



Research Services

Northern Rockies - Alaska Highway
Visitor Research Project
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Partners

Alberta Economic Development ▪ Alberta North Tourism Destination Region
Canadian Tourism Commission ▪ Doig River First Nation ▪ Fort Nelson First Nation
Northern Rockies - Alaska Highway Tourism Association ▪ Northern Rockies Regional District
Public Works & Government Services Canada ▪ Sci-Tech North ▪ Tourism Dawson Creek

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The Northern Rockies – Alaska Highway Visitor Research Project was undertaken in 2003 to provide data on the characteristics and volume of travelers along the highway and to support marketing plan design and product development in the Northern Rockies – Alaska Highway region. The project was sponsored by a partnership of eleven local, regional, provincial, and national organizations that provided direct funding and/or in-kind services.

Methods

Between May 15 and September 25, 2003, 3,259 interviews were conducted with travelers intercepted at two Visitor Info Centres, four attractions/museums and three campgrounds in Northeastern BC. The target population included all people traveling to or through Northeastern BC, except for those on a day trip, traveling for personal reasons, working as part of a construction crew or in shipping/transportation, or traveling as part of an organized bus or RV caravan tour group. Follow-up surveys were mailed to travelers in the target population in the fall of 2003 and 59% were returned by March 2004.

Demographics

Overall, half of all travelers were Canadians and 45% were Americans. BC and Alberta residents made up 70% of Canadian travelers intercepted in Northeastern BC. The top six states of residence for Americans were Alaska, California, Washington, Michigan, Florida and Texas. Overseas visitors accounted for 6% of travelers and were predominantly Europeans from Germany or Switzerland.

The travelers in this region are different in terms of age and travel party composition from other travelers in BC. Over half were over 55 years of age; a quarter were 65 years and older. Most people were traveling in parties of two or four and less than 15% were traveling with children.

Early in the season, travelers were more likely to be from the US and over 55 years of age. In the summer months, more Canadians and younger people were traveling in or through the region.

Trip characteristics

Most people were traveling for leisure (83%); nearly 10% were visiting friends and relatives, and 5% were traveling for business purposes.

Three-quarters of Americans said their primary destination was Alaska, compared to 20% of Canadians. Half of Canadians were traveling to Northeast BC or the Yukon (27% and 24% respectively). While 40% of overseas travelers were destined for Alaska, nearly a third said they were on a circle tour with no specific destination.

A third of travelers had visited their destination (or traveled on the same route) before. Sixty percent of these travelers had visited at least twice between 1997 and 2002; 28% had visited four or more times in the five year period.

Travelers were motivated to take their trip by the idea of seeing wildlife and wild landscapes, visiting places they had never been before, and/or taking a journey they had heard about and always wanted to make. At least sixty percent of travelers said these three motivations were

very important in their decision to take their trip to the North. Opportunities to enjoy outdoor activities or travel in places where they felt safe were also important motivations.

Half of travelers used self-contained vehicles – truck campers, camper vans, 5th wheel trailers, and motorhomes – as their primary mode of transportation. Self-contained vehicles were particularly popular among the older, Alaska-bound and leisure traveler segments. Most travelers were driving to and from their destination; however, 21% included a one-way flight or cruise in their trip.

Most travelers used two or three types of accommodation during their trip. Campgrounds – both government and private – were the most popular form of accommodation, followed by hotels or motels. Mode of transportation had the largest impact on choice of accommodation, as the majority of travelers in self-contained vehicles used campgrounds as their primary accommodation, compared to 40% of travelers driving a car, truck or van. A third of travelers spent at least one night in a road-side pullout or parking log during their trip. This proportion increased to 50% for travelers driving a camper van/truck camper or motorhome.

Trip length and expenditures

On average, travelers spent about 40 nights away from home on their trip. Regional travelers (from BC, Alberta, the Yukon and Alaska) spent about 20 nights away from home, whereas long-haul travelers were away for 50 nights or more.

During their trip, two-thirds of travelers in the North said they had some degree of flexibility in their return dates and 40% said they could change their return date by a week or more. Overall, eight percent of travelers extended their trip in the North for four to eight additional nights. Although relatively few travelers lengthened their trip, nearly 70% of travelers indicated that they wanted to extend their trip. Prior commitments and time constraints were the two most frequently cited reasons for not being able to stay longer.

On average, travel parties spent \$150 per day (\$CDN) during their trip. While total trip expenditures ranged from \$50 to \$50,000, the typical travel party spent about \$6,000 on their trip. While daily expenditures varied primarily by mode of transportation, total trip expenditures were driven predominantly by trip length. Basic expenses – for transportation, accommodation and food and beverages purchased at grocery stores – accounted for 70% of daily expenditures. Discretionary spending included food and beverages purchased in restaurants, shopping, entertainment, attractions, and outdoor recreation. Interestingly, the expenditure allocations were very consistent across the trip and demographic characteristics.

Trip activities

Travelers participated in seven different types of activities, on average. Over three quarters of travelers visited a provincial, state or national park, visited a museum, heritage or historic site or walked, hiked or cycled during their trip. Overall, participation rates for most activities were higher for the long stay, Alaska-bound, motorhome traveler segments.

Travelers were also asked about their interest in various activities on a similar trip. Comparing the participation rates and interest levels identifies areas of opportunity for the tourism industry. For example, while a third of travelers visited attended a fair or festival on their trip, 56% were interested in this activity on a similar trip. However, interest in a given activity was strongly dependent on whether a traveler had already participated in this activity. For example, interest

in attending a fair or festival was much higher among travelers who had attended a fair or festival during their trip (86%), compared to travelers who had not (44%).

Travel information

While half of travelers planned their trip within 4 months of departure, a quarter spent a year or more planning for their trip. On average, travelers used two or three sources of information in the planning stage. Canadians relied mainly on past experience and word of mouth, while US travelers favoured the *Milepost* guide and the internet, and overseas travelers used the internet and books.

During their trip, travelers typically used five different sources of information. Visitor Info Centre (VIC) counselors were the most frequently cited source of information, followed by the *Milepost*, brochures, past experience, and advice from local residents or staff working at campgrounds, restaurants or attractions. Overall, the *Milepost* was rated as the most useful source of information, followed by VIC counselors and past experience.

About 60% of travelers who stopped at a VIC in Northeastern BC wanted map or route information. Travelers were also looking for accommodation and attraction information. During their visit to the Dawson Creek and/or Fort Nelson VICs, 80% of travelers spoke with a VIC counselor.

Experiences and destination images

Over 90% of travelers said their travel experiences in the North met or exceeded their original expectations. Travelers on longer trips more frequently said that their experiences exceeded their expectations in a given region of the North, compared to those on shorter trips. While more first time travelers said their experiences exceeded their initial expectations compared to return visitors, between 20% and 40% of return visitors still indicated that their overall experience exceeded their expectations.

Travelers were asked about the images or characteristics they associated with Northern BC, Northern Alberta, the Yukon and Alaska. Scenery was the most frequently cited destination image for each region, followed by wildlife, history and hospitality. Some unique characteristics and differences were identified by travelers, but these results show that travelers do not differentiate specific regions within their image of 'the North'.

Traffic volume

Between May 15 and September 25, 2003, a traffic count was conducted at two locations north of Fort Nelson to determine the volume and origin of traffic traveling the Alaska Highway. These observations were used to estimate hourly traffic rates by month, time of day and traffic direction for calculate total traffic volume and traveler volume.

Overall, 139,700 vehicles traveled on the BC portion of the Alaska Highway, north of Fort Nelson. Non-commercial vehicles accounted for 86% of total traffic on average, giving a total of 120,600 traveler (non-commercial) vehicles. The total number of travelers - 320,400 - was estimated using the average party size (from the intercept interviews).