

Issues on Trail runners, Trail running and recreational and protected areas in Portugal

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Introduction

Trail running (TR), according to International Trail Running Association (ITRA), is a pedestrian race in a natural environment with minimal possible paved or asphalt road and has emerged over the last decade as one of the most popular outdoor sports in the world leading in some situations to what can be called the TR boom (Urbaneja & Farias, 2015). Like other well-established recreational activities such as trekking and mountain biking, the demand for rural, recreational and protected areas for this activity in Portugal is intense, and events can easily reach over two thousand participants. Environmental impacts of such use intensity has been studied by several authors, but management of these users and their events in the perspective of land management plans still needs baseline research especially in what regards its social aspects.

Total number of TR events in Portugal is not fully known, but the most important competitions and the national TR championship is managed by *Associação de Trail Running de Portugal* (ATRP) an affiliated body of the Portuguese Athletics Federation and of ITRA.

ATRP created in November 2012 quickly increased from a few hundred members to the actual figure of over 7.500 athletes. During the last 3 years the number of members has tripled, what could be an indicator of this sports popularity.

Present paper delivers a tentative picture of TR in Portugal, providing the first systematic research of this recreational activity. A geographical analysis is done to the race events of 2017 and analyzed according to the trail runners profile in order to understand the main motivations and characteristics of this activity. Comprising the practitioners expectations is an important step to support land managers and decision makers to accommodate those within the main objectives of classified and protected areas - nature conservation, local and sustainable development, etc.

Materials & Methods

ATRP 2017 Circuit

In order to picture trail running in Portugal mainland, competitions of ATRP 2017 circuit (including 68 official races organized in 35 Events) were studied and mapped (figure 1).

Among these races events, and following ITRA classification, 8 were Endurance TR (>100 km), 26 Ultra TR (between 42~100 km) and 34 TR (<42 km), but parallel trail running races are common to each event, totalizing 130 races gathering over 35.000 participants and almost 30.000 finishers.

To better know and understand trail runners a two-step approach was established. A major ATRP event was selected for its meaning for trail runners - Portugal Ultra Trail Cup -

Território CC Proença-a-Nova (<http://territoriocc.com/>) - and a survey was conducted among the enrolled runners.

Portugal Ultra Trail Cup - Território CC Proença-a-Nova

This event was held in March 10, 2018 in the center of Portugal, and provided direct entrance to the national team to winners, making it one of the most important event of the circuit, with a total of 361 enrolled runners (157 in 28 Km trail and 204 in 51 Km). Due to severe weather conditions (Storm Felix) total number of finishers was lower than expected: 132 in 28 Km and 173 in 51 Km trail.

Participants were mainly man (77% and 85% for each distance) and more than 60% of Ultra TR runners were over 40 years old.

Portugal Ultra Trail Cup - Território CC Proença-a-Nova Survey

The trail runners' profile was produced through an on-line survey distributed by email to all participants 2 days after the race, and re-enforced by a second call done 4 days after. This survey included 21 questions organized in 3 groups: first one regarding the TR habits and motivations (including a subsection dedicated to other and previous sports practices); second addressed directly to *Território CC* race; and a final third towards socio-economic aspects.

Results and Discussion

ATRP 2017 circuit spreads all over Portugal mainland, sometimes overlapping with recreational and protected areas, as shown in figure 1. Considering Portugal Ultra Trail Cup participants, the majority are coming from Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas, but also from remote places, showing that distance is not a restricting factor for their participation.



Figure 1 – ATRP 2017 circuit and Portugal Ultra Trail Cup participants geographic distribution

Due to low response rate (75 within 6 days), results should be considered as a pilot test, to be reinforced on future circuit events. All respondents are usual TR practitioners as expected, and the majority are members of ATRP (78%) and ITRA (61%) what could be a proxy to the commitment TR's activity and evolvements. Participants also proved the impact and growth of this activity in Portugal as the average of TR practice was of 4 years.

Motivations

Major motivations for trail runners (on a likert scale from 1 "doesn't motivate me" to 5 "motivates me a lot") were the fact that TR approaches them to the natural environment (4.8) and provides pleasure (4.7), linking this sport to recreational and protected areas. Respondents also stated that TR makes them feel good in various ways and disconnect from the daily concerns (4.6). Lower scores were related with friends or family members approval (3.2), meaning that is comfortable to practice with them but isn't the most important condition, or that TR is a reference or fashionable sport (3.3).

TR and other activities

TR requires intense training, but is also a recreational activity what explains the enrolment with other sports. 77% are regular practitioners of Gymnasiums, MTB, road cycling, and other tracks and field activities are common. Regarding previous recreational activities bicycle rides were favorite with 35%, but MTB was the most common with 29%.

Preferred distances

Trail Longo (21,0975 Km to 42,195 Km) is the favorite distance for the majority of trail runners. As distance increases, the number of participants decreases progressively. This can also be confirmed in ATRP rankings where Endurance Trail Running has fewer competitions and competitors.

Training practices

Solo training sessions are preferred by 79% of the respondents, followed by ones with friends within organized groups. 3 to 4 days a week is the most common training frequency and usually (97%) near residence area, but 87% of the runners has travel previously just to prepared for a specific type of practice/terrain or following friends' invitations.

GPS use is almost mandatory (94%) and tracks are uploaded to online services, such as Strava, Garmin Connect or Suunto Movescount by 82% of respondents.

Conclusions

TR is today a major outdoor sport with increasing popularity, gathering runners of every ages and gender. Portugal is no exception with a wide distribution of runners and competitions through all country.

Runners are mainly looking for personal wellbeing and proximity with nature, and they are also tech geeks and VGI providers through online sports APPs.

The general feeling is that TR is generating a positive impact in local economies, particularly in small villages in rural areas, but with potential negative impact on natural and sensitive environments, requiring further research in order to support new measures for managing environmental impacts in recreational and protected areas.

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