



Leaves OF Change



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Contact

InterfaceSouth

Annie Hermansen-Báez,
IS Center Manager
PO Box 110806
Bldg 164, Mowry Rd.
Gainesville, FL 32611
(352) 376-3271
(352) 376-4536 fax
www.interfacesouth.org

Urban Forestry South

Dudley Hartel,
UFS Center Manager
320 Green Street
Athens, GA 30602
(706) 559-4236
(706) 559-4266 fax
www.urbanforestrysouth.org

Guest contributor: Josh McDaniel,
Benchmarks Research & Safety, Inc.

Introduction

Outdoor Recreation in the South

THIS ISSUE of *Leaves of Change* is about outdoor recreation in the South, specifically focusing on the economic benefits that recreational trails can bring to communities. One of our research social scientists, Mike Bowker, has been studying the role of trail tourism in sparking economic life into rural areas in the South. In the case of the Virginia Creeper Trail, a railroad line built to haul harvested timber has been converted into a widely popular biking trail that has helped to revitalize communities who have suffered from economic shifts in the region.

Research

Recreational Trails Bring "Green" Benefits to Virginia Communities

WHY ARE recreational trails important? For local communities, trails promote healthy living, a place to connect with nature, and in many cases, opportunities to preserve history and culture. Moreover, if a trail becomes an important tourist draw, such as the case with the Virginia Creeper Trail, it can also be a substantial economic asset.

The story of the creation and growth in popularity of the Virginia Creeper Rail-Trail in southwestern Virginia is a prime example of the economic impact that recreational trails can have on a community and region. Winding through the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, the 34-mile, shared-use trail (mountain-biking, hiking, and equine) was established in 1987 in a unique collaboration between federal and local governments as well as private efforts.

The trail was built on an abandoned railway bed and has become a popular destination for East Coast outdoor enthusiasts. Bike rental shops, restaurants, and bed and breakfast lodges operate in the towns along the trail. In the trail community of Damascus, Virginia, 30 businesses have been established to serve hikers, bikers, and equestrian users of the Virginia Creeper trail. In fact, the trail is credited with revitalizing the town's economy, which had been moribund since the last furniture factory closed in the 1960s.



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Research: Recreational Trails Bring “Green” Benefits to Virginia Communities

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The costs of trail establishment and maintenance are not insignificant, especially for small towns faced with decreased revenue in the current economy. Detailed planning is required and normally large tracts of land (or right-of-ways in the case of rail trails) have to be purchased to connect trail sections and provide accessibility. Additionally, in years past, flooding has destroyed the old trestles on the trail, which had to be replaced at considerable cost. So the question always arises, do the benefits outweigh the costs?

Mike Bowker, one of our research social scientists, has been studying the economic impact of trails on local communities since the mid-1990s. In 2002 and 2003, Bowker and colleagues, John Bergstrom and Joshua Gill, from the University of Georgia completed an economic survey of the Virginia Creeper Trail to find out more about the trail’s users and the economic benefits of the trail’s use to the nearby towns. Bowker found that about 130,000 people visited the trail annually. Of these, 53% were nonlocal, and of the nonlocal trail users, 27% stayed overnight in the area. The study concluded that trail-related visitors spent about \$2.5 million annually and supported about 30 local jobs since trail users spent money in local restaurants, shops, and lodges.

Also, Bowker and his colleagues estimated the value of the trail to the users themselves. They surveyed users about how much they would be willing to pay to visit the trail. They found that the average value for a trail user (and this combined local and nonlocal users) was between \$23 and \$38 per person per trip.

Ed Morgan, the mayor of Abingdon, Virginia, a town near the trail, commented that “The great irony of this story is that the railway was built to haul a great wealth of timber out of the area that is now the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area. Now that little path through the woods is



The Virginia Creeper Trail was an abandoned rail bed that was brought to life through a combination of public and private funding and effort. Those efforts have now resulted in a regional asset that provides health, social, and environmental benefits, while also sparking the local economy, proving there is more than one way to “green” your local community.



being used to bring wealth back into the community.”

Other trail studies have shown comparable measures of economic value and impact. In another study completed on the Washington and Old Dominion Trail in northern Virginia, Bowker and his colleagues found that only about 5% of the visits were from nonlocals, but these trail users spent about \$7 million annually in the

area around the trail. In a more high profile example, Bowker and Stan Zarnoch (also a research scientist from the Southern Research Station) estimated that the Appalachian Trail generates about 2 million visits annually, resulting in about \$140 million in benefits to users.

Bowker’s research is clearly showing that recreational trails have significant value beyond the health and emotional benefits to the users; state and local governments are also taking notice.

Research on the Virginia Creeper Trail has been used by local planners to adjust management approaches in response to findings about trail user attitudes and preferences, and to support grant applications for trail enhancement. The study has also been used by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation in presentations to state and local officials to justify spending public dollars on recreation development.

The Virginia Creeper Trail was an abandoned rail bed that was brought to life through a combination of public and private funding and effort. Those efforts have now resulted in a regional asset that provides health, social, and environmental benefits, while also sparking the local economy, proving there is more than one way to “green” your local community. For more information about this research and other similar research projects, contact

Mike Bowker at **706-559-4271**, mbowker@fs.fed.us, <http://www.humanandnaturalsystems.org/about/employees/michael>.

Changing Roles Tour 2010

THE CHANGING ROLES (CR) Tour 2010 began in May and aims to (1) distribute CR materials; (2) help participants develop skills and learn concepts by participating in hands-on exercises; (3) provide examples of how CR has been used in the past, and (4) encourage agency personnel to consider how they would use the materials in their own work situations. Individual workshops are tailored to meet agency and site-specific needs, take advantage of local opportunities, and make the workshop content relevant to each audience. In some cases, the workshops target state agency personnel while in other cases the audience is broader, including participants such as developers and city planners.

Five introductory workshops were conducted in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Mississippi, and North Carolina, with more than 70 total participants overall. Of the workshop participants surveyed in Arkansas, Mississippi, and North Carolina, 71% rated their level of knowledge of wildland-urban interface issues as advanced or expert following the workshop as compared to just 38% before the workshop. One hundred percent of participants surveyed indicated that the workshop content and exercises were related to their agencies' missions and responded that they were likely to apply information and skills from the workshop in the work that they do. Almost all participants responded that they are likely to use Changing Roles materials (97%) and would recommend the workshop to a colleague (93%). The workshops were approved for Society of American Foresters continuing forestry education credit; in addition International Society of Arboriculture credit has been applied for. Additional Changing Roles activities are scheduled in Tennessee and Alabama in August. For more information about the Changing Roles Tour 2010, contact Nicole Wulff at **352-378-2451**, nmwulff@fs.fed.us.

Recommended Resource

Fire in the Interface Fact Sheets Now Available in Spanish

The *Fire in the Interface* fact sheet series was recently released in Spanish. These fact sheets explain WUI fire concepts related to understanding fire and how to select appropriate plants for landscaping in interface areas. To view these fact sheets please visit www.interfacesouth.org/products/fact_sheets.html?lang=es



Jaroldy Gonzalez, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities Intern



Since 1992, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) National Internship Program has been connecting Hispanic college students with federal agencies

and private companies throughout the United States. As the country's largest Hispanic college internship program, HACU has transformed the lives of more than 8,000 students, including that of Jaroldy Gonzalez, recent technology transfer summer intern with InterfaceSouth. Jaroldy is presently an undergraduate student at the University of Puerto Rico, majoring in Communications and Political Science.

Jaroldy assisted with InterfaceSouth's technology transfer activities, including the development and maintenance of the InterfaceSouth website, digitizing and editing videos, supporting the development of project newsletters and publications, and assisting with research field data collection and entry.

Each year, the HACU National Internship Program places hundreds of eligible Hispanic higher education students in paid summer, fall, and spring internships at dozens of federal agencies in Washington, D.C., and at federal agency field offices across the nation. The program is a great opportunity for Hispanic students interested in experiencing corporate and federal workplaces in their chosen major.

The networking and professional development opportunities that the HACU National Internship Program provides are essential in helping students become more competitive in the workplace and in also defining their career goals.

In the Next Issue

In our next issue we will focus on the i-Tree suite of software tools.

Upcoming Events

Date	Description	Location	Contact
September 29– October 2, 2010	National Association of Environmental Educators 39th Annual Conference	Buffalo-Niagara, NY	www.naaee.org/conference
October 25–29, 2010	National Recreation and Park Association 2010 Congress	Minneapolis, MN	www.nrpa.org/media/preview/congress.htm
October 26–27, 2010	i-Tree Eco workshop	Little Rock, AR	Eric Kuehler, ekuehler@fs.fed.us , 706-559-4268
November 2–3, 2010	i-Tree Eco workshop	Dallas, TX	Eric Kuehler, ekuehler@fs.fed.us , 706-559-4268



This issue can be found online at: www.interfacesouth.org/swuinet/files/LeavesofChangeIssue7.pdf

*Note: InterfaceSouth and Urban Forestry South are the technology transfer centers of the USFS Southern Research Station work unit, SRS-4952: *Integrating Human and Natural Systems in Urban and Urbanizing Environments* (www.humanandnaturalsystems.org) and are collectively called the Centers for Urban and Interface Forestry. InterfaceSouth focuses on wildland-urban interface issues while Urban Forestry South focuses on urban forestry issues.