
10 Tourism in the Intermountain West: The Role of Food and Agritourism in Neolocalism

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Abstract

The strong tourism industry in the Intermountain West – coupled with its growing local foods movement – provides fertile ground for food tourism expansion. This study examines non-resident tourist characteristics, attitudes, and interests related to food tourism activities through a visitor survey. Specifically, we examine tourists' associations among a variety of food and agritourism activities. We then group tourists into target markets to better understand their characteristics and interests. We discuss the primary target markets including preferred activities and best practices for promotion. Additionally, we provide suggestions for destination design based on three distinct groupings of food tourism related activities.

Introduction

Tourism is among the most important and largest industries in the western USA, supported by a network of national parks, outdoor recreation areas, state parks, ski resorts, festivals and special events, premier wine growing regions, and many historic and religious sites. Visitor spending drives economic activity in the parks, recreation,

and hospitality sectors across the West, and tourism is responsible for job creation and increasing levels of tax revenue (Utah Economic Council, 2015). The Intermountain West of the USA – the geographical region between the Rocky Mountains to the east and the Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges to the west – boasts some of the nation’s leading national parks and winter recreation activities. Annual ski visits to the region in 2017 numbered 20.8 million (RRC Associates, 2019), while US National Park Service visitations numbered 57.5 million (Ziesler & Singh, 2017). Table 10.1 summarises tourism activity for four states in the Intermountain West.

Table 10.1: Intermountain West tourism statistics – selected states (2017)

	Utah	Idaho	Nevada	Colorado
Total visitors (millions)	19.3	10.9	31.6	84.7
Visitor spending (billions \$USD)	9.15	4	63	20.9
Jobs supported	147,000	35,000	458,780	171,000
Ski visits (millions)	4.15	Unknown	Unknown	7.1
National park visits (millions)	10.5	Unknown	2.9	7.5
National Park Service (NPS) visits (millions)	15.1	0.7	6	7.6

Sources: Colorado.com (2018), Idaho Commerce (2018), Ziesler and Singh (2017), RRC Associates (2019), Nevada Industry Partners (2018), and Utah Office of Tourism (2018).

In Utah, tourism is a well-developed, \$9.15 billion industry (Utah Office of Tourism, 2018). In 2017, over 19 million people visited Utah, primarily to go skiing (4.15 million visitors) and to visit national parks (10.5 million visitors). Utah is home to the ‘mighty five’ national parks—including Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capital Reef, Arches, and Canyon Lands. Utah’s primary port of entry, the Salt Lake City International Airport, served 25.5 million passengers in 2018, making it the 23rd busiest airport in the USA (SLC International Airport, 2019). While tourism is Utah’s second largest industry overall, tourism plays an even more vital role in Utah’s rural communities, where tourism-related jobs can account for up to 40% of the job market (Leaver, 2014).

Growing consumer interest in food origins and production processes has given rise to the ‘buy local’ or ‘locavore’ movement, which emphasises purchasing food grown and/or processed close to home, such as in-state or within a certain number of miles (Slocum & Curtis, 2018). Evidence of the growing locavore movement in the USA is reflected in direct-to-consumer sales, which have exhibited positive growth over the

past three decades. For example, between 1978 and 2012, the total value of direct-to-consumer sales increased by nearly 240% (Low et al., 2015). Additionally, there was a 200% increase in farmers' markets from 2000 to 2016, a 275% increase in consumer supported agriculture programs from 2004 to 2014, and a 288% increase in food hubs from 2007 to 2014.

The locavore movement plays an important role in the growing food tourism industry and can support the neolocal process of crafting the tourism product around traditional agricultural practices. Specifically: dining out; visiting farmers' markets, breweries and wineries; and participating in agritourism activities while traveling can enhance sense of place and provide enticing narratives that draw tourists to rural agricultural communities. The National Restaurant Association (2015) reported that seven out of ten consumers were more likely to visit a restaurant offering locally sourced items. Food and culinary tourism are increasingly popular, as 27 million travellers participated in wine or culinary-related activities over a 3-year period (Sohn & Yuan, 2013).

At the same time, agricultural producers, especially small producers in rural areas, face unique challenges and may benefit from food and agritourism development and promotional efforts directed toward food tourists (Bond et al., 2008). Mass agricultural production is often governed by strict contracts and middlemen, leading to disproportionately small revenues for producers. Unreliable weather patterns, capricious growing seasons and fluctuating markets combine for uncertain yields, prices, and profits (Fleisher, 1990). Direct marketing agricultural goods through roadside stands, farm shops, farmers' markets, and restaurants to residents and tourists, when marketed appropriately, can improve profits for small producers with entrepreneurial skills (Slocum & Curtis, 2017). Destination marketing messages around food and agritourism products encourage tourists to spend their budgets in a way that reduces economic leakages (Getz et al., 2014).

The high quality and diversity of Utah's agriculture and food, combined with Utah's popularity as a vacation destination, may provide unique opportunities for the neolocal development of food and culinary tourism. The effective marketing of local foods to tourists may be a powerful rural economic development strategy, connecting Utah's flourishing tourism industry with local food providers and agritourism operators. Agritourism, especially, has been shown to have cultural, economic, and environmental benefits (Barbieri et al., 2019). However,