

Blueway Guide: A Summary

Introduction

Whether you are looking for whitewater rapids, coastal island hopping, sleepy swamps, or winding rivers, the Carolinas have paddling and fishing opportunities for every type of outdoor enthusiast. Communities can leverage their unique waterways to provide an environmental and cultural asset that supports not only local recreation but also brings in visitors and connects them to local businesses. The purpose of NCGrowth's Blueway Guide is to give blueway planners a better understanding of the technical aspects involved with planning, building, and maintaining a blueway and provide blueway planners with tools to leverage their blueway for economic development.

Major Points

With the impacts of COVID-19, travel plans are rapidly shifting. More people are choosing to spend time outdoors and are staying closer to home by traveling to locations within driving distance. Which could mean new opportunities for outdoor recreation in the Carolinas. Even before COVID-19, the outdoor industry was a rapidly growing sector in the U.S. According to the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), the North Carolina outdoor recreation economy generates \$28 billion in consumer spending annually.¹

Outdoor enthusiasts tend to have a relatively high level of discretionary income and enjoy going on multiple trips per year.² The user profiles for paddlers and anglers indicates that blueways can provide a popular space for recreation. According to an OIA *2019 Special Report on Paddlesports*,³ nearly 23 million people participated in at least one paddlesport activity with many making multiple trips per year. An OIA *2019 Special Report on Fishing*⁴ notes that nearly 50 million people went on at least one fishing trip per year with many making trips each year. Outdoor participants are motivated to go outside to spend time in nature, spend time with friends and family, and to get exercise.⁵

¹ "Outdoor Recreation Economy Report," Outdoor Industry Association, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2017-outdoor-recreation-economy-report/>.

² "Outdoor Recreation Economy Report"

³ "2019_Special_Report_on_Paddl.Pdf," accessed August 27, 2020, https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.american canoe.org/resource/resmgr/sei-educational_resources/2019_Special_Report_on_Paddl.pdf.

⁴ "2019-Special-Report-on-Fishing_RBFF_FINAL1.Pdf," accessed August 27, 2020, https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2019-Special-Report-on-Fishing_RBFF_FINAL1.pdf.

⁵ "Outdoor Recreation Economy Report."

This is also good news for rural areas as well. According to Headwaters Economics, rural recreation counties see more population growth compared to non-recreation rural counties.⁶ In the short-term, recreation drives support for tourism-related businesses. In the long-term, recreation supports the economy by recruiting new residents, business owners, entrepreneurs, and workers, which promotes job growth in earnings per job.⁷

Key Recommendations

Blueways can significantly impact local and regional economies. They provide healthy ways for residents to recreate and are a significant quality-of-life factor that can help keep younger residents and attract new ones. Blueways can attract tourism and recreation-related businesses while supporting existing businesses. To effectively leverage blueways and paddle trails for economic development NCGrowth recommends the following:

Recommendations

1. Understand Regulations and Planning Process

- Check local and state regulations and permits which vary by location
- Consider official trail designation –
 - » Aids in conservation efforts
 - » Builds awareness for the trail
 - » May open funding sources
- Plan for the long-term

2. Organize Stakeholders

- Identify key stakeholders to involve in each planning phase
- Seek public input
- Use public meetings to address concerns and generate buy-in

3. Identify and inventory assets

- Conduct an inventory of the natural and physical elements of the water body
- Identify areas for access points
- Identify additional community assets (e.g. cultural or environmental points of interest)
- Identify and inventory businesses that cater to blueway visitors (e.g. lodging, dining, and services)

4. Understand the technical aspects of building blueways & access sites

- Understand which types of materials will be best suited to environmental and long-term blueway goals
- Determine the number of access sites needed and types of amenities needed for each site

5. Leverage recreation for economic development

- Establish wayfinding and signage
- Create a robust online presence through social media, reviews, and a comprehensive trip planning website

6. Connect visitors to local businesses

- Provide a link to local businesses through marketing materials and promotional events

7. Build a sense of community

- Encourage annual or seasonal community events like festivals and races
- Encourage regular programming like clean-up days, guided trips, and environmental education programming

⁶ "Recreation Counties Across the U.S.," Headwaters Economics, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://headwaterseconomics.org/dataviz/recreation-counties-us/>.

⁷ "Recreation Counties Across the U.S."

Conclusion

Blueways, from the earliest stages of planning to hosting large special events with local business vendors, are about community engagement, stewardship, and connectivity. They provide a means for paddlers to connect with nature, friends, and family. They connect local businesses to visitors and environmental organizations. They also connect often forgotten or underutilized natural assets to the greater community. Whether your community is looking to build a blueway from scratch or is simply looking for ways to enhance it, this guide provides detailed steps and examples to help you think through each stage of planning and building your blueway. Community engagement and buy-in in the early stages will help ensure not only the long-term success of the blueway; it will make leveraging the paddle trail for economic development a smoother process.

