Dragon Boat Racing: Motivations, Importance of Event Context, and Travel Behaviour

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Dragon Boat racing is both a competitive and recreational sport “that involves strenuous, repetitive upper body activity of 18 to 20 paddlers propelling a 40-60 foot craft along a race course of 500 to 650 meters” (Harris & Niesen-Vertommen, 2000, p.95) and is characterized by racing teams who travel to compete in regional, national and international events. Previous studies document a variety of reasons for attending and competing in a dragon boat racing event. While dragon boat festivals are rooted in culture, the focus for many participants is the act of paddling and racing (Sofield & Sivan, 2003). McCartney and Osti (2007) found that participants’ motivations differed by culture; those participants in Melbourne, Australia were primarily motivated by fun, socialization, and exercise while the participants in Macao, China were focused on cultural identity. Similarly, attendees to the 2006 Dragon Festival at Phalen Park in St. Paul, Minnesota stated the most enjoyable part of their experience at the festival were the dragon boat races (Salk & Schneider, 2006). McKercher, Mei, and Tse (2006) found that tourists to a dragon boat festival in Hong Kong were mixed in their interest between viewing the festival as a sporting event or a cultural event. Two studies looking at experiences of North American-based breast cancer survivors and dragon boat racing highlighted the prevalence of physical exercise and social interaction motivations (Unruh & Elvin, 2004; McKenzie, 1998).

This poster contributes to knowledge of dragon boat racers as active sport tourists by describing the socio-demographic characteristics, motivations for travel and participation, level of racing experience, satisfaction with and importance of event and setting characteristics expressed by participants at a small scale dragon boat festival. This research addresses the call for study that clarifies who active sport tourists are (Kaplanidou and Gibson, 2010). Data was collected at the Banff Dragon Boat Festival, a small scale sporting event held in Banff National Park, Canada between August 22 and August 24, 2008. The event began with team registration and an eye-dotting ceremony at Lake Minnewanka. The race component included two distances (200m and 500m) in three divisions, two women’s only races (200m and 500m), and the 1000m Guts and Glory Cup.

Researchers intercepted team captains at the registration table on August 22, 2008 and prior to the first race on August 23; team captains were asked to distribute the surveys to their teams. During the event the researchers visited each team’s area to provide further information about the study and encourage the return of completed surveys. Approximately 300 surveys were distributed to 18 registered dragon boat teams (Banff Lake Louise, 2008) with 20 to 26 people per team. From conversations with participants and organizers it was concluded that some individuals participated on more than one team, therefore, there were far fewer than the possible 360 (assuming 18 boats with 20 paddlers each) participants present. Forty-nine completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 16%. Data presented were analyzed using SPSS 17.0. Qualitative open-ended comments were used to enhance analysis of the quantitative data. Sample: Fourteen respondents were male and 33 were female. This distribution of more female respondents is similar to other studies (e.g., McCartney & Osti, 2007; Salk & Schneider, 2006). Participants’ average age was 36 years. Respondents were from Alberta (n = 38) or British Columbia (n = 11). Post secondary education was completed by 87.5% of the participants and a majority reported household incomes between $80,000 to $99,000 CAD.

A majority of race participants viewed the Banff Dragon Boat Festival as a sporting event (80.9%) rather than a cultural event (19.1%). A five-point Likert scale was used to measure travel motivations (1=unimportant to 5=very important). Prevalent motivations were: To have a stimulating and exciting experience (4.77); to experience fun (4.58); to experience physical challenge (4.50); to engage in exercise (4.48); and spend time with family and friends (4.46). Competition in a sporting event averaged a “somewhat important” ranking (4.33). Learning about the setting’s natural and cultural heritage received the least support as a travel motivation. Participants were asked to rate the importance of 11 elements of Banff Natural National Park and the Festival on a five-point Likert scale. Top four visitation elements were: The dragon boat racing venue (4.67), opportunities to engage in dragon boat racing (4.59); event infrastructure (4.48); and social activities and opportunities to interact with other people (4.46). Cultural activities (3.41) and park-related learning opportunities (2.98) were deemed least important by participants. High satisfaction ratings were achieved for all 11 elements of the visitor experience. On a five-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) prevalent agreement was noted with the statements: “The Banff Dragon Boat Festival was more appealing to participate in because it was located in Banff National Park” (4.37) and “The Banff Dragon Boat Festival was a special event for me because it was located in Banff National Park” (4.27); respondents agreed least with the statement: “I can easily substitute the Dragon Boat Festival with another race” (2.71).

A large number of novices competed in the Banff Dragon Boat Festival; nearly half of participants had only participated in one dragon boat racing event in the last 12 months (i.e., the Banff event); the sample average was 3.79 events in the last year. Less dedication and/or involvement in the sport was also demonstrated by the lack of participation in overnight (0.7 trips/year) and
multi-night (0.7 trips/year) trips to compete in dragon boat racing, as opposed to the more frequent participation in travel to local events with a travel time less than 1 hour (1.6 trips/year) and day trips with travel more than 1 hour (1.3 trips/year).

Discussion: Based on previous dragon boat research (e.g., McCartney & Osti, 2007; Salk & Schneider, 2006; Unruh & Elvin, 2004) it was expected that race participants would be motivated to participate in the Festival because of an interest in interacting with others (social component) and to participate in competition. It was also expected that the unique event location, Lake Minnewanka in Banff National Park, would be an important motivating factor for participants. Survey results revealed learning about mountain culture and natural heritage was unimportant to participants. The motivations of having a stimulating and exciting experience and engaging in physical challenge and exercise might explain why a majority of race participants viewed the Banff Dragon Boat Festival as a sporting event (80.9%) rather than a cultural event (19.1%). Despite the result that cultural activities ranked low in importance and motivations responses, written comments highlighted a desire for cultural demonstrations at the event. Competition appears have been a slightly less important motivator for this sample than previously reported groups of dragon boat festival participants. The setting, a mountain park, was an important factor in perceived attractiveness of the event.

The theoretical and practical implications of this research contribute to establishing an understanding about dragon boat racing and active sport tourists engaged in small-scale sport event. The theoretical contribution of this poster presentation confirms and expands the understanding about the motives of dragon boat racers and highlights the importance of event location. Practical implications of this study confirm to destination managers and event coordinators that while race participants acknowledge the interesting cultural aspects of the dragon boat festivals/culture/history the majority of athletes were drawn to the physical challenge and social opportunities provided by the event. These latter aspects of the Festival should be emphasized in future event planning and promotion more than a focus on the heritage and cultural aspects of the dragon boat races.