

Roar of motorcycles could mean clank in the local cash register

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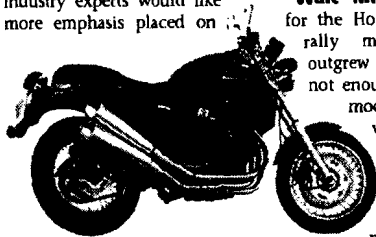
Each year thousands of motorcycle enthusiasts come to Western North Carolina. Some industry experts would like more emphasis placed on

visitors to Asheville and had a cumulative economic impact of approximately \$35 million, according to the Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Walt Miller, sales manager for the Honda Hoot, said the rally moved because it outgrew Asheville. There was not enough space to accommodate the number of vendors and attendees who wanted to come.

While the Hoot may have relocated, motorcycle tourism is still going strong in the mountains.

In June, the BMW Riders Association International Rally will roll into town, with an estimated 2,500 attendees who will leave behind approximately \$1.8 million, according to the Convention and Visitors Bureau.



Motorcycle tourism nets as much as \$20 million a year, just in Asheville.

the demographic.

The largest motorcycle event to be held in Western North Carolina was the Honda Hoot, which came to Asheville in 1994, and returned every year until 2000, when the event moved to Knoxville.

The Hoot brought 30,000

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June will also see the national rally of the Honda Sport Touring Association come to Asheville. Smaller than the BMW rally, with 500 expected attendees, the group will still spend quite a bit of money in Western North Carolina, said HSTA President **Dave Brickner**.

Attendees will collectively spend more than \$100,000 for hotel rooms alone, Brickner said. Overall, they will probably spend between \$350,000 and \$400,000 during their four-day stay in the area, Brickner said.

The North Carolina rally for the Honda Gold Wing Riders Association is held every year in Fletcher and attracts between 6,000 and 12,000 people, said **Angie Mitchell**, who, along with her husband **Mike**, recently stepped down as GWRA region directors for the Appalachian Region.

Convention and Visitors Bureau figures show that the GWRA Rally has an estimated \$5.3 million economic impact on Asheville every year.

Despite their prevalence, there are few hard and fast figures about the economic impact of motorcycle tourism in Western North Carolina. **Penn Dameron**, executive director of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area said his organization has extensive data on tourism in the 25-county area, but none on motorcyclists.

"We don't have anything specifically on motorcycle tourism," Dameron said.

Tim Lampkin, director of convention sales for the Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau, said that \$20 million is a conservative estimate of the annual economic impact of motorcycle tourism in the Asheville area, but there are no official figures.

Dale Walksler, founder and curator of the Wheels Through Time Transportation Museum in Maggie Valley, said he chose to move the museum from Illinois five years ago, because Western North Carolina is a Mecca for two-wheeled tourism. Walksler said he has been frustrated by the lack of interest in the economic impact of motorcycling in the mountains.

"This is the best place in the world for this type of thing, but it's not politically accepted," Walksler said.

Walksler said, he thinks the economic

impact of cyclists on Western North Carolina is somewhere between \$35 and \$100 million annually, with the actual number being closer to the higher figure.

"It's pretty upsetting that a \$100 million impact in a 25-county area doesn't get a notice," he said.

The days of the outlaw biker stereotype are long gone. According to figures from the cycling advocacy group the Motorcycle Industry Council, the mean age of a motorcycle owner is 40 years, and the median income is \$55,850. Roughly one third of motorcycle owners work in a professional or technical field.

Many members of motorcycle groups, especially those where members own touring motorcycles that can cost \$20,000, are exactly the sort of people who come to Asheville, said **Marla Tambellini**, director of marketing and communications for the Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The average visitor to the Asheville area is a college-educated baby boomer with a household income of more than \$100,000. "That aligns perfectly with some of these motorcycle groups," Tambellini said.

Asheville is not the only area to notice the desirability of motorcycle tourists, however. The state of Virginia has its own initiative to bring motorcyclists. Formed in 2005 by executive order, the Motorcycle Virginia Committee is charged with promoting motorcycle safety and tourism. Their initiatives have included producing a public service announcement to remind people to look out for motorcycles and bumper stickers.

Gestures like those made by Virginia are inexpensive and build up goodwill, said **Matt Walksler**, director of public relations for Wheels Through Time, and Dale Walksler's son.

"If Virginia is the one calling them, saying 'Come here, come here,' they're going to go there," he said.

Lampkin, who is also a motorcycle rider, said he has heard of Virginia's efforts and said it is something that North Carolina should think about doing.

"I've kind of wanted to champion that in our state," he said.

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