

Wild Rivers Coast: Regional Collaboration

THEME: An economically depressed rural region overcomes its isolating topography to build solid regional collaboration. This collaboration generated new visitor experiences, new capacity for tourism development, and increased interest by communities and funders outside the region to join in the success.

PROJECT IMPACT: For the first time, the region has dedicated staff to help develop regional tourism products. Two new full-time positions were funded to support tourism marketing and development, with funding support from Travel Oregon, local philanthropy Wild Rivers Coast Alliance (WRCA), Oregon State University Extension, and the Oregon Coast Visitors Association. While these new roles will work closely together, one position will focus more on product development and entrepreneurship, while the other will focus more on coordination and promotion.

Furthermore, in June 2016, based on the Wild Rivers Coast successful collaboration, the area's largest tourism business, Bandon Dunes, signed an agreement with Coos County for a six percent lodging assessment to be collected from its guests. In lieu of a new countywide tax proposal, this agreement provides funding for critical public safety investments, as well as tourism. When it takes effect in January 2017, the funds designated for tourism will be used to form an independent non-profit organization to promote and develop tourism throughout the county.

PLACE: The Wild Rivers Coast region holds the most isolated of Oregon's coastal communities in terms of distance from major population centers. From the southern part of Coos County at Bandon, it extends south through all of Curry County to the California border. Uniquely located between diverse coastal landscapes and true wilderness, the terrain varies from long flat beaches and sheltered harbors to churning rivers and dramatic promontories. This topography has helped shape these strongly independent communities.

As the traditional natural resource sectors of fishing and timber have declined, tourism has gained importance as a current source of employment and a driver of future growth in the region's economy. However, only recently has tourism become a true focus for a regional economic development strategy.

STORY: In 2012, the South Coast economy was in dire straits. Looming reductions in federal timber payments to support county services exacerbated the negative impacts of a lingering statewide recession and long-term decline of traditional industries. The region made headlines as sheriff patrols were eliminated and libraries shuttered. Against this backdrop, efforts by local marketing organizations, state agencies and the private sector rallied around the idea that growing tourism could create a much-needed and significant economic driver for their community.

Early in 2012, a marketing organization covering Curry County and Northern California approached Travel Oregon to host the Rural Tourism Studio. While Travel Oregon was supportive, it had already committed to other communities for the next 12 months, and there were issues to be worked out in terms of the appropriate regional boundary and key partnerships.

Concurrent with this initial proposal, the Oregon Governor's office was also focusing on the beleaguered South Coast as a priority for economic revitalization. Representatives of the Governor met with key business leaders, including Mike Keiser, owner of the Bandon Dunes Golf Resort, to strategize about tourism opportunities. The Wild Rivers Coast Alliance (WRCA), a new local philanthropy established by Keiser, was awarding its first round of grants. WRCA proposed a slightly larger region to Travel Oregon, adding Bandon in southern Coos County to the mix. WRCA also offered to convene the stakeholders and provide some matching funds. Seeing the community need and buy-in, RTS planning began in earnest in the spring of 2013.

While there was little history of past collaboration between Bandon and Curry County, they had some things in common. Both areas had participated in the Ford Family Foundation's community leadership and economic development programs, and they shared interest in culinary/agritourism, as well as outdoor recreation. Both areas depended heavily on tourism. They both shared concerns about being underserved by the state's regional tourism marketing structure, which left the area marginally connected with two different regional marketing organizations. All in all, while some felt initial skepticism about the defined RTS region, regional leaders knew their communities were struggling, and they were ready to work together to improve their circumstances. Much of the pre-planning focused on community-by-community outreach to build awareness of tourism assets and lay the groundwork for collaboration.

The RTS workshops were delivered between October 2013 and January 2014. The process of spending time together in the workshops, and later in action teams, built common understanding, trust and enduring friendships. As Frank Burris, a local extension agent, reflects on the shift that he experienced, he notes, "When I first heard of the RTS, I was angry and disappointed that people were putting so much into tourism. I had a bad experience in Alaska with how tourism changed communities. So, I went to the RTS to kick up a storm and straighten them out! Instead, I found a whole lot of people like me, all tired of the encampments throwing bombs at each other. I was excited!" Julie Miller, Executive Director of the Bandon Area Chamber of Commerce, said she, "Discovered people I needed to know, but didn't know I needed to know them!"

Many community members acknowledge and appreciate the responsiveness of Travel Oregon as a committed partner. They also recognize the critical role of the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance in bringing people together and investing strategically. The relationships among RTS participants have continued to deepen and grow. WRCA's Jim Seeley and Marie Simonds see, "A much stronger willingness to participate in a regional approach. While there is still some territorial bias, the players are much more cohesive." As Gold Beach City Manager Jodi Fritts observes, "I grew up here, and was used to seeing things not work. This is the first thing I've been involved in with so many different groups and personalities...and you know what? It's working."

The seed investments by the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance and Travel Oregon, and the commitment of local parties to collaborate, have also attracted new resources from outside the immediate region.

- The Oregon Coast Visitors Association (OCVA), has committed funding for a full-time South Coast staff person who will focus on continued implementation and coordination of marketing and action

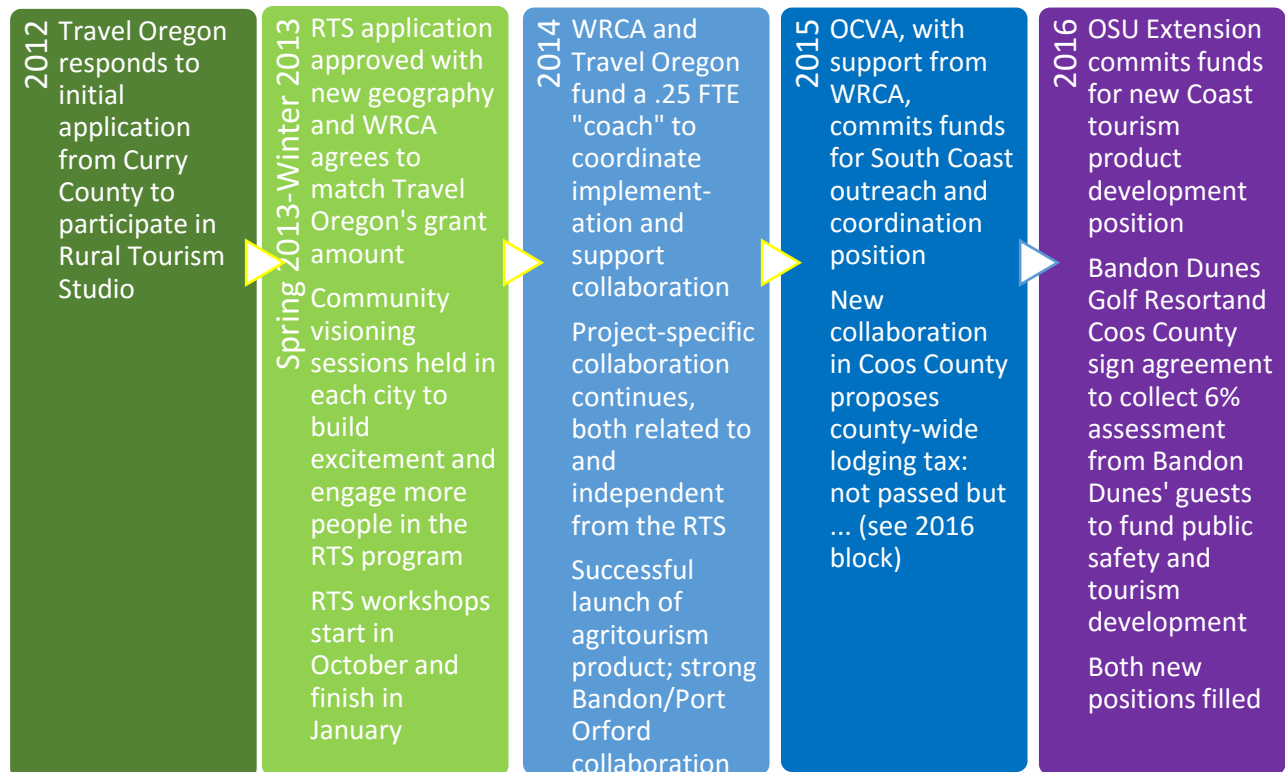
team projects. “I am impressed by the number of highly committed, tenacious volunteers who came out of the RTS initiative,” says Marcus Hinz, OCVA’s Executive Director. “They’ve been doing some sustained heavy lifting for a couple years, and what they’ve been able to do through sheer will is incredible. They make it easy for us to commit resources, because you can see they really want it. When you see this, it makes you feel good to help.”

- Oregon State University Extension is also funding a new pilot program with a full-time staff member that is focused on tourism product development and tourism entrepreneurship in coastal communities, with an emphasis on the South Coast. The Wild Rivers Coast region was selected as the pilot through an open call for proposals that could focus on anything related to Extension’s broad community development mission and collaboration. Frank Burris shared information about the opportunity, and then was a strong advocate for the region in the review process. “Seeing the groundswell of commitment and energy around tourism here, made it easy for me to support!”
- Julie Miller of the Bandon Area Chamber of Commerce was not initially sure how the RTS would benefit her organization and community. She now sees that, “The financial backing of WRCA elevated our work to a level where we are poised to react to conversations with partners (e.g. Cycle Oregon’s interest in helping us build new product). We weren’t there before, but now we have people and other potential funds in place. If there is a big idea, we can pull in a variety of funders and partners quickly. We have made connections and already have their ear.”
- As tourism continues to gain credibility as an economic development strategy, it attracts new supporters. Coos County Commissioner Melissa Cribbins has been working with a collaborative group to create a countywide lodging tax as a sustainable source of revenue for tourism promotion and development. She recalls, “When I ran for office, my platform was not tourism. It was that we have to diversify our economy. When the discussions about working together as a region for tourism came up, it was a nice fit for what I believe in.”

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the high level of trust and collaboration in the region than the expected collaboration between the two new full-time staff positions. While the two staff are employed by different organizations, they are expected to work closely together, with job descriptions that are defined interdependently. The exact way this interaction will happen, however, has not yet been defined. The positions are intended to evolve over time with maximum coordination and flexibility.

The process of building a strong regional collaboration is not without bumps, starting with initial suspicion about motives. As Melissa Cribbins notes, “Working together as a region seems kind of obvious. But, it takes time to build trust. Free ice cream on Friday would draw initial critiques and questions about motive too.” Not all communities participate equally, but the steering committee intentionally keeps the lines of communication open through regular updates and invitations. Discussions about a unified regional brand have not yet led to consensus. And, while the two new staff positions are a tremendous asset, they are not funded indefinitely. Much work lies ahead, but that doesn’t seem to dissuade anyone. In the words of Frank Burris, “We aren’t giving up on the South Coast. This is our home. We are going to make these communities strong.”

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- While the regional seed money provided by Wild Rivers Coast Alliance may be unique and not immediately replicable, such seed money is invaluable in aligning interests, conferring legitimacy and attracting other resources. Other communities and regions could look to a community foundation model or crowdfunding to build this resource.
- Be open to partnerships you might not expect. For example, the opportunity to work more closely with OSU Extension exists statewide.
- In places where “not everyone welcomes tourism with open arms,” leading with outdoor recreation development projects can build goodwill because residents will directly benefit.
- Outreach and education should include those who have the power to invest in tourism. “We learned that we need to focus on educating political and philanthropic decision makers about tourism and the variety of great jobs it generates beyond the front lines.”
- Shaking up the interpersonal and regional dynamics by altering the “normal” boundaries of the region, as was done here, brings new voices, skills and interactions that can break down fixed opinions of who should do what and how things should work. This may not have been an intentional outcome, but mixing leaders from part of Coos County with Curry County generated new and positive energy.

- Leaders were intentional about the roles they played within collaborative conversations, from asking tough questions to providing calm energy to opening their own minds. The steering committee had open conversations about how to be productive together.
- Keep an eye on the vision to sustain your energy: “The vision we had at RTS was powerful. It kept us from giving up. It doesn’t take many people, just a few committed people, a handful of believers to get the ball rolling. Don’t get derailed by not having everyone on board at the beginning.”
- Give it some time to unfold. Coaching helped this region to sustain momentum after the initial flush of excitement when the workshops ended and project successes became visible.

BUDGET:

This success story was not in and of itself funded by the Rural Tourism Studio implementation grant. The regional collaboration mindset is the backstory for funded tourism projects described in other case studies, as well as for the new funded staff capacity. The annual budget for the two new staff positions is between \$86,000- \$119,000, not including benefits. The collaborative effort was also supported by a part-time coach (40 hours per month) to facilitate regional work; this position was funded jointly by Travel Oregon and the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance at \$15,000 a year.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- Two new job descriptions for the Oregon Coast in 2016
 - [Oregon Coast Visitor's Association, South Coast Development Coordinator](#)
 - [Oregon State University, Assistant Professor, Tourism and Business Development](#)

CONTACTS:

Frank Burris, Oregon State University Extension	541-247-6672	frank.burris@oregonstate.edu
Melissa Cribbins, Coos County Commissioner	541-396-7539	mcribbins@co.coos.or.us
Jodi Fritts, Gold Beach Chamber of Commerce and City Manager	541-247-7029	jfritts@goldbeachoregon.com
Marcus Hinz, Oregon Coast Visitors Association	541-574-2679	director@thepeoplescoast.com
Julie Miller, Bandon Area Chamber of Commerce	541-347-9616	bandoncc@mycomspan.com
Jim Seeley and Marie Simonds, Wild Rivers Coast Alliance	541-347-5968	msimonds@wildriverscoastalliance.com ; jseeley@wildriverscoast.com