

Youth mountain biking at Bedgebury Active England project

In 2005/6, the Forestry Commission was awarded funding under the Active England programme to increase community participation in physical activity at Bedgebury Forest in Kent, with a particular emphasis on young people, as a key target group. This initiative was one of five Active England funded woodland projects. Mountain biking, as a popular youth sport, was promoted under the scheme and provides the case study for this research (completed in 2010) on young people's experiences of countryside leisure. The findings show that certain wooded spaces are important for youth leisure, as they afford a space away from the gaze of adults and from the conflicts associated with some other (urban) leisure space.



"I prefer woodland stuff 'cause you're out in nature, open space, fresh air and it's a designated space you don't have to worry about "ooh I shouldn't be riding here"". [Male 15, Bedgebury].

Background

Active England projects aimed to increase participation in sport and physical activity generally, but with a particular focus on key under-represented groups. Through Active England funding, Bedgebury has been transformed into a leisure destination orientated towards encouraging active lifestyles, particularly through mountain biking. Funding was used to create a 12 kilometre single track cross-country mountain biking trail, a freeride area with elevated wooden platforms and a section of specially shaped mud mounds for dirt jumping, a family cycle track, as well as bike hire and shower facilities.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- examine the importance of leisure space in relation to youth identity and lifestyle.
- address the neglect of countryside leisure in the theorisation of youth identity.
- understand the experiences of young people of mountain biking.

Methods

- The study involved 40 participants aged between 13 and 25 years old who went mountain biking at Bedgebury during 2007-08. Participants were recruited via the local cycling club and through a local mountain biking forum.
- The research employed semi-structured interviews, accompanied rides and participant observation.
- Data from the interviews and participant observation were analysed and themes were identified. These themes were broadly categorised into three areas: identity and lifestyle; identity and space; and how the sites were accessed.

Findings

Youth mountain bikers can generally be divided into two broad lifestyle groups. These groups use different types of equipment, hold divergent lifestyle values and form different kinds of relationships with woodland spaces. Dirt jump/downhill/freeride forms of mountain biking (referred to as DDF) were undertaken in the freeride area and were considered high risk by participants. Cross-country riding involved following a designated single track cycle trail and was considered to be an exercise in endurance and stamina. The motivations for participating in mountain biking for young women were concerned with self identity and potential health benefits, and for young men with group identity and personal challenge. There were strong connections between youth mountain biking identities and the use of woodlands. Participants described how woodlands provided an important place to escape and relax.

Recommendations

Bedgebury provides an important setting for a wide range of youth mountain biking lifestyles, which are accessed by young people from both the local area and from further afield. This research has highlighted the importance of woodland as a leisure space and as part of the process of building identity in young people. For many participants mountain biking is a way of exerting control over spaces, and a form of resistance to mainstream, adult society. In terms of future opportunities managers could consider the following:

- Mountain biking is a potential tool for woodland managers to consider in engaging young people in outdoor recreation in woodland spaces.
- Awareness of the difference between DDF and cross-country riders can enable managers to create appropriate opportunities for these different groups.
- Targeted strategies may be needed to involve young women, such as women only mountain bike groups.
- Mountain biking opportunities for young people can be used to promote health and well-being.
- While mountain biking can provide important benefits to participants, managers need to be aware of the legal and health and safety implications of such activities and any potential negative impacts on the conservation of flora and fauna, and on other countryside user groups.

Partners

School of Environment and Technology, University of Brighton and Forest Research

For further information contact: Liz.O'Brien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

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Reports and Publications

King, K. (2010) Lifestyle, identity and young people's experiences of mountain biking. Forestry Commission Research Note 7.

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