
Heart of Appalachia Regional Section

Introduction

As a supplement to the Virginia State Tourism Plan, this section is dedicated to the Heart of Appalachia region. ***It is strongly suggested that the Virginia State Tourism Plan be read in conjunction with this regional section.***

The key elements of this regional section include the following:

- A situational analysis of tourism in the region, which highlights the key tourism products, regional strengths and challenges, competitive considerations, and other relevant information, is presented to set the framework for the regional strategy.
- Key product themes of focus are identified and applicable objectives and strategies are presented for the five plan outcomes of Products, Pillars (infrastructure), Partnerships, Promotions, and Policies for the Heart of Appalachia tourism strategy.
- Action steps specific to the region, which are above and beyond the actions of the state level plan are outlined.
- Stakeholders proposed to be involved in implementing the plan are also identified.
- Key takeaways for Heart of Appalachia’s tourism development in the next five years are outlined.

Process for Findings

Numerous factors formed the basis of the Heart of Appalachia’s tourism strategy, including the tourism industry’s own vision for the region, an inventory and analysis of the tourism assets currently offered, input and analysis of visitor information, and an analysis of the competitive environment. These four key areas are further described below:

Industry Vision: The industry vision served as the foundation for the region’s strategy, based on input from approximately 1,300 responses statewide, including stakeholders from the Heart of Appalachia through workshops, surveys, and discussions. The overwhelming desire among Heart of Appalachia stakeholders is to utilize the region’s natural assets and further develop outdoor recreation and build upon the region's rich musical and cultural heritage in an authentic manner to increase tourism.

Tourism Assets: The Heart of Appalachia’s tourism assets were analyzed by the study team. This included the current mix of tourism products such as attractions, visitor activities, hotel inventory, natural assets and topography, industry base, and socio-cultural character. The strengths and challenges of the region’s current characteristics such as infrastructure, road/air accessibility, partnerships, policies, and promotions were

also discussed with numerous key stakeholders and assessed. In addition to the study team’s personal experience of the Heart of Appalachia, other input contributed to an understanding of the existing tourism assets, including input from tourism stakeholders, VTC databases, local tourism marketing information/promotional information from organizations such as the Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority, DMOs, chambers of commerce, existing tourism plans for Scott County, Tazewell County, and the Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority, tourism industry associations, tourism industry resources, PwC resources, and others.

Consumer Perspective: Research was analyzed on a global, national, state, and regional level. This research included visitor trends, activities, perceptions/preferences, performance indications, and emerging elements. Macro trends impacting tourism such as population and demographic trends, GDP/GSP, unemployment rates, consumer prices, personal consumption spending, gas prices, and other factors impacting tourism in a broad sense were also analyzed.

Sources of research related to Virginia and Heart of Appalachia compiled by the VTC were analyzed, which included profiles of past visitors (by traveler type, geography, season, and activity), traveler attitude studies, and other data. Profiles of past visitors (statewide) showed activities engaged in which are offered in the Heart of Appalachia, seasonality, party size, spending, demographics, income levels, travel distance and patterns, duration of trip, travel party origin, and other relevant information. Attitude studies of past and prospective travelers provided additional insight for the Heart of Appalachia in terms of appeal, perceptions of tourism products, activities, and destination attributes as well as other relevant hub and spoke travel behavior and activities engaged in by past and prospective visitors to Virginia.

Visitor data was also analyzed against existing tourism assets. Visitor insights show that Heart of Appalachia has a high favorability rating among past and prospective travelers, and it is highly rated for being relaxing, its outdoor recreation opportunities, good for families, and its overall atmosphere. The region was also recognized by most for being great for scenic drives, great for hiking/exploring nature, being a great place for camping, and possessing interesting small towns. Other outdoor elements such as fishing, paddle sports, biking, and hunting were not as prominent in visitors’ minds overall despite the offering of these activities. In addition, Heart of Appalachia has less name recognition among past and prospective travelers to Virginia than other regions, yet it is still relatively highly rated among the regions of Virginia and widely recognized for being scenic.

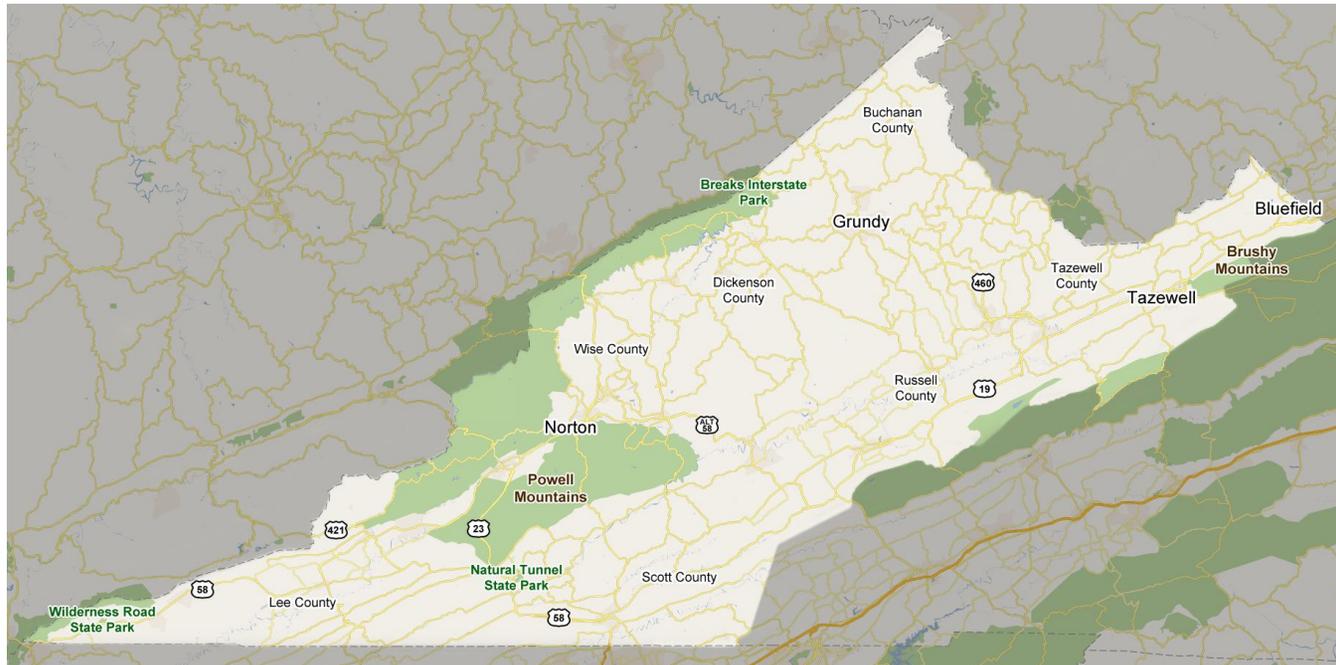
Additional state/regional sources included data on visitor spending patterns based on economic impact data in the region, state parks attendance, welcome center statistics, the Economic Impact of Wine and Grapes on the State of Virginia, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, and other sources. Examples of national and international sources include data from the United Nations World Tourism Organization, U.S. Travel Association, Office of Travel & Tourism Industries (OTTI), MMY Global, Outdoor Industry Association, U.S. Culture and Heritage Travel Council, National Trust for Historic Preservation, World Food Travel Association, National Parks Service, Smith Travel Research (STR), America's Byways, Woods & Poole, other U.S. government sources, travel industry publications and articles, and other relevant sources.

Competitive Perspective: To understand the offering and competitive positioning of Virginia and the Heart of Appalachia region, research and analysis was conducted which evaluated destinations, product offerings, market segments, and key strengths of competition on a regional basis and analysis of products, tourism spending, product rankings, and best practices and trends in tourism product areas on a statewide/national basis. For the Heart of Appalachia, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee were analyzed. More specifically, areas of those states were analyzed for key product strengths and included areas of southern West Virginia, the Eastern tourism region in Kentucky, and the Smoky Mountain and East Tennessee Region in Tennessee. Competitive insights show that similar destinations offer active outdoor recreation opportunities in which the region is challenged in differentiation, where similar offerings may be well known, competitively marketed, and offered in a concentrated area. Many active outdoor experiences in these states are clustered in close proximity to one another, some of which offer areas that are a one-stop shop for an active outdoor vacation with opportunities for families and outdoor enthusiasts to experience many activities in one area such as outdoor recreation vacations, including lodging, restaurants, camping facilities, along with recreation activities. West Virginia has developed its active outdoor recreation including white water rafting on the Gauley and New Rivers and ATViing on the Hatfield McCoy Trails (which the Spearhead Trails are expected to compete). Other destinations also offer varying levels of attractive mountain towns, Appalachian heritage, and culture, yet the distinctive music and arts of the region with the Crooked Road help to set the destination apart.

Sources of this competitive information included, but were not limited to, review of tourism marketing websites/promotional information, tourism marketing and strategic plans, tourism organization annual reports, tourism industry publications and articles, rankings, available consumer-oriented research (statewide) which addresses competition, and tourism companies (outfitters, tour guides, etc.).

Tourism Situation

The Heart of Appalachia region is situated in Southwest Virginia bordering Tennessee in the south, Kentucky in the west, and West Virginia in the north. It is also adjacent to the similar Blue Ridge Highlands region, with which it shares culture, heritage, and assets such as the Crooked Road and Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network.



Set within the Appalachian Mountain range and the surrounding plateau, the region is rich in natural beauty and assets, including scenic mountains and valleys, the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, and rivers, including the Clinch River, Bluestone River, Powell River, and others. The region also has deep historical roots of Appalachian cultural heritage, coal heritage, and musical history.

This eight county/city region has grown to over 200,000 residents, yet remains one of the least populous regions of the state. The largest counties are Tazewell with 45,000 residents and Wise with 41,500. With this limited population, the region's economic base remains a challenge, and cities/towns in the region are somewhat underdeveloped for visitors.

Heart of Appalachia is a developing tourism region, formed as its own tourism region in the late 1990's. It accounted for nearly \$162 million in travel and tourism expenditures in 2011 (approximately one percent of the state's overall travel and tourism expenditures), which is an increase of 15.5 percent since 2007, the highest in the Commonwealth. From a tourism industry perspective, the Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority is

Regional Facts:

- Region Population: 200,000
- Largest County: 45,000
- Border States: TN, WV, KY
- 2011 Tourism Expenditures: \$162 million
- 2007-11 Expenditure Growth: 15.5%

the state legislated body that markets the region. Furthermore, the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation also has a presence in the Heart of Appalachia and Blue Ridge Highlands regions. The foundation promotes tourism and supports major initiatives in the regions, including Appalachian Spring, Heartwood, Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network, and the Crooked Road. There is also a movement to form the Southwest Virginia Region through the cooperative efforts of the Blue Ridge Highlands and the Heart of Appalachia regions.

Visitor insights show that Heart of Appalachia has a high favorability rating among past and prospective travelers, and it is highly rated for being relaxing, its outdoor recreation opportunities, good for families, and its overall atmosphere. The region was also recognized by most for being great for scenic drives, great for hiking/exploring nature, being a great place for camping, and possessing interesting small towns. Other outdoor elements such as fishing, paddle sports, biking, and hunting were not as prominent in visitors’ minds despite the offering of these activities. Furthermore, approximately half of visitors to Virginia are likely to go to a state or national park on a future vacation. In addition, Heart of Appalachia has less name recognition among past and prospective travelers to Virginia as other regions, yet it is still relatively highly rated among the regions of Virginia and widely recognized for being scenic.

Nature and outdoor recreational opportunities are key visitor strengths for the region, offering outdoor adventures on its rugged terrain as well as scenic getaways. Notable outdoor assets include Burke’s Garden ("God's Thumbprint"), Breaks Interstate Park (the "Grand Canyon of the South"), Natural Tunnel, the Clinch River, George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, and the Heart of Appalachia Bike Trail. The Spearhead Trails project, expected to open in 2013, is a significant multi-use trail system for equestrian, ATV, and biking that will further enhance the outdoor experience for visitors. In addition, the Back of the Dragon trail is a specific road trail positioned for motorcycles and sports cars along Route 16. These assets and trails offer visitors the opportunity to ride ATVs, hike, bike, horseback ride, observe wildlife, hunt, fish, kayak, and canoe. Moreover, Breaks Interstate Park offers class IV and V rapids during certain times of the year

Highlights of Regional Lures/Strengths:

- Scenic beauty and Outdoor Recreation opportunities
- Natural Assets: George Wash. & Jeff. National Forest, Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, Channels State Forest
- State Parks: 4, includes Class IV and V rapids at certain times in the year
- National Main Street: St. Paul
- Notable Cities & Towns: Bluefield, Tazewell, Norton, Wise, Big Stone Gap, Gate City, Jonesville
- Potential for Spearhead Trails (under development)
- Crooked Road, Music, and Musical Heritage
- Visual and Craft Arts
- Appalachian Culture and Heritage: Daniel Boone Wilderness Trail
- Coal Heritage

Regional Product Challenges:

- Limited regional attraction anchors and concentrated experiences
- Differentiation from competition in nearby states - outdoors
- Limited recognition of assets and towns
- Lack of tourism industry maturity
- Limited outdoor and traditional accommodations
- Limited accessibility - interstate and air
- Limited community infrastructure in certain areas
- Challenged economic base
- Underdeveloped towns for visitors
- Beautification needs
- Lack of sense of arrival
- Attraction/destination distance regionally

when dam release occurs. Furthermore, the Clinch River Initiative is underway, which builds upon the unique cultural and ecological assets of the river to create new possibilities in the communities along the Clinch, particularly around environmental education and economic development. Related to the Clinch River Initiative is the development of the Clinch River State Park, which is in its early stages. The Appalachian Spring effort planned for Southwest Virginia is also designed to help connect outdoor experiences for visitors.

With the number of natural assets and outdoor recreation opportunities, outfitters and eco-oriented lodging, such as cabins and camping, appear to be underserved for the region in comparison to other areas of the state. Furthermore, traditional lodging is also limited with the region, containing only two percent of the state hotel supply based on STR data. In addition, the region's chain properties are entirely comprised of economy and mid-scale chains (excluding independent hotels).

Competitive insights show that similar destinations offer active outdoor recreation opportunities in which the region is challenged in differentiation, where similar offerings may be well known, competitively marketed, and offered in a concentrated area. West Virginia has developed its active outdoor recreation including white water rafting on the Gauley and New Rivers and ATVing on the field McCoy Trails (which the Spearhead Trails are expected to compete), while Kentucky offers thousands of miles of ATV trails through the reclaimed mine lands and wooded forests of southeastern Kentucky, both of which border the Heart of Appalachia region. Furthermore, in West Virginia and Tennessee, outdoor recreation opportunities are concentrated in centralized areas, offering opportunities for families and outdoor enthusiasts to experience many activities in one area such as outdoor recreation vacations, including lodging, restaurants, camping facilities, along with recreation activities (e.g. ACE Adventure Resort and Adventures on the Gorge Resort in West Virginia, French Broad River Dude Ranch in Tennessee, etc.). Eastern Tennessee is also well-promoted for its outdoor experiences and packages for rafting, zip lines, ropes courses, etc.

Other destinations also offer varying levels of attractive mountain towns, Appalachian heritage, and culture, yet the distinctive music and arts of the region with the Crooked Road help to set the destination apart. Visitors can travel the Crooked Road music trail to experience various musical genres, such as bluegrass, mountain music, folk, gospel, and country, and musical heritage in towns such as Clintwood, Hiltons, which is the home of the world-renowned Carter Family Fold, and Norton, or journey on one of the four Round the Mountain Artisan Trails in the region to admire the paintings, pottery, woodworking, fiber, jewelry, quilts, stained glass, and photography by the local artists. With the music and arts presence in the region, the creative economy is important. Opportunities for visitors to experience the coal history and Appalachian Cultural Heritage include the Harry W. Meador Coal Museum, Pocahontas Exhibition Mine & Museum, the Daniel Boone and the Wilderness Road trails and the Crab Orchard Museum, amongst others. Big Stone Gap's "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine," the official outdoor drama of Virginia, features the heritage and culture of the region.

While the region offers a variety of natural and cultural experiences, it generally lacks strong anchor attractions positioned and marketed to visitors as well as a destination with amenities such as accommodations, dining, retail, etc. to serve visitors which are found in typically larger and more developed towns and cities. In addition, the region's attractions and destinations generally lack the brand recognition compared to

competitive areas and other attractions in the state. Moreover, certain areas are limited in community infrastructure such as technology, water/sewer, waste management, etc., and some areas are in need of beautification.

The region also faces accessibility limitations without the benefit of major interstate access running throughout the region and no commercial airports in the region. There are, however, several general aviation airports. In addition, the Coalfield Expressway (currently under construction) will help some with accessibility. In addition, the Crooked Road, Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network, and trails such as the Fincastle Turnpike of the Wilderness Road – Virginia’s Heritage Route and the Coal Heritage Trail, help to connect attractions and destinations, many of which are distant from each other.

Heart of Appalachia Strategy

Product Focus Areas

Based upon research and analysis efforts described and in consideration of the tourism situation, the following are identified as the primary and secondary areas of product focus for the Heart of Appalachia. The key definitions below describe these areas, which form the basis of the product objectives.

- Primary theme focus: Nature & Outdoor Recreation, Arts & Music, History & Heritage , Town/City Centers, Events
- Secondary theme focus: Culinary (Agri-tourism, Dining)

Those product themes identified as "primary" can generally be characterized as existing or growing product areas that within the next five years should be further developed or enhanced in an effort to serve as (or support) primary draws for the area. Those categorized as "secondary" are areas that in the next five years may realistically need a longer time horizon to develop into a primary draw for the region. Secondary may also indicate areas that may be more niche focused, or those that are generally complementary/auxiliary product experiences to the primary draws in the next five years.

Key Definitions

Nature & Outdoor Recreation - Relaxing and active experiences to enjoy Virginia's scenic natural environment and outdoors, including but not limited to driving tours, hiking, biking, paddling, boating, fishing, hunting, observing wildlife, and others. Beach experiences are also included.

Arts & Music - Visual, performance, and craft arts experiences and music of various genres and musical heritage

History & Heritage - Experiences, structures, and sites that show Virginia and U.S. history and heritage

Town/City Centers - Refers to the central area of a destination, generally a downtown or main street area

Events - May include festivals, fairs, concerts, performances, tournaments/races (running, biking, swimming, kayaking, rowing, boating/sailing, fishing, etc.), and other events. These events serve to further enhance other product themes.

Culinary - Includes wineries, breweries, distilleries, foodie/dining, and agri/aqua-tourism

In addition, it should be noted that **cultural heritage** refers to the cultural and social characteristics of a region that are fundamental to evaluating a tourism destination. Culture consists of the beliefs, behaviors, objects, and other characteristics common to the members of a particular group or society. From a tourism perspective, visitors want to experience the local culture of a destination. This includes many components, such as art and music of the region, history, local crafts, traditions, style and types of local food, architecture, religion, and distinctive leisure activities. These are what make the cultural heritage of Virginia “authentic.” By its very nature, culture is interpreted by visitors in many ways. Each region will have the opportunity to further define the regional “cultural” lures, based on information in this plan.

Objectives and Strategies

Applicable objectives and strategies are presented for the five plan outcomes of Products, Pillars (infrastructure), Partnerships, Promotions, and Policies. Following the objectives and strategies are additional action steps specific to the region which are above and beyond the actions of the state level plan. Additional action steps should be read in conjunction with action steps of the state level plan.

Strategies in the plan are assigned a priority/timing as high or immediate action (denoted by red) and medium or mid-term action over the next five years (denoted by blue). The categorization of high or medium is both a function of priority and timing for the region. Those categorized as "high" can generally be characterized as existing or growing product areas that within the next five years should be further developed or enhanced in an effort to serve as (or support) primary draws. Those categorized as "medium" are areas that within the next five years may realistically need a longer time horizon to develop into a primary draw, those that may be more niche areas, or those that are generally complementary/auxiliary product experiences to the primary draws in the next five years.

Products

Nature & Outdoor Recreation

Nature & Outdoors Objective: Visitor experiences are further developed which highlight Virginia's natural beauty and natural assets			
<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
Develop, maintain, and expand outdoor trails and water trails	●	Seek and maintain designations for National Scenic Byways and the Virginia Scenic Byways and Scenic Drives	●
Continue to develop and enhance outdoor experiences at parks, forests, recreation areas, nature areas, and preserves	●	Develop and enhance accommodations related to outdoor experiences	●
Leverage Virginia's waterfront areas	●		

Additional Regional Actions:

- Complete the development of the Spearhead Trails and ensure distinctive outdoor trail experiences
- Explore the development or designation of adventure parks with rigorous activities attractive for outdoor enthusiasts and families, which may include mountain biking, rope courses, zip lines, ATVs, and other activities
- Continue promotion of the Birding and Wildlife Trails in the region, which includes the only Elk viewing visitor opportunity in Virginia further enhancing the outdoor brand of the region
- Leverage the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park as a cross-border asset with name recognition
- Continue support of Fish Virginia First initiative and develop/enhance fishing trails for the "mountain stream" fishing experience
- Pursue the development of Appalachian Spring Trail for connectivity among outdoor recreation experiences
- Develop a water trail for the Clinch River and ensure accessibility and amenities near the Clinch river and other water trails are developed
- Explore the development of additional driving trails, similar to Back of the Dragon Trails, which have the potential for scenic designations
- Explore the development of additional outdoor accommodations such as cabins, camping, and lodges near key recreation areas in strategic locations. Utilize history of the area to explore additional historic accommodations such as rustic lodges and mountain B&B.
- Explore the development and expansion of the equestrian businesses
- Explore opportunities to further develop and promote hunting experiences and supporting amenities for this market in strategic locations in the region

Products (continued)

Arts & Music

Arts & Music Objective: Visitor experiences related to music and arts (performance, visual, craft, etc.) are created and enriched			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop and enhance music and performance art venues	●	Add art to public spaces	●
Enhance and develop music and art trails	●	Develop and enhance concentrated arts experiences	●

Additional Regional Actions:

- Enhance experiential arts and music activities available to visitors, including participation in music and art events, classes, art viewings, and other experiences
- Leverage Heartwood as a gateway to music and arts experiences in the region
- Continue to enhance the Crooked Road experience, ensuring regular venue availability and activity for visitors and utilize the Crooked Road to connect other visitor themes
- Cluster new development to enhance the Crooked Road and Round the Mountain Trails (to the extent possible) to ensure additional activities are available in destinations along the trails, including shopping, dining, and accommodations
- Explore enhancing experiential arts and music activities available to visitors, including participation in music and art events, classes, art viewings, and other experiences
- Ensure works of regional artists are displayed, including those that show musical character with genres of the region such as bluegrass, country, mountain music, etc. and include other visitor themes such as the outdoors which may feature sculptures or other mediums such as rafting, hiking, climbing, fishing, or iconic representations of the region
- Explore the development of concentrated arts and music experiences such as an art and music commune as a place for artists and musicians to live, work, and display work and hold events for the public

Products (continued)

History & Heritage

History & Heritage Objective: History and heritage experiences are preserved, refreshed, and expanded			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Refresh history and heritage visitor experiences	●	Continue to connect history experiences	●
Invest in historic structures, sites, and attractions	●	Enhance historical experiences through accommodations	●

Additional Regional Actions:

- Ensure music heritage, Appalachian heritage, and coal heritage experiences include experiential elements and incorporate modern technology, such as those offered by the Ralph Stanley Museum
- Leverage the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park as a cross-border asset with name recognition
- Continue to enhance and support the Crooked Road, coal heritage, Wilderness Road trail, and other history/heritage experiences
- Utilize history/heritage of the area to explore additional historic accommodations such as rustic lodges and mountain B&Bs
- Further enhance experiences and events which showcase Appalachian Heritage

- Continue to showcase the region's history and heritage through events and festivals, including signature music festivals, as well as

personifying the culture of the region through visual and craft arts and culinary experiences

Products (continued)

Towns/City Centers

Town/City Centers Objective: Visitor experiences in town/city centers are improved to create attractive destinations			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop and enhance outdoor experiences in the town or city center	●	Take steps to align with standards of the Virginia Main Street Program and National Main Street Program	●
Enhance town/city center areas through development of the arts	●	Encourage the development of enterprises that enhance and balance the town/city center's current offerings and increase vibrancy	●
Establish and uphold guidelines for town/city center enhancement and redevelopment	●	Develop transportation that allows for enhanced connectivity within and to the town/city center	●

Additional Regional Actions:

- Leverage nature and recreation opportunities prevalent in the area and tie in these opportunities to the town/city center area. This includes outfitter locations in the downtown area where activity/equipment is visible to visitors, availability of shuttle service from town to outdoor areas for one-way biking, hiking, paddling trips, and connecting outdoor trails to town locations.
- Consider ATV friendly towns
- Ensure green spaces in town center areas
- Ensure works of regional artists are displayed, including those that show musical character with genres of the region such as bluegrass, country, mountain music, etc. and include other visitor

themes such as the outdoors which may feature sculptures or other mediums such as rafting, hiking, climbing, fishing, or iconic representations of the region

- Ensure beautification programs are included in development efforts, where needed
- Seek to align with the guidelines and goals of main street designations which can help to achieve mobilization, redevelopment, and economic development efforts to town areas
- Explore the development of business offerings to further support residents and visitors, including outfitters, accommodations, and unique dining and retail

Products (continued)

Events

Events Objective: Events which leverage Virginia's tourism assets are created and expanded	
Strategy	Priority/Timing
Enhance and develop events which promote the key visitor themes	●

Additional Regional Actions:

- Develop and enhance signature events for the region. These signature events should build upon, promote, and reinforce key visitor themes and showcase the authenticity and character for the region, including outdoors, music and arts, Appalachian heritage, coal heritage, and others.
- Use events to extend visitor seasons and further leverage the fall visitor season with events featuring fall foliage and Appalachian music and arts
- Tie in multiple visitor themes in events, where appropriate, which may include feature heritage, local agriculture, wine, local artists, and others
- Encourage athletic races/competitions, which fit well with the terrain, character and tourism offerings which may include running, biking, climbing, paddling, adventure challenges, and others

Culinary

Culinary Objective: Culinary visitor experiences (wineries, agri-tourism, dining, etc.) are established and expanded			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop and enhance visitor experiences related to Virginia's agriculture and aquaculture products	●	Develop and expand trails to enhance culinary experiences	●
Build reputation as a destination for dining and continue to develop unique restaurant experiences	●		

Additional Regional Actions:

- Continue to build agri-tourism experiences and tie in arts & crafts with agricultural experiences
- Further enhance experiences and events which showcase Appalachian Heritage
- Leverage routes such as the Crooked Road to help connect agri-tourism experiences
- Continue to develop unique dining experiences in building up towns/city centers
- Leverage arts and music strengths to create distinctive dining experiences through themes and allow for performance and display space

- Leverage the region's agri-tourism to build distinctive farm-to-table dining experiences and continue to develop unique dining
- Develop culinary trails, including wine, distilleries, and agri-tourism, which tie in other visitor themes, including music and arts

- Develop outdoor trails, which connect culinary experiences
- Continue to use events and festivals as a platform to enhance culinary profile of the region, tying in heritage, arts, music, and other visitor themes

Pillars

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
<i>Transportation Objective: Strategies to improve transportation are developed and executed</i>			
Initiate concerted strategy to improve road transportation for tourism	●		
<i>Wayfinding Objective: Visitor wayfinding is improved</i>			
Ensure signage and visitor information is visible and available through multiple points	●	Invest in technology infrastructure (Wi-Fi, cell reception, GPS, etc.)	●
Reinforce community sense of place	●		
<i>Education & Training Objective: Tourism education and training programs are continued and enhanced</i>			
Enhance training and education of tourism workforce	●	Ensure tourism education programs are continued for students	●
<i>Research Objective: Tourism research is available which supports tourism development and marketing initiatives</i>			
Continue to engage in or obtain research on visitors	●		

Additional Pillar Action Steps:

- Ensure tourism stakeholders are involved with other regional leaders in transportation planning initiatives, including improvements or expansions of highways, including completion of the Coalfield Expressway
- As a region, ensure tourism stakeholders come together to work with VDOT related to signage issues
- Continue to reinforce sense of place through further town redevelopment, economic development, and revitalization efforts with the aim of vibrant towns with additional accommodations, unique dining and retail, and entertainment available during visitor hours

Partnerships

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
Tourism Organizations Objective: Organizations to lead tourism initiatives are strengthened or formed			
Create and strengthen tourism organizations	●		
Government Objective: Collaboration among government organizations at the local, state, and federal levels for tourism initiatives is improved			
Increase communication, planning, and coordination among government entities	●		
Connectivity Objective: Connectivity among tourism attractions, businesses, and destinations is improved through partnering			
Develop and enhance communication and partnering among Virginia tourism industry stakeholders	●	Increase coordination and collaboration among stakeholders that share interests in tourism assets outside of Virginia	●

Additional Partnership Action Steps:

- Continue movement to form the Southwest Virginia Region through the cooperative efforts of the Blue Ridge Highlands and the Heart of Appalachia regions. As a unified region through organized efforts, there is potential for a region-wide DMO.
- Seek efforts to strengthen and build capacity of the Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority as a regional tourism leader and DMO
- Continue to build capacity for local DMOs in the region with tourism professionals dedicated to tourism marketing and development
- Continue to improve intra-government coordination and collaboration among the multiple destinations as stakeholders
- work as a region to address signage issues with VDOT, major regional events, trail initiatives such as Spearhead Trails, and other tourism initiatives
- Further enhance collaboration among attractions through additional package and itinerary development based on key visitor themes for the region, including nature/outdoors, cultural heritage, music, arts, and others
- Continue cooperation with Kentucky officials regarding shared interest for the Breaks Interstate Park and with the National Park Service and Tennessee entities regarding the Cumberland Gap National Park

Promotions

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
<u>Government, Business & Resident Objective:</u> Efforts to promote and educate government leaders, the business community, and residents on tourism initiatives and benefits are continued			
Communicate and inform local and state government officials on tourism benefits and initiatives	●	Communicate and inform tourism industry stakeholders, including partners, the business community, and residents on tourism initiatives and benefits	●
<u>Economic Development Objective:</u> Tourism promotion efforts for economic development are enhanced			
Enhance promotion of Virginia to potential tourism investors, businesses, and developers to generate economic development	●		
<u>Connectivity Objective:</u> Virginia is positioned based on the lures of tourism assets with a strategy to improve connectivity among destinations, attractions, and visitor themes			
Enhance and create visitor itineraries and packages	●	Enhance and develop themed trails	●
<u>High Impact Markets Objective:</u> Visitor markets with high impact continue to be targeted, while new markets are explored			
Continue to identify and evaluate key geographic and thematic target markets for promotions	●		

Additional Promotion Action Steps:

- Develop communication plans for government officials, tourism stakeholders, businesses, and residents and continue to educate and inform officials on tourism benefits (qualitative and quantitative based on research) as well as ongoing initiatives for economic development through various means
- Identify and engage key opinion leaders in the region, which may help to serve as ambassadors for the tourism industry and aid in the education and promotion of tourism to government leaders, funding efforts, and development initiatives
- Pursue completion of the Appalachian Spring Trail intended to connect outdoor recreation in the region
- Continue package and itinerary development based on key visitor themes for the region, including nature/outdoors, cultural heritage, town/city centers, music, arts, agri-tourism, and others
- Continue promotion of the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trails in the region, which includes the only Elk viewing visitor opportunity in Virginia further enhancing the outdoor brand of the region
- Leverage border location with West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee for promotions in addition to other high value target markets
- Continue niche theme promotions to music genres and key visitor segments
- Explore cooperative marketing efforts with the Blue Ridge Highlands region as the regions move towards forming the Southwest Virginia region

Policies

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
Funding Objective: Funding is available for tourism growth			
Enforce policy for use of tourism tax revenues collected by localities	●	Create sustainable funding policies for tourism marketing and development for communities	●
Tourism Policies and Programs for Assistance Objective: Tourism policies and programs which provide assistance for growth and development are enhanced			
Continue and enhance programs which support tourism marketing	●	Continue to evaluate policies which encourage an attractive tourism business environment	●
Continue and explore improvements for programs which support tourism product development	●	Educate public and private sector stakeholders on legislative policies and programs impacting tourism	●
Explore establishment of assistance program for tourism businesses	●		
Tourism Policy for Government Objective: Policy for government cooperation is created to assist and support the tourism industry			
Establish policy for cooperative guidelines and arrangements for cohesive government approach to the tourism industry	●		
Preservation Objective: Policies and programs designed to preserve historical, cultural, and natural assets are maintained			
Uphold policies and programs which promote sustainability and preservation of historical, cultural, and environmental assets	●		

Additional Policies Action Steps:

- Explore the development of a tourism council at the community level in localities where policy enforcement is recognized as an issue. The council should be comprised of public and private stakeholders that are responsible for overseeing the use of tourism tax revenue in the community.
- Identify local liaisons or advocates which can work to address policies and programs, including creation of Tourism Zones and national grant and assistance programs
- Continue to explore alternative creative funding solutions to achieve community solutions and work with local governments, where appropriate, to secure dedicated funding that could be reinvested for tourism marketing and development purposes. Garnering widespread support from tourism stakeholders and an

advocacy effort of the industry will be important in influencing government leaders. For tourism development, the formation of a tourism development fund at local level could be explored.

- Explore the development of tourism business assistance programs, such as incubators, through local governments, small business administrations, and economic development departments, as appropriate, to seek support and assistance for tourism businesses
- Continue to evaluate business policies, ordinances, codes, etc. at the local level that may impact visitation and tourism business growth. Local policies and their enforcement may vary throughout the state, and it is critical for local stakeholders to collaborate on efforts to create or amend policies which will positively impact tourism.

-
- Continue to engage in preservation and sustainability efforts at the local level, regarding historical, cultural, and environmental assets, including seeking Virginia Green Certifications and LEED certifications for new development

Key Stakeholders

The below list of regional and universal stakeholders illustrates the types of stakeholder groups that may be involved in implementing the State Tourism Plan and the region's strategies and action steps. The lists are comprehensive, but not necessarily exhaustive. In addition, regional stakeholders include local and regional government offices, economic development offices and planning district commissions. The list of regional stakeholders highlights organizations specific to the Heart of Appalachia, including those organizations identified as having tourism marketing representatives, while universal stakeholders includes a broader list comprised of key organization types, statewide organizations, state government entities, and federal organizations.

Regional

- Back of the Dragon
- Buchanan County Tourism Committee
- City of Norton Tourism Board
- Crooked Road
- Dickenson County Chamber of Commerce/Visitor's Center
- Daniel Boone Wilderness Trail Association
- Lee County Tourism Committee
- Round the Mountain
- Russell County Chamber of Commerce
- Scott County Tourism
- Southwest Regional Recreation Authority
- Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation
- St. Paul Tomorrow
- Tazewell County Office of Economic Development
- The Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority
- Wise County Tourism

Universal

- Art/Music Programs
- Artisan Center of Virginia
- Attraction Management
- Chambers of Commerce
- Colleges (including community)/Universities
- Council on Virginia's Future
- Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
- Department of Business Assistance
- Department of Conservation & Recreation
- Department of Environmental Quality
- Department of Forestry
- Department of Gaming & Inland Fisheries
- Department of Historic Resources
- Department of Housing & Community Development
- Department of Rail and Public Transportation
- Department of Transportation
- Destination Marketing Organizations
- Downtown Development Associations
- Educational Institutions
- Environmental Organizations
- History Foundations/Non-Profit Organizations
- Horse Breed Associations
- Hospitality Associations
- Keep Virginia Beautiful
- Local Arts Organizations
- Local Downtown Development Associations
- Local Government (Town/City/County)
- Military Associations
- National Park Service
- National Refuge Service
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Non-Profit Arts & Music Organizations
- Non-Profit Organizations
- Planning District Commissions
- Preservation Virginia
- Private Businesses
- Sports Associations
- State Government Departments
- State Legislators
- Urban Forest Council
- Virginia Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus
- Virginia Business Incubation Association
- Virginia Chamber of Commerce

-
- Virginia Commission for the Arts
 - Virginia Community Development Corporation
 - Virginia Downtown Development Association
 - Virginia Economic Development Partnership
 - Virginia Farm Bureau

- Virginia General Assembly
- Virginia Green
- Virginia Historical Society
- Virginia Horse Shows Association
- Virginia Hospitality & Travel Association
- Virginia Marine Resources Commission

- Virginia Music Associations
- Virginia Tech Community Design Assistance Center
- Virginia Tourism Corporation
- Virginia Wine Board
- Virginia Wine Marketing Office

Regional Strategy Takeaways

It is the combination of the tourism products which create a destination, and as such, these combined strategies are meant to build Heart of Appalachia as a destination in a sustainable manner and maintain the character and authenticity of the region. The strategies outlined are intended to build upon the Heart of Appalachia's core strengths, enhance visitor experiences, and ultimately enable the region to increase tourism. When unique and genuine tourism experiences are connected or clustered in offering, destination appeal and strength is increased, allowing the region to compete more effectively against other destinations. The Heart of Appalachia has the opportunity to do just this by growing its tourism asset base and connecting visitor experiences to increase tourism and enhance competitiveness.

The Heart of Appalachia region has the opportunity to lay the foundation for the future of tourism in the region and further define itself as a destination through outdoor recreation experiences in combination with the rich culture and heritage of the region. The region's landscape, parks, and trails offer adventure and challenge for outdoor enthusiasts in addition to soft recreation for families and those seeking relaxing outdoor getaways. Further development, concentration and connectivity of these outdoor opportunities will help to enhance competitiveness with completion of the Spearhead Trails and Appalachian Spring initiatives. Moreover, it is the authentic music and arts experiences that define the region and add significant depth to the visitor experience, and connectivity of these elements adds to destination appeal. It is the authentic music of Southwest Virginia, with the stand out asset of the Crooked Road, which differentiates the region from other parts of Virginia and other destinations.

High-Level Regional Takeaways:

- Leverage outdoors as a unifying theme for the region, further developing active outdoor experiences and scenic getaways
- Enhance authentic music and arts experiences
- Build recognition of tourism assets
- Continue to develop tourism anchors and signature experiences for the region
- Cluster product development and connect attractions and destinations for concentrated experiences, including outdoor recreation, heritage, music, and arts
- Leverage geographic position of the region bordering three states
- Continue to build creative economy
- Maintain character and authenticity, including Appalachian and musical heritage, and create new development in a sustainable manner
- Enhance economic base
- Improve community infrastructure
- Improve destination infrastructure, including town/city infrastructure for visitors, including accommodations, outfitters, and tourism support businesses