Sport Tourism and the Discourse of Social Cohesion at the World Pond Hockey Championship Event

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ABSTRACT

Canada’s World Pond Hockey Championship (WPHC) event is examined to show how the concept “social cohesion” functions as a discourse through which athletes, organizers and local residents articulate their experience of the event. No attempt is made to measure levels of social cohesion in the study community as an empirical fact. Instead, the authors’ objective is to show how a distinctive community has been created around this sport-based tourism event, one with its own particular discourse of social cohesion. The authors’ analysis is based on data collected through non-participant observation and dozens of semi-structured and unstructured interviews at the 2007 World Pond Hockey Championship event and through supplementary interviews and document analysis (press coverage, printed tourism promotional materials) activities conducted over the following four years, until mid-2011. The authors’ findings show how a distinctive social community has been created around this sport-based tourism event, one with its own particular discourse of social cohesion.

Keywords: Discourse, Regional Sport Tourism, Rural Sport Tourism, Social Cohesion, World Pond Hockey Championship

INTRODUCTION

In this paper the concept social cohesion is examined as a discourse -- as an expression of human experience -- rather than as a phenomenon in social ecology to be measured quantitatively. That is to say, our concern is with how people perceive and articulate their experience of a sport-based tourism event in terms of a social cohesion discourse which works to construct a distinctive community of association among event participants and volunteers from the host community. We argue that such a community is constructed around the World Pond Hockey Championship event by its various participants, event organizers and volunteers, and residents of the host community. Plaster Rock is a community in northwestern New Brunswick, situated...
along the Tobique River with a population of approximately 1,200 people. The community and surrounding area is reliant on the unstable forestry industry for its primary source employment and has consequently been experiencing great economic uncertainty and overall decline for many years. In response the community has pursued the development of a tourism industry to offset resource dependency and the World Pond Hockey Championship event stands as a prime example of this.

The research findings reported here help to assess the extent to which a sense of “attachment to place” and a concomitant sense of trust and well-being in rural places can be developed and reinforced through sport tourism activities how these are perceived and articulated by WPHC participants and residents of the host community. These findings aid in assessing the extent to which a sense of place attachment -- and a concomitant sense of trust and well-being -- in rural communities can be developed and reinforced through the hosting of sport-based tourism events such as the WPHC. More to the point, our objective is to show how a distinctive community has been created around this sport-based tourism event, one with its own particular discourse of social cohesion. No attempt is made to measure levels of social cohesion in the study community as an empirical fact. Instead the phenomenon of social cohesion is operationalized as a discourse through which event participants and host community stakeholders both perceive and articulate their experience of the World Pond Hockey Championship event.

The concept of social cohesion has attracted very little attention in the sport and communication literature though it has received enormous attention in many other social science contexts since the late 1980s. In terms of its constitutive dimensions, social cohesion is often used to describe a process more than a condition or state. In general terms social cohesion can be understood as an ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity based on trust, hope and reciprocity. In this sense social cohesion is concerned with a willingness to co-operate and engage in voluntary partnerships. Social cohesion manifests directly in socially cohesive activities and practices – such as participation in formal and informal social networks, group activities and associations, and participation in civic life.

In early 2000, the Tobique Valley Centennial Arena was deemed unsafe for use, as there was fear that the roof of the structure could not withstand the winter snowfall. In response, the community of Plaster Rock held Maritime Snowmobile Federation events on the Tobique River in 2000 and 2001 to raise money for a replacement arena. These events displayed the community as a tourist destination and provided measurable economic benefits for local businesses; however, they failed to provide significant funds towards the goal of a new arena. As a result, the World Pond Hockey Championship was created to kick-start a new fundraising campaign for the Tobique Valley. The name “World Pond Hockey Championship” was trademarked and in 2002 the village of Plaster Rock, New Brunswick became the home of the first ever international pond hockey event. The inaugural WPHC was staged in 2002 and featured forty teams from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and the U.S. state of Maine. This small event has grown to include 120 teams at the 2012 event. Teams are now comprised of players from every province in Canada, thirty-five U.S. states and a total of fifteen countries from around the globe including Germany, Ireland, Egypt and the Cayman Islands.

The goal of constructing a new arena facility provided the initial impetus for establishing the event as a fundraising vehicle. Since achieving their goal with the construction and opening of the new facility in 2007, the WPHC organizers have since expanded their original objective by developing multi-faceted goals which contain varying cultural, economic, social objectives. These have particular significance for framing a discourse of social cohesion around the event and are as follows:
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