

CHAPTER I

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE

Many individuals and communities in rural areas view nature tourism as an attractive form of economic development that can also stimulate natural resource conservation. Interpretive information is essential to the success of nature tourism. Interpretive information should (1) provide basic site information, (2) foster awareness and encourage investigation, and (3) encourage visitors to take responsible actions (Beck and Cable 1998). Appropriate interpretive information can also promote the site or an activity. The Internet has made it much easier for people to access information about other places. In fact, many rural communities currently operate World Wide Web (the Web) sites to attract and inform visitors. However, there has been little research on the characteristics and effectiveness of these sites in accomplishing the three functions of interpretive information stated above. Furthermore, the growth of the Internet has left this topic surprisingly uncharted by geographers (Adams and Warf 1997). At least two problems remain. First, little attention has been given to the subjective experience of visitors to these "virtual" places. Second, little research has attempted to measure the relationship between visitors' experience of the virtual tour and the effectiveness of these sites at accomplishing their intended goals – stimulating visitors' interest to visit the place represented in the virtual tour. Thus, further research is needed to investigate what

causes visitors to have an optimal experience while visiting a virtual tour Web site. How visitors feel during a visit (their experience), and what the potential of the experience to influence the visitor to actually visit the “real” place represented are the focuses of this research.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate empirically the experience and the effectiveness of the Internet virtual tours of a place to meet basic functions of interpretive information. For this research, the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail was selected to evaluate how the quality of people’s online experience affects their recognition and appreciation of the place presented. The concepts of topophilia (Tuan 1961, 1979), interpretation, and the optimal experience theory have provided the theoretical basis for the research. The optimal experience theory states that there is a state of being called “flow” when people are deeply involved in some event (Ghani and Deshpande 1994).

The research attempted to answer three questions. 1) Can an interpretive Web site induce flow experience? 2) What are the factors that affect the flow experience, and how do they affect that experience? The research especially focused on key factors including web content, design, and visitors’ demographic characteristics. 3) What is the consequence of the flow experience as it relates to the effectiveness of the virtual tour Web site to stimulate visitors’ interest in visiting the place presented?

This research included two essential components: 1) the evaluation of a virtual tour Web site devoted to the portrayal of a specific tourism destination, and 2) an evaluation of the relationships between: a) the characteristics of the Web site, b) visitors’ individual differences, c) visitors’ online experience, and d) the effectiveness of the virtual tour Web site. A flow model that hypothesizes relationships among key factors in

web site development, the flow experience, and the consequence of the flow experience was tested with survey data.

The Internet represents a new technology for communication, as well as a new frontier for exploration. This technology makes it possible to disseminate information about places efficiently. This new medium can facilitate and structure communication interactively in a hypermedia environment. Increased understanding of its potential effects can lead to wiser and more appropriate decisions in design, choice, application, and use of such technology (Rice 1984). Examinations of using this technology should change our conception of “doing geography.” It should also add to empirical studies on the implications of the Internet to geography in general.