



**GORGE**  
**TOURISM STUDIO**

# 12 Month Progress Report June 2017

Prepared for Travel Oregon by:  
Kathi Jaworski  
Write to Know Nonprofit Consulting  
Eugene Oregon  
[www.write-to-know.com](http://www.write-to-know.com)

# Gorge Tourism Studio 12 Month Progress Report

## CONTENTS

A. Introduction and Overview .....	2
B. Perceived Value and Impact of RTS: Survey and Interview Findings.....	3
C. Logic Model vs. Actual Activities and Outcomes .....	6
D. Promising Projects and Program Design Implications .....	9
 Appendix:	
Interviewees and Interview Questions .....	10

## A. Introduction and Overview

This report presents a progress assessment for the Gorge Tourism Studio (GTS) program in the Columbia Gorge region of Washington and Oregon, twelve months *after* workshop completion. It includes a summary of key findings from an e-survey of program participants six months ago, as well as information and interpretation from key stakeholder interviews and meeting records. Interviews were conducted in May and June 2017.

Adapted from Oregon's award-winning Rural Tourism Studio (RTS), the Gorge Tourism Studio convened representatives from the six counties with land in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Twenty-six different agencies and organizations signed on as partners. GTS consisted of six day-long workshops and several evening networking events between January and April 2016. The workshops were preceded by an extensive stakeholder survey on key issues and promising strategies, as well as a commissioned "Visitor Opportunities Study" to discern visitor motivation and satisfaction patterns. By design, the program included an intentional focus on destination management as well as destination development.

As with other Tourism Studios, the region also received a matching grant from Travel Oregon to implement specific projects. The region also received follow up technical assistance in the form of a full-time graduate level staff through the University of Oregon's RARE (Resource Assistance for Rural Environments) program, as well as consulting from experts in network-based collaboration.

Given the bi-state region's size and diversity, the national scenic area's complex land-use regulations, the destination's prominence as a world-class asset, and the challenges of managing crowding and congestion, the Gorge Tourism Studio was the most intensive and expensive Tourism Studio to date. While the Gorge is a unique area in many respects, it is not alone as a destination facing growth-related development challenges. Thus, the Gorge approach can potentially serve as a pilot for replication in other "over-loved" places.

The key findings are:

- This was already a high-capacity region, but its leaders and organizations are accomplishing far more than they could do alone.
- The vision and statement of intent has served as a useful touchpoint for navigating conversations about how to balance destination development and management.
- The network model for aligning and leveraging partner resources has advanced many projects beyond those directly funded by Travel Oregon.
- The trust built through interaction during the GTS workshops has facilitated tough but important conversations afterwards
- Communication mechanisms within the Alliance (especially across action teams) need refinement to go beyond "informing" toward "strategizing and leveraging."
- Communications with the wider community also needed, so that others can see (and support) the vision and its components.

## B. Perceived Value and Impact of RTS: Survey and Interview Findings

### E-Survey

In November of 2016, six months after completion of the RTS workshops, all participants received an electronic survey to gauge their short-term impressions of what aspects of the program had proven most useful and effective as the community moved into project implementation. While past Tourism Studio communities have generally experienced little *project implementation* success at the six-month mark, respondents reported tangible progress in the Gorge region at this benchmark. The e-Survey results, including comparisons with other RTS communities at the same stage of implementation, were summarized in a Six-Month Progress Report and those results are referenced in this report where appropriate.

Overall, respondents viewed GTS as highly impactful across both dimensions of program focus: increased personal engagement, and positive change in community conditions for tourism. Respondents also believe GTS played a key role in facilitating these changes, based on how they answered the question “Did the GTS affect any of the changes you noted in your answers to the prior questions? Please indicate the effect of the GTS program on a scale of 1(low) to 5 (high).” The perceived cause-and-effect was strong, with rankings, ranging from 3.08 to 3.85 on a scale of five.

Respondents were reported that all aspects of the program had lasting value for their work together after the workshops ended. The most valuable take-aways (by a slight margin given the overall high rankings) were:

- Connections with others in my community
- Connections with regional and statewide tourism development organizations
- Connections with expert presenters
- Development of a tourism action plan

The e-survey results, including narrative responses, suggested several specific areas for additional probing at the twelve-month mark.

- How is the action plan being implemented? How is the work of different action teams and participating organizations coordinated?
- The challenges of balancing the goals as articulated in the GTS “Statement of Intent” are real and remain difficult. Which are most challenging. How, if at all, has this affected participation, power and decision-making?

These questions were integrated into the interview questions as included in the Appendix.

### Interviews:

Action teams do not fit a one-size fits all format, and still they are effective.

- Except for the marketing team, which meets once a month in person, the other teams are smaller and more virtual. Team members actively apply their expertise and tap their networks to advance team projects.
- “We have a lot going on, but we don’t meet a lot. We use email and phone.” (Outdoor Recreation)

- Based on how ready their project ideas were for implementation, and the need for outside resources, three of the five action teams—Gorge Outdoor Action Team (outdoor recreation, Marketing and Culinary--received matching grant funds from the Travel Oregon matching grants.
  - “Project vetting was easy- a great process where each team vetted its top three ideas and others could comment.”
- The three funded projects—a video to educate the community and donors about the Towns to Trails project, a podcast series about Gorge history and culture building from Gorge-owned’s “Sense of Place” lectures, and a customer service training adapted from the WeSpeak program for front-line workers—were all completed early and enthusiastically received. Given the recent completion, however, their impact has not yet been assessed.
- The action teams demonstrated efficient use of resources. For example, “we were trying to not reinvent the wheel, so building off something that already existed made sense. And because our action team contacts had good contact lists from their past work, they publicized our events for us, reaching 600-700 households. (Culture, Heritage).
- As teams narrow their focus onto specific projects, it can be challenging to sustain everyone’s engagement: “As we got deeper in the implementation process, it was really just three of us who were heavily involved. We kind of lost the rest of the team. It’s time to reconnect with them as we move into other activities.”
- While the Culinary and Agritourism Action Team was not very active in the first year after GTS as its planned leaders were too busy with other commitments, this niche market nevertheless gained value-added from the efforts of the other action teams.
  - “The Towns to Trails project has generated interest and participation by culinary and agritourism ventures along the trails. New businesses are engaged as a result”.
  - “The Gorge Hub project grew out of the partnerships developed through the Ready, Set, Gorge initiative.”

Partners with pre-existing projects gained more support, legitimacy and capacity for action as a result of the Gorge Tourism Studio activities:

- Before GTS began, the Oregon Solutions Congestion Mitigation project was initiated by ODOT in response to Travel Oregon’s very successful Seven Wonders Campaign, which had worsened congestion in the Gorge. The project required complex planning and coordinate implementation across many jurisdictions, and included the “Ready, Set, Gorge” campaign to encourage car-free travel to and around the Gorge.
  - “It would be a discombobulated mess without GTS! Just getting people to talk and work beyond their jurisdictions has been incredible. The force of people coming together around congestion has also elevated cycling as a way of moving around the Gorge.”
  - The process brought Washington Dept of Transportation
- The geography of the GTS helped with ODOT’s Historic Columbia Highway work.
  - “Without this process, people from Troutdale would never know to speak to anyone from The Dalles.”
  - “We now have an organized group of advocates to address congestion, move folks eastward, promote transit and more. We’ve gained capacity through stronger partnerships-

- we applied for three larger grants and have been funded for all three to support increased transit.
- Since 2011, the non-profit Friends of the Columbia Gorge has been working on Towns to Trails, a visionary 200-mile loop system of trails that links natural areas with communities. One of the highest priorities in the National Scenic Area Management Plan, this project not only creates new tourism product to support inn-to-inn hiking, but also protects habitat and supports local economic development by bringing outdoor recreationalists into towns to eat, drink, shop and stay overnight.
    - “The project was known as a Friends of the Gorge project, which limited its community support as some see us as outsiders and/or controversial.” New GTS relationships, as well as the Travel Oregon-funded Towns to Trails video helped the Friends communicate the purpose and value of the project, resulting in The Dalles City Council passing a resolution of support as well as a Mosier winemaker working to purchasing a key parcel of land needed for the trail.
    - “While Friends of the Gorge is financially the backbone, it is now a regional community project.”

The Gorge Tourism Studio built a forum, and a level of trust, to address the inherent tensions in the **region’s vision and statement of intent for** destination management.

- “Is the Alliance more than a marketing organization? What is the balance between visitor education, management and marketing? It hasn’t been fully addressed, but we are using our 15-year vision to drive our priorities.”
- “Transit brings people to concentrated hot spots where there are already a lot of people: reducing cars could increase congestion there. Right now, what we have for car-free options serves people with limited mobility and challenge geeks.’ We are missing the middle.”
- “Because Washington lacks funding, leaders there seem more proactive about collaborating than some of the Oregon folks. You can see them reaching out, but some of the Oregon folks don’t reciprocate- I think this is because they don’t see all the value of collaboration beyond the bottom line.”
- “Will distributing use even work, or is that even a good strategy? Do we want more people in more far-flung areas that are harder to monitor and manage? We are already getting overflow use in at places that aren’t traditionally busy.”
- “The Columbia Gorge Fruit Growers have reached out to the network to help resolve issues around orchard spray and bicycling. They support bicyclists, but also need to operate their businesses.”
- “Those who have been engaged are beginning to understand land management issues. And it’s clear to me that we, as land managers, are part of an interconnected system. The actions we take have an effect on businesses. Th GTS helped us better see how we are linked.”
- Several interviewees remarked about the focus on solving problems and building understanding “The issues won’t go away, but we can talk about them without fear.”

The Alliance as a network of interested people and organizations has delivered value for participants. There is, however, as room to improve as a vehicle for fostering true collaboration that leverages all that the members can offer and increases the visibility of their work.

- “I really enjoy the meetings- everyone gets it, and really enjoys hearing what others are doing. They are involved because they care about the region. They want to spend time on things that have a future. We have no other platform for hearing what others are up to- it saves time and duplication. We can share resources, inspire, and help each other. Incredible value- that’s why I participate! “
- “The RARE coordinator really helped with coordination and information sharing, but we could do better in terms of leveraging support across the network e.g. getting the message out about “Hear in the Gorge.”
- “Basecamp is a place where people announce things vs. a platform for planning and connecting in strategic ways. With Basecamp, I don’t have a good sense of what the other action teams are doing until it is too late to help, support, or provide input.”
- “There’s a lack of coordination between the different groups- specifically to provide input on each other’s projects that would enable joint action. For example, we could all benefit from a coordinated approach to community outreach. We didn’t get information to pass around to our folks from the other action teams working on this. And vice versa- for example, we could post information about the podcasts at transit stops.”
- While they understand that the Alliance is still in its formative stage, several interviewees mentioned the need to reconnect with the broader local community. “I have been pushing for more regular press releases and updates, so that the community gets the big picture of what’s happening. When I talk to people, they know the video and the podcasts, but they aren’t aware of the connection to GTS!”

### C. Logic Model vs. Actual Activities and Outcomes

When the initial Rural Tourism Studio program was first being designed, Travel Oregon developed a “logic model” to identify the programs intended benefits and results as it unfolded in each host community over time. The chart below summarizes the key logic model milestones for the first twelve months of activities after the RTS workshops are delivered, and the associated progress indicators for the Gorge. Green shaded areas are meet or exceed milestones; yellow shaded areas have made good but incomplete progress, and red text areas represent areas of little or no progress.

Because the original logic model was designed for communities seeking to increase and develop tourism, rather than already-popular destinations for whom managing congestion and protecting fragile assets was the highest priority, the logic model framework does not fully line up with the expected long-term outcomes. Development of an updated model is planned for Fy17-18.

*Immediate outcomes* as per logic model:

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for the Columbia Gorge
Formation of action teams to move ideas and projects forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5 action teams formed at final GTS meeting: Outdoor Recreation, Cultural Heritage Tourism, Culinary and Agritourism, Car-Free Transportation, and Marketing</li> </ul>
Newer, more diverse mix of people involved with action teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Five different participating organizations took a leadership role in convening the action teams. 54 people signed up to participate in action teams.</li> </ul>
New awareness and knowledge of tourism development opportunities and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes, notably more knowledge about the diversity of tourism resources, and opportunities to disperse visitors to high quality, less crowded areas.</li> </ul>
New connections made across diverse sectors in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes, and highly valued as an outcome as per individual workshop evaluations and 6-month e-survey.</li> </ul>
Community in agreement on a vision for tourism in their area and critical next steps to move forward.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes, vision and statement of intent/guiding principles for action. This community was the first to develop such a “statement of intent” to confirm their common purpose and acknowledge the potential tensions in balancing these purposes. In agreement about intent, some differences in preferred strategies and/or timing.</li> </ul>
Establish deeper relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes. Particularly strong in building connections between Washington and Oregon organization. Formed the Columbia Gorge Tourism Alliance as a structure for collaboration.</li> <li>Mt Hood Territory (Regional Destination Management Organization) relationships still evolving, as the Alliance structure is shifting roles, responsibilities and resources.</li> </ul>

Short term follow-up *activities* as per logic model (3-12 months):

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for the Columbia Gorge
Action teams meet, grow, and make decisions on priorities and begin implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significant progress by Outdoor Recreation, Cultural Heritage Tourism, and Marketing Teams. The Culinary and Agritourism Team has not been consistently active, although as noted in prior section, agritourism operators are connecting with the Towns to Trails project that has been the initial Outdoor Recreation Team’s focus. The Car-Free Team has supported the Ready, Set, Gorge project.</li> <li>The action teams do not all meet regularly. This does not appear to hinder their productivity. New people have become involved in the action teams as well as at the Alliance level.</li> </ul>
Submittal of matching grant applications to Travel Oregon that reflect clear connections to goals of RTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Three action team projects including in the matching grant application. As noted below, all three initial projects have been completed. This is the first Tourism Studio region to achieve this rapid progress.</li> <li>Each project is aligned with RTS goals and the statement of intent.</li> <li>Projects</li> </ul>
Products from RTS completed (e.g. strategic plan, vision, asset inventory, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes, with the addition of the statement of intent.</li> </ul>
Follow up assistance provided from Travel Oregon, Regional Destination marketing organizations (RDMO), and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Full-time coordinator for two years starting Sept. 2016, secured from the University of Oregon’s RARE program, as part of formal collaborative with Travel Oregon’s Rural Tourism Studio.</li> <li>Consulting and facilitation assistance to develop a network structure to sustain collective action and coordination.</li> </ul>
Ongoing evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No local action cited yet, but yes by Travel Oregon</li> </ul>

Short term (3-12 months) *outcomes* as per logic model:

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for the Columbia Gorge
Visible synergy and momentum of action teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active planning for second round of projects, including leveraging new funding resources</li> <li>Action teams using Basecamp to share information internally: however, according to several interviewees, neither this nor the Alliance meetings have yet provided an adequate platform for intentionally coordinating and leveraging activities <i>across</i> action teams for synergy among projects. Culinary and Agritourism Team has attracted new members, but still has not gained traction.</li> </ul>
New projects underway or progress on pre-existing projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All three matching grant projects completed ahead of schedule: Hear in the Gorge podcasts (first 2 already released publicly); Towns to Trail information brochure; Customer Service training for front-line employees, adapted from the RTS WeSpeak program.</li> <li>While three of the five action teams had matching grant projects, the goals of all five teams were advanced by related partner projects and spin-off benefits; ReadySetGorge funding secured for congestion mitigation, transit and car-free travel promotional brochure; Towns to Trails project engaging culinary and agricultural businesses; and more. This reflects power of a common vision.</li> </ul>
Businesses are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wineries and restaurants buying into Towns to Trails project: Trail will cross three wineries</li> </ul>
Public and nonprofit support organizations are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hear in the Gorge podcast project is a perfect example</li> <li>New collaboratively-produced visitor guide for Gorge focuses on “hidden gems” and more dispersed locations</li> </ul>
New partnerships and new resources for tourism development, including more integrated relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal structure for Columbia Gorge Tourism Alliance as a network of key players at all levels.</li> <li>Funding strategy in place, and new resources already secured to fund second year of RARE coordinator. Funding from both Washington and Oregon stakeholders.</li> </ul>
Increased integration of tourism planning with other community and regional planning, other community and regional stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many partners involved in the Alliance beyond tourism-specific organizations, for example, Gorge Grown</li> <li>Columbia Gorge Commission support</li> <li>The Dalles City Council Resolution in support of Towns to Trails project</li> <li>Transportation and Land Management Agencies through ReadySetGorge work</li> </ul>

## D. Promising Projects and Program Design Implications

In a region grappling with its enormous popularity, world-class natural assets, and complex regulatory environments, coming together to build a destination management strategy has shifted the conversation toward creative, collaborative solutions. There are many success stories in the first twelve months. Some grew directly from the Gorge Tourism Studio, while others that pre-dated the Studio were advanced by GTS processes and partnerships.

### Promising projects to document include:

“Hear on the Gorge” podcast series.

- Aligns with so many parts of the statement of intent
- Roots outdoor recreation in the area with local culture and heritage
- A product that also resonates strongly with residents and builds community
- Built off an existing local success, “Sense of Place” and utilized the contacts of organizations involved with that project to publicize this one.

Towns to Trails video project

- Video has supported broader range of partnerships, including political and private investors
- Project has built links with culinary/agritourism businesses with an interest in tapping tourism opportunities
- Transformation from being strongly identified as the project of a single organization to a regionally supported and better understood community economic development project

Network formation-

- Ready, Set, Gorge as an example of productive network dynamics (described in report)
  - Capacity for Historic Columbia Highway
  - Increased cross-jurisdictional collaboration
- Value delivered in terms of bistate partnership, leveraging new financial resources to sustain effort. RARE partnership.

### Implications for program design:

- Statement of Intent is a strong anchor for collaboration and values-based decision-making.
- The network model is powerful, and worth continuing as an approach for all Tourism Studios.
- Paid coordination support for follow-up is essential, even in a high-capacity region. The RARE partnership should be institutionalized if possible
- Particularly for areas with complex tourism challenges, it may be worth integrating advanced program content around building agreement/finding common ground.
- Size of action team not correlated with their success. Small can be effective.
- Each team doesn't need a funded project if not ready for the initial Travel Oregon Matching Grant funding application deadline. Incorporating the concept of funding rounds helped with momentum, both in terms of encouraging the unfunded action teams and supporting longer term project concepts.
- The logic model needs updating to reflect destination management progress indicators.

## Appendix- Stakeholder Interview Questions

### Interviewees\*

Heidi Beierle	Car-Free Action Team; Bike tourism consultant and more
Lloyd DeKay	Cultural Heritage Tourism Action Team; Ice Age Flood Institute
Stan Hinatsu	Car-Free and Outdoor Recreation Action Teams; US Forest Service,
Lizzie Keenan	Marketing Team; Mt Hood Territory (Regional Destination Management Organization)
Amanda Lawrence	Cultural Heritage Team; Gorge-Owned
Sara Mercier	Coordinator; RARE
Kristin Stallman	Car-Free Action Team; Oregon Dept of Transportation
Renee Tkach	Outdoor Recreation Team, Friends of the Gorge

\*Was unable to interview key stakeholder Casey Roeder, Executive Director of the Columbia River Gorge Tourism Alliance due to an illness in her family. Two other intended interviewees were unavailable.

### Questions

- About the process
  - What's been happening since GTS ended- overall and with your action team?
  - How often do you meet? How do you work?
  - Have you been able to sustain your momentum? Have new people become involved?
  - How connected is the work of the various action teams? Do you feel well informed about the whole?
- About the matching grant
  - Was it hard to come to agreement about priority projects? Was the application process smooth?
- About the six-month e-survey findings
  - What contributed to the large gains in collaboration? What are specific examples of those connections yielding benefit?
  - How is the action plan being implemented? How is the work of different action teams and participating organizations coordinated?
  - There were some comments in the e-survey about "tensions" that still needed to be resolved. Do you agree, and what are areas of potential tension from your perspective? How, if at all, has this affected participation, power and decision-making?
  - Has the vision and statement of intent served as a useful guide?
  - What has been done since the GTS ended to keep workshop participants and the community engaged, and what yielded results?
- About the accomplishments to date
  - What stories are emerging?
    - What helped with success?
    - What's been challenging?
- Outlook for future, lessons for other communities and next steps