



# Small-scale event sport tourism: A case study in sustainable tourism<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have suggested that small-scale sports events may be a sustainable form of tourism development for communities (e.g., Higham, 1999). The purpose of this study was to examine six small-scale sports events and the work of a local sports commission in the context of the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. Small-scale sports events are largely competitor or parent-as-spectator based, often annual, and attract little media attention. The six events were: a marathon, Senior Games, archery, soccer, softball, and swimming. The participants or spectators of the six events were surveyed onsite or online over an 18-month period and additional data from the sports commission, where relevant, were included. Sample sizes ranged from  $n = 68$  to  $n = 447$ . The results suggest that a small-scale sports event portfolio consistent with a community's infrastructure and human and cultural capital may be a viable form of sustainable tourism development.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing critique regarding the sustainability of positive legacies from hosting mega sports events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup (Smith, 2009). Concerns have been raised about the financial burdens (Lee & Taylor, 2006), the utility of the facilities after the event (Hiller, 2006), the environmental impacts (Chernushenko, 1996), and negative social legacies such as resident displacement (Hall & Hodges, 1996). Even the legacy of increased tourism in the post event years has been questioned (Brown, 2006). All of these raise issues about the efficacy of developing national sport tourism initiatives around large-scale sports events, a policy Swart (1998) has questioned in relation to South Africa. As the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) begin a renewed focus on sport tourism and have introduced the concept of sustainability into the discussion (UNWTO International Summit on Tourism, Sport and Mega-events, February 2010), it is time to examine sustainable development through sport tourism. In his call for a more critical analysis of the impacts of mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games, Higham (1999) proposed that communities wishing to develop sport tourism should focus on regular season sports or hosting smaller scale sports events. He suggested, "the tourism and economic development opportunities presented by sporting occasions of a more modest scale are generally positive" (p. 87). He also introduced the idea that small-scale sport tourism may "comply with the principles of sustainable tourism more so than sporting mega events" (p. 87). To illustrate this suggestion Higham pointed out that small-scale sport tourism tends to generate a reliable flow of visitors, use existing infrastructure, be an appropriate size for the community, and to require very little in the way of public funding.

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In the US, sports commissions have played an integral role in establishing small-scale sport tourism as a viable sector of an existing tourism industry, or providing a reason to visit a community if no prior tourism sector exists. Sports commissions may work at the state, county or city levels; they may be part of a convention and visitors bureau or may comprise a stand-alone non-profit agency. The National Association of Sports Commissions (NASC) was formed in 1992 with 13 members. Currently, there are almost 500 member organizations in the US, Canada, and Puerto Rico ([www.sportscommissions.org](http://www.sportscommissions.org)). This is a testament to the interest in hosting small-scale sport tourism among communities in North America. However, very little empirical research exists that has focused on the tourism-related benefits and other impacts that small-scale event sport tourism can have for a community, or the idea that small-scale sport tourism is a form of sustainable development. Don Schumacher, current Executive Director of the NASC in a presentation to parks and recreation directors about the potential for economic development through small-scale sport tourism said, “A participant-based, or grass-roots event can produce hundreds of thousands of dollars in visitor spending,” the national average being about \$300,000 (USD) (Schumacher, 2007). He also noted that some of the trends within these events include: “The younger the athlete, the more people travel with them;” “More people travel with girls/female athletes;” and “63% of the events held are for 12–17 year olds.” Thus, economically, establishing a small-scale event portfolio for a community, especially one that encompasses youth sport seems to make sense. However, Schumacher, also emphasized that “the development of new facilities should be tied to unmet local needs, not tournaments/visitors,” a comment that is compatible with principles of sustainable community development in that new infrastructure should only be built with a view to long-term use by the community. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the three pillars of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) in relation to small-scale event sport tourism in the context of six small-scale sports events and the workings of a local sports commission over an 18-month period.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Sustainability

The terms sustainability, sustainable development, and sustainable tourism are often used interchangeably, however, Liu (2003) suggested that there are differences in the meanings associated with them. She proposed that sustainability is “state focused” in that it describes the condition of something over the long-term (p. 460), whereas sustainable development is process oriented and involves the management of something for the short and long-term. Indeed, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) in the Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability for future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 43). Liu described sustainable tourism as encompassing all forms of tourism that are “compatible with and contribute to sustainable development” (p. 460). The UNWTO (1993) is more explicit and stipulates “sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future.”

The focus on tourists as a key part of sustainable tourism is an important point as the pervasive understandings of sustainable tourism tend to be environmentally and host population focused. Indeed, Cater (1993) added tourist satisfaction as a key dimension in developing sustainable tourism. Liu (2003) developed this idea further and she argued that tourism demand must be part of any sustainable tourism development plan as destinations cannot assume tourists will continue to visit, and that visitation numbers will grow. Tourist preferences and motivations change and increasingly tourism is subject to external forces such as natural disasters, terrorism, and economic recession, among others. Thus, while natural and cultural resources are important parts of the tourism product, it is important to understand that sustainable tourism development needs to encompass a broader vision. This vision should acknowledge that tourism development is dynamic and “requires simultaneously meeting the needs of the tourists, the tourist businesses, the host community and the needs for environmental protection” (Liu, 2003, p. 467). With this holistic approach the goals of sustainable tourism would be enhanced quality of life, satisfied tourists, a profitable tourism industry, and environmental protection.

Part of this broader conception of sustainability is the idea that sustainable development encompasses three dimensions, economic, social and environmental, or what is commonly called the triple bottom line, an accounting term coined by Elkington (1997). Originally the concept was used in corporate accountability, or what is now more commonly referred to as corporate social responsibility. Today it is an approach to sustainability that recognizes the interdependence of the three domains and has been adopted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization for sustainable tourism initiatives (UNWTO, 2004). As part of the 2007 Davos Declaration the need for urgent action in regards to climate change was raised and a quadruple bottom line with a fourth pillar of climate responsiveness was proposed (UNWTO, 2007). In continued collaboration with the United Nations Environmental Programme and other agencies, a call was made to integrate the mitigation of climate change into the “mainstream environmental activities” of these agencies (Simpson, Gössling, Scott, Hall, & Gladin, 2008). Other scholars have proposed an alternative fourth pillar, that of the institutional dimensions of policy and political governance (e.g., Cottrell, Vaske, Shen, & Ritter, 2007). Thus, while definitions of sustainability continue to be debated, this study works with the most widely accepted approach to sustainable tourism that of the triple bottom line of social, environmental, and economic (UNWTO, 2004), while acknowledging the need to address climate responsiveness as part of the environmental pillar.

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