a high school diploma or less believe local children understand Delta heritage, while more of those with some college believe it is important for local youth to know about the region's culture and nature.

A higher percentage of Deltans believe that the children in their communities understand natural history than cultural history. This may be because rural children have many opportunities to experience nature, but only learn about culture through schools or specialized programs.

### Support for Heritage Tourism

To what extent do Deltans support heritage tourism in their communities? Heritage tourists prefer locally unique experiences, and are more likely than other tourists to engage with a variety of local residents, including those not working in the tourism industry. Locals play a key role in ensuring that heritage tourists enjoy positive and educational experiences, so it is important that local residents support heritage tourism for it to be successful. Table 2 shows the percentage of Delta residents who support various heritage tourism activities.

A substantial majority of Deltans express support for tourists visiting a variety of natural, cultural and historical heritage sites in their communities. Over 85% support heritage tourism to parks and refuges, to agricultural sites, and to Mississippi River sites. Only half support tourism to private hunting clubs, although it is not clear if the low support is because respondents do not want hunting in their area or because they oppose private clubs.

Cultural tourism garners wide support as well. Over 80% of Deltans would like to see tourists visiting literary sites, and over 70% support tourism to blues clubs, festivals and museums. There is very little support for tourism to juke joints, however; only 28% of those surveyed back visitation to juke joints in their communities. Reasons for low support to juke joint tourism are rooted in religious sentiment, the perception that these locales pose a danger to tourists and to communities, and a desire to keep juke joints authentic.

Over three-fourths of Deltans support tourism to historic sites. Nearly 80% support tourism to historic churches and cemeteries. Over 85% support tourism to civil rights sites.

While support for heritage tourism is high among most groups, a higher proportion of young Deltans support heritage tourism than older residents. Likewise, a higher percentage of white Deltans support heritage tourism than blacks, except to civil rights sites, which garner support from over 90% of African Americans. A greater percentage of those that continued their education after high school support all types of heritage tourism, and higher annual incomes are also associated with greater support for heritage tourism.

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The highest levels of support are for tourism to natural sites, with the exception of private hunting clubs. Deltans show strong support for tourism to state and national parks and refuges, agricultural sites, and Mississippi River museums and other sites. While support for tourism to historic and cultural sites is still high, it is less than for natural areas. Many Delta residents associate heritage tourism in the Delta with the blues, yet local support for tourism to blues clubs, festivals and museums was slightly lower than for other cultural, historic and natural sites. Generally, however, the results of this survey suggest that most Deltans are ready to welcome heritage tourists to their communities.

**Table 2: Support for Tourists Visiting Heritage Sites In Respondent's Community (Percent)**

Respondent Characteristics	Response Category	Cultural Sites				Historic Sites			Natural Sites			
		Blues Club or Festival	Blues Museum or Other Site	Juke Joint	Literary Site	Civil Rights Site	Historic Church	Historic Cemetery	Agricultural History Site	Mississippi River Site	Private Hunting Club	State/National Park or Refuge
	All Respondents	71.6	78.3	27.9	82.7	85.6	79.2	78.6	88.4	86.7	50.3	88.1
Age	18 - 34	83.1	88.3	39.8	87.9	93.5	82.6	85.4	91.6	87.7	55.9	90.1
	35 - 54	73.7	82.2	29.3	83.0	88.3	81.2	76.9	87.8	88.3	45.4	90.6
	55 & Older	63.3	68.2	20.3	80.0	78.8	75.6	77.0	87.4	84.9	54.0	84.8
	Significance	**	**	**	**	**	*	**	**	**	**	**
Race	White	76.9	80.3	30.0	85.0	76.9	79.4	83.9	91.1	91.4	65.8	90.0
	Black	68.6	77.1	25.7	81.7	90.8	79.1	75.5	86.9	83.8	41.1	87.1
	Significance	**		*		**		**	*	**	**	
Educational Attainment	H.S. or Less	65.8	71.8	23.8	78.1	82.3	73.6	75.0	85.7	83.4	45.0	85.7
	Some College	77.6	84.7	31.9	87.2	89.3	84.7	82.7	91.3	90.1	56.1	90.9
	Significance	**	**	**	**	**	**	*	**	**	**	**
Income	< \$30,000	68.4	75.1	26.6	80.4	86.9	78.1	77.1	86.9	85.5	48.1	86.9
	\$30,000-\$60,000	70.6	85.4	26.2	88.2	85.8	84.0	78.7	93.4	91.5	50.0	92.5
	> \$60,000	85.8	88.8	42.5	88.7	84.9	89.6	87.7	91.5	89.7	72.4	96.2
	Significance	**	**	**			**				**	*

Significance: \* p ≤ 0.05 \*\* p ≤ 0.01

Source: 2005 Delta Rural Poll

### *Who Responded to the 2005 Delta Rural Poll?*

The Delta Rural Poll was conducted in January and February, 2005, through telephone interviews with 1,009 randomly selected adults in 11 Northwest Mississippi counties; 67.6% of respondents were female; 62% were black; 61% worked full- or part-time during 2004; 48% of the respondents had a high school diploma or less, while 26% had a college degree or higher, and 27% had some college; 61% earned less than \$30,000 total household income in 2004, 26% had a household income between \$30,000 and \$60,000, and 13% had a household income above \$60,000; 40% lived in towns with more than 10,000 residents, 27% lived in small villages (less than 1,000 residents), and 33% lived in towns with between 1,000 and 10,000 residents; Two-thirds lived within city limits, 10% lived outside a city on a farm, and 22% lived outside a city, not on a farm; 58% had lived in the same community for more than twenty years, while 16% lived in their current community less than five years.

### *Counties Surveyed in the Delta Rural Poll:*

Bolivar  
Coahoma  
Humphreys  
Issaquena  
Leflore  
Quitman  
Sharkey  
Sunflower  
Tallahatchie  
Tunica  
Washington

## **Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area**

What can policymakers and the public do to increase local knowledge of the Delta's rich traditions, and to fulfill people's expressed desire for heritage tourism in their communities? One approach, used by an increasing number of regions around the country, is to establish a heritage area, which partners local tourism providers and heritage sites, state and federal agencies, and a local coordinating entity which oversees and administers the partnerships.

For more than ten years, efforts have been underway to create a Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, in partnership with the U.S. National Park Service's Cultural Resources Program. Current efforts are being spearheaded at the region's two universities, Delta State (DSU) and Mississippi Valley State (MVSU), in cooperation with state agencies and local organizations. The Delta's nationally significant stories clearly qualify for National Heritage Area status; however, heritage areas rely primarily on local leadership and coordination. Local people play a key role in a successful heritage area.

To date, efforts to promote tourism in the Delta have been hampered, as communities compete for scarce tourists rather than collaborate to promote regional tourism. A heritage area would provide a means of regional coordination that would increase total tourism to the benefit of all. Local entrepreneurship is crucial to a successful heritage area, as heritage tourists prefer to patronize local businesses. Deltans must invest in tourism operations, such as lodging, restaurants, guide services, and promotion to realize maximum benefits. A heritage area would attract specialists to assist in these endeavors. In addition, business education, access to financing at reasonable terms, and other support for small business would help Deltans to provide opportunities to tourists.

A heritage area in the Delta could address the wide gap between how important it is for children to know about heritage, and what children actually know about local traditions. The primary mission of a heritage area is to provide opportunities for locals and outsiders to experience and learn about local traditions. A heritage area would also allow Deltans to share their natural and cultural amenities with others, and generate income in the process. The strong support shown for most types of heritage tourism suggests that Deltans would support this initiative.

While heritage tourism can contribute to community and economic development in the Delta region, it is not a panacea. Heritage tourism would be most successful if it were included in a comprehensive plan for regional development. In addition to entrepreneurial training and investment, a regional strategy would include greater emphasis on local history in the schools, and opportunities to study heritage in higher education. Creating linkages and package opportunities with gaming tourism centers would increase the value of heritage tourism as well. Finally, building on the strong sense of regional identity among Delta residents to emphasize regional coordination between political and business leaders would enhance the success of a heritage area initiative. Tourism specialists at DSU and MVSU could lead the way towards greater regional cooperation by forging an alliance to manage a heritage area in the Delta.

The Delta's stories are waiting to be told. A heritage area is the best means to ensure they are heard.

*The Delta Rural Poll is a collaboration between the Center for Community and Economic Development and the Division of Social Sciences at Delta State University. The Mid-South Delta Consortium provided funding and the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University assisted in data collection.*

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<http://www.deltastate.edu/cced/ruralpoll.htm>