

Nantahala Gorge searches for a fix

“The mentality of so many is been there, done that. To me the problem is, what else can we do provide? How do you keep them here?”

— Paul Wolf, director of SCC’s Outdoor Leadership Program

As Western North Carolina heads into a tourist season that has many worried, it’s a good time for those in the Nantahala Gorge to look at what it offers visitors and how that “product” could be improved. Because like it or not, the rafting industry has its work cut out for it.

Two weeks ago business owners and others who want to attract more visitors to the Nantahala Gorge met in an all-day session to do just that. The Smoky Mountain Host — a regional tourism promotion organization — helped secure a grant from the Rural Development Center that paid for the meeting two weeks ago and for other future meetings designed to look at tourism along the entire U.S. 19 corridor. In addition, Western Carolina University is conducting an economic analysis of the corridor.

So what’s the problem? To begin with, the Nantahala Gorge has suffered from a nearly 17 percent drop in visitors since 1997. That’s worrisome, especially to the smaller outfitters and resort owners who simply don’t have the marketing money or savvy of larger companies like the Nantahala Outdoor Center.

There’s little doubt that increased competition has contributed to the decline. As successful whitewater rivers like the Pigeon, the Tuckasegee, and the French Broad have opened doors to new outfitters, the combined marketing efforts of those companies have no doubt attracted some rafters who might otherwise have taken a second or third trip down the Nantahala. Resorts that offer a combination of mountain biking, guided nature hikes and more are attracting more travelers.

And, of course, anyone who resides in this area knows that the WNC tourist is aging. Many people who may have ventured here for the outdoor fun a decade ago may now find themselves shopping for a second home or spending time in nice restaurants rather than taking whitewater trips.

Another change, unfortunately, is that many teens are overweight and addicted to video games and electronic entertainment rather than outdoor activities. Perhaps that has led to a decrease in rafting trips by locals and tourists alike. Throw in the competition from other indoor activities like shopping and movies and you find less people on the river.

For these reasons and more, the Nantahala Gorge meeting is an important first step in what is going to be a study of the U.S. 19 corridor from Maggie Valley to the gorge. This area includes some of Western North Carolina's tourism mainstays — Maggie Valley, Cherokee, Bryson City, the gorge, the national park and the parkway — and so is of vital importance to this area's economy.

There is no silver bullet that will send people into the Nantahala Gorge in droves, but finding ways to turn around the decline isn't rocket science either. To begin with, outfitters large and small must work together. Instead of competition that drives the price of their product down, they need to market as a group. Some in the industry say the constant turnover among outfitter employees means those who do visit don't always have a good experience. The other obvious solution is to package rafting with mountain biking, hiking, camping and shopping in either Bryson City, Dillsboro or Sylva.

Improving the river put-in in the gorge is a good first step, and the idea of a man-made whitewater feature also would be beneficial. Smoky Mountain Host may be able to help get state or federal funding for the whitewater park, which in the long run would help anyone in business in the gorge. The state also needs to spend more money marketing the area west of Asheville, and Smoky Mountain Host's David Huskins and others are working on that. Tourism is the industry out here, and the state needs to realize that is where we need investment.

Too often tourism businesses — whether it's river outfitters, restaurants or hotels — forget that working together provides the most long-term benefits. In this case, it's the key to reversing the decline in visitation.

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