



Freeride area at Bedgebury Forest

Research Note

Lifestyle, identity and young people's experiences of mountain biking

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It has been widely recognised that, for young people, experiencing the natural environment may hold multiple benefits for well-being and the future development of healthy lifestyles. The Active England programme awarded funding aimed at increasing participation in sport and physical activity at Bedgebury Forest in Kent, with a particular emphasis on young people as a key target group. Mountain biking, as a popular youth sport that often occurs in woodlands, was promoted under the scheme and provides the case study upon which this Note is based. The research employed ethnographic techniques to capture youth experiences and understandings of mountain biking and to investigate the resulting relationships young people developed with countryside spaces. Methods included semi-structured interviews that allowed for flexibility, 'mobile' methods such as accompanied and unaccompanied recorded rides and participant observation. The research reveals the different riding philosophies, lifestyle values and relationships with the landscape that are formed as part of youth mountain biking lifestyles. The research shows that certain countryside spaces, especially woodlands are important for youth leisure. They afford a space away from the gaze of adults and from the conflicts associated with other (urban) leisure space, and provide opportunities to feel ownership. Bedgebury Forest offered a range of 'ready made' mountain biking spaces for both beginner and more experienced youth mountain bikers that participants could access without fear of reprimand. This was in sharp contrast to their experiences of other privately owned spaces.

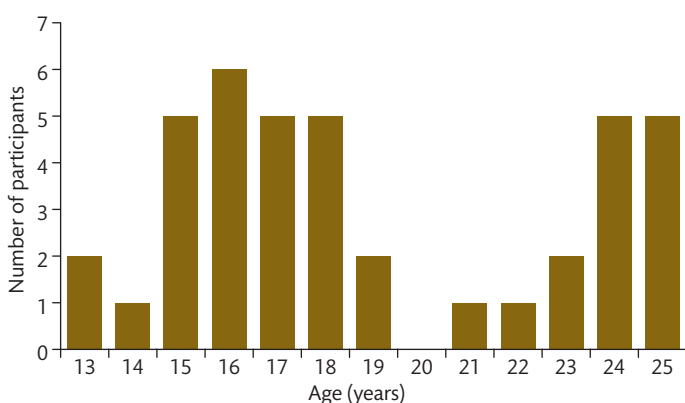
Introduction

This Research Note summarises in-depth research conducted with young people as part of the Active England project at Bedgebury Forest, Kent. Active England projects had two principal aims: to increase physical activity levels in key under-represented groups; and to increase participation in sport and physical activity more generally (O'Brien and Morris, 2009). Through Active England funding, Bedgebury has been transformed into a leisure destination focused on encouraging active lifestyles, particularly through mountain biking. Funding was used to create a 12 km single track for cross-country mountain biking, a freeride area with elevated wooden 'north shore' platforms* and a section of specially shaped mud mounds for dirt jumping, a family cycle track, as well as bike hire and shower facilities. An emphasis at Bedgebury on cross-country mountain biking, dirt jump and freeride areas, the local cycle club, youth coaching initiatives and organised racing events has encouraged strong youth participation.

The research involved 40 participants aged between 13 and 25 years (Figure 1) who participated in mountain biking at Bedgebury during 2007–08. Interviews were conducted with participants and each respondent was observed or took part in a recorded ride with the researcher at Bedgebury Forest.

Participants were selected across a broad range of ages, level of riding experience, degree of involvement and gender mix. Thirty six participants were male and four were female; the 10% female representation replicates similar profiles of participation of women in mountain biking in the United Kingdom (Ruff and Mellors, 1993). Participants were recruited via the local cycle club and also through participation in a local mountain biking forum. Data from the interviews and participant observation were analysed and key themes were identified around three broad topics: (1) identity and lifestyle; (2) identity and space; and (3) context such as how the sites were accessed, or demographic information. The following sections present a

Figure 1 Age of participants.



summary of the findings exploring the characteristics of youth lifestyles, and their relationships with Bedgebury Forest.

Youth mountain biking lifestyles

Previous research on mountain biking has tended to focus on adults and environmental issues, giving very little consideration to identity, lifestyle and younger people (King, 2009). However, according to youths participating in this study, mountain biking lifestyles are broadly split into two types: dirt jump/downhill/freeride forms of mountain biking (collectively referred to as DDF) and cross-country mountain bikers. Twelve of the 40 respondents classified themselves as interested in a combination of DDF or mountain biking, with five respondents describing themselves solely as dirt jump riders and two as BMX dirt jumpers (Table 1).

DDF took place largely in the freeride area of Bedgebury Forest which provided dirt jump and freeride facilities (Figures 2 and 3). These forms of mountain biking are considered high risk, and all disciplines require specialist mountain bikes with full suspension. Cross-country mountain biking involved cycling long distances following a designated cycle trail known as 'single track' (Figure 4). Cross-country riding was an exercise in endurance and stamina, usually involving mountain bikes with front suspension.

Dirt jumps, downhill and freeride

During weekends and school holidays the freeride area was frequently populated with several different groups of DDF mountain bikers of varying ages and abilities. In addition to DDF riders there was a small community of BMX riders who also used the freeride area. The freeride provided a social space for DDF riders and in between riding, young people participated in other activities such as sharing tips and techniques with other riders, discussing equipment, watching others or hanging around with friends.

The freeride area was dominated by young people and was an informal leisure setting where young people were able to practice cycling skills away from adult surveillance. For DDF riders biking was concerned with thrill seeking and risk taking, and identities were construed through association with 'adrenaline addicts' (Box 1). As a designated DDF space, the freeride area provided the most challenging mountain biking terrain at Bedgebury and DDF riders distinguished themselves from cross-country riders through their use of these spaces and viewed these kinds of activities as essentially non adult. In addition, DDF riders differentiated themselves from adult mountain bikers and from cross-country mountain bikers as they considered DDF was a more casual approach to leisure.

*North shore is a term used to describe obstacles constructed out of wooden materials, such as elevated platforms and jumps.

Table 1 Classification of participant identities by activity type.

Discipline	Number of participants
BMX dirt jumping	2
Dirt jumping	5
Dirt jumping, freeride and downhill (DDF)	12
Cross-country	14
Cross-country and DDF	7
Total	40

Figure 2 'North shore' section, Bedgebury freeride area.



Figure 3 Dirt jumps, Bedgebury freeride area.



Figure 4 Section of Bedgebury single track.



Box 1 – Adrenaline addicts

'[the freeride area] is for just hanging around and then jumping on the bike and doing something, but if we're doing the single-track we're often quite competitive ... we try and do it as fast as possible and try and beat each other' [Male, 17]

'I love that for the adrenalin rush, for going far too fast, and cutting that fine edge between you and falling off and hitting a tree very hard' [Male, 22]

'Um I probably enjoy down-hill and things more because I'm a bit of an adrenaline junkie really' [Male, 13]

Cross-country and single track

Bedgebury was valued by youth cross-country cyclists for its technical single track, particularly in an area where the landscape was considered unsuitable for cross-country mountain biking because it is fairly flat with poor drainage. Cross-country riding was perceived as very physically and psychologically demanding and involved cycling long distances. Participants were often widely dispersed around the forest. Youth cross-country riders suggested social relationships were more problematic than in DDF communities because opportunities to meet other riders were greatly reduced and the single track cross-country route in Bedgebury offered limited places for stopping. In addition, young people participating in cross-country appeared to experience additional social isolation because they generally encountered riders of an older age group. Youth cross-country participants were, therefore, more likely to join Bedgebury Cycle Club, or participate in organised race events because of the opportunity to communicate, socialise and share experiences with others as demonstrated through the quotations in Box 2.

Cross-country riding was frequently understood as an adult activity which had little resonance with youth people. DDF

Box 2 – Community and cross country

'[Bedgebury] There's not much designated places for mountain biking round here that's why this place is so attractive' [Male 15]

'[The cycle club] They're really good, 'cause you're with people who like cycling, so like the same as you and they're really friendly so if you're stuck doing something you're trying to do, like learning to jump even, they'll just help you, and tell you how to do it' [Male, 16]

'You don't tend to see many younger cross-countryers, 'cause it's not seen to be cool' [Male, 22]

riders, for example, classified it as too serious and that there was not enough emphasis on fun or risk. Youth cross-country riders were often aware of the marginal status of cross-country within wider youth mountain biking culture, and would often attempt to distance themselves from serious or adult cross-country activity by wearing clothing similar to those involved in DDF or by emphasising risk.

Motivations and gender

It is claimed young women do not participate as much as young men in adventurous activities in outdoor space (Ward Thompson *et al.*, 2006), and within the mountain biking literature the under-representation of women within the sport has been further explored (Cessford, 1995). For those who took part in this study, the motivations for participating in mountain biking appeared to differ with young women being more concerned about their own identity and young men with an association with lifestyle and group identity.

For young women, mountain biking was often undertaken as a fitness activity and participation was linked with potential health benefits or specifically with the ideal of losing weight (Box 3). Young women were likely to undertake mountain biking more privately than young men. Some young women disclosed that they felt embarrassed or lacked confidence about mountain biking in front of male participants for fear of being judged, and consequently chose mountain biking spaces away from male riders. For others, however, distancing themselves from a traditional feminine identity was appealing and some young women constructed mountain biking as a masculine sport to distinguish themselves from other females (Box 3).

Box 3 – Being healthy

'I just prefer to be more active I suppose because I drive everywhere, and so I need to balance it out or I'll become a big fat lump' [Female, 19]

'I don't like to follow the crowd all the time, I like to be different. I don't know any other girls who do it, like people think I'm a tomboy but I'm not I just don't like stuff like other girls' [Female, 19]

Young men were more motivated by the challenge of mountain biking and associated this with being 'outdoorsy'. An outdoorsy identity was important for those who compared their lifestyles to the wider youth population who were perceived to pursue sedentary leisure activities, often in urban locations. Being part

of a community of mountain bikers was also a motivation for young males who emphasised the social benefits of participation.

Mountain biking and woodlands

There were strong connections between youth mountain biking and the use of countryside space (see Box 4). Ease of access of countryside spaces, particularly woodlands, was one of the most common ways in which young people became involved in mountain biking. Youth mountain bikers visited a wide variety of spaces through mountain biking, including derelict land, remote woodlands, back gardens, disused farmland, city streets or skate parks. However, they favoured countryside or non built-up spaces compared to those in urban or built-up environments. Bedgebury represented an important woodland space for local youth mountain bikers and for participants from further afield, including towns like Hastings (19 miles away), and suburban parts of south London (around 40 miles away).

Box 4 – Being outdoorsy

'I s'pose I'm a country bumpkin like that, just hang around out here with my mates ... it's just what we do' [Male, 16]

'You won't find anyone more woodlandy than me' [Male, 18]

Freedom and escape

For participants living in rural areas surrounding Bedgebury, mountain biking was an integral part of their identity and represented a response to the lack of leisure opportunities available to young people living in rural areas. Mountain biking offered a way of overcoming isolation and gave them what they termed 'freedom' as both a form of transport and as a leisure activity in itself. Visiting Bedgebury provided as sense of escape which youth mountain bikers associated with being in the countryside as demonstrated by the quotations in Box 5.

Box 5 – A place to escape

'Cause like sometimes I'll just go down on my own and it's just like quiet and you do what you wanna do and there's no-one telling you what to do, there's no-one for miles around. It's much more freer sort of thing ... that's part of the reason we're in the woods though ... is to get away from other people' [Male, 18].

'... I prefer woodland stuff 'cause you're out in nature, open space fresh air, and also it's a designated space you don't have to worry about ooh I shouldn't be riding here' [Male, 15].

In comparison, riders generally considered urban areas as unsuitable for mountain biking and made reference to episodes of conflict or feelings of threat. Young people also felt excluded from safe cycling spaces in urban areas. They described situations of conflict with pedestrians and the police and being reprimanded for using pavements or other no cycle zones, yet felt cycling on the road was too dangerous. Respondents claimed mountain biking in urban areas was seen as potentially deviant by adults and authorities. Therefore, youth mountain bikers living in urban or more built-up areas described accessing the countryside as a safe space, free from surveillance or confrontation with adults, and away from the restrictions experienced in urban space.

Nature and identity

Woodlands appealed to youth mountain bikers as a landscape which offered significant visual attraction whilst riding, with participants commenting in particular on the importance of trees and the appeal of woodlands. Participants were, however, dismissive of any outward appreciation of nature. Despite the importance of the countryside as part of mountain biking; appreciation of nature was not considered relevant to the leisure experience and nature appreciation was considered a more adult ideal. Therefore, despite the preference for the countryside as a leisure space, discussing nature or attitudes to the countryside was often problematic and uncomfortable for participants who did not associate their lifestyle with nature or the natural environment (see Box 6).

Box 6 – Discussing nature

'... all my friends are like really outdoorsy people' [Male, 18]

'It's better than being surrounded by bricks' [Male, 25]

'... we're not tree huggers' [Male, 24]

Space and ownership

Youth mountain bikers would often express a significant connection to particular cycle spaces. For example, at Bedgebury, the freeride area was perceived as an area free from surveillance which enabled them to assert their own control over the space. Respondents valued the spatial separation between user groups such as walkers, horse riders and cyclists at Bedgebury because they believed it prioritised cyclists and this gave them a sense of empowerment. In response, several riders expressed a sense of ownership over the freeride area, and other cycle spaces through their identities as 'locals' (see Box 7).

Box 7 – Forming belonging

'... here this is your space and walkers don't go on your track'
[Male, 25]

'We always ride here, this is as local as it gets for us'
[Male, 15]

The 'locals' asserted certain rights over spaces which they had discovered, contributed to, accessed most often, or where they had demonstrated the most skill. The 'locals' would sometimes act as custodians over mountain biking spaces, enforcing often unspoken rules on cycle etiquette and negotiating with adult authorities over the use of particular spaces. In the freeride area at Bedgebury, the 'locals' would liaise with the cycle club or Forestry Commission, help and instruct younger or less experienced riders.

Sometimes, however, the 'locals' were involved in conflict with other user groups or landowners. For example, in some locations away from Bedgebury, DDF riders took tools to construct jumps and mounds in 'secret spaces'. This was seen as an exciting activity but frequently resulted in conflict with landowners and residents. In addition some younger riders described how they felt excluded by the 'locals' in certain cycle spaces because they were less skilled than them, or because they did not have the right equipment.

Conclusions

Bedgebury Forest provides an important setting for a wide range of youth mountain biking, accessed by young people from both the local area and from further afield. Participants associated mountain biking as being part of a healthy and active, outdoor lifestyle. Youth mountain bikers are generally distinguished into two broad lifestyle groups, DDF and cross-country, which use different equipment, hold different values and form different relationships with woodland spaces. Although male mountain bikers dominated the mountain biking scene at Bedgebury, a few young women also chose to participate in mountain biking as part of a healthy lifestyle. For some, this was used to distance themselves from a traditional feminine identity. For others, however, mountain biking with males was a barrier to participation. Both cross-country and DDF mountain bikers sought to distance themselves from adult mountain biking and emphasised risk and a relaxed approach to leisure, although this identity was stronger amongst DDF riders. Both DDF and cross-country cyclists formed distinct relationships with Bedgebury which provided a space to relax, experience freedom and exert some control over space.

For forest managers, mountain biking represents an important tool for engaging young people in outdoor recreation in forest spaces. However, participation is not gender neutral and encouraging young women to participate may require different strategies and techniques, and specific modes of intervention. For example, some young women may benefit from female only mountain biking groups, whilst others would prefer a more casual leisure experience and the opportunity to recreate alongside their male peers.

In addition, the various categories of youth mountain biking found within this study have important implications for the management of forests and the wider countryside. For many youth participants mountain biking is a way of exerting their own control over physical spaces, and demonstrating a form of resistance to mainstream, adult society. Many describe designing and building their own jumps and accessing private land that they know is 'off limits' as a way of reinforcing these associations. Youth mountain bikers stress the importance of experimenting with jump building as part of the mountain biking experience and the opportunity to take part in these activities facilitates a feeling of freedom that was associated with being in the countryside.

While these activities do have important benefits to participants, they may have significant legal (including health and safety) implications. They may also impact negatively on the conservation of flora and fauna by removing trees or shrubs to make way for jumps and may affect the enjoyment of these spaces by other countryside user groups. There are, however, opportunities for encouraging young people's involvement in the design and maintenance of mountain biking routes at Forestry Commission sites. Importantly, this could offer a sense of empowerment and ownership to young people particularly for those who identify themselves as 'locals' and are clearly interested in taking responsibility for protecting and maintaining mountain biking sites.

As a popular youth sport, mountain biking in woodlands can make an important contribution to the Government's health agenda (Bingley and Milligan, 2007). Nevertheless, in encouraging

young people to visit forest spaces to take part in healthy physical activity, forest managers must account for the fact that this activity cannot necessarily be spatially confined and youth mountain bikers have a tendency to migrate to other areas to build jumps or create new routes because they may offer different opportunities for riding. The need to balance the many and sometimes conflicting needs of different countryside users will provide important future challenges for the Forestry Commission.

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