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An Examination of the Travel Behaviors and Site Preferences of Canadian and US Mountain Bike Tourists

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Mountain biking has grown extensively over the past two decades (Buning & Lamont, 2020), with 8.6 million participants in the US as of 2019 (OIA, 2020). In conjunction with the activity's growth, mountain biking tourism has emerged as a budding tourism sector (Buning, Cole, & Lamont, 2019). Subsequently, communities have become increasingly interested in how to develop the infrastructure necessary for an attractive destination (Freeman & Thomlinson, 2014) to suit the needs mountain bike tourists (Buning et al., 2019). However, Buning et al. (2019) found that formal research into the demographic profiles, travel behaviors, and site preferences of mountain bike tourists is limited, necessitating a need for further research on the topic.

Literature Review

To guide the investigation of the topic, mountain biking was defined as off-road cycling requiring specialized equipment to navigate the remote, rough, and narrow trails that traverse through forests, deserts, mountains, and/or meadows (Siderelis, Leung, & Nader, 2010). Mountain bike-specific tourism was defined as overnight travel of at least 24 hours and away from one's home for the primary purpose of active participation in mountain biking (Moularde & Weaver, 2016). With mountain bike-specific travel, destination attractiveness is based on the perception of a destination's ability to fulfill mountain bike activity requirements (Moularde & Weaver, 2016). In sport related tourism, activity dependent pull factors form the core of destination attractiveness necessitating the examination of both mountain bike-specific tourism and generic tourism pull attributes (Hu & Ritchie, 1993). Therefore, the research aimed to: 1) develop a profile of Canadian and US mountain bike tourists by examining demographic characteristics, mountain bike behaviors, and travel behaviors; 2) and identify the destination pull factors that form destination attractiveness among Canadian and US mountain bikers.

Methods

A quantitative, online questionnaire was used to gain access to a large sample of mountain bikers from various regions of Canada and the US. Closed questioning was used to explore eight demographic indicators, four mountain bike behavior indicators, and eight travel behavior indicators. A seven-point Likert scale (1 = very unimportant, 7 = very important) was used to determine the importance of 41 destination pull items. Responses were collected from 29 mountain bike clubs within Canada and the US who shared the online questionnaire with their members. Following a three week data collection period, 1346 responses were collected, with a total sample of n = 720 was retained after responses were deleted if the respondent resided outside of North America or the response had missing data. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics were performed to establish a profile of North American mountain bike tourists. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed on the 41 pull items with a factor loading of 0.55 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019) to determine travel pull factors.

Findings

The sample was predominantly male (80%), white (91%), and between the ages of 35 and 54 (61%). Respondents were well educated and affluent, as 79% reported having a college or post-graduate degree and 62% had annual households incomes of US$100,000 or higher. Regarding family dynamics, 72% or respondents were married and 64% had one or more children. The

most frequent mountain biking disciplines were cross-county (48%) and enduro (44%). The respondents were experienced mountain bikers, as most (59%) indicated 10+ years of mountain biking experience and 82% reported an intermediate or advanced ability level.

Regarding travel behaviors, 79.8% of respondents indicated taking at least one overnight vacation annually. Respondents most frequently indicated taking two (21.3%), one (19.7%), and six or more (14.5%) trips annually. Most respondents (55.2%) spent less than US$500 on their vacation. Most trips were one-to-two nights (46.6%) or three-to-four nights (33.2%) in duration. Most respondents (71.4%) travelled under 500 miles to their vacation destination. Most individuals (51.6%) travelled in small groups of one-to-two people consisting of family (36.8%) or friends (31%). RV park/campground (29.8%), rental home (26.2%), and hotel (24.4%) were the most common accommodation used by respondents. While on vacation, respondents indicated participating in the cross-county (47%) or enduro (39.8%) disciplines and rode intermediate (50.8%) or advanced (40%) level trails. Lastly, while on vacation, 76.4% of the respondents did not pay a fee to access a trail network.

Exploratory factor analysis of the 41 pull attributes found the presence of seven underlying pull factors. The seven pull factors, ranked in order of highest to lowest means, were: climate (M=5.83, SD=0.88); trail conditions (M=5.75, SD=0.86); information sources (M=5.24, SD=0.99); setting (M=5.23, SD=0.89); trail features (M=4.74, SD=1.28); tourism infrastructure (M=4.06, SD=1.37); and entertainment options (M=3.73, SD=1.15). The suitability of the destination's climate, trail conditions, and destination setting were highly ranked suggesting these pull factors form the core of destination attractiveness. Destination attractiveness appears to be influenced by positive recommendations, word-of-mouth, and online reviews. The lower ranking of a destination's trail features and tourism infrastructure suggests that mountain a destination's climate, setting, and trail conditions may be antecedent to the pull of challenging features and tourism infrastructure. Entertainment options were among the lowest ranked destination attributes, suggesting entertainment options had minimal importance on the determination of destination attractiveness.

Conclusion

To appeal to most mountain bike-specific tourists, communities should develop destination trail networks catering to the cross-county and enduro disciplines and devote 80 - 90% of the trails to the intermediate and advanced skill levels. Communities might benefit from marketing their destination as an accessible and inexpensive getaway, as mountain bike-specific tourists prefer short and inexpensive vacations close to home. The pull factors of climate, setting, and riding conditions had the highest rankings, suggesting the three pull factors form the foundation of a destination's attractiveness. As such, a community should prioritize routine maintenance of a trail network to ensure pristine riding conditions that offer a satisfying riding experience. While the climate and setting of a destination is beyond the control of a community, recognizing and communicating the ideal travel season based on the climate and setting may offer an advantage over competition. Mountain bike-specific tourists appear to be impartial to the accommodation type, provided that accommodations are of high quality and affordable. To initiate word-of-mouth reputation, online reviews, and personal recommendations, emerging destinations might benefit from providing an abundance of information on their destination through web-based formats and social media.

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