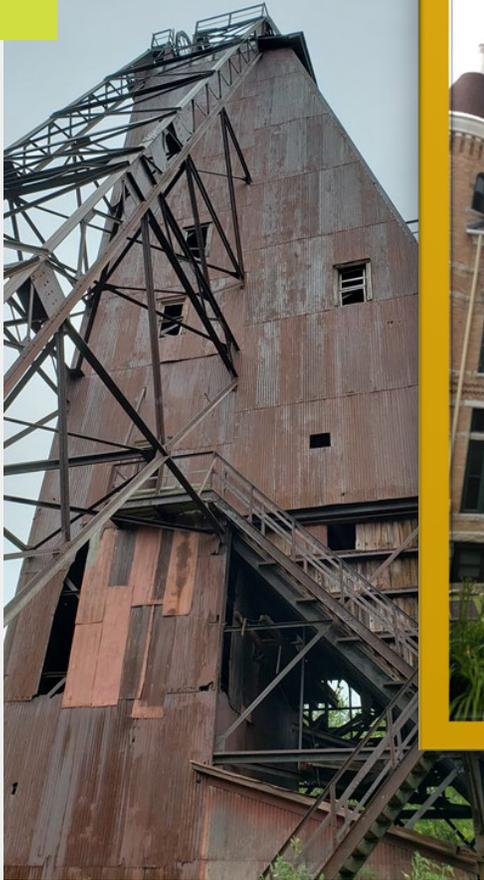




# First Impressions

## Assessing your Community for Tourism



## First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report

# Iron County, Michigan

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## I. Introduction

The First Impressions program was developed in 1991 by the University of Wisconsin Extension to help communities learn about their existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of first-time visitors. The program's results have been used to inform economic initiatives or further develop community goals to communities across the USA and Canada. Michigan State University Extension has adapted this program to meet the needs of Michigan communities.

This summary report is based on the observations of five assessors. Before beginning their unannounced visit to Iron County, each assessor was asked to conduct research of the destination online. This research helped plan and shape their visit based on personal interests, activities in the community, and within a budget allocated to each individual. They then traveled individually to Iron County between July 13<sup>th</sup> and September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Each team member recorded their experiences while conducting their visit, exploring Iron County and the surrounding area. They visited stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces, and additional tourism-related sites. They evaluated community characteristics by completing a multi-page assessment focused on initial and lasting impressions, community information, visitor motives, the downtown, residential areas, tourism assets, as well as providing input on the quality of information found online of Iron County. Their assessment results and photographs of the community were then downloaded into a data management program. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and the public presentation.

Additionally, it should be noted that this was MSU Extension's first attempt at conducting a FIT assessment of a geographic area larger than a single community. MSUE staff worked closely with the team at the Iron County Economic Chamber Alliance to pilot the program. The team visited tourism assets in Iron River, Crystal Falls, Amasa, Alpha, Chicagon, Gaastra, Caspian, Mastodon, and several locations in the backcountry.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. A copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data are attached to this report.

## II. Key Findings

This portion of the report is divided into 11 sections reflecting the structure of the assessment tool used by each assessor before, during, and after their visit.

### **Iron County has assets**

Iron County has some wonderful assets including the Iron County Historical Museum, unmatched wilderness, river and lake access, a growing trail system, an emerging food and drink scene, the Humongous Fungus, and regional attractions like Ski Brule.

Iron County may have more work to do on the road to growing as a tourist destination, but these assets serve as a foundation to build upon and strengthen Iron County's image for visitors and possible future residents.



## **Pre-Assessment**

In order to foster a true tourist experience, the visitors conducted online research prior to traveling to Iron County. The purpose was to prepare for the in-person tourist experience. By requiring visitors to view Iron County's online presence beforehand assessors were able to determine highlights in the community they intended to visit and/or learn more about. Tourism websites in Iron County received relatively high marks all the way around. One assessor wrote of the ICECA website: "very well-designed website with a lot of great pictures, information on things to do, but it comes up 9th in a Google search for 'Iron County Michigan' and the page description reads 'No information is available for this page,'" a good reminder of the need for careful Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Of the Iron County Lodging Association: "Nice site with many detailed descriptions of things to do by season and places to stay." Comments on the County website were mixed: "Nice welcome video (by the ICECA) with several tourism related promotions, but very dated website – very poor webpage for Pentoga Park with only a phone number, no listing of things to do or other organizations to contact to learn more."

Other web research was hit-and-miss, with most assessors turning to big social media sites like TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google for further research on specific locations and day-of-visit information. It was noted that many Iron County businesses use Facebook as their primary website. This is not an ideal arrangement for many reasons, and it is encouraged that these businesses consider building simple, standalone websites.

Section 1 and 9 of the Qualtrics data report highlights additional pre and post-assessment of web-based information and assessor experiences.

## **Visualizing Iron County:**

Assessors were asked to visualize Iron County prior to visiting. Overall, one assessor summed up the feelings of the group with the following comment: "I envisioned Iron County being dominated by Crystal Falls and Iron River when it comes to tourism activities with the balance of the county having less to offer. I had things reversed and spent relatively more time outside those 'urban center's enjoying the rural, natural, and wild amenities that abound!"

## **Initial Impression**

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first 5 minutes. One assessor's comment: "This is a difficult question to answer given that we assessed the entire county, but my impression has evolved to understand that Iron County is really an outdoor enthusiast's / sportsman's delight! There are so many rivers, lakes, natural areas to explore and a huge amount of camping facilities that appear largely underutilized. Many tourist businesses and attractions need updates and up-keep but the amenities are there and things generally need a little polish."

When asked if they would feel compelled to stop if they were randomly passing by, three of five assessors agreed that they would.



### Community Information

Assessors overall felt that it was relatively easy to obtain community information once they arrived in Iron County. Directions were accurate, it was easy to find an open visitors center with helpful staff, and tourist brochures and maps were readily available.

### Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 14 reasons visitors come to a destination and asked to select the top three. Assessors broadly agreed on these, as seen in the accompanying table.

Be in Nature	5
Get Away From People	4
Visit Historical Sites	2

### Destination Strengths

- Nature-based activities
- Authenticity of attractions
- Value for money in tourism experiences
- Adventure-based activities
- Safety and Security
- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Customer Service
- Historic/Heritage attractions

*“Everyone benefits from exposure to the beautiful outdoors and historical museums.”*

### Destination Opportunities for Improvement

- Variety and quality of shopping options
- Variety and quality of restaurants
- Shopping facilities
- Directional signage
- Activities for children
- Special Events
- Well-known landmarks
- Visitor accessibility to attractions

*“More areas to rest and enjoy the area, like parks. Benches, picnic tables, fire pits, shaded areas, etc. If these exist already, give them better documentation so people can find them.”*

### Residential Areas

Assessors were encouraged to visit residential areas either by walking, cycling, and/or driving. By visiting the residential areas, this gives assessors a better understanding of the community at large and also provides communities with a perspective rarely evaluated by outside visitors. Overall, residential areas were rated about average among peer communities. One comment that sums things up: “Generally, most homes seemed in good repair, but there are certainly some that border on blight. I wonder how 'proactive' local and county government is at getting these properties cleaned-up (e.g. blight ordinance, property maintenance code, land bank, etc.).”



## Tourism Assets You Visited

Each asset visited received a review and is found in Section 7 of the Qualtrics data report. In addition, assessors chose not share reviews of private businesses during public forums, but do encourage community leadership teams to notify businesses of their reviews whether negative or positive.

## Lasting Impressions

The visiting team identified various positive experiences while visiting Iron County.

- Getting way out in the woods at Deer Lake and doing some fishing. Totally alone and super peaceful. It's what "Pure Michigan" is really selling.
- Iron County Historical Museum - hands down!
- I really enjoyed biking along the Apple Blossom Trail and Iron County Heritage Trail. I wish I would have had more time to ride all the way to Chicagon Lake or even Crystal Falls.
- Visiting the Iron County Historical Museum. It was just a very well-organized and fascinating exploration of the local community's history and culture.
- The kindness shown at the Chicagon Lake Inn was above and beyond. Being driven out to the launch site let me kayak the Brule River instead of another lake. This was a nature experience like none other.



However, the visiting team also identified various negative experience while visiting Iron County.

- I wish I had learned earlier of a second kayak rental company in town who will drop a kayak off for you at the site you choose. Actually, until getting into town I didn't know any kayaking companies were in the area. Searching 'kayak rental' on google maps yielded nothing for the county.
- I really wanted to get in my canoe on the water and cover a few miles on the Paint River. I tried calling three different businesses and no one was able to shuttle me up stream to be able to paddle back to my car. There were boats for rent, but no shuttle services. With the large number of river miles all around me, this was disappointing.
- Amasa could really benefit from a facelift, maybe a coffee or ice cream shop in the train station would bring some life to the entrance to town next to the museum.
- The limited access to other historical museums. Many were 'by appointment.' How would a visitor know to do this, and would they take that extra step?
- It rained on and off while I was there, and while the weather is not under control the realization that there really wasn't much to do inside during the rain was pretty tough.
- Strengths:





- Outdoor recreation, this is real wilderness and it is awesome. I'm sure this is just as true in the winter.
- There is a wide variety of things to do and experience. The road condition is excellent, which makes for easy driving. The Heritage Trail is an excellent resource and attraction.
- Rivers and lakes for paddling and fishing - that's obvious, but I'm not sure the asset is being fully leveraged. The vast amount of national forest is a strength for outdoor recreation including sportsman, ORV riders, hikers, and more. I wonder if the Forest Service is a partner at the table during tourism and economic development conversations. Related to the above, the large number of campgrounds and rustic camping options is a strength, but there may be so many that few are ever very busy or capturing enough revenue to sustain operations. Perhaps some are a burden to maintain with the limited revenue coming in.
- Most certainly the scenic open spaces and variety of lakes and lake access is a tremendous strength. The proximity to a major highway (US 2) and Wisconsin population centers are also likely strengths to build on.
- The nature experiences are unparalleled. People are incredibly nice, if you take a moment to get to know them. The great locations that are here are more remote, lending an air of authenticity to things.
- Challenges:
  - Things to do when not in the wilderness. The only amenities really are bars (aside from Contrast) and there's not much indoors that would be good for families with kids.
  - Need more shopping and restaurants near the county attractions.
  - To me, the tourism infrastructure seemed tired and suggestive of a 'heydey' that's passed. I've mentioned in other comments the worn out look of signs and building facades and decorations and decor that is dated (or perhaps just too country, folksy, woodsy for my taste!). There may be a limited amount of modern lodging options (e.g. hotels), I'm not entirely sure because I was set on camping. There may be a robust supply of vacation rentals to offset this lodging limitation. Iron River and Crystal Falls have room to do more with placemaking in order to make those more viable 'urban' assets for tourists. As I mentioned elsewhere, I think the rural, natural, wild lands in between and around the two cities are stronger assets at this time, but both urban and rural assets need to thrive!
  - Some of the road infrastructure is pretty rough. In a rural/remote county like this one, I don't expect every road to be paved, but many of the gravel roads are in desperate need of grading. It also seems like hotel/motel-type lodging is limited. All 3 places I checked for lodging had no vacancies, so I ended up having to stay in Iron Mountain.



## Using Senses and Safety

Assessors commented that Iron County didn't have any pleasant or unpleasant smells throughout the community. Two of the assessors noted that traffic on US2 causes unpleasant sound.

Regarding safety and security in Iron County, there were mixed feelings. Overall, assessors felt welcomed and found residents pleasant, however one assessor noted that they felt unsafe at Ethnic Commons, when they were "pretty thoroughly stared at by a local smoking a cigarette." Another assessor wrote: "Customer service was pretty perfunctory and no one really seemed happy to see me aside from folks at Copper Peak."

*"A place to experience Michigan's rich past and its unrivaled natural areas."*

## III. Recommendations

### Key Recommendations:

- Overall improvement of community web presence so visitors can find the info they need.
  - Businesses need updated websites, can't only use Facebook.
  - Improve quality of social media across the board: Google, TA, Yelp, Facebook.
- Work with business leaders to evaluate and refresh business "curb appeal" throughout the county.
  - General scrubbing and a coat of paint would go a long way.
  - Details are important, even fresh soap and TP in the bathroom.
  - Some facades are likely intimidating to out-of-towners, need to be softened and refreshed.
- General improvement of both public and private signage. Again, a coat of paint would do wonders. Consider incentive programs.
  - Improve access and infrastructure for outdoor recreation.
  - More outfitters, guides, shuttles are needed.
  - Asset inventory of sites to be entered in online maps (e.g. Google). What facilities are present? What can I do there?
  - Roads to some advertised sites were really bad for non-4x4s.
  - Consider this as part of an overall economic development initiative.
- Consider eating and drinking tourism as a future promotional tool.
- With a bit of TLC, Pentoga Park could be the "#1 Option" for camping in the county.
  - Improve web presence including online reservations, currently unclear how to reserve sites.
  - Currently kind of a party place, could it be made more family-friendly?
- Cycling assets are underpromoted, and rentals are needed.
- The Iron County Museum is a regional attraction and must be a focus area for community support and



external marketing.

### **Business:**

- Hold tourism and customer service training series so businesses can learn of local tourism assets to be promoted and best practices for doing so while making visitors feel welcome and comfortable.
- Consider programs (e.g. revolving loan fund) to improve facades in downtown and the surrounding area. For vacant properties, paint the windows with a seasonal theme or cover them so visitors do not see the interior condition.
- Explore “Popup Shop” program to fill vacant storefronts during busy tourist seasons. This may help grow permanent downtown businesses as well.
- Encourage businesses to take credit/debit cards and the full line of cards (AmEx) visitors might want to use. Costs should be offset with strategic pricing.
- Encourage business to take ownership of their Yelp, Google, and TripAdvisor pages to properly market themselves in this space and curate the content (e.g. negative reviews) that others post.

### **Community:**

- Explore “Placemaking for Tourism” in all community cores to achieve a more modern, fresh look and feel and add more amenities and human-scaled elements.
- Consider a set of countywide meetings for residents to discuss how to coordinate efforts among the smaller communities, possibly pooling talent and other resources to enhance the look, feel and basic services for all. Again, find ways to help residents and business owners identify and promote the distinctiveness of each local community.
- Amendments to and/or better enforcement of property maintenance code and rental code.
- Create a bigger online presence for ‘Historic’ or Cultural Attractions’. Or organize info on existing websites differently (create a page for) so this tourism niche is more prominent.

### **Recreation:**

- Continue to market Iron County regionally as an outdoor recreation destination and as a hub for regional attractions.
- More Humongous Fungus! Is there a way (at all) to see it? Interpretation site? Perhaps at the Alpha Roadside Park on US2?
- Even more storytelling about Iron Countys unique history within the broader region.
- More promotion and better online presence for the Apple Blossom Trail, the Iron County Heritage Trail and other bike routes.
- Focus economic development efforts on attracting small businesses that support outdoor recreation.



## Downtown Recommendations

Because the assessment was countywide, the assessment team compiled specific recommendations for the downtown areas of both Iron River and Crystal Falls.

### Iron River

- The Good:
  - Streetscaping is well-done.
  - There are nice businesses, improve “curb appeal” and consider new lines of business to attract new customers and keep existing ones longer.
  - Murals are a good start.
  - Well located right on US-2. This is rare in the UP!
- Needs Improvement:
  - Need a façade program, as nicer buildings make others really stick out.
  - Do something, even temporarily, with vacant lots. Consider a pocket park program.



### Crystal Falls

- The Good:
  - Amazing view!
  - The Riverwalk is an excellent amenity.
  - The theater is a great asset.
  - Some very interesting shopping options.
- Needs Improvement:
  - Some basic placemaking would go a long way: street trees, anything to soften the area. Traffic calming if possible.
  - A good freshening up: powerwashing, refresh signage public and private.
  - Build upon assets: Expand the riverwalk, more events at the theater.





### General Suggestions to All FIT communities:

- Considering developing “Be a tourist in your own community” (e.g. Alcona County Bus Tour).
- Use the stories of people who have made your community their home to weave a narrative that informs a sense of place and exemplifies what makes the community a great place to live, work, and play and *visit*.
- Update all websites regularly (daily or weekly), ensuring business hours and other pertinent information is always accurate.
- Encourage monthly or quarterly business after hours at downtown businesses and create downtown as a gathering place
- Continue downtown improvements (Façade, parking, filling vacant storefronts, visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, sandwich boards, etc.).
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via DDA, etc.
- Provide training to business owners/employees (customer service, local event updates/brochures). Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote what there is to do in your community, including information that makes each place special and meaningful to the tourist.

### IV. Additional Next Steps for All FIT Communities:

- Catalog existing funding sources – search-out new funding opportunities.
- Search-out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure its completion.
- Schedule a discussion between the CLT, local leaders, and active/concerned citizens of all ages to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Encourage and support entrepreneurship. Provide ‘how to start a business’ and other entrepreneur training, such as an online program presented by MSU Extension Educator Andy Northrop - *Shared Economy for Entrepreneurs and Tourism* (northro5@anr.msu.edu).
- Explore Agri-tourism as a niche. Identify farmers, explore what other areas are doing, and become involved with Michigan Agritourism (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>), and review articles (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- Consult “FIT Community Next Steps” manual provided to your CLT.

### Summary of MSU Extension tourism development programs:

The following programs are available statewide to guide decision making around tourism development and implementation.

#### Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities (UTMC)

This interactive workshop highlights tourism industry statistics and exposes communities to trends and travelers’ interests, as well as a number of niche tourism markets. UTMC is specifically designed to promote regional synergies, leadership and tourism product development.



## Planning for Tourism

This workshop walks communities through a planning process and uses life-cycle models to explore where communities may be in establishing themselves as tourism destinations. Additional tools will be employed to determine their readiness, identify next steps for action and explore engagement strategies for coalition building within the community.

## First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism (FIT)

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community positioned to lead development based on the program results. FIT involves developing community leadership, assessing the host community, sharing the results in a community forum open to all, and providing suggestions to drive community action. Overall, FIT helps communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors.

## Strengthening Tourism Leadership: Facilitation Tools to Move Community-driven Tourism Forward

This experiential workshop is designed to build and strengthen the skills necessary to lead and facilitate productive community groups. Participants will practice using a variety of facilitation tools and learn techniques and verbal skills necessary to lead group discussions, reach consensus, set outcome-based goals and generate ideas for action.

## Custom Tourism Programs

MSU Extension tourism educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs and interests of Michigan communities. Specialized programs are available to communities with a specific interest in agri-tourism, eco-tourism and/or cultural/heritage tourism.

## Contact

As Iron County continues on its journey in tourism development, please contact MSU Extension as needs arise!

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Learn more about MSU Extension tourism programs by visiting <http://msue.anr.msu.edu/topic/info/tourism>.