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A new spin on tourism

Can windmills attract travelers? Some say yes, others no.

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by Jim Pfiffer

Tourists come to the Southern Tier to visit the wineries, Finger Lakes, Mark Twain's study, and the windmills.

Windmills?

Could be. Proponents say high-tech windmills used to generate electricity are also tourist attractions for curious travelers who have never seen a wind farm.

Plans are under way to build 35 wind turbines on and near Dutch Hill in the northern Steuben County town of Cohocton.

Hundreds of Web sites, as well as newspaper articles, claim wind farms are great tourist attractions.

An example is California's Palm Springs wind farm that provides daily tours of the "ultimate power trip" to nearly 12,000 tourists annually, says a January 2006 story in the Atlantic City Weekly.

Denmark, which leads the world in using and exporting wind energy, saw a 25-percent increase in tourism in or around their wind farms, the Atlantic City Weekly article says. Research shows that popular vacation spots, near wind farms, attract more tourists who want to see the wind farms, buy T-shirts and other souvenirs and get photographed with the towering giants in the background.

Baloney, says James Hall, a member of the Cohocton Wind Watch, a citizens group opposed to the Cohocton wind farm.

"The idea that industrial wind turbines are tourist attracts is absurd and ludicrous," Hall says. "Anyone who thinks people would be fascinated by industrial machines on pristine wilderness hilltops is an idiot."

Hall claims that wind farms decrease tourism and hurt the local economy.

"Property values sink like a rock because people near the wind farms put their properties up for sale because of the noise and other problems generated by these hideous monsters," Hall says. "They will destroy the beauty of the Finger Lakes."

Gordon Yancey of Martinsburg, N.Y., (about 55 miles northeast of Syracuse) agrees. Yancey owns Flat Rock Inn on Tug Hill, where 195 nearby windmills spin in the breeze, make noise, throw ice from the blades in winter and drive away the snowmobile and ATV riders who are his main customers.

The 400-foot-high towers don't attract tourists, but instead lure rubberneckers, Yancey says.

"They drive up the road, look at these things, get out of their cars and take some pictures and then drive away." Yancey says. "They don't stay and spend their money here."

Curious people may find the windmills interesting the first time they see them, Yancey says.

"But by the second and third time, they realize how truly ugly and distasteful they are," Yancey adds. "They have marred and destroyed the serenity and beauty of the rural landscape. It's no longer a wilderness area, but an industrial plant."

Steuben County tourism officials don't know whether the Cohocton wind farm, owned by Canandaigua Power Partners II of Newton, Mass., will increase tourism.

"We have heard from both sides pro and con," says Peggy Coleman, president of the Steuben County Conference and Visitors Bureau. "The board voted that it's not a tourism issue, and for us to take a side one way or another is inappropriate."

But other tourism officials say wind farms do improve tourism.

That's the case in Madison County, N.Y., home to three wind farms. One of those farms includes an education facility where people learn about wind energy and get close to a working wind generator, says Jim Walter, executive director of Madison County Tourism.

"I'd say we get 50-75 bus tours a year coming to tour the windmills," Walter says. "The tourists range from people who are about to have a wind farm built in their hometowns to people who are just curious and want to see what one looks like.

"The wind farm that has the education center went on line in (2001), and every year since then, we've had an increase in tourism. I can't say, for sure, that the wind farm contributes to that increase, but I can say that it sure hasn't hurt tourism."

Will that be the case in Cohocton?

The answer is blowing in the wind.

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