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An Exploration of Tourists' Perceptions of a Rural Mountain Bike Event

Brianna L. Newland
Martin Robertson

Abstract

The natural attributes of rural locations are well suited to sport event tourism and can play a significant role in strategic tourism development in new markets. The purpose of the study was to explore consumer perceptions of sport event tourism in rural locations, which is important for event managers and for those involved in rural tourism development. Data collected over two days at a mountain bike event in the rural highlands of Scotland explored the visitor awareness and perception of events in a rural location. Results indicates that attendee background does influence the perception of the impact a sport event has on a rural location.

Keywords: *Rural sport tourism, active sport tourism, mountain bike events*

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Research Problem

Event tourism attracts a great deal of attention by academia and industry. Many host destinations use events to attract visitors to market the destination and enhance the location image (Chalip & McGuirty, 2004). Similarly, governments in rural destinations have used events, and the subsequent flow on tourism, to develop and/or revitalize a location (Kline & Milburn, 2010). Outdoor sport activities and events are key attractions to rural locations that possess rich natural assets to support competitive activities, such as mountainous trails (Costa & Chalip, 2005; Robertson, Newland, & Darby, 2014). Further, sport events attract attendees that identify strongly with specific attributes related to the sport and location. The recent rapid rise in the popularity of “adventure” or “extreme” sports, has bolstered the development of adventure tourism business in rural regions (Costa & Chalip, 2005; Robertson et al., 2014).

Since rural tourism offers opportunities for niche market development (Frochot, 2005; Sharpley, 2007), this research bolsters existing sport event tourism research (Aicher & Newland, in press; Buning & Gibson, 2016; Costa & Chalip, 2005; Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2012; Robertson et al., 2014), by illustrating a way to expand tourism offerings and augment them to enhance tourism interest and demand (STA, 2012; 2016). To date, there is limited research examining the sport consumer views of rural tourism. This research partially fills this void by exploring consumer perceptions of sport event tourism in rural locations. Perceptual knowledge is important for policymakers and marketing strategists. With destinations turning to rural tourism as a viable growth segment, it is important to know whether consumers are interested in tourist offerings. Therefore, the findings presented herein are useful to tourism boards and other organizations who market rural destinations, in addition to sport event directors, who make strategic decisions on the role of niche sport events with regards to the marketing objectives of rural locations.

Background

Context: Scotland, Adventurers, and Mountain Bikes

Tourism in Scotland has been the topic of previous research (Aitchison, MacLeod, & Shaw, 2000; Bhandari, 2013; Robertson et al., 2014) because of the importance of growing rural tourism as part of the broader national tourism strategy. Scotland’s mountains, lochs, and coastline have been sites of touristic exploration for centuries and its cultural milieu contribute to the perceptions of Scotland worldwide (Aitchison et al., 2000). The campaign, Active in Scotland, led by the official tourist board, Visit Scotland, has been an important capstone for adventure tourism by building upon the history of adventure and outdoor activities since the 19th Century. The Highlands of Scotland, in particular, have become the perfect background where adventure sport tourism activities could be developed

and promoted. In rural Scotland, the use of mountain bike events to boost tourism is well established (STA, 2012; 2016) and has had strong linkage with the Active Scotland campaign as well as the strategy of Event Scotland, the national agency for events meant to deliver a viable portfolio of major events.

Literature Review

Rural destinations have moved from a predominantly agrarian economy and culture to one that is multidimensional and in transition (Fløysand & Jakobsen, 2007; Holmes, 2006). Governments have tried numerous methods to revitalize communities and instigate entrepreneurialism in response to a decline in traditional employment (Kline & Milburn, 2010). One important tool of change remains tourism (Daugstad, 2008; Sharpley, 2007), where sport activities and events are key attractors (Robertson et al., 2014). In Scotland, the government has identified rural tourism as an integral piece of the tourism mosaic for the country (STA, 2012; 2016). Accordingly, through a number of entrepreneurial initiatives the community and local businesses have come together to expand their tourism assets. In addition, an increased infrastructure of pathways, trails, and dedicated tracks in rural areas have served to support the adventure sport market (Robertson et al., 2014). In this way, adventure sport travelers, as well as related events and the subsequent attendees, have been attracted to the area.

Tourism is place specific, and its manifestations vary greatly from region to region (Sharpley, 2007). Each region or country is likely to have a different range of stakeholders, each with different needs. There is often a limited capacity for development in rural destinations, which hinders interest in the location due to fewer attractions (Cai, 2002). Perceived disinterest may be because of a limited understanding of the push (i.e., motivation) and pull (i.e., destination attribute) components that affect customer value (Aicher & Newland, in press; Pesonen, Komppula, Kronenberg, & Peters, 2011). Marketing strategies may be quite different from effective urban and resort tourism campaigns (Li, Huang, Cai, 2009), so the use of sport events as tactics for local and regional development is common (Chalip & McGuirly, 2004; Ziakas & Costa, 2011). Rural tourism, while complicated, offers opportunities for niche markets (Frochot, 2005; Sharpley, 2007), yet there is limited research looking at the consumer view of the rural tourism experience (Fløysand & Jakobsen, 2007; Sharpley, 2007). Frochot (2005) concluded that a simple categorization of product type/activity fails to understand how the consumer perceives the rural offer. Therefore, this study explores the consumers' perception of a mountain bike event's impact on a rural destination: Fort William – the highlands of Scotland.

Method

Participants

The researchers collected $N = 447$ useable surveys over a two-day mountain bike event. The participant profile consisted of a majority of males (64.9%), ranging in age from 17 to 65 years ($M = 42.2$ years, $SD = 11.63$). Most had attained a college certificate or diploma (34.2%) or a bachelor's degree or higher qualification (39%). Over 68% held full-time employment. Of the surveys gathered, 55 respondents (12.3%) indicated that they were event participants, 153 were friends/family attending with event participants (34.2%), and 225 (50.3%) were spectators with no affiliation. Only 45 (10.1%) were residents, 236 (52.8%) were Scottish, but not local, and the remaining 166 (37.1%) were foreign visitors. The main reason for visiting the rural area (Fort William) was the mountain bike event ($n = 369$, 82.6%), while only 3.8% travelled to the rural area on holiday and decided to attend the event.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Researchers distributed surveys at a mountain bike event over two days using a systematic intercept sampling technique (Miller, Wilder, Stillman, & Becker, 1997; Troped, Whitcomb, Hutto, Reed, & Hooker, 2009). To attain a representative sample of the event attendees, participants were solicited at multiple event points that included the food tent, lines for the gondola, in the spectator stands, the exhibition area, the parking lot, and bus stops. Participants self-completed the paper survey and returned it to one of the researchers upon completion. Each of the trained surveyors waited discreetly to the side to be available for questions and ensure the survey was fully completed upon return. No incentives to complete the survey were provided.

The survey instrument was developed from the extensive review of literature (Ap, 1992; Gursoy, Jurovski, & Uysal, 2002) and asked respondents about their perceptions of tourism associated with the sport event in Fort William as well as descriptive information such as: participant type (athlete, family peer of athlete, or general spectator); residency (local, Scottish, or outside Scotland); the main reason for attending the event; and the main reason for visiting Scotland. Lastly, the demographic section gathered information on gender, education, age, and employment status.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 illustrates the demographic profile of the respondents. As the table shows, the majority claimed that the main reason for visiting the Fort William area was for the mountain bike event. Further, over a third noted that the mountain bike event was the main reason for visiting Scotland.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics*

Participant Type	<i>N</i> = 447	%
Event Participant	55	12.3
Spectator (family/friend)	153	34.2
Spectator (no affiliation)	225	50.3
Missing	14	3.1
Residency		
Ft. William	45	10.1
Scottish (not from highlands)	236	52.8
Visitor outside Scotland	166	37.1
Reason for visit to Highlands		
Mountain Bike Event	369	82.6
Resident (non-tourist)	45	10.0
Other	33	7.4
Reason for visit to Scotland		
Event	149	33.3
Scottish Resident	274	61.3
Other	24	5.4

Perception of Sport Event Impact on Rural Tourism

Next, researchers explored the differences in perception by participant type and by visitor type. The MANOVA (i.e., a test of mean score differences) revealed statistically significant differences between participant type and perception of the mountain bike event's impact on tourism in Fort William ($F(2, 423) = 1.881, p = 0.011$; Pillai's Trace = .087; partial $\eta^2 = .043$). This means that event participants and spectators (i.e., with affiliation to the participant and with no affiliation) perceived the effect of the sport event on tourism to the Fort William area differently. A second MANOVA revealed statistically significant differences between visitor type and perception of the mountain bike event in Fort William ($F(2, 423) = 1.860, p = 0.031$; Pillai's Trace = .083; partial $\eta^2 = .042$). Again, this means that Fort William residents, Scottish residents and foreigners perceived rural tourism differently. The complete results of the univariate analysis are found in Table 2 and are discussed below.

Table 2

MANOVA Results of Perception of a Rural Sport Event

Perception	Participant Type			F	Post hoc
	Participant (n = 54)	Spectator w/Participant (n = 149)	Spectator no affiliation (n = 223)		
Holding a major sport event is a huge advantage to FW	5.00(.174)	5.00(.104)	5.29(.085)	2.692*	3>1,2*
History gives FW a distinct character	4.65(.172)	5.02(.104)	5.09(.085)	2.600*	2,3>1*
I would only visit FW when it hosts international events	3.61(.245)	4.043(.147)	4.31(.120)	3.655*	2,3>1*
Global perception of sport events in rural FW	4.52(.100)	4.68(.060)	4.78(.049)	3.019*	3>2*

Note: Tukey Post Hoc performed. 1=Participant, 2=spectator-family/friend, 3=spectator, no affiliation. **p*<.05

Perception	Visitor Type			F (2, 437)	Post hoc
	FW Resident (n = 43) M (SE)	Scottish Resident (n = 232) M (SE)	Foreign Traveler (n = 165) M (SE)		
Holding a major sport event is a huge advantage to FW	4.65 (.193)	5.29 (.083)	5.08 (.099)	4.971**	2,3>1**
Sport events have a strong influence to attract visitors	4.65(.184)	5.26(.079)	5.08(.094)	4.868**	2,3>1**
Sport events are important tourist attractions to FW	5.05(.169)	5.44(.073)	5.188(.086)	3.821*	2>1*
I would travel to FW for other for other leisure events	--	4.52(.102)	4.09(.121)	3.867*	2>3*
History gives FW a distinct character	4.69(.193)	5.16(.083)	4.87(.098)	3.997*	2,3>1*
I would only visit FW when it hosts international events	--	4.35(.118)	3.79(.140)	4.800*	2>3**
Global perception of sport events in rural FW	4.50(.111)	4.86(.048)	4.58(.057)	9.11**	2>1,3**

Note: Tukey post hoc performed. 1=FW resident, 2=Scottish resident, 3=foreign traveler. **p*<.05, ***p*<.001.

Discussion and Implications

There are many possible advantages of holding small (i.e., non-mega) sport events in rural destinations. Prime amongst these is the capacity to offer a form of sustainable tourism (Gibson et al., 2012). While there is genuine concern for the potential for significant damage to the environment (White, Waskey, Brodehl, & Foti, 2006), Scotland’s strategy is to develop sustainable mountain bike tourism. The Scottish Mountain Bike Development Consortium (SMBDC) is a coalition of leading public and voluntary sector members, who developed a national strategy that indicated clear awareness of their responsibility to the environment (SMBDC, 2009) and dedication to preserving the fragile ecosystem (Potheary, Brown, & Banks, 2013). This current research explored the perception of sport consumers, (i.e., tourists) at a mountain bike event to better understand their insights of rural sport tourism.

By exploring the perception of the visitor, the results show that perceptions of the local, rural resident were not as positive as those from outside the area. Both non-local Scottish residents and non-Scottish residents had a more positive perception toward the advantages the event brought to the area. These include the history of the area adding to the attractiveness of the location, the sporting event having the ability to attract visitors, and the importance of sport events as a tourist attraction. This is important since it signifies that local residents might not agree with the value of tourism to their area (Ritchie, Shipway, & Cleeve, 2009). Perhaps this is because the local residents are impacted by the influx of tourists much differently than those who do not live in the area. Given that the town amenities are far less than that of a city, the rural town feels the impact of an influx of visitors much more heavily. While those that reside in Scotland see the value an event brings to a rural destination, they do not have to deal with the disruptions to daily life as the Fort William residents do.

What is also telling is that residents who attended the mountain bike event do not perceive sport events as having a strong influence in attracting visitors nor do they believe them to be important tourist attractions to the Fort William area. This suggests that locals in attendance have not embraced the larger regional strategy for tourism growth (STA, 2012, 2016). Future research should explore the perception of the strategy by local and national residents to better understand whether the community supports the development of tourism to the area or not (Panyik, Costa, & Rátz, 2011). We know from past research that the needs of the rural location are in transition and their sustainability may be enhanced by the capacity of sport events such as the one analyzed here, especially if they are bundled with tourism assets in the region (Aicher & Newland, *in press*; Chalip & McGuirty, 2004). While this study only provides a glimpse of what Fort William residents perceive about sport tourism, perhaps it is wise to include the local community as a significant contributor to the larger regional strategy. Including the rural community's voice could potentially impact perception and, as a positive consequence, local attitudes toward events and tourism. Future research should explore this avenue.

The perception of the event attendees was also significant. The spectator, with no event participant affiliation, perceived the sport event to be an advantage to the Fort William area and was also more likely to travel to the area for international events. These attendees also perceived the history of the area to provide a distinct character that is attractive to tourists. Why, however, did the participant and spectators affiliated with them (e.g., friends/family) not have similar perceptions? It may be that because the mountain bike event is part of a series that the participants must attend to compete. Accordingly, these visitors have not chosen this location; the sport event chose it for them. Therefore, the participants and their family/friends' perceptions of its impact on the rural community are not as salient as their primary purpose for travel is the sport event, not tourism (Buning & Gibson, 2016).

Recommendations for Practice

The case of rural Scotland demonstrates many possible advantages of holding sport events in rural locations; among them is a form of sustainable tourism for the rural host (Gibson et al., 2012). However, this research also shows the importance of understanding the perception of the event consumer (Aicher & Newland, in press; Buning & Gibson). The tourist that is clearly interested in visiting the area for the sport event alone and perceives the tourist options as being inconsequential is indicative of this importance (Buning & Gibson, 2016). It would behoove the sport event manager to interact with rural leaders to elicit buy-in for the event and its associated tourism. Explaining the benefits of tourism related to the sport event is key. For tourism organizations, the findings suggest that taking a bottom up approach to working with rural leaders might be warranted and beneficial to meeting strategic goals for the area and country (STA, 2012; 2016). The support of the community is required if tourism to the area is to be sustained. Town hall meetings or developing rural satellite offices where there is a rural representative contributing to the regional strategy could help. Including the rural residents and understanding the perception of the tourist is critical if the process of rural change is to be sustained and supported by sport events for long-term benefit (Robertson et al., 2014).

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