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Differences in tourist and host perceptions of Appalachia: Elasticity in Place Identity

Appalachia, like many regions around the world, exists without absolute and universally-accepted borders. Depending on whether one is speaking in historical, political, economic, agricultural, geographic, or cultural terms, Appalachia may be described as so large to include all or parts of thirteen states and as small as consisting of only three or four states in the mountain South. This research note briefly reviews the literature concerning the differences in perception regarding Appalachian identity and geographic place as described by cultural insiders and outsiders, presents and interprets new data gathered in southern Ohio, and comments on the relevance of perceptions of cultural outsiders to contemporary tourism marketing efforts.

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The Appalachian region has been known as a tourist destination since the 18th century (Drake, 2001). But while Appalachia's physical location and geographic identity are clear and widely agreed-upon, the region's location and boundaries as perceived by both cultural insiders and outsiders are not as well-defined. One reason for this is the number of competing definitions for the region which are premised on widely-varying characteristics or criteria (Ulack & Raitz, 1982). Thus, there exist physiographic, geographic, socio-cultural, legal, and even cognitive maps of the Appalachian region which are not consistent in their delimiting of the region.

One attempt to delimit a cognitive map of Appalachia and compare it to other established definitions was a 1981 study by Ulack and Raitz which determined that the perceived boundaries of the Appalachian region were very different, and in fact much more restrictive, than the legal boundaries established by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and that there were further differences between the cognitive maps produced by cultural insiders and cultural outsiders.

In addition to the ongoing disagreement on the physical boundaries of the Appalachia region, there are also competing stereotypes of what constitutes Appalachian character and culture, ranging from the sublime to the benighted (Zuefle, 2003). Despite these competing definitions and images, many communities around the periphery of Appalachia are pinning their identities on the region and marketing themselves to potential tourists as part of Appalachia (Zuefle, 1994).

One of the communities on Appalachia's edge is Portsmouth, Ohio. Portsmouth is located on the Ohio River, just west of the union of the Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia state borders. Portsmouth's traditional mixed economy of industry, commerce, and agriculture has been declining for over forty years and tourism has come to figure prominently in local economic redevelopment strategies.

Many of Portsmouth's efforts have been attempts to capitalize on its proximity to the Ohio River, nearby forests, parks and Native American sites, and its Appalachian heritage. One of the more notable recent developments has been a series of floodwall murals similar to those found in Paducah, Kentucky and Vicksburg, Mississippi which depict the region's history and stretch for over 2,000 feet near the city's riverfront (Portsmouth Convention & Visitors Bureau, 2004).

One of the largest single events drawing out-of-town tourists to the city is a bicycle tour called the Tour of the Scioto River Valley (TOSRV). This two day, 200 mile cycling tour starts in Columbus, Ohio and swings south through Ohio's hill country to Portsmouth, which is its southern terminus and the principal overnight destination for riders and their families. The tour started in 1962 and grew to over 6,500 riders by the late 1980s. By 2004, the tour's numbers had dipped to 2,918 riders---the lowest total since 1973 (Columbus Outdoor Pursuits, 2004).

In May 2002 a survey of TOSRV participants and festival goers was undertaken. 114 respondents were surveyed at the finish line area and queried as to their satisfaction with the event, knowledge of local amenities, and spending habits while in the vicinity. Additionally, the

survey included several items which measured recognition of the southern Ohio region as being a part of the greater Appalachian region.

The results of analysis of these questions related to perceptions of place show that while there were no significant differences in recognition of the region as an Appalachian destination based on sex, race/ethnicity, educational level, or income, there was a significant difference between cultural insiders and cultural outsiders with respect to recognition of the southern Ohio region as being part of Appalachia.

Specifically, both current residents of the region and those persons originating from the central/northern Appalachian region were much more likely to recognize the city of Portsmouth and southern Ohio as being “in Appalachia” than nonresidents and non-Appalachian natives. For example, the recognition rate of the local area as being part of Appalachia was 69.8% by cultural insiders, while it was only 24.0% for cultural outsiders. Chi-square tests of association performed on the several cross tabulations of these variables demonstrated significance levels no greater than $p < .005$.

These place perceptions of cognitive insiders and outsiders are somewhat different than those found in earlier studies which showed that cultural outsiders were more likely to have expanded perceptions of the region’s boundaries (Ulack & Raitz, 1981) and that the south-central Ohio region was situated near the 40% recognition isoline on a cognitive map as portrayed by cultural insiders (Ulack & Raitz, 1982). However, this “stretching” and changing of the cognitive map of Appalachia for both cultural insiders and cultural outsiders is consistent with

the conjectures of earlier hypotheses on the possible effects of tourism on regional identity and recognition (Zuefle, 1994). Indeed, tourism-related phenomena may be creating an “Elastic Appalachia” which expands and contracts as needed for the purposes of tourism marketing and development.

One of the practical implications to be drawn from these findings appears to be that communities such as Portsmouth which are located on or near the periphery of Appalachia, especially those near its cognitively recognized borders, may need to engage in further efforts to educate potential visitors about their area’s claims to Appalachian regional inclusion in order to compensate for the much lower levels of place recognition by cultural outsiders. A failure to do so, coupled with a focus and dependence on Appalachian identity for tourism marketing efforts, may yield unsatisfactory results.

Additionally, the malleability and variance of cultural identity and recognition which may be observable here should be of interest to all researchers investigating issues related to authenticity, cultural preservation, and sense of place.

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