

Action

PUBLIC ISSUE INFORMATION FOR ALABAMA CITIZENS

FROM THE EDITOR

Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference

The tourism and travel industry is one of the two largest industries for both Alabama and our neighbor, Mississippi. Community leaders often believe that the tourism industry assists only the larger communities, not their small or mid-sized community. While travelers are obviously still going to the Disneys and Six Flags of the world, more and more are exploring less developed areas and participating in off-the-beaten trail activities that get them back to America's roots. The **Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference** was initiated to provide best practices to entrepreneurs and to assist community leaders in including tourism as part of their local economic development strategies.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Community Resource Development (CRD) unit publishes *Action* once each quarter. The goal of the CRD unit is to help people solve community problems, take advantage of opportunities and build on their assets. To accomplish this, 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 a tool we use to link community groups to Extension's resources. This issue represents links between Extension and Mississippi State University Extension Service, Tenn-Tom Tourism Association and local Chambers of Commerce.

Extension's involvement and links to others involved in the **Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference** is the focus of this Summer 2005 issue of *Action*. J. Thomas Chesnutt, Extension tourism specialist, is the coordinator for this issue. Other contributors are Anne Hamner (Fayette Area Chamber of Commerce), Agnes Zaiontz (Tenn-Tom Tourism Association), and Chance L. McDavid (Mississippi State University Extension Service).

The next issue of *Action*, Fall 2005, will highlight **leadership development**. Without effective leadership, Alabama's communities will be unable to meet the changing demands of the 21st century. 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

Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference

The fourth annual Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference was held this past fall in Decatur, Ala. The conference rotates between western Alabama and eastern Mississippi, with the 2005 conference to be held this August in Chotaw, Miss. (see details later in this issue). The focus is always on helping Mississippi and Alabama communities capitalize on tourism opportunities. This is accomplished by providing an optimal, high-value, low-cost educational experience for Mississippi and Alabama tourism professionals by securing speakers considered as recognized leaders in their fields.

The theme of a recent conference was Partnerships and Possibilities, which epitomizes the spirit of this excellent model of two states cooperating in a joint economic development venture. The leadership team for the conference includes the chair of the planning team and the chairs of the eight committees: educational sessions, marketing, facilities, sponsorships, exhibitors, hospitality, administration and evaluation. This past year, there were 25 individuals on the planning team, approximately half from Alabama and half from Mississippi. The chairs of the committees are also divided equally.

One of the desires was to keep the cost affordable to individuals on limited budgets. To assist in this effort, sponsors are sought to underwrite portions of the conference. The sponsors obtained for the past two conferences have included: Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Authority, Mississippi Development

Authority (Tourism), Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel, Mississippi State University Extension Service, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, North Alabama Tourism Association, Tenn-Tom Tourism Association, Appalachian Regional Commission, Tuscaloosa Convention and Visitors Bureau, Greater Starkville Development Partnership, Florence-Lauderdale Tourism, Aberdeen Visitors Bureau, Southern Living Magazine, Colbert County Tourism & Convention Bureau and Decatur-Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Attendance has grown from less than 50 participants to more than 120 for this two-day conference. Keynote speakers have included the tourism director for Southern Living magazine, director of the Mississippi Development Authority, CEO of Southeast Tourism Society and producer of "Discovering Alabama" (television show). The key to the conference is quality educational sessions covering topics such as historic preservation, agritourism, partnering across boundaries (city, county and state), budgeting on limited budgets, nature based tourism, Native American traditions, African-American sites, birding and sustainability.

The Rural Tourism Conference began in 2001 at Lake Tiak-O'Khata (near Louisville), Miss. The initial RTC in Alabama was held at Joe Wheeler State Park (near Rogersville) in 2002. Starkville, Miss., was the host for the 2003 RTC, and noted earlier, Decatur, Ala., held the 2004 conference. The state listed first in the conference title depends upon the

conference's location. Since the RTC will be held in Chotaw, Miss., this August, the formal title is the 2005 Mississippi-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference.

All of the conferences have been well received. Evaluations of recent conferences have yielded the following results through the use of a five-point Likert scale, with 5 being the highest rating.

Component Evaluated	Mean
Overall value of conference	4.5
Achievement of objectives	4.3
Speakers (overall)	4.3
Meeting facilities	4.7
Value for your money	4.3

Furthermore, the following comments have been received on the evaluation form under the "additional comments" section.

- This conference always gives me ideas I can begin to use immediately upon my return to my office.
- Overall this is an excellent meeting. This has a higher educational value than the State Tourism Conf (AL).
- The 2003 Rural Tourism Conference is one of the best I have attended. You had great speakers and program of work.
- It is one of the best. Thanks for keeping it affordable. Thanks! Good Job!!!
- This was my first year attending. I think it was very informative and I really enjoyed the conference, and I really learned a lot. Will definitely attend again.
- Kudos to the planning committee for continued improvement and growth of the conference.
- Informative conference. Wonderful networking opportunity.
- Thank you so much! It was great. I love how things were kept on time - I love the facilities!
- This is the BEST "nuts & bolts" conference of my year.
- Great job. Important resource.
- It is hard to choose from the sessions. I would like to attend all sessions. Maybe add another half day so attendees can attend all sessions. Thanks.
- Great conference and program.

Evaluation is a serious component of the conference. Participant evaluation forms are completed at the end of each conference and the results formally reported to the entire planning team. Beginning with that meeting, suggestions are reviewed and considered as committees are reformed and plans are initiated for the next annual conference.

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Extension Tourism Specialist
Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Participants Point of View

I have marked my calendar for August 29 and 30 to attend the Mississippi-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference at Pearl River Resort. I have attended this conference for the past two years and found it to be helpful as well as fun. Leaders from Alabama and Mississippi coming together to share ideas and look for ways to promote our individual communities is a positive thing.

The speakers and breakout sessions are always on timely subjects that have actually been submitted by the conference participants from the previous meeting. Not only are you receiving current information, but also you get ideas for speakers to use at your own meetings.

Alabama and Mississippi alternate as hosts for the meeting, so another good thing is that you get to visit towns and communities that you might not otherwise make the effort to visit. For example, at the Decatur meeting last year, we had the pleasure of visiting a beautiful farm that has a maze and pumpkin patch for school children and tourists to enjoy. We had a delicious barbecue dinner, some excellent music and good fellowship. It was an enjoyable evening.

Our goal is to look for ways to develop and promote our region's full potential for tourism through walking tours, agri-tourism, heritage tourism and special events promotion, etc. By sharing information and working together, we are better able to achieve this goal.

Anne Hamner
Executive Director
Fayette Area Chamber of Commerce

Sponsors Point of View

The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority and the Tenn-Tom Tourism Association have sponsored the Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference since its inception in 2001. We serve as the secretariats and members of the RTC planning committee. This meeting is important to the rural communities along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway in Alabama and Mississippi. Most of these communities have limited budgets to promote tourism in their area; however, these communities are rich in history and attractions.

The Rural Tourism Conference has proven to be a valuable educational tool for these areas through the use of speakers that address the possibilities of promoting their area on limited funding and networking with the larger area communities. One of the primary reasons we are sponsors is because through sponsorships we have been able to make this conference affordable for these rural communities.

Agnes Zaiontz
Executive Director
Tenn-Tom Tourism Association

Action

Alabama
Communities
in Transition

Editor

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Extension Tourism Specialist



ALABAMA COOPERATIVE Extension SYSTEM
Your Experts for Life

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.



Rural Tourism Conference

2005 Mississippi-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference

Make your plans now to attend the 2005 Mississippi-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference.

Dates: August 29-30
Location: Pearl River Resort
Choctaw, Miss.
Web site: www.aces.edu/rtc

The focus of the conference will be on educational sessions emphasizing rural tourism success stories. Half of the speakers will be from Mississippi and half from Alabama. The schedule and topics for the conference are as follows.

Monday, Aug 29th

- 10:00 – 12:00 Registration
- 12:00 – 1:30 Lunch & Keynote Speaker
- 1:45 – 2:30 Breakout Sessions (3)
 - Tourism development with very little resources (the Alabama-Tombigbee success story)
 - Agri-tourism attraction success story (a Mississippi success story)
 - Generating tourism through hunting and fishing (a Mississippi success story)
- 2:30 – 2:45 Break
- 2:45 – 3:30 Breakout Sessions (3) *[repeat of 1:45 sessions]*
- 3:30 – 4:15 General Session - Partnerships between local CVBs and rural areas
- 5:00 – 6:00 Reception

Tuesday, Aug 30th

- 8:00 – 9:30 Breakfast & Keynote Speaker
- 9:45 – 10:30 Breakout Sessions (3)
 - Building and creating tourism infrastructure (the Eufaula, Ala., success story)
 - Revitalizing downtown (the Moundville, Ala., success story)
 - Publicity venues
- 10:30 – 10:45 Break
- 10:45 – 11:30 Breakout Sessions (3) *[repeat of 9:45 sessions]*
- 11:30 – 12:15 General Session - 45 ideas in 45 minutes

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Extension Tourism Specialist
Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Mississippi Extension's Involvement

The Mississippi State University Extension Service is pleased to be one of the many agencies that help make the Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference a reality each year. Since the inaugural conference several years ago, MSU Extension has been actively involved in the planning process. Today, retired Extension Specialist Ron Walker continues to coordinate the evaluation process to ensure that the conference is meeting the needs of attendees each year.

It is an invaluable educational opportunity for residents and tourism organizations alike for East Mississippi and West Alabama. As a bistate effort, it gives MSU Extension another avenue to reach a diverse clientele base that is multiplied through the relationships we have with our neighbors to the east. Rural tourism challenges, concerns and successes are not isolated to just Mississippi or Alabama. Through our combined resources, Alabama and Mississippi are

able to put together a great learning experience that is timely and relevant for today's rural tourism training needs.

Quality community attractions are the foundation of a successful tourism program. As a community or region takes inventory of existing or potential attractions, such as festivals and events, natural resources, historical attractions and recreation opportunities, local leaders should be mindful that tourism is a highly competitive business. Successful local tourism efforts build on existing strengths.

The success of any business or community as a tourist destination also depends on the attitudes of those who come in contact with the visitor. Sales clerks, servers and service station attendants are as important as the receptionist at the local visitor's information center. Local officials and residents contribute to the overall appeal and image of the community as they go about their daily routines. Tourism hospitality is the responsibility of both individual businesses and the entire community.

I invite you to attend this year's Mississippi-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference to learn how to effectively showcase the unique attractions and experiences that exist in your region. Through a series of lectures, workshops and networking activities, you will likely learn ways that rural tourism development can work for your community.

Chance L. McDavid
Extension Associate, Community
Resource Development
Mississippi State University Extension System

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



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