The Potential Economic Impact of the Continental Divide Trail in Cuba, New Mexico

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Abstract

Poverty, a social determinant of health, is common in rural communities. Developing recreation and tourism infrastructure, such as trails, has the potential to reduce disparities and improve the quality of life through effects on health and local economies. There is limited information that exists on the economic impact of outdoor recreation and tourism on small, rural communities, but there is a known relationship between economic well-being and health. Cuba, New Mexico, a small rural community, experiences high rates of obesity and diabetes among its tri-ethnic (Hispanic, American Indian, Anglo) population. The University of New Mexico Prevention Research Center (PRC) has partnered with Cuba to increase awareness of, develop, and study the effects of walking and hiking trails. The Santa Fe National Forest Service (SFNS) and New Mexico Bureau of Land Management (NMBLM) recently proposed to construct a new segment of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT) near Cuba. The PRC is conducting a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) including the economic impact of the proposed trail segment. An HIA uses multiple data sources and stakeholder input to determine the effects of a proposed plan on the health of a population. We conducted mixed methods research focused on the economic component of the HIA by examining data from local and visitor populations to predict the likelihood of trail use, related expenditures, and the public’s perceptions of the CDT expansion on the community. Decision-makers including the SFNS, the NMBLM, NM Department of Transportation, Sandoval County, and the Village of Cuba will use the results to determine exact CDT placement, use, and design. Economic effects predicted from this HIA will help decision-makers maximize desirable economic outcomes. Our findings indicate that CDT development has the potential to attract many users from central and northwest New Mexico and provide substantial local economic stimulation. This HIA will also serve as a model for others interested in studying and projecting both health and economic impacts of new trails.

Background

VIVA-Step Into Cuba: A university-community partnership between the UNM Prevention Research Center and the Nacimiento Community Foundation to promote healthy physical activity through development of sidewalks, paths, trails, social support, and opportunities for lifestyle change.

Continental Divide Trail (CDT): 3,100 mile regional trail system running between Mexico and Canada. Proposed 12 mile trail segment to run through Cuba.

Health Impact Assessment (HIA): “A systematic process that uses an array of data sources and analytical methods and considers input from stakeholders to determine the potential effects of a proposed policy, plan, or project on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population.” (National Research Council)

Methods

Purpose: To examine the existing literature on the economic impact that trails have on communities and to determine gaps in research. (n=20)

• Peer-reviewed articles, published reports, fact sheets, economic development plans
• Key Word Search: “economic impact trails”; “trail development”, “economy walking trails”

Purpose: To determine the public’s perceptions of the CDT expansion.

• Qualitative data – Semi-structured interviews (n=50) from 2011 (Nivio 10)
• Key Word Search: “economy”, “business”, “CONSERVATION”

• Stakeholders & community members involved in the implementation of VIVA-Step Into Cuba

Survey Data

Purpose: To predict the likelihood of trail use, perceived economic benefit, and estimated travel-related expenditures.

• Quantitative data – Fixed-response Sanderval Fair surveys (n=310) & STEP-HIA surveys (n=33) conducted at local community events.

Survey Results

Figure 1: Visitor spending among STEP-HIA survey respondents that would use the CDT trail and stay overnight in Cuba (n=46).

Figure 2: Sanderval Fair survey and STEP-HIA survey (n=43) local and visitor participants.

Survey Results

Anticipated Visitor Spending per Family

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<th>Category</th>
<th>Mexico &amp; Groceries</th>
<th>Gas &amp; Parking</th>
<th>Grocery &amp; Convenience</th>
<th>Hunting &amp; Bird Hunting</th>
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Systematic Literature Review

Local economies are influenced by trail infrastructure.

• $6.18 outdoor recreation consumer spending in NM (Outdoor Industry Association).
• Trails passing through rural town centers may enjoy a larger economic impact than suburban and urban trails (Rais-to-Trails Consensary).
• Trail users are more likely to stop in small towns than other sightseers and purchase consumable goods (Fuchs et. al).
• “Recreation and tourism development contributes to rural well-being, increasing local employment, wage levels, and income” (Headwaters Economics & Audubon NM).
• Building trails is cost-effective: $1 investment in trails = $2.94 in medical savings (Wang et al.)

Interview Results

“I want to see the CDT done passing close to Cuba and the fairgrounds...totally connected right into town...”

“It (Fisher Trail) has the potential to be a tourist venue—people could stop in and take a trip—a little day trip and take a picnic; not only for the community, but for the highway traffic.”

Cuba & 550 Highway Corridor

• Tri-Ethnic: Hispanic, American Indian, and Anglo
• 200-mile highway corridor connecting Albuquerque to Farmington
• >965,000 people in the 217 census tracts that border the corridor
• Hwy 550 thru traffic: 9,800 vehicles/day (2006)

Key Points

• There is a significant gaps between the health and economic impact of recreation and tourism on small, rural communities.

Challenges

• A lack of barrier data; economic data is predominantly on large metropolitan areas.

Future Directions

• Implementation of VIVA All-Ski Into Cuba September 2014 – September 2019
• Gather data on Cuba’s local businesses (number, annual revenue)
• Cost-Benefit Analysis on money saved in health care costs
• Determine need and use for an Economic Development Plan/Program

References

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Rais-to-Trails Consensary (2012). Recreational trails and economic development in the Santa Fe area. New Mexico State University: New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station.