CHAPTER I

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE

The Internet is a rapidly growing phenomenon (Schwartz and Quarterman 1993). Only a few years ago most people had never heard of the Internet (Donert 2000). In 2000, it was estimated that more than 401 million people worldwide used the Internet for various purposes (NUA 2000). In 1995, 173 countries had access to the Internet, with 65 countries not connected. By 1999 almost every country had an Internet presence (Telegeography 1999). As of 1997, Arnum and Conti (1998) measured that the World Wide Web (the Web) consisted of 84,000,000 Web pages. Internet traffic is estimated to be doubling every three months and the number of Internet users is increasing at 20 to 50 percent per year (Coffman and Odlyzko 1998). Along with this growth, many organizations and individuals involved with nature tourism have developed web sites to attract customers or to disseminate information about their organizations. This is because the Internet is especially advantageous to providing information about travel and tourism. The number of tourism Web sites that are available highlights this fact.

A number of authors conducting research about "cyberspace" recognize the Web as having an impact on tourism, travel, and other recreation (Squire 1996; Batty 1997; Graham and Aurigi 1997; Kitchin 1998; Graham 1998). However, little or no research has been conducted to understand the character and geography of nature tourism organizations that use the Internet. In addition, it appears that little attention has been

given to understand these organizations and their motivations when they establish an Internet presence.

Therefore, the purposes of this research were: (1) to characterize the geographical location of nature tourism Web sites in the U.S., (2) to establish the geographical locations of the actual nature tourism entities that are represented, (3) to identify whether these nature tourism entities are located in states that have programs or policies supporting the development of nature tourism, (4) to create a profile of these entities and determine the nature of their business and activities, and their motivations and perspectives about their businesses and their activities on the Web, (5) to investigate how "place" was intended to be represented on nature tourism Web sites, and (6) to determine whether organizations and individuals developing Web sites perceived themselves as part of a nature tourism community either on or off the Internet.

I conducted a sample survey of the businesses/institutions/individuals that are using the Internet as a vehicle for disseminating information about nature tourism in the U.S. It was impossible to ascertain the entire "universe" of nature tourism activities represented on the Web because of their diversity and because tools to navigate and identify those resources (e.g. search engines) only access a portion of the entire Web (Maxwell 2000). In addition, many of the people who are promoting activities that fall under the definition of nature tourism may not be familiar with this terminology and thus have not promoted their Web sites as being associated with nature tourism. Thus, this research provided a profile of a group of Web sites that could be located with conventional Web searching methods. This research provided an overview of nature tourism activities on the Web, and its participants, based on a survey of Internet Content

Sponsors (ICSs). This research also investigated the geographic phenomenon of nature tourism on the Web, and identified the real locations of the businesses/organizations/ individuals that have Web sites.

This research aimed to provide some insights into one small part of cyberspace. In order to come to a greater understanding of the geography of the Web, it is imperative that research be conducted at manageable scales. By conducting a survey of nature tourism Web sites, a niche of the Web could be investigated for a relatively large geographic area (the United States). It provided a "snap-shot" of the Web's impact on how people are doing nature tourism. It also provided some understanding of the geographic aspects of the Web's development that have not been considered previously.