OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO OUTDOOR RECREATION – PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP SOLUTIONS

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Abstract
The outdoor recreation industry has been experiencing several challenges related to the lack of funding. Much of this is a result of the recent negative economic climate, which has led to several park closures, limited hours of operation, a reduction in quality, and dissatisfied users (Koeberer, 2011). An additional challenge is the availability of public land for trail-based recreation. The Kingdom Trails Association (KTA) in northeastern Vermont is a model success story for overcoming these challenges. The KTA is a partnership of private land owners who designate, design, and manage their own trail systems. Through in-depth interviews with key informants, local business owners, and community members, a protocol for the “steps to success” were developed to help other communities with similar goals develop or expand their own trails. Information was gathered and paired, and from this themes were extracted. These themes were then developed into the operating protocol which was then reviewed and edited with input from the key informants.

1.0 Introduction
Public recreation and trail systems have been negatively impacted by the recent economic downturn (McLean & Hurd, 2011), and this has led to neglected trails, closures, and dissatisfaction (Crompton, 1999; Koeberer, 2011). Several communities now find themselves taking the lead as trail planners and developers. One major limitation is the availability of public land for these types of endeavors (Ignatius & Bald, 2007) and the careful planning and dedication of a core group to take charge (T. Tierney, personal communication, January 17, 2013).

The formulation and development of partnerships between the traditional recreation service providers and users has helped to meet the growing needs of outdoor recreation. In some cases a partnership between private land owners (e.g., residents) and public land holders (e.g., state lands) has greatly increased the acreage, accessibility, development, and maintenance of regional trails. One group that has pioneered this effort and can offer valuable insight to the process is the Kingdom Trails Association (KTA) in northeastern Vermont.

KTA provides 110 miles of well-designed trails encompassing seven square miles, on 57 different private land owner parcels and two public sites. It began as an idea from a few local mountain bikers in 1990, and now draws over 56,000 visitors a year, has an economic impact of more than $5.6 million to the community, paved the way for tourism into the region, and is entirely self-funded. Beyond that, Kingdom Trails have been named “Best Trail System in North America” by Bike magazine in 2008, and “Best of New England” by Travel and Life, 2011. The trails offer opportunities for Nordic skiing, snow shoeing, and skate skiing in winter and spring, and mountain biking, walking, equestrian and running in the fall and summer.

This paper has two main goals. The first is to tell the story of how one community brought an idea to offer an exceptional trail system to fruition, and the unique history and outstanding promise for the future that this has brought to an otherwise underserved region of New England. The second is to provide a process map that other communities, organizations, or individuals can use as a guide to achieve similar results.

2.0 Methods
In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, KTA staff, local business owners, community members, and local tourism boards to gather information around the main themes of process/development and community perceptions of KTA. Of those interviews, they were spread out among KTA staff such as the founder, and the executive director, with key informants such as trail developers, and land owners, and with local business members in lodging/real estate, and the chamber of commerce (Table 1).

Table 1. Positions and Key Information Provided during Interviews of Kingdom Trails Association

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Key Information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KTA Founder</td>
<td>KTA history, process, pitfalls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KTA Executive Director</td>
<td>Inner workings, community outreach, trail growth, future plans/concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trail Builder</td>
<td>Trail development, community networking, approval process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Landowner</td>
<td>Benefits of partnership, early perceptions of KTA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate Agent</td>
<td>Contributions of KTA to community, change in KTA’s role over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>KTA role in community, contributions to local business</td>
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Questions aimed at KTA staff were designed to best understand the history, development, steps, process, pitfalls and recommendations for developing a similar trail system in another community. The main goal was to provide a protocol or “steps to success” to help other communities with similar goals formulate or expand their own trail systems. Questions aimed towards local business owners, community members, and the tourism boards were developed to best capture the community perceptions of KTA. Also the process of acceptance that the community went through during the developmental and growth stages of KTA were investigated.

Information was gathered and paired, and from this themes were extracted and developed into the operating protocol which was then reviewed and edited with input from the key informants and KTA staff. Additionally, data from a survey of over 1000 trail users that was conducted by Lyndon State College was used to provide demographic information to better understand the user population, their motivations, and experience. This was an onsite survey conducted at trail heads across the trail system during summer. This information was utilized in this study as supplemental information to provide broad demographic information about the Kingdom Trail users and subsequently no statistical analyses were conducted.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Kingdom Trails has an interesting history, one that could offer ideas and options for other communities who are interested in creating a similar type of system in their region. In 1989 local mountain bikers began riding the decrepit cross country trails in the region, and consequently began some moderate, but unsanctioned, improvements to the trails. By 1991 other riders began to use the trails from the region and a small following was started. In 1993 two riders began to ask local land owners for permission to create trails on their property. Realizing they were faced with liability concerns and fears from potential landowners, they formed a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and the Kingdom Trails Association was born.

In 1995 one of the original riders became the trail manager and the organization developed a modest trail map for the trails. Purchase of a map was required to ride the trails as of 1998 and this was the first fee system implemented by the association. The map cost three dollars and a local outdoor shop handled the sales. In 1999 they hired their first intern who handled marketing, administrative duties, and outreach.

By the year 2000 permission requests for land use grew the trail system to 50 miles. In 2001, by use of press kits and grant proposals, their publicity grew dramatically. Map purchase subsequently was increased to five dollars. In 2002 KTA hired a half-time director who worked from home during the winter and had a demonstration tent during the summer months. The fee system was also restructured at $20 for the season, and five dollars per day. The following year a strategic planning effort identified the need for a full time director and in 2004 one was hired to fulfill that role, working out of a small office in the town of Burke, VT. The following years they hired 3-4 summer staff to handle trail work and ticket sales, along with one full time trail manager and a redesigned map. Fees were increased to seven dollars per day and $35/season, while the trail network was up to 57 miles long.

2007-2009 marked major increases in KTA’s accomplishments. A five year strategic plan was developed as well as a new welcome center, bathroom facilities, a new groomer for winter ski trail grooming, and new map. They introduced four new bike patrollers, and six bush/trail crew. Kingdom Trails received notable accolades as well. Named “Best Trail Network in North America” by Bike Magazine in 2008, and “Best of New England” by Boston Magazine in 2009, the trail system was expanding its reach.

One major contribution to the reach of the trail system occurred in 2010 when they connected their network to the local ski area, Burke Mountain, and could now offer lift-access mountain biking in one package. Today KTA has 3,400 members with 18,200 day pass sales, and 56,000 rider visits. They have a social network of 3,500 Facebook fans with 100,800 website hits and an email list of over 10,000. The trail network now tops 125 miles of trails, a downhill park, and lift access riding from the ski area.

3.1 Kingdom Trails Recreational Use

Recreational users at the Kingdom Trails had a mean age of 36 years, and the average group size was five individuals. Visitors travel large distances to reach the trail system from as far as Quebec, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, for a mean distance traveled of 250 miles. The mean days of a visit to the trail was 2.5 days, mostly as weekend trips, and people made eight trips to the Kingdom Trails per year on average. The Kingdom Trails function most often as a reunion place for family and friends, drawing groups from several locations to convene at the Trail System, stay in local hotels, lodging, or campgrounds, ride the trails, and enjoy each other’s company. In 2012 the Kingdom Trails attracted 56,000 visitors for an estimated economic impact of 5.6 million dollars.

3.2 Steps to Success

From the interviews a series of “steps to success” were developed to act as a guide or reference for other communities who may choose to embark on a similar type of trail development endeavor. These steps were developed based upon input from all informants. These steps were an attempt at combining input to reflect the needs of both the trail association as well as community members, local businesses, and landowners. These steps are listed below, along with additional information on each item, as well as supporting quotes from informants.
1. Formulate core leadership - leadership should be a small (3-5 member) group, and dedicated to the vision
   “We started out small and proved our worth and credibility as a viable partner over the years” (Community Trail Builder)

2. Establish a region to work within (a great benefit will come if this can be tied into any existing public land such as state or national forest)
   “The crucial ingredients for a KT-like system are a large enough tract of land to create a good system and a village with some amenities including a bike shop” (KTA founder)

3. Identify landowners and make contact (establish trust with a “trusted elder” to act as an ally and allay any fears. By developing a 501(c)(3) status with legal liability information you can release landowners of responsibility)
   “I tell people if you are starting out and need to get landowner permission, do not send the MTB avid enthusiast alone, send a town respected elder who sees the big picture and can allay fears/doubts” (Tim Tierney, KTA Executive Director)
   “Much of the early work I was doing was creating new trails to ride. Some I had permission for and others I did not. This meant in order to legalize the system we had to get landowner permission for trails that already existed. Luckily this worked out but I would certainly get all the permissions before you start” (KTA founder)

4. Gain local business support (they can offer publicity, resources, and community support)
   “Kingdom Trails plays a huge role in the health of our local economy, in the immediate Burke area and beyond. The reasons for success are many – they have also grown in a responsible and careful way that benefits the entire community” (Chamber Administrator, Burke Chamber of Commerce)

5. Begin with a small trail system and build it right first (best to offer a small amount of well-built trails than to over spread your resources and offer a large amount of shoddy trails)
   “Key to success is build it right the first time” (KTA Executive Director)

6. Utilize several resources for trail building such as members, interns, volunteers (by using multiple sources it will not only increase your resources and protect your members’ time but also increase public awareness
   “It really took a whole community of landowners, business owners, schools, state agencies, town officials and a passionate group of volunteers” (KTA Executive Director)

7. Fee structure should be inexpensive, especially at the start (remember that new comers do not know what you are offering or who you are. Costly trail fees may drive them to look elsewhere to fulfill recreational needs)

8. Look for grants or donations to help with start up costs (there are many types of support for new trails)

9. Limit liability (this can be done with conservation easements, or revocable licenses. Having the help of an attorney will ensure you follow the proper steps for your state and city)

10. Draw business as soon as you are ready (marketing, online, social networking, events, all help with this)

11. Build your work force (hire as needed, interns, volunteers, managers, trail crews)

12. Grow wisely (establishing a small permanent staff will help give structure to the organization, while seasonal staff can be less expensive and provide a fresh perspective
   “The key is to try and understand the many concerns, needs, and desires of both community and partner organizations to position yourself as an ally” (Community Trail Builder)

These steps are also founded within the relationships of the stakeholders, and bound together by particular attributes. For example, town officials, business owners, and visitors, may all have differing concerns, levels of trust, and vision, but these all bind them in the effort to support the development and use of a trail system (Figure 1.). Recognizing the key stakeholders in any trail development effort is paramount, and realizing these differing needs (and how to resolve them) are all elemental in a successful project. Also, the dedicated, passionate, founding group is what provides the central thrust of the project and keeps tasks moving forward and maintains the effort as a priority for the stakeholders.
Finally, there are oft along with snow–customers are not gaining illegal access to the trail network. There are also issues of rogue access to the trail network. Beyond this, they have also felt pressure to have the trails stay open late in the season, and formulates the path of action over the life of the network.

It would serve any community well to take the steps outlined here and use them as a guideline, but also keep privy to their particular needs, community, and circumstances. It is important to note that this was outlined for a small, rural community, where tourism was very low before the development of the trail system. Burke, Vermont is somewhat remote, and the rural character enabled a “handshake agreement” among neighbors, mountain bikers, and state agencies. This may not be viable in larger communities, but it is nonetheless doable.

It is also an interesting fact that this network was not designed originally to attract visitors, but rather to provide outdoor recreation opportunities to the community members already in place. I believe this exemplifies the dedication and passion behind these high quality trails, and portrays the dedication the leadership has had.

4.0 Conclusions and Implications
Development of a trail network that includes a multitude of private landowner partnerships is no easy task. It is the development and maintenance of a shared vision, establishment of trust, allaying concerns, and utilization of education to engender an environmental ethic which are the fabric holding this endeavor together. Recognizing the contributing stakeholders and their needs, concerns, and efforts are also of utmost importance. Finally it is the dedicated core group which ultimately sets the tone, and formulates the path of action over the life of the network.

4.1 Future Concerns
The Kingdom Trails are not all a tale of great success with little concerns. As they have grown from a handful of users to upwards of over 56,000 visitors per year, there have been growing pains. For one, as they grow they struggle with their direction and strategic planning. They often face questions of what type, and how much growth is healthy, and when does it become counter active. They have seen a recent pressure for more facilities such as bathrooms, parking, signage, rentals, and supplies. In their effort to be a positive community entity they face these challenges and find themselves between budgetary constraints and neighborly duty.

The hiring of full time staff has also placed an economic burden on the organization, and this poses questions to the longevity of the association. As they grow, they also recognize their responsibility as a major community player. Many businesses have come to depend upon trail visitors as their clients for lodging rentals, gas, gear, restaurants, and supplies. There is also an increased pressure for them to hold major events as these attract a large number of participants to the area and commercial business has a keen interest in this. Beyond this, they have also felt pressure to have the trails stay open later in the season, and also to get them groomed and ready earlier upon opening.

There are also issues of rogue access to the trail network. With over 125 miles of trails, it is difficult to maintain that non-paying customers are not gaining illegal access to trails. Recent expansions to connect with the lift-serve mountain biking at Burke Mountain have also attracted another type of rider – the downhill rider, which poses new needs, to provide high quality recreation experiences.

Finally, there are often alternate, unforeseen uses of the trails. For example, dogsledgers have begun using the trails in winter, along with snow-bikers with studded tires during the colder months. These new uses and technologies always pose challenge for recreation providers and Kingdom Trails are not unique in this situation.
One method used by the association to help meet some of these challenges is by developing partnerships to share responsibilities and increase resources. For example, a partnership with the local bike shop may offer the trail network a supply of potential bike patrollers, volunteer trail crew, publicity from potential riders, and parking and shuttle services during a race event. Alternatively, the bike shop may gain exposure to a larger clientele, increased business, and positive branding or publicity. The important element to remember is that what has been created is a unique trail system that offers high quality recreation for users. The challenges are surmountable and as KTA Executive Director Tim Tierney has said “it’s all about the trails and everything else is a bonus as far as bucolic setting, small town charm, etc.” With careful growth, attention to community members, and dedication to the human and natural resources, a similar trail system could be an attractive attribute to any fellow community.

5.0 References