The Evolution of Cycling Active Sport Event Travel Careers

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While concerns grow over rising physical inactivity rates in the United States (Brownson, Boehmer, & Luke, 2005) some individuals have adopted and created lifestyles based upon active leisure. These individuals often travel to participate in events related to their interests, which has aided in the establishment of sport tourism (Gibson, 1998). Among this group are cyclists that regularly take part in active event travel, a form of sport tourism. Active event sport tourism refers to individuals that travel specifically to participate in a sport of interest in an event related context (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010). Cycling has grown over the past decade and is now the third most popular outdoor activity generating over $70 billion in travel related expenses annually (Outdoor Industry Association, 2012). Getz (2008) proposed that active event sport tourists might follow a career like pattern in terms of their involvement and commitment to their sport. Getz termed this idea as an event travel career (ETC), which is defined as a potential lifetime pursuit of travel to participate in sport events that develops over time and leads to evolving preferences for event characteristics and travel arrangements. To describe the trajectory of an ETC, Getz hypothesized changes in six dimensions: motivation, travel style, temporal patterns, geographic patterns, event type, and destination criteria. As individuals progress along a career this eventually leads to modified behavior from the experienced event tourist. To distinguish active sport event travel from other types of event related travel we propose use of the term active sport event travel career (ASETC). The purpose of the study was to explore the evolution and trajectory of ASETCs through stages of development among cyclists. The guiding research questions were as follows: RQ1: How do amateur cyclists progress or regress through ASETCs? RQ2: How do event travel career dimensions evolve throughout ASETCs? RQ3: What factors affect movement along ASETCs?

In proposing the ETC, Getz (2008) combined the ideas of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982) and the travel career pattern (Pearce, 1988). Stebbins (1992) defined serious leisure as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (p. 3). Serious leisure is defined through six qualities: perseverance through the activity, career potential, significant personal effort to gain skill and knowledge, obtainable durable benefits, a unique ethos/social world, and identification with the leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 1982). The idea that tourists develop travel careers involving short and long-term motivation was first conceptualized from Maslow’s (1970) motivational hierarchy by Pearce (1988) as the travel career ladder (TCL). The TCL depicts tourism needs/motives through five subdivided hierarchical levels including: physiological needs, safety/security, love and belongingness (relationship needs), self-esteem (development needs), and self-actualization (fulfillment needs) (Pearce, 1988). Later, Pearce (2005) modified the TCL which was reconceptualized as the travel career pattern (TCP), which suggests motives are linked to the current state of an individual’s travel career. This can be assessed through combined attention to travel experience, age and life cycle.

Scholarly work investigating cycling tourism has stretched from early work on a New Zealand bike tour by Ritchie (1998) to British racing cyclists (Bull, 2006). Adapted from Lamont (2009) cycling tourism is defined as trips involving a minimum distance of 50 miles from a person’s home and an overnight stay, or trips involving a minimum non-cycling round trip component of 50 miles and a minimum four hour period away from home (for day trips) of which cycling, involving active participation is the main purpose for that trip. In order to understand the complex evolution ASETCs, a qualitative grounded theory approach utilizing in-depth interviews with amateur cyclists that were actively engaged, beginning, or have culminated ASETCs was utilized. Prospective respondents completed an online survey to assess qualifications for inclusion in the study. Three phases of data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously using purposeful, relational, variational, and discriminate techniques using NVivo 8.0. Sample size was determined as the study progressed and terminated when saturation of the data was achieved (Marshall, 1996). The sample (N=12) consisted of four females and eight males from 22-67 years old (M=46) with event travel experience ranging from 1.5 to 40 years (M=16.08).
The results revealed ASETCs evolve through a complex progression of nine main themes, which included: the first event, starting out, motivation, temporal, travel style, destination criteria, event type, spatial, and later in life. Based on these findings a six-stage travel career grounded theory model is proposed consisting of: initiation, introduction, expansion, peak threshold, maintenance, and withdrawal. The developed ASETC model identifies the trajectory of career cyclists and provides a framework for the future study of active event travel. Contrary to Snelgrove and Wood (2010) who suggested repeat participants are more motivated by identification with a charitable cause, this study found charitable intentions diminished with career progression. Thus, charity events might present an ideal venue to attract inexperienced cyclists and initiate an ASETC. Racing and non-racing cyclists diverged in their style of travel and the importance of destination criteria, extending the findings of previous ETC research. Career progression was portrayed by an emphasis on increased event evaluation rigor and a reduction on the importance of superfluous event attributes (e.g., charity, entertainment, food, etc.) suggesting the event and destination preferences identified by Getz and McConnell (2011) are dependent on competitive orientation and family dynamics. Contrary to previous notions advanced by Getz (2008) and Getz and McConnell (2011), expanding travel distance was more dependent on constraints than travel career progression. Further, frequency of event travel was dependent on the location of the individual’s primary residence, the availability of events, and other constraints. The final stage of the proposed ASETC model suggests individuals may transition later in their career from an amateur to a volunteer within the serious leisure framework (Stebbins, 1992).

From this model, theoretical contributions, suggestions for future research, and practical implications for sport tourism and event management will be discussed. Principally, event organizers and tourism boards should seek to market and organize events in regards to the competitiveness of the event along with the family dynamics and experience of their potential participants. Event managers seeking to expand the travel distance of their potential participants should focus on the identified event characteristics (e.g., uniqueness) that promote this behavior. Lastly, implications for the promotion and progression of ASETCs in regards to physical activity will also be discussed.