

## Visitation to Heritage Tourism Sites By Residents of the Mississippi Delta Alan W. Barton, Ph.D.



*Residents of the Mississippi Delta show an interest in visiting a variety of heritage sites, but only a small proportion make repeat visits to such sites over the course of a year. More attention to marketing and outreach within the Delta by heritage site managers, regional tourism officials, and policymakers would increase the viability of heritage management in the region, and would raise local pride in the Delta's stories. Creating a regional heritage coordinating entity to link heritage promotion across sectors would raise awareness both inside and outside the Delta, and would facilitate efforts to market sites and stories to local residents.*

Respondent Characteristics	Response Category	Blues Club or Festival	Blues Museum or Other Site	Literary Museum or Site	Civil Rights Museum or Site	Historic Church	Private Hunting Club	National Park, Forest or Wildlife Refuge	State Park, Forest or Wildlife Management Area
All Respondents		32.0	22.6	17.9	26.4	22.8	15.1	30.3	52.9
Age	18 - 34	45.7	28.5	23.6	32.9	24.9	17.0	37.7	64.3
	35 - 54	39.8	27.7	18.3	32.2	23.3	15.1	30.4	56.2
	55 and Older	15.4	13.8	14.4	16.9	21.3	14.6	24.5	43.3
		***	***	**	***			**	***
Gender	Male	41.5	26.8	19.3	30.9	26.2	21.0	36.0	57.9
	Female	23.8	18.9	16.7	22.5	20.1	10.1	25.3	48.8
		***	**		**	**	***	***	**
Race	White	32.6	23.4	22.7	19.9	20.9	33.3	37.3	66.9
	Black	31.3	21.6	15.2	30.3	23.4	4.4	25.5	44.4
				**	***		***	***	***
Educational Attainment	H.S. Diploma or Less	27.1	15.2	11.0	18.9	18.8	10.4	26.4	43.6
	Some College	36.7	29.5	24.5	33.5	26.8	19.8	33.9	61.9
		***	***	***	***	**	***	**	***
Income	Less Than \$30,000	28.6	15.8	12.1	21.7	18.1	8.1	23.4	44.6
	\$30,000 to \$60,000	36.4	31.3	23.1	34.0	27.8	17.5	32.9	62.7
	More Than \$60,000	38.7	31.1	26.4	38.7	25.5	34.9	49.1	78.3
		**	***	***	***	**	***	***	***

Significance: \*  $p \leq 0.10$

\*\*  $p \leq 0.05$

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

Source: 2005 Delta Rural Poll

**Table 1: Delta Residents Who Have Visited Various Heritage Tourism Sites At Least Once in the Past Year (Percent)**

**Heritage Tourism Opportunities in the Mississippi Delta**

**Visitation to Heritage Tourism Sites by Delta Residents**

Heritage tourism has gained popularity around the United States and the world, and has become a viable community development strategy for many rural areas. Various sectors in the Mississippi Delta are working to capitalize on this trend by marketing the region’s heritage sites and stories. Residents of the Delta played a vital role in the emergence of the blues and other forms of popular music, which are celebrated in blues clubs, blues festivals and blues museums around the Delta. Many well-known authors have lived in the region, and their homes are preserved as historical sites. The area’s tremendous natural diversity provides opportunities for ecotourism and outdoor recreation, at parks, forests and wildlife areas managed by Mississippi State and the federal government, as well as at privately owned hunting clubs. The area’s agricultural history has spawned many fascinating stories, and is celebrated today with festivals, farmers markets and museums. The struggle to create a more civil society in the United States is reflected in the Delta’s history, and historic sites recount these stories stretching from the Civil War to the modern Civil Rights movement. Family and religion have always played a central role in the lives of Deltans, and this is evident in the many historic churches found in the region. All of these tourism opportunities are available not just to outsiders, but to Delta residents as well. Yet, all too frequently, people do not take advantage of the tourism opportunities right in their own backyard.

We asked Delta Rural Poll respondents if they had participated in various heritage tourism activities over the previous year, either in Mississippi or elsewhere.

Responses indicate that ecotourism and outdoor recreation are popular activities among Delta residents. Over half said they had visited a state-managed protected area, while more than 30% had visited a federally protected area. These sites were more popular with respondents that were younger, males, whites, the college educated and those with annual incomes over \$60,000, as shown in Table 1. Fifteen percent said they had visited a private hunting club, an activity that is very popular among white males and those with high incomes.

Blues clubs, festivals and museums are also popular sites among Delta residents, particularly those who are under age 55, males, those with some college, and those with annual incomes over \$30,000. About 18% indicated they had visited a literary site, an activity that was more popular with whites, those with some college and those with incomes over \$30,000. Over one-quarter had visited a civil rights site, an activity favored by African Americans, the college educated and those with incomes over \$30,000. There was little difference among the 23% who had visited a historic church; slightly more were male, and had some college, and those with low incomes were less likely to visit a historic church..

## Frequency of Visits

Attracting local residents to many heritage sites can bring significant value to the areas, particularly if they get repeat visitation. Some types of heritage sites are amenable to frequent repeat visitation, while other types of sites may have to vary the experiences they offer to bring locals back frequently. A blues club, for example, may attract locals frequently, looking for a site to socialize, dance and listen to music. The club may increase the number of repeat visitors by varying musical acts, as well. Similarly, hunters would likely return frequently to hunting clubs or wildlife refuges, to enjoy the outdoors and camaraderie with friends, although hunting is only offered during certain seasons. State parks, if they provide day use recreation such as picnic sites, might also attract local residents repeatedly, although cold weather may reduce visitation by local residents during some times of the year. Agricultural tourism is subject to seasonality as well, and sites would have to offer a variety of attractions during different seasons to bring locals back repeatedly. Museums might have to offer traveling exhibits or lectures to attract interested locals over and over. And locals, of course, could only go to annual festivals once per year, although such festivals typically rely heavily on local attendance.

Who is more likely to visit certain types of sites multiple times during a year? Table 2 shows the percent of Deltans who said they had visited various heritage sites at least six

times in the past year. Overall, the percentages of repeat heritage tourists is low among Delta residents — 6.1% said they visited a private hunting club at least 6 times, 4.5% had visited a state-managed protected area at least 6 times, and 3.4% had visited a blues club or festival at least 6 times; however, less than 2% of respondents had visited blues museums, literary sites, civil rights sites, historic churches, and federal protected areas 6 or more times.

Despite the generally low repeat visitation, identifiable groups were more likely to return frequently to different types of sites. For example, among those visiting hunting clubs at least six times, significantly more were high income, college educated and male. Visitors to state protected areas were also more likely high income, college educated and male, and in addition more were younger and white. A significantly higher percentage of middle aged and college educated Deltans visited all types of museums — whether they focused on blues, literature or civil rights. And Delta residents who visited blues clubs and festivals frequently were more likely to be middle aged, high income, male and white. Table 2 provides heritage site managers with information to tailor marketing to local residents, either to reach frequent visitors or to increase visitation among infrequent visitors.

*Some types of sites are amenable to frequent repeat visitation; others may have to vary the experiences they offer to bring locals back*

**Table 2: Delta Residents Who Have Visited Various Heritage Tourism Sites At Least Six Times in the Past Year (Percent)**

Respondent Characteristics	Response Category	Blues Club or Festival	Blues Museum or Other Site	Literary Museum or Site	Civil Rights Museum or Site	Historic Church	Private Hunting Club	National Park, Forest or Wildlife Refuge	State Park, Forest or Wildlife Mgmt. Area
All Respondents		3.4	1.5	1.0	1.2	1.7	6.1	1.7	4.5
Age	18 - 34	4.3	1.9	0.5	0.5	1.9	7.1	5.2	8.5
	35 - 54	5.2	2.5	2.0	2.2	2.3	6.7	1.2	5.0
	55 and Older	1.1	0.3	0.3	0.8	1.1	5.2	0.6	1.9
		**	**	**				***	***
Gender	Male	5.9	2.2	2.0	1.7	2.9	10.3	2.9	7.0
	Female	1.3	0.7	0.2	0.8	0.8	2.6	0.9	2.6
		***	*	**		**	***	**	***
Race	White	4.7	2.2	1.4	0.3	1.1	16.3	3.1	8.2
	Black	2.6	1.1	0.7	2.0	2.1	0.3	1.0	2.6
		*			**		***	**	***
Educational Attainment	H.S. Diploma or Less	3.0	0.4	0.2	0.4	1.1	3.4	1.7	2.8
	Some College	3.7	2.5	1.7	1.9	2.3	8.8	1.9	6.2
			**	**	**		***		**
Income	Less Than \$30,000	2.7	1.1	0.2	0.4	0.4	2.0	1.6	2.7
	\$30,000 to \$60,000	5.3	1.9	0.9	3.3	2.4	8.0	4.3	8.1
	More Than \$60,000	6.5	1.9	4.7	1.9	3.9	22.6	0.9	11.2
		*		***	**	**	***	*	***

Significance: \*  $p \leq 0.10$  \*\*  $p \leq 0.05$  \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

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, and 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

## **Promoting Heritage Tourism To Local Residents**

In promoting heritage tourism, state and local officials, tourism operators and heritage site managers should not overlook the local market.

There is value in attracting out-of-state visitors who bring “fresh” dollars to the region and spend their money at local businesses. Tourism creates direct and secondary multiplier effects that would stimulate economic development in the Delta. There are, however, many reasons to promote heritage tourism to Delta sites among local and in-state residents as well. First, creating greater awareness of the region’s heritage among local residents builds pride and optimism. Both play a role in civic and economic development, and enhance a community’s quality of life. Proud and knowledgeable residents also offer a better and more authentic experience to outside visitors, particularly heritage tourists who are interested in meeting local people. Second, research in other areas suggests that a significant portion of visitors to heritage sites come from less than two hours away. Many tourist trips are short-term, such as weekend getaways. These tourists provide a viable market for heritage sites. Third, a large proportion of tourists drive to their destinations, and may stop at heritage sites along the way, including sites near their homes. Managers at heritage sites can enhance the attraction to local residents by tailoring aspects of their educational offerings to locals, and by providing facilities to assist motorists seeking a rest stop, such as picnic tables, public restrooms and open space for kids and pets.

While Delta tourism promoters advertise in national magazines and at various conferences, more effort could go into reaching a local audience. Reaching a local audience requires a different marketing strategy, as residents are not likely to look at tourism literature to find opportunities for day trips or weekend visits. Local marketing, in city newspapers and on local radio and television, provide one opportunity to reach nearby consumers. Perhaps more effective, however, is educational outreach. Heritage sites should aim to incorporate at least one visit to a local school or community group per month, to increase their stature and visibility in local communities. Efforts to reach groups that are not among the site’s core constituency or traditionally served by the site, by reaching across boundaries imposed by race and income, will make these educational efforts even more valuable.

Partnerships provide opportunities for government agencies to influence policy and practice on heritage sites. Regional marketing strategies are emerging in the Delta, such as the Mississippi Delta Tourism Association, and on a broader scale, the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Commission. These groups are good at reaching audiences beyond the Delta, but should not ignore the potential for local tourism either. “Friends” groups, private voluntary organizations that assist in the management and promotion of individual heritage sites, are another partnership that brings dividends. Friends groups are particularly effective at public sites, which may be bound by laws that restrict their ability to advertise or by funding limitations that prevent outreach. Finally, a regional heritage-oriented coordinating agency designated to manage the region as a heritage area, would allow synergistic marketing, so that historic, cultural and natural sites could be packaged together. A regional heritage agency would also enhance opportunities for outreach and education to local groups, as well as for research aimed at building up the base of knowledge about the Delta’s heritage.

*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 collaborated on data collection.*

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