Nature-Based Tourism Entrepreneurs in the Northern Great Plains:
Some Preliminary Results

Presented at
National Extension Tourism Conference
Traverse City, Michigan
September 17, 2002

Presented by:
Dr. Tim Schroeder, Associate Professor
Recreation and Leisure Services Program
University of North Dakota
P.O. Box 7135, Grand Forks, ND 58202
Phone: (701)-777-4339     Fax: (701)-777-4257
E-mail: tim.schroeder@mail.und.nodak.edu

Study funded by:
Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, USDA
The purpose of this paper is to report on preliminary results of a qualitative research project examining nature-based tourism entrepreneurs in the northern Great Plains. The researcher interviewed 25 tourism entrepreneurs, delimited for this study to local owner/operators, small in size, and taking advantage of existing local natural and cultural resources. These entrepreneurs included bird watching guides, outdoor adventure guides, hunting guides and lodges, and activity-oriented bed and breakfasts. The businesses were located in North Dakota (21) and northeast Nebraska (4). The interviews were conducted at the place of business or in the locale of the businesses during the months of February through May of 2002. The interviews typically lasted 1 to 2 hours. The researcher also collected and reviewed web pages, brochures, and other material available about the businesses in the sample. Although a few of these tourism businesses were full-time endeavors, the vast majority were significant part-time efforts.

The guiding questions for the interviews were:

- What motivated you to get into the tourism business?;
- Describe the service(s) that you provide;
- What is the nature of your product?;
- To what extent have you achieved financial success?;
- Besides income, what other factors are satisfying?;
- What are the most difficult parts of being in the tourism business?;
- What was your background prior to getting into tourism? What in your background helped you?;
- What government programs and policies have been helpful to you? What programs and policies have been a hindrance or have not helped as intended?;
- What type of education, training, development have you sought and/or need?;
- What are your research needs?;
- How do you market your services? Where?;
- What businesses/services do you partner with in the local area?;
- Who owns/manages the resources that you utilize? Do you do anything to enhance, preserve or protect those resources?

The interview data were analyzed by identifying themes in the data. These are reported in five broad areas: Motivations/Satisfactions from being in the tourism business; The entrepreneur’s background, and training and education needs; Marketing and advertising; Government relations, including financial assistance and regulations; and Relationships, with other partner organizations and local communities. Several results or findings are presented for each of these broad areas, followed by illustrative quotes from the interviews.

MOTIVATIONS/SATISFACTIONS

A commonly cited motivation for starting the tourism business was a desire to diversify the productivity of the land resource available. In some cases this was done out of economic necessity, due to problems with the farm economy. In other cases it was more of a philosophical direction.
I guess two reasons. Having the land available to do it and wanting to make the best use of that land possible. … You want to maximize your return per acre. If you have some pretty stuff, with trees and whatnot, it’s hard to farm it, so what can you do to maximize the return on that per acre. We were driven to do that because of low commodity prices. You have to tweak everything to make it most efficient you can. Just maximizing the return per acre. That’s the economic standpoint.

The value of the land is as much what it looks like and what it smells like and sounds like as what it produces for grass or wood or any other kind of thing. … I wanted to define a more balanced land use. I mean I really want to diversify. I could see that part of the problem my dad had over the years was that he was too narrowly focused in his resources. All grazing or all farming. I needed more income and I needed to diversify the land use.

We were washed up. We lost our small net worth. Our small family farm. We were done. We didn’t know what to do. I had 2 young boys and wanted to raise them in the country. I knew it wasn’t going to work farming when you didn’t have nothing left. So we decided to go where there might be some more money and take advantage of the recreational market.

*The farming economy made us start thinking about how we could make more income.* Subsidize the farming, if we can get something to get the living expense up. Most of the farmers around here, especially all the young ones, their wives have the living expense covered in town. There are very, very few where the wife doesn’t work.

Another common motivator was that the entrepreneur identified or was presented with an **opportunity** that was too good to pass up. This opportunity usually related to the availability of a building that could be converted into lodging, a locational advantage, or becoming aware of significant demand for a type of recreation that could be readily supplied by the entrepreneur.

We started hearing about the Lewis and Clark bicentennial coming up. … It was interest, and timing. Having property right along the river didn’t hurt a bit.

[This building] was constructed in 1979. It was a government rural low-income housing project. In 1999 it was sold on bids. We bid because we just didn’t want it leaving the community, they were going to move it out. We didn’t know what we were going to do with it. … Then someone put a bug in our ear about a lodge and the marvelous hunting in the area. That’s where it all evolved from.

We had people come in from Lincoln, friends of our boy’s. They’d come out here in the fall and hunt. We didn’t charge them anything. We didn’t have this lodge at that time. … I thought if these guys from the city are coming out here to hunt, I ought to start charging them. You can’t get anything for free in the city. From there on it just kept kind of growing.

That house to the north was where my grandparents lived when they farmed here. We moved it back there in 1967 when my parents built this house. … So finally about 1985, my brother and I decided to tear it down. … The bedrooms were all gutted, the roof was all off. In drives my cousin, “Hey Jim, how’s it going? I hear you’re getting married next summer. You going to still have hunters here? Where do they stay?” They’d been staying in that trailer, but lately I’d been letting them stay in the basement. “Say, is your new wife going to be wanting these hunters in the basement?” I’d never thought of that. “Jim, why are you tearing this down?” It was like a light bulb. I didn’t know. What we did was put a different roof on it, and shingles. And instead of bedrooms, its one big room. And all new wiring and a new furnace and new insulation. They love it. They absolutely love it.

We were raising elk and raising bison out on the farm and there were always people coming out to look around on the weekend. People came out, knew we had those animals and wanted to look at them. A friend told us that we ought to charge for this, start doing it as a business. So we decided to do that.
The business was frequently identified as an extension of personal interests or activities. Entrepreneurs wanted to be involved in an industry that related to their own recreational interests and experiences.

I love to do it. I love being out there exploring new areas. Some of my hikes are in areas proposed for wilderness areas. A lot of my hikes go through those areas. You don’t see a road, you don’t see a high line pole, you don’t see an oil well pumping. You feel like you’re 100 years back in time. There’s no concept of what’s going on back in the city. You just lose yourself out there and you find a lot of neat stuff.

We both started working at a science and outdoor skills camp sponsored by the Game and Fish Dept. … We were both at a real keen interest in outdoor things and birding and like that. We started getting together at other times of year to do those kind of things. One year we decided to start a guide service for birding…. We enjoyed doing it and just thought it might be kind of fun doing something we liked to do and maybe make some money at it too. We just thought let’s try this.

My wife and I, we’ve canoed for 25 or 30 years. We race canoes. I thought about a canoe rental. Going back years.

I guess mostly it’s something I’ve enjoyed doing all my life by myself. And I enjoy showing other people how good it can be if it’s worked right. How easy it is. If I didn’t like doing it, I probably wouldn’t do it.

I started back in the 1960’s when I was in high school. I still have some of those people I guided back then still coming. We talked about it for years and years. You know, “I’d like to have a hunting lodge someday.” With all the farming I do, how could I take 100 men in the fall. I remember the wife saying, you take 100 men now in the fall. You might as well make it a business. So we decided to. They always say if you are thinking of starting a business, what is it you enjoy doing and you are doing for people for free? It could be an enterprise that you could try for.

One of the things I’ve always enjoyed growing up in North Dakota is the availability of the ability to hunt. I had some great uncles that taught me to hunt. And I guess I wanted to get into the tourism business of getting these people in from out-of-state and letting them enjoy what we can enjoy here.

It’s nice to have a purpose to go birding. I’m scoping out birds somewhere that someone wants to see. They send me their wish list before they get here, and if I don’t know where one of those is, I’ll try to go find one.

A serious problem in the region is population loss, particularly migration of young people out of the area. Several of the entrepreneurs talked about a desire to create income opportunities that would help keep their children in the area.

And someday maybe one of our kids will, we have 4 children, and sometimes I think they could learn a lot by even helping me with it as they grow up. And then maybe someday one of them will just take this and sort of go with it.

I don’t want to see our communities die. That’s one of the reasons I’m trying to help my kids live here. If we don’t try, it will become a Buffalo Commons.

The other thing is that we have a son that we are interested in keeping around the area. We want to create something that would create work, create enough income to keep him employed and support a second family on the farm.
My kids. There’s got to be something to keep them here. I might be able to give them a different option if they want. There isn’t many options around here. There isn’t really anything here to hold them down except family ties. That’s what’s keeping me here. Family ties to the farm and my mom and dad. Otherwise I’d be gone.

A number of the entrepreneurs were very **civic minded**. Their businesses were partly aimed at helping the local community, particularly in economic ways.

We’re spreading the money out, the money we make, we’re putting it back into the community and the general area. … The communities around, they’re kind of going downhill. You look at Mott and Regent down there, the hunting is all that’s keeping them going. If I get big enough and have enough income where I can support the community a little better, then if I do good someone else will maybe get into it.

If I make something financially out of it, great. That would be nice. The other thing, I kind of wanted to help the community out. I intend to live here, this is where we’ll stay. The better off we are economically, it helps us.

I do think the hunting does have a financial impact on this area though. It’s a real economic impact, it really is. In town and stuff during hunting season the town is busy, the grocery store is busy. Our grocery store owner is always saying “I wish this season would last like 6 weeks longer because this is my best time of my year.” And it does, it has a big impact. It helps.

[Bringing hunters in] creates jobs. We’re not a big operation obviously, but during hunting season we employ close to 10 people, between the guides, the cook, the bird cleaners. That money stays in the community. We have to buy gas, we have to buy food.

By turning this into a lodge was a way to get revenue coming back into a small community. It was a way to diversify out from the depressed agricultural economics to generate a source of income where there’s actually some demand for a product. With agriculture there’s a lot of supply and no demand. With tourism there’s a lot of sporting and vacationing, there’s a lot of demand and not much supply. … Eventually what I’d like to do is start taking some of this revenue and open the café again. Since the café closed we don’t get together like we used to. I guess that’s one of the goals I have.

I cannot imagine the dollars. I’m chairman of the board for our farmer’s coop. I know the sales in our convenience store and gas pumps is phenomenal in October. And its out-of-state people. Bringing those nonresident dollars in is new money. It’s not recycled.

Many entrepreneurs talked about the **positive personal relationships** they have developed with their clients. Interactions with visitors were seen as life enriching experiences for rural residents who many times have limited social and cultural opportunities.

Its more than just the hunt, in the evenings we sit around. The people from New York were talking about the Trade Center bombings. We get to be more than just a client relationship. We care about their family, they care about our family. While we still live 2 different lifestyles, we still have common interests and they’re concerned about us just as much as we’re concerned about them having a good time.

The people, by-and-large, are some of the finest people you’ll meet. … Very nice, very nice people. I have a memory of when our first child was born, she worked a lot as an OB nurse, we had our TV in that corner. When the Twins won the World Series that year there must have been 10 hunters right here and I’d give the baby to these hunters and I’d go dish up ice cream and we’d have ice cream and cheer the Twins on. I’ll never forget that. In fact when our one guy scored, we shouted in the room and Nathan was half asleep and we woke him up and he cried. We were just cheering. … So that’s why I think we do this, its like part of our mission statement, to just have a kind word to strangers.
The biggest thing is meeting people. We’ve become very good friends with so many people. It’s more of a family, friendship type thing. For our clients it’s like coming hunting with old friends again. That’s the biggest thing, just the friendships we make.

One of the greatest parts is people coming from all over and just meeting them and talking about what they do in their area. And they come here and say “wow, just look at this, there’s not trees anywhere. You can see for miles.” Yeah, meeting the different people from around the country and having a chance to visit with them and learn something is part of the enjoyment too. You establish friends, you know.

It’s the people. I like visiting with the people. It’s very satisfying taking the people out. Most of the guys that come are in their middle 50’s to 60. The older end of the baby-boomers. They’ve had a pretty successful life and remember doing this as a kid. And because of their busy schedules have gotten away from it for 20-30 years. They just enjoy coming back out.

BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION

Several questions elicited information about the education, experience, and background of the entrepreneurs. They also were asked to indicate types of training and development, related to their businesses, that they needed or had sought.

Those involved in providing non-consumptive types of outdoor activities tend to have a higher level of formal education. Most indicated college degrees and some had advanced degrees.

My major was biology. I grew up in Jamestown, but I never paid any attention to birds until I went to college here at Valley City. That’s what got it started. … It’s something that people have a knack for one way or another. In the past I’ve been a bookkeeper, a legal secretary, a volunteer coordinator, a housewife. And now a teacher. Everything leads you to a place and all these things have led me to this place.

I’ve been birding since I was in college, so around 30 years or so. I enjoy it and its an interest of my own. I teach high school biology and advanced biology. Where I am now I take kids out in the spring as part of a course. And I’ve done some local birding with some of the local bird clubs here. And it’s the kind of thing where I’ve just built up experience over the years.

I had a full-time job with Hennepin County Parks and Rec. We’d lead outdoor programs and this kind of thing. At Gustavus Adolphus there is a group called Friends of the Arboretum. I had a lot of friends who were into this. They’d go off to watch the swan migration, etc.

I’m an experienced canoest. As far as running the business, I’m kind of the physical plant kind of guy. I take care of the tepees and trailers. And the equipment. I’m a mechanic out at work. Everyone’s got their own skills. We’ve got the teachers. The brother-in-law’s in human resources. So everybody has their niche. It’s good to have a wide range of skills to run something like this. It really works well.

I’m at least a 4th generation bird watcher. I’ve been around it all my life. I’m a native of the area. … I’m educated in it in the sense that I have a degree in education. I was a school administrator, but I studied zoology at the University of Wyoming and I have a masters degree in science and education from the University of Utah. As well as personal experience, I also have the educational background. I’ve had ornithology, I’ve had entomology.

Those involved in the hunting sector of the industry tended to rely more on life experience for education and preparation. They typically had agricultural backgrounds and lots of hands-on experience in the rural setting.
I grew up out here, farming. I went to a year of school in Wahpeton. Then the oil field was going gangbusters and I got involved in that. After a few years I came back here, and here I am. I always thought that working the land and working with cattle was a pretty honorable profession.

I am practically a native. I was born in Texas, I was an Air Force brat, but I was about 10 months old when we moved to North Dakota. We’re on the family farm, it’s a fourth generation farm. When my dad got out of the Air Force he came back to the family farm. And we have just about all the in-laws and such are hunters. We do hunt. I did a lot of bow hunting in the past.

I went to NDSU, was an animal science major with a science option. I always have been an innovator, I always have. I’ve always been willing to jump into things that people normally wouldn’t wanted to jump into. … When I got out of NDSU, none of the traditional jobs really appealed to me. I wound up forming my own business … we sold livestock products and services. I went from there to a western felt hat manufacturing startup … that built and sold western felt hats wholesale. I came home in February of 1983 and I’ve been here ever since. That background, … pretty much taught me that new things were a lot of fun, a lot of opportunity. You best not be waiting for it to come to you, you’ve got to go after it.

I was raised on a farm. My husband and I have farmed together for 20 years. I delivered a rural route for 2 years and was in the Post Office for 4 years. That’s where I learned my people skills …. Mostly I know the land. I grew up only 8 miles away, so we knew everybody in the area.

Farmers. Both local. I was born and raised across the road. She was raised just south of here. I’ve hunted my whole life since I was old enough to carry a gun.

I’m quite embarrassed of this, but I did not graduate from high school and did not go to college. I believed in very hard work and have done everything the old fashioned way on the farm, everything is done with the back and the arm. … I’ve never been schooled on this. … To add to that, I think would be, plain out experience in life. I went into business very young, 17 years old. I was doing some very large business already. I had to face a lot of different experiences, whether it be financial or with my family or immediate family. Nothing beats experience. There’s nothing wrong with college classes or schooling of any kind, but hands-on can clearly give you the advantage.

Influential individuals were important components of the background of several entrepreneurs. These individuals had positive effects on them in relation to their businesses.

I had an ecology class with a professor up there and I was really interested in that class. I had a talk with him. Basically he told me that if I’m going to do what I want to do, then go out and do it. Don’t sit around a watch everybody pass me by.

I grew up at a wildlife refuge. My father was one of the longest serving employees for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Clark J. Salyer used to come out every fall and sit at our table. He was an interesting guy. My father worked under him. My father was not a highly educated man, but he worked his way up to be a refuge manager.

My dad was a principal and did construction on his own. I started working with him when I was 11 years old. I just kind of molded in there. Being your own boss, there’s some risk you take with it, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

The person that taught me the most important things about that was … an English teacher I had at … High School. He inspired me, through the theater, we did 2 musicals. He taught me through that process that there ain’t nothing that you should be afraid of tackling. And I haven’t been.
Dad kept on telling us kids “you’re going to have to diversify if you’re going to stay in agriculture.” And he pounded us with that ever since high school. … He was a community leader. On the school board. He was and still is a big pusher of the local community. Its weird how you just fall into your dad’s footsteps. I remember asking him if this was economic development. He said well, you don’t have to hire anyone else for it to be economic impact. If it just provides for you it has a positive impact.

The answers to the question about training or development needed or desired resulted in limited responses. There seemed to be a fairly high perception of competence to do the scope and type of business that they are engaged in. Some cited a need for more business-related training.

If we went bigger, then yeah, I’d need some more help in bookkeeping, which I could probably do, but I’d need help. And hiring.

The marketing thing. We could probably use help in that. How the reach the right target market. … We’re having a hard time finding that market. A little more help on marketing research and advertising.

As far as education, we certainly could use something in the management area, putting together a business plan and like that.

I need more business training, about managing money, managing budgets, managing communications. I can communicate pretty well by talking, but my writing skills are just average. I didn’t have any business training, I need more of that.

Training as far as bookkeeping and that sort of thing we probably could have used. We learned by trial and error. We did get a computer a year ago. I’d like to spend more time on it.

Well to me the questions like liability, advertising, maybe some financing for some people. Collaboration, I see a great potential for that. There maybe needs to be a tax incentive for young entrepreneurs.

There had been some limited involvement in workshops related to the tourism industry, usually sponsored at the state level.

We try to go to seminars they put out about the internet. Then we always go to the tourism conventions and try to pick up anything they’ve got. Especially about he foreigners coming in, from Sweden, Germany and Norway.

We went to a workshop down in Bismarck, Marketplace, and we learned some things and one thing led to another and we decided to try it on our own.

I went to two workshops sponsored in part through Ag Extension. They were organized by NDSU. 1999 Farm and ranch recreation workshop. I went to another one in Devils Lake during the Ag roundup that had some similar ideas.

We did go to one program, but that was just to learn and educate ourselves. We went to Marketplace, that Kent Conrad got going. It was in Bismarck. One of the guys from Cannonball Company was putting on a little workshop. How to Make Your Farm into a Hunting Farm was the name of the workshop. I learned a lot by listening to guys who had been doing it before. What to do and what not to do. That helped us out as a tool and confidence.

Several seemed to believe that the internet was the only resource they needed as an educational resource.
On the internet there are all kinds of things you can model off of for preparing a business plan. They have little courses there.

The internet is right there. The answers for all my questions are there.

MARKETING

Several concepts related to marketing were very evident in the interviews. There were trends in the geographic location of the markets for the region’s businesses. How to set the price for services was a struggle for many of the entrepreneurs. And how and where to advertise was a common concern. The idea of needing to market and advertise was a new concept for many. As expressed by one interviewee the idea of marketing is an unfamiliar concept to many farmers:

Before when we had a truckload of wheat, we never had to advertise to sell it. You took it to the elevator and got your check.

Geographically, the market segments for the region seem to be the Great Lakes States (Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin) and the two coasts, especially the east coast (California, New York, the Carolinas, Georgia).

Most of the customers come from Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana. That’d be about it. Oh, and Missouri. Madison, Green Bay, Milwaukee in Wisconsin.

Most of our business comes from Wisconsin and Minnesota. Those folks pretty much fill us up.

Mostly they come from Minnesota. We get more inquiries from Minnesota than anywhere.

Most of my clients are out-of-towners, coming from the Cities, all over Wisconsin, some from Iowa.

The phone rings off the hook here. And its no longer Minnesota, Twin Cities hunters. Its Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, we had a guy from Tennessee with us last year. So its phenomenal.

People coming from New York, California, Chicago. Our hunters are either east coast or west coast, except one group from Aspen. Lots of well-off people, doctors, lawyers, stock brokers, etc. We get very little Midwest.

People from New Hampshire, Connecticut, Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia, St. Louis, Michigan, Wisconsin, Chicago. One guy out of Iowa for 2 years now.

Most of our clientele come from down along the east coast, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida. We always get a couple of groups from New York City and Chicago and about 2 or 3 groups from California.

My deer hunters are 95% nonresidents. Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, New York, Louisiana, are the 4 big states.

I put something on the internet and got a lot of calls from Maine and New Jersey.

On our web site we have a counter and a site map, where we get our calls from. Most of them are from the eastern edge of Florida up to New York. Along there, that’s where 90% of our calls come from.
We’ve had people from North Carolina, Oklahoma, Los Angeles, I just got a call from California, all over the country really. Illinois.

If you get into Florida, Alabama, Georgia, there’s a lot of those people who tend to want to hunt up here. That and the northern tier, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota. For the most part, money is not the object. If they want to come here, they will.

**Pricing is a difficult issue** for many of the entrepreneurs. They often started off looking at pricing from a local perspective, thinking about what their neighbors would be willing to pay for their services. Another issue is that many of the customers are also their friends, so there is an uneasiness about charging their friends “too much”. Many admit they probably have their services under-priced. The full-time entrepreneurs seemed to have the most realistic pricing structure.

I charge these day use people about $600 per day. And you can’t believe the number of days we’ve got sold at $600 a day. Just for using the site. It’s unbelievable. And we’ve just barely scratched the surface of what we could be doing, and maybe should be doing. … Pricing to us is a constant irritant. You’re never really comfortable with your pricing formula. The reasons why, in my opinion, are that a business like ours, we have people coming here from when we were first in business. The way I feel about that is that you have to repay that loyalty. So you have to have about 3 different formulas to do your pricing. You have formulas for friends and long-time customers. You have formulas for people who bring large groups and are responsible for other large groups coming. You have a formula for getting everything you can out of that one customer because you know they are only going to be here one time. Then you have formulas based on how long people are going to be here, how large is the total bill. Pricing is complex, it’s not as simple as selling jeans or shoes. Some of the people are your customer because they’re friends. They want to support you.

We were at $500 per day and we went up to $550 per day (per person). So that’s $1650 per hunt. When we started we went down and visited [another lodge] and they were charging $400 per day. We started out at $350 and I thought “this is going to be a money maker”. We lost our butt.

We try to gauge what we charge by how much we are unbooked. You want to be about ¼ unbooked. If you’re all booked a year ahead of time, you’re not charging enough. The hardest thing, when we go out and do seminars for others, is to get them to charge what they’re worth. It’s been hard for us too. We started out at $150 a day and thought who’s going to pay $150 a day?

One of the hardest things to know is how much to charge. How much is this worth? Part of that North Dakota work ethic type thing, you don’t want to blow your own horn and make yourself out to be more than you really are. Its’ still a struggle, knowing what to charge. Some clients from Arkansas gave us an additional $200, so maybe we’re not charging enough.

A very common concern was the **cost of advertising**. Partly this related to a lack of money available for advertising, but also related to knowing what advertising would be cost-effective.

We advertise in a magazine, its out of Georgia I think. The average income for that magazine was like $60,000. But we never had any response off that. What is the best advertising and how much you should spend on advertising?

Advertising is really expensive. We advertised one month over the radio. It cost us like $500 and we didn’t get one call.

So I guess the biggest problem is just getting the information out. Because advertising is expensive. We did advertise once during the first year in another birding magazine, Birding Digest, for about $270 for one
issue. How much money do you put into advertising, and hope to get that money back. We don’t want to put in a lot of money. That’s probably been the hardest thing.

I was the only one at the Nebraska Deer Expo. There are only two of us that advertise in the Nebraska Sportsman. That tells me one thing. They’re either too damn dumb to advertise or they don’t need to advertise, they’ve got too much business. I know which one it is, people feel like they’ve got enough business, they don’t need to advertise. A lot of these operations are to their maximums now unless they want to continue to grow it.

It’s quite expensive to advertise. A little 1x2 ad in the back of a hunting magazine is $300 per month. Allocating your dollars to the right place is a challenge.

Probably the biggest thing would be advertising and getting the word out. We know of several places that would probably be good to advertise, but it’s just a cost thing.

Marketing is a real problem for us. It’s hard to find the dollars to do it properly.

One of the tough things is the advertising, where do you go. By the time you find some place that is good, you advertise with them a few times and you get no response, your money is already spent. Here’s one we are considering for deer hunting, full page ad is $4,000, two colors $5,000. We usually always do 1/3 of a page in color, we’re at $2,240 if you do all 12 issues. It’s crazy. When we started out they were $500, $600, $700 for ½ page in color. Now we’ve cut down to 1/3 page and they’re $800, $900 up to $1,200.

I used the radio last year. I used it September, October, November, December. I spent way too much money for whatever I thought I’d get out of it. I spent $600 for advertising. The first three weeks I was on the radio 5 times a day, seven days a week. That was it, that’s all I did. Then I went to 3 days, 3 times per day. That was $500 per month. I never did get my money’s worth out of that.

**Word-of-mouth and repeat customers** was a strong source of business. In fact some entrepreneurs said that they did no advertising, and never had from the beginning.

I haven’t necessarily had to do a lot of advertising. The first group of hunters that came out, went back and told people and word spread like wildfire Generally word-of-mouth is most effective. People come here and have a good time and tell others and come back themselves.

We’re basically booked on past customers, so we are not doing a lot of advertising period.

But once you guide these people and they see what’s out here, word-of-mouth they take it back to their town and if they have an outdoor club they belong to, if they can recommend me that’s the best.

We get a lot of repeat business, probably about 60%. A lot of people like to come here.

65% of our business is all repeat business.

Most of the people we’ve had here for years. As they leave one year they book for the next year.

The hunters that come, are always willing to take some brochures with them. Word-of-mouth is always the best.

Number two has probably been word of mouth.
Many of the businesses have web sites. They indicated that their clientele were very good at finding resources on the internet. Some of the web sites were professionally developed and maintained, but many were developed by family members or local sources.

I’m in the process of redoing my web page. My other server crashed. I had to get another one, but I’m not happy with it. I do subscribe to a search engine promoter. Its not one of the real spendy ones. If you want to pay more money, you’ll get it promoted a lot more. That’s one thing, the money can go fast if you use internet advertising. An ad on a banner, you pay for how many times your banner shows up on somebody’s page, whether they click on it or not. Your $100 is gone in a matter of days, and you’ve seen nothing for it.

And our clientele, since we got with the Chamber, they put our name on the website. There are so many of these hunters are pretty good with the internet. The phone rings off the hook here.

I’ve got a web site. I have some search engines attached to it, but I’m not really getting the hits I want to get on it. I’m with the North Dakota Tourism when you click on their site. So I’m using the internet.

Well one of our strongest tools … I grew up farming, never into technology or anything like that. I had no knowledge or experience, they didn’t have computers when I was in high school. I had no experience with computers at all. Really didn’t visualize the impact it could have. Vocational Rehabilitation brought us out a computer. I did some work, my wife and myself, built us a website. Its the most valuable tool in the shed. Well I would say the computer is number one. … Doctors or lawyers or whatever that sit down with their lunch or soda or whatever in front of their computer and punch in hunting and Nebraska and bang, we’re up on it. That’s why I call it the largest tool in the shed.

I have a web site. My daughter put it on geocities.

There’s a bird alert network, Audubon has a listserv. So we read, e-mail, from other people who have seen things and where they saw it. If you have questions, you can write back. It’s quite active.

We’ve got a web site but we’ve never gotten it to where we really like it. We just turned it over to a young fellow who’s redoing it. We took it away from the biggest outfit in Bismarck, the one who wins all the prizes for all the wonderful web sites and charges thousands of dollars. They built it but nobody came because they didn’t build it right. I go to a few classes to try to pick up the high points of who’s building what web sites and why, but they didn’t believe me. There’s been very few hits. This young fellow sounds really good, so we took it away from them. They asked, what are you going to do when the kid moves away, I said find another kid. He’s going to do it so they can print it off, just like a brochure.

I’ve got this website now. One of the main reasons I have the website is its so costly to advertise in any of the outdoor magazines. I thought with this I could put in a real short ad, and almost everybody’s on the internet, and I could give them a link to my website. You cut down on a real long ad and just give them that.

Now we use a web site hosted by this advertising company located down the road on a farm like us. So you can be in the middle of nowhere and run an internet business anywhere. It’s wonderful. She’s got like “HunttheWorld”, “FishtheWorld”, “GolfttheWorld”, “HuntNorthDakota.Com”, “PheasantHunt.Com”, all the good domain names taken up. It’s a nice, long scrolling simple web site with enough information on and contact information on it. That’s where almost all our bookings came from this year.

I’ve got a web site. I did that last year. My brother did that for me.

Reliance on the state tourism departments, local chambers of commerce, and similar organizations for advertising help was common.
Now, other than being a Chamber member, we don’t do any additional advertising. Because most of ours come back every year, and through the website I usually get enough phone calls to fill us up. Through the Chamber’s website.

Tourism [Dept.] does have that list that we’re on. We’ve had some inquiries from that. So they’re trying to help there. Helping us target might be something the Tourism Dept. should do.

We have our brochure and state tourism department does some marketing. That’s pretty much it. We’re so picturesque, that’s all we need. The tourism department has been real good to us. They send out a lot of brochures. In fact they’ve just been over in Europe. They’re interested in us over there.

We did actually get a sponsor, the Williston Convention and Visitors Bureau is going to pay for our booth, $500. And in turn we’re going to be doing some work for them. Hopefully we’re setting up something for them. We’ve done some things with North Dakota Tourism. They have a link, we have a link on their site. They’ve been really good that way. I talked to them when we first started about trying to set up some tours for the Europeans coming in, but that never panned out. And so we haven’t really talked to them much lately, but as far as I know they still have a link on their website. I haven’t checked it lately but they had it on there. And I know there have been people who have found out about us that way.

I don’t have any ads, other than the website. And I’m listed with the Chamber of Commerce. It would be good if the state had a good website, where people like myself could be connected.

Many had participated in sports and trade shows, but mainly with disappointing outcomes. Typically the expense, both in money and time, was not worth the amount of business generated.

This year we are planning to go to the ABA, American Birding Association, national convention.

What’s frustrating, we went to a sports show in St. Paul the last 2 years. You would not believe how many people are out there wanting to help you in return for something free. After each sports show there’s probably 20 or 30 guys wanting something. We even got contacted by an agent in Manchester, NH who will book hunts for a fee. Of course before he will book them, he wants to see the place. Wants a free hunt. I guess that’s not really difficult, its just the nature of the business.

We’ve done the Fargo Sports Show 2 years. We did the Valley City Winter Show the first year. That was pathetic. We had lots of people talk to us, but not a single person came to hunt, except the guy who won the free hunt. We went to the Anoka Sports Show, in Anoka, Minnesota. That was a blow off, just kind of a dog and pony show. I did the St. Cloud show here a month ago, and that had some real interest. And … going to St. Paul this weekend and do that deer show and put our info out. I think we’ve got to start going to the bigger shows, like Nebraska. But that takes big dollars. We were just talking about our brother-in-law, he’s going to have some time on his hands now. We don’t have a nickel to dig up to send him, but we’re going to have to send him to Milwaukee and Detroit to promote our duck and goose hunting and to promote our deer hunting. But the problem is the investment in getting there.

Last year we did two trade shows on the east coast, and for the amount of money we put into that compared to magazine ads, and internet, it wasn’t worth it. We went to Syracuse, NY and Worcester, MA. We were gone a week and a half. We went through thousands and thousands of people.

I think I know how to do it [promote the business], but I’m not interested in traveling to all them shows. I’d like to have a broker that could hit every show in the country and book people.

And we did advertise in a few magazines and sports shows. The sports shows weren’t the greatest advertising.
We were at the Omaha Sports Show. That was fun. It was good once, anyway. We didn’t get too much business out of it. We put out a lot of brochures, 1100. It was 5 days. We enjoyed it, but we won’t go to that particular place again.

And then more traditionally we go to one sportsman’s trade show in the Detroit, Michigan area. We’ve been going there for a long time. Michigan is full of nice people. We don’t market much around Chicago. We’ve done a lot of marketing in Minnesota and Wisconsin, but we’ve got such a customer stream coming that we don’t really have to go back to those parts anymore.

Several entrepreneurs were using or considering using booking agents to promote and sign business for them.

We even got contacted by an agent in Manchester, NH who will book hunts for a fee. Of course before he will book them, he wants to see the place. Wants a free hunt. I guess that’s not really difficult, its just the nature of the business.

The consultants are like booking agents, they take 15%, on repeat clients 10%. Most generally, a mixed group like that, I try to get personally involved rather than one of the guides that works for me. Not that I’m a professional in that area, but it is my business, not there’s. I try my best to make these guys aware of each other’s pet peeves.

I’m going to list my site with booking agents. These guys are getting 2.5 million hits per year. If you get 2% of that look at your site, you’re getting 50,000 hits looking at your site alone. As far as people advertising through these booking agents in North Dakota, there’s maybe one or two guides on that. The booking agents are on the east coast mostly. They book the parties and get 10% of that.

I’d like to have a broker that could hit every show in the country and book people. I’ve got one guy doing that for me now. I go up to them at sports shows at their booths, cause I’m interested in their hunting – like caribou. Especially if they don’t have any waterfowl, I say are you interested in booking some hunts for me. I give them my information.

Free publicity was cited by only a few of the entrepreneurs. Even those who received this publicity seemed not to have sought it, but it just happened.

One thing that might have helped us to start with, because we didn’t really have the money to advertise, but a lot of newspapers, they heard about us, what happened to me, and they done feature stories on us. How we wanted to continue to work and live in a lifestyle of what we were kind of used to. That really brought in our first business and got us going. I don’t know that some of the people maybe didn’t come because they felt kind of sorry for our financial situation at the time. Well then they enjoyed themselves and went home and told cousin Jim and uncle John about it or their friend and before long. That was probably our biggest boost, to start up.

We also had lots of media coverage. Because it was the first time ever, it was a serendipitous time. The media was very cooperative, tons of coverage.

We put the canoe in a parade a few years ago. Also got a group of buckskinners to do a trip, spend the night in the tepees. Took publicity pictures. There was a picture in Readers Digest, in the travel section. It’s getting to be that we’re about as busy as we can be, unless we go out and hire someone full-time. The
National Geographic Traveler has us in it, they came through last year when we were doing a thing for the state water commission.

GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Overall the entrepreneurs seemed to be very independent, self-reliant types of people. They mostly wanted to do it on their own, and had the resources to do it that way.

I want to do it on my own. Its hard. Governments there for a reason, I know that. I might have been able to get some economic development money, and might still do that. But I want to try to do it on my own first. I don’t want to rely on that stuff first and then do it on my own. Really a business should try to take care of itself. If it can’t take care of itself with the minimal amount of expenses I have, what would it do with more money?

We just went to the local bank. I did some asking around about government programs but didn’t really run across any federally funded or state funded, I didn’t really fall across anything. We got a loan here. Our accountant looked at the rate and he said he wouldn’t even do the paperwork to get what he thought was available. We’ve got a credit line, so if we need money we can get it.

I haven’t borrowed money. I’ve been able to develop it part-time on my own. Some people have encouraged me to expand and then I’d need to buy vans, etc. All that outfitting kind of stuff.

We haven’t needed any government loans. We have talked about building on, in that case we’ll be looking for some help.

The CRP program has enhanced the ability of many of the hunting operations to exist. There were some indications of problems associated with CRP.

CRP works wonderful. Some of the land in CRP doesn’t even have a road into it. That is an area we might put our nature trail through.

My dad has some land in CRP. We do some hunting on that. That’s been another issue, the people in town think they are helping pay for CRP. That’s just like the farmers are paying taxes to help support schools in town.

None of the land is in CRP. We tried to the first year, but we ran into a problem with the regulation that says you can’t have a commercial business on CRP. They deleted our contract and since it was approved and deleted, we’re never allowed to sign it up in CRP again as long as we own it.

We don’t have any CRP. We have referred hunters to friends that have CRP. I sometimes wonder at what point in the future it may be economically feasible to do that, to take good farm land and turn it into wildlife habitat. If farming got really, really bad and you could say I can make more off from hunting.

There’s some things I disagree with as far as, if you want to starting talking about rules and the farm aspect of it, such as CRP Programs and such and the rules you have to bounce through. I do have some land in CRP. We’re continuously trying to get some more in CRP. That’s one of the things, some people swear up and down you can’t run a commercial business on CRP, that you can’t collect from a product being harvested off the ground. At the federal level, I don’t know if the rule will ever be changed, I don’t know that once you’re in you’ll be grandfathered in, I don’t know what the rules or regs will be on it. We’re going to see more and more of this across the country. Yes it is a way to get extra revenue. If you get a $50 per acre payment back and you’re still able to go out there and shoot 50 roosters on that land, yeah. My
theory is that it’s out of production, the erosion, the purpose of why its in CRP, is still being implemented. The hunting has nothing to do with the erosion.

I put a lot of land in CRP about 10 or 15 years ago. We were looking for a way to utilize it. The CRP through the Federal government has been helpful in getting the habitat there. Of course I enhance it for wildlife. You couldn’t have the land available without CRP.

For a while we were concerned that they didn’t want to let us hunt pheasants on our CRP ground. We weren’t supposed to do any enterprise on there to make money. We had a little battle and got some of the Congressmen in Washington and finally got that straightened out.

Some had taken advantage of government assistance with financing. Typically this took the form of a low interest loan.

The Bank of North Dakota financed 80% of the loan for these buildings. 1% lower interest rate. So I had to go to the Bank of North Dakota and get a low interest rate loan that helped me. Without that I probably couldn’t have done it. Thanks to North Dakota for that small business loan creating jobs and the environment.

When we started, the RC&D got me a small grant, a $5,000 grant, what’s the name of that? It was a small grant, it did help. But that’s the only help.

With the Bank of North Dakota. That’s how this house was built. Enhancing agriculture. Its called a PACE loan. It’s a good program. I’d recommend it to someone who wants to go that route.

The financial nightmare of starting a business when you aren’t very well heeled already. Thank God for the EDC in Jamestown, they’ve helped us with some 6% interest money.

When we first started we got a PACE loan, a 1% loan for part of the building. It really helped out. That interest is tough.

We didn’t qualify for any conventional lending because of our net worth. The only place we could get lending was from the Farm Service Agency, which is a government lending agency for farmers. Low interest loans for people who could not accommodate other … So the loophole for us to get our foot in and get our foot started, we had to keep so much livestock around to be considered a farmer to borrow the money to buy the land. Because they won’t borrow money for recreational businesses. Nothing says you can’t run cattle on the same land. So that’s kind of how we did it.

The non-consumptive providers were concerned about restrictions on the use of public lands for their businesses. This usually related to the issuance of special use permits or concessionaire licenses for federal areas.

We thought the Game and Fish was going to be hitting it, which would have been bad enough, but now the Dept. of Interior is going to be doing it and that is worse. You have to come in there and explain to them why you think this is necessary to come up to there to do your guiding for birdwatching or whatever. And everything will be contracted out. So if they contract it out to you, the other fellow on the other side that’s running a similar bed and breakfast or whatever won’t be able to do it because I already have the license, or I won’t be able to do it because he has the license. You have to show cause. If you can’t show cause why
you can’t do it outside the fence as well as you can do it inside the fence, they won’t give you the contract. So its another hurdle.

The biggest hindrance lately has been the Forest Service policy on guiding and outfitters requiring your financial statements, full disclosure of your finances, which I think is an invasion of privacy. I’ve had several quite lengthy phone calls with several Forest Service people about it and they are very firm about their position that it’s their national policy and that’s what they need done and if you want to be certified by them you need to do it. I said I’d avoid Forest Service roads and Forest Service lands. The public roads are what I’ll stay to. It doesn’t make a difference what scale your business is, whether you’re an outfitter taking trail rides and stuff like that or if you’re driving along the road and hiking. In fact it includes viewing geologic formations, birdwatching, wildlife watching, wildflower watching, they’ve got it all up there. If you’re hosting people, you’re supposed to apply for a license.

[Government permits] is kind of an issue right now. We’re getting kind of mixed signals. I have one friend who does kind of the same thing, and she basically was told by somebody at the National Park that she could not take people in there without a permit of some kind. And what they were asking for was really outrageous, I mean it’s a huge sum of money. As a result she’s told them she’ll never bring anyone into the National Park. She’ll stay on Forest Service, on open public roads. We’ve been hearing rumblings about the same kind of things maybe for the wildlife refuges, although we’ve never had any problems with that. And as long as we stay on the roads there’s no problem. There’s been some rumblings about starting to require a permit. We wouldn’t be able to do it if they had to start that kind of business. It really doesn’t make any sense, its nonconsumptive. It’s a public place, why should we have to pay for a permit to use it. We want all this ecotourism and bring people into the state, but now all the sudden you’re penalizing us for doing it. So far it hasn’t been a problem for us, but we hear things. I could see it if it was a case where we were going off-trail, wilderness areas and like that. Where we’re going is public access. In some cases it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission. They know what we’re doing up there, in fact have encouraged us, the people that we’ve talked to. And have never really said anything to us, but we’ve heard other people say things. They need to decide what they want to do about that. If you’re going to push ecotourism, you need to encourage ecotourism, not penalize it.

My relationship with the Forest Service is very good. The Grassland Plan is another issue. There are parts of that plan that are designed to get permitees and people in western North Dakota thinking more about recreation as an income source, so it is relevant. … You obviously need to recognize the importance of recreation and tourism, but they are expecting a little bit too much, too quick. So what that creates then is the potential for failure, or the perception of it. Success is more about definition than it is reality. So the Forest Service has defined recreation in a way that kind of creates the potential to be able to identify failures. They could have made the expectations different instead and defined success.

Every year I have to submit (to the Forest Service) my annual itinerary, my CPR/First Aid, my insurance, and I have to pay 3% of what I’m projected to make at the start of the year and at the end of the year they adjust from that. But as far as the Forest Service is concerned, I’d say they haven’t stepped in yet, they’re watching us, monitoring us, and making sure we’re following their rules and regulations, providing safe tours out there. I believe they have contacted a few people that I’ve guided in the past and sent them questionnaires on the service they got for the money they paid and whether they’d come back again. It’s all new to them. They had to model off other states on how to set these things up.

**RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS**

Mostly the partnerships identified were very **limited in scope, local, and informal**. Typically they involved referring clients to other services available in the local area or referring and accepting overflow from other providers.

I work with Dakota Guides Service here in town and the Mah Dah Hey Lodge up by Grassy Butte. Basically he advertises his lodging services and also for guided hikes. If he books anyone for a guided hike,
I take them and he gets a cut. And vice versa, if I book a group for 2 days and we stay overnight in his lodge, I get a fee.

There’s a steak house in Battle Creek, that we push each other. There’s 2 or 3 motels in Norfolk that send me business.

Well I wouldn’t say partnered. We’ve done things with Cross Ranch State Park and the Interpretative Center. They are getting up a trip that they’ll sell. Knife River Ranches. We work together, but not really what I’d call partnering. We work together and share customers.

I usually, if the hunters don’t know already, I tell them where they can eat. There’s a bar in town. I mention the restaurants. But there’s nothing formal. If I’m booked up, I’ll give the names of other people that do this. And that’s a two way street.

Some restaurants and accommodation places, like hotels and bed and breakfasts. Like the Long Steer Inn in Steele, ND. The manager there is very interested in promoting birding. We stayed in a bed and breakfast in Baker, MT. When we were coming in June, that’s a good time for them. Another place north of Belfield has asked me to look over their place.

The motel in town. We’ve got a little deal going with them. And the restaurant in town, they’ve got a little room for us when we’ve got hunters coming in.

We have a couple of local steakhouses. We send them in there for supper at night. They’re not fancy, but we like it.

We partner with the local café for the breakfasts. They know we’re coming with a bunch of guys and give us the coupons. We are considering partnering up with another lodging operation, but we haven’t decided. These guys leave tips! They’ll throw 7 or 8 or 10 dollars down on the table.

We have some people that are in business themselves, looking for ways to utilize what we have. There’s a gal that wanted to give massages to hunters.

With my neighbor, I lease the hunting rights to his private land. And then we do things with local entertainers. We hire them all to come in and entertain people.

There are many informal arrangements for land use. Sometimes these involved use of public lands for non-consumptive activities. Frequently these arrangements are for hunting access. Liability is a potential issue related to these informal arrangements.

It’s tough to do. The access isn’t good. I’d like to see a state agency do something about it. I grew up on the river and I know how landowners along the river are too. You’ve got to kind of juggle things. If you approach people right, you can get access here. We’ve never had any trouble, but we’re local. That helps.

I guess the thing that scares me is insurance. We’ve got these companies that are leasing the hunting rights and then not paying insurance on that land. Its going to come down on the landowner eventually. If they get caught once, its going to be a problem. They’re leasing the hunting rights, not the land. The outfitter is probably not bonded for the number of acres they are hunting. Someone could really get hurt over that and the landlords are going to get screwed.

We’ve got good friends that we tried to give them some money and they shied away. They’re friends of ours and they’d like to see him succeed in what he’s doing.
Because of the neighbors. We pay a few of them to hunt on their land. The fellow I sold the hunting land off to, he lets us hunt on that land and the rest of his land. I give some of the hay land that they rent, we hunt on their land. A fellow up here uses some of our grain bins, and I hunt on his land.

A neighbor owns a ¼ section to the south of us and he lets us use that. Our uncle owns the land just to the north of us and we use his farm land.

There’s 10 quarters of land. Five of the 10 quarters we have, ourselves. The others are a neighbor’s. I don’t rent for cash from him, but we trade off, letting him graze cattle on our land.

When we first started we thought we’d do it simple and just run it like a motel. Let them hunt on their own. But we realized that being landowners, if they did something wrong, got in trouble, we would be in trouble also. So we went fully guided. At first the neighbors posted up their land. Now they see that we aren’t going to hurt anything. So far we don’t pay the neighbors for hunting. Some know exactly what we are doing and are fine with it.

We don’t lease. I don’t have the cash to lease. My uncle and dad and friends total about 8,000 acres.

I have 15,000 acres lined up for hunting. Some of it my husband and I own, some is family land, and other is area farmers giving us a shot.

Local communities are mostly accepting of the tourism businesses, but some concerns were identified that the entrepreneurs are sensitive to and try to manage.

Sometimes the word ecotour, people misunderstand it. They think, oh its just environmentalists.

People around here don’t say a lot, especially to your face. Maybe we’ve had, oh we had one of our hunters that didn’t quite see where the line was between our land and our neighbor’s land, who has his land posted, its off limits. So he was hunting on the wrong side of the line. But we’re still friends with our neighbor. It didn’t cause a long-term problem.

We have had nothing but encouragement from the neighbors. At first when we started doing it, I thought, lets keep it quiet. But we brought in two semi loads of fence posts. How do you smuggle those in? Actually they encourage it. The older guys ask how things are going. They want periodic updates. The public’s reaction has been very positive.

I haven’t noticed any backlash to birdwatching. Mostly they think you’re a little odd to go watch birds, they don’t understand it. But some people want to do it, if they hear about a group getting together. It’s a growing thing.

I haven’t heard anything directly, but you hear things. I do not cross any lines, I don’t go on anybody else’s land. I’m not going to do anything wrong. I don’t like people to talk about me. I think its more greed. Some of the land I hunt belongs to a friend of mine way out west. I watch the CRP for him. I do pay him a little bit. They are all concerned that I don’t pay nothing and I take hunters out there. Really its none of their business. Anybody else could do this, but I don’t think there’s too many that would put in the time to do it right.

Our neighbors have been positive. I haven’t really heard of any problems. In fact when we were starting out they were really helpful. They’ve been really helpful and supportive. Except when we pulled our land out for deer hunting, there were a few comments about that. I wish they would talk to us directly so we could tell them our side of it.
At first the neighbors didn’t really have an opinion. It was kind of like it was new. We’re out of the main, heart of the, like in the Mott region they’re really in the heart of it. … The neighbors are getting more receptive, they really are. It’s starting to happen, you know. We have one neighbor for sure that didn’t like it at all. Then last year he came and asked it if we would take his land. He always had people coming on there to hunt anyway. He called me up, we needed more land.

Local community has been very supportive. At first adjacent land owners were concerned we’d be taking hunters on their land. After finding out we didn’t do that, they were okay. Having the restaurant open in the summertime, they’ve been really supportive of that. They patronize the lodge.

That’s a whole nuther issue about what the recreational industry has done with the value of land, per acre of private land. The traditional ag community hates it, because the value recreationists tie to high quality land like this is typically 5 to 10 times greater than the traditional agricultural interest is. That’s a fair thing because the recreational business is a whole lot more profitable than traditional agriculture deal. There’s going to be some discussion about that in this environment for change too. How to deal with the tax issues relative to land selling for $1,000 per acre for recreational value vs. $200 per acre for agricultural value.

The local community, we’ve had no problems. They are pretty glad we’re here.

We haven’t had any problems with the neighbors or local people. We went to some shows and we tried to explain where we were at, and he said I know exactly where you are at. He was huffy, we were taking prime hunting land out of public access. We bowed out of the local shows because we didn’t want to get into confrontations. We’ve talked to other people to get together with them to discuss how to solve our common problems.

They have this proposed grazing restriction. As a guide I’m talking to the ranchers all the time trying to keep up a good persona with them. But in a sense I’m working with the Grasslands and they’re fighting the Grasslands, so you’re stuck kind of in the middle. You want to see change but you don’t want to see change, because its been this way since this area was settled and these guys are fifth generation ranchers and they don’t want to see restrictions and changes being enforced and coming into law. So you have to kind of take the good with the bad. You’re talking to them and hearing their side of the story and trying to explain to them the benefits of setting aside these wild wilderness areas. You know 41,000 acres out of 1.2 million is not that much for the wilderness designation areas. But with any change there’s resistance. That’s the big thing right now.

There was some identification of community concerns about "outsiders" being attracted by the tourism businesses.

One of our biggest problems is that we sometimes don’t want to share our area. You hear 20 below keeps out the riff raff. Its nice to go to the lake and not have it be crowded. There’s a lot of things that could be done. I’m not so sure we would like all those things. We want all the perks and none of the drawbacks.

Some of the local residents weren’t sure what kind of people we were going to bring in. Set in their ways. We don’t need that. After the first couple of years they realized there wasn’t going to be a problem. The biggest upset we had was with the construction crew, because it was all Mexican Hispanic people. And to tell you the truth, they were all appreciative and grateful. They’d casually walk around town. Everyone would lock their doors.

One thing that comes up is some people don’t want more people here. They don’t want to be like Medora. On the other hand there are some people trying to promote things.
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The rural tourism entrepreneurs interviewed for this study appear to be fairly self-reliant, independent people who have developed their businesses with little assistance from governmental agencies. They have had limited involvement in tourism-related training programs but feel very competent to operate their businesses. In spite of this feeling of competence, they did indicate need for help with some business-related issues, particularly pricing and advertising.

There tends to be a strong network of informal neighbor-to-neighbor, friend-to-friend, and family partnerships and relationships that assist the entrepreneurs. More formal relationships were less evident. The prevalence of informal networks makes it more difficult to identify models of how to start and operate similar businesses.

Although making a profit is one of the motivations of most of the tourism entrepreneurs, it is hardly the sole motive of any of them. There are a variety of motives and satisfactions derived from involvement in their businesses. So many of them talked about the positive social relationships with their clients that the researcher began to sense that they might continue to engage in the business, even without making a monetary profit. In a way they seemed to be hosting friends who came to visit them on their farms or in their rural communities. While this attitude can lead to a high level of hospitality provided to visitors, it also can lead to problems in making business decisions, such as how high to set prices.

Many times difficulty in price setting arose out of initially using the wrong frame of reference for setting prices. The entrepreneurs thought in terms of what the local market would pay, not what their actual market would be willing to pay. Thus many of them started out significantly under-priced and then struggled with how to increase prices without losing existing customers that were used to the low price.

Finding that many customers came from the upper Midwest states was not surprising. North Dakota has for many years been positioned as the outdoor playground for the upper Midwest. Hearing about the numbers of customers from California and the east coast was unexpected. It seemed that the tourism businesses charging the highest prices and being most seriously engaged in tourism for their livelihoods were most heavily involved with the “coasts” for their market. The state tourism departments and other marketing agencies may want to examine the potential of attracting even more visitors from the coasts.

It appears that tourism is contributing to the quality of life, economically and socially, for many rural families and communities. This is a preliminary analysis, and the results and conclusions have not been fully developed. Further analysis of this data will lead to more discussion and recommendations that will be disseminated in the future and hopefully will be useful to tourism agencies, entrepreneurs, researchers, trainers and planners. Updates on this analysis will be available on the author’s web site: www.und.edu/instruct/tschroed/