

Action

PUBLIC ISSUE INFORMATION FOR ALABAMA CITIZENS

FROM THE EDITOR

Regional Tourism Organizations

Tourism is a method many Alabama communities are including in their mix of economic development strategies. Like other techniques of economic development, tourism will not happen by itself. To be successful, communities must effectively market their tourism attractions and hospitality services. One method of accomplishing this is through the development of **regional tourism organizations** designed to promote multicounty regions.

Action is a quarterly publication of the Community Resource Development (CRD) unit of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The goal of CRD is to help people solve community problems, take advantage of opportunities and build on their assets. The CRD unit provides educational and technical assistance in economic development, leadership development, strategic planning, environmental education, community health and public policy education. *Action* is one tool used to link community groups to internal and external resources. This issue represents links between Extension and North Alabama Tourism Association (NATA), Historic Chattahoochee Commission (HCC) and five regional volunteer organizations (Alabama Sunrise Region, Southeast Alabama Trails, Tenn-Tom Tourism Association, Alabama Tombigbee Tourism Initiative and West Alabama Regional Alliance).

Extension's involvement and links to others involved in **regional tourism organizations** is the focus of this issue of *Action*. J. Thomas Chesnutt, Extension tourism specialist, is the coordinator for this issue. Other contributors are Beth Goodwin (NATA), Douglas C. Purcell (HCC), Jan Wood (Wetumpka Chamber of Commerce), Charles Simon (Covington County Extension coordinator), Kathy Shaw (Quest Marketing), Linda Vice (Alabama Tombigbee Tourism Initiative) and James Mock (University of West Alabama).

The next issue of *Action*, Summer 2005, will highlight the **Mississippi-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference**. For more information on these topics or suggestions for additional topics, contact the editor at (334) 844-3517, fax (334) 844-9022, or e-mail jchesnut@aces.edu.

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Editor
Extension Tourism Specialist

Regional Tourism Organizations

Tourism is one of the two largest industries in Alabama. Last year more than 18.9 million people visited Alabama, spending more than \$6.7 billion in the state. Travel industry expenditures represent about 3 percent of Alabama's gross state product. More than 148,000 jobs—7.9 percent of nonagricultural employment in Alabama—were directly or indirectly attributable to the travel and tourism industry, and more than \$432 million of state and local tax revenues were realized, primarily due to travel and tourism activities.

The travel and tourism industry is composed of several major components: attractions, hospitality services, shopping, professional organizations and marketing organizations. Obviously, the **attractions** are significant because they draw the tourists to Alabama. A second major component is the **hospitality services** segment that provides accommodations, food and beverages. The **shopping** component is important because much of the economic gain comes from tourists' expenditures at our shopping malls, antiques shops and outlet malls. **Professional organizations** provide the training, support and coordination for the leaders of the tourism industry.

Marketing organizations, although mentioned here last, are definitely not the least of the travel industry's components. Only in the movies can you operate on the premise that "if you build it, they will come." This is not Hollywood, this is real-world Alabama. The Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel is the state's primary tourism marketing organization and they do an

effective job of attracting visitors. However, communities cannot rely solely upon the state. Each community interested in including tourism as part of its economic development strategy must develop and implement a marketing plan. Yet, that marketing will not reach its full potential if it is done in a vacuum. To fully achieve our tourism potential, we must market regions of the state, not just individual communities and attractions.

There are a number of regional tourism organizations that are currently marketing multicounty regions. These range from two that have professional staffs to those that rely almost entirely on volunteers. Each of these organizations will be briefly highlighted in the remainder of this issue.

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Extension Tourism Specialist
Alabama Cooperative Extension System

North Alabama Tourism Association

The North Alabama Tourism Association represents the 16 northernmost counties in Alabama. The boundaries of this region touch Mississippi, Tennessee and Georgia. NATA is a membership organization with 475 members. Membership includes attractions, accommodations, restaurants and many other allied members.

NATA celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2004. The organization was set up by the legislature to promote tourism throughout the 16-county region. Funding is received through membership dues and a portion of the lodging tax from each member county.

Marketing the area to tourists is the focus of NATA's efforts. This is done through advertising, collateral materials,

brochure distribution, travel shows and media exposure. NATA is also involved in the legislative process, working to support economic development.

Advertising for NATA is done in publications with a strong presence in the southeastern United States. We offer cooperative advertising opportunities in many publications including *Southern Living*, *Country Living*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Bassmaster*, *Crappie World* and the *Alabama Bureau of Tourism & Travel's Guide to Travel*. These cooperatives allow members to purchase advertising in publications for a discounted rate.

Each year NATA produces several collateral pieces to help promote the region. The most important and widely used is the *North Alabama Official Visitor's Guide* (300,000 copies). Tear-off maps, group tour planners, shopping guides and outdoor guides are also produced.

Many of NATA's members are involved in the brochure distribution program. Brochure racks are maintained throughout the region in restaurants, hotels and attractions to provide visitors easy access to information about our members.

Each year NATA hosts several writers from large magazines and newspapers and attends seven travel shows that reach more than 1 million possible tourists.

For more information on NATA and the services provided, please visit the Web site, www.northalabama.org, or call (800) 648-5381.

Beth Bentley Goodwin
Vice President of Marketing
North Alabama Tourism Association

Chattahoochee Trace Commission

Organized in 1970, the Historic Chattahoochee Commission (HCC) serves 18 Alabama and Georgia counties along the lower Chattahoochee River in a region called the Chattahoochee Trace. In 1978, through an interstate compact approved by the U.S. Congress, the HCC became a state agency of both Alabama and Georgia. The mission of this agency is to develop the region's full potential for tourism and historic preservation through a multifaceted program of work that includes projects in agritourism,

heritage tourism, cultural tourism, genealogical tourism and nature-based tourism.

Notable projects include a publications program that has sponsored or co-sponsored 28 books and a historical marker program that now has more than 260 "messages in metal" about the people, places and events that have helped to shape the history of the lower Chattahoochee Valley. A Chattahoochee Trace Heritage Education Unit is in use at 42 schools in the region. The Chattahoochee Valley Folklife Project has spawned two publications and a major exhibition, which has been displayed at several bistate venues.

In 1988, the HCC spearheaded a project to develop the Chattahoochee Indian Heritage Center at Fort Mitchell. Since that time, more than \$1 million has been raised and the facility is now in service. Rural architectural studies and the Chattahoochee Valley Threatened Landmark Program have helped focus attention on significant historic commercial and residential structures that are part of the special character of this region.

Over the last 35 years, the HCC has printed and distributed millions of Chattahoochee Trace brochures and has successfully promoted the region. A major USDA rural development grant has launched the Chattahoochee AgriTourism Project to create effective economic development alternatives to conventional farming and traditional agriculture. This will be accomplished through the development of alternative agricultural land uses based principally on tourism. More innovative heritage tourism projects are in various stages of development.

Douglas C. Purcell
Executive Director
Historic Chattahoochee Commission

Alabama Sunrise Region

Alabama Sunrise Region, Inc. promotes community development in East Central Alabama.

In 1993, Alabama Cooperative Extension System agents, Chamber of Commerce directors and corporate representatives met to plan for promoting tourism and retirement assets in a group of basically rural counties—Calhoun, Clay, Cleburne and Talladega.

Joined several years later by Chambers, Coosa, Randolph, Tallapoosa, Autauga, Chilton, Elmore, Lee, Macon, Russell and, most recently, Montgomery counties, these areas are home to numerous locations that provide attractive tourist destinations. Realizing the necessity for promoting multiple locations surrounding a focal destination, these counties set about the task of identifying all of the assets in its multicounty area.

The ASR counties are traversed by I-20 on the north, I-65 on the west and I-85 on a portion of the south. These counties contain national forests, three Robert Trent Jones golf courses, a chain of fresh water lakes and several large rivers. Boating, fishing and other water-related activities are popular in the region. Turkey, deer and other game are plentiful and several notable hunting lodges are located in the Alabama Sunrise Region. With the recent inclusion of Montgomery County, the historical and cultural offerings were expanded from Civil War to Civil Rights. Centrally located to Atlanta and Birmingham, the region has favorable access to large tourist markets. This setting offers a rich choice of recreation, tourism and retirement possibilities.

The Alabama Sunrise Region is structured as a total volunteer organization with elected leaders who assume the responsibility of strategic planning, promotion, exhibition and evaluation. Representatives from ASR regularly attend promotional venues, such as Alabama Lifestyles Retiree Expo, Alabama Association of County Commissioners, leadership programs and Chamber of Commerce events. Since its initial production of a video, brochure and Web site (www.alasunrise.com), ASR's continuing growth is now regarded as an additional resource for economic and community development.

Jan Wood
Executive Director, Wetumpka Area
Chamber of Commerce
Past President, Alabama Sunrise
Region

Southeast Alabama Trails

This organization's roots began with a small multicounty group, the Lower Alabama Tourism and Retiree Association (LATRA), led by Dan Presley,

the Coffee County coordinator. Under the leadership of Sandra Coffey, who succeeded Dan Presley upon his retirement, this small group became the Southeast Alabama Trails (SEATS) organization. As SEATS, it was expanded to the counties comprising the southeast corner of Alabama, roughly bordered by I-65 and I-85.

Funding for this new organization came from several grants, but especially a major grant from the USDA. With new funding, SEATS was able to hire a full-time director, Lin Graham. Under her direction, SEATS developed several trails brochures, working for recognition of that corner of the state as an area for retirees or to just visit.

SEATS is continuing to explore new areas in tourism, such as historic preservation and agri-tourism. It is also working across the state line with Florida, especially the northern half of the bordering counties. Please take a look at the Wiregrass region of Alabama—you will be pleasantly surprised at what you find.

Charles Simon
Covington County Extension
Coordinator
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Co-Chairperson, SEATS

Action

Alabama
Communities
in Transition

Editor

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Extension Tourism Specialist



Action is published once each quarter by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

We would like you to share success stories in your community for inclusion in future issues of *Action*. Send to: J. Thomas Chesnutt, 218 Extension Hall, Auburn University, Alabama 36849.

Tenn-Tom Tourism Association

Although it's potential has yet to be fully recognized by those outside the industry, waterway tourism, the tourism of recreational boating, is one of the fastest growing in the country. Before 1994, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority was making some efforts in relation to tourism. It was at a tourism conference the organization sponsored that Bob Paulson with the Army Corps of Engineers approached the authority administrator, Don Waldon, with the idea of forming a regional tourism association made up of all the counties along the Tenn-Tom corridor.

With the commitment of several visitors and convention bureaus and the support of the Development Authority, the Tenn-Tom Tourism Association was birthed in 1994. It functions as a non-profit organization under the umbrella of the Tenn-Tom Waterway Development Authority. Agnes Zaiontz, office manager of the Development Authority, has seen tremendous growth in the organization. "There are 54 counties along the waterway from Kentucky to the Gulf Coast of Alabama, and almost all of them have representation in our organization."

The growth is due in large part to the tireless efforts of Zaiontz, who has served as the unofficial executive director of the Tenn-Tom Tourism Association for the past 10 years. Most recently, she has seen an influx of marinas join.

The association's marketing efforts are indeed its strongest offering. A broad range of promotional brochures is kept updated and is sent regularly to interested parties and other tourism organizations. In addition, the association has booths at the country's two largest boat shows each year. A Web site is maintained, serving as an online travel agency for boaters. The office also coordinates media placement in a number of boating and tourism publications. With the limited budgets found in most of the rural counties through which the Tenn-Tom flows, this marketing assistance is invaluable. It enables members to do far more together than they ever could do on their own.

Kathy Shaw
CEO, Quest Marketing
President, Tenn-Tom Tourism
Association

Alabama Tombigbee Tourism Initiative

This project covers rural southwest Alabama. The Alabama Tombigbee Tourism Initiative is sponsored by the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission, Ala-Tom Resource Conservation and Development (R C&D) Council and the Center for Economic Development at the University of Alabama. The program was designed for economic development in a rural area that has trouble attracting major industry because of the lack of infrastructure.

Tourists are attracted to the natural resources, history, heritage and hospitality of the area. This is the place where Alabama began. All the early history of the state took place in this area. A video was developed emphasizing these assets with Katherine Tucker Windham as narrator. This video was nominated for two national awards. The program has been in existence for only 3 years. In that length of time, the program has formed a network of tourism partners in the 10-county area who work together to develop special interest trails that tourists can follow through the region.

There are presently four trails available with printable maps on the Web site, www.alabamasfrontporches.org. These trails are an American Indian trail, a black history and heritage trail, an overall history and heritage trail and an antiques, uniques, and collectibles trail. There will be tear-off pads available in tourism sites and public places in the region as well. A companion site, www.blackbelttreasures.com, is being developed on which items including art, literature, crafts and food items made in the Black Belt will be offered for sale. Additional trails will be developed in the future.

There are several game preserves and recreational areas as well as hunting and fishing trails. There are nine sites listed in "Alabama's 100 Places to Eat Before You Die" that are located in the region. For more information about the area, call Linda Vice at (334) 636-5506 or e-mail at lvice@pinebelt.net.

Linda Vice
Director
Alabama Tombigbee Tourism
Initiative

West Alabama Regional Alliance

Since 2002, the West Alabama counties of Greene, Hale, Marengo, Perry and Sumter have been developing a regional alliance in an effort to collaborate in the areas of community and economic development. The West Alabama Regional Alliance is a grass roots initiative involving private sector individuals. In June 2003, it formalized itself in the Regional Center for Community & Economic Development, a partnership between the alliance and the University of West Alabama.

The alliance is organized into four working committees: economic development, education, marketing and tourism. "The tourism committee has made the greatest progress to date (of the four committees)," notes James Mock, director of the Regional Center. With a focus on heritage tourism, the

alliance's tourism committee has developed a regional brochure, has created a Web site (www.alabamacanebrake.org) and is in the process of applying for the Scenic Byways designation (with a proposed route that traverses all five of its member counties).

"In addition to the progress that the tourism committee is making for the alliance," states Mock, "the alliance, in general, has been collaborating with other organizations to promote rural tourism in Alabama. Under the leadership of the Alabama Power Company, the alliance participated in the formation of a hunting and fishing trail. It has also participated as a member of the Tourism Partners group (an initiative of the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission). And, it has been an active member in supporting and planning the annual Alabama/Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference."

The alliance is currently in the process of developing a tourism coupon booklet that will be available through its members' attraction sites and possibly placed at each of the state's welcome centers. In addition, it is beginning the process of developing various tourism trails (historic homes, churches, etc.) throughout its region.

James Mock
Director

Regional Center for Community & Economic Development
University of West Alabama

Visit the Community Resource Development home page at www.aces.edu/department/crd/



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