

HOME (/)
ABOUT
JOURNAL (/ABOUT)
MASTHEAD (/NEW-PAGE)
PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS (/PROSPECTIVE-MEMBERS)
SUBSCRIBE (/SUBSCRIBE)
STAFF RESOURCES (/STAFF-RESOURCES)
PUBLICATIONS
PUBLICATION ARCHIVE (/PUBLICATION-ARCHIVE)
VOLUME 1 (2009) (/VOLUME-1-2008-2009)
VOLUME 2 (2010) (/VOLUME-2-2009-2010)
VOLUME 3 (2011) (/VOLUME-3-2010-2011)
VOLUME 4 (2012) (/VOLUME-4-2011-2012)
VOLUME 5 (2013) (/VOLUME-5-2012-2013)
VOLUME 6 (2014) (/VOLUME-6-2013-2014)
VOLUME 7 (2015) (/VOLUME-7-2014-2015)
VOLUME 8 (2016) (/VOLUME-8-2015-2016)
VOLUME 9 (2017) (/VOLUME-9-2016-2017)
VOLUME 10 (2018) (/VOLUME-10-2018)
SYMPOSIUM
INFORMATION (/SYMPOSIUM)
BLOG
FULL BLOG (/FULL-BLOG)
BLOG ARCHIVE (/BLOG-ARCHIVE-1)

SUBMISSIONS (/SUBMISSIONS)

January 17, 2014 (/full-blog/2014/01/appalachian-coal-country-fueling-future.html)

Appalachian Coal Country: Fueling the Future of Kentucky Tourism? (/full-blog/2014/01/appalachian- coal-country-fueling-future.html)



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Image Source (http://www.redrivergorgecabinrentals.com/images/cabin54_gallery/dsc_0301p.jpg)

By: Benjamin Metzger, Staff Member

Call it a tale of two Appalachian regions. On one hand, there is the Appalachian region of Eastern Tennessee. The picturesque area is anchored by the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Millions of tourists flock to Gatlinburg, a quaint Tennessee town nestled at the base of the towering Smokies. [i] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn1)

Contrast this with the Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky, an area encompassing Daniel Boone National Forest. No community is seizing tourism opportunities. Instead, rural towns cling to coal mining, and they are losing jobs by the thousands. [ii]

(file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn2)

To explore this intriguing contrast, the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce commissioned an international consulting firm to analyze the feasibility of creating a robust tourism industry in Eastern Kentucky. [iii]

(file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn3) The study's conclusions were encouraging. The study supported Eastern Kentucky's potential to capitalize on its natural resources by turning them into tourism generators. The culture and history-rich Appalachian region offers natural beauty and numerous opportunities for outdoor recreation;

these are essential factors contributing to the success of rural tourism destinations.[iv]
(file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn4)

However, developing an Eastern Kentucky version of Gatlinburg is not without some obstacles. Perhaps the most formidable challenge is renovating existing lodging and creating new hotels. The region lacks any upscale hotels, which are important to conference organizers and vacation planners. [v] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn5) Local ordinances regulating alcohol sales also pose a hurdle. Of the thirty-four Eastern Kentucky counties, only six are wet counties. The other twenty-eight are either dry or have limitations on alcohol sales.[vi] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn6) Finally, the study noted that a lack of broadband Internet access discourages tourism.[vii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn7)

What steps must Kentucky take to create a tourism center? The study first suggested that state parks should pursue private-public partnerships. Although the government is cash-strapped, private funding could provide the dollars required for much-needed renovations and development within the state parks.[viii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn8) The Kentucky legislature may also attract higher-end hotels—along with golf courses, spas, and restaurants—by promoting public incentives to private developers.[ix] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn9) These types of businesses open the door for tourism. Eastern Kentucky could also focus on developing a tourism workforce via training and education.[x] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn10) A tourism center requires a specialized workforce, so high schools and colleges in Eastern Kentucky would be wise to offer hospitality management and customer service training.

The downturn in the coal industry has triggered an important dialogue about ways in which Eastern Kentucky can diversify its economy.[xi] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn11) This is an opportune time to consider tapping natural resources for tourism instead of coal. Economic analysis concludes a “modern, well-planned Gatlinburg” is not out of reach for the Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky.[xii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_edn12) The Commonwealth’s business and political leaders should seize the chance to develop rural tourism and revitalize a suffering economy.

[i] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref1) AECOM. Potential for Tourism Development in Eastern Kentucky. Kentucky Chamber Foundation, 85-89 (Oct. 8, 2013), <http://www.kychamber.com/sites/default/files/EasternKyTourism2013.pdf>.

[ii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref2) Bill Estep, Study: Eastern Kentucky could create ‘modern, well-planned Gatlinburg’ (Oct. 30, 2013), <http://www.kentucky.com/2013/10/30/2903321/study-eastern-kentucky-could-create.html>.

[iii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref3) Chamber Tours Tourism Potential of Eastern Kentucky. Kentucky Chamber of Commerce (Oct. 29, 2013), <http://www.kychamber.com/news/2013/10/29/chamber-tours-tourism-potential-eastern-kentucky>.

[iv] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref4) AECOM. Potential for Tourism Development in Eastern Kentucky. Kentucky Chamber Foundation, 4 (Oct. 8, 2013), <http://www.kychamber.com/sites/default/files/EasternKyTourism2013.pdf>.

[v] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref5) *Id.* at 24.

[vi] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref6) *Id.* at 95-8.

[vii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref7) *Id.* at 98-9.

[viii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref8) *Id.* at 2-3.

[ix] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref9) *Id.*

[x] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref10) *Id.*

[xi] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref11) Bill Estep, Study: Eastern Kentucky could create ‘modern, well-planned Gatlinburg’ (Oct. 30, 2013), <http://www.kentucky.com/2013/10/30/2903321/study-eastern-kentucky-could-create.html>.

[xii] (file:///C:/Users/Jeremy/AppData/Local/Temp/Metzger%20Blog%20Post%201.doc#_ednref12) AECOM. Potential for Tourism Development in Eastern Kentucky. Kentucky Chamber Foundation, 4 (Oct. 8, 2013), <http://www.kychamber.com/sites/default/files/EasternKyTourism2013.pdf>.

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631 SOUTH LIMESTONE, LEXINGTON, KY

40508 (859) 257-4747 [BLOG.KJEANRL@GMAIL.COM](mailto:blog.kjeanrl@gmail.com) ([MAILTO:BLOG.KJEANRL@GMAIL.COM](mailto:blog.kjeanrl@gmail.com))