

# Betting on tourism? Romanticization of Tourism as a Rural Economic Development Strategy

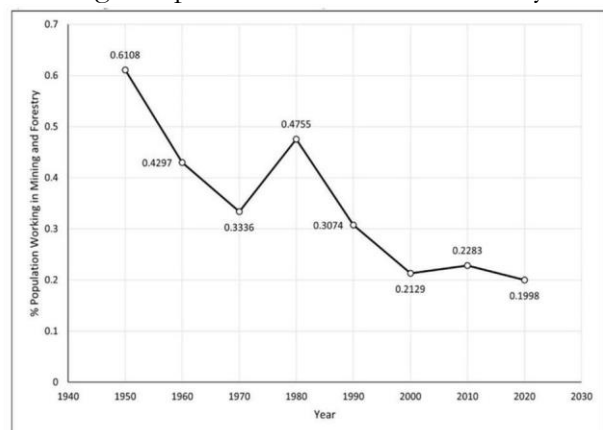
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## Abstract

*Rural communities in the United States (US) have experienced significant economic impacts since the 1960s. Primarily, this has been due to the consequences of globalization and its effects on undiversified economies that are dependent on extractive industries. This has resulted in rural poverty rates that vastly outpace their urban counterparts. In the 1980s, tourism was identified as a form of rural economic development that utilized various amenities inherent to rural communities. However, while rural tourism development has occurred on an impressive scale throughout the US, rural poverty rates remain significant. This implies that tourism itself is not a cure-all in promoting rural economic development. Tourism possesses substantial negative impacts including the corruption of a community's authentic culture which degrades its quality of life. Paradoxically, tourism corrupts a community's culture by using economic incentives that are mostly hypothetical and seldom fully realized. Therefore, rural communities remain vulnerable and require holistic economic development that maintains their quality of life. This paper evaluates the impact of tourism on the rural community of Cripple Creek, CO, a mining-turned casino town. It reaffirms the implication that tourism by itself is unlikely to solve the US rural economic crisis.*

## Introduction

Since the 1960s, rural poverty rates have been consistently higher than their urban counterparts in the United States (US). This has been a result of decreasing employment and increasing instability of extractive industries which were their economic foundation (Donnermeyer, 2015). Primarily, this is a consequence of global economic phenomena that have linked US extractive industries to international markets, increasing their volatility and the demand for cheaper production. Such a demand incentivizes mechanization which in turn dramatically reduces employment in extractive industries<sup>1</sup> in the US while providing cheaper alternatives internationally (Nelson *et al.*, 2014). Figure 1 reflects this trend of decreasing employment within both the logging and mining industries since the 1950s (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). With the economic foundation of rural communities in the hands of a much smaller proportion of the population, rural young adults are faced with fewer economic opportunities. This collapse of traditional rural ways of life has contributed to rural-urban migration as rural young adults move to urban areas seeking greater educational and economic opportunities. Their incentive to do so is strong. From 1980 to 2009, 22% of adults aged 25 to 30



**Figure 1:** Percent of US Population Working in Mining and Forestry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020)

<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations, “extractive industries” can be defined as “processes that involve different activities that lead to the extraction of raw materials from the earth (such as oil, metals, mineral and aggregates), processing and utilization by consumers.” (Sigam & Garcia, 2012, p. 3)

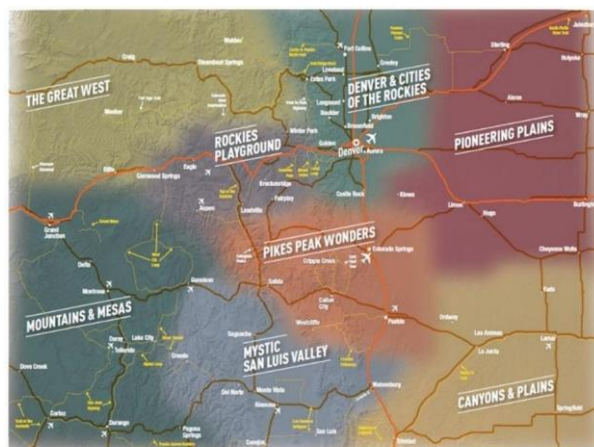
fell into poverty (Berry & Hirschl, 2017). So, the economic base of rural communities has become more volatile, and its benefits are reaching more minute proportions of the population. Additionally, rural-urban migration is accelerating so that, for the first time, the overall population of US rural communities has been declining since 2010 (Thiede *et al.*, 2018). These phenomena have created a positive feedback loop in which rural economic decline is perpetuated by a reduction in both human and financial resources, thereby hindering rural economic diversification.

Since the 1980s, tourism has been identified as an industry that could bolster the economies of rural communities by providing diversification (Chow, 1980; Truong *et al.*, 2014). Tourism accomplishes this by providing an external revenue source through monetizing the well-preserved heritage, culture, and architecture found in rural communities (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003), and by developing the recreational potential of extractive industries (Kim *et al.*, 2005). For example, Bowe and Marcouiller (2007) observed how rural communities in the Northeast US achieved more desirable socio-economic attributes, including lower unemployment rates and higher per capita income by developing recreation such as hiking, camping, and horseback riding on their forestry sites. However, the benefits of rural tourism have been contested (Deller, 2010), and US rural poverty rates remain higher than their urban counterparts. In 2013, 6.7% of the rural population was classified as officially poor compared to 5.7% of the urban population. In comparison, a look at relative poverty rates increases this gap with rural jumping to 19.4% and urban to 15.2% (Thiede *et al.*, 2018). As a result, this essay will examine rural tourism development efforts in the US state of Colorado and discuss socio-economic factors that are limiting its efficacy.

### A Brief History of Rural Tourism Promotion in Colorado

Luloff *et al.* (1994) conducted a survey of state tourism offices to assess efforts in rural tourism being undertaken throughout the US. These researchers accomplished this through telephone interviews that were conducted to assess information on types and numbers of rural tourism programs, promotional activities, economic spinoffs, evaluation studies, and agency policies. Since its promotion in the 1980s, 60% of states adopted rural tourism efforts by 1991 (Luloff *et al.*, 1994) Colorado was one of these states. It had one rural tourism program which promoted rural areas through advertising and marketing intended to present attractions to interest in the state. With this aim, Colorado's state tourism office conducted studies that evaluated the overall state-wide efficacy of tourism efforts without monitoring the regional or local distribution of its benefits. Therefore, Colorado's state tourism office was not explicitly concerned with tourism's efficacy in promoting rural development (Luloff *et al.*, 1994).

Around the year 2000, regional branding proved to be an effective tourism marketing strategy (Cai, 2002). Regional branding is an effort to project a consistent cognitive image across a geographic region based on the shared destination attributes of the communities that comprise it. Through regional branding, communities cooperate to attract tourists so that visitors are attracted to many communities within a branded region. Rural communities, therefore, attract more tourists due to their contributions to a regional experience than they would have as an isolated attraction (Cai, 2002). Today, the Colorado Tourism Office (CTO) (2020) retains regional branding as Colorado's tourism marketing



**Figure 2:** Regional Brands of Colorado (Colorado Tourism Office, 2020)

strategy as Figure 2 illustrates. However, CTO (2020) has greatly broadened its support for rural tourism by providing advertising, grants, co-ops, educational programs, sustainability initiatives, and location-specific programs. The specific programs offered by CTO (2020) are presented in Figure 3. These services are combined with annual tourism research programs to create the “Colorado Tourism Roadmap” which is CTO’s (2020) strategic tourism development plan. Nonetheless, while these programs are helping rural tourism development, rural poverty remains prevalent. Thus, rural tourism is unlikely to be the sole solution to rural economic development. To explore how tourism efforts have impacted a rural destination in Colorado, Cripple Creek is examined as a case study.

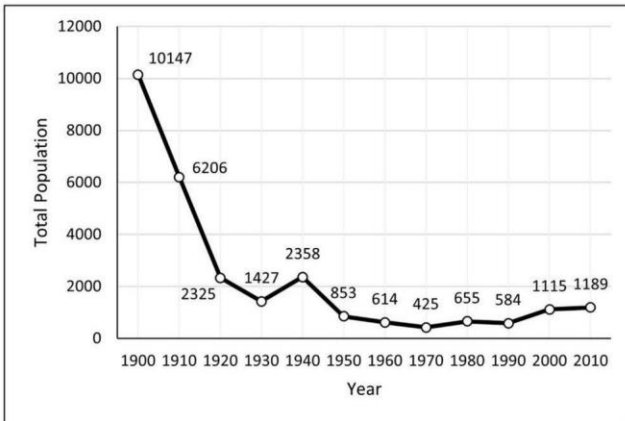
Marketing	Regional Branding
Advertising	TV Spots
	Digital Banners
	Print Ads
Research	Annual Programs
Grants	Marketing Matching
	Tourism Development
Co-ops	Paid Media
	Social Media
	User-Generated Content
	Digital Marketing Attribution & Research
Educational	"Colorado Tourism Leadership Journey"
	"Colorado Concierge"
Location-Specific	"Colo-Road Trips"
	"Colorado Rural Academy for Tourism"
Sustainability	"Responsible Tourism"
Planning	"Colorado Tourism Roadmap"

**Figure 3:** *Programs Offered by CTO (Colorado Tourism Office, 2020)*

### Tourism Development in Cripple Creek, CO: A Case Study

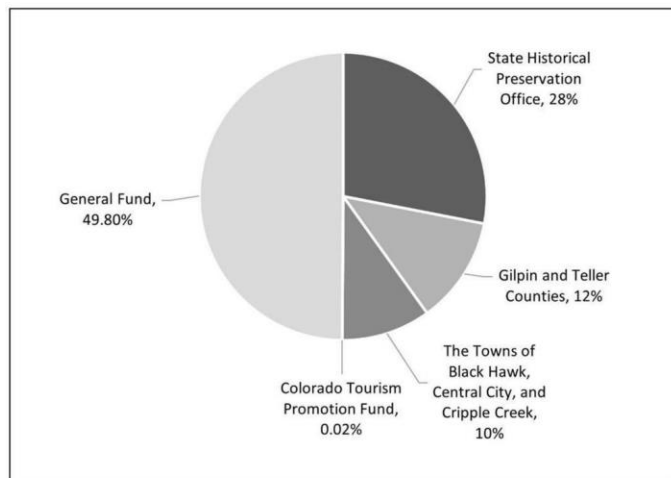
Cripple Creek was chosen as a case study to explore how the effects of tourism have impacted a rural community in Colorado because of its accessibility to a major urban center and its rich tourism history. The community is located 45 miles from Colorado Springs, a major urban center, and has promoted tourism for over a century to combat its economic instability. Cripple Creek thrived as a gold mining hub from its founding in 1892 until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Western Mining History, n.d.). However, local geology created conditions in which the gold was of low quality because it did not form distinguishable veins or nuggets, making it difficult to identify and expensive to extract, so the mines were owned and operated by large corporations (Harner, 2021, p. 95) When labor tensions between these corporations and the local laborers rose in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gold extraction was dramatically reduced, and eventually halted by two world wars, decimating its economic foundation (Western Mining History, n.d.). Due to the economic instability of extractive industries as a consequence of sporadic mining efforts and fluctuating gold prices, Cripple Creek was first promoted as a tourism site in 1907. The tourism industry, however, did not thrive until the 1950s and 1960s when the US economy grew considerably, automobile ownership boomed, and commercial air travel increased, providing consumers with greater expendable income and mobility and expanding opportunities for potential leisure destinations. This coincided with the expansion of historic preservation efforts and media fascination with the West which led to the near-immediate declaration of Cripple Creek as a National Historic Landmark in 1961 and its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 (Rhatigan, 2008).

However, these historic preservation designations did not provide an economic stimulus large enough to enable Cripple Creek to prosper and grow. Figure 4 demonstrates how the population of Cripple Creek remained stagnant in the decades following the 1960s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In response to this economic and demographic stagnation, following a recent national trend, Colorado legislators put a vote to Colorado citizens to legalize limited-stakes gambling in three former mining towns: Black Hawk, Central City, and Cripple Creek.



**Figure 4:** Total Population of Cripple Creek, CO (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020)

society in the US with \$15 million in annual revenue as of 2008, distantly followed by California's SHPO with \$8 million in annual revenue (Rhatigan, 2008). Unfortunately, even with such robust funding, the introduction of gambling in Cripple Creek has ultimately resulted in a contrived landscape. By tearing down all but the original façades of existing buildings, casino developers have promoted profit by creating a superficial landscape that caters to visitor's perceptions of what is authentic rather than what is historically accurate. So, while the preservation of historic structures may not be possible without the funding provided by gambling tax revenue, the resulting economic opportunities have come at the expense of the authentic preservation of Cripple Creek, ruining its educational, aesthetic, and symbolic value. Yet, even with the corruption of authentic culture in promoting a landscape contrived for economic gain, CTO (2020) promotes Cripple Creek as authentic and historic.



**Figure 5:** Allocation of Gaming Tax Revenue (Rhatigan, 2008)

### The Complex and Elusive Nature of Authenticity and Tourism's Corruption of Authenticity

CTO's assertion of Cripple Creek's authenticity lacks identification of what characteristic of the community is authentic (Figure 6). But the context in which authenticity is claimed by CTO indicates that it is likely to be the cultural landscape that is described as authentic. The cultural landscape of a community is the unique environment that arises from the interaction between the community and its natural resources (Rhatigan, 2008). Such an interaction alters the community's environment by promoting effective utilization of natural resources and constructive characteristics of a culture (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013). Therefore, culture represents a collection of social

## HISTORIC CRIPPLE CREEK

### Cripple Creek

Cripple Creek stands alone for its historical significance, continued relevance and authenticity. Tour a real, historic gold mine deep underground along with a modern gold mine still producing almost half a million ounces a year. Enjoy the unparalleled scenery by steam locomotive, browse unique shops, take in the professional theater and learn more about the heritage in one of seven museums. Take selfies with the herd of comic, free range, mining-descendant donkeys. Or take in some of the most beautiful terrain in Colorado by hiking, biking or climbing in the area. There's more than one way to strike it rich in Cripple Creek.

**Figure 6:** *Advertisement for Cripple Creek, CO (Colorado Tourism Office & City of Colorado Springs, 2020, p. 19)*

constructions that enable a community's residents to thrive in their environment. However, culture is complex, contested, and constantly evolving (Li *et al.*, 2019). Communities are not homogenous in their perceptions and values, so their culture is identified from the predominant shared social constructions of the community (Ooi *et al.*, 2015). Further, culture is continuously created and re-created by using past social constructions as a foundation and finding a compromise between them and contemporary values and needs (Chhabra *et al.*, 2003). This complexity that is inherent to the development and evolution of a community's culture often obscures those parts of it which are authentic and promote the well-being of its constituents within their environment. Since culture is a social phenomenon and shared with others in the community, authenticity is manifested through the establishment of the mutual meaning of culture through both intra- and interpersonal experiences (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013). So, while

authenticity is commonly oversimplified as the accurate re-creation of the past, this is not necessarily true (Martin, 2010). Instead, accurate re-creations of the past are commonly inauthentic because they fail to recognize that communities are constantly evolving (Li *et al.* 2019) and dismiss their contemporary values and needs (Chhabra *et al.*, 2003).

The benefits of maintaining an authentic culture within a community cannot be overstated. Besculides *et al.* (2002) examined a scenic byway in Southwestern Colorado and found through surveys that maintaining an authentic culture has many benefits that include, but are not limited to:

- Reciprocity
- Community pride
- Tolerance
- A stronger sense of ethnic identity
- Cohesion
- Exchange of ideas
- Social interaction
- Togetherness
- Community wellness
- Increased demand for and production of local art
- Improved image
- Revitalization of local traditions
- A stronger sense of the individual
- A better sense of the individual's place in history
- Increased acceptance of others
- Being a part of a community rich in culture and history

Even with extensive benefits, maintaining a culture's authenticity depends on the willingness of the community's residents to uphold social responsibility. Tourism represents a unique threat to a community's authentic culture because it uses economic incentives to promote the corruption of cultural authenticity (Li *et al.*, 2019). To promote tourism's profitability, tourism sites alter the presentation of their attraction to conform to tourists' perceptions of what is authentic (Poria *et al.*, 2003). By doing so, tourism misrepresents the community's culture, and corrupts its authenticity, harming residents' quality of life (Vogt *et al.*, 2020). Within rural communities such as Cripple Creek, conforming to the perceptions of tourists represents a greater threat to cultural authenticity because there is a higher proportion of tourists to residents. This increases cultural conflict by making the community at least temporarily, but dramatically, more pluralistic (Hampton, 2005). Therefore, in rural communities, the authentic culture which evolved to enable the community to thrive in its environment is significantly challenged by tourists (Ooi *et al.*, 2015). To mitigate tourism's corruption of cultural authenticity, tourism sites should reflect residents' perceptions of what is authentic (Poria *et al.*, 2003). Unfortunately, this idealistic sentiment is rarely realized because of the economic incentives of tourism. Ultimately, tourism contributes to the evolution of a community, having a unique effect on local culture and what is presented and perceived as authentic.

### **Tourism Development: are the consequences worth it?**

In addition to its corruption of cultural authenticity and historical legacy, tourism harms a community's quality of life in more direct ways. Tourism is widely criticized for its poor quality of employment. In general, employment within the tourism industry is seasonal with low wages and few, if any, benefits (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000). While Cripple Creek certainly experiences these inevitable consequences of tourism development, two additional consequences have had major impacts on the community. First, increased tax burdens and costs of living have displaced Cripple Creek's residents. Shortly after the Colorado Limited Gaming Act of 1991 was passed, property values in Cripple Creek doubled. What resulted was a radical emigration of Cripple Creek's residents. Out of the 100 businesses that were registered in Cripple Creek before the Colorado Limited Gaming Act of 1991, only 16 remained by 2008 (Rhatigan, 2008). Second, artificial reconstruction occurred instead of traditional and cultural preservation. Motivated to increase revenue, the casino developers contrived a landscape that conformed to tourists' perceptions of their desires with little regard for the community's cultural authenticity. Developers in Cripple Creek were able to do so because of their loose interpretation of the building guidelines established by the Colorado Limited Gaming Act of 1991:

"Limited gaming shall only be conducted in structures which conform, as determined by the respective municipal governing bodies, to the architectural styles and designs that were common to the areas prior to World War I and which conform to the requirements of applicable respective city ordinances, regardless of the age of said structures." (Article 18, Section 9:2(b), cited in Rhatigan, 2008)

Through a loose interpretation of these ambiguous guidelines, developers were not required to represent the community's authentic culture but merely had to conform to historic architectural styles and designs. What resulted was a process called "Disneyfication" which is common in areas dominated by tourism development and is described as superficial placemaking that combines history, myth, reality, and fantasy with no regard for authenticity or geographic setting (Rhatigan, 2008). Through Disneyfication, Cripple Creek has sacrificed the cultural authenticity and quality of life of its residents for a contrived landscape that is merely a playground for tourists.

These negative impacts are commonly overlooked due to the perceived benefits of tourism development. However, these perceived benefits of tourism development are mostly hypothetical and are seldom fully realized. The most asserted benefits of tourism development include tourists'

spending and employment opportunities (Lee *et al.*, 2010). Although, if the quality of tourism employment is poor, its efficacy in tourism development is questionable. Further, another claimed benefit in Cripple Creek is the introduction of external investments and businesses (Lee *et al.*, 2010). Ownership of the casinos in Cripple Creek is primarily held by large and multinational corporations with casinos in Las Vegas and around the world. Additionally, many of the casinos in Cripple Creek are owned by the same corporations. For example, “the Midnight Rose, J.P McGill’s, and the Brass Ass casinos are all owned by the same corporation” (Rhatigan, 2008, p. 84). But if the tourism sites are owned by external businesses, does an increase in tourists’ spending provide many benefits to the residents of Cripple Creek? It is likely that increased tourists’ spending primarily benefits residents through tax revenue, but only 10% of the gaming tax revenue is allocated to Colorado’s gaming towns (Rhatigan, 2008). Therefore, while tourism development is perceived as beneficial, its benefits are exaggerated and rarely fulfilled. Lindberg *et al.* (2001) explored this phenomenon by surveying communities around ski resorts in Sweden. The researchers found that while tourism development is widely perceived as beneficial by residents, it results in a decreased quality of life for those residents with a corresponding increase in quality of experience for tourists. Such a distorted view of tourism development, where negative impacts are overlooked in favor of hypothetical positive benefits, represents a prevailing romanticized view of tourism.

### **Recommendations: removing the rose-tinted glasses**

The prevailing romanticized view of tourism leads to its overdevelopment. To evaluate this impact of overdevelopment, Lee *et al.* (2010) surveyed residents’ perceptions of casino development in Gangwon, South Korea, and Colorado’s gaming towns. The survey results indicated that community size and the magnitude of casino development within the community were substantial indicators of the quality of life for residents. Lee *et al.* (2010) observed how smaller communities that were dominated by casino development experienced the negative consequences associated with its development with greater severity. In Colorado’s gaming towns, where casino development dominates rural communities, residents demonstrate much less support for further gaming development than in Gangwon where gaming development represents only a small portion of a diversified economy. These results corroborate Rhatigan’s (2008) assertion that “a comprehensive survey of residents of the three towns found that only 7.9 percent would recommend other towns legalize gambling” (p. 106).

These results do not indicate that tourism development does not possess benefits. Instead, they indicate that the benefits of tourism development fail to justify its detriment when it is overdeveloped and dominates the economy of a community. When tourism development comes to dominate the economy of a community, its authentic culture is more susceptible to the economic incentives that motivate its corruption. Additionally, by becoming economically dependent on tourism, rural communities are repeating past mistakes by trading one form of dependency for another. Hampton (2005) identified that developing nations were trading a dependency on extractive industries for a dependency on tourism. Ooi *et al.* (2015) asserted that this process is occurring in the rural American West as well. By remaining undiversified, the economies of rural communities are still vulnerable to the negative consequences that they have experienced for relying on extractive industries. To address this persistent vulnerability, the economic development of rural communities should focus on diversification and holistic development (Vogt *et al.*, 2020). However, since it has been established that tourism development possesses a unique ability to degrade a community’s authentic culture, small-scale and local development should be promoted (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000). Not only does small-scale development allow space for economic diversification, but local entrepreneurs share in the community’s authentic culture, and feel a greater responsibility towards upholding it (Su *et al.*, 2013). While tourism development on a large scale can significantly degrade



the quality of life in rural communities, diversification can enable rural communities to benefit from tourism development while mitigating its negative consequences.

### **Conclusion**

Since the 1960s, globalization has caused rural poverty rates that vastly outpace their urban counterparts. Primarily, this has been the result of rural economic dependence on extractive industries and a corresponding lack of diversification. In the 1980s, tourism was identified as an economic development opportunity to alleviate rural poverty. Tourism was promoted because it utilized amenities that are inherent to rural communities, making its development convenient. Even though rural tourism development has occurred on an impressive scale in the US, rural poverty rates remain significant. This implies that tourism does not represent the whole solution in promoting rural economic development. Tourism results in substantial negative impacts including the corruption of a community's authentic culture, which degrades its quality of life. The town of Cripple Creek, CO has experienced tourism's negative consequences harshly as casino development came to dominate the rural community, due to the intentional loose interpretation of legislated guidelines. Paradoxically, the gaming industry was able to do so because tourism uses economic incentives that are mostly hypothetical and seldom fully realized. Decades after the Colorado Limited Gaming Act of 1991, Cripple Creek's population remains stagnant, implying the inefficacy of tourism in its holistic economic development. This distorted view of tourism, where negative impacts are overlooked in favor of exaggerated benefits, represents a prevailing romanticized view of tourism. When tourism is romanticized it is overdeveloped, and its benefits fail to justify its detriment. In Cripple Creek, this is represented by the community's overwhelming lack of support for further casino development. Additionally, rural communities such as Cripple Creek are merely trading a dependency on extractive industries for a dependency on tourism, which fails to resolve the original lack of diversification. Therefore, rural communities remain vulnerable and require holistic economic development that maintains their quality of life. Such development is only likely to occur through small-scale and local entrepreneurship that upholds social responsibility.



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