

## Governor's Conference on Tourism Accentuates the Positive

By Jim Schaefer, Executive Director, Custer Country

The 2008 Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation was held in West Yellowstone on April 17 and 18. The theme of the conference was "Finding a Niche." Representatives from Montana's six Travel Regions and eleven Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVBs) along with owners and operators of tourism businesses and non-profits gathered together to get updates on travel trends and what to expect in the future. Speakers offered advice on topics such as developing a "brand" for Montana tourism and how to use the web to spread the word about the attractions the state offers.

Eco- and Geo- tourism were overriding topics during this year's conference. The terms refer to the practice of using the geographical nature of Montana to attract visitors, while also striving to maintain the unique qualities that make the state desirable to tourists. One of the main goals is striking a delicate balance between preserving the beauty and pristine nature of Montana while upgrading the amenities we offer tourists, who are expecting both breath-taking views and great places to shop and unwind. These two qualities can both be attained with thoughtful planning, according to many of the featured speakers.

Governor Schweitzer, who was not originally scheduled to attend, was able to adjust his schedule to address the 440 assembled attendees at the Friday morning session. While congratulating Montana's tourism industry for meeting the goals he set forth at the 2006 Conference, he issued a challenge to increase visitation and economic impact even more over the coming years.

At the Friday luncheon, first lady Nancy Schweitzer and Montana Department of Transportation Administrator Jim Lynch did a presentation of Mrs. Schweitzer's "Math and Science" initiative. While the connection of the program to tourism was not immediately obvious to many of the attendees, it was soon made so. One aspect of the initiative is the placement of informational signs along major roadways in Montana that point out unusual and important geological and geographical aspects of Montana's landscape. The effort also includes a school outreach program, trading cards with facts about Montana's varied geology for elementary school children and brochures that catalogue the locations of the kiosks.

One of the topics discussed was the decreasing number of children who are getting access to the outdoors. Dr. Cheryl Charles presented a program entitled "No child left indoors," which outlined her efforts to encourage children nationwide to experience nature first-hand through programs that engage them in outdoor activities, field trips to nature centers and wildlife study areas and other activities that would give

children hands-on experiences with nature. According to Dr. Charles, children today are often over-protected due to unreasonable safety concerns. As a result, many of today's children are in danger of growing up with no appreciation for nor connection with nature. According to her, if a child is not exposed to nature by the time they are 7 years old, creating these connections is unlikely to occur.

One question that arose at the Conference was how to create the amenities today's travelers expect while on vacation while still maintaining the basic ambiance of the state. The answer is to use existing structures with an eye to as little change in character as possible or building new structures that blend in with the existing architecture of an area. This will address the needs of the tourist who expects to experience the wild and scenic wonders of the state, then return to higher-end comforts such as spas, massage services and even pedicures.

Overviews of tourism trends in Asia were presented by Montana Trade Representatives Mei Mei Wang of Taipei, Taiwan, and Mako Kamaguchi, of Kumamoto, Japan. Both representatives brought news of changing trends among Asian visitors, away from the traditional guided bus tours to more individualized trips that include fly-drive vacations to working ranches, Bed and Breakfast Inns, and National Parks. According to both Wang and Kamaguchi, inquiries to travel agencies in these markets about such trips are up dramatically.

Pam Gosink, Marketing Program Manager for Travel Montana, the European market also offers growing prospects for Montana. At the Rocky Mountain International Roundup in Casper, Wyoming in early April, over 40 tour operators from seven foreign countries were represented. The weakened U.S. dollar has suddenly made travel to America much more affordable to Europeans, many of whom have already been to either coast and who now want to experience adventures in the western U.S. Gosink says, "Bookings by Europeans for trips to places in Montana, South Dakota, Idaho and Montana are up as much as 55%. This bodes very well for tourism-related businesses in our region over the next several years."

Other seminars included "The Power and Pitfalls of the Internet," "Follow the Money: How to get your share of the tourism dollar," and "Understanding the Montana Visitor-statistics from Montana Tourism and Recreation Research-MSU." For more information, go to [www.ITRR.UMT.EDU](http://www.ITRR.UMT.EDU).

The Governors Conference is also the occasion for announcing the winners of the Governor's Tourism Awards. The most eagerly-awaited of these is the "Tourism Person of the Year" recipient. This year the award was presented to Mary Sue Costello, Executive Director of the West Yellowstone CVB. As noted in her letter of nomination, "She has quietly and steadily dedicated herself to the tourism industry in her community, region and the state overall for the past twenty-five years." According to Stan Ozark, Tourism Advisory Council member from Glasgow, MT and emcee of the

awards banquet, she is credited with having "... immeasurable qualities that are integral to a tourism leader- perceptive vision, persistent dedication, and unerring work undertaken each day."

Awards for "Tourism Partnership of the Year" went to the West Yellowstone Winter Trails Association and "Tourism Event of the Year" was awarded to Ft. Benton's annual Summer Celebration. The next Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation will be held in Helena, MT. The dates are to be announced.