How Conservation and Recreation Created an Economic Engine in Whitefish, Montana

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https://headwaterseconomics.org
Presentation overview

• Vision and origins of the Whitefish Trail

• Methods for this study

• Our main findings

• Takeaways for other communities
Where the heck is Whitefish, MT?
...community-minded vision to ensure conservation, education, and recreation on the lands around Whitefish for future generations.

- Protect local lands, permanently
- Secure public access and connect community to Places Worth Protecting
- Generate $$ for MT Schools
- Provide platform for outdoor learning
Whitefish Area Neighborhood Plan adopted by City, County, and MT State Land Board

2006

Whitefish Trail Master Plan outlined 55+ mile recreation loop trail

2011

WLP and City win MT’s largest RTP grant - $500k
THE WHITEFISH TRAIL

- 42 miles natural surface, multi-use trail
- 12 trailheads
- 285 volunteers donate ~2,000 hours/year
- 40 annual education programs
- 6,100 acres protected forever
VOLUNTEERS AND DONORS

13 ADOPT-A-TRAIL CREWS

53 CORPORATE SPONSORS

$100 ALL-TIME MEDIAN DONATION

1,108 DONORS
Methods
Methods

Data Collection

• Infrared counters
• Intercept surveys
• Manual verification
• Strava
Methods

Data Analysis

• Profile of locals
• Profile of visitors
• IMPLAN economic model
• Extrapolate with additional sources
Results
• 72,966 uses counted
  • 3 mountain lions

• 1,794 interviews completed
  • 1,078 locals (47% trailhead)
  • 716 visitors (49% trailhead)
SHARE OF TRAIL USE BY LOCALS AND VISITORS

- Locals
- Visitors
Outdoor recreation is the #1 reason why locals stay and visitors visit Whitefish.
Visitors come to Whitefish for recreation

- 65% of visitors have recreation as their primary purpose.
- 35% of visitors have a primary purpose that is not recreation.

N=714
Locals stay in Whitefish for recreation

- Summer Recreation
- Community
- Winter Recreation
- Job
- Family
- Friends

Why did you move to or stay in Whitefish?

N=933
Economic Impact from the Whitefish Trail

72,966
ANNUAL TRAIL USERS

$6.4 MILLION
ANNUAL CONSUMER SPENDING
ATTRIBUTED TO THE WHITEFISH TRAIL

68 JOBS
SUPPORTED
BY VISITORS WHO USE
THE WHITEFISH TRAIL

The economic impact of the Whitefish Trail will continue to grow as the community completes their vision.
Recreators spend more & stay longer

Average daily spending

- Non-recreation: $181
- Recreation: $222

Average # of nights in Whitefish

- Non-recreation: 4.2
- Recreation: 5.8

N=669
Local trail users spend more on gear

Trail users
$1,383

NOT trail users
$605

N=750
Trail & Pathway Use Across Flathead County, Montana
Summer Activities in 2017 Estimated with Strava
Takeaways for other communities
**RECIPE FOR SUCCESS**

- Engage broad and authentic community support
- Secure and grow key partnerships
- Generate solid vision and integrate in planning
- Develop consistent and effective branding

**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS**
Lessons learned for other communities

Conservation
+ Recreation
+ Economic Development
Lessons learned for other communities

Leverage social data
Trails Benefits Library

Curated 130+ studies
Searchable collection
Overview summaries:
  Business impacts
  Quality of life benefits
  Property value
  Public health
  Equity
  Legal issues

All studies are available at [https://headwaterseconomics.org/trail/](https://headwaterseconomics.org/trail/).
The bigger picture

Rural economic development

National policy & momentum

Engage broader stakeholders
Thank you!

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