Douglas C. Frechtling is a professor of tourism studies in the Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, School of Business of The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA. By Providence, he founded and managed an independent, nonprofit research center for the tourism industries for 14 years. While there, he developed methods for measuring tourism volume and impact. Later, he consulted for a number of tourism clients, spending most of his time with the World Tourism Organization on standardizing tourism definitions and impact methodologies. When the George Washington University offered him a visiting professor position, he accepted and wormed his way into a tenured position through research on improving measurement of tourism and forecasting its future. After 40 years of laboring to standardize definitions and methodologies for measuring tourism and its impact, he wonders if it will take this long again to see academia, government, and industry recognize and employ these tools.

Growing up in Washington, DC, a government career seemed to be a good, safe place to spend my working life. However, I began my undergraduate stint as a pre-engineering major at Hamilton College in New York state, aiming to become an aeronautical engineer. Freshman calculus knocked that idea out of my head. Instead, I enjoyed freshman economics and chose to major in it.

Looking back, I believe it was the amalgam of sociology and mathematics that appealed to me. The head of the economics department was Dr. John Gambs, a proponent of the institutional school of economics. Institutionalists believe that economic studies should focus on the role of institutions in the shaping of economic outcomes and behavior. Leading lights included Thorstein Veblen (Theory of the Leisure Class) and John Kenneth Galbraith (The Affluent Society).

Dr. Gambs reputation and personality kept the extreme mathematical modeling forces at bay. The study of economics was more like studying history and politics than econometrics, and presented an agreeable field for me.

INTO THE WORLD

I was introduced to a Hamilton alum, Don Webster, who was working at the Joint Economic Committee (JEC) of the U.S. Congress in the mid 1960s. The JEC was created by the Employment Act of 1946, the first national legislative commitment to economic growth and price stability. The Act required the President to issue an
annual report on the state of the U.S. economy and what should be done to reduce unemployment and maintain price stability. The JEC was charged with reporting Congress's views on these annual reports.

Congressional rules required the JEC to reflect both the majority and minority parties in each house. Mr. Webster was the economist for the Republican members of the Committee in the 1960s, called the Minority, and needed a research assistant. I got the job on the basis of graduating from Hamilton College with an economics major and being sympathetic to conservative economic policies. These included balancing the Federal budget over the business cycle, reducing price inflation to near zero, keeping tax rates low and restraining government spending.

Initially my duties were mostly clerical. But over time I contributed sections to speeches and reports issued by the Republican members. Our major effort centered on reviewing the President's economic report each January. This required gathering witnesses for hearings before the Committee, writing questions and statement for the members, and drafting a reaction to the report to be revised and approved by the Minority members. This was a big deal because at that time no other Congressional committee was responsible for recommending macroeconomic policies for the U.S. Our Minority views served as the major statement Republican Party positions on economic policies for the coming year.

Don Webster, had spent ten years as a journalist and strongly valued clear, concise writing. I learned this skill after months of trial and error, and came to value such communication as critical to professional success in economics. Moreover, Don was interested in taking graduate courses at the George Washington University (GW) in the evenings. I was accepted into GW’s doctoral program, so the two of us would motor down to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue two nights a week for our courses. We were able to put the principles we learned in the classroom to work and to improve our arguments for sound economic policies.

One of the JEC Subcommittees was devoted to economic statistics from the federal government. This struck me as superfluous as “everyone” knew that federal government statistics were valid. However, listening to debates and reading reports convinced me that only the devotion of a hard core of statisticians and economists maintained these statistics at a high level of accuracy. And that to maintain this accuracy, some series must be revised to reflect more recent data and superior collection methods. Indeed, the quarterly Gross Domestic Product estimates are still revised three times after their first release.

Don left the JEC in early 1968 to work for Richard M. Nixon’s second campaign for the Presidency. His recommendation led to my being elevated to Minority Economist and serving as the chief staffer for the eight Republican members of the Committee. Among other events, this position generated to my first publication, a report on a Congressional study tour examining approaches to building New Towns in Europe and Israel. I learned that Members of Congress were not very interested in details,
and instead of publishing my report as their own, they preferred that the JEC publish it under my name. Hence the birth of my first publication, probably read by 40 people in 40 years.

When the time came, I wrote, discussed, re-wrote and finally achieved consensus on the Minority Views regarding the 1970 Economic Report of the President. The fact that the President was the Republican R. M. Nixon made my job easier. Nevertheless, liberal members of the party made for some interesting contretemps in trying to achieve consensus on how to respond to the views of the Democratic members of the Committee.

FROM PRESCRIBING TO ADMINISTERING

That 1970 report turned out to be my swansong, as Don Webster engineered my appointment to be Deputy Assistant to the Secretary of the U.S. Treasury. I recall being reluctant to leave my Congressional job, but realized I could learn much more about economic policy in the Administration. My doctoral concentration was fiscal policy, so the new position fit in well with my studies at GW.

Moreover, while Congress could talk and pass legislation, the U.S. Treasury Department was responsible for implementing economic policy in the areas of taxation, credit and interest rates, and our international balance of payments. The most exciting time in my government career was under John Connally’s term as Secretary. A very popular Texas governor, wounded when President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963, Connally was a charismatic and thoughtful politician who wanted to improve the business environment and the rate of economic growth of our nation. With a strong team including Paul Volcker, he convinced the White House to reduce U.S. adherence to the gold standard and institute wage and price controls to terminate the widespread inflation at the time.

I believe Secretary Connally was successful for two reasons. One, he had a persuasive personality and could charm the wings off a fly. But he also kept the best, most recent macroeconomic data at hand to support his positions.

Connally’s resignation in 1972 was unexpected and unwanted. He took an activist approach to economic policy formation, going head-to-head with Administration officials and Congressional leaders to return the country to economic growth without inflation. In our weekly staff meetings, he challenged all of us to think clearly and defend long-held positions and opinions. He convinced me of the value of sound data in public policy discussions.

One curious find during my tenure as an assistant to the Secretary was a report to the Treasury by economist and educator Peter L. Bernstein on the accuracy of U.S. balance of payments statistics. I recall it pointing out that one of the weakest areas was the international travel and transportation account. The system providing these
estimates was quite weak. It is interesting that this debate continues to this day, fifty years later.

As the Watergate scandal heated up, being a political appointee in the Treasury under a new Secretary was a prescription for sleepless nights. I was completing my doctoral dissertation and wondering whether I wanted to sink into the Treasury as a career employee or join some other government agency.

Fortunately, Divine Providence offered me a way out to a career I never imagined.

CHANGE IN CAREER

A cold call from a journalist about something called “travel and tourism” landed me an interview with the President of Discover America Travel Organizations (DATO), the umbrella association covering all U.S. industries serving travelers away from home. William D. Toohey was apparently impressed by my Congressional and Treasury positions, devotion to good writing and sound research, and earned doctorate in economics. He hired me to set up a nonprofit research center for the tourism industries called the “U.S. Travel Data Center.”

Mr. Toohey negotiated a matching grant from the U.S. Travel Service in the Department of Commerce to establish the Center and operate it for a year. The Department required that the Data Center be an independent, nonprofit corporation, and we operated that way for 14 years. We opened our doors in January 1973 with a first-rate Board of Directors and a staff of two. The challenge was to develop sound research on the course and economic consequences of travel and tourism to, from and within the United States. And to obtain the funding necessary to sustain this effort.

A sidebar on jargon is necessary here. Forty years ago, and still somewhat true today, “tourism” was a limiting and questionable term in America. It referred to leisure travel, a luxury enjoyed by few and somewhat suspect in our hard-working country. On the other hand, “travel” by itself was too broad a term, appropriated by transportation researchers decades earlier to refer to all movement of persons once they left their homes headed for any destination. By lumping together “travel” and “tourism”, one could make clear he was referring to all travel away from home, both for personal and for business purposes. Never mind that the rest of the world was quite comfortable with “tourism” as the central word with a long tradition of referring to both personal and business travel.

The U.S. has become much more involved in the global economy over the last half-century, but the uneasiness with “tourism” is still evident: note the title of the U.S. version of the tourism satellite account is “U.S. Travel and Tourism Satellite Account.” In this memoir, I will stick with the World Tourism Organization’s widely-endorsed approach to defining the activities we are interested in and refer to “tourism” as the activity of traveling away from one’s own usual environment and returning, and “visitor” as the person who engages in this activity.
In search of valid data on tourism spending and its impact, I visited the University of Colorado at Boulder to meet Dr. Charles R. Goeldner in fall 1972. He was widely recognized as the leading tourism researcher in the country. His Journal of Travel Research was the only respected peer-reviewed journal devoted to tourism in North America. His Bureau of Business Research at the University turned out bibliographies and data compendia for TTRA that were the only source of annual statistical information on tourism in the country. He maintained the largest collection of tourism books and studies in the Americas and perhaps the world.

The meeting was propitious in a number of ways. Chuck shared my interest in improving the quality and expanding the range of data on tourism in the U.S. He agreed to serve on the USTDC Board and faithfully did so for more than 30 years. He convinced me to join the Board of Directors of TTRA and eventually serve as President and Chairman. And he encouraged me to learn the art of alpine skiing through sojourns at Aspen, Vail, Copper Mountain and Winter Park, Colorado. We spent a great deal of time together and I still treasure his friendship and support.

My meeting with Chuck confirmed the anecdotal evidence that there were a number of different estimates of national visitor spending making the rounds, and some appeared grossly distorted. Fortunately, DATO had lobbied successfully for a National Travel Survey (NTS) in 1972 to be conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as part of the quinquennial Economic Censuses program. The NTS obtained detailed data by mail through a national probability sample on trips taken to places 75 miles or more away from home and return, except for commuting to work. Estimates were reported on trips to places 100 miles or more away from home to account for possible under-reporting of shorter distance trips qualifying for this survey. The survey data were expanded to a total of 237 million person-trips for the year.

A BIRTHING OF TOURISM STATISTICS

In 1969, Don Church, an official of the U.S. Bureau of the Census assessed the difficulty of obtaining valid estimates of visitor spending through household surveys after visitors had returned home. He proposed a cost-factor model to estimate U.S. resident domestic spending on travel away from home. Well-designed household surveys could gather reliable data on each trip taken in a quarter, who traveled on them, where visitors spent their nights, their accommodations, their transport mode, and other trip activities. Industry sources would provide the costs per unit of these activities: cost per night of commercial accommodations in a state, cost per mile of air travel and like variables that were derived from accounts rather than survey respondent recall.

My first task as Director of the U.S. Travel Data Center was to design and implement a cost-factor model joining the 1972 NTS data on tourism activity levels (miles traveled by air, nights spent in hotels/motels by state, etc.) with the costs per unit derived from industry and government sources to estimate traveler spending.
After some delays precipitated by the immensity of the NTEM programming challenge (incorporating more than 1,800 equations and detailing each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia), the National Travel Expenditure Study was released in 1974. It was the first national report on estimated tourism expenditures in the U.S. and each of its states based on an economic model. Many state tourism offices received it with gratitude. A few that had hired consultants, universities or other state government agencies to develop earlier estimates generally felt the USTDC numbers were too conservative. That was fine with me. We intentionally chose conservative cost factors and, by the nature of the activity data, excluded foreign visitor spending in the states.

Another initiative I undertook was an inventory of data available from various government agencies, consultancies and publishers on long-distance travel and the industries that serviced it at the national and state levels. The Travel Data Locator Index seems quaint in this age of the world wide web and search engines, but in 1973, there was no way of locating available data except through the collective memories of experts.

As I recall, the first Index covered about 60 data series that I had located by talking to such experts, reading widely and pestering staff in federal agencies that might have something to do with tourism statistics. The series were indexed by subject, geographic area and frequency. Each was listed as a publication by an organization, complete with name, street address and telephone number. The second edition published in 1978 was expanded to 104 series in 102 publications from 28 organizations. There was no warranty as to quality, but at least the current state of tourism statistics in America was evident in one publication.

And this state was pretty dismal. The available data were virtually all supply side statistics: number of airline passengers, hotel rooms sold, motor coach miles driven, intercity vehicle miles driven, number of visitors to National Parks and the like. Aside from the passenger data that our government required airlines to report, there were no origin-destination volumes. Annual consumer spending on travel “out of town” was available with a long lag, but nothing on business or convention traveler spending. While we might surmise that visits to parks and recreation areas were leisure trips, there was no way to obtain the proportion constituting tourism. In short, there were very few up-to-date statistics on American tourism patterns, expenditures or economic impact.

So when the Arab nations announced an embargo on petroleum shipments to the Western world in October 1973, there was very little objective, national-to-regional information on the non-airline portion of tourism. Legislation was introduced in Congress to restrict dwindling petroleum product supplies to “essential” sectors of the economy, and these did not include the tourism industries. Some members of Congress proposed gasoline rationing as a solution without any consideration of its devastating effects on tourism. We put together a loose coalition of researchers to and cobble together a report on the size of the tourism sector and its place in the
national economy to bolster our industries’ side of the debate. Fortunately, the embargo was lifted in March 1974. But only after doing incalculable harm to American tourism activities and the businesses that support it. This was a wake-up call for better tourism data if there ever was one.

FROM EXPENDITURES TO IMPACT

Of course, visitor spending reveals little beyond the likely distribution of tourism’s economic impact among states and industries. In 1974, the U.S. Department of the Interior engaged the Data Center to produce a Travel Economic Impact Model (TEIM) that would provide annual estimates of the employment, payroll income, and federal, state and local tax revenue generated by visitor spending at state and county levels.

The Department needed these estimates to project the impact of a potential oil spill in the Baltimore Canyon off our middle Atlantic coast. Our Model produced the baseline estimates for the Department’s required environmental impact statement. Interestingly, although the oil companies received approval to begin drilling, evidence of oil deposits justifying major drilling investments never materialized.

Nevertheless, the Data Center began to publish estimates of visitor spending and the resulting employment, income and tax revenue in each of the states and the District of Columbia in 1977. This has continued annually to this day. In 1985, under contract to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Data Center began a series of annual estimates of foreign visitor spending and its economic impact for each state based on its continuing In-flight Survey of International Air Travelers.

These estimates required a great deal of base data. Our state and city stakeholders wanted these estimates as soon after the calendar year as possible. But the underlying statistics were subject to revision as time went by. To ignore these revisions is bad research practice. Yet the howls generated by such revisions defied description. We were accused of generating estimates that “didn’t stand still!” But we settled into the practice of revising the previous year’s impact estimates for the states when we published the results for a new year. But when the TEIM went through a major recalibration in 1989, we were reminded how much people hated change.

CHALLENGES OF TOURISM SURVEYS

Such annual estimates of tourism’s economic impact require annual surveys of U.S. resident tourism activity. The Census Bureau was responsible for conducting such a national survey once every five years at most. So in 1973, we signed a contract with Home Testing Institute to conduct monthly mail surveys of households in its panel database by a questionnaire based on the 1972 NTS instrument. This data collection effort continued through 1974 and 1975.

The results were quite disappointing. The number of trips reported per household was substantially higher than the Census Bureau found for 1972. And the annual estimates for a number of states gyrated wildly. We surmised that this panel was
composed of people who were far more active travelers than the overall U.S. population for nearly every demographic category. This may well be a design effect of surveying people who have agreed in advance to participate in consumer surveys and are rewarded for doing so.

We tried a mail survey through a probability sample of U.S. households in 1976. The response rate from mailing to nearly 6,000 households throughout the year was only 56 percent.

So in 1979, we switched to a monthly telephone survey of a households selected through stratified sampling of 20 thousand 1,700 U.S. households each month through RL Associates of Princeton, NJ. Response rates topped 60 percent but the reporting was much faster than the mail surveys. The variability of the estimates settled down and we secured reasonably valid monthly national data on travel away from home. These estimates appeared to track well with sporadic data series from other sources, and served as the foundation for annual estimates of the economic impact of tourism.

One important lesson we learned from these efforts is that it is much, much more difficult to produce an objective, consistent, coherent monthly series measuring a phenomenon like tourism than it is to turn out one-off studies.

Meanwhile, the Census Bureau was planning for the 1977 National Travel Survey. I prepared a list of improvements that should be made to the 1972 effort and presented them to the TTRA Board of Directors. After discussion and revision, I presented these to the U.S. Senate subcommittee on Foreign Commerce and Tourism in 1976. These improvements centered on ensuring reliable estimates of person-trips were available for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. A number of them were implemented in the 1977 Survey.

While considerably expanded from the 1972 effort in terms of sample size and topics covered, the 1977 NTS demonstrated a major weakness of the federal economic censuses. While covering the tourism activities of U.S. residents in 1977, the results were not released until October 1979. By then, the country was suffering from another disruption in petroleum supplies from the Middle East. Patterns evident nearly two years earlier were not very relevant in an environment of limited gasoline supplies and soaring prices. This sad insensitivity to timely reporting was repeated when the Census Bureau next (and last) conducted a survey of tourism activity. The 1995 survey, while exemplary in methodology and coverage, was not released until November two years later.

**TRYING TO RAISE THE BAR**

During my term as President of the TTRA, I addressed the 1979 national conference on “What’s wrong with travel research?” I noted there were a host of analytical techniques used in tourism research but that they were applied indiscriminately without following the rules that guaranteed their validity. Little attention was paid to
the quality of data analyzed. Studies published in our growing number of journals appeared to have few practical applications. There was no generally accepted body of knowledge about tourism behavior and its consequences. As a result of these failures, few in industry or government make use of research results published in journals or pay any attention to them at all.

Finally, I lauded the efforts by Brent Ritchie at the University of Calgary and Chuck Goeldner to edit a comprehensive handbook of tourism research as the state-of-the-art guide to research findings and practices. The first edition of Travel, Tourism and Hospitality Research: a Handbook for Managers and Researchers was finally published in 1987, with an improved edition in 1994. To this day I am surprised at how little these landmark efforts have been cited in journal-published tourism research. It appears that tourism researchers have an aversion to growing our combined intelligence about tourism and its consequences. Re-inventing the wheel is more popular than helping improve a lasting vehicle.

The word, “analysis,” comes from a Greek word meaning to break up into elements. When academics and other analyze data or history or behavior, they are examining the constituent parts of a phenomenon in detail in order to draw conclusions. Books, particularly textbooks, on the other hand, are integrating, they join parts together to make a coherent whole. Students and other should be able to go to the textbooks on tourism economics to determine the state of this field of study. And this is done in universities and research centers. But those publishing the analytical articles in the myriad journals in our field pay scant attention to what has already been codified. As a result, I still see tourism research articles published as if nothing has progressed since 1979. This is clearly evident in the history of definitions and classifications in tourism.

FOUNDATIONS OF SOUND TOURISM RESEARCH

From my beginnings in this field, I have believed our country could not have valid data on tourism without agreeing on definitions of the main variables. I recommended a set of definitions to the 1975 TTRA Conference. These received little traction that I could observe. However, these and other studies I authored came to the attention of Enzo Paci, chief of the Department of Statistics, Economic Analysis and Market Research of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). After I left the Data Center, he engaged me in 1988 as UNWTO “Expert” in a long-term project to obtain international agreement on definitions and classifications for tourism and a new methodology for quantifying the direct economic impact of tourism in nations called the Tourism Satellite account. I continued as an Expert until shortly after Mr. Paci’s untimely death in 1998.

Enzo Paci was a visionary with a knack for getting things done. With the support of the Canadian government, UNWTO conducted a week-long International Conference on Travel and Tourism Statistics in Ottawa in early 1991. This was the first worldwide conference to reach agreement on improving the world’s tourism statistics
since seminal definitions of international tourism were approved by nations gathered in Rome in 1963.

I presented a paper to the Conference entitled, “A Proposed Work Program for Tourism Marketing and Economic Statistics”. I enumerated seven fundamental principles of a rational approach to collection and use of statistics on tourism markets and economic impact. These introduced and supported what I called the “Prime Tourism Economic Objective” – to increase tourism’s net contribution to the economic welfare of the residents of a community, state or province, nation or group of nations. I argued that it was the net economic benefits of hosting visitors that governments at all levels seek. This requires measuring both the gross economic benefits of tourism and the gross economic costs. The former are well known and have been enumerated above.

Economic costs, however, are seldom estimated. They include all monetary expenditures by all levels of government related to hosting visitors. Examples are variable expenses such as border control and customs activities, fixed costs that are initially determined by visitor volumes such as infrastructure maintenance and security services, and public investment expenditures required to service visitors (e.g., new roads, air terminals, information centers). While the literature on measuring and analyzing the economic benefits of tourism to an area has grown voluminous, there has been little published on measuring the economic costs. This is an area that still deserves study by governments that wish to allocate their scarce budget resources wisely.

STATISTICAL DREAMING

Led by Mr. Paci, several of us UNWTO experts traveled the world promoting the standard definitions and classifications of tourism activities. In 1992, I told the annual conference of the Travel and Tourism Research Association that I had a dream of a better world of international tourism statistics. This brave new world would be characterized by certain realities:

1. Data on international visitor flows by country are current and available from UNWTO in useful detail.
2. The 184 nations currently reporting to UNWTO all provide monthly data on visitors, departures and related expenditures with no more than a four month lag
3. Academic researchers publish articles without a confusion of definitions and collection methodologies and all employ data from the UNWTO in their analyses to the exclusion of alternative sources.

I would argue that through the efforts of the UNWTO, dream elements one and two above have come true in the ensuing decades. However, there has been little progress in getting academic and other researchers to employ the standard definitions,

After this watershed UNWTO international conference, I wrote manuals for UNWTO on collection and generating visitor statistics, conducting visitor surveys and forecasting visitor demand. It is unclear what impact these had on the tourism data collection and analysis activities of individual countries. I prepared a special report on the U.S. tourism statistical system for Statistics Canada and the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration in 1995. My investigation found the U.S. “system” of tourism statistics comprised seven distinct data collection programs plus statistics form Canadian and Mexican authorities. The U.S. portion failed to observe most of the new UNWTO definitions and classifications. One of the most frustrating obstacles to interpreting visitor data from these programs was failure to agree on how far someone must travel away from home to be considered a visitor. These varied from “out of town” to 50 miles to 60 miles to crossing an international border.

A NEW TOOL FOR IMPACT MEASUREMENT

Fortunately, by this time the UNWTO supported by OECD, Eurostat, the Canadian government and the national statistical agencies in a number of countries was making substantial progress toward agreeing on the framework for the Tourism Satellite Account. Authorized for national income accounts in 1993, the TSA would conceptually cover all productive activities serving visitors, was connected to the main national economic accounts and followed similar accounting rules, and was an account requiring observations or counts of economic variables. After hundreds of hours of meetings and thousands of pages of discussion, the Conceptual Framework for the Tourism Satellite Account was approved by the principle economic and statistical bodies of the world in 2008. This effort necessarily required changes in the World Tourism Organization’s standard definitions and classifications, which changes were also approved in 2008. Finally the world had a comprehensive and coherent way to enumerate the direct economic contributions of visitors to national economies and standard terminology to facilitate communication regarding these efforts.

Of course, having standards and seeing them applied widely are worlds apart. The U.S. Travel and Tourism Satellite Account produces excellent quarterly updates on the economic contribution of tourism in America. One would think that this would serve as the national benchmark and methodological source for tourism impact studies at regional levels, But instead of adopting the terminologies and accounting procedures specified by UNWTO and its statistical agency colleagues, consultancies, universities and others have appropriated the term, “tourism satellite account,” to title studies that have nothing to do with either.

This has raised considerable concerns at UNWTO. At its March 2010 meeting, the organization noted, “Such activities threaten the credibility of the TSA as a sound, comprehensive method of measuring the direct contribution of tourism to national economies. I enumerated six reports by consultancies and academics in the U.S. in
two years that were called “tourism satellite accounts” but were, in fact, little more than standard economic impact studies for states.

This is an ironic development. After years of laboring in the UNWTO vineyards for rational definitions and valid methodologies, our efforts were so successful that unscrupulous or ignorant research organizations have borrowed them and applied them to their own research products for sale. The UNWTO has made considerable progress in halting the assaults on its TSA brand by international organizations. But the battle has shifted to domestic venues less vulnerable to UNWTO exposure. Efforts to enlist U.S. government assistance in discouraging such deception in America are ongoing but fruitless so far.

SOUND RESEARCH PROGRAMS ARE VULNERABLE

Indeed, another important lesson I have learned in practicing tourism economics is the tendency for successful research methods and programs to be vulnerable to appropriation by others. After 14 years of building the credibility of the U.S. Travel Data Center as an independent, well-financed and credible center for gathering, analyzing and publishing sound research on tourism to, from and within the United States, its Board of Trustees agreed to merge the Data Center with the Travel Industry Association. The argument advanced was that TIA needed the research resources and reputation of the Data Center to assure TIA’s future success in advancing the interests of the tourism industries in the country.

This occurred in 1986. A year later, I left to lead a new hotel marketing company devoted to assisting independently-owned luxury hotels to compete against the chains. My extremely able lieutenant at the Data Center, Suzanne Cook, was appointed Senior Vice President of Research to head up the enhanced TIA research entity. But in 2000, the name of the U.S. Travel Data Center disappeared from use. Since then, TIA, now U.S. Travel Association, has reduced the size and programs of its research department.

In 14 years, dozens of tourism research officials and executives and scores of state tourism directors achieved something unique in the world: a nonprofit center devoted to creating sound tourism research and disseminating it broadly that was supported by industry dues and grants and aggressively serving the needs of its stakeholders. It is difficult for me to view this as anything less than a tragedy.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

My venture into hotel marketing did not prove successful. So I did what any self-respecting professional researcher does upon losing his job: I went into consulting. After serving two years in the consulting wilderness, I joined Don Hawkins and his colleagues at The George Washington University in teaching and administering the first masters degree in tourism administration in North America. Through God’s grace, I have risen through the ranks to full professor and Chair of the Department of
Tourism and Hospitality Management in the School of Business. It is extremely rewarding to conduct sound research and then present the results for discussion in the classroom. And, best of all, I get to teach the tenets of valid and reliable research to future generations of tourism managers.

For there is much more work to do to raise tourism economic research to the levels of other branches of economic study. There is still too much junk research published on the economic impact of tourism. Fortunately the Tourism Satellite Account campaign has raised the bar for national studies. But industry and local research is still sorely lacking in the domains of validity and ethics.

A research study is valid if it actually measures what it purports to measure. There is no research technique so widely used and badly used in our field as the probability sample survey. Reviewing the methodologies of hundreds of studies is a frustrating project. In some cases, it is clear the methodology is flawed and the results cannot represent a defined larger population. But in a majority of the cases, a reader cannot tell whether the methodology leads to valid results because it is so sparsely presented. The American Association for Public Opinion Research and other respected associations have published codes of ethics for the conduct of probability sample surveys. The foundation of these codes is transparency for verification. Even our best journals fall far short of presenting these methodologies in a transparent manner. How can a field of study even consider calling itself science without this foundation?

CONCLUSION

The 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard famously observed, “Life is lived forward but understood backward.” If I had known what a struggle pushing the rock of sound tourism economic data up the mount would be, I sometimes wonder if I would have begun. I have seen progress in improving the quality and expanding the range of tourism economic research. The world has a set of standard definitions and classifications approved by the highest levels of international statistics. But these appear only in a minority of studies to now. We know how to conduct sound surveys projectable to larger populations to assist in measuring visitor spending, but this is seldom evident in published research. We know that the heart of scientific advance is verifiability yet techniques like computable general equilibrium models are as obscure as any occult ceremony. When the data underlying our economic estimates change, then our estimates based upon them must change as well. We need to the courage to make these revisions and explain them to our stakeholders.

There is cause for hope in America. The Travel Promotion Act signed by the President in March 2010 makes $200 million or more available for promoting international travel to the U.S. Built into this legislation is the requirement that the effectiveness of the program in increasing jobs and income be continually evaluated. This will require substantial improvements in the current programs measuring inbound tourism and
visitor spending. One hopes this priority for improved measurement will infect other tourism data collection programs, as well.

Such prospects gladden a data junky’s heart!

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Submitted September 30, 2010