Chapter 13

Recreation Travel and tourism

Introduction:

Tourism continues to be a mainstay of the Corpus Christi economy. According to the Texas Office of the Governor, the Padre Island National Seashore, Texas State Aquarium and USS Lexington are among top attractions in Texas. The most popular activities among visitors to Corpus Christi remained to be related to nature, including the area's beaches and waterfront (22%), and national and state parks (5%). These nature-related activities together accounted for 27 percent of local tourist activities in 2008, as compared to 10 percent for Texas as a whole.

Despite the sheer size of this sector, official statistics about its economic significance are absence. The board scope and integrative nature of tourism make it less straightforward to provide quantitative assessments, particularly at a regional level.

A recent report by Professor Lee of Texas A&M – Corpus Christi titled The Economic Significance of Tourism and Nature Tourism in Corpus Christi was published in 2009. It provides an update to previous studies on tourism in the Corpus Christi metropolitan area. This study quantitatively estimates the extent to which Corpus Christi visitors contribute to the region's economic activity, household income and employment.

Corpus Christi remains the sixth most popular tourist destination in Texas. Corpus Christi continues to have a high concentration of family vacationers. An estimated total of 7.2 million visitors spent nearly 17 million days in the area in 2008, injecting over $1 billion into the Corpus Christi economy.

Nearly 5 percent of the area's economic activity comes from the core tourism industries. In addition to the area's hotels, motels and other lodging establishments, substantial portions of restaurants, food stores, retail businesses, public and recreational facilities, and transportation services are closely tied to visitors' activities in Corpus Christi.

Nearly 13,000 local jobs are directly related to tourism, making this sector the second largest private employer in Corpus Christi. Direct visitor spending contributes the greatest number of jobs to eating and drinking establishments (5,733 jobs), followed by hotels and other accommodations (2,341 jobs). Employment in the tourism sector has grown about 24 percent since 2000, and it is projected to grow steadily at least through the end of 2010.

The estimated total annual economic impact of tourism on Corpus Christi is $1.2 billion, or 8 percent of regional value-added economic activity. Visitors' total spending of $514.4 million in the area generates secondary or ripple effects, which total $677.9 million. The total volume of business activity directly or indirectly related to tourism supports nearly 22,000 jobs, $457.5 million in household earnings, and $82.9 million in state and local taxes.

A significant share of tourist activities in Corpus Christi is related to nature and wildlife with nature tourism accounting for nearly 40 percent of all visitor-trips.

Goals and Objectives:

The goals and objectives adopted by the MPO to support the transportation needs of the recreational travel and tourism industry include:

- Improving access to MPO area attractions.
- Increase collaboration with public and private sector decision-makers to improve and establish intermodal connections for recreational travel needs.
- Promote cooperation among regional, state, and local interest groups to integrate land use and transportation for providing attractive tourism environment.
- Adopt and promote environmental friendly design standards for roadways, bikeways, and walkways.

Specific actions and plans that support the above goals include:

1. The MPO area's geographical location near the Gulf of Mexico water provides a natural habitat for local and migrating birds which attracts bird watchers from everywhere. Several improvements have been made to capture the opportunities in support of these eco-tourism activities such as the US 181 parallel access road and parking at the bird viewing areas at Sunset Lake Park, the water level access road on PR 22 on the Laguna Madre, and the planned improvement to PR 22 to allow fresh water exchange for the developed boat channel community.

2. In cooperation with the City of Corpus Christi the MPO developed a pedestrian and bicycle plan that facilitated the improvement and connectivity of hike and bike trails for visitors to use bikes and walk safely between various tourist attractions. Working with the Downtown Management District and Pollution Prevention Partnership a bicycle rack plan was implemented in the downtown area. The MPO and the Regional Transportation Authority have supported purchase of all buses to include bicycle racks. Connecting Intermodal facilities and links across and between modes of transportation, such as bikeways and hiking trails will improve accessibility and efficient movement of both motorized and non-motorized traffic.

3. The MPO has supported and participated with facilitation by the US Fish and Wildlife Dept., in the creation of a public education effort on developing the Oso Creek as a series of interconnected parks.

4. The MPO will be supporting the efforts of the City of Corpus Christi to utilize potential program funding from the Transportation Enhancements program, Bicycle Transportation and Pedestrian Walkways (NHS), Recreational Trails Program, National Scenic Byways Program, Parkways and Park Roads Program, and Transportation and Community and System Preservation Program funds.

Attractions:

Following are some areas of interest for recreation and tourism in the MPO area:

Texas State Aquarium:

The Texas State Aquarium offers education and entertaining programming, with interactive exhibits. The Texas State Aquarium promotes and practices environmental conservation and wildlife rehabilitation. Located on Corpus Christi Beach, and an RTA water taxi stop, the Texas State Aquarium has welcomed over 6.5 million visitors since 1990.

USS Lexington Museum on the Bay:

The USS Lexington or "The Blue Ghost" is the most famous World War II aircraft carrier in U.S. Naval history. The ship is open to the public and provides tours, flight simulator, overnight camping, mess deck café and a MEGA Theater.

South Texas Institute for the Arts:

The Institute offers exhibition and educational programs which reflect the multicultural heritage of the region. A newly completed addition to the Art Museum of South Texas was recently introduced. The addition nearly doubles the size of the current facility, which was designed by Philip Johnson and opened in 1972.

Corpus Christi Botanical Garden:

The South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center is one of the region's five major visitor attractions. The 180-acre site is an integral part of the city's growing Oso Creek Greenbelt system, is a Texas Watchable Wildlife Program site, and is on the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. It also is recognized as one of the key birding sites in Corpus Christi, which has been named the *Birdiest City* in the United States.

Padre Island National Seashore:

The 110 mile long Padre Island National Seashore encompasses 133,000 acres of America's vanishing barrier islands. It is the longest remaining undeveloped barrier island in the world. Each end of the narrow sand island is developed with

parks and resorts. But in between, the National Seashore preserves an unblemished 80-mile stretch.

Mustang Island State Park:

Mustang Island is just east of the city of Corpus Christi with five miles of open beach. One of the most popular family beaches in Texas, facilities near the park include campsites with water and electricity, primitive beach sites, shaded picnic areas, restrooms and showers.

Highlights of Corpus Christi Tourism:

- 2008 saw 7.2 million visitors (person trips to the metro area)
- About 17 million visitor-days (average 2.3 days per trip)
- Average party size of 2.3
- 22% visitors go to beaches/waterfront, 20% sightseeing, and 8% hunting/fishing

Spending:

- Over $1 billion in total visitor destination spending
- $110.7 per visitor per day -- spending by category: restaurants & bars (25%), lodging (22%), local transportation, (18%), shopping (15%), recreation & entertainment (11%)
- Visitors account for 81% of sales in local hotels, 60% airport activity, 55% car rentals, 26% local transportation, 25% amusements, and 22% restaurants & bars

Economic Impacts:

- $514.4 million in value added (output) - $275.6 million in wages & salaries - 12,999 jobs
- $23.2 million in local taxes, $59.7 million in state taxes

Nature Tourism:

- Largest component of visitor activities - 40% of local visitor trips are nature based
- Opportunities for fishing and hunting abound throughout the state.