Tourism and the International Wolf Center

by David T. Schaller

For many years Ely, Minnesota has served as a gateway for a growing nature-based tourism industry focused on the Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness and neighboring areas. These lakes and forests continue to be the primary basis for Ely's tourist economy, but the 1993 opening of the International Wolf Center has also given the city a prominent environmental education facility. As an ecocenter, the Wolf Center's mission is to promote public education about wolf ecology. In order to fulfill this mission it needs to function successfully as a tourist attraction. How well is it attracting tourists to Ely? Is it dependent on Ely's existing tourism activity or is it an attraction in its own right? To answer these questions, a survey of Ely tourists was conducted between May 1995 and February 1996. Some 862 tourists, including both visitors to the International Wolf Center and other tourists, were surveyed to determine the role of the center in area tourism.

History of the Wolf Center

The mission of the International Wolf Center is to support the survival of wolves by being a focal point for worldwide environmental education about the wolf, the wolf's interrelationships with other species, and its role within human cultures. Toward this end, it publishes a magazine, International Wolf, and offers educational programs and information resources to the public. At the heart of its efforts is its educational facility in Ely, Minnesota.

This nonprofit center was the brainchild of L. David Mech, a prominent wolf biologist who provided technical assistance to the Science Museum of Minnesota for its "Wolves and Humans" exhibit in 1985. As this exhibit toured North America in the late 1980s, a number of people concerned about wolf survival joined Mech to plan for the

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exhibit's return to Minnesota. They formed a Committee for an International Wolf Center and by 1989 had established a small, temporary museum on the outskirts of Ely. Momentarily, other facilities for this center quickly grew, since it was increasingly seen as a tool for both public education and regional economic development. Through the efforts of State Senator Doug Johnstone and then-State Representative Dave Battaglia, the Minnesota legislature in 1990 approved $1.2 million for the Wolf Center. These funds, along with private donations, contributions from the Iron Range Resource and Rehabilitation Board, and the Science Museum's donation of its exhibit, paid for the $3 million expansion and renovation.

Since opening in June 1993, the International Wolf Center has been home to a resident pack of four wolves, which live in a 1.25 acre fenced enclosure adjacent to the center. An observation window allows visitors to watch the wolves throughout the day, but particularly during scheduled presentations when interpreters (sometimes dressed as Little Red Riding Hood) attract the wolves to the window with food. As the four wolves eat, socialize and relax, they often exhibit hierarchical pack behavior as the interpreter explains the complex social dynamics of a wolf pack.

Visitors may also explore the "Wolves and Humans" exhibit, where they learn about wolf myths and legends, wolf behavior and ecology, and controversies surrounding the reintroduction of wolves to areas such as Yellowstone National Park. Visitors can practice howling like a wolf at the "Wolf Talk" howling room and play a wolf survival video game. In the "Kids' Corner," children can make wolf masks, wolf tracks, and play a wolf survival game. A small video theater and gift shop round out the center's visitor facilities. Other activities for visitors include naturalist-led walks, evening wolf howls, and weekend educational programs.

In the three years since it opened, the International Wolf Center has gained considerable publicity in regional and national media. From the start, nearly 50,000 people have visited it annually. However, early projections of 113,000 visitors annually have not yet materialized, and the economic impact of the center has remained unclear.

The CURA Study

The purpose of this study was to examine current visitation to the Wolf Center in light of its twin roles as an education facility and a tourist attraction. By understanding better who comes to the Wolf Center and why, it is possible to assess the center's impact on Ely's tourism economy and to suggest ways in which the Wolf Center may attract more visitors. With these goals in mind, Ely tourists were divided into two groups: those who visited the International Wolf Center (IWC) and those who did not. Some 862 tourists were surveyed, 445 at IWC and 417 in and around Ely, people who were not visiting IWC on this vacation.

Tourists were selected in a random stratified sample based on season and type of lodging. Tourists in Ely and IWC are concentrated in the summer, especially July and August, though another spurt occurs in February and March. Tourists were sampled proportionately during four survey periods in warm months—mid May (7 percent of the total sample), early June (12 percent), late July (62 percent) and late September (11 percent)—and one in February (6 percent).

Stratification by lodging was based on lodging tax data. Thirty-six percent of Ely tourists were backcountry visitors, 44 percent resort guests, 11 percent motel or bed and breakfast guests, and 12 percent campground guests. Tourists using other types of lodging such as private cabins or homes of friends or family, as well as day trippers, were not included in the stratification since no numbers were available upon which to base estimates.

The research instrument was a self-administered questionnaire. IWC visitors were intercepted as they left the building; non-visitors were surveyed in downtown Ely and at resorts, campgrounds, and Boundary Waters Canoe Area entry points. They were offered a copy of IWC's International Wolf magazine as an incentive to participate in the survey. The response rate was 90 percent.

Tourism in Ely

Because little existing data was available on general tourism activity in Ely, this study also undertook a comprehensive study of Ely tourists in order to make comparisons between IWC visitors and other tourists. The study showed that 30 percent of Ely tourists visit the area primarily to fish, while another 30 percent come primarily to canoe. These two groups tend to travel longer distances to vacation in Ely (medians of 480 and 350 miles, respectively) than the tourists who come primarily to hike, camp, relax, visit with friends or relatives, or visit the Wolf Center. Canoeists tend to have the highest levels of income and education—42 percent have household incomes higher than $60,000 and 39 percent have some graduate work. Anglers are similar in terms of income but not education, with 34 percent above $60,000 in household income but only 19 percent with graduate school experience. As a whole, Ely tourists tend to have both higher incomes and higher levels of education than Minnesota's population or tourists throughout the state.

Visitors at the Wolf Center

Visitors to IWC come from all parts of the country (Figure 1). Although most are Minnesotans (55 percent) and half of the Minnesotans come from the Twin Cities metropolitan area, nearly 15 percent have traveled over a thousand miles to visit Ely and the International Wolf Center. There are surprisingly strong numbers from Florida and Texas, perhaps due to the number of Minnesotans who retire in those states and return to Minnesota for their vacations.

These visitors numbered nearly 50,000 in 1995, or roughly one-fourth of all Ely tourists. In addition, 40 percent of the tourists surveyed in this study who did not visit IWC had visited it on a previous trip to Ely. Thus, 65 percent of all Ely tourists in 1995 had toured IWC at some point. Clearly, the Wolf Center is a major tourist attraction in Ely.

But how many of those tourists did IWC actually bring to Ely? Elsewhere in rural Minnesota, attracting 50,000 visitors to an exhibit would be a considerable achievement. In a major tourist destination like Ely, however, it might be assumed that these

Figure 1. Origins of Visitors to the International Wolf Center

Each dot represents one tourist
(about 14,800 in all)
Dots are randomly distributed within three-digit ZIP Code areas
Visitors to the International Wolf Center watch the resident pack of four wolves through an observation window.

Visitors probably would have chosen to vacation in the area whether or not IWC existed. Indeed, 23 percent of IWC visitors said that fishing was the main activity which drew them to Ely, and another 19 percent said canoeing was the main attraction. For these tourists, the International Wolf Center offered an interesting diversion from a week's worth of fishing or canoeing.

For some tourists, however, the International Wolf Center itself is worth a visit to Ely. This study found that 24 percent of visitors to the Wolf Center say that IWC had a great influence on their decision to vacation in Ely. The percentage of IWC-influenced tourists never dipped below 23 percent in the summer and fall and rose to 30 percent in the spring and winter. These figures correspond to about 11,000 tourists that IWC is largely responsible for bringing to the Ely area. Another 27 percent said IWC had some influence on their choice of destination.

Thus, about half of IWC visitors reported that IWC had played some role in their decision to vacation in Ely. Buttressing these results are responses ranking the top three activities that drew tourists to the Ely area. For all IWC visitors surveyed, the Wolf Center tied with canoeing for second place, with 19 percent citing it as their main reason for visiting Ely (Figure 2). Another 14 percent listed it as the second most important reason for their visit to Ely, and 15 percent listed it third.

**Impact of the Wolf Center**

These IWC-influenced tourists report different travel behavior than other tourists; they tend to travel shorter distances to visit Ely, spend fewer nights in Ely, and spend less money compared to the broad spectrum of Ely tourists. As a result, IWC-influenced tourists do not play as prominent a part as other tourists in Ely's tourism economy. Nevertheless, their role should not be discounted.

First, these tourists are much less likely to be familiar with the Ely area. Whereas about half of all Ely tourists reported a previous visit to Ely since 1993, this was the case for only a quarter of IWC-influenced tourists. These tourists, then, appear not to be regular Ely vacationers. Although they are usually in the area for only a day or two, it is possible that these tourists will remember Ely when planning a future vacation. By drawing this new blood to Ely, IWC may well be enriching the pool of future tourists.

Second, their economic impact is by no means inconsequential. With average group expenditures of $185, they spent an estimated $655,000 in the Ely area in 1995. Another $70,000 was spent by the 20 percent of IWC visitors who extended their vacation, usually by only a few hours but in some cases overnight, in order to visit the Wolf Center. Total tourist expenditures that are directly attributable to IWC in 1995 amount to about $725,000. While this is only a small fraction of the estimated $24 million spent by all Ely tourists that year, the additional effects of these dollars as they ripple through the economy are sizable.

These effects can be estimated with IMPLAN, an economic input-output model developed by the U.S. Forest Service. IMPLAN estimates the ripple effects that follow an economic shock to the regional economy (in this case, St. Louis and Lake Counties), such as the opening of IWC. Like all models, IMPLAN simplifies the great complexity of the actual economy to make estimates about economic relationships and impacts. IMPLAN, for example, uses a sectoral model of the economy which does not have a clear category for IWC. To use the model, IWC was placed in a broad sector that includes political associations and other nonprofit organizations as well as museums and zoos. The accuracy of the resulting estimates are difficult to determine.

The economic impact of a tourist attraction like IWC comes from two sources: increased tourist expenditures and the operating expenses of the facility itself. IMPLAN estimated that in 1995 as many as thirty-seven new jobs and about $1.2 million in the two-county region can be attributed to increased tourism due to the Wolf Center. In addition, IWC's own operating expenses play a role in the regional economy through its hiring of employees, purchasing of maintenance and heating supplies, and buying of books and apparel from local merchants for resale in the gift shop. IMPLAN estimated IWC's operations

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**Figure 2. Main Reason for Visiting Ely among IWC Visitors**

- **Fishing**: 23%
- **Canoeing**: 19%
- **Shopping**: 3%
- **Sightseeing**: 3%
- **Family/Friends**: 5%
- **Hiking/Backpacking**: 6%
- **Camping**: 11%
- **Other**: 11%

*Other includes bicycling, water sports, and winter sports
added about $1.5 million dollars, twice IWC's operating budget, and as many as twenty-nine new jobs (including about fourteen at IWC) to the economy in 1995. All in all, the International Wolf Center is associated with about $3 million in annual economic activity and as many as sixty-six new jobs in the region.

Where does the new money go in the economy? Table 1 outlines the increased economic activity in various sectors of the regional economy. While most of the new economic activity is concentrated in tourism-related businesses, the impact appears in other sectors as well, such as trade and services. Some twenty-one new jobs (both full-time and part-time) were created in industries other than tourism in 1995. All these figures, of course, are estimates, and their accuracy is limited by the assumptions of the IMPLAN model itself and those taken in this particular analysis.

Table 1. Economic Impact of the International Wolf Center, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Industrial Output (in thousands)</th>
<th>New Jobs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tourism-Related Businesses</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist attractions and services*</td>
<td>$758.8</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodging</td>
<td>238.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants and groceries</td>
<td>397.9</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>125.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Industries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIRE**/services</td>
<td>885.7</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade/transportation</td>
<td>372.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other***</td>
<td>227.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>$3,006.6</td>
<td>66.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes backcountry guides, camps, and gear outfitters, as well as museums and zoos such as IWC.
** Finance, insurance, and real estate.
*** Includes agriculture, mining, manufacturing, construction, and government.

These few differences are not easily explained by lodging choices. Non-visitors were more likely than visitors to favor the traditional lodging choices of lake resorts and, in particular, backcountry campsites. Many backcountry visitors probably prefer to spend as much of their vacation as possible in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, leaving little time for a stop at the Wolf Center. The notable difference in this category suggests the difficulty in luring these tourists to IWC. Resort guests, on the other hand, may be easier to attract. Many resort guests remarked casually during the survey that they had thought about visiting IWC but simply ran out of time.

In socioeconomic aspects, differences between visitors and non-visitors seem minimal. Levels of education and household income were very similar, and for both groups they were higher than for either tourists statewide or the general state population. For example, the majority of both IWC visitors (53 percent) and other Ely tourists (59 percent) have earned a college degree or beyond, compared to 22 percent of the general state population. Similarly, over a third of each group has a household income above $60,000, compared to just 17 percent for the state population (Figure 3).

Table 2. Differences Between International Wolf Center Visitors and Non-Visitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995/96 IWC Visitors (333)</th>
<th>Never Visited IWC (254)</th>
<th>Significant* Difference?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance traveled to Ely</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>No (p=.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of nights in Ely</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>No (p=.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dollars spent in Ely</td>
<td>$412</td>
<td>$535</td>
<td>No (p=.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of respondent</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>No (p=.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of adults in party</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Yes (p=.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in party</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>No (p=.97)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significance based on test of difference of means, with a significance level of .05. Distant outliers were removed prior to testing.

Figure 3. Household Income of Minnesota Residents and Tourists

The Wolf Center offers many interpretive programs, including a three-day dog-sled adventure in December and February.

In terms of almost all of the variables included in this study, IWC is currently attracting a typical cross-section of Ely tourists. There is no evidence to indicate that the Wolf Center is of interest only to certain kinds of Ely tourists, nor that it has already thoroughly tapped its market. While its potential for growth appears strong, there are also warning signs that ought to be noted.

Ways to Increase Visitors

Visitors to the International Wolf Center come in two kinds: those already vacationing in Ely, and those who visit Ely because of the Wolf Center. Attracting more visitors from the two groups does not necessarily involve two different strategies, though certain tactics, such as increasing highway signage, may be more effective with one group than the other.

Larger numbers of visitors may be attracted to Ely through the Wolf Center's outreach programs. These include the speakers' bureau, which sends interpreters to schools and special-interest groups, and the World Wide Web site, which may inspire virtual visitors to become actual visitors. Since many visitors learn about the Wolf Center from friends or relatives (30 percent) as well as from the mass media (29 percent), the impact of a high profile among wolf lovers may be considerable.

However, the long-term challenge facing the Wolf Center is attracting repeat visits. By the end of 1995, less than three years after the center opened, about 65 percent of all Ely tourists had visited it. Since half of all Ely visitors vacation in the area on a regular basis, the pool of potential new visitors is smaller than it might be for other tourist destinations. To avoid a drop in visits, as Ely regulars one by one check it off their list of things to do, it is crucial that IWC attract repeat visitors. New or traveling exhibits would, of course, be welcome. Existing interpretive programs, however, are not well known among visitors and, if promoted effectively, might be equally attractive to repeat visitors.

Moreover, it may be necessary to redefine IWC in the minds of tourists. Currently, most visitors come to see live wolves and, to a lesser extent, the exhibit. Although some visitors expressed an interest in revisiting the wolves over the seasons and the years, many others may not think the wolves and the existing exhibit merit a second visit. Interpretive programs, however, offer an ongoing and easily varied attraction. Only one-third of those who visit the Wolf Center are aware of these programs; the percentage is undoubtedly even lower among non-visitors.

By emphasizing these interpretive programs, nature hikes, wolf howls, and summer day camp, the center may show potential visitors that it is something more than just a mini-zoo. The International Wolf Center might even become known as a Visitor's Center for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, a role for which it is particularly well suited considering the presence of the Forest Service Permit Station in the same building. For those tourists who will not come to IWC, IWC could bring its programs to them by establishing a roving naturalist program at area resorts. Children's programs might also be expanded, both within the center's facilities and at nearby resorts.

These tactics could be used to attract both Ely tourists and tourists who visit Ely because of the Wolf Center. When planning any campaign to increase visitors, it is worth remembering that nearly one-third of both types of visitors first heard of the Wolf Center from friends or relatives. Thus, the most effective way to redefine IWC may be with the help of those who actually visit it. If visitors have a different and exciting experience at the Wolf Center, their friends will hear about it.

The International Wolf Center is an appealing destination, serving as both an environmental education facility and a tourist attraction. There is a strong existing base of tourists in Ely on which IWC can continue to draw, but to increase its visitors' numbers, the center should make concerted efforts to attract repeat visits by regular Ely tourists. If it continues to serve as a primary attraction for a significant number of tourists, it will cement its role as a small but distinct contributor in the health of Ely's economy.

David Shaller is a graduate student in geography at the University of Minnesota. He has studied the economic and cultural aspects of ecotourism development in Minnesota and Latin America. This article presents a summary version of his full study, The Ecocenter as Tourist Attraction, which is available for sale at the International Wolf Center (218/365-HOWL) and on the Center's World Wide Web site (www.wolf.org). The study was funded by CURA and the Tourism Center, Minnesota Extension Service. Additional support was provided by the International Wolf Center and the Ely Chamber of Commerce.

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Maps and figures prepared for the authors by the Cartography Laboratory, Department of Geography, University of Minnesota.