

Worth the Climb

The Benefits of Diversifying Outdoor Recreational Tourism in a Rural Community.

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Introduction

Outdoor recreational tourism has the potential to transform even the most secluded rural communities, breathing life into economies and fostering an environment ripe for growth. Rhea County, Tennessee, stands at the precipice of change. Defined as a Tier IV, At-Risk County by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the community has been grappling with economic challenges and stunted growth. An At-Risk, bottom-of the barrel economic classification should not define Rhea County. The untapped potential of new recreational tourism markets has the potential to not only change these figures and classifications, but the fabric of life in a sleepy rural community. Through a comprehensive analysis of the economic landscape, and by harnessing the possibilities of outdoor recreational growth, the community has the potential to come together, take appropriate actions, and elevate Rhea County's fortunes. The community's growth is something to benefit all of its residents and businesses.

Getting to Know Rhea County, Tennessee

Rhea County's classification as a Tier IV, At-Risk County speaks volumes about its economic struggles. According to the ARC, "at-risk counties are those at risk of becoming economically distressed. They rank between the worst 10 percent and 25 percent of the nation's counties." This ranking is accomplished by comparing each county's averages for three economic indicators: the three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate.

The county's economic situation is starkly evident, when looking at raw numbers: 16.8% of Rhea County's 34,000 residents are below the poverty rate, and the median income of \$48,872 is merely 70.8% of the National Average. Per Capita income of \$24,815 sits at 65.9% of the United States as a whole. Yet, beneath these challenges lies the potential for a remarkable resurgence.

Rhea County has been blessed with a bounty of natural resources perfectly suited for outdoor recreation, and they remain largely untapped. Comparisons with similar counties across the nation reveal the potential for growth through diversification of outdoor recreational tourism. Places like Bentonville, Arkansas and Damascus, Virginia come to mind. Many of the concepts and methodologies that were taught throughout the UT CIS TCED coursework come into play in this analysis. From Small Business Development to Workforce Development and Marketing & Attraction, the coursework was full of helpful topics, suggestions, and discussion.

Importance of Tourism Growth and Development in Rural Counties

Tourism has the power to invigorate economies and redefine rural landscapes. In the State of Tennessee, over \$9B is annually spent on tourism, which supports \$90,000 jobs throughout the state. Rhea County seems to be barely scratching the surface of that. The community's journey toward revitalization hinges on understanding the multiple avenues through which tourism can foster growth. The increase in tourism-based businesses stimulates the local economy, while the increase in property, occupancy, and sales tax has generated incredible revenue for local government coffers. Tourism has helped enhance the appeal of a community for potential business investors and residents, which ends up increasing the tax base. These interconnected benefits lay the foundation for a more resilient and thriving community.

Ten years ago, Economic Developer Dennis Tumlin helped the area to capitalize on a fantastic natural resource for outdoor sports tourism. His vision for bringing more tournaments had perfect timing, as Lake Chickamauga was just beginning to teem with incredible numbers of remarkably

sized largemouth bass. It was the perfect recipe for growth, and private investment was quick to follow. Since 2014, over \$22,000,000 has been invested in various real estate in Dayton, TN as a direct result of increased fishing tournaments in the area. From 2 new hotels, the renovation of 2 others, and a patent-pending boutique hotel concept that is tailor-made for anglers, incredible investment has been made in providing more lodging opportunities for tourists. Additionally, numerous short-term rental options have opened up to meet the increased demand. The development hasn't stopped at lodging alone: Zaxby's, Burger King, and KFC have all opened new locations in Dayton within the last four years, stating that they came in order to meet to the increased demand of "temporary taxpayers" that come chasing big bass.

The way to maintain and grow the fishing tournaments is three-fold. A fishing committee was created by RETC's board, and every tournament opportunity is weighed against the possible mortality rate of the fish — which heavily depends on the time of year, and water temperature, while also looking at the cost and benefit of the tournament. Conservation for the future, while allowing the "right" tournaments to compete is a fine line, but something that the committee helps to regulate, by analyzing the cost of the host fee, and weighing the economic benefit with the potential detriment to the natural resource (bass population). The second way is to expand hosting tournaments in Spring City, on Watts Bar Lake. This does two things: give more tourism growth opportunity to another small town, while simultaneously reducing the fishing "pressure" on the ever-popular Lake Chickamauga. More infrastructure development is happening in Spring City in order to better host tournaments into the future, and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) is scheduled to replace a boat ramp and add docks this Fall to realize that goal. Additionally, while these lakes are known for their bass, other types of fish are also quite

present, and have the ability to bring in tournaments as well: both crappie and catfish tournaments are being discussed. The biggest obstacle there is that these tournaments typically cost more, yet bring in fewer boats than bass fishing does, mostly due to the fact that Crappie and Catfish tournaments simply lack the sponsorship dollars that Bass fishing enjoys.

As Tennessee's Commissioner of Tourism Mark Ezell is known to quote: "Tourism is Real Money." It injects new money into the local economy. Tourists spend money on accommodations, food, transportation, equipment, rentals, and local goods and services. This spending can create new business opportunities and stimulate the growth of existing businesses, leading to increased revenue and job creation.

With Tennessee's sales tax of 9.75%, seven percent goes directly to the State of TN, while the remaining 2.75% is distributed to a city or county, depending on the location where those funds are spent. Tax revenue increases in the last decade within the City of Dayton are nothing short of astonishing, especially when compared with inflation, and measured against the rate of population growth for the town. The "temporary taxpayers" known as tourists are undoubtedly the source of this incredible increase.

With the City of Dayton having a full coffer from sales taxes, local Economic Developer Dennis Tumlin was able to go fishing again, this time for industry. He landed a fish that broke all sorts of records: a foreign tire company whose \$570,000,000 investment made an incredible splash. Because of Bass Fishing, Dayton now has another industry that pays a living wage to 525 people.

Nearly five hundred families have an opportunity for gainful employment. That improvement can be directly traced back to the increased influx of tourism dollars to the community.

Both Rhea County and the City of Dayton have continued to support bringing fishing tournaments and anglers into the community. Some tournaments cost upwards of \$50,000 to host, while others are completely cost-free, so long as the venue is available. The good news is that the funding for these tournaments is completely funded by tourism itself! The beauty of the Occupancy Tax (a.k.a.: Hotel/Motel tax) is that it utilizes funding from the rental of each hotel stay to fund future events. Rhea County has a 5% occupancy tax, while the City of Dayton and the Town of Spring City have levied a 4% tax. Over time, these funds build up, and are designated to be utilized solely for tourism and economic development-related activities, such as sponsoring sports tourism!

Rhea County's New Tourism Development Position

For the last 20+ years, the Rhea Economic and Tourism Council has had two positions: Executive Director, and Executive Assistant. Those two people have been tasked with: Economic Development, Workforce Development, Tourism Development, and Community Development. As the community grew in size, and development grew in complexity, those positions remained the same, despite having dramatically increased involvement and demand. Now, in addition to those four flavors of development, the duo manages everything from extensive community grant-writing to a scholarship fund, the County IDB, a seasonal ice rink, a community meeting room, and over 25 fishing tournaments every year.

The case has been made for an additional position to be created to help manage and develop the tourism industry within Rhea County, and its two towns: Spring City and Graysville, as well as the City of Dayton, the county seat. This position would be propped up initially by Federal COVID-19 relief funds that are funneled down through the TN Department of Tourism, and additionally supported by the occupancy taxes that accrue in both Dayton and Rhea County. The key to continued growth in tourism for Rhea County lies in sustaining the Bass fishing tournaments, while developing new avenues of tourism growth. An additional employee is imperative for any tourism growth, as there simply is no additional likelihood of more tourism development without more help.

Rhea County is also developing a tourism committee to have great representation from across the community in support of a variety of tourism. This committee will aid in helping to get more citizens involved in the decision-making processes and helping to develop a vested interest in the tourism development of the area, rather than simply being bystanders. Central to Rhea County's evolution is the collaborative effort to develop its tourism assets. Equipping committee members with a deep understanding of the importance of outdoor and sports tourism is paramount. This knowledge empowers them to identify facility needs and oversee maintenance procedures, ensuring that the county's offerings remain attractive and sustainable for both residents and visitors.

Outdoor Recreational Opportunities for Improvement

Rhea County's natural assets offer a myriad of opportunities for outdoor recreational expansion. Fishing, which encompasses everything from top pro events: such as MLF Bass Pro and

Bassmaster Elite Series, to high school tournaments and casual family outings, presents strong continued potential. Dayton is set to host the 2024 Bassmaster Junior High School and High School National Championship Tournament. This one event will bring thousands of tourists in over a two-week competition period, with countless additional practice trips in advance. The estimated total Economic Impact for just this pair of tournaments is over \$2 Million.

Walden's Ridge features a rock face known as the Cumberland Escarpment, which is famous for its sandstone rock walls. These rock formations trace through the length of the entire county, creating rock climbing and bouldering sites: from Spring City down to Dayton and into Graysville, and offer an exhilarating adventure for enthusiasts. There are three distinct types of climbing, and Rhea County is fortunate to possess rock formations which allow for all of them. From bouldering to sport climbing and traditional climbing, one can do it all in Rhea County! Partners such as the Access Fund and the Southeastern Climbers Coalition have made significant real estate investments in the community, specifically to protect climbing areas, as well as preserve trail access to climbing hotspots. While many of the climbing areas are known regionally and nationally, some of the greatest untapped opportunity for the county is in these sandstone walls. New studies from both Access Fund and SCC show the demographics of climbers to be changing the dated stereotypes. Today's climbers are well-educated, and have deep pockets, spending an average of 3.8 days on climbing trips. Post-climb, they frequent restaurants and breweries. More advertising, and the development of a festival geared towards climbing are necessary to further grow this sport in Rhea County.

The Cumberland Trail is a 300-mile trail that roughly follows the Eastern edge of Walden's Ridge from Tennessee's Northern border, all of the way South to Chattanooga. Rhea County is bisected by nearly 50 miles of the trail. In addition to providing recreational space for both locals and tourists, the Cumberland Trail will serve as a miniature Appalachian Trail. Dayton and Spring City's downtowns are both well-positioned to become "trail towns." Thanks to a generous donation from the Lyndhurst Foundation and support from local government, Rhea County has a Cumberland Trail Connector study that analyzes trail alignments for two greenway trails: one to connect Downtown Spring City to the Cumberland Trail, and the second to connect into Downtown Dayton. That way, as "through-hikers" come into a town, they can re-supply, get a hotel room to shower, and maybe try Monkeytown Brewery's Cumberland Trail Ale before getting back to their journey. Within the next few years, the entire 300-mile trail is supposed to be finished, and Rhea County needs to capitalize on the opportunity by completing these connections!

While this community is not yet a mountain biking (MTB) destination, it's sandwiched between two fairly well-known MTB meccas: Chattanooga, TN and Knoxville, TN. A philanthropic landowner recently gifted three thousand acres to the Cumberland Trail State Park. Most of this large parcel lies below the Cumberland Escarpment, and the area features hand-built trails, as the former owner was known for leading Humvee tours all over his land. One of the best ways to get MTB tourism "rolling" is to seek ways to redevelop these trails specifically for mountain bikes. Certainly, bumps and twists will possibly make this difficult: such as the trouble of finding and creating the right access points and finding funding. However, the reward is much greater than the risk. A recent study by Dr. Andrew Bailey for the University of TN at Chattanooga

demonstrates the economic impact of mountain biking in 2021 to have an \$11,200,000 impact on Chattanooga and the 20 counties that surround it. Granted, there are 85 miles of MTB trails, which bring in 16,900 tourist visits. Rhea County will have to crawl before it walks towards this magnitude of result, however the opportunity is one not to be missed.

Another new sport that is quickly on the rise is disc golf. While the area doesn't currently possess any courses, relentless efforts from local enthusiasts prompted the City of Dayton to approve funding to develop two 18-hole disc golf courses. These are currently in the design phase, and the possibility for a third course will hinge on the success of the initial ones. From all accounts and studies, this sport has a very low cost of entry: a basic set of discs will cost less than the course fees of a traditional golf course. To become a disc golf destination, the area will have to be sure that these courses are well-advertised, and purpose-built so as to be somewhat difficult to play. Courses that are too easy and simple, get quickly outgrown and overlooked. The goal would be to create enough courses to warrant a day trip, or possibly a weekend trip to play, while also providing the opportunity to host disc golf tournaments in the future.

While the area has become well-known for bass fishing, there is also a great opportunity for pleasure boating and paddling. Currently, the community is putting together an application to be a part of the Tennessee RiverLine, which is an organization led by the TVA and University of TN that sees the Tennessee River from a much broader perspective: it's viewed as a 652-mile blueway (a water-based greenway). The group does significant work in designing outdoor areas to help encourage paddling sports: such as canoeing, kayaking, and stand-up paddle boarding, and helps to galvanize communities for better stewardship of the streams and lakes that many

have taken for granted. Spring City was awarded a TN RiverTowns designation in 2020. It has proven to be a very worthwhile program, as it helps bring the paddling community together with non-profits and elected leaders.

Developing Facilities and Management Procedures for Organized Sports Tourism

The allure of organized sports tourism is undeniable, and Rhea County is poised to harness this potential. From soccer and baseball tournaments to volleyball, basketball, and even pickleball, the county's facilities need to be developed and maintained to attract participants and spectators alike. By ensuring the provision of top-tier facilities and implementing effective management procedures, Rhea County can stake its claim in the organized sports tourism landscape.

Currently, few fields in the community are maintained appropriately to attract tournament play through sports tourism. However, the Rhea Economic and Tourism Council just spearheaded an effort to unite the City of Dayton and Rhea County to this end: the entities came together and purchased an 84-acre parcel of land specifically to create sports fields. While 20 acres of it will be donated for the purpose of a \$20M technical college, the remaining 64 acres are dedicated to recreation. Additionally, a \$3,000,000 TDEC LPRF grant was just written to help fund the development of rectangular fields, restrooms, parking, maintenance, and a walking track. Though it has yet to hit the news cycle, the community won the grant, and political leaders are very excited about how this will develop into the future. Though millions are being invested, there is no doubt that the community's benefits will quickly eclipse the initial investment.

To better cater to sports tourism, the community will need to develop or improve infrastructure such as roads, accommodations, recreational facilities, and develop policies and procedures to better maintain these amenities. While initially an investment, these improvements can have long-term benefits for both tourists and local residents.

Future Plans

The path forward for Rhea County is illuminated by strategic planning and sustainable development. Short-term and long-term goals aligned with the Rhea County Master Growth Plan and the Parks and Recreation Master Plan will serve as guiding beacons. Funding this ambitious transformation requires a multi-pronged approach, including grant opportunities, while leveraging occupancy taxes from both the City and County levels. The ultimate goal is to maintain the county's tourism and recreational assets at a high standard, ensuring continued community enjoyment, while being able to attract tournaments and competitions that can fuel economic growth. An integral part of sustaining this type of development and growth is being able to tell the story: of increased revenues and business development, so that local residents and political leaders have a clear understanding of the benefits that the community can realize from hosting tourism events. If the public perception sways the wrong way, then even the best ideas can somehow be misunderstood, and their benefits misconstrued. The truth is that the benefits of growing outdoor and sports tourism generally far outweigh the costs. The taxes generated from tourism-related activities provide local governments with additional revenue. This can be used to fund public services, infrastructure improvements, and community development projects that benefit both residents and visitors.

Conclusion

Rhea County's journey from an At-Risk County to a vibrant hub of outdoor recreational tourism is worth every penny invested. The benefits of diversification extend far beyond economics; they encompass community pride, environmental conservation, and a developing and resilient economy. As the county builds on its potential, fueled by a unified vision and guided by sustainable practices, it can emerge as a testament to the power of outdoor recreational tourism to transform rural communities. It will certainly not be easy in any way, but just like a long hike, the view from the top will certainly make it worth the climb.

Worth the Climb - Resources

1. <https://www.arc.gov/distressed-designation-and-county-economic-status-classification-system/>
2. Chattanooga Mountain Biking Impact Report 2022, Andrew W. Bailey, Ph.D. & Natalie Chandler UTC Tourism Center. 2/1/2022
3. Occupancy Tax records, Rhea County, Tennessee