THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ESTABLISHING BLUEWAYS IN ONE’S COMMUNITY

A blueway is very similar in concept to a greenway except rather than being a trail across land, this is a water trail. Creating blueways in one’s community can provide a venue to promote river stewardship and encourage “leave no trace” ethics. It also provides information about access points and routes for canoes, kayaks, and motorized watercrafts as well as encourages safe use of waterways and designated public access points. See example and an interactive map at www.wku.edu/blueways.

Two Studies on the Economic Impact of Blueways

An economic impact study was conducted on 58 miles of river in the western section of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail in the Adirondack Mountains of New York during the Summer of 2006. Three public campgrounds, dozens of remote campsites, over fifty lodging establishments are located on the waterway. It is estimated that approximately 28,000 visitors paddle a portion of the 750 mile Northern Forest Canoe Trail each year spending an estimated $4.4 million in the local economies. After accounting for multiplier effects, these expenditures created $3.3 million in value added to the local economy, $6.2 million in total economic impact, supported an estimated 134 jobs and provided $2.1 million in personal income.

The most common expenses were lodging (54%), restaurants (59%), groceries (56%) and transportation (45%). Only 9.4% used guides or outfitters and 31% reported spending money on other retail purchases with each paddler group spending on average $215 in local economies with the non-locals spending on average $414-$498 each trip or $46 per person per day primarily on food, lodging and transportation. Depending on the infrastructure in each of the areas, some local economies tended to capitalize considerably more than other areas in capturing tourism dollars.

A similar study in the North Carolina coastal plains reported nearly $55 million in paddler economic impacts. Both reports suggested that the majority of users appeared to be from a 4 to 5 hour radius and tended to be fairly self supporting with only a small portion (less than 10% used outfitters or guides) and many others doing day trips. The greatest amount of revenue was during multi-day canoe races held several times a year and suggested more such events be planned to encourage larger number of people to come to the area more often.

The results of the two studies suggest that paddler recreation and tourism can positively impact local economies. Expenditures by visitors coming to an area to paddle can help stabilize and diversify the local economy, supporting a greater mix of businesses in rural communities. Communities with developed tourism infrastructure situated close to well-traveled waterways appear most successful at capturing visitor dollars. Economic benefits can be greatly increased by expanding camping and lodging opportunities on both public and private lands, constructing rustic shelters to attract additional users, developing and supporting guide training and promotion initiatives, holding organized events such as canoe races and festivals, and participating in collaborative marketing efforts.

In both studies, the economic impact of the blueways on local economies was fairly modest compared to the overall tourism dollars spent in each area. Rather than creating new markets, both studies recommended working with existing businesses to provide additional food, lodging and outfitting services and increase the number of special events to encourage longer and more frequent stays.
CREATING A BLUEWAYS BECOMES A CLASS PROJECT

Similar in concept to a greenway but focused on Kentucky’s waterways, the first ever “Blueway in Kentucky” has been developed for over 185 miles of rivers in Warren and parts of Allen, Logan, Butler, Barren and Edmonson counties. The project was designed to increase river stewardship and improve the quality of life in South Central Kentucky by improving river awareness, conservation, improving river access, and ultimately by bringing the rivers back to the people. Blueways also tend to encourage economic development and tourism through the enhancement and promotion of the existing river resources.

An ultimate goal of the Blueways Project is to become a designated Water Trail as recognized by the American Canoe Association Water Trails Program and to expand the Blueways Trail to other rivers throughout the Commonwealth.

Funded through grants from the Kentucky Department of Local Development’s Recreational Trails Program and WKU Provost’s Initiative for Excellence, Western Kentucky University students did much of the data collection for the project and assisted in installing the designated markers at each of the access points along the river ways.

At the heart of the Blueways project is a web page at www.wku.edu/blueways. The web site was developed by Kevin Cary with the WKU GIS center with assistance from We Make Things Happen Corporation and includes river stewardship Information, access points for canoeing, pictures of the access points, pictures of segments on rivers, identifies motorized river segments, access points suitable for trailers, and various river related links.

“We are continually adding to this project. Our Web page is a work in progress”, said Steve Spencer, the Blueways Project Coordinator. “A companion brochure and detailed map are now in the works and will soon be downloadable from the website”.

Dr. Steve Spencer, a professor at Western Kentucky University who teaches outdoor leadership skills through adventure tourism activities stated, “A strong emphasis beyond promoting river stewardship has been to improve access to rivers. Warren County Parks and the Bowling Green, Warren County Greenways have played an integral role throughout this process.”

Signage identifying all public river access points have been posted at river access points at locations noted on the website. The signs resemble the standardized trail sign utilized throughout our National Parks and Forest Service lands and include the Blueways logo.
CASE STUDY: DEVELOPING BLUEWAYS

How the Southwestern Kentucky Rivers Blueways came to fruition…

Through a course at Western Kentucky University, students assisted in establishing the Southeastern Kentucky Rivers Blueways from “running the river” and providing both GPS coordinates and photos of the route to making the signs and installing them at each of the access points along the trail. Funding was provided by a Recreational Trails Program.

Example of a 4-color brochure developed to promote the Blueways and educate the users.
Students at Western Kentucky University helped develop the first Blueways in Kentucky
- A 185 mile river trail through six counties -

Now that is something to write home about.

WKU Students helped in the mapping and sign placement.
SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA WATERWAYS

Virginia is blessed with a multitude of waterways. The Spearhead Trails region in particularly has river segments that are suitable for everything from flatwater floating, all the way to Class V whitewater which should be navigated only by experts.

When one looks at the whitewater opportunities, the American Whitewater Association identifies numerous rivers and sections in SW Virginia. Many of these runs are for Kayaks only and are extreme. Whitewater boating carries inherent risks and paddlers running whitewater creeks and streams understand this inherent risk. For tourism purposes, those individuals looking for extreme whitewater experiences are fairly independent. Most whitewater boaters of this variety have their own equipment and due to the infrequent water levels that make the rivers extreme, there are not many public access points on these creeks and streams. Focusing on rafting venues and exploring the possibility of adding additional elements during times when rivers may not be flowing as much may be the better option.

In SW. Virginia, tourism related paddling is a relatively untapped market. The wide variety of streams offers unlimited options to be developed for the middle paddling range market. In fact, for paddling to become a financial benefit, marketing and livery operation must be developed. One ideal area to be considered for tourism development and livery operation is the Clinch River from St. Paul to Dungannon (See APPENDIX B: Rivers & River Accesses for more on the Clinch and other rivers in Southwest Virginia.)

RECOMMENDATIONS:
Establishing and promoting blueways along rivers such as the Clinch River through Wise, Scott & Russell counties and the Powell River through Lee County into Tennessee is recommended. Creating greater river access along the Cranes Nest, Russell Fork and Prater into communities such as Haysi should also be encouraged and could become the first step to developing an opportunity for an entrepreneur to open a campground or start a canoe livery service.

The SSRA should work with river communities to encourage the development of campsites, signage, and portage trails, as well as to promote the trail in the media. At the same time, local communities and SSRA must work together to proactively plan and implement strategies to minimize the negative social and environmental impacts of increased visitation, which may include the spread of invasive aquatic species, wildlife disturbance, increased traffic, overcrowding of waterways, and land degradation at campsites.