The Influence of Setting in Determining Sport Event Participation: A Case Study of Participants in Banff Bike Fest 2008

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Small-scale sport events are often used to showcase the natural, cultural, and historical characteristics of destinations. Some researchers, however, would argue that sports are becoming removed from individualistic place characteristics to create a more consistent sporting space across geographies (Griggs, 2009; Bale & Vertinsky, 2004). Other authors have argued that the local setting (e.g., landscape, and spectators) may have an influence on the consumer’s sporting experience (Bale & Vertinsky, 2004). Certain sports may be removed from characteristics of the local setting (e.g., weather, and geography), but is it possible to remove those characteristics from sporting events that occur on repurposed spaces? For example, bicycle road races occur on public roads that are temporarily designated as a sporting facility. This study focused on the landscape perspectives of participants of the Banff Bike Fest 2008. Banff Bike Fest was held over the weekend of June 21 and June 22, 2008. Bike Fest included five events ranging from invitational time trials for experienced cyclists to races for families and children (Banff Lake Louise Tourism, 2008). The Alberta Bicycle Association sanctioned one event, the Criterium, a circuit race on the streets of Banff. Licensed racers received points towards their provincial standings (Banff Lake Louise Tourism, 2008). Bike Fest also encouraged the cyclists and visitors to experience Banff National Park during the competition. The purpose of this study is to compare the participants’ motivations for participation with their perspectives and preferences about the event and the destination (Banff National Park).

Methods

Data were collected as part of a larger study that explored the hosting of special events within Banff National Park, Canada. The study was explained to each participant and they were asked to return the completed surveys in a postage paid envelope once they arrived home. The questionnaire was designed to examine experiences and motivations about visiting Banff National Park, bicycling behavior, and travel habits. Specific questions explored the appropriateness of the races in Banff National Park as well as the importance of the event being located in the national park as a motivating factor for participation. Demographic information was also collected. Approximately 200 surveys were distributed to adult race competitors between June 20 and 21, 2008. Fifty-seven completed surveys were returned; 50 respondents were male, six were female, and one respondent did not indicate their gender. Participants’ average age was 36.5 years. Participants were residents of nearby communities and provinces; travel distances and periods of visitation to Banff National Park varied greatly. Data presented were analyzed using SPSS 16.0. Qualitative open-ended comments were used to enhance analysis of the quantitative data.

Results

Top five motivations rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very unimportant; 5 = very important) were: “to have a stimulating and exciting experience” (4.68); “to experience physical challenge” (4.53); “to participate in competition” (4.61); “to experience fun” (4.53); “to engage in exercise” (4.46) and “to be with people who enjoy the same things I do” (4.32). The two lowest motivations were “to develop my knowledge of alpine history and culture” (2.54) and “to learn about Banff’s natural and cultural heritage” (2.58). The participants were asked to state the degree to which they agreed with statements about Bike Fest in Banff National Park. Items with a focus on setting and location were rated highest, “the physical landscape of BNP makes it an appropriate site for Bike Fest” (4.86), “Bike Fest is an appropriate event to hold in BNP” (4.86), “the social and cultural atmosphere of BNP makes it an appropriate location for Bike Fest” (4.54), “participating in Bike Fest has made me feel more connected to BNP” (4.21) and “participating in Bike Fest inspired me to bicycle more frequently in BNP” (4.16). The connection between bicycling and setting were also evident in other responses, for example, respondents indicated that an increase of road and trail bicycling opportunities should be facilitated by their communities and Banff National Park management. Respondents were able to comment on their preferred racing landscape under the question “If the location of Bike Fest was relocated, how appealing would the following alternative locations be?” The mountain setting was rated the highest (4.20) over all other options; these included: rural setting (2.91), large urban park (2.87), fully urban setting...
(2.85), and urban-rural fringe (2.56). Finally, respondents were asked to state the degree to which they agreed with various statements about Bike Fest and Banff National Park on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Both Bike Fest and Banff National Park were rated positively as an event and park. “I would recommend BNP as a travel destination to my friends and family” (4.81), “Plans to return to Bike Fest in the near future” (4.72), “I would recommend Bike Fest as a cycling venue to my friends and family” (4.72), “Bike Fest was more appealing to participate in because it was located in BNP” (4.7) and “Bike Fest was a special event for me because it was located in BNP” (4.42).

Discussion

This study investigated the influence of landscape on the motivations and preferences of participants in Banff Bike Fest 2008. Specifically, data was analyzed around the motivations, and landscape preferences of cyclists in a competitive setting. The data presented confirmed that athletes were aware of landscape around them. While the participants indicated that the educational opportunities to learn about Banff National Park’s culture, environment, and history were not a motivation for visiting, the physical challenge and competition at Banff Bike Fest were important. These two motivations might explain or be linked to the perceptions of the landscape that suggests Banff National Park’s landscape was appropriate for bicycle racing, and that participants felt a connection to the park which was exemplified through stronger desire to bicycle in the park more frequently. The theoretical and practical implications of this research contribute to the gap in the research identified by Keeling (1999) that a lack of research exists on cycle racing tourists. The theoretical implications of this study reveal that although some sports are separated from the landscape, in this instance the athletes were strongly influenced by or attracted to the physical features of Banff National Park’s landscape. Practical implications of this study confirm to destination managers and event coordinators that the landscape is important to participants of certain sporting events (e.g., bicycle road racing). Furthermore, the destination's image is also influential in attracting participants’ interested in various events and should be used effectively in marketing by sport managers and marketers. It is recommended that organizers of sport events, such as bicycle road races and marathons, use the features of the landscape to provide a varied or unique experience for the participants. For example, during Banff Bike Fest 2008 the landscape of the mountain park and its reputation were pull factors for participants who wanted to experience various features of the park while competing in a bicycle race.