

PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-DRIVE TOURISTS ALONG THE ALASKA-CANADA BORDER TOWARD THE INCREASED SECURITY REQUIREMENTS OF THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE TRAVEL INITIATIVE

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Abstract.—This study explores the attitudes and feelings of self-drive tourists who cross the Alaska-Canada border about the increased security requirements of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), and how such attitudes and feelings may impact the tourism industry in this region. Results of a 2007 survey suggest that implementation of passport requirements will have little effect on tourism in the region. Although the WHTI is a polarizing issue with a sizeable proportion of opponents, many travelers showed support for the initiative. It appears that the price of fuel, especially in northwestern Canada, is more likely to have a negative impact on tourism than will passport requirements.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) is part of the wide-ranging national security increases in the United States following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. WHTI would require “travelers to and from the Caribbean, Bermuda, Panama, Mexico, and Canada have a passport or other secure, accepted document to enter or re-enter the United States” (U.S. Department of State 2006a). Alternative documents have not yet been created or chosen, so most parties see the WHTI as primarily a passport requirement and assume that it will stay that way. The first phase of the WHTI was implemented on Jan. 8, 2007, requiring a passport for arrivals by air or sea. The second phase would require the same documents for crossings by land and ferry and was originally set to start on

Jan. 1, 2008 (U.S. Department of State 2006a). Reflecting how strongly some people feel about this issue, action in the U.S. Congress delayed this implementation to June 2009 at the latest (Harper 2006).

The WHTI would require travelers to obtain a passport if they do not already have one, costing U.S. citizens at least \$100 with an approximately 6-week wait (U.S. Department of State 2006b). Thus, the WHTI has caused much concern in the U.S. and Canadian travel and tourism sector that the price and planning required for a passport will deter travel, especially more spontaneous and short-term trips. Roughly \$20 billion is spent annually by tourists traveling across the U.S.-Canada border (Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat 2006, U.S. Office of Travel and Tourism Industries 2006), and it is anticipated that the tourism market will be hard hit by the new requirements. The Canadian Tourism Commission (2005) argues that tourists are far more discretionary in their travel choices and will show a much greater reaction to WHTI requirements—and that the tourism industry will suffer significant economic losses as a result.

The WHTI’s impact on tourism may have its strongest effect on the heavily tourism-dependent communities of Alaska and the Yukon Territory in Canada. Tourism accounts for at least 5 percent of the gross domestic product and at least 8 percent of employment in the Yukon (Yukon 2004); 70 percent of tourists in the Yukon are from the United States and nearly 25 percent are from Canada. More than 400,000 Americans and Canadians enter Alaska each year by driving through Canada, and more than a quarter of those are Canadian travelers who spend over CDN\$81 million in Alaska (Taylor 2005). While lower numbers of tourists would be expected to affect all of Alaska and the Yukon negatively, it will likely be worse in

communities such as Beaver Creek, Tok, Haines, and Dawson City, where tourists who drive themselves constitute a larger percentage of the local economy.

1.1 Self-drive Tourism in Alaska and Northwestern Canada

A 1990 report on Alaskan tourism noted, “Alaska offers a novel vacation destination since it is physically remote, distinct with respect to climate, and culturally different owing to its indigenous peoples and history” (Snepenger et al. 1990). This claim may be especially true for visitors who drive themselves (“self-drive tourism”) since few if any other destinations in North America, and possibly the world, are as attractive to road tourists as a trip through Canada to Alaska (Valencia 2006). There are several reasons for this attraction. First, the natural elements of the region, such as the wilderness, history, glaciers, mountains, and wildlife, are easily viewed from the highways. Second, there are many popular attractions and destinations, not just one or two prime ones. This variety encourages driving throughout and across the region instead of merely to one or two areas, keeping with the observed pattern that multi-destination trips are popular for long-haul destinations (Opperman 1995). Third, the North is out of the way of normal travel routes and few people ever travel there compared to more easily reached destinations like Florida or New York; it is thus a rarer and more exciting destination. Finally, this region is so popular with self-drive tourists because the nature of the roads in this region makes them an attraction unto themselves. Despite the vast size of Alaska, the Yukon, northern British Columbia, and western parts of the Northwest Territories—an area more than four times the size of Texas (Valencia 2006)—there are extremely few roads, and many are unpaved. Often rather desolate, these roads have no billboards and little if any development along them. They serve as pathways through the wilderness and offer drivers the opportunity to be surrounded by spectacular scenery for hundreds of miles in any direction. The nature of these roads makes them more challenging to drive and distinct from most highways in the rest of the continent. Thus they have become prized and fabled destinations for the self-drive tourism market. This

fascination extends back to the very construction of the highways; Canadian authorities were shocked at the high demand for travel on the Alaska Highway following its opening to the general public in 1948 (Wonders 1994).

1.2 Purpose

To date, no academic studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals that examine the potential effects of the WHTI or other identification requirements on tourism, despite the large amount of attention and worry that these new laws are generating in the U.S. and Canada. Some research on this subject has been conducted by various governmental or trade organizations, but studies have focused on the southern Canadian border. In addition, previous research has collected information from prospective tourists, but no studies have been done in the field with tourists who have actually traveled to the region. Therefore, this study examines the WHTI’s potential impacts on tourism from both an academic perspective and an empirical approach using a survey of tourists who were traveling to Alaska by car. Its aim is to examine self-drive tourists’ feelings about and attitudes towards the implementation of stricter border-crossing regulations and explore how these feelings and attitudes might affect tourism in Alaska, the Yukon, and British Columbia. The research hypothesis is that tourists will have negative feelings towards the increased regulations and related costs, but that these will not dissuade them from visiting Alaska.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Study Area

This study was conducted during the 2007 summer tourism season in Alaska and the Yukon Territory in conjunction with related dissertation research. Self-administered surveys (Mehmetoglu 2007) were utilized for data collection. During 22 randomly chosen sampling days, surveys were distributed at 14 public and private campgrounds and recreational vehicle parks throughout the region. Ranging from Yukon territorial campgrounds to Alaska state and city parks and Denali National Park, these locations constituted a convenience sample based on sites where permission to survey was granted.

2.2 Sampling Methods

Self-drive tourists were identified while camping in or near their vehicles in the evenings while resting at their sites. All campers at each location were approached, except for those who were clearly from Alaska and the Yukon. Identification of self-drive tourists was made initially through observing license plates. For tourists who flew to Alaska or the Yukon and then rented vehicles, identification was possible despite their local license plates by observing rental company decals and bar-code stickers. In addition, common vehicle models in the rental fleets that summer—such as Dodge Caliburs and Chevrolet Impalas and Cobalts—are not generally popular among locals and thus were easily identifiable as rentals. After a brief discussion of the project, surveys were left with the campers and completed surveys were collected either that same evening or the following morning.

2.3 Survey Design

The survey consisted of four yes/no questions and several short-answer/multiple-choice items designed to gather demographic information and more detailed information about feelings towards the WHTI and fuel prices. There were also seven Likert-type scale items aimed at gathering information on degree of agreement with statements pertaining to the WHTI. These scales ranged from 1 to 8, with 1 representing “Do not agree at all” and 8 representing “Strongly agree.”

3.0 RESULTS

A total of 229 surveys were returned for a response rate of 79 percent. Just over 90 percent of respondents were repeat visitors to the area. About 80 percent were

from the U.S., 10 percent were from Canada, and 8 percent were from elsewhere. Almost 65 percent were retired, and the mean age was 57. More than 95 percent were aware of the upcoming passport requirement, 88.9 percent already owned a passport, and 77.9 percent indicated that they supported the WHTI. There were no significant differences between U.S. and Canadian travelers in any of these survey items.

The Likert-type scale questions produced mostly skewed results. Respondents strongly agreed that crossing borders is not a burden, that acquiring a passport is not a hassle nor would it cost too much, and that the price of fuel was an inconvenience. The only items with more varied distributions were: “The WHTI is necessary,” which had strong agreement (47 percent scored 8) with a smaller yet significant portion (17.3 percent) scoring 1, and “I would not go to the Yukon if I could not continue to Alaska,” which had 24.2 percent scoring 1 and the same percentage scoring 8. There was a significant difference between Canadians and Americans on this last item; Canadians were more willing to go just to the Yukon and not to Alaska, ($p < 05$). Results are summarized in Table 1.

More than 61 percent of visitors ($n = 140$) indicated that fuel prices were at or near levels that would deter future visitation. On the Likert-type scales for “The price of fuel was an inconvenience,” Americans had a mean score of 6.36, compared to 4.75 for Canadians, and 3.2 for other nationalities. The average price of fuel that would deter future visits was U.S.\$3.31 per gallon for Americans, \$4.35 for Canadians, and \$5.45

Table 1.—Results from Likert-type survey items

Statement	Percent Indicating Each Likert-Type Scale Value								n
	Do not agree				Strongly agree				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
The WHTI is necessary	17.3	3.5	4.0	4.5	7.9	5.9	9.9	47.0	202
Crossing international borders is a burden	33.8	14.7	9.8	7.4	13.2	8.8	2.9	9.3	204
Acquiring a passport would be a hassle	69.8	9.4	3.0	2.5	4.0	3.0	1.5	6.9	202
A passport would cost too much for me	68.5	11.3	3.0	4.4	4.4	3.0	0.5	4.9	203
I would not go to Yukon if I could not continue on to Alaska	24.2	9.7	8.2	5.3	8.2	7.2	13.0	24.2	207
The price of fuel is an inconvenience	8.5	5.2	5.7	6.2	7.1	10.4	12.8	44.1	211

for others. Differences were all significant from each other at the .05 level with p-values of 0.000. A survey by the author of fuel prices in July and August 2007 throughout the parts of the region connected to the road system showed average prices of U.S.\$3 per gallon in urban Alaska, \$3.69 in rural Alaska, and \$5.50+ per gallon in rural Canada.

4.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Results from this survey suggest that the implementation of passport requirements will have little or no effect on tourism in the region. Most tourists surveyed already had passports and/or felt that the money and work required to obtain one were not obstacles that would keep them from traveling through this region as its attraction is too great. There is a fairly strong showing of support for the WHTI among the travelers although this requirement proved to be a polarizing issue; opponents of the WHTI measures, though in the minority, had strong negative feelings and attitudes about the WHTI. Travelers were relatively split, however, on whether or not they would travel to the Yukon Territory if they could not continue on to Alaska. The research hypothesis was therefore partially supported.

The results from this study are intriguing as the data do not support the concern of tourism agencies, governments, and communities in the region that the WHTI will hurt self-drive tourism. Rather, it appears that the price of fuel is more likely to have a negative impact on tourism than will passport requirements, especially in northwestern Canada. Of course, this issue is of ever-growing concern in the face of record fuel prices. It is likely that the Yukon Territory will be most at risk for negative tourism impacts from rising fuel prices. The Yukon was found to be a less attractive destination than Alaska for U.S. travelers and it is easily bypassed by air or boat travel. Many tourists already choose to fly to Alaska instead of driving (Niziol 2006) and higher fuel prices in the Yukon and northern British Columbia may make this option more attractive to those who would otherwise drive, thus depriving the Yukon of some of the drive-through tourism it currently enjoys.

It should be noted that this study did have several limitations. First, it was conducted through the use of a convenience sample and thus did not utilize a random sampling method. Second, the vast majority of those sampled were repeat visitors, and many already had passports even though they were not yet required for border crossings. Because these repeat visitors had previously visited the region and were impressed enough with it to return, it can be assumed that they would be more likely to return yet again in the future. In addition, the passport requirement is obviously not a burden for travelers who already have one. Future study could sample prospective tourists who have not yet driven to the North and who might therefore be more hesitant about paying for passports. Examining how these potential new travelers feel about the WHTI might produce different results from those gained from this study, and may show how the WHTI could affect future first-time visitation to Alaska and Northwestern Canada.

5.0 CITATIONS

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