



University of  
Massachusetts  
Amherst

## **Made for Residents, Enjoyed by Visitors: Examining Tourism as a Byproduct of Local Outdoor Recreation Development**

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Authors	Lindblom, Jada;Verhoog, Ryan;O'Leary, Ethan
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# **Made for Residents, Enjoyed by Visitors: Examining Tourism as a Byproduct of Local Outdoor Recreation Development**

## **Introduction**

Many rural communities aim to leverage tourism as means of economic revival and vitality. Nature and outdoor recreation are typically some of the primary assets to attract visitors to rural or remote regions. In the Northeastern United States, local parks and recreational trails are often developed and overseen by local nonprofit organizations, recreational clubs, land trusts, or municipal or regional conservation/recreation offices, committees, or commissions. These groups may have very little, if any, affiliation or regular interaction with tourism-related agencies or organizations. However, the spaces and experiences they help to create can become key components of a region's destination development and visitor appeal.

In these scenarios, local organizations and individuals may be unwittingly designing tourism products, without much intentional consideration for tourists or tourism. What might this mean in terms of economic development, sustainability, and visitor and resident satisfaction? Do such trails and recreation areas manage to serve both residents and visitors in a more "local," "low-key," and "authentic" fashion? Or, is a lack of intentional tourism planning potentially putting outdoor recreation on a course toward frustrations and pitfalls for both the local community and visitors?

Insights from applied research on locally-focused trail and outdoor recreation development in New Hampshire raise a variety of questions pertaining to the design and management of outdoor amenities. This paper encourages recreation/land managers and tourism practitioners to critically examine the visitor experience implications of tourism amenities that aren't necessarily designed with tourists in mind. This inquiry is also attuned to how the popular tourism construct of *authenticity* may (or may not) be valuable in understanding or predicting visitor use of "local" outdoor recreation sites.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Visitor motivations and use of "local" spaces***

Many tourists seeking outdoor recreation and natural scenery choose well-known and superlative destinations such as national parks. However, many others seek outdoor recreation on a smaller scale or supplementary basis while visiting other types of destinations, such as rural regions or small cities. Tourists are not motivated only by "the extraordinary," but also by variety, quality, and congenial atmospheres (Cohen, 2010). Research indicates that for tourists seeking "soft adventures" (e.g., hiking), motivations including discovery, relaxation, and socialization contribute positively to satisfaction (Bichler & Peters, 2021). Casual outdoor recreationists, perhaps seeking stress relief, are often driven by convenience and proximity when selecting

locations (Komossa et al., 2018). Factors such as age and activity preference may impact how far people are likely to travel for recreation (McCormack et al., 2006). Some outdoor recreation enthusiasts may seek alternatives to major outdoor recreation destinations (such as national parks) to avoid crowding (Ferguson et al., 2022a; Manning & Valliere, 2001), or opt for less-visited places for sustainability reasons (Seeler et al., 2022), especially in light of growing public attention to overtourism (Mihalic, 2020). Research on urban tourism has noted increasing visitor preferences for “off the beaten track” destinations as alternatives to crowded, well-known cities (Matoga & Pawłowska, 2018), but this phenomenon has not been as widely investigated in formal studies pertaining to the intersection of outdoor recreation and rural tourism.

It is no surprise that tourists often enjoy the same things as local people. Sometimes, visitors intentionally seek experiences that mimic or provide a taste of what it’s like to be a resident, such as through choosing accommodation choices like shared rooms or apartments (Paulaskaite et al., 2017), seeking out local food and dining (Sims, 2009), and spending time in spaces like pubs and coffee shops (Oldenburg, 1999; Maitland, 2008). Interaction with local people can be a key factor determining whether visitors feel endearment for a destination (Prentice et al., 1994).

Like pubs and cafes, parks and trails are key public spaces that visitors may seek out as part of their travel experience, while residents enjoy as part of their regular/daily lifestyle. Visitors’ trail-based experiences may play an important role in their overall impressions of their trip and the destination, and thus their likelihood to return and/or spend more time in a community. Many local trails and recreation areas are unhosted and available free of charge, and a visitor might have no or very little interaction with other people while there. Experience-wise, a visitor’s hike or mountain bike ride might be virtually identical to how a local person would use the area, minus some degree of local knowledge (e.g., orientation/directions, safety considerations) and priorly-developed preferences (e.g., favorite routes). Trails and other outdoor recreation spaces developed primarily for local people thus offer an intriguing setting to examine access to local knowledge and the perceived authenticity of the visitor experience, as well as site design and management implications of these themes.

### ***Authenticity***

For several decades now, tourism research has expressed much interest in the concept of *authenticity* and how visitors’ perceptions of a destination’s or attraction’s “realness” or, conversely, performative qualities may impact travel motivations, choices, and satisfaction. Following MacCannell’s (1973) seminal work on “staged authenticity,” investigations of authenticity in tourism have most often focused on visitor experiences at cultural sites and in other contexts with more apparent performative interactions between “hosts” and “guests.” Contextual extensions and definitional interpretations of authenticity continue to capture the interest of many tourism researchers (Ning, 2017).

While it could be assumed that less-touristic places typically offer a more authentic experience to visitors, the role of authenticity in “off the beaten track” regions has been elusive in the literature

(Tiberghien et al., 2017). Lovell and Bull (2017) note that rural regions have long evoked a variety of clichés and preconceived notions in the collective mind. This engrained societal enamoredness with bucolic settings may impact visitor perceptions of (or the ability to perceive) authenticity in rural areas. The limited tourism research investigating the roles of perceived authenticity in influencing outdoor recreation experiences have typically focused on national parks or heritage areas (e.g., Lee et al., 2017), rather than lower-profile, community-oriented recreation sites. Similarly, there is a noted shortage of research examining authenticity in the context of sport tourism (Takata & Hallman, 2021) and site management, for instance regarding natural resources interpretation (Hill & Cable, 2006). Cohen (2010) suggests that the construct of authenticity may be usefully applied more broadly in leisure studies, rather than just tourism studies, as lines continue to blur in society between what is “tourist” versus “leisure” behavior. Such blurring may be especially notable when comparing *tourism activities* and *outdoor recreation activities* (Williams & Shaw, 2009). Condevaux et al. (2016, n.p.) note that this blurring between “ordinary” and “tourist” places means that “tourists are becoming actors in the creation of tourism products,” raising more questions about what can really be considered authentic.

It remains somewhat unknown in the literature the degree to which visitors seek trail-based outdoor recreation experiences specifically for their “local” or “authentic” qualities. Recreation research comparing locals and visitors has found that locals more often visit trails for purposes of seeking solitude and quietude and for health and fitness, whereas visitors tend to be more activity-driven, such as for mountain biking (Spencer, 2013). While factors such as proximity and ease of access may make local trails appealing, it may also be the case that in this modern era of overtourism and costly tourism experiences, contemporary visitors may increasingly enjoy using nearby trails in a “local style,” and be attracted to feelings of informality, discovery, and/or solitude offered by lesser-known recreational areas. Such visitor preferences, as well as differences in experience levels, may have management implications regarding promotion, signage, safety, visitor use planning, and trail feature design, which projects that are designed to serve local audiences might not consider.

### ***Case study geographical context***

This research focuses on a multi-community region of central New Hampshire (NH). A largely rural and forested state, NH has over 1.8 million publicly-accessible acres available for outdoor recreation, which are managed by a variety of public, private, and non-profit organizations (NH DNCR et al., 2024). The U.S. outdoor recreation economy has continued to grow in recent years, up 3.6% in 2023 (inflation adjusted) from the previous year, compared to 2.9% growth for the overall U.S. economy (BEA, 2024). New Hampshire ranks #8 in the nation for outdoor recreation’s share of the total state GDP, coming in at 3.4% in 2023 (BEA, 2024). In terms of its identity as a destination, NH is most commonly known for its outdoors, but in general is not as well-known as its surrounding New England states (SMARInsights, 2016). Visitor spending for the grouped category of arts, entertainment and recreation has continued to grow steadily in NH,

amounting to \$667.5 million in 2023, compared to a pre-COVID total of \$534.9 in 2019 (DRA, 2024).

In Central New Hampshire, a variety of rural towns and small cities lay just at the periphery of well-known tourism destinations, including the Lakes Region and the White Mountains Region. Some recreation sites in these nearby regions, such as in the National Forest, have been recently observed to have levels of visitor crowding that negatively influence the reported visitor experience quality (Ferguson et al., 2022a). While outdoor recreation has long been an important part of the local lifestyle in the study region, in the past decade there have been numerous efforts and initiatives to develop, improve, or formalize trail systems and recreation areas, such as for hiking, mountain biking, and snowmobiling. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the local growth in popularity of sports such as mountain biking and e-biking have influenced interest in trail development projects in this region. Some of this growth in outdoor recreation participation stems from new habits and interests that people developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in increased overall outdoor recreation participation in New England (Ferguson et al., 2022b) and in the U.S. more generally (Taff et al., 2021).

## **Methodology**

Research (still underway) from a 2023-2025 New Hampshire-based project focused on community-driven recreational trail development offers useful insights for tourism and recreation planning. This research includes three primary data sources: 1) post-event surveys from participants of three educational webinars and three in-person workshops, all focused on regional trail and recreation development topics relevant to the case study region within New Hampshire ( $n=88$ ); 2) an online survey of New Hampshire trail-related outdoor recreation organization active members and leaders ( $n=116$ ); and 3) interviews with recreational trail-related organization leaders ( $n=13$ ). These research participants were all program participants in a multi-tiered and interdisciplinary educational engagement project called “Developing Interconnections for Regional Trails” (a.k.a. “DIRT”), led by University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension community and economic development and natural resource management specialists. To date, the DIRT project has engaged over 200 individuals in workshops, networking opportunities, and other events aimed at building knowledge and capacity for locally-based outdoor recreation development and trail stewardship.

In the surveys and interviews, participants were asked directly about their interests in tourism and economic development pertaining to their respective trail projects, as well as given the opportunity to respond more open-endedly through general questions about their projects’ goals and what drives participation in their organizations’ initiatives. Surveys distributed to educational webinar and workshop attendees helped inform the subsequent in-depth interview questions. A forthcoming research report, intended to provide insights for both recreational organization leaders as well as educators and consultants, integrates findings from the post-event surveys, comprehensive program survey, and interviews.

## Findings

Preliminary analysis of the data from New Hampshire indicates that there is a wide range of levels of engagement and intentionality among local project leaders pertaining to tourism planning and development. Some groups embrace tourism as an important component of their mission and see it as a promising pathway for rural economic development. Other organization leaders and members are not greatly considering visitors or tourism development when they design, construct, and maintain their trails and recreational areas.

The survey data, while more limited, provides useful, basic information regarding organizational motivations and focuses. Of the trail organization leaders and key engaged members who responded to the final program survey, 41% ( $n=48$ ) stated that their organization has economic development interests or concerns. Forty-seven respondents (68%) stated that tourism and destination development were among their main economic development interests or concerns.

The interviews revealed that the majority of local trail and outdoor recreation organization leaders and participants are *primarily* engaged in trail development work because they are passionate about their own participation in outdoor recreation (e.g., mountain biking, snowmobiling, horseback riding). Furthermore, many enjoy the local, special interest communities that these projects help generate. For example, one interview participant provided a frank explanation of their organization's engagement (or lack thereof) in the tourism development landscape:

*We're too busy having a good time to try to market with chambers of commerce or something.*

However, other organization leaders expressed that they were engaged in tourism-based economic development initiatives or efforts. Cross-organizational communication and partnerships appear to be moderators of whether a trail organization considers tourism development to be a goal of their work, as is suggested by the following quotes from trail organization leaders:

*We're definitely on board with the whole 'recreation brings in people and money and jobs' thing. We're sort of a sister organization of the whitewater park [a nearby recreation site with economic development goals].*

*We don't directly promote tourism. We have a pretty good social media presence and we try to get word out as much as we can. As far as that goes, obviously one of our selling points for why we need trails in this town is because of tourism and tourist dollars and things like that. So, we use that when we're presenting to, say, local governments.*

*We've never gotten involved or been invited to get involved in statewide tourism activity.*

Overall, the interviews revealed that while many organizations are at least partly motivated by goals of economic development and are supportive of growing tourism in their region, most trail

development projects primarily arise from individuals with shared interests coming together to create better opportunities to pursue their own leisure interests. Since nearly all organizations are volunteer based, some leaders reflected that they don't have enough time or money to dedicate more attention to the tourism side of their work.

## **Discussion**

Trail organization leaders' personal passion for sport and recreation often translates to a high standard of quality in their trails and recreation areas, positioning these sites to become competitive tourism amenities. Given that a variety of projects and recreational offerings have been developed in this region and are continuing to be developed, there is evidence that tourism could become an unintentional (although not necessarily surprising) byproduct of local passion projects, as visitor interest in affordable, less-crowded recreation sites and off-the-beaten-track experiences continue to grow. However, since these trails are built with mostly local use in mind, they are not necessarily designed for optimal visitor experience. For instance, promotion, education, signage, and wayfinding may be lacking.

The New Hampshire findings suggest that there are many individuals and organizations playing critical roles in local *amenity* development that are not giving very much thought to *tourism* development, even if their amenities are some of the key types of attractions that visitors seek. Importantly, this oversight does not necessarily stem from negative perceptions of visitors or intentional disregard for tourism, although for some, there may be elements of these influences involved. Importantly, this was a study of trail and recreation organization leaders, not residents or trail users in general. Since trail development projects often arise from intentions of personal and local community use, increased visitor use could lead to negative sentiments toward tourism if sites become crowded, overused, or mistreated.

This data from New Hampshire indicates that for many trail-related organizations' members and leaders, catering to visitors is simply not a top priority, even if they acknowledge (often with appreciation and positivity) that their projects and actions may contribute to regional economic development via tourism. In some sense, these groups are creating trails that are "*authentic*" to the motivations, preferences, and lifestyles of local people, largely unadulterated by commercial interests. In their essences, the types of recreational trails included in this study represent local people making local products that they themselves plan to consume. Future research would be needed to effectively explore how this trail development intention translates to (non-local) visitor use and usability, as well as to visitors' perceptions and preferences.

It is important to note that levels of (non-resident) visitor traffic vary across the different types of recreational sites represented in the case study dataset, with tourists being more common historically at some than at others. Additionally, while the study region is largely "off the beaten track," it is near several well-known destinations where many visitors spend extended time seasonally, for instance at lake houses. Many of these seasonal visitors do not consider

themselves “tourists,” and due to the extended time they spend in their vacation communities, they may experience the destination differently than shorter-term or first-time visitors.

## Conclusion

Blurred lines between “residents” and “visitors,” in tandem with growing visitor interests in off-the-beaten-track experiences, suggest that this is a timely moment to further consider how locally-focused outdoor recreation development contributes to destination development. In considering the implications of *inadvertent* tourism amenity development, these initial research findings provide justification for further exploration of: 1) the respective needs and interests of locals versus visitors; 2) visitor interests in “authentic,” local-style recreation experiences; 3) the ways in which outdoor recreation can contribute to visitor perceptions of destination-level authenticity; and 4) the potential management or community consequences of developing outdoor recreation amenities without much intentionality for tourism planning. Since the current New Hampshire research focuses on the *producer* side (local trail developers and managers) and did not include surveys or interviews with the [non-producer] *consumer* side (visitors), future research could also engage visitors in an investigation of the influences of authenticity upon recreation motivations and preferences.

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