

325 Florida Gym, PO Box 118209
Gainesville, FL 32611-8209

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 20, 2010

UF study: A Preliminary Glance at Changing Visitation Perceptions due to the Deepwater Horizon Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill

GAINESVILLE, Fla. – The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill could not have come at a worse time for those who depend on tourism as their livelihood, as destinations in the Gulf were just entering the peak summer season. “Undeniably, in addition to the environmental, economic, and social impacts, the Oil Spill is also a crisis of perception,” said Lori Pennington-Gray, Director of UF’s Tourism Crisis Management Institute.

As oil started leaking into the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010, media coverage also began. “The intensity of this coverage has obviously had a tremendous impact on travelers’ awareness and interest in the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. It has also clearly had negative impacts, particularly on potential tourists to the region,” said Pennington-Gray.

The media does not always confine the crisis to a specific geographic area. Consequently, a much larger area has been affected in terms of the impact to tourism. For example, some research suggests that the entire state of Florida is being affected by the Oil Spill, while in reality; only some Panhandle beaches have seen tar balls and/or oil sheen.

“The Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico provides a unique setting to monitor how risk perceptions of potential tourists changes over a prolonged period of time. Tracking the dynamics over a prolonged crisis may provide significant insight into response and recovery efforts,” said Pennington-Gray. Given the unique situation, a study of potential and/or past visitors to Gulf Coast beach destinations was conducted in three pulses by Research Data Services, Inc in Tampa, Florida in partnership with UF’s Tourism Crisis Management Institute. The pulses were conducted on May 7-12, 2010, June 4-8, 2010, and June 18-22, 2010.

The study found that travelers’ intentions to visit the Gulf Coast had been affected over the past four months. There was an increase in the number of respondents who said that the Oil Spill affected a change in their vacation destination choice. Almost 20% of respondents in Time 1 indicated an affect, 34.4% in Time 2, and 35.3% in Time 3 indicated an affect.

Place of residence was the only demographic that was statistically significant in relation to a change in vacation intentions over the last four months. “Results indicated that residents in the Southeast, Midwest, as well as international tourists all increased over time; whereas, affects in

the Northeast went up in Time 2, which was to be expected, and then down in Time 3. This may make sense given that VISIT FLORIDA®, the state tourism agency, received \$25M from BP for advertising and a portion of these advertising dollars were spent in major metro markets such as New York and Philadelphia,” said Pennington-Gray.

The Southeast was found to be the most affected geographic market, which is interesting because it is the most viable market for the Panhandle. Possibly this is because this geographic market is likely to follow both national and local media coverage of the impact of the spill and may not be convinced that the destination has been unaffected by oil.

The findings of this study suggest that advertising in an effort to mitigate perceptions might have regional impacts, which has been influenced by other variables. Future research is being conducted to see if this is a permanent trend and whether other regions are simply just slower to respond to the advertising messages.

For more information, please visit www.tourismcrisis.com or contact Lori Pennington-Gray at (352) 392-4042 x1318, pennggray@hhp.ufl.edu.