

SPORTS TOURISM THEORY AND METHOD: CONCEPTS, ISSUES AND EPISTEMOLOGIES

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Context

While sports tourism research has developed considerably in recent years, some in the 'parent' subjects of sport and of tourism have criticised the area for lacking theoretical underpinnings and methodological diversity and rigour. In this climate, a special issue of the EASM journal, *European Sport Management Quarterly* was conceived to focus on *Theoretical Approaches to Sports Tourism*. The publication of this special issue, which contains papers examining sports tourism places, economic impact modelling, authenticity, and leveraging and planning, has been timed to coincide with the 13th EASM Congress in Newcastle/Gateshead. There is a focus, to a lesser or greater extent, in all the papers on the experiences of sports tourists and how such experiences can inform our understanding of aspects of impacts, participants, policy-making and provision in sports tourism research.

Method

This paper takes an overview of the sports tourism literature to date and discusses the extent to which the way in which sports tourism is defined can inform understanding of a range of aspects of the sports tourism phenomenon. It also argues that a focus on sports tourism experiences can help to develop research that is conceptually, theoretically and methodologically rigorous.

Results

Early work on sports tourism showed a preoccupation with defining and delimiting the topic area. More recently, there has been less concern with definitions, although this does not mean that such definitional issues have been resolved. Most definitions of sports tourism (eg Standeven & deKnop, 1999) simply seek to combine established definitions of tourism and sport and thus define sports tourism as tourism activity involving some aspect of sport. Others (eg Gammon and Robinson, 1997; Sofield, 2003) have attempted to separate out 'sports tourists' (for whom sport is the primary purpose) from 'tourism sportists'(sic) (for whom tourism is the primary purpose). However, the fatal flaw in such definitional work is that it is dependent on defining tourism in terms of sport, or sport in terms of tourism, and as such inevitably establishes a subordinate role for either tourism or sport in an understanding of the area. Weed and Bull (2004) take a slightly different view. Instead of defining sports tourism in terms of tourism and sport, the features of both tourism and sport are examined, and a conceptualisation of the area based on these features is established. As such, sport can be seen as involving some form of activity (eg kayaking, cycling, etc), and involving other people, as co-participants and/or competitors. Similarly, tourism involves visiting places outside of the tourist's usual environment. It also involves people, as co-travellers and/or as hosts. Combining these features of sport and tourism, Weed and Bull (2004; 37) conceptualise sports tourism as 'arising from the unique interaction of activity, people and place'. Thinking about sports tourism in this way moves the area away from a dependence on definitions of tourism and sport to delimit the area, and thus establishes sports tourism as something more than a tourism market niche or a subset of sport management. This has implications for terminology. Derived from definitions of the area as being dependent on definitions of tourism and sport, the term 'sport tourism' (rather than 'sports tourism') has achieved common currency because this is seen as encompassing a wider analysis of sport as a social institution. However, the focus on the area as arising from the unique interaction of activity, people and place renders the use of sport as a social institution to define the area somewhat incongruous. Furthermore, the concept of sport can be a misnomer in that it implies coherence where none exists and detracts from an understanding of the heterogeneous nature of sporting activities. In fact, Weed and Bull (2004; xv) argue that one of the unique aspects of sports tourism is that the interaction of people and place with the activities in question expands rather than limits heterogeneity, and thus it is more appropriate to use the term 'sports tourism', along with the focus on diverse and heterogeneous activities that the term implies.

Discussion

Weed (2004) conducted a preliminary four year systematic review and meta-evaluation of sports tourism knowledge and methods (a full five year review is currently in press). The largest single area of investigation was found to be experiences, perceptions and profiles (35%) with other work taking place on impacts (32%), provision, management and marketing (21%), policy (6%) and conceptualisation (6%). However, typically the work on experiences was descriptive, with findings tending to show that many participants enjoy the sports tourism experience, and that many would like to repeat the experience at some point in the future. What this research does not investigate is WHY the experience is enjoyable and WHY participants would like to repeat the experience. The reason for this is perhaps revealed by the analysis of method, with 87% of empirical sports tourism research employing a positivist quantitative research design, and 50% presenting descriptive results that were devoid of any theoretical discussion (Weed, 2004). The overall picture, therefore, was that sports tourism as an area of study lacks methodological diversity, rarely tends to answer 'why' questions, and in around half of cases, does not employ any clear theoretical perspective to underpin what is largely descriptive research. Consequently, while the size of the research area is growing, there is no coherent 'body of knowledge'.

It seems clear, therefore, that a change in direction is needed, and the conceptualisation of sports tourism as arising from the unique interaction of activity, people and place can perhaps assist in this. If sports tourism experiences are understood in this way, then research can focus on which aspects of activity, people and place, and the interactions between them, contribute to positive sports tourism experiences. This, in turn, can inform policy and provision, and contribute to an understanding of impacts and the way in which positive impacts can be maximised. Weed and Bull (2004; 205) discuss the use of perspectives from the disciplines of psychology, geography, sociology, policy studies, marketing and management, along with the use of grounded theory, to inform their analysis of sports tourism, and the papers in the ESMQ special issue on Theoretical Approaches to Sports Tourism also draw on a number of these disciplines. Notice that the focus here is on disciplines (eg geography and psychology) rather than subjects (eg sport and tourism) as providing the foundation for such studies and this, again, is enabled by the conceptualisation of sports tourism as being derived from the interaction of activity, people and place rather than from its 'parent' subject areas of sport and tourism. The papers in the ESMQ special issue are also, like much of the research upon which Weed and Bull's (2004) analysis is based, epistemologically varied, with perspectives from both the positivist and interpretivist traditions contributing to a balanced and complementary collection of studies.

This paper has argued that sports tourism is best understood as arising from the unique interaction of activity, people and place, and that an understanding of the experiences of sports tourists is central to the development of quality research on sports tourism impacts, participants, policy and provision. Such experiences need to be investigated from varying epistemological traditions and, specifically, there is a need for more in-depth interpretive qualitative research to understand WHY sports tourists largely report that their experiences are enjoyable.

References

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