



Center for Industrial Services
INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC SERVICE

The Powell River: How an Underutilized Natural Asset Helped Spur Community Development and Tourism

TCED Capstone Fall 2021

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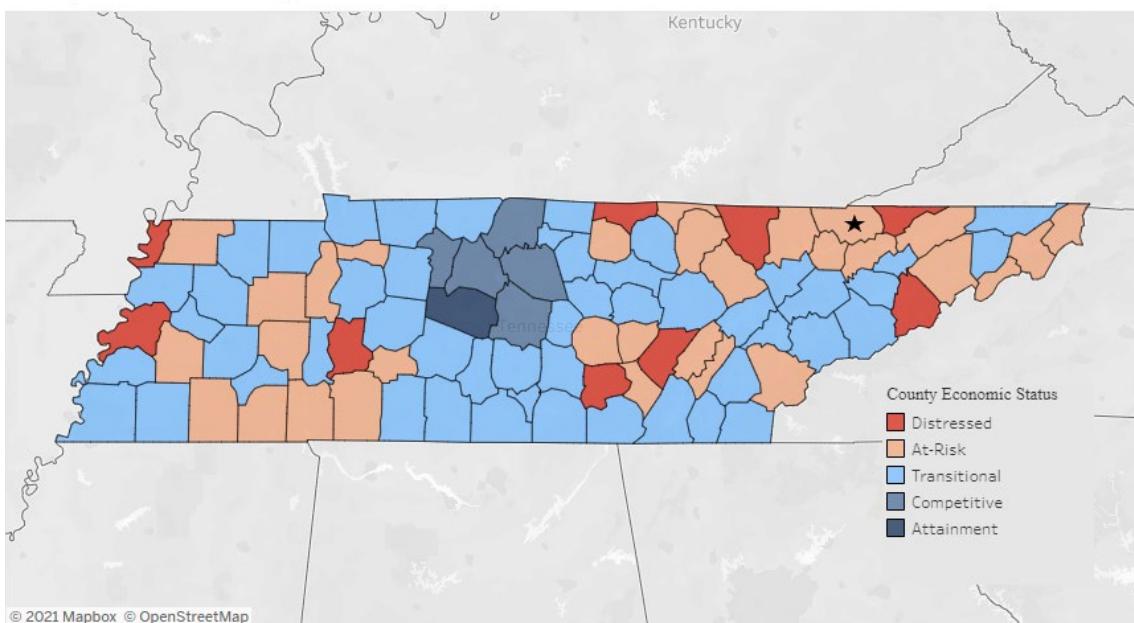
Introduction

The Powell River is one of Claiborne County's greatest natural assets. The Powell, along with the Clinch, are the two-largest free flowing rivers in Tennessee. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Powell River is "One of the most biologically diverse in a temperate climate anywhere in the world."¹ However, despite this fact, the Powell River has been greatly underutilized due to safe access. This project focuses on this asset and its economic potential and impact.

Overview of Claiborne County

Claiborne County is located in upper East Tennessee and is home to Cumberland Gap, where Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia converge. It was founded in 1801 and named in honor of William C. C. Claiborne, Tennessee's first congressional representative.² The County has four municipalities, which are: Tazewell (county seat), New Tazewell, Cumberland Gap, and Harrogate. Claiborne County spans 434 square miles with a population of just over 32,000. The per-capita market income is \$23,504, and the three-year average unemployment rate is 4.4 percent.³ It is an at-risk county, meaning it is between the bottom ten to twenty-five percent of the counties in the United States. This measure is based on Appalachian Regional Commission's economic status designations. These designations are identified through each county's three-year unemployment rate, poverty rate, and per capita market income.⁴

County Economic Status Map (*Fiscal Year 2022*)



Project Description

The Powell River has always been one of Claiborne County's greatest assets. In 2014, the Powell River Blueway Trail Committee (a branch off of the Claiborne County Tourism Commission) was formed, and they began the Powell River Regatta, a 12-mile kayak, canoe, and stand-up paddle board race on the Powell River.

In Spring of 2017, a group of community stakeholders came together for the yearly Asset-Based Planning meeting, through the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development. During this meeting, the Powell River was identified as one of the County's most important natural assets that could be capitalized upon. The Asset-Based Planning Grant, that awarded up to \$50,000 per approved project, was also mentioned during this meeting. Shortly after, the Powell River Blueway Trail Committee, along with the Claiborne County Chamber of Commerce prepared and

submitted the grant application, which included the development of the Powell River Blueway Trail and user amenities for fishing and paddling.⁵ In the Summer of 2017, Claiborne County was awarded the \$50,000 Asset Based Planning Grant.

The Powell River Blueway Trail is a project by the Powell River Blueway Trail Committee to identify, improve, and publicize public access points on and off the 70 miles of the Powell River that are in Claiborne County. The Asset-Based Enhancement Grant was awarded for the following purposes:

- To provide road signage to public river access locations
- To provide river mileage signs along the trail
- Create the Powell River Blueway Trail website
- Design marketing literature and maps
- Construct a new river access at Indian Creek
- Improve the road to the Gap Creek access point
- Identify and obtain land rights to the new access on the river
- Draft an action plan for future Powell River Blueway Trail development.⁵

Many different organizations were and have been involved in this project, including Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Tennessee Department of Transportation, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, Tennessee Department of Agriculture Division of Forestry, Clinch-Powell RC & D, Well Being Retreat Center, The Nature Conservancy, and others.

As a result of the grant and group collaboration, the Blueway Trail Committee was able to create four new public access points in Claiborne County: Indian Creek, Riverside Baptist Church, Highway 25E Bridge, and Williams Landing. The grant also allowed the committee to build a website, print brochures, and post directional road signs.

In 2018, this project received two awards: the East Tennessee Development District Excellence Award and the 2018 Excellence in Communication and Outreach Award to protect aquatic biodiversity from the Tennessee River Basin Network (a \$5,000 grant also came with this award).¹

After grant funding ended in December 2018, work has continued to be done. There are currently nine public access points to the Powell River. There are also signs at a number of the access points with information on the biodiversity and ecology of the Powell River. The Powell River Blueway Trail Committee continues to meet monthly and continues to work diligently on developing more access points and marketing the river to increase river usage.

Outcomes of Project

The Powell River Blueway Trail has had great impact on tourism revenues in Claiborne County. In 2017, tourism generated \$19.93 million in expenditures in Claiborne County. In 2018, tourism generated \$21.14 million in expenditures in Claiborne County, and in 2019, tourism generated \$21.83 million in expenditures in Claiborne County. This is an increase of \$1.9 million over two years.

The Blueway Trail has also impacted local tax revenues. In 2017, tourism generated \$1.5 million in local tax revenues. In 2018, tourism generated \$1.57 million in local tax revenues. In 2019, tourism generated \$1.61 million in local tax revenues, resulting in an increase of \$110,000 in local tax revenues over two years. If it were not for the increase in tourism revenues, each household in Claiborne County would pay an additional \$218.34 in taxes.⁶

River businesses in Claiborne County have increased since the Powell River Blueway Trail project. These businesses include Shelley Belle's kayak and tube Rentals, Shelley Belle's Restaurant on the river, Shelley Belle's axe throwing and putt-putt, Well Being Retreat Center, and Riverside Rentals.

Shelley Belle's kayak and tube rentals opened in 2016. Shelley Belle's is right off of Highway 25E and is one of the private access points on the Powell River Blueway Trail on river mile sixty-six. Since the Powell River Blueway Trail project, Shelley Belle's has not only grown their kayak and tube rental business, but they have also built a restaurant and just recently added axe throwing and putt-putt. Shelley Belle's restaurant on the river opened in June of 2018. The restaurant opened due to an increase in river traffic and usage. Shelley Belle's restaurant is an American family restaurant with a patio that overlooks the Powell River. It is the perfect spot to have a nice lunch or supper after a float on the river. Since the opening of the restaurant, they have also added a nine-hole putt-putt course and four lanes of axe throwing. This addition to the business officially opened August 1, 2020. In the Fall of 2020, they added an axe-throwing league that meets for seven weeks, with the tournament being

the eighth week. Axe throwing and putt-putt has grown in popularity and business revenue since the opening.⁷

The property for the Well Being Retreat Center was purchased in 2008 by the Well Being Foundation. This property is on 160 acres surrounded by two and a half miles of the Powell River. The Well Being Foundation is a non-profit foundation founded by Don Oakley, with his wife Patty Bottari being the Director and Vice-President of the foundation. Don is also the Committee Chair for the Powell River Blueway Trail committee and Patty is a member of the committee as well. The Retreat center is another private access point on the Blueway Trail at river mile ninety-two.

When the Well Being Foundation purchased the property for the retreat center, the only thing on the property was an old barn. After beginning work on the property, four sod roof cabins were built as well as a bigger cabin that has a ventilated metal roof. The retreat center was also built, which has a meeting room that can fit fifty people, a commercial kitchen and dining room where meals are served, and a deck overlooking the property that can be used for outdoor dining. Six cabinnettes which have two twin beds, a mini-fridge, and a table were built as well as the Powell River pavilion, a covered, open-air pavilion with seating for fifty, a commercial kitchen, a wood-fired pizza oven, a gas grill, stage, and a large chess board. After these amenities were built, the Foundation realized that due to the increase of river traffic because the Blueway Trail had put Powell River “on the map” and tourists, that they needed to expand even more. In the summer of 2018, six tiny houses were built to be able to better accommodate guests and tourists. These houses have two beds, a kitchenette, a full bathroom, and a deck overlooking the mountains and hills of Claiborne County. The retreat center can

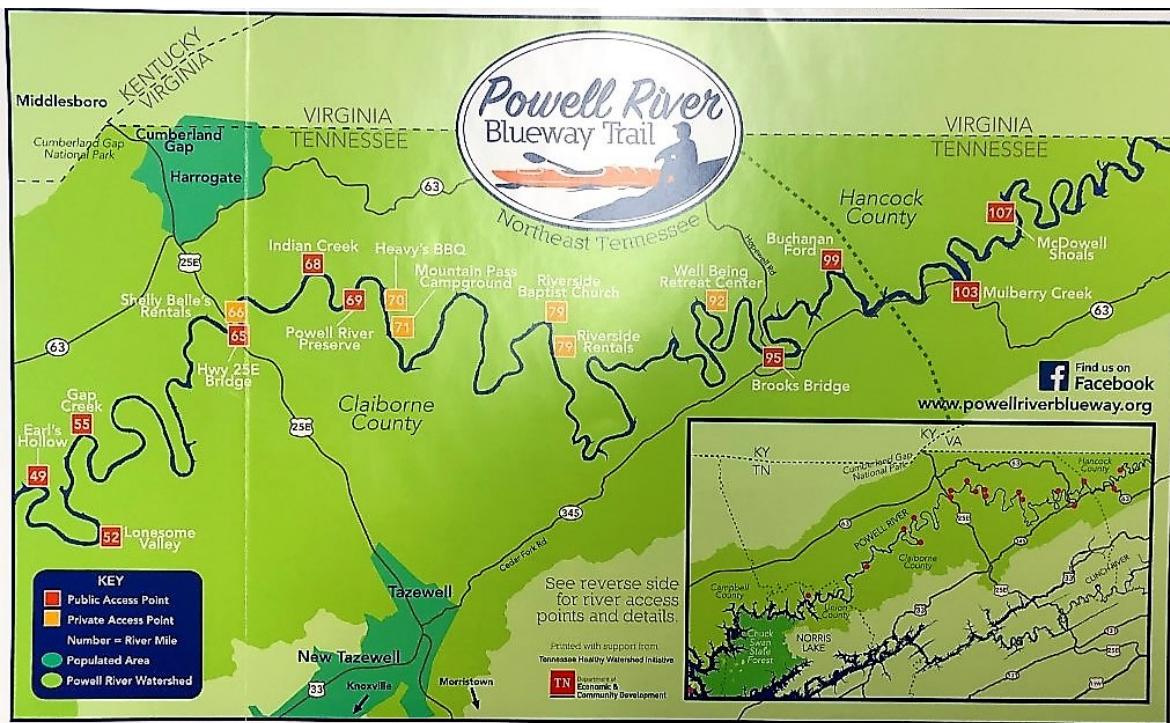
sleep up to thirty-nine people and they are currently booked until the end of calendar year 2021.⁸

Riverside rentals has also gained revenue due to the Powell River Blueway Trail. Riverside is a private access point along the Blueway trail on river mile eighty. It was first opened in May 2011. Carson Williams, owner of Riverside Rentals, is a member of the Blueway Trail committee. Since its opening, their business has grown and continues to grow each year. Much of this growth can attribute to the Blueway trail and marketing of the river. Since 2017, the business has seen a ten percent growth in customers and visitors. They do not have a current number from 2020, but it is expected to continue the growth pattern as tourism was up in rural counties due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

The Powell River Regatta has grown as well due to the Powell River Blueway Trail. The regatta, a 12-mile kayak, canoe, and stand-up paddle board race on the Powell River was first started in 2015. The Regatta has been held each year after except for 2019 due to forty-two-degree weather and the finish line being three feet under water and in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This race begins at the Well Being Retreat Center and ends at Riverside Rentals. The proceeds from the Regatta are used to continue to fund the Powell River Blueway Trail project. In 2015, there were forty-seven boats in the Regatta. In 2018, that number almost doubled with ninety-three boats participating in the Regatta. Fifteen of the participants were out of state. With these increasing numbers, it is expected that the 2022 Regatta will top 120 boats and participants.¹⁰

Looking Forward

Although the Asset Based planning grant has ended, work on the Powell River Blueway Trail continues. The Blueway Trail Committee continues to meet on a monthly basis and install additional access points and information at existing access points. The Blueway Trail Committee's goal is to have a river access point every five river miles. There are currently fourteen access points in Claiborne County, of which nine are public. Below is a map of the Blueway Trail and the current access points.¹⁰



Property along the Powell River has become exceedingly popular due to the Blueway Trail and the access points. River businesses continue to grow as there are more access points added. The economic impact that is expected and continues to be seen are restaurants and kayak, canoe, and tubing rental businesses along the river. It is also expected for new businesses such as fishing tackle sales and fishing guides to

emerge. These businesses would attract many outdoor enthusiasts and river anglers. Campgrounds have also begun to build along the river, of which many have tourists that will lease a camping spot for a week or a month. It is also expected that cabins will be constructed along the river for weekly/monthly rentals, which will increase hotel/motel tax.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic put a damper on many things, rural tourism continued to grow. The activities that were considered “safe” were activities that were outdoors, such as kayaking, canoeing, tubing, fishing, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic also increased ecotourism among rural counties. Ecotourism has become increasingly popular among the Millennial generation of which many have found a love for outdoor recreation and activities. This has had a great impact on tourism and revenue in Claiborne County.

The Regatta continues to be the main source of funding for the Blueway Trail as the Asset Based Planning grant has closed. In 2018, the Regatta brought in over \$8,000 from registration donations and sponsorships. The Powell River Blueway trail also received a \$15,000 Tennessee Watershed Initiative Grant as well as a Tennessee River Basin Grant in the amount of \$5,000. They have also had in-kind donations through Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency and The Nature Conservancy. These funds have helped continue the construction of additional access points and the growth of the Blueway Trail. The Blueway Trail committee continues to seek other funding and grant opportunities for access points, maintenance, and marketing. The members of the Blueway Trail committee along with Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency maintain the current access points and are the “hands and feet” of the trail. The Blueway Trail

committee has recently been asked to help assist our neighboring county in Virginia to start a similar trail system in their county along their parts of the Powell River. There is a potential for the Powell River Blueway Trail to be a multi-state and multi-county Blueway trail.

Conclusion

The Powell River Blueway Trail has been the catalyst that Claiborne County needed to focus its efforts on increasing tourism and community development. It has and continues to attract outdoor enthusiasts, kayakers, canoers, and river anglers. The access points along the Blueway Trail also attract those that are nature enthusiasts and want to be around the sounds of the river and nature. As the Blueway Trail continues to grow, Claiborne County will continue to see an increase in tourism receipts, building permits along river properties, and river-based businesses. The efforts of the Powell River Blueway Trail committee and the impact the Powell River Blueway Trail continues to make are heading Claiborne County into a better future. Without the Powell River Blueway Trail and committee, the Powell River would still be one of the greatest underutilized assets in Claiborne County. In the words of Jim Harrison, “You can’t be unhappy in the middle of a big, beautiful river,” and many people and visitors to Claiborne County now realize that due to the Powell River Blueway Trail.

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