

2011 VACo Achievement Awards
Botetourt County – Upper James River Water Trail

Eligibility:

Botetourt County is a member of Virginia Association of Counties in good standing. Several members of the Botetourt County Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Department played key roles in the planning and implementing of the program being submitted.

Category: Parks and Recreation

Criteria:

Narrative:

The mighty James River finds its source at the confluence of the Jackson and Cowpasture rivers in Botetourt County. These headwaters commonly known as the Upper James River have played an important role in the economies of the communities along the river. Historically, the river was used as a transportation system with a series of locks and canals used to carry goods downstream towards Lynchburg. Today, the river is a recreational corridor used for fishing, canoeing, kayaking and water viewing along is 45-mile stretch in Botetourt. The major assets of the Upper James River include its scenery, world-class bass fishing, friendly small town atmosphere and its rich history and diverse character.

In order to capitalize on the many assets of the Upper James, the Botetourt County Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Department developed a strategic analysis to use as a tool to improve, enhance, and preserve the environmental, historic, and recreational opportunities on the river for future generations to enjoy. The goal is to create a water-based trail

system that will link the different assets found on the river to form the Upper James Water Trail. A “Water Trail” is a small boat and/or paddling route (or series of routes) along a waterway that combines recreation and environmental awareness while linking communities and land-based attractions such as recreational trails, historic sites, and parks.

Problem:

The problem for the project was how to develop a viable outdoor recreation and tourism attraction using existing river access points that are owned and operated by two different State agencies, develop traditional access points that are located on private property by working with local land and business owners, and to encourage new local business development. The County wanted to capitalize on the many assets that the river has and to make the Upper James River Water Trail a premier outdoor recreation asset. Key obstacles to overcome in order to accomplish the goal included:

- Current water access points were not owned and maintained by the county.
- Increased river traffic might pose problems such as potential trespassing on private property, littering, and overuse of limited facilities.
- No known brand recognition of the Upper James River in Botetourt County
- No official source of information about the river and its assets

Partnering and Collaboration:

The Upper James River Water Trail was undertaken as a cooperative effort between the Botetourt County Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Department, the Upper James River

Water Trail Committee, the Upper James River Roundtable, the Town of Buchanan, and Twin River Outfitters. Key State agencies involved in the project include Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Virginia Department of Transportation, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Virginia Tourism Corporation.

Overview:

Program Overview:

A strategic planning committee of local outfitters, business owners, landowners along the James, outdoor recreation enthusiasts, and county staff gathered for many months during 2009 and developed a strategic plan of action (see attachment). During the planning process, a public forum was held in order to solicit public support especially from landowners adjacent to the James River. The plan was presented to the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries to establish their commitment and support of the proposed project. The strategic plan was then presented to the Botetourt County Board of Supervisors and adopted. The Office of Tourism and the Upper James River Water Trail Committee has been working on implementing the plan in a phased approach since that time.

Goals and objectives were developed to address the issues and opportunities that were identified by the Advisory Committee.

Goal #1 - Increase Public Access to the River

1. Improve existing access points to allow a variety of recreational types such as boating, fishing, picnicking and river viewing.
2. Target locations for new access points that create convenient opportunities to easily access areas that are currently difficult to reach by boat and/or car.
3. Improve signage at access points to identify and welcome visitors.

Goal #2 - Develop an Identity for the Upper James River Water Trail

1. Determine thematic and character areas that help create a “brand” for the water trail that summarizes its character and opportunities.
2. Develop a water trail signage program to help identify and raise awareness of the water trail and to provide navigational aids.
3. Develop a marketing program and materials that identify potential visitors and reach out to them using a variety of promotional tools.

Goal #3 - Develop a Sustainable Tourism-Based Economy

1. Identify and encourage independent projects that will assist in the revitalization of the water trail corridor such as trails, parks, scenic byways, downtown revitalizations, etc.
2. Protect water quality by encouraging infrastructure improvements, reduction of sedimentation and restoration of riparian vegetation where appropriate.
3. Protect ecologically sensitive waterfront resources.
4. Educate visitors through the use of interpretive signage, displays, pamphlets, web-based information, etc.

5. Seek Virginia Scenic River Status for the entire water trail.

In 2010, during phase one of the project, a promotional brochure was designed and printed that is used as a lure piece in feeder markets and as a fulfillment piece for requests for information. The website www.upperjamesriverwatertrail.com was designed and published to promote the water trail, providing detail mapping information, as well as information about area attractions, dining and lodging facilities. The Upper James River Water Trail was officially launched in February of 2010 with the release of the website and printing of the brochure.

The water trail committee conducted a gap analysis of the trail and identified locations for additional access points, camping, and historic sites to interpret which took place in phase two of the project in late 2010.

The water trail project is currently in phase two where the County, local business and landowners are designating new access points to add to the water trail. Trail head signs are being installed at all of the access points to help inform the new users of the water trail.

Financing of Program:

The first phase of the project had a budget of \$75,000 that was used to design the brochure, website, and develop an advertising campaign. This funding came from several sources. The county off-set costs by partnering with community groups, local

outfitters, the Town of Buchanan, and received a grant from the Virginia Tourism Corporation for \$25,000.

Staffing:

County staff that contributed to this project includes Director of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Pete Peters, Assistant to the County Administrator Spencer Suter, County Planner Tim Ward, County Engineering Tech Carol Craft, Tourism Coordinator Kevin Costello, and Parks, Recreation and Tourism Intern Jeff Bona.

Results:

The Upper James River Water Trail project has been the most successful tourism initiative undertaken by Botetourt County since the tourism office opened in 2005. The goal of the project as outlined in the grant application was to design a brand for the water trail, produce a brochure, website, and marketing campaign. This goal was accomplished and has produced a multi-award winning program that is now being copied by localities across the state and region.

Brochure

In February we printed 20,000 brochures for distribution to welcome centers, regional visitor centers, partners' sites, and as a fulfillment piece. We have distributed 18,000 to date.

Upper James River Water Trail Website

www.upperjamesriverwatertrail.com - Google Analytics Dashboard

Dates: February 1, 2010 - April 30, 2011

- 15,911 Visits
- 43,963 Page views
- 2.76 Pages/Visit
- 52.42% Bounce Rate
- 00:02:39 Average Time on Site
- 80.43% Percentage of New Visits

Visitation

Our key source for visitor information related to this project is through our main outfitter Twin River Outfitters in Buchanan, VA. Twin River Outfitters reported a 10% increase in business during the 2010 season (March –October) compared with their 2009 season.

Economic Development

One of the long-term goals of this project was to bring new businesses to Botetourt County and to some of the smaller towns along the river. Since the beginning of the project, there have been two new businesses opened as a direct result of the project. Twin River Outfitters in Buchanan opened a new inn, the James River House, to accommodate overnight guests, and Breeden's Bottom campground in Arcadia opened last spring.

Awards and Comments

The Upper James River Water Trail campaign has been a highly recognized program among marketing peers. The campaign has won several awards in the past 18 months including:

- 2010 Hermes Platinum Award for Integrated Marketing Campaign
- 2010 Southeast Tourism Society Shining Example Award
- 2010 ADDY Award
- 2010 Virginia Conservation Council Better Models Award

Conclusion

The Upper James River Water Trail continues to represent a significant economic and community development opportunity for Botetourt County. With the support of Virginia Tourism Corporation on the front end of the development of this project, the County is well on its way to achieving that opportunity.

Future development on the water trail should be focused on increasing public access to the river while working to preserve the natural state of the Upper James. Developing partnerships is vital to the success of the project. The County's ultimate goal is to make the Upper James Water Trail a premier outdoor recreation destination for Western Virginia.

Population: Botetourt County is in the (3) 30,001 to 50,000 population category.

Photos



Supporting Materials

1. Upper James River Water Trail brochure
2. Upper James River Water Trail website proofs
3. Upper James River Water Trail strategic plan document