E-Mountain Biking – Potential for Swiss Tourism Destinations

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, mountain biking has been one of the fastest growing outdoor recreational activities in Switzerland and now represents an important branch in Swiss tourism. The average cost of a one-day mountain bike tour in Switzerland is 83 Swiss francs (= 86 USD) per person per day and 227 Swiss francs (= 236 USD) per person per day for overnight mountain bike tours. In all, mountain bike tours in Switzerland generate annual revenues of 800 million Swiss francs (= 832 million USD) (Rikus, Fischer & Lamprecht, 2015).
A few years ago, electric motor-assisted bikes were introduced. Swiss sales statistics illustrate the importance of this development with 28,704 E-MTBs (8.5% of total bike sales) sold in 2017 in Switzerland (Velosuisse, 2018). Environmental impacts and conflicts between users of E-MTB are often discussed. However, very few scientific studies on the subject of E-MTB are currently available. According to Eller and Lommele (2015), the environmental impacts of E-mountain biking are similar to those of mountain bikes and less severe than those associated with motorcycle use. However, E-MTBs may cause more severe soil displacement at turns, on ascents and descents, and in the case of sudden changes in trail conditions (Eller & Lommele, 2015). Articles that focus on the conflicts between E-MTB users and other recreationists show that politicians, environmental organisations, and local officials have been voicing concerns about higher frequencies on trails and the difference in speed between E-MTB users and other recreationists. Although hikers and mountain bikers show similar patterns in terms of motivation, requirements and behaviour, there is an on-going debate on the subject of compatibility of hiking and mountain biking. Conflicts arise when user groups differ in speed on the same trail, and when new sectors of outdoor recreational use intrude into territory that had been traditionally used exclusively by one group of recreationists (Morey et al., 2002; Rupf 2016).

Methodology

In this study, focus groups were formed to examine the needs of Swiss tourism destinations for adaptation to E-mountain biking, most of them without E-MTB experience. A total of six focus group workshops took place in 2016 in Swiss tourism destinations. Each workshop lasted approximately two hours. Seventy professionals from different sectors such as tourism, mountain biking experts, destination managers and local authorities discussed the E-MTB market situation, the potential of E-mountain biking for tourism destinations, and the needs of tourism destinations when adapting to E-MTB tourism.

Results

In the focus groups, three drivers of growth that might explain the rising numbers of E-MTB sales were detected. Firstly, E-MTBs enable people with poor physical condition to ride together with fitter cyclists. Secondly, E-MTBs enable users to cycle to places that are inaccessible to them without engine support due to distance, altitudinal difference or steepness of the trail. The third driver of growth is people's need for optimization of time management; in other words, with E-mountain biking, more can be experienced in less time.
The focus group participants agreed on several requirements that are important for tourism destinations when adapting to E-MTBs.

- Cycling directions for E-MTB users must be given on specific trail sections.
- Trails and routes should be defined and classified in terms of skills required, and not by physical condition.
- E-MTB tourism destinations need to provide charging stations and inform users exactly where these charging stations are.
- The co-existence of different user groups (hikers, bikers etc.) should be regulated.
- Considering the wide potential of E-mountain biking, interregional destination offers could provide additional attractions.
- Specific education in E-mountain biking for guides as well as coordinated communication should be considered.

Challenges that should be monitored in the future are co-existence between trail users, trail conditions und the maintenance of trails. It is conceivable that E-MTBs will cause more trail damage, so the maintenance of trails will need to be adapted. Key players and decision makers should therefore be more sensitized to the needs of E-MTB.

Conclusions

This study is a first attempt to analyse E-mountain biking and its relevance for tourism destinations in Switzerland. Even though the scientific literature about E-mountain biking is still limited, it can nevertheless be inferred that this sport has important economic value and that it is a topical issue in terms of environmental impacts and user conflicts. This has been confirmed by the outcomes of this focus group study. Thus, E-mountain biking can be regarded as a trend in outdoor recreation with high potential for tourism destinations.
If E-mountain biking develops in a similar way to E-bikes and mountain bikes, its popularity can be expected to increase. It might expand the mountain bike target group and boost mountain bike tourism. When adapting to the trend of E-MTB tourism, destinations should consider the environmental impacts of E-MTBs, especially if higher frequencies on the trails are generated. A number of important issues need to be taken into account by tourism destinations when joining the E-MTB trend. Especially in times of climate change, when tourism destinations are facing new challenges, E-mountain biking can bring new benefits. Promoting summer tourism and specializing in E-mountain biking might be a good opportunity to maintain the attraction of winter tourism destinations whose profitability is at risk because of the ascending snowline (OcCC, 2007).
However, given the many aspects that are important to look at, the potential of E-MTB for Swiss tourism destinations is not very easy to assess. It is still not yet clear what economic benefits E-mountain biking will provide, what the socio-economic profile of E-MTB users will look like, what impacts E-MTBs will have on the environment, or how conflicts between E-MTB users and other recreationists can be solved. It is therefore important to bear these open questions in mind and to scientifically follow the E-MTB trend. Further research on E-

mountain biking will help to reduce conflicts between recreationists and environmental impacts. It will also support tourism destinations in optimizing their offers for E-MTB users, and thus prepare them for the E-mountain biking trend.

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