

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Geotourism at Work

By Keith Hammer

March 19, 2009, Lakeshore Country Journal

Twenty-five years ago, a group of local residents formed the nonprofit Swan View Coalition to protect the natural and visual integrity of the Swan Range. Their efforts to stop the Noisy Face Timber Sale were soon joined by the Bigfork Chamber of Commerce, Echo Lake Homeowners Association and many other voices. Thankfully, their efforts were successful and the Forest Service cancelled its plans to carve up to 30 miles of road and twelve 20-acre square clearcuts on the Swan Face between Lake Blaine and Ferndale.

We all continue to reap the rewards of this community foresight while studies of recreation trends back up its wisdom. Simply put, destroying the natural and aesthetic beauty that surrounds us not only lessens our enjoyment of where we live, it devalues the primary reason other people visit the area. In other words, it kills the goose that lays the golden egg.

If you are drawn to places of natural beauty and to the natural and cultural history of the area, you are among those participating in what has become known as "geotourism." The term is attributed to Jonathan Tourtellot of National Geographic who defined the term as "tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place - its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and well being of its residents." The simple premise is that those given opportunities to learn about a place and its people are more likely to better care for them.

A recent study "Geotourism in the Crown of the Continent" investigated to what degree visitors in the Crown of the Continent share the values of geotourism. It used Tourtellot's definition of geotourism and surveyed visitors to sites on National Geographic's Crown of the Continent MapGuide, which can be found on-line at <http://www.crownofthecontinent.net>. The Crown of the Continent runs from the Canadian Crows Nest Pass and Elk River areas on the north to our Blackfoot River on the south, and from the Tobacco, Flathead and Mission Valleys on the west to the Alberta and Rocky Mountain Front on the east.

This study found that a large portion of the visitors surveyed shared both the attitudes and behaviors of geotourism. It also found that scenic beauty is one of the most important aspects of visits to the area and that national parks are often primary destinations. A 2002 report "Exploring Tourism Development Potential: Resident Attitudes in Kalispell, MT" is consistent in finding the top four places locals take visitors are to Glacier National Park, Flathead Lake, Big Mountain, and Jewel Basin Hiking Area in the Swan Range.

An apparent disconnect between visitors' attitudes and practices was discovered in the geotourism study, however. Visitors' concern for the well-being of local people on average was higher than their demonstration of that concern by actually staying in local accommodations, eating at local establishments, and buying local goods. Visitor

comments thankfully provide a clue to bridging the gap in this regard, with many visitors wanting more information on the environmental practices of businesses and whether they are locally owned – and even more simply wanting receptacles for their recyclable waste!

An appendix to the geotourism study includes 568 comments submitted on its survey forms and one can discern that highlighting the “green” and local-owner aspects of one’s business may indeed increase business. It appears such measures could be as simple as providing recycle bins for visitors, giving multiple-night guests the option to not have their bedding needlessly laundered every day, buying and highlighting locally grown foods on the menu, and perhaps hanging a photo of the owners near the entryway.

The study suggests a travel guide along these lines may be helpful, but it is important to also not overlook the importance of having a good reputation among the locals who then recommend to visitors the best places to visit, eat and stay. And it certainly doesn’t hurt to locate your business within view of the wonderful scenery folks are coming from around the world to see! Indeed a visit to some of the businesses listed on the Crown of the Continent MapGuide, like the Echo Lake Café near Bigfork or the Park Café in St. Mary, will quickly reveal why such businesses were nominated and placed on the geotourism MapGuide.

I’ve long held that it is not the number of people visiting public lands and rural communities that will help conserve them, but the number of people with a desire to learn about them and contribute to their wellbeing. To the degree that geotourism is more about quality and less about quantity than other forms of tourism promotion, the better. The reports I’ve mentioned here can be found at <http://www.itr.umt.edu>.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



The Echo Lake Café offers plentiful views of the beautiful Swan Range. Keith Hammer photo.