

Wild Rivers Coast Rural Tourism Studio
Sixteen Month Progress Report
June 2015



RURAL TOURISM STUDIO

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A. Introduction and Overview

This report presents a progress assessment for the Rural Tourism Studio (RTS) program in the Wild Rivers Coast (WRC) region. This region includes Curry County and the southern part of Coos County, starting at Bandon and extending south to the California border. The RTS program workshops commenced in October 2013, and wrapped up in January 2014.

In August of 2014, 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. Based on past RTS experience, communities don't tend to make breakthroughs on their projects until at least a year after the workshops, so there is generally little *project implementation* success to report at the six month mark: this was also true for the Wild Rivers Coast region. 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.

The RTS program design was significantly modified and intensified for this region, which despite its rich tourism assets, has been historically fractured and economically distressed. Furthermore, this RTS involved a close partnership with a local grant maker, the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance, which provided significant additional leadership, financial and in-kind support throughout the process through RTS and other projects. Design modifications included:

- Extensive community outreach and tourism asset inventorying in the Spring of 2013
- Formal coaching after the workshops
- Grant writing assistance after the workshops (WCRA)
- Market research through a visitor intercept survey in August 2014 to increase understanding of the region's visitor profile and establish baseline market data (WCRA)
- Stipends for critical community-based leadership roles on action teams WCRA and TO cost-share)
- Project implementation funds from Travel Oregon of \$20,000, matched by the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance- double what prior RTS communities have received
- Establishment of a dedicated Wild Rivers Coast page as a designated sub-region of the Oregon Coast on the Travel Oregon visitor website.

This report is based on stakeholder interviews conducted 16 months after the end of the Rural Tourism Studio workshops, in June 2014. The interviews had originally been scheduled for 12 months after the RTS program, and interviewees were asked to compare the current status of their tourism projects with what it had been 4 months earlier. **At the twelve month mark, which is the normal schedule for this progress report, the region's progress did not look very different from past RTS communities, despite the increased resources. However, the value of the intensive support, especially community coaching, is clear at sixteen months: there is tremendous momentum and visible achievements in product development to report.**

This report draws on phone or in-person interviews with several steering committee members and other key stakeholders as recommended by Travel Oregon. Interviews were conducted in June of 2015. The Appendix includes a summary of key interview questions.

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

Well over 100 community members participated in RTS activities, far more than in any past community; counting the networking sessions held in the spring, over 150 participated. Between 48 and 66 people attended each workshop. Furthermore, there was no downturn in attendance over the course of the RTS workshops—the final teaming workshop attendance attracted 56 attendees, which was far higher proportionately than for past communities.

The e-survey at six months post-RTS shows strong evidence that RTS has led to positive change on most short term parameters in the logic model. RTS had a positive impact on all variables related to the level of personal engagement in future tourism development, and on all community conditions related to tourism.

All of the indicators related to personal engagement in tourism development improved (by between 8% and 54%) after the RTS workshops. In terms of level of personal engagement, the three indicators (of 6) that changed the most were:

- Knowledge of emerging market opportunities (54%)
- Awareness of assets and resources (+36.2% change)
- Knowledge of sustainable tourism development principles (+36.0% change)

Compared with past RTS communities, the starting level of personal engagement in tourism development was average, with the exception of two factors which were both above average: “current level of involvement with tourism development” and (most strikingly) “commitment to take action.”

The Initial “commitment to action” here was the highest of any RTS community to date. This could be a result of RTS design changes: the extensive community outreach and vetting for this region, the presence of a local funding partner, the broad participation in community networking and asset mapping prior to the workshops, and or other program design factors that differed from past RTS communities.

Interviewees felt that while the above were all potential contributing factors, there were three main reasons they cited first:

- Recognition and appreciation of the commitment by Travel Oregon and the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance; it was contagious
- Attracting the right people into the room, formal and informal leaders who cared about community well-being
- Reaching a threshold of desperation about continuing economic decline, and willingness to try new things. “We were ready.”

In terms of their starting level of community conditions, WRC respondents rated themselves lower, on average, than past RTS communities. However, compared with most other communities, they ranked their starting capacity to attract new and repeat visitors as strong.

All of the indicators related to community conditions for future tourism development improved positively (by between 15% and 75%) after the RTS workshops. In terms of community conditions related to tourism, the four indicators (of 12) that changed the most were:

- Level of collaboration (+74.3%)
- Clarity of community vision for tourism development (+69.4% change)
- Clarity of action plan (+63.9)
- Clarity of community priorities (+54.6%)

This is the second consecutive RTS community (following South Lincoln County) to report “level of collaboration” as the single most significant change. This has been a major focus of RTS’ original design and program modifications. **Also of note, respondents’ perception of “local political support for tourism” grew 41.6% stronger, by far the greatest change noted in any RTS community to date.**

In terms of **factors influencing increased collaboration**, interviewees cited the following:

- Building on the base of Ford Institute, Rural Development Initiatives, local food systems planning and MainStreet relationships that already existed across communities
- Getting the right people in the room for the networking sessions, based on the leadership developed above
- Being galvanized by the RTS experience to not only work on common projects, but toward an inspiring common vision that was compelling
- Learning how much we had in common

In terms of **factors influencing increased political support**, interviewees noted the following:

- Lots of outreach to provide data about the economic impact of tourism, conveyed by Travel Oregon directly, and by WCRA staff in speaking engagements. WCRA drew heavily from the Baseline Report developed at the start of the Rural Tourism Studio
- People with political influence participating directly and authentically in the process
- Desperation and desire by elected officials to be associated with positive developments
- Interviewees do not all agree that political support has increased.

Here are some survey and interview quotes about the **positive accomplishments**:

- *While we had worked on some regional projects, we weren’t moving in a common direction yet. I don’t think we’d be where we are without RTS. The process was THE instigator for bringing us together to work regionally*
- *. . . The thread to weave all these projects together into something bigger.*

- *Travel Oregon, through the RTS process, tirelessly explained the value of the tourism economy- not just economically but also socially and quality of life. People were converted:*
- *We developed a great relationship with Travel Oregon; the staff are genuine, caring and full of expertise*
- *WRCA's role was critical: shepherding us like a "herd dog"- and kindly keeping is on track, (and of course funding!)*
- *The coaching was invaluable. When the workshops concluded, we had continual meetings, but no action, just notes and ideas. Jon-Paul listened, helped us sort through our ideas, and develop action plans. Also brought capacity to cut through red tape and troubleshoot.*
- *We were surprised how much interest there was in farmers, restaurants and chefs getting to know one another, and then in farmers organizing a trail for tourists. Just bring people together had an amazing effect. The Bandon Chamber is assisting the with the farm trail project, even though it is located in Curry County.*
- *It was very helpful to have Travel Oregon's assistance with finding models and resources for our digital map project.*
- *While we still have not figured out the regional structure for marketing the Wild Rivers Coast (size of region, who is represented and how, etc.), we are further along than at the start of RTS, and beginning to feel more connected with the Oregon Coast Visitors Association than we were before. New OCVA Chair is Jodi Fritts from Gold Beach.*
- *The structure for working together—steering committee, action teams, and action team lead coordinating meetings—seemed to work well for keeping us connected and informed.*
- *When I go to these meetings, I feel good when I come out- we get things done, we all have the same vision, and I feel like I am doing good things for my community*
- *We discovered that Bandon and Curry County really did have a lot in common around our assets for tourism (more so than what Bandon has in common with the rest of Coos County, and it is worth continuing to work together.*
- *Connecting with the scenic bikeway project has created a buzz about tourism.*
- *The RTS process engaged the community in asking each other for permission to pursue tourism- a big change of identity whose time has come.*
- *Bandon Dunes is supporting an increase in the County-wide lodging tax in Coos County- this is unusual for a business to do, and it reflects how tourism is being better understood as an economic driver.*
- *If you had asked me in February (a year after RTS), I wouldn't have been as positive- that was when we were in the grind stage, we were tired of getting together and just pushing. Now, focused on a product and seeing results.*

The personal interviews and the email survey also reveal some challenges. Here are some quotes about the **challenges to achieving additional progress.**

- *I struggled with understanding "What is a product?" or how to turn an idea into a good product- didn't feel I had mastered that by the end of the workshops. When it came to the grant application, I wasn't sure what kinds of projects would be acceptable to Travel Oregon.*
- *I know they wanted us to be creative, but more parameters would be helpful.*

- *We don't really have the expertise we need to develop and implement a top notch regional marketing plan- could use advice and assistance*
- *The transition between the end of the workshops and the launch of the action teams seemed abrupt- not enough time to get clear on our roles and priorities before we were on our own. Wish we could have been weaned more slowly. We lost momentum as we floundered for a few months.*
- *We love the Ford Institute, and the local leaders who participated in that added to our community capacity for sure. But the leadership model- the emphasis on consensus, flipcharts and lots of "kumbaya" process doesn't really work for the business community- it feels cumbersome and painfully slow. That may be why business people did not sustain their participation for the most part. We need a middle group- I found it incredibly frustrating*
- *Brookings did not participate as much as we hoped, though mainly because of internal conflicts within that community. Not much we could have done to reach out to them.*
- *The Wild River Coast brand is gaining traction, but a new staffer for Curry County has introduced a Curry County-only brand that is counterproductive to our efforts (even though County participated in RTS). We are working to connect and align, but have not succeeded yet.*
- *Overall, participation in action teams has shrunk, but we hope our initial successes will bring some back.*
- *While WRCA has been a great resource, having them lead an action team (WRCA leading the marketing team by default) is not ideal- it stifles conversation sometimes because no one wants to question ideas proposed by the funder.*
- *The technology for communication among ourselves- website, googledocs, basecamp- feels unwieldy. As time went on, harder and harder to find what I needed. An area for improvement.*

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 intended benefits and results of the program 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 indicators of progress for the Wild Rivers Coast** during this time period. The rows shaded in green show milestones that have been completely met. The yellow rows show milestones where some notable progress has been made, even if incomplete. Red rows indicate milestones and activities that have stalled.

In the case of the Wild Rivers Coast, the majority of milestones have been fully met, and there are no areas in which activity has totally stalled. Given the pattern observed here and in past RTS communities, **the logic model should be changed in terms of its assumption that productive action teams will grow in size within a year of their formation.** The more typical pattern is that participation actually shrinks initially in action teams, depending on the specific project that gets selected as a priority, and/or as some participants realize they cannot give the time required. WRC Interviewees predict that after visible project successes, more past RTS attendees and new people will come on board to help with future projects; this has been a pattern in several past RTS communities.

Immediate outcomes as per logic model:

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for Wild Rivers Coast
Formation of action teams to move ideas and projects forward	4 teams formed at final RTS meeting: events, outdoor recreation, marketing and agritourism (“Eat Fresh and local”).
Newer, more diverse mix of people involved with action teams	While the action teams have not grown in size since the end of RTS, the Outdoor Recreation team has 2 members who were not involved in RTS, and the Eat Fresh and Local team is primarily new people.
New awareness and knowledge of tourism development opportunities and resources	Yes, as evidenced by the e-survey results. Increased Knowledge of emerging market opportunities (54%), and awareness of assets and resources (+36.2% change)
New connections made across diverse sectors in the community	Yes, stronger relationships between cities especially. City officials advocating for each other’s projects (e.g Brookings Mayor and past chair of Port Orford Port promoting scenic bikeway together, Bandon Chamber of Commerce assisting Curry County Farm Tour promotion, and more.
Community in agreement on a vision for tourism in their area and critical next steps to move forward	Yes, vision developed through RTS, refined at final workshop, used as guide for grant application and action team priorities
Establish deeper relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	The connections were extremely poor between regional and local players, and quite new with Travel Oregon when RTS started. While the regional structure is still in flux, the relationships are far stronger and more collegial.

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

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for Wild Rivers Coast
Action teams meet, grow , make decisions on priorities, begin implementation*	3 now actives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor recreation- 8-10 core members • Eat Fresh and Local- 6-10 core members • Marketing- 4 core members + Travel Oregon coach “Events” is inactive- original chair had to withdraw due to health; new lead on board and recruiting for first event; grand opening of the new Wild River Coast Scenic Bikeway in October
Submittal of matching grant applications to Travel Oregon that reflect clear connections to goals of RTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Done with assistance from contracted grantwriter. • Matching funds provided in their entirety by local funder (Wild Rivers Coast Alliance); no delay due to having to raise \$ from multiple sources • Implementation well underway.
Products from RTS completed (e.g. strategic plan, vision, asset inventory, etc)	Yes, with most extensive asset inventory to date. Networking sessions held prior to RTS workshops, and mapping by Travel Oregon staff, gave the inventory a jump-start.
Follow up assistance provided from Travel Oregon, Regional Destination marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, more intensively, through coach funded by Travel Oregon with regular on-site presence.

organizations (RDMO), and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of Wild Rivers Coast sub-regional page on Travel Oregon visitor website. • Assistance with best practices (e.g. mapping) and models from TO staff. • Stipends provided to action team leads. • Assistance with facilitating more effective RDMO roles for the region- still underway. • Local grantmaker, Wild Rivers Coast Alliance, key investor in capacity and projects • Oregon Coast Visitors Association working on project to engage public land managers in tourism development, along the coast but with initial concerted effort in the WRC region
Ongoing evaluation	Market intercept study in August 2014 to build baseline data for evaluation. Funded through TO.

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

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for Wild Rivers Coast
Visible synergy and momentum of action teams	Absolutely. Yes. But at 12 months, was not true. Last few months have been breakthrough months; coaching seen as critical factor
New projects underway or progress on pre-existing projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of scenic bikeway designation- (pre-existing project) • Digital outdoor recreation map • North County Farm Tour has been organized as a result of connections made through RTS “Meet and greet” events for farmers, restaurants and chefs.
Businesses are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing of new products and markets by farms and restaurants, but results not clear yet
Public and nonprofit support organizations are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenic bikeway grand opening scheduled for October • Farm tours above = nonprofit and private sector partnership
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"> • New Tourism Marketing Plan for City of Gold Beach Visitors Center reflects regional priorities and brand. • New established independent Curry County brand an issue- disconnected from work of Wild Rivers Coast product and brand identity • RDMO structure still in development: possibility of a sub-regional affiliate. • Gold Beach City Administrator new chair for OCVA.
Increased integration of tourism planning with other community and regional planning, other community and regional stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism not yet seen a central driver for economic development, but Wild Rivers Coast Alliance and others are actively promoting to wide range of audiences, with data from baseline report and market information from Travel Oregon and local analysis. • Wild Rivers Brand adopted by other projects in region e.g. Healthy Forest Initiative

D. Follow up Opportunities, Promising Projects, and Program Design Implications

Travel Oregon and the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance have done a wonderful job in providing follow-up support to this region, in terms of general communication as well as resources for action team leader stipends, a contractor to assist with grant writing, a “boots on the ground” coach, web presence and more, as indicated in Section A. This assistance provided through this partnership is recognized and highly appreciated.

Opportunities for followup on the Wild Rivers Coast (none of which will surprise Travel Oregon!)

- This region could be considered as a pilot for more intensive agritourism development, should that initiative become a priority of the Oregon Agritourism Network.
- Engaging public land managers around tourism development in a sufficient and sustained way has been challenging in several RTS regions, including this one. OCVA is working on strengthening these relationships along the coast, with an initial focus on the South Coast. This is an opportunity for further collaboration with Travel Oregon and the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance.
- Both Travel Oregon and Wild Rivers Coast Alliance are deeply involved with OCVA in crafting a functioning structure for regional collaboration that is complementary to the RMDO structure, but focused locally and funded sustainably. This will require continued intensive involvement.
- The coaching role has been extremely valuable, highlighted by most interviewees without any prompt question. However, the coach role on the marketing team is viewed more as a leadership/driving function rather than coaching. It is worth considering if this is the best way for Travel Oregon to support the technical assistance needs of the region around marketing, since the coach role is a temporary one.
- When the coaching role is scaled back at some future point, aim to wean the community slowly rather than an abrupt ending, to preserve momentum and ensure a smooth transition to full self-management.

Promising Projects to Document as Case Studies

The two current action team projects look very promising in terms of yielding useful, inspiring lessons for other communities.

- Creating a digital trails map- the decision to go all-digital first; the delicate balance of deciding what should be on the map and what should not (e.g. local surf spots, delicate natural areas, etc); negotiating with public land managers about infrastructure for access; the process of translating the [NW Coast Trail map project](#) to the local context; and the development of (what is hoped to be) a sustainable business model for revenue generation to pay the costs of updating and distribution.
- Creating a successful “meet and greet” event for farmers, restaurants and chefs as a vehicle for building awareness of tourism product development opportunities, and parlaying that interest into new products such as the Wild Rivers Coast Farm Trail in northern Curry County. This case study would also capture what messages resonated with local food system stakeholders and the tourism industry as mutually beneficial?
- Partnering with local philanthropy to invest in tourism development; building trust, making the case, roles to be played as the initial “backbone” structure, measures of success

- As a pilot project, the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance is separately funding a revamp of the Bandon Chamber of Commerce website to automate much of the information flow between local assets, the Chamber, its regional marketing partner and Travel Oregon. This is potentially another promising practice worth documenting for other RTS communities, as an example of a streamlined marketing system.

Implications for program design

- Nearly all interviewees identified the need for coaching support to happen earlier in the action team process, to head off the months of floundering that they experienced. At the same time, they recognize the need to take ownership of their own success, and don't want to create overreliance on a coach. Perhaps the coach could be available to action teams at regular, structured intervals in the first 3 months after the RTS workshop to help truly launch the action teams with a plan; then a planned gap during which the local action teams start implementation and complete some short term tasks before additional on-call coaching is offered.
- The stipend for action team leads is seen as a critical factor for the progress achieved to date. Several interviews complimented the decision to offer stipends after the teams began their work, rather than upfront, to ensure that the most active and committed person, rather than the one with the most interest in a contract, would surface as the appropriate lead.
- Data is used. Information from the visitor survey, Travel Oregon's market data, and the Baseline Assessment (which was specifically cited as valuable) was used for building positive public awareness of tourism's economic impact in the community. Maximize reference back to this information as a communications resource throughout the workshops.
- Leadership model- Recognizing that RTS borrows and builds upon many elements of the Ford Institute Leadership Program, and that this is not universally appreciated, conduct a review of the modules with an eye toward making the format more business friendly, without losing the benefits of shared leadership and decision-making where appropriate.
- Over time, the RTS curriculum seems to have shifted to place more emphasis on tourism *product* development, even though it started with an intentional focus on destination development. This is not a bad thing, but there may be need for more workshop content on the basics of product development- what is a product, how do you go about surfacing product development opportunities, how do you know if you have a good product idea, are there any generalizable steps etc. Many interviewees mentioned this as a knowledge gap that contributed to their "floundering" before Jon-Paul began working with them and helping with these very questions many months after the workshops ended. Perhaps the "Progression of Economic Value" concept used in the agritourism niche module could be pulled into the skill workshops, or otherwise illustrated more intentionally through all the workshops with examples.
- The kinks that early RTS communities experienced with the grant application process and the organizational structure for implementation seem to have been resolved well. There is no great need to tinker with what was landed upon for the Wild Rivers Coast- it worked quite well.

Appendix- Stakeholder Interview Questions

Interviewees:

Harv Shubothe	Greater Bandon Association and Ford Family Foundation
Jim Seeley	Wild Rivers Coast Alliance
Marie Simonds	Wild Rivers Coast Alliance
Jodi Fritts-Matthey	Gold Beach City Administrator, Oregon Coast Visitors Association
Frank Burris	OSU Extension Service
Larry Becker	Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
Tyson Raser	Port Orford Ocean Resource Team
Cathy Boden	Curry Watersheds Partnership
Kim Hunter (brief)	Rogue-Siskiyou National Forest
Julie Miller	Bandon Chamber of Commerce
Karen Auburn	Port Orford Mainstreet Program
Marcus Hines	Oregon Coast Visitors Association

Questions

While this looks like a long list of questions, stakeholders generally answered most C and E as they answered Section A. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes.

A. Status

1. Tell me about what's been happening related to tourism since the RTS program workshops concluded in January. (What are the projects and how are you involved?)
2. Tell me about the grant application? Any tough decisions there, or was it easy to agree?
3. How have you used your vision statement?
4. Have you experienced any breaks in momentum: tell me about that.
5. *What would you have said differently about your progress had I called you in February (the 12 month mark)?*

B. Organization

6. Is your action team active? *Focused, energized, effective, # of people, new people, frequency of meeting?* Are there enough members to be productive?
7. Are you satisfied with its progress so far? How much do you know about the work of action teams that you are not personally involved with? Are you satisfied with how much information you have about what is happening across projects?
8. Is the overall steering committee active? Well connected with the work of the action teams? What is it doing that is important for your future success?
9. What support do you need, if any, to help your steering committee and/or action teams be effective going forward?
10. Do you think the tourism action teams are connected to other initiatives in the community?

11. What changes do you see in the overall level of involvement in tourism development after RTS (*who is involved, how many people are involved, new people*)? Do you see a link between RTS and that change? How connected are tourism development initiatives across the region?

C. Changes in Program Design

12. Did you participate in the networking sessions that preceded the RTS workshops? How useful/important did they turn out to be?
13. How critical was the grant writing and coaching assistance? Was it timely? Impact?
14. How critical were the stipends paid to the Action Team leads? Impact?

D. Changes in personal commitment and community conditions (as derived from the results of the six month progress report's e-survey for this particular RTS community)

15. Participants rate the increase in collaboration and the amount of collaboration after RTS as higher than any previous RTS community? Do you agree, and what do you see as the cause and effect? What specific changes have you seen, if any?
16. Participants also rate the local increase in political support as very significant. Do you agree, and what do you see as the cause and effect? What specific changes have you seen, if any?
17. Finally, this community started with the highest level of "commitment to take action" or any RTS community to date. Do you agree, and what do you see as the cause and effect?

E. Outlook and Next steps

18. What are you most excited about in terms of RTS each project or tourism development in general?
19. Do you have any concerns about challenges that the projects or tourism development in general will face? *Scale, energy, etc*
20. Is there anything else that Travel Oregon could do now to help you succeed?