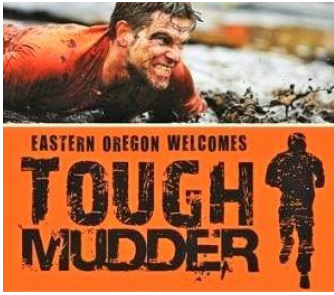


John Day River Territory: Tough Mudder Event



THEME: A really small town surprises itself when a really big event arrives on its doorstep. The tiny community of Fossil Oregon, population 466, successfully hosts an extreme sporting event that drew 5-6,000 visitors on a single weekend in June 2013. Creative and collaborative mobilization of expanded visitor services for the weekend is the key to success.

PROJECT IMPACT:

While the long term impact of this recent project is not yet clear, there are a number of anecdotal impacts already visible. These include:

- Favorable reviews of community from the Tough Mudder national organization, with possibility of repeat event hosting in future years.
- Raised the profile of the area as a great destination to a large audience. Many Tough Mudder participants stayed in the area for 2-3 days because of its remoteness, and many participants and spectators indicating plans to return to the area with friends and family.
- Community learned it could host such a large gathering, and that some of its “taken for granted” cultural characteristics (friendly, safe, etc) were noticed and appreciated by visitors as real assets.
- Schools were able to raise \$5,000 for scholarships and sports teams raised another \$7,000, by offering visitor services such as camping sites, showers, and food concessions,
- Local sourcing of services and employment

The Rural Tourism Studio was loosely connected to the project through its role in building new relationships among tourism stakeholders throughout the John Day River Territory Region, including its support in building a structure for collaboration among marketing entities.

PLACE:

Located in the north-central part of Oregon, the four-county John Day River Territory includes Sherman, Gilliam, Wheeler and Grant counties. Like many areas along the Columbia River, it is located in the ancestral territory of many tribes, including the Columbia River Tenino and Wyam, Nez Perce, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservations, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation, Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakima Indians, and the Northern Paiute. The Oregon Trail passes through Gilliam and Sherman Counties. This part of the region was first settled by non-Indian pioneers starting in 1858.

Fossil is located in Wheeler County, in the southeast part of the John Day River Territory. Wheeler County, with a population density of just .8 people per square mile, is one of the most sparsely populated counties in the state. Its terrain is varied and rugged, including parts of two national forests (Ochoco and Umatilla) and internationally known geological features such as The John Day Fossil Beds and the Painted Hills. The John Day River in the region is a nationally designated wild and scenic river.

The area's economy has long been dependent on natural resource-based activities and it is subject to swings in commodity prices. Throughout the region, there has been a concerted effort to expand marketing and develop new tourism products that highlight cultural/heritage resources, outdoor recreational opportunities, and agri-tourism. Tourism is still a relatively small part of the regional economy, with the most product currently centered on Grant County adjacent to the Fossil area.

STORY:

The Oregon Sports Authority had been working with the national Tough Mudder (TM) organization to local a suitable site for TM's inaugural event in Oregon. Given the unique site requirements for a 10-12 mile extreme obstacle course that could handle 5000 participants, the search was difficult. Finally, unsuccessful for two years in finding such a site within a two hour radius of Portland (that distance from an international airport was an initial search criteria), organizers expanded the search geography. Wilson Ranches Retreat in Fossil turned up in a google search.

Thus, out of the blue, Nancy Wilson received a phone inquiry in February 2013, and while she didn't recognize the "Tough Mudder" name, her daughter Kara Wilson Anglin was already an enthusiastic fan. She knew that Tough Mudder already operated in 44 states, and supported the Wounded Warriors Project as well as local charities in the host communities they visited. She began negotiations, and within a matter of weeks, the event was confirmed for June, with less than three months to organize. Kara estimated that her family dedicated 40 hours a week for ten weeks straight to pull it off.

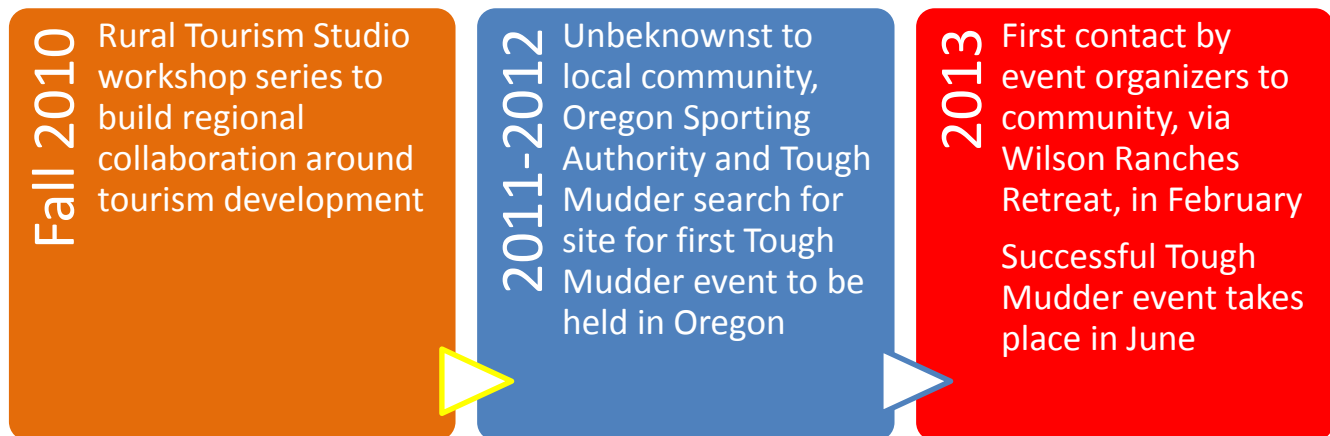
The initial community reaction to the impending event was mixed, from excitement about the possibilities to resentment about the lack of a formal community buy-in process to fear of failure. As Wheeler County Commissioner (and hotel owner) Anne Mitchell, recalls, "Though we recognized a great opportunity, the concern was 'what if we screw up'? That could hurt tourism for a long time, and give a bad impression. Some people were also a little off-put about the event that seemed just thrust upon us. Why weren't we in the community consulted?"

While the community had hosted Cycle Oregon with success in the past, this event posed the challenges of being larger, longer in duration, and less centralized in terms of coordination. But a series of grass-roots meetings sponsored by Wilson Ranches Retreat as well as the Tough Mudder planning team allayed most fears. The Chair of the Wheeler County Board of Commissioners was also an active advocate and troubleshooter for the project.

Wilson Ranches Retreat consciously choose to maximize economic opportunities for its community rather than centralize all visitor services through its own business. According to Kara, "We elected not to allow camping on the ranch- we wanted the opportunity for others within town to benefit. The school hosted campers, allowed showers, and made \$5,000 for scholarships. Sports teams ran concessions at the event and earned another \$7,000." Other landowners and lodging property owners in Wheeler County and the adjacent Condon area organized temporary shelter and other services to support the large influx of visitors.

On the event weekend, things went smoothly. According to Anne, the only reported "traffic jams" were at the bars: the low capacity of bar seating meant that racers had to stand on line and wait for their beers! One restaurant that had been shuttered, Big Timber, reopened as Country Café just for the event, and based on their positive experience, decided to stay open through the summer. "Without exception, every guest was delightful," said Anne. "We are all pleasantly surprised—in fact, we are still in shock and awe that we did it. What a fantastic opportunity it was for us! If Fossil can do it, anyone can do it!"

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- Vet the event sponsor beforehand. In this case, Tough Mudder lived up to its reputation as being a great, community minded partner
- Use events as an opportunity to support entrepreneurs and community groups to offer goods and services to visitors, rather than trying to over-centralize planning for all the different services that will be needed.
- Work with the event sponsor to anticipate and reserve lodging for the key people they need to bring in to make the event a success. In Fossil, local EMT and security capacity was taxed because there was not enough lodging for Tough Mudder's contractors for these services.
- For this athletic event, community sponsored breakfast were far more in demand than dinners (perhaps the racers were just too tired to eat!)

BUDGET:

Not applicable- all self-financed by participating businesses.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

n/a

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