TESTIMONY

PRESENTED TO THE

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE & TRANSPORTATION

OF THE

UNITED STATES SENATE

BY

DR. INGRID E. SCHNEIDER

PROFESSOR, Forest Resources

AND

DIRECTOR, Tourism Center

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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I am Ingrid Schneider, Professor in the University of Minnesota’s Department of Forest Resources in the College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences and Director for the University’s Tourism Center, within the University of Minnesota Extension. My statement is from the unique perspective of this joint role where the University creates new knowledge related to tourism and provides research-based education and engagement for tourism-dependent communities and businesses. The Tourism Center makes a difference for Minnesota by providing applied research and targeted education to sustain tourism businesses and communities. The Department of Forest Resources advances science and management of forest and related natural resources as well as prepares professionals to manage these resources upon which Minnesota depends for much of its tourism.

From Minnesota’s iconic attractions to the small towns on the way to those attractions, tourism has significant impact. It’s not only the tangible dollars that circulate in our economy, but the less tangible, readjustment of tourist psyches and contributions to residents’ quality of life, as well as the impacts on our environment. From travelers who wine and dine in Minnesota’s thriving metropolitan areas to those who paddle, pedal or putter through greater Minnesota, their impact is far-reaching. As the economic crisis continues, the degree of negative impact remains uncertain. But make no mistake, Minnesota businesses, communities and residents are faced with critical decisions for their future and our future: those decisions demand research-based information and analysis to sustain successful tourism endeavors and maximize positive impacts for Minnesota’s residents and resources. Those decisions also demand professionals prepared with the integrated planning, marketing and management education offered by the University of Minnesota.

I’d like to expand on the impacts of tourism in our state.

Perhaps the most tangible impacts of tourism are impacts to the economy. In 2008, tourism contributed more than $11 billion to Minnesota’s economy and employed 247,000 people. Certainly these numbers
are impressive, but to make them more meaningful, we can consider the economic impact of specific activities or sectors. Minnesota is known for both its shopping and lake-based opportunities. Beyond those, however, consider the more subtle and emerging tourism areas that can lead to both urban and rural-revitalization. For example, although 8 of 10 Minnesotan’s think outdoor recreation is important, fewer probably recognize its impact as tourism activity. The economic impact of state parks like those along Lake Superior’s north shore was estimated at $300 million earlier this decade. To further understand the impact of trails that are so important to Minnesota communities and quality of life, SAFE TEA-LU Recreational Trail Program dollars are supporting a study to assess the economic impact of trail-related travel. With these results and through our assistance, communities can make research-based decisions on infrastructure development and planning that can simultaneously improve their attractiveness as a destination and as a choice of residence. Off the trail, Minnesota’s emerging wine tourism segment is another example of tourism’s sometimes subtle economic impact. Minnesota hosts 35 wineries and the University has facilitated the development of two wine trails, with another in process. A 2007 study of Minnesota grape growers revealed the value of winery tourism alone was $14 million. This subset of agricultural tourism is just one way tourism can and has contributed to rural revitalization. Fortunately, Minnesotan’s recognize the importance of tourism. An annual survey supported by the Tourism Center indicates that, for the fourth year in a row, more than 9 of 10 Minnesotan’s indicate tourism is important to Minnesota’s economy. As a destination that people primarily drive to, the role of tourism in Minnesota will remain or increase in importance in the current economic situation as tourists take shorter, closer to home vacations and business travelers decide to ‘meet in the middle’ of the U.S. As such, providing decision makers with the best possible information is critical to maximize return on investment. As tourism is generally revenue positive, investments to support relevant information acquisition and dissemination seem both prudent and powerful.
Beyond economics, tourism both depends on and impacts the environment. As such, the retention and reparation of high quality environments is essential. Sustainable tourism includes an emphasis on the environment, as well as the economic and social aspects. Minnesota is a national leader in sustainable tourism as evidenced by our hosting one of the first state sustainable tourism conferences, innovative monitoring of sustainable tourism industry practices, and cooperatively creating environmental marketing opportunities for Minnesota tourism businesses. The University’s Travel Green education effort will continue to advance these environmental efforts. Given Minnesota’s great dependency on the environment for tourism, understanding the impacts of our changing climate on tourism activities will be an important step moving forward. While opportunities to extend our summer season can be advantageous, a shortening of winter has significant implications. To remain competitive in this evolving environment, Minnesota must be prepared with accurate, timely and objective data as well as educated professionals who think critically and holistically.

Finally, tourism impacts individuals and communities. I think we can all attest to the renewal we experience following either a quick weekend escape or a longer travel opportunity. Like the economic benefits that stimulate our economy, travel’s social benefits stimulate society by creating more productive employees and stronger social bonds. Social impacts also occur in the communities we visit. Certainly the attractions, restaurants and aesthetic qualities of destinations improve a residents’ quality of life. Further, the sense of community pride facilitated by heritage festivals or heightened awareness of our history creates a sense of community many U.S. residents seek and need in these uncertain times. However, challenges such as congestion and density may emerge as destinations evolve. To address the challenges of destination development and equitable benefit distribution, inclusive and collaborative community planning can retain and sustain the qualities that make the community attractive to both tourists and residents alike.
In sum, tourism has significant impacts for Minnesota, its residents and resources. To better understand, predict and subsequently plan for successful and sustainable tourism, additional information is mandatory. The information obtained and shared by the University of Minnesota Tourism Center has had significant impact on Minnesota communities and businesses: from increased return on investments to stronger social networks, the Center makes a difference for Minnesota tourism. As the world flattens and Minnesota diversifies, the tourism product must innovate and adjust. Information provided by the University and its partners informs such innovation. Deliberate, inclusive and science-based planning can sustain the communities and economies Minnesota tourism supports. Continued and enhanced support for such informed planning and tourism professional education will maximize tourism’s return on investment economically, environmentally and socially.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement.