

# The Economic Benefits of the Island Explorer at Acadia National Park to its Gateway Communities

July 2012



*Paul S. Sarbanes  
Transit In Parks*

Technical Assistance Center

UNDERSTANDING

RESOURCES

SOLUTIONS

*This document was prepared for the Federal Transit Administration  
by the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center*

## COVER PHOTO CREDIT

Photos courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park.

## DISCLAIMER

This document is disseminated under the sponsorship of the U.S. Department of Transportation in the interest of information exchange. The United States Government assumes no liability for its contents or use thereof. The United States Government does not endorse products of manufacturers. Trade or manufacturers' names appear herein solely because they are considered essential to the objective of this report.

## AUTHOR

This document was authored by Natalie Villwock-Witte of the Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University Bozeman, the lead organization of the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center (TRIPTAC).

## INTRODUCTION

Acadia National Park is located in eastern Maine, mostly on Mount Desert Island. Visitors can access the Park from the “gateway communities” of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor and Tremont. The Island Explorer, the shuttle at Acadia National Park that has been in operation since 1999, provides service between and within the towns and the Park.<sup>1</sup>

After more than 10 years of operation, the Island Explorer has provided many tangible benefits to the Park and its visitors. In addition, the shuttle has demonstrated economic benefits to the gateway communities, including increased job creation and business opportunities.

## CREATING JOB OPPORTUNITIES

The creation of the Island Explorer has increased job opportunities both directly and indirectly throughout the Park region. Directly, the Island Explorer has created positions for drivers and managers of the system. The Island Explorer shuttle system reported fifty-one total positions in 2005, an increase from forty-nine positions in 2001.<sup>2,3</sup> Forty-seven of the fifty-one are drivers and four are shift supervisor positions.<sup>3</sup> Indirectly, the Island Explorer increases mobility for those living in the gateway communities. For residents, it provides a free and convenient connection to the businesses present in these communities and the job opportunities they offer.

For individuals who do not own a car or are not of a legal age to drive, the Island Explorer has created employment opportunities. This is particularly true for the young, elderly, disabled and foreign workers.<sup>3</sup> The following quote from the 2010 Island Explorer survey sums up this sentiment, “I work on the island and rely on the buses to get around because I have no car. The same is true of many of the island’s foreign workers.”<sup>3</sup>

*“I work on the island and rely on the buses to get around because I have no car. The same is true of many of the island’s foreign workers.”*



*Photo courtesy of John Daigle, Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center*

From a business owner’s perspective, the Island Explorer helps expand the pool of potential employees.<sup>3</sup> In fact, input from business owners indicated that twenty-one percent of businesses had at least one employee that used the Island Explorer to get to work.<sup>5</sup>

## INCREASING BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

The presence of the Island Explorer increases business opportunities by facilitating access to their services, attracting an additional tourist demographic, creating new marketing opportunities, and encouraging longer/expanded visitation to the Park.

*“It is a huge help to those of us with low income who wouldn’t be able to go places without the bus.”*

The gateway communities surrounding Acadia National Park recognized the potential of the Island Explorer shuttle system to alleviate local traffic and parking congestion. With the implementation of the shuttle, tourists can visit community businesses even when parking areas are full.<sup>5,6</sup> As a result, the Island Explorer is essentially increasing the client base of businesses that were previously constrained by their parking capacity.<sup>6</sup>

The design of the Island Explorer also increases accessibility to businesses for local residents. Residents without a private vehicle may have previously limited their trips to businesses. With the Island Explorer, they can easily access them, as illustrated by the following comment from a visitor survey:<sup>4</sup> “It is a huge help to those of us with low income who wouldn’t be able to go places without the bus.”

The Island Explorer has created the possibility for carless visits to Acadia National Park and its gateway communities, thus attracting a different demographic of tourist.<sup>5</sup> The opportunity to sight-see without a private vehicle appeals to both environmentally-conscious and international tourists. Foreign visitors, who often have greater access to public transit in their home countries, might find the system more appealing than renting or driving a private vehicle.<sup>3,6</sup> According to annual rider surveys of the Island Explorer, non-Canadian international visitation has increased from 2000 to 2010.<sup>4</sup>

The Island Explorer has opened additional marketing opportunities. First, it can be used as a tool to attract visitors. Chambers of commerce have found that “they can use the Island Explorer as a selling point to convince people to visit the area.”<sup>3,4</sup> Second, partners who support the shuttle promote the system to their own organizations and clients. For example, LL Bean donated money for the operation of the Island Explorer. To advertise their donation, they featured Acadia National Park and the Island Explorer on their catalog cover in 2003.<sup>3</sup> Anyone who received the catalog in 2003 saw photos of the Island Explorer and Acadia National Park.

Business owners have realized that “if visitors like the shuttle service and feel they had an easy time traveling about Mount Desert Island, they might return for another visit in the future.”<sup>3</sup> For example, a passenger comment in the Island Explorer Short Range Transit Plan, Final Report said, “It [the Island Explorer] will play an important role in our decision to return in coming years.”



*Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park*

This sentiment has been repeated in numerous similar comments from passengers who completed the 2010 Island Explorer rider survey:<sup>4</sup>

- “We come here every year mainly because of the bus service,”
- The Island Explorer “Made our visit much more enjoyable. We will return,”
- “Without the [shuttle] service we would not be here. Please keep it in service,”
- “You [the Island Explorer] are a big reason we vacation @ MDI [Mount Desert Island] each year,”
- “We planned our trip so that we could use this fine, free transit system and leave our car at the motel,” and
- “It allows me a car-free vacation every year.”

Over the years, the Island Explorer service has expanded its service periods and the information provided about the service. These expansions have lengthened daily and seasonal access to businesses, resulting in economic benefits.

Initially, the Island Explorer service operated only during peak season but has since expanded into the shoulder season. In 2003, the service period in the fall extended from Labor Day to Columbus Day.<sup>3</sup> Creating a desirable visitor experience into the shoulder season is advantageous; research indicates that visitors in this season tend to spend more money when compared with those during the peak season.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, an increase in visitation during this period would mean an increase in revenues.

In 2002, the Island Explorer system added an intelligent transportation system that, among other features, provides visitors at shuttle stops with vehicle arrival times. This service enhancement provides updated arrival time information to tourists who might otherwise wait at the shuttle stop so that they can instead use extra time to shop in neighboring businesses.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, while the cause and effect is unclear, visitors who used intelligent transportation system information about the shuttles (or about parking and the shuttles) averaged longer stays than those visitors who did not

use any information (or those who only used the information for parking.<sup>8</sup>) Furthermore, visitors who used the intelligent transportation system information, especially the information related to the shuttles, spent more.<sup>5,8</sup>

In summary, the Island Explorer provides economic benefits through job and business opportunities. The Island Explorer provides direct and indirect job benefits including creating driver and shuttle supervisor positions and increasing resident access to employment options. It now allows businesses previously constrained by parking to increase their capacity,

attracts the car-less tourist, provides indirect marketing, and generates repeat customers.



*Photo courtesy of John Daigle, Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center*

## WORKS CITED

1. John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center. (2003). Partnering for Transportation Success at Acadia National Park. U.S. Department of Transportation. Retrieved January 30, 2012 from the National Park Service website: <http://www.nps.gov/acad/parkmgmt/upload/ie.pdf>
2. Clement, Stephanie. (2001). Trip Report for Stephanie Clement, Conservation Director: Grand Canyon, Zion, Bryce Canyon, and Yosemite National Parks Transportation Study Tour. Friends of Acadia.
3. Dunning, Anne E. (2005). Transit for National Parks and Gateway Communities: Impacts and Guidance. (Doctoral dissertation).
4. Tom Crikelair Associates. (2011). Memorandum on the Island Explorer Passenger Survey 2010. Retrieved January 30, 2012 from the Island Explorer website: <http://exploreacadia.com/comments.htm>
5. Zimmerman, Carol A.; Daigle, John; and James Pol. (2004). Tourism Business and Intelligent Transportation Systems: Acadia National Park, Maine. Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board, No. 1895. National Research Council, Washington D.C., pp.182-187. Available at: <http://www.trb.org/Publications/Pubs/TRRJournalPrint.aspx>
6. National Park Service. (October 2009). Transportation Fact Sheet: Economic Benefits of Transportation Investment. National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior. Retrieved January 30, 2012 from the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center (TRIPTAC) website: <http://www.triptac.org/ResourceLibrary/CentralRepository/Repository.aspx>
7. Tom Crikelair Associates. (2007). Island Explorer Short Range Transit Plan, Final Report. Retrieved January 30, 2012 from Island Explorer website: <http://exploreacadia.com/planning.htm>
8. Daigle, John and Carol Zimmerman. (2003). Acadia National Park ITS Field Operational Test – Visitor Survey. U.S. Department of Transportation.

