

Understanding mountain bikers' choices of recreational settings

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This research seeks to identify the range of site attributes that attract experienced cross-country mountain bikers to certain locations. Schreyer et al. (1985) conceptualize the interplay of motivation, behaviour *and* environment that leads to a satisfactory recreational experience; riding environments, and their individual characteristics, therefore play an important role in enabling mountain bikers to meet and exceed their personal ambitions and expectations. Riders' preferences for trail settings or features have been explored by a limited number of studies (Cessford, 1995b; Goeft and Alder, 2000; Bowker and English, 2002; Gajda, 2008); many of these studies are now quite dated and it is argued that more sophisticated bike technology, and greater consumer expectations, have advanced riders' preferences.

This study was relatively unique in comparison to this extant literature in that it employed a qualitative research method, whereby semi-structured and open-ended interviews, with bikers in the UK and New Zealand, facilitated greater depth of response. Employing a pragmatic general inductive method of analysis, the findings are consequently punctuated with rich and vivid participant quotes to illustrate their feelings on this emotive subject. The conclusions of this research not only further scholarly knowledge on this subject, but also augment previous quantitative studies through more applied implications for land management and trail development.

Research Findings

Participant reaction substantiated that there is a wide range of attributes or factors that attract mountain bikers to specific settings where participation can satisfy their motivations. Riders generally seek a combination of site attributes to realise their motivations, even if some characteristics are deemed to be more desirable than others. Furthermore, those attributes that are perceived as preferable can vary depending on the individual's needs and desires, and temporal fluctuations in the motivations for participation. While some of these characteristics are tangible, such as amenities, others are more perceptual and less easy to define.

Fast, Flowing Singletrack: Mountain Biking Nirvana?

When asked to name some of the characteristics of a great trail, many interviewees extolled the attraction of riding on narrow singletrack trails. 'Fast and flowing' was often used to describe ideal singletrack, as a trail characteristic that enables participants to strike up a good rhythm; it is difficult to reconcile speed with a trail that keeps interrupting your momentum. 'Thrilling', or a relevant synonym, was used by many of the interviewees to describe trails, especially those purpose-built for mountain biking.

Purpose-Built Centres: Commodifying Mountain Biking?

It was suggested that purpose-built mountain biking centres have a number of key advantages over traditional trails. These centres are often situated in forests and consequently have all-weather, year-round trails. A further advantage of trail centres is the variety of trail types within a single location, a desirable characteristic for mountain bikers (Sumathi and Berard, 1997; Gajda, 2008).

The proliferation of purpose-built trail centres throughout the UK with a range of facilities, such as cafés and shops, has arguably raised people's expectations, and many interviewees considered such facilities desirable. Many participants in New Zealand, where trailhead facilities are less common, were less enamoured. This suggests a possible conflict between the motivations of different riders that places even experienced bikers on different points of the hard-soft adventure continuum. One of the greatest characteristics of a trail centre, according to interviewees, is the lack of potential conflict with other users on the trail, a subject that has received much attention (Ramthun, 1995; Carothers et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2008, for example).

Traditional Rights-of-Way: A Different Type of Experience

Traditional rights-of-way, or multiple-use tracks, are considered to have a number of features that can make them preferable to purpose-built biking trails. They can offer a greater sense of exploration, whether perceived or real, a quality that is felt by some riders to be missing from purpose-built trails, which are often well signposted and sited in plantation forests. Traditional trails can often feel more adventurous, with a destination as a focus and an element of the unknown.

A third advantage identified of traditional trails relates to the great scenery to be enjoyed. Native landscapes, rather than commercial forests, are identified as the preferred settings for many bikers (Sumathi and Berard, 1997). Many participants, in both New Zealand and the UK, considered great scenery to be an important environmental attribute, and while some participants considered scenery to be of secondary importance to the trail itself, they nonetheless conceded the importance of aesthetic values.

Management Implications

The popularity of purpose-built trail centres undoubtedly has foundations in the perception of these locations as great riding environments. Offering a condensed 'adrenalin hit' through the provision of often relatively short and easily-navigated trails, many centres are increasing their range of high-quality trails, to create a great experience for riders of a range of abilities. The associated facilities serve increasingly sophisticated expectations and help to create family-friendly destinations that widen their customer appeal.

Many more experienced riders, however, while appreciating the attraction of such centres, embrace the adventure and challenge of riding on tracks away from purpose-built centres, and prefer their more natural aesthetics. In order to maintain this, sometimes perceived, wildness an appropriate level of information for planning rides should be provided, but without great intrusion upon the trail.

The research confirms that mountain biking is widely perceived as a sociable recreational activity, and, through the creation of suitable facilities, land and trail managers should embrace opportunities for taking advantage of this desire to swap post-ride stories, tell (tall) tales of crashes and near-misses and increase riders' 'social capital'.

Conclusion

It is a diverse range of factors that attracts mountain bikers to destinations, and responses suggested that mountain bikers do not generally seek one particular attribute, even on a single ride. While physical site attributes can be purely functional, many serve to satisfy the hedonic motivations that attract people to participate in what is still, for many, the ultimate mean of experiencing the great outdoors. While the quality of the trail may be the prime characteristic for many riders, and more experienced bikers may embrace the rawness of wild trails, land and trail managers need to recognise and cater for an increasingly demanding and heterogeneous group of consumers.

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