

Tourism Businesses, Landowners Target Outdoor Enthusiasts

By: Randy Dockendorf

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FREEMAN -- While hunters and fishermen already enjoy the great outdoors in southeast South Dakota, they can be welcomed for even more months out of the year, a regional tourism official said Tuesday.

More dollars can flow into the region by encouraging outdoors enthusiasts to stay longer and by meeting more of their needs, said Jacquie Fuks, executive director of the Southeast South Dakota Visitors Association (SESDVA).

"We have even talked about the Missouri River siltation at Springfield and how it can be used for duck hunting. We want to make something positive out of it," she said.

Fuks shared the aggressive marketing strategy during Tuesday's SESDVA meeting at the Heritage Hall Museum in Freeman. She will present the plan to her entire SESDVA board today (Wednesday).

As part of the strategy, she held a workshop last week in Howard which drew two dozen hunting-preserve operators and business owners who cater to the outdoors enthusiasts.

"There are places charging \$150 to \$250 per day per person for hunting on their land," Fuks said. "At Howard, they have really promoted pheasant hunting in the past. The local businesses get together with landowners to entice hunters to come."

The Howard meeting ran an hour longer than anticipated and generated a great deal of enthusiasm, Fuks said.

"By the end of the evening, they were talking about getting together and creating a brochure with phone numbers for hunters to contact them. They want to get out the word that Miner County is pro-pheasant," she said.

Fuks is finalizing the dates and locations of next week's workshops in Yankton and Springfield. Interested persons can contact her at 665-2435.

"We are not putting on these workshops as a hard sell for what we are doing or as a requirement that they join the SESDVA," she said. "We want these businesses to think of themselves as partners and not as competitors. They can use the Internet and brochures to tell outdoorsmen to come to their land or business."

"Once business is established at these places, they can continue to serving the next generation of customers."

A major part of the marketing strategy is redefining the traditional seasons, Fuks said.

"We talk about shoulder seasons' which consist of September to December for the fall and March through May for the spring," she said. "We want to stretch the season and show there are more things to do during that time. We want to let people know where they can get the best hunting and fishing guides, the best places to eat and be entertained, and the things to see in the area."

The possibilities are endless and stretch across a wide range of businesses and services, she said.

"When hunters bring their dogs, we can point them out to kennels that will hold their dogs or offer a special rate for services while they are in the area," she said. "For fishermen, we can show them not only where to catch fish but where to buy their bait or rent a boat."

Restaurants and hotels, along with bed-and-breakfast establishments, also cater to the outdoors man or woman, she said.

The great outdoors is not limited to hunters and fishermen, Fuks said. The region's trails and campgrounds are great any time of year, she said.

"Campers can come in the fall, which is a great time because school has started," she said. "People can get out on the river and enjoy canoeing in early spring or fall. And there are plenty of activities after the snow flies. We offer skiing, snowmobiling and ice fishing."

Meanwhile, May was busier than ever for Interstate information centers in South Dakota.

At the 13 information centers along Interstates 90 and 29 in South Dakota, a record 65,516 people visited in May. That's the highest count for May on record.

"May is the beginning of the visitor season in South Dakota. Because our information centers drew such a crowd during the month, we are excited about this year's travel season and expect another tremendous year," said John Calvin, secretary of the Department of Tourism and State Development.

The 27,761 cars that stopped at the information centers in May 2003 represent a 19.5 percent increase

over May 2002.

Canadian visitors were up 40.6 percent over 2002, and international visitors increased almost 8 percent over 2002.

Fuks said the SESDVA guide has used the theme "Off The Beaten Path" to lure people back to nature and new experiences.

"People don't have to spend the night in a tent. They can spend all day in nature and then stay in a bed and breakfast," she said.

The SESDVA inquiries -- and rural tourism in general -- have skyrocketed since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Fuks said.

"Our phones were ringing off the hook after 9/11. I had one grandfather who said he had planned to take his children and grandchildren to Disneyland, but instead they were coming to South Dakota," she said.

"They were traveling all across the state and were taking in Mount Rushmore. He said it was safer, and he wanted to show his kids and grandkids the real America."

The Web site hits for June at www.southeastsouthdakota.com were double the traffic of a year ago, she said.

"Maybe it's the (Iraqi) war being over, and people feel it's safe to travel," she said. "Americans are pretty resilient, and people have bounced back."

Contact Randy Dockendorf at 665-7811 (ext. 133) or randy.dockendorf@yankton.net.