

# Regional Sports Tourism Networks

Hagen Wäsche, University of Konstanz, Germany, [hagen.waesche@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:hagen.waesche@uni-konstanz.de)

Alexander Woll, University of Konstanz, Germany

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## Abstract

### Introduction and Research Aim

These days, sports tourism is an essential part of an experience-oriented lifestyle. People travel to experience mountains, rivers, the sea etc. by means of various activities. Others travel for reasons of physical and mental regeneration. Moreover, major sports events and competitions draw the attention of many visitors. Sports tourism is a central element of almost every tourist region. Since sports tourism as a regional product is created by a diverse group of actors, intersectoral co-operation is crucial for its quality. Although sports tourism is of great socio-economic significance, only a small body of scientific knowledge about this phenomenon is available. Particularly aspects of co-operation and the underlying structure of relationships between regional actors on the supply side have been a neglected area of academic study. The aim of this paper is to provide a conceptual foundation for a deeper understanding of the organisational structure and mechanisms of regional sports tourism.

### Theoretical Background

According to existing research data, the major problem in organising regional sports tourism is the absence of an integrated policy structure (Ritchie & Adair, 2004). Many actors are involved in regional sports tourism, but structural relations concerning intersectoral communication and co-operation among the actors involved are only fragmentary. While this finding describes the major problem in the organisation of regional sports tourism, there is still a lack of theoretical explanations of structures and management approaches. A review of theoretical approaches to interaction in regional sports tourism showed that there is only sparse knowledge about it. Weed and Bull (2004) described a "sport-tourism policy network" and developed a model of cross-sectoral policy development, which is based on a dichotomy of the sport and the tourism community. Breuer (2004) overcame this bipolarity and developed a network management model for regional sports tourism which is characterised by the integration of all regional actors. However, this field of research still lacks a consistent theoretical foundation. To fully understand regional sports tourism and the interaction of all actors involved, a comprehensive theoretical and conceptual framework needs to be developed.

**Regional Sports Tourism Networks** This paper suggests considering the structure of regional sports tourism as a social network, more precisely an inter-organisational

network. This particular type of network, also known in the fields of politics and economics, can be used to describe structural relations between organisations. Hence, a regional sports tourism (RST) network is understood as a horizontal form of operational coordination among actors involved in regional sports tourism. The focus lies on the relations between the actors (interactions like exchange of information or resources) and the role of a focal actor. Neither market nor hierarchy, the normative basis of the RST network is the complementary strength of its members (Powell, 1990) which is based on an established trust culture. Central mechanisms of the theory of inter-organisational networks are co-operation, emergence and innovation (Weyer, 2000). Applying this theory to RST networks provides a fundamental understanding of individual and collective action (micro-macro level), sustainability, organisational learning, and evolutionary processes within regional sports tourism.

### Implications

There are several potential benefits to be gained from the concept of RST networks. Firstly, the structural environment of regional sports tourism can be identified and analysed, e.g. the strength of ties, positions of actors and structural holes. Furthermore, through the analysis of their latent mechanisms it will be possible not only to explore and describe RST networks but also to explain and understand them.

Methodologically, quantitative network analysis seems to be useful to identify and compare structures of RST networks. For a deeper understanding of how such networks operate, social processes and situations have to be reconstructed. Therefore, qualitative research methods like in-depth interviews seem to be more suitable. Furthermore, social network theory provides several management implications. The crucial point for managing regional sports tourism networks is to recognise the importance of the relations in a network. A horizontal network is built upon a culture of trust. Relationship management is the key to co-operation in the RST network. Moreover, sustainability is highly significant for the development of its emergent structures. Last but not least, knowledge management is needed to support innovation. Innovation leverages an evolutionary process, which is a prerequisite for the RST network's successful persistence.

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