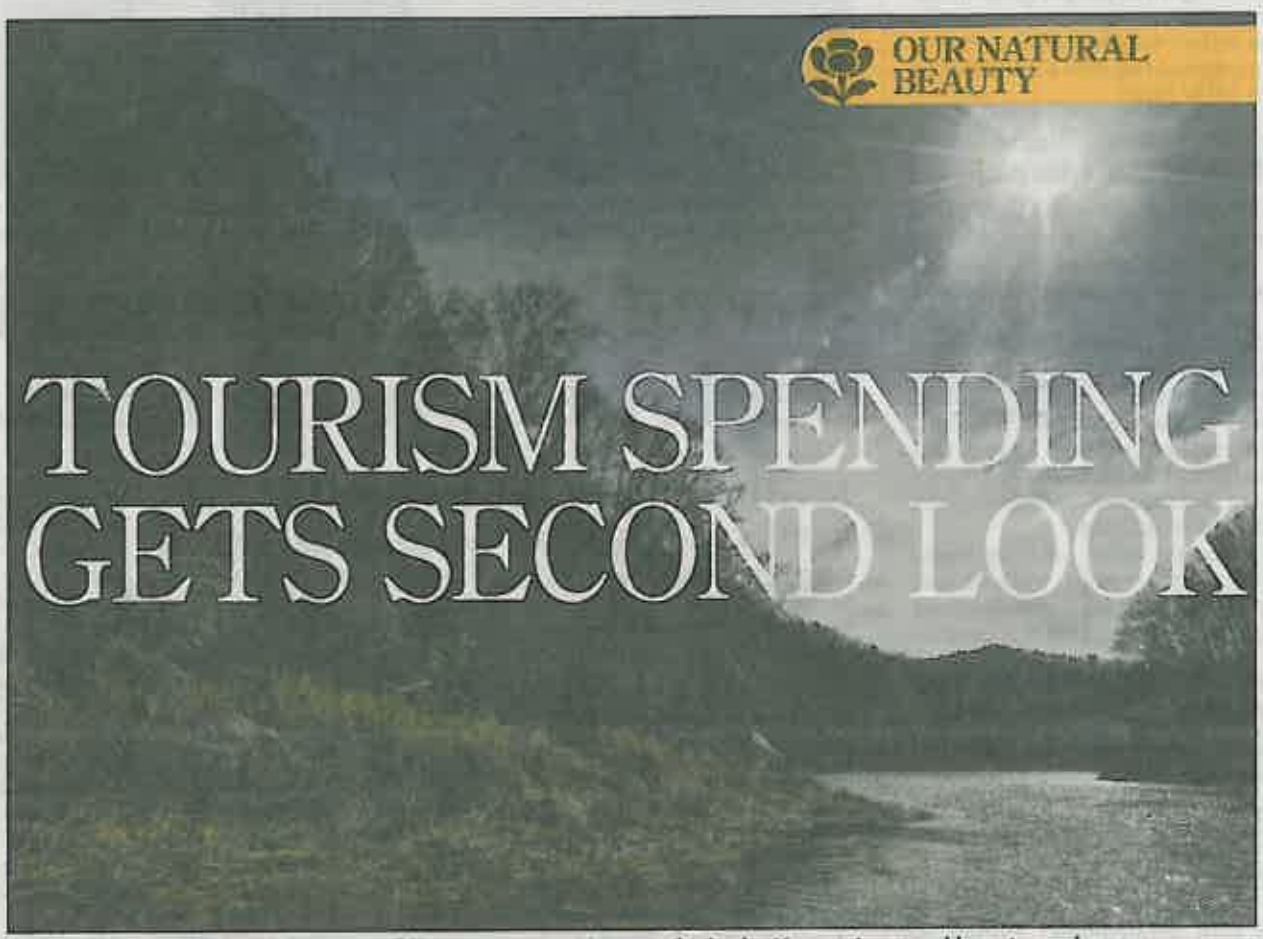
Some question use of taxpayer dollars, but lesser-known places welcome funding



A new state marketing campaign could bring more tourists to take in the Upstate's natural beauty, such as undeveloped areas of Lake Jocassee that can be accessed only by boat. HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF

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The ice cold spray splashed against Brooks Wade's gray watertight boots as he stood under a rock outcropping on the underside of a waterfall and gingerly stuck his hands out to feel its chilly might.

Here, where roads haven't plowed and trails don't lead, the only way to navigate to these falls that spill into Lake Jocassee is by boat.

So Wade started a business three years ago selling boat tours of the lake. It's a pristine, mostly undeveloped lake set against the backdrop of Jocassee Gorges and the Blue Ridge Escarpment that's just far enough from metro areas like Greenville, Anderson and Asheville that, for many, it's remained undiscovered.



Brooks Wade started a business three years ago giving boat tours of Lake Jocassee. HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF

Arizona has the Grand Canyon, Wade likes to say, "Well, this is our Grand Canyon."

It's to places like Jocassee — without the marketing dollars and name recognition of top destinations like Charleston, Myrtle Beach, Hilton Head Island or even Greenville, to an extent — that the state's tourism agency wants to reel in visitors with a new $2.5 million marketing campaign that it's calling "Undiscovered S.C."

Government spending raises questions about the role the state plays using taxpayer money to market destinations and events, many at private hotels or golf courses.

Tourism sales and marketing cost taxpayers $21.7 million in the 2012 fiscal year budget. The agency has requested $24.8 million in the upcoming budget.

The expenditure of taxpayers' dollars also raises questions about

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UPSTATE RESOURCE

PHOTO GALLERY
See the beauty of Lake Jocassee in winter in a photo gallery.

VIDEO
Watch how a tourism business gets its start on a rural lake in a video at GreenvilleOnline.com.

$1.00 Daily



A new state marketing campaign could bring more tourists to take in the Upstate's natural beauty, such as undeveloped areas of Lake Jocassee that can be accessed only by boat. HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF



Brooks Wade and his dog Pearl take visitors across Lake Jocassee on boat tours through Wade's company, Jocassee Lake Tours. For years coastal cities have been marketed at the state's top attractions, but Upstate gems like Jocassee are now getting a boost. HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF

TOURISM

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the fairness of how the money is spent.

State officials defend the programs, citing statewide tourism spending that totaled $15 billion in 2010, according to the state Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department's 2011-2012 accountability report.

For those tied to tourism promotion of the lesser-known destination gems, including the mountains, lakes and rivers of the Upstate, the impact of extra marketing dollars to boost meager budgets could be significant, though tough to quantify, said Tim Todd, executive director of Discover Upcountry.

Ecotourism — travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves local welfare — has developed into the fastest-growing tourism sector, according to the Center for Responsible Travel. And now local tourism officials believe a focused campaign on what the Upstate has to offer will bring a whole new type of traveler — with a backpack strapped on or fishing rod in hand — to the Upstate.

Travel to South Carolina has bounced back post-recession, showing huge gains in the past year. Now the state's tourism marketing arm is looking to cash in with an expanded budget to market high-visibility destinations. And Upstate tourism officials are enthused at the potential of the first-time "Undiscovered S.C." campaign designed to market niche locales, many which are located in the Upstate.

Disparity of tourism funding

For years, South Carolina has issued grants, matched $2 for every state $1 by specific visitors bureaus, to promote the highest profile tourist destinations.

The bulk of those funds have traditionally gone to the coast because Charleston, Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head could pool a $1-a-room hotel tax to come up with the $500,000 needed to match every $250,000 the state contributed, said Marion Edmunds, PRT spokesman.

In 2011, Greenville was able to come up with enough to match and received its first allotment of the Destination Specific Marketing Grant.

The state has issued the grants since 2006 at $8 million per year. This year, it rolled $4 million more into the program, bringing it to $12 million, according to budget documents. It may keep the extra $4 million in the destination marketing fund again this year. A budget proviso seeks to roll up to $4 million in unused wage incentives for films into the grant fund.

To some, like Ashley Landess, president of the conservative South Carolina Policy Council, the state shouldn't be in the advertising business at all, and especially not to the benefit of certain locations and businesses at the expense of all taxpayers.

The money belongs to taxpayers, and companies should be able to pool their own resources and make their own decisions about their ad dollars, she said.

"Why should all taxpayers all over the state have their dollars, which are very precious to them right now, go into advertising for businesses and industries that the politicians pick?" she said.

"There are core services that people expect with their tax dollars," she said. "How many people really understand that this money is not going to fix crumbling roads?"

The state measures its tourism impact by the amount of accommodations and admissions taxes it brings in. Admissions taxes are collected from nearly every round of golf and go to the state coffer, Edmunds said. Accommodations taxes are returned to county and local agencies to reinvest in tourism, he said.

Hotel occupancy rose 2.3 percent in the 2012 fiscal year to 54.8 percent and accommodations taxes rose 15 percent to $50.9 million. Admissions taxes totaled $34.3 million, a six-percent increase over the previous year, according to state figures.

Travelers accounted for $1.2 billion in state and local taxes, the equivalent of lifting a $655 tax burden from each household, according to the PRT accountability report.

"Those dollars help reduce the tax burden of every single South Carolinian," Edmunds said. "When you're in Myrtle Beach in May, you don't have any trouble understanding the economic impact of tourism on the state and how much that pumps into an economy."

But some of the state's best natural resources don't have the marketing punch of hotel-lined beaches because they're located in small towns or rural byways or — like Jocassee Gorges or Scenic Highway 11 — are nestled in the mountains away from the hotels and metro areas.

Promotion of these treasures by the state arm has been a long time coming, said Ken Sloan, director of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau that promotes Oconee County.

"It's just acknowledgement to the world that, yes, we do have mountains, lakes and rivers in South Carolina," Sloan said. "It's not all beaches and golf courses."

Oconee County has aggressively marketed itself for the past five years, built mobile apps, and partnered with Clemson University to study segments of travelers who are drawn to its sites, said Phil Shirley, Oconee's Parks, Recreation and Tourism director.

Still, it has just $50,000-$60,000 to spend on marketing annually, and has a limited reach, Shirley said. A statewide campaign would be a boost, he said.

"I'm excited from the point that the people who haven't stumbled upon us yet or haven't seen our marketing campaign, this may help us get a little more marketability," he said.

Wade, who spent his life as an ocean fisherman living off a Florida barrier island, was immediately drawn to the place where those mountain rivers meet Lake Jocassee. Wade and his wife Kay first saw Lake Jocassee during a two-week camping trip.

"When you walk out to this expanse of light and mountains and color and water and you just fall to your knees," Wade said. "It's as close to a religious experience as you can have."

The Wades immediately made plans to move from the Florida beaches to the South Carolina mountains. They spent more than two years as camp hosts at Devil's Fork State Park campground and still live in a 1978 Airstream trailer within a long walk of the lake.

Wade saw an opportunity in the lake's rustic setting, bought a pontoon boat and started Jocassee Lake Tours three years ago.

Most days Wade can be found on his boat, accompanied by Pearl, his 12-year-old yellow Labrador, as he winds his way up tentacles of the lake, chugging around bends until he cuts off the outboard motor and lets the boat drift, dropping in unannounced where whitewater spills over jumbled boulders that sit like stacked marbles at one of the lake's headwaters.

"It's magical," Wade says, then lets the silence linger.

Focus on eco-tourism

While the state's marketing strategy on golf travelers reaches into the Midwest and lower Northeast to draw golfers from winter hibernation to South Carolina's lush greens and fairways, its Undiscovered South Carolina campaign will target consumers within 350 miles of the state.

Marketing will be heavy in-state to draw visitors to discover cultural and natural sites, Edmunds said.

Digital, television and print campaigns will broaden in wider circles to Georgia, North Carolina, northeastern Florida, southern Virginia and eastern Tennessee, targeting adults 25-64 with incomes above $50,000 in search of fishing, bird-watching, boating, visiting parks, shopping, antiquing, history, culture and soft adventures like canoeing, kayaking, biking, hiking and camping, according to the plan.

Wade has built his boat tour business by selling the lake's beauty to nature lovers. He books geologists and school children, experts and novices, but his commentary on a multiple-hour trip along the lake's many crevices is focused on the ecosystem.

Massive rocks along the shoreline lay exposed like beached gray whales, and leafbare trees offered a glimpse far up the slopes that can only be seen in winter when foliage doesn't block the view. Loons frolicked on the diamond shimmering lake surface and then dived, minutes at a time, to snatch fish in the depths.

Wade said he wants to sell the lake as a winter destination. Business is more sporadic in winter and he travels and connects with nature groups in and out of state. Business cards and flyers can only do so much.

Todd, with Discover Upcountry, said Myrtle Beach and Charleston have earned their recognition as world-class destinations, but the Upstate hasn't reached that point of critical mass where people know it's a place a go.

"If you go to Tallahassee and stop someone on the street, and ask them about Greenville, South Carolina, they'll say 'I couldn't tell you where it was,' but if you ask them about Myrtle Beach, they'll say, 'Oh yeah, I've been there,'" Todd said. "So this is something that will help us."

The Blue Ridge Escarpment, where mountains rise from the Piedmont 2,000 feet in a matter of miles, is a world-class destination, Sloan said. It's just a struggle to tell the world about it, he said.

National Geographic helped spread that word in November 2012, when it named Jocassee Gorges to a list of "50 of the World's Last Great Places."

That's exposure the Mountain Lakes CVB couldn't afford to buy, Sloan said.

A new direction

The new marketing isn't designed as a one-time, one-year campaign, but it's made possible by the success of the state's largest draws, Edmunds said.

Because of the destination-specific funding, the state's "bread and butter" destinations have more money than ever to market their specific destination, Edmunds said.

He called it a "new direction" for the agency.

The state hired BFG Communications of Bluffton as its contracted marketing agency in January. The total worth of the contract could be $57 million over 6½ years, Edmunds said. It replaces Leslie Advertising/the Bounce Agency of Greenville, which had contracted with the state for 30 years.

BFG will fully roll out the campaign by the fall, and it will build upon niche groupings — for instance, a barbeque trail or cultural identity — that it will highlight each year, Edmunds said.

Businesses like Jocassee Lake Tours will benefit from "the rising tide that lifts all boats," Edmunds said.

For now, Wade keeps filling up his boat and setting across the lake to help visitors discover for themselves its unique and remote beauty.

"Where else in the East can you just boat ride through the mountains?" he said.

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