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Theory in sport tourism: some critical reflections

Since the call for more theoretically situated studies in the field of sport tourism (Gibson, 2004; Weed, 2005), the past decade has seen a concerted effort within the academic community to incorporate and apply a range of quite diverse theories from an equally diverse assortment of disciplines (see Gibson, [this issue](#)). Studies published within this journal, and many other closely related periodicals, have undoubtedly helped formulate a better idea of what sport tourism is, what it does, as well as how it is experienced, and how it effects/impacts upon the experiences of others. Yet, *a better idea* is not ideal, as it draws attention to the fact that we are still very much in the ‘work in progress’ stage. Having been invited to consider the ‘BIG’ questions, the aim of this special edition was to attract thought-provoking papers that focused on the adoption and adaptation of theories and theoretical frameworks within the continued advancement of sport tourism scholarship. Although we feel that sport tourism has moved beyond Weed’s (2005) ‘bricks on the pile’ metaphor and built several robust pillars of knowledge, this field still has not necessarily developed its own theoretical underpinnings, nor has it necessarily meaningfully engaged scholars from other fields and disciplines. The idea of ‘why’ sport tourism has not necessarily theoretically progressed, and what can be done about it, is perhaps the discussion that this special issue might provoke. Although asking questions of ‘why’, and not ‘what’ or ‘how’ are often viewed through the lenses of business and organisational development (see Sinek, 2009), they are also pertinent for fields of inquiry including sport tourism. On this occasion our ‘Why?’ relates to the failure to have made bigger strides in forming a clearer body of theory to help inform us of what is or is not considered to be sport tourism. In other words, along with many others, we have found ourselves celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Journal of Sport and Tourism (JS&T) by looking back at the bigger picture and questioning ‘why’, despite a substantial increase in the sport tourism body of knowledge, the subject still appears to be standing at the same crossroads encountered by Gibson in 2005 (over a decade ago).

The answers to any ‘why?’ question are undoubtedly many, varied and open to further debate. Furthermore, they can rarely be answered at the first attempt, or in one outing. In our eyes, however, the answer to the question above is likely to live within one or more of the following three areas. First, it could be argued that the field of sport tourism remains at the pre-paradigmatic phase of its development. Henry (1964), Echtner and Jamal (1997), McCartney (2005), Chalip (2006) and Stebbins (2011) have all shared similar misgivings relating to their own fields of study (e.g. physical education, tourism, event management, sport management and leisure studies). Each case has led to their own identity issues and crises of representation, surrounding whether they could, would or should, ever be accepted as a distinct discipline in their own right. Whilst such a debate is thankfully, at present, of less vital concern for those working and researching in sport tourism, it does relate to the notable omission in the theoretically framed studies mentioned elsewhere in this issue (see Van Rheenen, Cernaianu & Sobry; Gibson, [this issue](#)).

Whilst inter-disciplinarity is a key feature of sport, tourism and sport tourism research, what is lacking is any significant evidence of theoretical reciprocity from those situated within business schools (e.g. economist, marketing and management scholars), the humanities

(geographers and historians) or the social sciences (e.g. psychologists, sociologist, anthropologists). Rather than focussing upon what other 'grown up' disciplines can tell us about sport tourism, we have arguably neglected to consider why the study of sport tourism has emerged, why it is deemed greater than the sum of its parts and why it not only informs but also has the potential to advance current understandings of other fields and disciplines. This reticence in championing the many findings and implications emanating from the unique synergy of sport and tourism to other disciplines is understandable – especially given that sport tourism is far from being considered as a discipline itself. But this should not deter us from at least suggesting that the increasing desire to experience sport as a tourist raises some important questions and implications to a range of other disciplines. The ambition for fields of study to be more influential on their more dominant counterparts is not new, as illustrated by Chris Rojek's remarks when considering the study of leisure:

I maintain that it is at its most intellectually robust and practically stimulating when it engages with the debates in these disciplines by showing what the established social sciences have to learn from the specialized study of leisure and vice versa. (2005, p. 15)

Sport tourism scholars should not shy away from such intellectual robustness. In fact, as members of the academy, we are duty bound to critique and, where appropriate, challenge the work of our peers (Harland, Tidswell, Everett, Hale, & Pickering, 2010). Promoting sport tourism research in other disciplines can only improve its profile and integrity, whilst at the same time gaining further insights upon the essence and nature of the field.

A second, but related, reason the field of sport tourism has not progressed as quickly as we might have hoped in the last decade may be down to the fact that the overwhelming majority of contributions have focussed on *theories in*, rather than, *theories of* sport tourism. In other words, whilst there has been a growing literature highlighting the relevance of numerous theories to sport tourism contexts, there have been considerably fewer studies that have used theory to help reveal its essence and resulting principles. This is not to imply that the application of new theories to sport tourism is any less important, but rather to warn against sport tourism being utilised as a means in which to support a theory, rather than to be used as a means to reveal something new about the field. We have to be careful that the random studies that were akin to throwing bricks on a pile (Weed, 2005) have not been replaced by an ever-increasing pile of equally random theories. If we are to utilise the many theories that have, thus far, been applied to sport tourism, then we need to do so in a more unifying fashion. For 'understanding how we "organize our knowledge" means to understand our theory. That's what theory is: the summary and synthesis of what is known about a field' (Moore, 1991, p. 3).

Gammon and Kurtzman (2002) complained that many of us researching and writing in sport tourism suffered from *STEF* (sport tourism explanation fatigue) – a condition which appears to be still lingering today. Recently, a student of one of the editorial team asked, when choosing their classes for the following academic year, 'Sport tourism? What's that about then? To be honest I didn't really know it was a thing'. Similarly, on the other side of the world, another member of the editorial team was asked by a couple of senior academic colleagues from within a school of sport and recreation to reveal 'what' he would include within a sports tourism module he wished to establish. Yet, according to Van Rheenen et al. ([this issue](#)), the questions being asked within the sport tourism research community over the past decade have started to change; from the what and the how, to the why. It is here that theory can help us most (Gibson, 2005). There are, of course, plenty of discussions that have attempted to theorise such philosophical yet fundamental enquiries about the nature and essence of sport tourism (Hinch & Higham, 2011; Weed, 2007), but there still lacks widespread consensus

(see Van Rheenen et al. [this issue](#)). We should not shy away from such ontological inconsistencies, but rather see them as an opportunity to not only explore hitherto unapplied theories but to have the confidence of adding to them, or even to develop new ones.

This point brings attention to the third reason – and that is, that contributions to the sport tourism literature have tended to be reluctant in adapting and/or augmenting existing theories; preferring to either show how such theories perfectly fit to sport tourism contexts or to ignore them when they don't. As intimated above, this is not to suggest that a good deal of theory can be perfectly applied, and as a result offer important new insights to the field (as numerous important studies can attest to), but rather to encourage researchers to consider how and, more importantly, *why* sport tourism might add an additional perspective to theory that had otherwise been missed. For example, one of the central questions in our area of study is to determine in what way sport is experienced differently as a tourist. There are plenty of existing theories that explain the experience of both sport and tourism but none completely address the unique qualities found in sport tourism (Weed and Bull, 2009). Likewise, we still do not fully understand why some sport tourism ventures prove more attractive, and profitable, than others, or why historical sites of sporting significance are rarely perceived, preserved or protected to the same degree as other, less popular, sites of 'heritage' (see Geffroy; Ramshaw & Gammon; Pinson, [this issue](#)).

It is important to mention that it is not our intention to suggest that the discussions outlined above are in any way a negative assessment on the theoretical developments that have taken place over the last decade. Rather, that they should be seen as opportunities for taking the field to the next level – where sport tourism is no longer viewed as only a context in which to base theory, but as a unique field of study that reveals something hitherto unexplored about human experience and behaviour. This is not to imply that we should resist from utilising theories from elsewhere, as such applications continue to help inform and shed light on the many facets that sport tourism boasts. But, we must be mindful that whichever theoretical lenses are being used, they genuinely reveal something important about the field. If sport tourism is to maintain its position as a unique field of inquiry, and not merely another form of (adjective) tourism, it must be more robust in either generating or critically engaging with theory. We will need to be able to do more than merely explain what it is, or how it works. On the contrary, we will need to be able to articulate exactly why it exists, and why it needs continued exploration.

Whilst there are a number of theories which predominate research in sport tourism, there still remains a number of areas (along with their concomitant theories) that have been somewhat neglected. In addition, there may also be some opportunities to revisit and add to theories that have been explored and applied in the past. Consequently, the following section aims to draw attention to these areas, recommending how they might be addressed and built upon.

Once we have established and agreed upon our *why*, any appraisal of theory and sport tourism can focus on how (i.e. where and by whom) sport tourism research is being constructed. Certainly, as sport tourism is a relatively recent field of study, it is understandable that the creators of sport tourism research would be a relatively homogenous group. However, for sport tourism to grow – particularly from a theoretical perspective – it must be a broader church. This is not to suggest that sport tourism research has somehow been exclusionary, but rather that sport tourism research must begin to reach audiences that may not have necessarily thought about sport tourism as an avenue of research. Part of this challenge lies, perhaps, in perceptions of sport and tourism from outside of our field; that neither is a particularly serious or worthy of inquiry. Although it may be obvious to us the ways in which sport tourism impacts (and is impacted by) cultures, societies, economies and environments, this might not be as apparent to others.

In order to augment and enhance sport tourism's theoretical base, we must make two steps: first, engage with theories and research lenses that have yet to be critically applied in sport tourism and, second, more critically engage with the theory that we already employ in sport tourism research. Engaging with theories and research lenses that, as yet, are unfamiliar in sport tourism research may, at first glance, be a challenge. Certainly, what sport tourism research does at present – such as understanding the behaviours, motivations and destinations involved in sport tourism – it does very well. However, theoretically driven interdisciplinary viewpoints are not unusual in tourism and sport studies more generally, so it would seem that sport tourism has the capacity to employ perspectives from across the social sciences. This would, of course, require other researchers from other fields to engage with sport tourism, while potentially also shifting some of the *foci* in sport tourism research from the promotion of sport tourism to the critical examination of sport tourism. Given that much of sport tourism research is, in part, generated through sport tourism researchers working with providers to increase and manage sport tourism at a destination level, the inclusion of more academic, theoretical lenses to sport tourism may conflict with both neo-liberal agendas in higher education as well as to test the 'real world relevancy' of sport tourism. However, if we are to move the field forward, the pendulum ought to move to a more theory/application balance. Second, a more critical application of theory employed in sport tourism would also be welcome. Applying different perspectives about, for example, serious leisure and sport tourism or authenticity and sport tourism would not only provide new perspectives and theoretical insights about sport tourism, they would also potentially help us to use familiar theories in new ways – and, possibly, in ways that challenge dominant and widely-held perceptions about our field. The five papers in this special issue, we feel, are pushing at the boundaries of 'what we know' about sport tourism. Though we (and, we feel, the authors in this collection) believe that we have not yet *created* new sport tourism theory nor necessarily (yet) applied new theories to the field, we contend that this collection helps look at sport tourism in new, and often critical ways.

The first paper in this special edition, presented by Van Rheenen et al., outlines 'five primary parameters or dimensions' that they believe 'highlight the epistemological foundations' of our field of study. A systematic content analysis of literature published within the Journal of Sport and Tourism (including the Journals' previous incarnation, as the Journal of Sport Tourism) over the past two decades was undertaken, tracing 'the development of key concepts and definitions underlying an evolving epistemology' and highlighting the various disciplinary approaches that have, over time, 'expanded our understanding of the various types of sport tourism and different kinds of sport tourists'. The authors of this meta-evaluation are critical of the failure to establish a globally accepted definition outcome despite the large number of studies focused almost exclusively on defining 'what' constitutes sport tourism and/or the sport tourist. The authors explore the positive and negative consequences of adopting a 'position of neutrality', and conclude that the deliberate widening of the scope (through the introduction of the '&' to the Journal in 2006) and the subsequent promotion of 'the broadest possible definition of sport tourism' (i.e. the interaction between people, place and activity) has left the field open to criticism from both inside and outside the areas of sport *and* tourism studies.

For the issue's second paper, Geffroy proposes that 'play' 'allows for a comprehensive understanding of the ways active sport tourists engage with space, where space is viewed as an object or material for this play'. A new conceptual tool, referred to as 'playing with space', is subsequently introduced as a potential way in which to approach the increased mediatization of leisure practices, the lived experience and the 'sacred' spaces consumed as a consequence of sport tourism activity. In keeping with the other contributions, Geffroy is quick to acknowledge

the need for sport tourism scholars to look beyond the realms of sport and tourism to find answers to the big questions around the various motivations and movements of twenty-first century sport tourists.

The importance of 'place' (i.e. space with meaning attached), 'time' (past, present and future) and sports-related leisure activity was further explored within both the third and fourth contributions offered within this special edition, both of which look at the ever-increasing production and consumption of 'heritage-based' visitor attractions (both events and venues). Much like Van Rheenen et al.'s content analysis, Ramshaw and Gammon's response to our call for papers has also resulted in them looking back into the archives of existing sport tourism research. Thus, the third paper looks at 'the development and increased acceptance for heritage becoming a key component of sport tourism research', concluding that

Sport heritages are not benign, and can be vehicles for many social, political, and economic initiatives that have both positive and negative outcomes – both for sport tourism, and outside of our field. Beyond the idea of simply recognizing that heritage is a part of sport tourism, we must now understand how it works.

Similarly, in the penultimate paper, Pinson constructivist-inspired exploration of heritage sport tourism reveals a thought-provoking framework inspired, yet again, by a multi-disciplinary review of the existing literature. His case-studied conceptualisation of the heritage sport event (HSE) looks at the value to both the product (i.e. the sports event) and the host (i.e. the destination), offering recommendations as to why a location may seek to establish an event that effectively showcases' its local history.

Finally, Gibson offers a critical reflection in identifying how, despite the increased integration of theories and concepts from the humanities and social sciences, the study of sport tourism still lacks a coherent body of knowledge that sets it apart from the study of leisure, tourism and events. The paper also reflects upon the more recent emergence of event management scholarship and the long established connections between sport tourism and leisure studies, arguing – not for the first time – that leisure scholars have been contributing to our understanding in these domains since the genesis of the field and still have much to offer. As with the opening paper, there is an apparent element of concern regarding the long-term sustainability of a field of study that lacks a universally accepted theoretical base upon which to build new knowledge.

In conclusion, despite the establishment of its own periodical, the evidence presented within the five papers packaged together for this special edition suggests that the subject of sport tourism has encountered yet another, if not the very same, crossroads (Gibson, 2005). In many ways, despite a decade of quality assured, peer-reviewed research outputs, the lack of an accepted theoretical platform has restricted its expansion beyond the broader surrounds of special interest/niche tourism (Weiler & Hall, 1992). What's more, the recent arrival of (sports) event management, along with the resurgence in serious leisure studies (Stebbins, 2011), have arguably left sport and tourism scholars needing to establish some basic rules of engagement. Though the community of sport tourism researchers has undoubtedly grown larger, older and wiser over the past two decades, our failure to unearth a theoretical model that accurately encapsulates everything that we perceive to be essential within the production and consumption of sports-inspired tourism has not gone unnoticed. In many ways, we have failed to fully establish our position or our reason for being (McCartney, 2005).

As noted at the beginning, the aim of this special edition was to encourage papers that expanded and/or augmented current theory, whilst also focusing on one or more of the key features of sport tourism research. Ultimately, what we have been able to present in this issue is a stocktake of where we find ourselves in terms of both theory in and of sport

tourism. The papers, when consumed as a collection, reveal the consequences of focusing on the creation of definitions and classifications around what is or is not sport tourism and who is or is not a sport tourist. Looking to the future, we hope this special issue will inspire our fellow sport tourism researchers to resist the urge to settle for the low hanging fruit (i.e. applying an existing theory from elsewhere in the academy to yet another case study) and rather position our future projects to (re)establish our 'why'?

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