

Pedal power: the economic value of off-road cycling



The crowning of Mark Cavendish as the BBC's 2011 Sports Personality of the Year marked another major milestone in the rise of cycling in the UK. Cavendish, the world road race champion and winner of the Tour de France green jersey, followed in the tyre-tracks of Sir Chris Hoy, who topped the vote in 2008 after claiming three gold medals at the Beijing Olympics.

Sports Personality of the Year undoubtedly offers a compelling snapshot of the nation's sporting consciousness. Even so, a far more precise grasp of cycling's popularity and participants is needed. Research by the University of Exeter's Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism is geared towards helping develop a clearer picture of the economic value of a pastime that is increasingly capturing the nation's imagination.



Overview

A wealth of emerging evidence points to cycling's burgeoning appeal in the UK. National sporting success – including Great Britain's medal haul at the 2008 Olympics and Mark Cavendish's 2011 world road race title – has been crucial in boosting interest, while an increased focus on personal fitness levels and a growing awareness of green issues have also played major roles. According to The British Cycling Economy, a study released last year, the country saw a net increase in regular cyclists of half a million in 2010 alone.

A key challenge for policymakers now is how best to take advantage of cycling's entry into the broader public consciousness. There might never have been a better time to encourage even more participation and build the sort of infrastructure necessary to support it. Research that sheds light on cycling's enduring economic worth is likely to be crucial to the successful realisation of efforts in this direction.

It is in this context that the University of Exeter is investigating the economic value of off-road cycling – a pursuit that, despite its popularity, has received comparatively little attention within the academic literature. The study, which is being carried out in partnership with the 1 South West Cycle Adventure

Project, represents one of the first attempts to analyse in detail how an investment in recreation impacts on the tourism sector.

The 1 South West project's goal is the coordinated and sustainable development of an off-road cycling "region". Such a scheme ought to be of particular benefit in an area such as the south west, which is renowned for its natural beauty and so places significant stock in its environmental assets. Ideally, investment in off-road cycling infrastructure could attract new markets, retain existing visitors for longer, relieve pressure on already-popular coastal resorts and increase off-peak tourism.

Focusing on two trails in Haldon Forest Park, which stands on the outskirts of Exeter and is one of 10 1 South West Trail Hub locations, the study began collecting data in January 2012. Quarterly sampling in proportion to the previous year's visitor figures will continue until October 2012 so as to encompass all four seasons and take account of seasonal visitor number variations. The expectation is that examining usage patterns and combining them with a large-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews will provide a rich picture of when, how and, above all, why cyclists use the site – and, just as pertinently, who those cyclists are.

KEY FACTS

- Cycling's popularity in the UK is at its highest for years, delivering ever-growing economic benefits.
- There might never have been a better time to encourage even more participation and build the infrastructure to support it.
- Research by the University of Exeter is helping to produce a clearer picture of cycling's economic value.
- This involves developing an enhanced understanding of the characteristics and preferences of the people who take part.
- The study's findings could ultimately help schemes across the UK maximise cycling's economic, social and environmental benefits.

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Pedal power: the economic value of off-road cycling (cont.)



Comments and implications

"We want to comprehensively break down the economic value of off-road cycling and gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics and preferences of the people who take part in it," says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Neil Ormerod.

"Our first task is to deliver a set of results that will give I South West a detailed picture of its 'region'. But the broader hope is that our findings could also help future developments maximise the economic, social and environmental benefits of off-road cycling – not just in the south west but elsewhere."

Cycling's new-found mass-market appeal was crucial to the study's conception. A project such as I South West might once have sought to attract only a hard core of expert riders – experienced bikers able to tackle challenging "black-grade runs" on which casual enthusiasts might risk life and limb. Cycling is now sufficiently popular to target a far wider audience. Blue is the magic colour: these moderate-grade runs offer something for everyone.

"The ethos of facilities like I South West demonstrates cycling's rise," says Ormerod, himself a keen rider. *"There was a time when there really was nothing for the inexperienced*

or for families. Now the market is there, we need to develop a very fine-grained appreciation of who these people are, what they're getting out of the experience at the moment and what else they would like to get out of it in the future.

Our survey poses questions about where they live or are holidaying, how far they've travelled, whether they've been before or will come again, whether they've spent money only at I South West or contributed to the wider local economy, how important off-road cycling is to them, whether they've hired bikes or brought their own, how much they spend on cycling in general – all data that can give us a detailed impression of who uses these facilities and whether what's being provided is what they actually want.

This is the sort of information we need if we're going to take full advantage of cycling's popularity and develop an infrastructure – not just in the south west but throughout the country – that accurately reflects growing enthusiasm for the sport."

"We want to ensure this isn't a flash in the pan," adds Paul Hawkins, Manager of the I South West project. *"We want to help realise a genuinely sustainable future for cycling, and Neil's study will bring independent academic rigour to our efforts."*

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Neil Ormerod
ESRC Researcher

"We want to ensure this isn't a flash in the pan – we want to help realise a sustainable future for cycling."

Paul Hawkins
Manager, I South West project

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