

# Tornado-chasing becomes vacation choice, researchers find

September 16 2010

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Instead of heading to the coast for vacation, people are traveling to Tornado Alley. The number of people registering to get a closer look at tornadoes is growing as vacationers trade in their beach towels for a ride with storm chasers. Labeled "Tornado Tourists" by a University of Missouri research team, these travelers are searching for an experience beyond just thrills.

Sonja Wilhelm Stanis and Carla Barbieri, associate professors in the School of Natural Resources Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism in the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, found that most of these travelers aren't just looking for risk; rather, they are seeking a unique and unconventional opportunity to enjoy nature's power and beauty.

"With the help of movies like Twister, storm-chasing has become an international phenomenon," Barbieri said. "While more than half of the surveyed travelers lived in North America, 11 percent came from Australia and nearly a third traveled from Europe to get a close encounter with a tornado."

Handling three to 10 tours per season, experienced meteorologists and trained storm chasers are serving as tour guides using sophisticated equipment to track the [severe weather](#) on the road. Typically costing between \$3,000 and \$5,000, not including food and hotels, the tours last one to two weeks as tour guides drive among tornado watch areas in a van.

The study found that most of the amateur storm chasers were happy with their experiences. One-third of the tourists experienced a tornado, while 50 percent spotted funnel clouds and more than 95 percent reported seeing a significant atmospheric event. Most respondents were so satisfied, they said they would take another tour and recommended tornado chasing to their friends.

"Although tornado tourism is a small niche market, the market continues to grow with help from television shows and movies," Stanis said. "Storm-chasing tours continue to develop as a part of the Midwest's tourism scene, with tours filling up as much as a year in advance."

The research team presented the first demographic and socio-psychographic profile of the tornado tourists to a national academic audience at the 2010 Northeast Recreation Research Symposium in New York. These tornado tourists were introduced into the broader research category called "risk recreation and tourism" that includes activities such as skydiving and white-water rafting.

"Tornado tourists were found to be primarily middle-aged, single, highly educated and wealthy," Babieri said. "With this information, storm-chasing tour guides will be better able to cater to their market."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Tornado-chasing becomes vacation choice, researchers find (2010, September 16) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

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