

Applegate Valley

Destination Management Plan

Executive Summary



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Introduction

As a destination, the Applegate Valley is at a critical juncture. To date visitation has been relatively light, as have visitor impacts. Strong trends in the tourism industry indicate that the valley is poised to receive a significant uptick in visitors. Its burgeoning wine production, outdoor recreation offerings, and sense of being just off the beaten path align with visitor preferences. These attributes paired with renewed investments in destination marketing from Travel Southern Oregon and Travel Oregon set the table for intentional destination development with a bias toward supporting local businesses.

The Applegate Valley is a rural destination located in southern Oregon. It is characterized by bucolic farmland hemmed in by abundant public land and traversed by the Applegate River. Its gateways are the City of Grants Pass to the north, and Jacksonville to the east. The valley is home to several small unincorporated communities, which are connected by Oregon Route 238, also known as Jacksonville Highway. These communities are characterized by a diverse blend of people who strongly identify as “Applegaters.”

Purpose of the Destination Management Plan

This plan is intended to help the communities in the Applegate Valley, and the institutions that support them:

1. Share a vision and plan for developing and managing the tourism economy
2. Inform how limited resources are invested
3. Make the case for targeted investments from external funders

A worst-case scenario for tourism growth is exposure that leads to the pricing out of existing residents and artisans and crowding and degradation of natural areas. In short, marketing the destination without proper planning and management could result in a more dramatic housing shortage and less opportunity for long-term residents to benefit financially from tourism-related business. This risk is accelerated by the increased mobility of the U.S. workforce, partly as a result of COVID-19. Knowledge workers are moving to rural areas in greater numbers than ever.

This plan intends to outline a pathway for managing the growth of the Applegate Valley’s tourism economy with a bias for locally owned businesses. A Greater Applegate (AGA), Travel Southern Oregon (TSO), and The Ford Family Foundation (TFFF) commissioned this work with the intent of benefiting the artists, farmers and food producers, public and private land managers, event producers and outdoor enthusiasts that make the Applegate Valley special.

Planning Components

A Greater Applegate (AGA) and Travel Southern Oregon (TSO) partnered with Destination Management Advisors to produce this plan. The plan is informed by AGA’s historic and ongoing work in the Applegate, interviews, and tourism industry data.

The Applegate Valley is in a “no man’s land,” in terms of political structures. It straddles Jackson and Josephine Counties, BLM units, and the Oregon-California border. This has led to a lack of planning services for valley residents. As a result, AGA, a 501c3 nonprofit, is the primary community and economic development structure in the valley. This plan will inform AGA’s organizational priorities.

Stakeholder groups engaged in planning have included local business owners, artists, farmers and artisanal food producers, wine makers, environmentalists, land managers, and tourism industry professionals. COVID-19 has made community engagement more challenging than usual. However, the planning process has benefitted from AGA’s history in the valley and the broad-based visioning process that has unfolded concurrently to the destination management plan.

Findings

The growing tourism economy can benefit residents by supplementing the artisan and outdoor recreation culture inspired by the geography of the Applegate Valley.

Wine producers are thriving. Their success is growing the Applegate Valley brand for wine enthusiasts. Boutique food producers, artists, and artisans can draft on this growing reputation by packaging goods and art for wine enthusiasts who are already coming to the destination. The creation and bundling of farm experiences and products will appeal to this already strong target market but will also attract younger visitors who increasingly plan travel around local food and culture, especially when they can be combined with outdoor recreation.

Artists and artisans, including wellness professionals, have been drawn to the Applegate for generations. The lack of a gathering place and maker space has made networking a challenge. The significant lack of retail space within the valley makes it hard for artists and artisans to get their work in front of potential buyers.

The valley and surrounding region are dominated by inspiring landscapes on public land and water. However, outdoor recreation is an underutilized resource. Access to the Applegate River is limited. Trails infrastructure on the valley floor and surrounding forests is lacking. Investments in access to nature are a high priority for locals and a strong motivator for the typical Applegate Valley visitor.

The area’s signature paragliding events have a strong draw and niche target market. However, the large crowds drawn to these events spend more in the gateway communities than in the valley. This is a result of insufficient lodging and restaurants in the valley.

The valley lacks overnight lodging options. Tourism experiences are designed to keep visitors in destinations overnight in order to capture more of the visitor spend, which is disproportionately allocated to dinner, evening entertainment, and lodging. Growing the alternative lodging network is necessary in order to translate increased visitation into economic opportunity.

Recommendations

This plan outlines an approach to creating experiences that align with the valley's potential offerings, the interests of its residents, and potential growth markets. The recommendations serve the vision and goals that AGA has articulated through ongoing engagement with the communities it serves.

Destination Management Advisors uses four variables to prioritize recommendations for product development. First, the valley's sense of place is defined by residents. The sense of place that emerges is further defined by the type of visitor experiences it can offer. These potential experiences are cross-referenced with visitor trends that indicate how likely certain visitor types are to dedicate valuable vacation time to those experiences. Finally, the potential experiences are assessed to measure the difference between their current state and visitor readiness (the experience a visitor built up in their minds while planning leisure travel). Experiences that align with the community's sense of place are compelling to an existing target market and can be made visitor ready when a reasonable amount of investment is prioritized.

Strategy

Manage tourism as a vehicle for community and economic development that has a bias toward locally owned businesses that contribute to the Applegate Valley's artisan culture, agricultural landscape, and sustainable outdoor recreation. Prioritize creating experiences that are equally beneficial to locals and compelling to visitors. Specific strategies include:

- Increase overnight stays by helping local makers develop alternative lodging that compliments the experiences they offer
- Package, bundle, and present artisanal food, on-farm experiences and art to existing visitors, especially wine enthusiasts
- Create connectivity for pedestrians and bicyclists on the valley floor
- Increase access to nature, especially the Applegate River and public lands
- Create more opportunities for artists and artisans to sell products locally through cross-marketing and events.

In short, the highest priorities for destination development in the Applegate Valley are to support local businesses by helping them achieve visitor readiness, package experiences in a way that leads to purchases within the destination and growing the inventory of overnight options.

Destination Development Priorities and Actions

Over the next 2-3 years, investments in the Applegate Valley should focus on developing five types of experiences that align its sense of place, visitor preferences, and readiness.

1. **Culinary/Agritourism:** Grow the valley's reputation as a high-quality local food destination.
 - Bundle locally made food and sell in picnic baskets at the gateways, at wineries, and a kiosk along Highway 238

- Cultivate a list of producers willing to create on farm experiences, support visitor readiness, aggregate and market experiences when ready
 - Encourage educational experiences, such as cheese-making, that generate supplemental income for producers and lead to farm stays
 - Create an Applegate Valley Food Trail that serves as a companion to the Applegate Valley Wine Trail and builds off of work done to create the Rogue Valley Food Trail
 - Support use of Applegate Valley logo on regional food products
 - Build partnerships with wineries that showcase local foods at point of purchase (local food picnic baskets, ala-carte goods) through chef dinners, and events
 - Leverage resident food influencers to expose their audiences to the Applegate Valley's culture of food and artisanal products.
2. **Wine Tourism:** Support success and expose wine travelers to the rest of the cornucopia.
- Manage relationships with vineyard and winery owners and operators to support their success. Create an overlapping network of wine producers, farmers, and artisans that helps expose wine enthusiasts to local food and art
 - Create an event series that pairs local wines with seasonal and boutique foods
 - Create a referral network by hosting local familiarization tours for front line staff
 - Produce visitor friendly collateral and distribute at wineries
 - Leverage wine influencer's trips to the valley by providing tailored culinary experiences and on-farm experiences
 - Encourage wineries to create boutique lodging opportunities for visitors.
3. **Arts & Artisan Culture:** Connect the visitor economy and the arts and artisan community.
- Support the creation of a gathering place and makerspace at each end of the valley. Encourage the creation of educational experiences for visitors
 - Convene artists and artisans to further define a regional brand
 - Explore applying the Applegate Valley logo to regional food products
 - Package art and sell in gateways. Gather data that provides insight into how to reach the right visitor markets with the right offering at the right price
 - Integrate art into the growing network of alternative lodging options
 - In partnership with wellness experts, create a complimentary suit of treatments and market collectively.
4. **Outdoor Recreation:** Improve access to outdoor recreation to encourage longer stays and return trips.
- Partner with local trails organizations and land management agencies, especially the BLM, to prioritize and develop trailheads, trail connectors, and new trails
 - Identify possible access points for the Applegate and Little Applegate Rivers, with a focus on BLM, Jackson County, and State of Oregon parcels
 - Explore easements or land donations that will increase public access
 - Engage ODOT to assess feasibility of a continuous path for active transportation along the valley floor. Prioritize building sections of path that provide critical links
 - Coordinate with historical society to highlight points of interest.

5. **Events:** Leverage paragliding events to disseminate visitors throughout the valley and inspire return visits. Create new events to bolster awareness of the valley's culinary and artistic offerings.

Existing Events

- Partner with paragliding event producers and local landowners to create temporary overnight lodging during the events.
- Expand events into festivals that encourage overnight stays in the valley and dining at local restaurants, food carts, and producers.
- Liaise with county officials to allow permitting of temporary group camp and RV sites.

New Events

- In partnership with food producers, create a shoulder-season event to showcase local products, e.g., Applegate Harvest Festival
- In partnership with artists and artisans, create a shoulder or off-season event to showcase local art

Lodging Network

The biggest single barrier impeding residents from the economic benefits of increased tourism is the lack of lodging in the valley. Data suggests that visitors spend 70% of their daily budget after 5 PM, meaning that day trips into the valley generate far less revenue for the local economy than overnight visitors. This presents an exceptional opportunity for destination management. Local property owners can create "beds" that fill unmet demand and supplement their income. These alternative lodging options are increasingly popular with consumers and benefit the regional economy by keeping visitors in the destination. They also provide supplemental income for hosts.

Unique lodging experiences provide a compelling visitor experience unto themselves. They can range from a small outdoor space for someone to pitch a tent to a luxury space accompanied by curated meals and experiences. Ideally, they complement and leverage the valley's other emerging attractions.

AGA, and its partners, can support the creation of new overnight lodging in several ways:

Infrastructure and permitting

- Map existing permitting process, barriers, liability
- Liaise with county officials and lobby for exemptions, where appropriate

Supply

- Create a database of property owners and managers interested in hosting
- Help define readiness based on visitor and industry input
- Create a process map for potential hosts and resource guidelines
- Identify host sites (Airbnb, Hipcamp, Harvest Host)

Management

- Create and maintain a referral network
- Organize or offer centralized support services such as cleaning, bookkeeping, liability insurance

- Provide visitor friendly resources for guests, like recreation maps, farm trail brochures, a local events calendar, and guided experiences.

Marketing Priorities

In order to avoid increased congestion without economic benefit, destination marketing should be scaled after experiences have been developed and more lodging has come online. In the short-term marketing materials can be developed for local distribution. Priorities include an outdoor recreation map, Applegate Valley Food Trail Guide, and other collateral useful to front line staff, particularly at wineries. As a precursor to scaling destination marketing, stakeholders can:

- Distinguish the Applegate Valley as a destination within Oregon, and southern Oregon by developing a brand identity and story. The valley is a hidden landscape that embodies the reconnection with nature, food, and community that visitors are longing for.
- Develop a regional brand for artisanal products, especially foods, art, and wellness rituals
- Partner with TSO and TO to attract travel and food writers specializing in emerging destinations.

Organizational Priorities and Funding Opportunities

Implementation of this plan can be as robust as resources allow. Foundations, state agencies, federal land managers, and private investors have overlapping interests with certain priorities. More guidance on potential funding sources for specific projects can be found in the full plan.

Conclusion

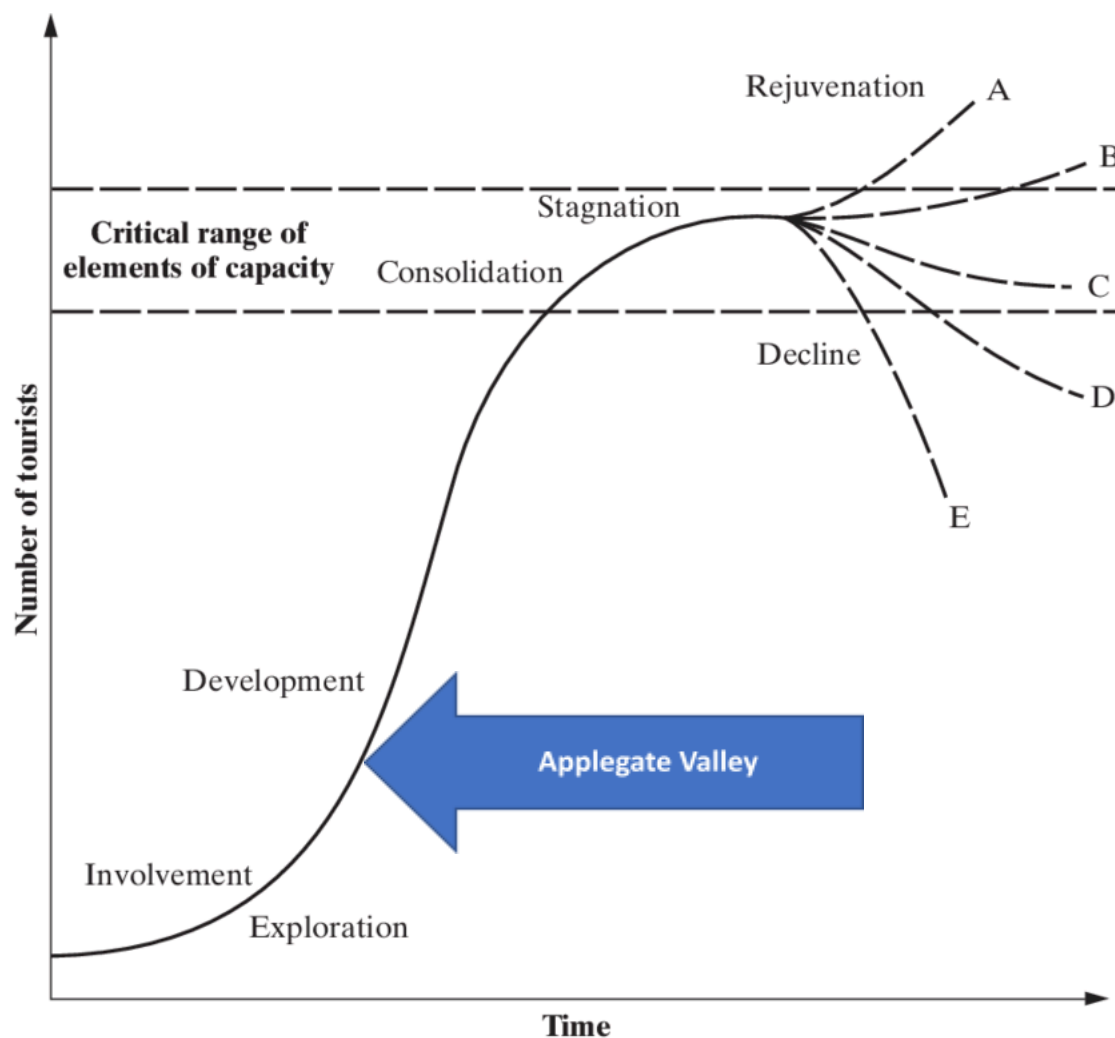
The Applegate Valley is an idyllic community. Creatives, farmers, artisans, and locals are carving out livelihoods as they have for generations. Tourism presents new challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, tourism can lead to housing inflation, seasonal crowding, and environmental degradation. This is especially true for the Applegate, which is geographically constrained in its picturesque valley, with its lone highway, and few trailheads.

On the other hand, well-managed tourism growth can bring a sustainable marketplace of visitors to the valley. It can be thoughtfully designed to elevate the artisans whose creativity, hard work, and communal spirit enliven the community. More outdoor recreation infrastructure for visitors means more access for locals, and a lighter impact on the environment that drew people here in the first place.

ANNEX 1: Applegate Valley as a Developing Destination

As a developing destination, priority should be given to projects that help integrate local businesses into the tourism economy for the long-term. Applegaters can get ahead of tourism's detrimental impacts by investing in infrastructure that connects the artisanal economy to the visitor economy, leading to economic security of the residents who are able to maintain the Applegate's sense of place.

The Applegate Valley is a developing destination based on the relatively modest levels of visitation, the state of visitor readiness of experiences, and the low number of overnight lodging options for visitors.



Butler's model of the destination life cycle

Investments in destination planning, management, and coordinated development will pay dividends because they can still significantly affect the trajectory of the Applegate Valley as a

destination, and therefore the impacts that increased visitation have on the local economy, environment, and culture. The recommendations provided in this plan focus on three areas of destination management:

1. Destination development, which identifies opportunities to convert resources that are central to the Applegate Valley's sense of place into assets that are visitor ready and maximize return on investment to the local economy, environment, and culture.
2. Destination Marketing, the mainstay of the traditional tourism industry, which can be designed to attract the type of visitor most likely to benefit residents and even out the cyclical nature of visitation that can lead to boom-and-bust cycles throughout high seasons, shoulder seasons, and off-seasons.
3. Organizational Infrastructure, which is necessary to implement the plan and help individual stakeholders find the right fit for implementing and benefiting from the plan.