



What factors make rail trails successful as tourism attractions? Developing a conceptual framework from relevant literature



Paul Taylor

Faculty of Higher Education William Angliss Institute, 555 La Trobe Street, Melbourne 3000, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Some outdoor recreational trails are becoming significant tourism drawcards for destinations where they exist. One segment of this growing collection of destination trails is rail trails. Converted from abandoned railway lines, these outdoor recreational trails are being developed by local government bodies and community groups in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Advocates for rail trails argue that their development provides opportunities to conserve heritage assets, provide recreational opportunities for local people and attract tourists to their regions. This article proposes a framework that identifies factors that potentially contribute to the success of these types of trails as tourism attractions. Whilst little research has been done in this area, there are various studies in the broader tourism attractions literature that offer clues as to what some of these success factors might be. This study examines this literature as well as research in other relevant disciplines, such as recreation, park management and leisure to construct a framework that might be relevant. The applicability of the framework is examined by considering iconic destination rail trails in Australia, New Zealand and America.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Some rail trails are emerging as significant tourism attractions in destinations. Understanding what makes them successful as tourism attractions should be especially useful for the multitude of individuals and organisations that are responsible for planning, managing or advocating for rail trails or other outdoor recreation based trails, especially those with tourism aspirations for their trail. The framework identifies the following factors as being relevant:

- The long distance linear nature of rail trails means that some form of cooperation between stakeholders is essential.
- A systematic professional approach to marketing is very important. Organisations with specialist skills and knowledge in these areas should be responsible for managing this aspect of the trail.
- A focus by management and relevant stakeholders on the visitor experience - pre, during and post is critical.
- Sustainable forms of funding for ongoing trail maintenance and development is essential.
- Local community support through the provision of services (private and public) is required. Non-profit groups can provide a focal point for community engagement.
- Linkages with secondary attractions add to the visitor experience.
- Gateway towns or hubs provide entry and exit points and the provision of services such as accommodation, restaurants, bike hire and information.
- Interpretation of unique trail features such as railway heritage is a key component of the visitor experience.
- Private enterprise is often pivotal in co-creating the experience with visitors.

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1. Introduction

Outdoor trails in various forms have always been an important resource for humans. Before mass forms of transport they were

E-mail address: paultay@angliss.edu.au

important routes for people who moved by foot from one location to another for cultural, religious, exploration, food gathering or trade reasons. Many trails today still have a utilitarian purpose and serve as transport thoroughfares for those travelling to attend some type of event or for more mundane daily activities such as work, school or shopping. The rise in urbanisation, changes to work and leisure patterns and the protection of lands for conservation, particularly in more developed countries, has seen an increase in the popularity of trails used for recreation purposes. For these users, trails are 'settings for activities and experiences' (Moore & Shafer, 2001, p. 2) rather than simply a route to get from one location to another.

Moore and Ross (1998) have suggested that at least five broad overlapping types of trails exist in the context of parks and recreation. These include: (1) traditional backcountry trails, (2) recreational greenways (3) multiple-use trails (4) Water trails and (5) rail-trails. Trails from their fifth category are the focus of this article. Rail trails have been defined by Reis and Jellum (2012) as 'multi-use trails used for transportation and recreation, either sited on former railway lines or that run continuously beside an active railway for most of its length' (p. 134). They serve several purposes. Many are used by locals for health and fitness activities, or as transport thoroughfares (Abildso, Zizzi, Selin & Gordon, 2012; Bichis-Lupas & Moisey, 2001; Merom, Bauman, Vita & Close, 2003; Mundet & Coenders, 2010). Others, particularly longer trails in rural or regional locations, have become an important recreational resource not only for locals, but also for cycle tourists who travel considerable distances to ride on them (Beeton, 2009; Reis & Jellum, 2012; Willard & Beeton, 2012). Despite this importance, research on rail trails is still somewhat limited, although it is growing.

Rail trails that attract a significant number of non-locals have been described by Tomes and Knoch (2009) as destination trails. These trails share characteristics that make them different to smaller community rail trails. The most obvious is that they have attributes that attract a substantial number of non-local users who are overnight or day visitors. These attributes appear to be related to factors such as length, location, landscape and their unique rail heritage (Reis & Jellum, 2012). Many are longer than forty kilometres and pass through regional landscapes and small towns which exhibit natural, rural and heritage characteristics that provide visitors with opportunities for physical challenge, social interaction, food and wine experiences and cultural or heritage appreciation. Interactions with local people are also important elements of the tourism experience for visitors (Blackwell, 2002).

Given the majority of users of destination rail trails are cycle tourists (Beeton, 2009; Central Otago District Council, 2011; Tomes & Knoch, 2013), it is worth noting the work of researchers such as Lamont (2009), Lumsden (see Roberts, Hall, Grant & Lumsdon (2001)) and Downward and Lumsdon (2001) who have all spent time defining cycle tourism. Of these Lamont's (2009, p. 20) definition is the most comprehensive:

Trips involving a minimum distance of 40 km from a person's home and an overnight stay (for overnight trips), or trips involving a minimum non-cycling round trip component of 50 km and a minimum four hour period away from home (for day trips) of which cycling, involving active participation or passive observation, for holiday, recreation, leisure and/or competition, is the main purpose for that trip.

This, it must be stated, is an Australian-centric view (other countries such as Canada require day visitors to travel 80 km from their home to be considered a tourist), but nevertheless it clearly demonstrates that for the most part, destination rail trails could be considered to be a specialised form of cycle tourism, albeit that these visitors are not 'hard-core cyclists' (Beeton, 2009).

Lumsdon's thoughts on cycle tourism, cited in Roberts et al.

(2001, p.173) are also informative. His thoughts that 'the cycle tourism offering is essentially intangible and brings benefits such as 'having fun' or viewing 'beautiful countryside'; it involves a wide range of service and societal elements' reflect a central tenet of Moore and Shafer's (2001) views of trails being about activities and intangibles such as experiences.

Published literature on rail trails (both academic and industry based) has tended to focus on various forms of impacts. These include: economic impacts (Beeton, 2009; Bowker, Bergstrom & Gill, 2007; Busbee, 2001; Cope, Doxford, & Hill, 1998; Cox et al., 2011; Gill, 2004; Palau, Forgas, Blasco, & Ferrer, 2012; Ryan, Trinh, Sun, & Li, 2014; Tomes & Knoch, 2009); health and physical impacts (Abildso et al., 2012; Merom, Bauman, Vita & Close, 2003; VanBlarcom & Janmaat, 2013); recreation demand (Betz, Bergstrom & Bowker, 2003); rail trail users and experiences (Spencer, 2010; Willard & Beeton, 2012); community and visitor benefit (Blackwell, 2002; Mundet & Coenders, 2010); rural restructuring (Dowsett, 2008); legal issues (Ferster, 2006) and sustainable development (Reis & Jellum, 2012).

Few of these studies explicitly mention tourism or indeed discuss the potential for rail trails to be considered as cycle tourism attractions. Those that do include Willard and Beeton (2012), Reis and Jellum (2012), Beeton (2009), Mundet and Coenders (2010), Ryan, Trinh, Sun, and Li (2014) and Reis, Lovelock & Jellum (2014). However only Reis and Jellum (2012) and Reis, Lovelock and Jellum (2014) provide some sort of conceptual framework for rail trails as tourism products. Nevertheless while academic research is limited, there is considerable evidence to suggest that rail trails are becoming important tourism attractions for destinations and that organisations responsible for tourism planning and development are increasingly keen to develop them in their locations.

In Australia, the state of Victoria has created a Great Trails program that promotes fifteen outdoor recreational trails as tourism attractions. These trails range from long distance walking and cycling trails to well developed mountain bike parks. Five of the trails are rail trails including the iconic Murray to Mountains Rail Trail. The state government in its trails strategy (The State Government of Victoria, 2014) lists the Murray to Mountains Rail Trail as being one of only two cycling trails in the state that are of international and national significance. These trails are considered tourism destinations in their own right with the ability to attract international and interstate visitors. Studies by Beeton (2003; 2009) support this. A host of other rail trails are considered to be of state significance, including Australia's longest rail trail, the recently completed Great Victorian Rail Trail. Supporters of other potential rail trails in Australia such as the Northern Rivers Rail Trail in New South Wales (Broome, 2013) and the Busselton-Flinders Bay Rail Trail (City of Busselton, 2013) in Western Australia highlight the potential of these trails to act as tourism attractions for their respective destinations. Another heavily promoted cycle trail in Western Australia, the 900km Mundi Bidi Trail, partly follows abandoned timber tramways.

In New Zealand, the Otago Central Rail Trail is considered the pre-eminent cycle tourism trail in the country (Blackwell, 2002; Central Otago Tourism, 2012; Reis & Jellum, 2012). Its success has been the inspiration for building a national network of cycling trails known as Nga Haerenga – The New Zealand Cycle Trail (Ryan, Trinh, Sun & Li, 2014). New Zealand's Prime Minister John Key even went as far as to suggest that the idea behind Nga Haerenga was 'to build a nationwide network of cycle trails that would emulate the benefits of the Otago Central Rail Trail and promote New Zealand as an international cycling destination' (Stark, 2012, para. 11). Six of the twenty-three trails in the network are along disused railway or tramlines.

In the United States, studies completed on rail trails such as the

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