

A MEASUREMENT OF THE EXPERIENCE PREFERENCES OF CENTRAL APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN BICYCLISTS

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Abstract: As the sport of mountain biking has grown in popularity, many localities have begun to develop facilities and promote cycling based tourism. Unfortunately, these promotional efforts often occur with little knowledge of the characteristics and preferences of mountain bikers. This study was an initial effort to collect descriptive data on the riding, travel and spending behavior of mountain bicyclists in the Central Appalachian region.

Introduction

As the sport of mountain biking has grown and developed over the past twenty years, many areas of the country have been identified by off-road cyclists as good places to ride and therefore desirable destinations for mountain biking vacations. These "good places" tend to be recognized by cyclists as desirable locations because of a variety of factors including public access, trail infrastructure, topography and scenery. Communities that have some of the factors (particularly the uncontrollable factors of topography and scenery) are recognizing that they may be able to improve mountain bike based tourism by improving the controllable factors such as public access and trail infrastructure. In addition, many of these suitable locations have begun to recognize the benefits of hosting cycling oriented special events (Bradley, 1997). The development of trails and facilities has also begun to be recognized as an important quality of life factor for local residents (NBPC, 1995). For these reasons, areas identified as desirable destinations have begun to develop trail systems, specialize their amenities and market themselves nationally to mountain bikers. As yet, much of this marketing and development is not supported by research on the participation habits and travel behavior of mountain bikers. Existing research on riding habits and travel

preferences has tended to be regionally oriented (Holmes & Schuett, 1995) or to focus on biking in specific management settings (Hollenhorst, Schuett, Olson & Chavez, 1993). As tourism marketing is typically approached on a community or regional basis, it is important to obtain assessments of the preferences of cyclists on a regional basis. This study focused on mountain bikers in the central Appalachian region.

Methods

An on-site survey was administered to 230 mountain bikers in southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia. Respondents were approached at trailheads or bicycle shops at random intervals. The survey included items that measured the typical riding preferences of cyclists, their motives for riding and their criteria for trail selection. In addition, respondents were questioned about their vacation patterns, lodging preferences and mountain bike related spending. The analysis presented here is descriptive in nature.

Results

Usable surveys were obtained from 226 respondents. The sample consisted of 74% male and 24% female respondents. The mean age of respondents was 26.4 years with a range from 18 to 52 years of age. The sampled respondents had a mean of 5.1 years of experience in mountain biking (SD = 4.20), with a range of less than one year's experience to more than 20 years of experience. Also, 16% of the sample reported belonging to a cycling club or organization. Of the respondents, 67.7% reported that often or occasionally plan vacations or weekend trips for the purpose of mountain biking while 32.3% reported that they did not plan trips based on the sport.

Riding Preferences The ride time preferred by the largest number of respondents was one to two hours although a significant number (19.5%) stated a preference for rides of more than three hours duration (See Table 1). A majority of the respondents (48.7%) indicated preferences for single-track trails as their preferred riding venue. Unmaintained roads (ie logging roads etc) were the second choice, preferred by 38.1% of the respondents (See Table 1). A majority of respondents (71.2%) preferred to ride in social groups with one or two other riders, while 17.3% preferred to ride alone and 11.1% preferred to ride with three or more other riders (See Table 1). Preferences for riding frequency in non-vacation situations varied widely (See Table 1).

Table 1. Riding Preferences

Typical Riding Time	Frequency	Valid Pct
less than 1 hour	30	13.3
1 to 2 hours	99	44.0
2 to 3 hours	52	23.1
more than 3 hours	44	19.6
Total	225	100.0
Missing	1	
Trail Preference		
gravel roads	27	12.1
unmaintained (ie logging) roads	86	38.6
singletrack trails	110	49.3
Total	223	100.0
Missing	3	
Riding Group Preference		
alone	39	17.3
with 1 or 2 others	161	71.6
with 3 or more others	25	11.1
Total	225	100.0
Missing	1	
Riding Frequency		
1 or more times per week	83	37.2
2 to 3 times per month	59	26.5
once per month	31	13.9
less than once per month	50	22.4
Total	223	100.0
Missing	3	

Respondents were also asked to choose their primary criteria for selecting a trail from a battery of nine options. The primary motivation for trail selection was physical challenge (33.2%), followed by scenic beauty (27.4%) and convenience (17.4%). Trail characteristics that allowed

high-speed riding were the primary selection criteria for a notable minority (9.4%) of the riders (See Table 2). The availability of additional tourism related services was not a factor in the respondents' decision criteria for trails.

Table 2. Trail Selection Preferences

Selection Criteria	Frequency	Valid Pct
convenience	39	17.3
scenery	62	27.4
challenge	75	33.2
prior knowledge of trail	17	7.5
others services nearby	3	1.3
ability to ride fast/trail quality	10	4.4
ability to ride fast/ few users	11	4.9
ability to plan long complex rides	8	3.5
other	1	.4
Total	226	100.0

Travel and Spending Behavior

A majority of the respondents (67.7%) reported that they either often or occasionally planned vacations or weekend trips for the purpose of off-road biking. An additional 32.3% of the respondents reported taking a bike along on trips that were primarily for family or business purposes. The primary lodging preference is campgrounds, preferred by 48.2% of the sample. Hotels or motels were preferred by 20.3% of the respondents while 8% would stay with friends or family, 6.2% would prefer a resort setting, 5.8% prefer a bed & breakfast and 7% prefer an "other"

arrangement. The respondents reported spending a mean of \$39.00 per day while on cycling trips. The respondents reported a spending a mean of \$400.00 per year on mountain biking equipment, clothing and accessories. Most people who travel for pleasure tend to incorporate multiple activities into an outing. The mountain bikers in this survey also stated that they are likely to participate in additional activities on their trips. They report a preference to incorporate hiking and visits to scenic or historic areas into their mountain biking vacations. Swimming and eating out at restaurants were also popular (See Table 3).

Table 3. Additional Activities Preferred by Mountain Biking Travelers
(measured on a 5 point scale with "1" indicating lowest preference)

Activity	N	Mean	Std Dev
Hiking	225	3.928	1.099
Fishing	225	2.857	1.36
Golf	222	1.936	1.326
Canoe or Kayak	224	2.767	1.27
Visit Scenic Areas	225	4.093	.988
Visit Historic Areas	225	3.61	1.22
Swim	225	3.568	1.201
Rafting	225	3.106	1.368
Shopping	225	2.65	1.412
Restaurants	224	3.573	1.472

Conclusion

As more Appalachian communities attempt to lure mountain bikers as potential tourists, it becomes important to develop a better understanding of the unique preferences that these recreationists. While the findings of this study are largely descriptive in nature, it does provide a starting point in the development of a usable profile of mountain biker as a user of recreational facilities and tourism services. This profile may help to develop trail infrastructure and tourism amenities that are appropriate for the targeted market.

The respondents in this study are likely to engage in tourism behavior based on mountain biking. They prefer to ride in dyads or triads, choose trail systems based on challenge and scenery and incorporate visits to scenic and historic sites into their agenda. Many prefer low cost accommodations such as campgrounds. Campgrounds may also be preferred because of close proximity to trails.

References

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