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Matthew James Lamont  
*Southern Cross University*

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# BICYCLE TOURISTS IN AUSTRALIA: INFRASTRUCTURE, INFORMATION & SUPPORT SERVICE REQUIREMENTS

Matthew Lamont  
Southern Cross University  
Australia  
Email: [m.lamont.10@scu.edu.au](mailto:m.lamont.10@scu.edu.au)

## ABSTRACT

Bicycle tourism is developing as a growing segment of the global tourism market, particularly in European countries. Previous studies into bicycle tourism have examined demand-side characteristics of bicycle tourism such as demographics, trip characteristics, and economic impact. However, little is known regarding the supply-side factors that attract bicycle tourists to a destination. It is the aim of this PhD study to better understand the infrastructure, information, and support service needs of bicycle tourists. Such knowledge may facilitate more effective planning and management, and maximisation of benefits to destinations that elect to strategically attract bicycle tourists to their region.

**Key words:** Bicycle tourism, regional, infrastructure, special interest

## INTRODUCTION

### *A Shift in Global Tourism*

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a trend amongst consumers in which traditional mass-tourism products have declined in popularity. Crowded seaside resorts have been displaced by more authentic forms of tourism, influenced by personal interests of the individual (Poon, 1994). The emergence of *special interest tourism*, as such new forms of tourism have been dubbed, has been influenced by factors such as increased leisure time, higher disposable incomes, and the desire of many to live a healthier lifestyle (Hall, 1992). Subsequently, numerous niche markets have emerged within the tourism industry such as adventure, sport, and health tourism (Hall, 1992).

Positioned under the umbrella of adventure tourism (Ewert, 1987; Williams & Soutar, 2005), bicycle tourism has been identified as an increasingly popular niche market within the global tourism industry (Solly, 2003). In European countries this form of tourism is claimed to be growing at a rate of 4% per annum (Jabaudon, 2003), and is forecast to be worth upwards of £14 billion annually by 2020 (Sustrans, 1999).

### *Bicycle Tourism Defined*

A universal definition of bicycle tourism is yet to be accepted, however Ritchie (1998: 568-569) characterised a bicycle tourist as:

A person who is away from their home town or country for a period not less than 24 hours or one night, for the purpose of a vacation or holiday, and for whom using a bicycle as a mode of transport during this time away is an integral part of their holiday or vacation. This vacation may be independently organised or part of a commercial tour and may include the use of transport support services and any type of formal and/or informal accommodation.

Additionally, Jabaudon (2003) opined that local cycling trips such as to the shops, to work, or to school should be excluded from any definition of bicycle tourism. Simonsen and Jorgenson (1998) add that racing cyclists should also be excluded as they are motivated by

competition as opposed to recreation. Above all, it is widely held that for a tourism experience to be classified as bicycle tourism, a bicycle must be the main mode of transport, or cycling must be an integral component of the journey (Lumsdon, 1996; Ritchie, 1998; Simonsen & Jorgenson, 1998; Sustrans, 1999).

#### *Bicycle Tourism in Regional Areas*

According to Lane (1994), regional communities have been pressured into undergoing a process of economic restructuring in order to remain viable places for people to live and work. In many instances, tourism has been embraced as a partial solution to the economic anguish of many regional areas (Butler, Hall, & Jenkins, 1997). Bicycle tourism is a form of tourism most suited to taking place in regional areas. Cyclists prefer the varied terrain, appealing scenery, and low traffic levels of regional settings (Schuett & Holmes, 1996), attributes not usually offered in crowded urban centres.

The presence of bicycle tourists at regional destinations has the potential to benefit a wide range of business sectors. These tourists spend money on items such as accommodation, food and beverages, groceries, cultural and natural attractions, transport and bicycle-related products and services (EcoGIS Consultants, 2000). Ritchie and Hall (1999) suggest that bicycle tourists may be valuable to regional destinations as they have been found to have a longer length of stay than 'other' tourists, and subsequently generate a higher total spend per trip. These authors found that bicycle tourists in the south island of New Zealand spent on average \$3201 per person per trip, compared with \$2776 for international visitors to New Zealand.

#### *Requirements of Bicycle Tourists: The Need for further Research*

There is a distinct lack of knowledge regarding the needs of bicycle tourists. Much existing literature in this area is speculative in nature, a position supported by Ritchie (1998: 569), who stated that "assumptions have been made as to what cycle tourists require with respect to infrastructure without adequate research into the demand side". Further, Downward and Lumsdon (2001) reported that it is common for recreational cycling routes to be developed based upon the attributes that recreational managers feel is required, as opposed to attributes required by the actual or potential route users. Subsequently, these authors called for further enquiry in order to better understand the requirements of bicycle tourists.

Ritchie (1999) proposed that four elements combine together to form the primary bicycle tourism product. They are accommodation, road networks and alternative routes, signposting, and transport and bicycle tourism support services. While Ritchie's proposition is useful in broadly describing the requirements of bicycle tourists, a detailed inquiry into each of the four dimensions may enhance current knowledge regarding the attributes that destinations should provide in order to effectively cater for the needs of such tourists.

Thus, it is the overall aim of the present PhD study to apply and build upon Ritchie's (1999) four dimensions of the primary bicycle tourism product in an Australian setting to generate a greater understanding of the infrastructure, information, and support services required by bicycle tourists.

### **PROPOSED METHODOLOGY**

A mixed methods approach has been selected as the appropriate strategy for this study, and shall be carried out over two stages. Stage one of the research involves administering a self-completion questionnaire to persons who are avid bicycle tourists, or who have undertaken bicycle tours previously.

In order to access such persons, a self-completion questionnaire shall be distributed to a sample of subscribers to *Australian Cyclist* magazine during mid-2007. *Australian Cyclist* is a bi-monthly bicycle touring publication with a circulation of 12,000 copies and subscription base of approximately 6,000. A sample of 2,000 subscribers shall receive a self-completion questionnaire and pre-paid return envelope in the April issue of *Australian Cyclist*. Adopting a strategy such as this provides a cost-effective means of accessing a high concentration of persons with an interest in bicycle touring.

A quantitative survey instrument has been developed, which is divided into six sections and utilises a mix of open-ended and closed questions. Many closed questions employ visual analogue scale responses in which respondents place a vertical mark on a line bordered by textual descriptors such as 'not important at all' and 'very important'.

The concluding section of the survey instrument requests respondents' participation in stage two of the research. Respondents are asked if they would be interested in participating further by way of a telephone interview, and if so are directed to advise the researcher by telephone or email. Stage two of the research is a qualitative inquiry, which at the time of writing this paper is yet to be designed. It is intended that stage two will serve to add depth to data collected in stage one.

## **CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS**

Bicycle tourism may serve as an effective vehicle for diversifying and adding strength to regional economies that have suffered from the effects of global forces such as industrialisation and urbanisation. Previous studies have set out to understand the bicycle tourist through investigating aspects such as demographics, trip characteristics, motivations, and expenditure levels (see for instance Jabaudon, 2003; Ritchie, 1998; Simonsen & Jorgenson, 1998). However, few empirical studies have paid specific attention to supply-side attributes that facilitate bicycle tourism. As such, little is known regarding factors that serve to attract bicycle tourists to particular destinations.

The present study sets out to apply and build upon four elements proposed by Ritchie (1999) that are thought to comprise the primary bicycle tourism product. A possible outcome of this research is a model that may serve as a planning and management tool for regional destinations that may wish to attract bicycle tourists in order to develop the local economy. Such knowledge may lead to enhanced experiences for bicycle tourists, more effective leveraging of benefits for destinations, and the further development of this form of tourism regional areas.

The next phase of this research involves pilot testing the self-completion questionnaire that has been developed, followed by formal administration of the questionnaire to the study sample. It is envisaged that preliminary results may begin to emerge towards late 2007.

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