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The role of belonging and affective economies in managing outdoor recreation: Mountain biking and the disengagement tipping point

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ABSTRACT

Mountain Biking is seen as important activity for growing outdoor recreation participation. Increasingly places are marketed as mountain biking places with supporting legal rights of access in place. However, in this study of the Cairngorms National Park in Scotland as in many places, mountain bikers are not always made very welcome on the ground by managers and other users. This disjuncture between promotion and provision of facilities and embodied experience can lead to mixed messages being received by mountain bikers and create challenges for the regulation of outdoor recreation which relies heavily on informal norms. This paper explores how this disjoint is experienced by participants on the ground and how it affects the ability of mountain biking to co-exist with more established activities, and wider ecologies. It shows that such inconsistences or a lack of welcome could come at a price for co-existence, pointing in particular to how feelings of belonging and disbelonging can work to develop constructive or destructive affective economies, which profoundly shape how boundaries of outdoor citizenship are enacted. Notably, we find that a'disengagement threshold' can be reached when a mountain biker's experience of feeling'alien' ('other' or less-than-citizen) develops into more entrenched feelings of being alienated, whereupon they give up striving for acceptance and became disconnected from informal normative agency. The paper thus re-centres emotions as crucial in understanding how outdoor recreation is regulated through the formal and informal disciplining of moving bodies, and highlights belonging as an under-acknowledged and under-utilised mechanism of management.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- A sense of belonging, and associated emotional economies, are under-acknowledged and under-utilised mechanisms of outdoor recreation management.
- Mountain bikers receive mixed messages regarding their welcome in the outdoors as their participation is encouraged by proponents of health and business but resisted in practice by some land managers, recreation managers and other users through social interactions and material infrastructure.
- There are implications for regulating mountain biking – and any mixture of outdoor activities or participants - of creating sense of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.
- Attempts to limit mountain biking – especially within the legal entitlement – can be ineffective or even have the opposite effect.
- Inducing guilt or 'feeling bad' in such a recreationist perceived to be acting inappropriately does not necessarily lead to more appropriate behaviour.
- A more overt multi-use ethic may aid co-existence and safety (e.g. walkers and mountain bikers expecting and attuned to each other).

1. Introduction

As in many places, mountain biking is increasingly encouraged in the Cairngorms National Park (hereafter CNP, or The Park) for reasons of boosting both wellbeing and economic development in

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Scotland (CNPA, 2015; Rocket Science UK Ltd, 2012). Mountain biking is regarded as a high-spend activity with particular appeal for youth and family participation, which is increasingly noted amid growing alarm about childhood obesity (King, 2010; SMBDC, 2010; UHI, 2013). However, those advocating greater mountain biking participation are not always those having to deal with its consequences. In the case of the CNP, businesses are encouraged to increase recreational visitors - and increase visitor satisfaction through a sense of welcome and belonging - through the Park Authority's 'Make it Yours' campaign and branding.[1] Yet it is land managers, recreation managers and other users that have to deal with the effects of increased visitors (those citing cycling as the main reason for their visit has risen from 1% in the 2003/4 Cairngorms Visitor Survey to 7% in the 2014–15 Cairngorms Visitor Survey[2]). Mountain bikers are endorsed in the Park in so far as they are regularly used in images and text in marketing material to attract people to the Park, with rides promoted on official websites[3] ranging from easy, low-level wide forest tracks to demanding mountain top routes.[3] However, as seen in this paper, they are not always made welcome on the ground, reflecting several other studies demonstrating conflicts between mountain bikers and other users or managers (e.g. Carothers, Vaske, & Donnelly, 2001; Cessford, 2003; Chiu & Kriwoken, 2003; Heer, Rusterholz, & Baur, 2003; Rossi, Pickering, & Byrne, 2016; Ramthun, 1995; Tumes, 2007).

In Scotland, mountain bikers became legally classified as outdoor citizens through the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 (hereafter LRSA). The Act provides the basis for all paths to be multi-use paths (i.e. setting up a presumption against zoning different use types) by granting all forms of non-motorised mobility access rights to virtually all land and water if behaving 'responsibly'. The Act is supported by practical principles outlined in an associated 'Code' (SNH, 2005). Prior to this legal classification, ambiguity reigned. Access for mountain biking was neither encouraged nor specifically legally sanctioned. The case of public rights of access in Scotland thus provides an excellent real-life laboratory for examining how mountain bikers come to share space with other land users. It illustrates very well how legal rights of outdoor citizenship – as with any citizenship – only become meaningful when enacted in and through embodied practice, and with the tacit acceptance of others, and the myriad social and environmental contingencies upon which this depends (Brown, 2012, 2015; Flemsaeter, Setten, & Brown et al., 2015; Matless, 1998; Parker, 2006, 2007).

Even where legal rights are in place, any increase in the volume and diversity of recreation demand poses two key challenges relating: firstly, to how recreational space can be shared by a growing range of people, technologies and practices, and thus how different ways of 'making sense' of landscapes can be harmonised (Brown, 2012; Edensor, 2006), and; secondly, how to deal with the implications for infrastructure and ecologies (Pickering, Hill, Newsome, & Leung, 2010; White, Waskey, Brodehl, & Foti, 2006), especially in protected areas like National Parks.

Any lack of integration between promotion, provision of facilities and management can lead to mixed messages being received by mountain bikers as to their expectations of what they can do, and where. Using an interpretive approach drawing upon qualitative fieldwork in CNP, this paper explores how this disjoint is experienced – particularly emotionally – by walkers and mountain bikers on the ground and how related emotional dynamics affect the ability of mountain biking to co-exist with more established activities, and wider ecologies. So far emotions have tended to be studied indirectly or implicitly in relation to recreation conflict, for example, as components of place attachment (Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003), social values (Rossi et al., 2016) and attitudes (Heberlein, 2012), rather than explored centrally (Vittersø, Chipeniuk, Skår, & Vistad, 2004). Moreover, little attention has been paid to the relational dynamics of how the lived experience of subjective feelings matters for generating a sense of belonging amongst user groups. Therefore, informed by theories of belonging relating to citizenship, neotribes and affect – and particularly Ahmed (2004) concept of affective economies – this analysis highlights the role of emotions in the normative (dis)ordering of outdoor recreation spaces, especially as they work to bound insiders and outsiders in relation to particular communities of recreationists.

2. Mountain biking and the boundaries of outdoor citizenship

2.1. Citizenship, belonging and the (un)making of outdoor citizens

Once seen as a fixed allocation of rights and responsibilities (Marshall, 1950 [2009]), citizenship is now more typically conceived of as a fluid, processual, everyday accomplishment; a relational struggle over who belongs and who does not, who is an insider and an outsider of various layered communities interlinked across social and spatial scales (Chouinard, 2009; Desforges, Jones, & Woods, 2005; Isin, 2002, 2009). Citizens are defined morally as well as legally through ongoing, embodied and contested practices of bounding who counts as a member of particular groups, and thus delimits who can conduct themselves in particular ways and access associated resources. As emphasised by Isin (2002), the production of the noncitizen is part and parcel of the production of the citizen. Accordingly, citizenship is not given, but involves the active negotiation of acceptance and belonging, and therefore has to be learned, and continually worked at (Hall, Coffey, & Williamson, 1999).

Recent scholarship has made clear that movement and mobility are central to the making and unmaking of citizen subjects, and thus how people move affects whether they get membership of particular 'communities' and vice versa. In this area the work of Cresswell has been pivotal (e.g. Cresswell, 2006, 2013), underscoring how mobility is produced as the subjectivities of self and other are produced, and how "the citizen has to be protected from others who move differently – the vagabond or the 'alien'" Cresswell (2013: 110). We thus become aware of how groups posit particular forms of mobility as part of a universal citizen identity, which works to mask and alienate a multiplicity of mobile practices (Spinney, Aldred, & Brown, 2015), and prompts us to critically examine how the extent of citizenship affects particular communities of mobility.

There is clear resonance here for debates about outdoor citizenship addressing socially and materially situated normativities of how nature *ought* to be engaged with and made sense of, and how they are used to judge who counts as a legitimate citizen of the outdoors (Edensor, 2006; Matless, 1998). Although in most countries there are laws, formal rules and codes framing rights of public access, the disciplining of outdoor recreation leans heavily on informal norms to delineate and 'police' appropriate ways to behave in particular situations in relation to the environment and to other users (Brown, 2012, 2014; Flemsaeter et al., 2015; Parker, 2006, 2007). This is due not least to outdoor recreation being a

[1] http://visitcairngorms.com/makeityours [accessed 4.5.16].

[2] For context, 18% of visitors cite 'walking/hillwalking' as the main reason for their visit in the 2014/15 survey. It is thought that at least 1.4 M people visit the Cairngorms each year (http://visitcairngorms.com/keyfacts, accessed 4.5.16) which means an estimated 98,000 people visiting p.a. with cycling/mountain biking as their main reason and 252,000 p.a. with walking/hillwalking as their main reason. Many visitors walk and cycle as part of their visit.

[3] http://visitcairngorms.com/onabike [accessed 20.6.15]; Highland MTB online guide: http://www.highlandeguide.co.uk/ [accessed 20.6.15].

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