

# You Gotta Know the TERRITORY

Georgia Tech research reveals whether and how to invest in tourism development.

by LINCOLN BATES



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Three years ago, 11 counties along southeast Georgia's Altamaha River wanted to explore the possibility of developing nature-based tourism around the 137-mile, undammed waterway called one of the "75 last great places in the world" by The Nature Conservancy.

The Altamaha and its tributaries not only house a wealth of flora and fauna, but also contain historic elements such as the Rifle Cut Canal and offer diverse opportunities for outdoor recreation. With such features, local officials believed the river could offer the economic boost the region needed.

So the Tourism and Regional Assistance Centers (TRACS), part of Georgia Tech's Economic Development Institute, conducted a year-long feasibility study that examined environmental issues, analyzed promising tourism segments, inventoried area assets and made several recommendations.

Today, it's evident the research paid off. The counties formed a partnership and launched the tourism effort. The group has formalized its organizational structure, implemented distinctive signage, established a Web site, raised nearly \$1.5 million for infrastructure improvements and marketing, instituted three new river-based events and attracted at least one new outfitter business. Now, the partnership is contemplating opportunities for area improvements, such as the addition of public landings along the river.

"Up-front research tells communities if it makes sense to invest in tourism development and promotion, and where to spend those dollars most effectively," says TRACS manager Ann O'Neill.

With interest growing in tourism as an economic development tool, TRACS has undertaken similar efforts elsewhere in Georgia. For example, an east Georgia alliance wants to revive the Woodpecker Trail, once billed as "the fastest route to Florida's west coast" through 10 Georgia counties from Richmond to Charlton via state Highway 121.

"The feasibility study completed by (TRACS) disclosed excellent opportunities for our communities that otherwise may not have been explored," says Mayor Billy Trapnell of Metter, one of the towns along the Woodpecker Trail.

Other recent studies have involved:

(1) Georgia Lake Country, a group representing Putnam, Greene and Morgan counties, which promotes the area's historic and recreational assets; (2) the Golden Isles Parkway Association, which wants to assess tourism-related economic development along state Highway 341; and (3) the Lower Chattahoochee Regional Development Council, which wants to develop a market profile of visitors to the southwest Georgia region.

TRACS uses several tools to conduct tourism research, and can provide decision-making information to the entire tourism industry, from a rural chamber of commerce to the state's Tourism Division, O'Neill says. The tools include:

■ Travel USA, a syndicated study from Longwoods International. It tracks 200,000 U.S. households annually, measuring and profiling visitation to all 50 states, 19 U.S. cities and 20 foreign countries. The Georgia Visitors Survey queries some of the Georgia tourists tracked in the Travel USA study to gather more detail on their planning and booking, transportation, lodging, activities, expenditures and opinions about destinations. An example of this data's utility was the response it helped the Tourism Division formulate to counter declining tourism after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. That response included a supplemental \$1 million appropriation into the state's targeted tourism marketing. A Longwoods return-on-investment study later determined that Georgia got back \$7.63 for every \$1 it spent on that effort.

■ PRIZM from Claritas Inc., a lifestyle segmentation analysis based on the concept that people with similar backgrounds and needs tend to live near each other, as in the old adage, "Birds of a feather flock together." It uses guest register data to



**Based on Georgia Tech tourism research, a group of southeast Georgia counties formed a partnership and launched an effort to bring visitors to the scenic Altamaha River.**

identify addresses of former visitors, then assigns them to one of 62 profile clusters based on demographic and behavioral characteristics of residents. PRIZM gives them catchy names like “Shotguns & Pickups,” “Greenbelt America” and “Kids & Cul-de-Sacs.” Clusters are displayed in map or graphical form.

In 2001, TRACS employed PRIZM in a study for the state’s Augusta-anchored Classic South tourism region to profile key visitor segments. It revealed that the region’s single-most important consumer group is “Landed Gentry,” an affluent group comprising large, multi-income families headed by executives and professionals and having an interest in historic tourism. It recommended the Classic South region initially promote itself to Atlanta because the metro area has more than 230,000 key cluster households and the largest concentration of them in Georgia and neighboring states. TRACS also advised using print, rather than broadcast, advertising because this cluster prefers print media.

■ State government also conducts tourism-related research, as discussed by the Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism’s (GDITT) Kevin Langston at the TRACS-sponsored Travel Trends conference held in fall 2002 in Macon. Research enables GDITT to chart progress, provide objective feedback and guide decision-making, Langston says. But such studies don’t address all issues or answer all questions. Research is a valuable tool to help gauge past performance, current situation and future direction, as long as its limitations are considered, Langston adds.

One GDITT tool is the annual Economic Impact Study that uses visitor survey and lodging data plus statistics from the state departments of Labor and Revenue. The study determines how many people visit Georgia, how much money they spend, how many jobs tourism supports and how much tax revenue the state collects from tourism. A second is the Smith Travel Research Report, which measures hotel occupancy and room rate and revenue to assess the economic health of the hotel industry.

Knowing how things are faring — be it a local attraction, hotel chain or a state’s entire assets — is

increasingly important, researchers say. In his recently published guide to tourism best practices, Researcher Rich Harrill observes that tourism practitioners today must be adept at destination management instead of destination marketing. Also, agencies are embracing accountability and evaluation, and return-on-investment studies are no longer a luxury, but a critical step in demonstrating effectiveness to legislators and providing data for internal benchmarking purposes. Research is integral to this contemporary way of doing business in the increasingly competitive tourism arena, Harrill adds.

Harrill’s book, published by the Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Lodging Association, discusses 16 best practices in six categories—research, funding, professional development, information dissemination, advocacy and Web marketing. The case studies represent efforts of tourism organizations across the country — from Florida to Hawaii—and many of the techniques are adaptable by other state and local tourism practitioners.

“TRACS exists to give Georgia’s tourism industry a competitive advantage through high-quality, decision-making information,” O’Neill says. “No community or tourism business is too small to benefit from this.” And, with the exception of PRIZM, these tools are available free to members of Georgia’s tourism industry, she adds.

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**Below: Tourists enjoy a wine tasting in New York’s Finger Lakes Wine Country area.**



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