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Stefan Bosiacki

Academy of Physical Education in Poznań
Faculty of Tourism Economics and Organization

SPORTS TOURISM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON SEMANTIC MISUNDERSTANDING

In the contemporary world, sport is becoming not only a huge ‘industry’, generating a gigantic turnover, but it is also a significant element of culture. Cities are fighting to organize important sporting events, which are a perfect tool for promoting a given area (destination), creating a positive image for a city and, consequently, stimulating the local economy, including the tourism economy.

As Smith rightly says, “for the local authorities, sports personifies a new era and is a new way for cities suffering from the post-industrial identity crisis” (SMITH 2001, p. 129). Sporting events, the positive emotions they evoke as well as the presence in national and international media, are a very good way to change the image of a city or region.

While in the 1980s sports and tourism were perceived by academics and business as separate domains of human activity, nowadays they are often put together and at the same time attempts are made to establish new semantic rules, not always entirely justifiable.

One such concept is ‘sports tourism’, usually defined as “all forms of active and passive engagement in sports activity, individually or in an organized way, for non-commercial or business-commercial purposes, which require travelling far from home and place of work” (STANDEVEN & DE KNOP 1999, p. 12).

Researchers distinguish four categories of sports tourism: tourism including elements of sport, tourism involving participation in sport, trips for training purposes, and trips to sporting events (WEED & BULL 2004, pp. 124-131).

The question arises whether such a definition of sports tourism does not distort the meaning of the commonly used definition of tourism.

The answer to this question is clear to me: tourism is a single entity while its motivations are many. The motivation to participate in sporting events (actively or passively) is just one of the numerous motivations behind tourist trips. Thus, as it is not an independent ‘entity’, sports tourism is not one either.

Semantic complications involved in sports tourism also refer to the current fashion for an active style of spending one’s free time during holidays or weekends. Is a person who spends their holidays at the seaside, goes jogging, cycling for pleasure or plays tennis, a traditional recreational tourist or perhaps a sports tourist?

It seems justifiable if we understand sports tourism as exclusively those trips where the main motivation is passive attendance at sporting events (fans) or active participation in amateur sporting events (e.g. running marathons, canoeing trips or hiking).

It is hard to call the remaining types of trips sports tourism, because their participants are athletes – professionals (the commercial effect), or people for whom the main goal is sports as such and not those elements which have long been ascribed to tourism.

It is also difficult to find the border between terms already functioning in tourism terminology, such as specialised tourism, active tourism and sports tourism. Similarly, it is hard to point to the skills (predispositions) which sports tourism participants should possess.

Tourists taking part in sport usually take advantage of the general tourism infrastructure (accommodation and gastronomic facilities, transports, tourist information) and sport-recreational facilities available to all tourists regardless of their motivations to travel to recreation destinations. Only a small part of highly specialised sport-recreational facilities is intended only for those with particular skills (e.g. sailing marinas, climbing walls, cycling tracks, etc.), but even these buildings and facilities can be used by tourists who arrive at a destination to spend holidays or weekends there. To me, they are tourists in the traditional sense.

As it is impossible to define sports tourism clearly and precisely, it is difficult to establish its scale and seasonality, or the measures which show what portion of all tourist trips can be treated as sports tourism. It seems

relatively simple to estimate the number of tourists – sports fans present at the most important international sporting events (it is much harder as regards national events), but establishing the scale during holiday or weekend trips is a difficult task. I also believe that it is quite unnecessary.

Nowadays, academic terminology regarding tourism is adopting new, ‘fashionable’ terms which are not academically justifiable and make this terminology semantically chaotic. To my mind, ‘sports tourism’ is one of these terms. It is an expression currently widely used in Polish tourism literature, trying to transform the terms ‘specialised tourism’ and ‘active tourism’ into one joint conceptual aggregate, yet unsuccessfully.

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Leszek Butowski

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

SPORTS TOURISM: REAL OR VIRTUAL?

In as early as the 1970s, the Polish literature on the subject presented a classification of tourism by the motivations to travel and the types of tourism assets used. According to these criteria, the following types of tourism were distinguished: recreational (recreation as the motivation to travel), sightseeing (cognitive motivation) and specialised (an opportunity to pursue one’s hobby, passion, etc.) (ROGALEWSKI 1974). This classification, though at present a little outdated, is still useful, especially for didactic purposes. Its main drawback, however, is incompleteness, as it does not include certain new forms of tourism which have rapidly developed in recent decades. Its incompleteness also results from expanding the definition of tourism which has started to encompass business trips (business tourism). It seems, however, that in order to discuss the semantic range of the term ‘sports tourism’, the traditional division into sightseeing and specialised tourism may prove useful.

Let us start from establishing the semantic framework of the term ‘sports tourism’. In the literature, it usually includes the following four forms of tourism activity (BONCZAK 2013a, GIBSON 1998, p. 45, MOKRAS-GRABOWSKA 2015, pp. 121-2): 1) trips made in order to watch sporting events (fan tourism); 2) trips made in order to visit sports facilities (e.g. famous stadiums, not necessarily during sporting events); 3) trips made in order to participate in sporting events as competitors¹; 4) trips made in order to undertake various forms of sports activity (without elements of competition²).

Even a superficial analysis of these forms of sports tourism shows that each of them can be ascribed to one of the types of tourism mentioned earlier. Thus, trips made in order to visit sports facilities as special tourism assets (attractions) are a typical example of sightseeing tourism. The situation is similar in the case of so-called ‘fan tourism’, which is a cultural variety of sightseeing tourism (a sporting event as an element of mass culture). On the other hand, active participation in sports competitions, as well as being involved in sports activities without the element of competition meet the traditional criteria of specialised tourism (participants’ skills, the ability to use specialist equipment). It can be seen from this that individual forms of so called ‘sports tourism’ are different in character, despite the fact that they often occur under the same name (Table 1).

This short terminological analysis, defining at least in general the semantic range of the term ‘sports tourism’ as well as its relation to other types of tourism, may be the basis for certain general conclusions. Firstly, is using the term ‘sports tourism’ legitimate (in the sense that it appears in contemporary literature)? It seems that from the cognitive point of view it is not justifiable and may introduce terminological chaos. The term ‘sports tourism’ covers (as was shown in the discussion) various, genetically distinct forms of tourism, while in order to accurately

¹ There are certain doubts whether trips of this type can be classified as tourist trips because a considerable part of them are work-related (professional sport) (BONCZAK 2013b). However, there is also a group of amateur athletes (in the literal sense of the word), who do not treat their participation in the competition as gainful activity.

² It must be stressed that in accordance with the Sports Act of 25th June 2010, “sport is all forms of physical activity which by incidental or arranged participation help to achieve or improve physical and mental strength, develop social relations or achieve sports results on all levels”. This means that competition may but does not have to be an attribute of sports activity.