

APPENDIX H: West Virginia Trail User Survey Results: Spring 1999

Introduction

The *West Virginia Trail User Survey Results: Spring 1999* is an unpublished report produced by West Virginia University researchers Dr. David M. Ostergren and Miles Phillips, in consultation with Peggy Pings of the National Park Service, Rivers & Trails Program. The West Virginia Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration and the West Virginia Recreational Trails Advisory Board provided funding.

The West Virginia trail user survey assessed how well the present trail system is serving the public and what aspects of the system need improvement to attract and meet the needs of the public. The findings will help improve the trail system thus increasing interest in residents and nonresidents, encouraging multiple visits and increasing word-of-mouth advertising.

It is important that West Virginia improve its trail system. The travel and tourism industry is one of the largest industries in West Virginia as well as in other states throughout the country. West Virginia's tourism industry offers potential for further growth in economic development, especially revitalization of small rural communities. West Virginia is a national attraction as the most mountainous state. The state boasts an extensive system of public forests, parks and trails; numerous clear, fast-moving rivers and streams; and a rich history. Protection and enhancement of this natural and cultural heritage makes West Virginia a desirable place to live, work and play.

Methodology

A survey was mailed to 1,280 non-residents in the five states bordering West Virginia and Washington D.C. The names were randomly selected from a database of people requesting information from the West Virginia Division of Tourism and from the member list of the West Virginia State Park Hiking Association. The response rate was 19 percent with 242 surveys returned.

An Internet survey was promoted and posted for three months on a web page created for this purpose. A total of 303 responses were reported including 210 (69 percent) from West Virginia residents and 93 (31 percent) from nonresidents.

Use of Findings

The survey results are preliminary and demonstrate general tendencies. They can be used to direct resources for West Virginia's trail system for trail development, trail user needs and future trail studies.

Findings

The mail survey results indicated the trail system is doing a good job addressing the following (out of a list of 18 services and issues):

- 1) ability to experience natural environment

- 2) trailheads kept free of trash and vandalism
- 3) sense of safety on trails and trailhead
- 4) helpfulness/ friendliness of locals

The Internet survey indicated the trail system is doing a good job addressing the following (out of a list of 18 services and issues):

- 1) ability to experience natural environment
- 2) trailheads kept free of trash and vandalism
- 3) sense of safety on trails and trailhead
- 4) helpfulness/ friendliness of locals
- 5) trail surface maintenance
- 6) parking space at trailheads or river put-ins
- 7) public access to trailheads or river put-ins

The mail survey indicated the trail system needs to improve:

- 1) road signs with directions to trailheads
- 2) trail maps at trailheads
- 3) parking space at trailheads or river put-ins
- 4) public access to trailheads or river put-ins

The Internet survey indicated four improvements:

- 1) road signs with directions to trailheads
- 2) trail maps at trailheads
- 3) trail information on the Internet
- 4) safe bike lanes on highway

The mail and Internet surveys indicate that for resident and nonresident trail users the top two activities on West Virginia trails are:

- 1) hiking for solitude and wildlife viewing
- 2) hiking for exercise

The mail and Internet surveys indicate that:

- 1) Seventy-five percent of nonresident respondents stayed more than three days in West Virginia to use trails.
- 2) Forty-eight percent of nonresident trail users used remote/undeveloped trails.

Summary

The surveys suggest that the top two areas needing improvement in the West Virginia trail system are information and access. Safety is an important issue. Many people come to West Virginia for several days at a time to enjoy the natural resources on one of the many trails. We need to maintain our pristine and undeveloped natural environment, the safety of our trails and the friendliness of West Virginia residents.