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Open Water as Sports Infrastructure

*P. Béla József*¹

¹University of Jyväskylä, Sport Sciences, Jyväskylä, Finland

belpave@jyu.fi

Abundant open water surfaces - lakes, rivers and seashore area - are providing ideal and free infrastructure to all kinds of water sports. Canoeing has a low impact on environment and it provides a unique way of experiencing nature. As a nature-based sport, is suitable for leisure and competitive purposes in its various forms. In five European countries (Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Sweden) investigation was carried out to examine the use of this infrastructure, from the point of view of a canoe paddler.

Canoe federations, and clubs, recreational sport associations and commercial interests are the stakeholders on the field, along with water management and environmental authorities on the governmental side. As data source, publicly accessible GIS-based national databanks of sport facilities, annual reports and personal interviews with stakeholders were used.

The number of participants in canoeing activities is growing in recent years. This is partly due to the increasing awareness of global environmental degradation, thus people gaining deeper appreciation towards nature. Urban citizens are seeking for experiences in rural areas and in nature, which in consequence opens the market for commercial use of that area. Clubs open their traditional operation towards service provider's activities and new entrepreneurships are entering to the market of leisure time services and active tourism.

In the examined countries different political-, economic environment and socio-cultural relationship between people and water exists. Moreover, the density of population, the quality and extension of commercial water traffic, the industrial use of water for energy producing are differing notably.

The British Canoe Union is a strong player in England's water management development plans, where private ownership of water area is common. In Finland the Everyman's Right provides free access to nature, as consequence, lobbying interest did not forced canoe paddlers together. Further the scattered Lakeland is mostly used for leisure boating instead of commercial traffic, which is safer environment than heavily used rivers like Danube in Hungary of Rheine in Germany.

Yet it is observed, that the use of water surfaces as recreational infrastructure is overseen. Interrelationship exists, thus active cooperation between governmental authorities, non-governmental organizations and private companies are recommended in order to find consensus for the development of open water areas as leisure time sport infrastructure.