

Chapter 23

Uniqueness as a Draw for Riding Under the Midnight Sun

Blake Rowsell and Patrick T. Maher

Abstract The Yukon Territory, in Canada's western Arctic, has tremendous potential for tourism. The territory has abundant natural beauty, and a historical mystique that naturally draws people to the destination. The Yukon has already established itself as an adventure tourism destination for activities such as paddling (canoeing, kayaking and rafting) and dog-sledding. However, mountain biking is a new segment of the Yukon tourism industry. A greater understanding of tourism in the Arctic can be developed through an examination of the destination attributes that draw mountain bike tourists to the Yukon.

23.1 Introduction

Mountain biking is one of the most popular recreational activities worldwide (Leberman and Mason 2000; Taylor 2010). Research in the United States has shown that annually cycling contributes \$133 billion to the U.S. economy, supports nearly 1.1 million jobs, and provides sustainable growth in many rural communities (Newsome and Davies 2009; Outdoor Industry Foundation 2006).

Destination attributes are the on-the-ground tangible features of a destination; the site characteristics that are critical in a tourists' vacation destination decision-making (Weaver 1994). For mountain biking these attributes include inherent features such as natural landscapes, as well as constructed amenities such as trails (Freeman 2011). Destination attributes are the pull factors that make up the attractiveness of a region (Chon 1990; Devesa et al. 2010), and the factors by which a person is motivated to want to visit (Fluker and Turner 2000) the site. The Yukon is renowned for its beautiful scenery, and the lack of development providing an

B. Rowsell (✉)
Capilano University, North Vancouver, BC, Canada
e-mail: blakerowsell@capilanou.ca

P.T. Maher
Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS, Canada
e-mail: pat_maher@cbu.ca

“excess” of nature. Arctic destinations, such as the Yukon, can capitalize on tourism dollars by taking advantage of these natural amenities.

23.2 Methodology

This project was guided by initial meetings with key informants in the Yukon mountain bike community. These contacts included the owners of Boréale Adventures, the head of the Whitehorse municipal trail crew, individual members of the trail crew, the executive of the local mountain bike club, and other local mountain bikers. In addition to being guided by stakeholder involvement, this research project also concluded by conducting feedback sessions and formal meetings to assist with closure of the project, and to ensure the return of information and dissemination of findings to the community. This practice follows the work of Kindon et al. (2007).

Qualitative research methods were used to understand a larger reality in the context of the trends and patterns occurring in mountain bike tourism in the Yukon. The project used semi-structured interviews, and participatory observation. Interviews were conducted on site at Boréale Adventures with the clients of the mountain bike-themed eco-lodge and with other mountain bike tourists in Whitehorse. Participant observation in the form of “ride alongs” were also conducted with mountain bike tourists in Whitehorse. These dual methods allowed for greater insight into motivations and interests that people may be unwilling to talk about or that would have been missed otherwise (Taylor 2010). In addition, it allowed for an understanding of the context (Patton 2002) for this research.

The participants were all on a mountain bike vacation in Whitehorse. Many were clients of Boréale Adventures, although some participants were also on independent holidays. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 62, and 71% of the study participants were male. Participants ranged from “dirtbag” free and independent travellers who were camping or sleeping in their car to make the trip as cheap as possible, to those that had flown thousands of kilometres and desired amenities like steak and champagne on the trail. All participants were asked about their motivations and feelings with respect to mountain bike tourism. All participants interviewed had been involved in mountain bike tourism before their trip to the Yukon.

23.3 Tourist Preferences

Remoteness and scenic attributes of the destination are key draws for mountain bike tourists. However, the tourists traveling to the Yukon Territory were in search of something specific: they desired the uniqueness of the destination.

Mountain bike tourists felt that there had to be characteristics of a destination that were different than they were used to. Participants did not want their mountain bike vacation to be like riding at home; most riders indicated that they have enjoyable

trails at home, so when they travel they want to experience something more out of the destination. One mountain bike tourist explained that

if you travelled miles and miles, and you rode a trail that was as good as one of your local trails but felt like one of your local trails, it would be a disappointing trail. Because, why did I travel all that distance?

Mountain bike tourists seek experiences that provide lasting memories (Young 2008). In particular, mountain bike tourists sought something different than what they were used to through a trip to the circumpolar north. Mountain bike tourists were searching for something to write home about. They emphasized that when a destination was unique, they were excited to tell people how great the experience was. Travel to the Arctic is not an easy task, and as a result tourists invest a lot of time and money into their trip. Mountain bike tourists expressed a desire for an experience that is different from what they normally have. The uniqueness can come from a variety of different factors or attributes, but something has to be unique.

Participants attributed many factors needed to create this uniqueness for them. It could be something as simple as different trees, or a different trail surface than they are used to riding. Many participants indicated that different scenery could also differentiate one experience from another.

In many regions around the world, signature bike trails have come to define a region's mountain bike culture (Young 2008). Signature trails help to strengthen a regions' trail network and draw tourists into a destination. Typically, signature trails offer unique backcountry experiences, with stunning scenery and offering a sense of physical accomplishment (Young 2008). Many of these trails have been granted "epic" status by the International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA). IMBA claims that "if you are a mountain biker, this is your bucket list. Every single one of the mountain bike trails listed on this page will blow your mind. Guaranteed" (IMBA 2012). Many study participants indicated a clear link between IMBA's bucket list and their personal to-do lists. Mountain Hero trail in Carcross, just outside Whitehorse was granted epic status in 2011; IMBA states that the Mountain Hero trail offers stunning alpine views, historic mining artefacts, and a chance to see caribou and other wildlife (IMBA 2012). Figure 23.1 is an example of the mining history that is located along the Mountain Hero trail. Many study participants indicated that riding the Mountain Hero trail was the highlight of their trip. The majority of the participants had heard about the Mountain Hero trail before coming to the Yukon; however, it exceeded everyone's expectations.

The concept of a "bucket list," a list of to-do things that riders need to cross off, came up as a motivation for travel to the Yukon. Several riders desire to do and see things that they have not experienced yet in their lifetime. Riders suggested that "I don't want to do something I've done before. It's gotta be new." This characteristic of uniqueness was seen as being a defining factor, or at least a value-added feature, of a destination.

All participants highlighted the importance of scenic appeal as a unique destination attribute. Some riders even went as far as suggesting that scenery is one of the primary motivating factors for participation in the sport. The term scenery had



Fig. 23.1 Mining history on Mountain Hero Trail (Photo courtesy: B. Rowsell)

different meanings for different participants. However, they all indicated that the overall concept of scenery is very important to rider satisfaction about a tourism destination. One mountain bike tourist explained that “scenery is important; otherwise, I can just stay in my own backyard to ride.” Generally, participants indicated that scenic appeal makes for a great riding experience. They highlighted the importance of scenic views of mountains, and lakes, and suggested that scenic views help them put their life into perspective within the bigger picture. Figure 23.2 is an example of scenery around Carcross, Yukon. The participants also indicated the importance of scenic nature, including forests, trees, and flowers. The concept of scenery discussed by interviewees was divided into two thematic categories: views and nature. Views being when trails take riders out of the forest, and allow them a view of the larger surroundings. Nature being the natural things that riders see while in the forest, or on the trail.

At lower latitudes around the world, the majority of mountain biking takes place on trails surrounded by trees. While participants indicated that they enjoy riding in forest settings, many suggested that alpine views are important to enhancing their riding experience and making it different that they are used to. Participants discussed that scenery is not just trees; they desired to see for miles in front of and



Fig. 23.2 The view from the top of Montana Mountain, Carcross, Yukon (Photo courtesy: B. Rowsell)

behind them while riding. Many of the interviewees explained that they are attracted to mountains. Many Arctic regions allow riders to experience scenic views such as mountains, which riders identified as being spectacular to look at. Also, the increase in elevation allowed by mountains permits access to viewpoints with unobstructed views. This access is made easier by the lower tree line in Arctic regions. Most riders emphasized the appeal of alpine riding above the treeline for both the uniqueness and scenery.

Participants indicated that uniqueness can also come from the remoteness and mystique of a destination. For many riders, remote areas were also seen as pristine. One mountain bike tourist indicated that one of his favourite characteristics about riding in the Yukon was the feeling of remoteness. Figure 23.3 is an example of the remoteness of the Yukon River. Many mountain bike tourists pointed out that this sense of remoteness could be accomplished by both scenic views, or through forest settings. Participants also explained that they desire to see nature as it was meant to be – in its natural state. While on trails, riders in this study were looking for scenery they considered to be pretty and unique, which included forests, trees, nature, and wildflowers. Some tourists mentioned that they appreciate seeing wildlife on trails, and enjoy forests and wooded areas because it increases their chance of seeing wildlife. Participants explained that they enjoy viewing wildlife that they could not view at home, such as caribou and grizzly bears.



Fig. 23.3 Remoteness on the Yukon River Trail (Photo courtesy: A. Campbell)

Mystique can be related to the culture or history of a destination. Participants highlighted, though, that this type of uniqueness does not have to be on or near the trails but part of their overall tourism experience. Mountain bike tourists indicated that a nearby town could provide the desired uniqueness if it was rustic or authentic. In addition to feeling remote and having a different culture, riders said they seek out places that are unrefined, and create what they feel is a true adventure because it feels a little unsafe, giving it an edgy feel.

The quality of a mountain bike-specific holiday can best be determined by the mountain bike rides that participants take while on their trip. In particular, the quality and variety of trails ridden, and the scenic appeal of the trails add to the quality of the holiday as a whole. However, the participants required more in a great trip – they wanted something unique. The uniqueness could be related to the above-mentioned attributes, other factors of the trail, or of the trip itself. Mountain bike trails are simply the vehicle through which mountain bike tourists can experience the remoteness, wilderness, and heritage.

23.4 Implications for Arctic Tourism

The results of this study show that participants were seeking an experience that is different from anything they have done before, but still within their comfort zone. This can be accomplished in the circumpolar north by taking an activity that tourists

already know and feel comfortable with, and using it as a vehicle to see or experience something new to the tourist. In the case of the Yukon, trail builders have designed trails based around historic landmarks, or scenic views, or alpine areas, or a sense of remoteness to create a unique tourism experience. Other Arctic destinations may be able to capitalize on existing unique features by designing trails that allow tourists to access attributes that are notable and different. In particular, access to alpine regions, fjords, or historic and cultural areas of significance can create a unique and memorable experience for tourists. To draw tourists in, Arctic destinations can focus image-specific marketing campaigns on demonstrating the uniqueness of a location that can be most readily accessed. As an example, connecting long-distance mountain biking in the summer in Finnmark, Norway to the world-renowned Finnmarksloppet would seem to create the same appeal (Northern Norway Tourism Board [n.d.](#)). Combinations of unique features can help create an experience and perhaps play on the participants' sense of adventure.

The Yukon, as a destination, has to offer something unique to draw mountain bike tourists there. The major elements of uniqueness that the Yukon mountain bike tourism industry can capitalize on are wilderness, remoteness, and to a lesser extent, heritage, in order to develop a unique destination for mountain bikers.

Aspiring mountain biking destinations such as Whitehorse need to take advantage of the uniqueness of the destination. Because many riders have such a strong attachment to their home trails, destinations have to work hard to differentiate themselves and make their destination unique. There is no simple formula for uniqueness, as each location has to capitalize on its own characteristics. However, the information from this study indicates that the Yukon already has begun to take advantage of characteristics that are desirable by mountain bike tourists.

23.5 Conclusions

With the growth of the sport as a leisure time activity, the economic impact of mountain bike tourism is beginning to be realized and capitalized on by many destinations. Cycle tourism can be a path towards economic development. Arctic destinations such as the Yukon Territory can capitalize on increased understanding of the importance of destination attributes for mountain bike tourists to increase their tourism market share.

Destination attributes are the on-the-ground tangible features of a destination. Destination attributes help to influence where mountain bikers want to ride (Taylor 2010) and drive the tourist's choice of and substitution between destinations (Moran et al. 2006).

Understanding the attributes that attract mountain bike tourists to a destination can help destinations offer an enjoyable vacation and can assist destinations in capitalizing on the mountain bike tourism market. There are many specific attributes that mountain bike tourists value. Great trails alone are not enough to satisfy

mountain bike tourists because there are many great trails worldwide to choose from; destinations have to offer more to give mountain bike tourists something to write home about.

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