

NATURE TOURISM IN CYBERSPACE: AN EXAMINATION OF ITS GEOGRAPHY
AND CHARACTER IN THE NETWORK

DISSERTATION

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By

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To My Family

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ABSTRACT

Nature Tourism in Cyberspace: an Examination of its Geography and Character in the
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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. James R. Kimmel

This research was an exploratory study of nature tourism businesses in the United States that use the World Wide Web. Four research questions were investigated: (1) Are the geographical locations of nature tourism businesses proximate to the Internet Web hosting businesses? (2) What is the geography of these nature tourism businesses – are they urban, urban fringe, or rural? (3) Are these nature tourism businesses located in states that have policies or programs aimed at promoting nature tourism development and facilitation of the use of the Web? (4) What are the characteristics of the nature tourism businesses and how do they use the Web?

Co-evolutionary perspective and actor-network theory provided the theoretical foundation, as well as the guidance for designing and conducting this research. The research methods used were a quantitative online survey and follow-up qualitative case study interviews. The online survey was used to investigate the general geography and the character of the nature tourism businesses as they co-evolve with the Internet

technology. The case studies provided a way to follow individual nature tourism business actors, and supplied a detailed examination of these businesses and their relationships with the factors in the networks that they operate in.

It was found that, on one hand, the nature tourism businesses and their Internet hosts are operating in a new geo-cyberspace where physical distance is no longer a barrier. On the other hand, the co-evolution of the nature tourism businesses and the Internet has expanded cyberspace by creating new cyberplaces.

Most of the nature tourism businesses identified in this research are associated with rural communities. The rapid diffusion of Internet technology has made it possible for rural communities to market their natural attractions at an affordable cost.

This research has identified several levels of networks that these nature tourism businesses operate in. These nature tourism owners/managers are highly dependent on the resources provided by the network for their businesses to succeed. Several technical and non-technical components in the network are found to have impacts on the performance of these businesses. The technical components are related to marketing and Web site development. The non-technical components are state policies and programs, collaboration with Web-based communities and financial support.