

# Get off my land! Managing youth leisure in multiple natural environments

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The UK has seen a rise of state managed outdoor leisure destinations in recent years, partly in response to government agendas to improve the nation's health by encouraging more active lifestyles in key population groups such as young people. The health agenda has identified young people as a target group for whom regular physical activity can help to prevent health problems, but whose participation in active forms of sport and leisure is low (Department of Health 2009). In addition there is what is perceived to be an absence of young people from activities which take part in 'nature' (Natural England 2006). This is despite evidence to suggest that that experiencing nature could play an important role in improving health and increasing levels of physical activity (Bingley and Milligan 2007). Experiencing the natural environment in childhood and youth is thought to be beneficial to the cognitive and social development of children and young people (Bell et al. 2003) and is claimed to hold multiple benefits for well being and future development of healthy lifestyles (Ward Thompson et al. 2006; Bingley and Milligan 2007).

Several initiatives have therefore focussed on improving young people's participation in physical activity and access to natural environments and has led to a rise in state managed outdoor leisure initiatives which place inclusivity of diverse population groups at the centre of their objectives (see DEFRA 2011). Sports such as mountain biking which are performed in a variety of natural environments and which appeal to young people's lifestyles and identities have formed the basis of some of these schemes and represent a significant opportunity to leverage participation. Young people perform mountain biking in a variety of leisure environments from open countryside and forests to urban fringe woodlands and derelict land all of which present different challenges and opportunities for managers to promote participation.

This paper will draw upon the findings of two research projects which investigated the experience of mountain biking by young people and the experience of managing and encouraging youth mountain biking participation by leisure destination staff respectively. The first set of findings relate to qualitative research conducted at a forest in the South East of England which received government funding to increase participation in physical activity in key target groups. The forest was redeveloped to provide facilities for mountain biking and opportunities for engaging young people in the sport with forty young people took part in ethnographic style research which included a series of semi structured interviews, mobile methods, participant observation and social media activities.

The second part of the paper will present preliminary findings from a recent study with forest management staff at several forest destinations in the South of England, all of which are supported through some form of state ma-

nagement or funding. Ten forest managers took part in semi structured interviews to explore some of the management issues associated with young people's participation in mountain biking, paying particular attention to the differences between participation in urban proximate space and other natural environments.

The paper will first explore young people's use of different natural environments for mountain biking specifically highlighting the distinctive opportunities these different spaces can offer for the performance of youth mountain biking lifestyles, paying particular attention to urban proximate environments which are often easily accessible to young people and can offer more significant opportunities for mountain biking.

The paper will then focus on the practices which characterise youth mountain biking lifestyles which can at times present particular challenges for leisure managers. For example young people can experience exclusionary lifestyle practices such as localism, class based discrimination or sporting tensions between rival youth groups which could prevent access for some individuals. This therefore presents a challenge for schemes which seek to encourage fair access and participation for all. In addition experiencing risk is an important part of youth mountain biking lifestyles and participants describe involvement in trespassing, vandalism and unpermitted jump building as some examples of risky behaviour that can threaten the management of ecologically sensitive environments. The second part of the paper will therefore explore forest managers responses to these challenges and the different strategies employed for managing and enhancing opportunities for mountain biking. The notion of ownership emerges as central to the development of sustainable relationships between young people and management staff, with particularly important implications in urban proximate locations.

The paper will conclude by reviewing the implications of these findings in relation to government policy which places inclusivity at the centre of state funded initiatives in natural environments and consider the potential for urban proximate spaces to contribute to these agendas.

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