

Involving the Local Community in Sport Tourism Development: Physical, Mental, and Cognitive Benefits as a Foundation for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This article examines the importance of involving the local community in the development of sport tourism, with a focus on the multidimensional benefits of sport and physical education. The study investigates how sport activity contributes to the physical, mental, social, and cognitive well-being of local community residents, and how these benefits can serve as a foundation for sustainable sport tourism development. Through a comprehensive literature review, the article presents the close relationship between physical education, public health, and community development. It demonstrates that investment in sport infrastructure and physical education programs serves as a dual lever: both improving residents' quality of life and attracting sports tourists. The article is based on a doctoral study examining the development of a sport tourism village in Ein Qiniyya, located in the Israeli Golan Heights.

Keywords: sport tourism; community involvement; physical education; mental well-being; cognitive abilities; sustainable development; Golan Heights.

1. Introduction

Sport tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry worldwide, with a growth rate of approximately 15% per year, three times the growth rate of the general tourism industry (Donner, 2011). This trend reflects a fundamental shift in tourist preferences, transitioning from mass tourism focused on relaxation and entertainment to experiential tourism that includes physical activity, personal challenge, and connection with nature (Nordin, 2005; Radicchi, 2013).

However, successful and sustainable sport tourism development cannot exist in a vacuum. It requires the active involvement of the local community in planning, implementing, and enjoying the fruits of development (González-García et al., 2018). This community involvement serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it ensures that tourism development serves the needs of residents and contributes to their quality of life; on the other hand, a healthy, active, and sport-involved local community constitutes in itself a significant tourism asset, as it creates an authentic and inviting atmosphere for tourists.

This article is based on a chapter from a doctoral study examining the development of a sport tourism village in Ein Qiniyya, a Druze village situated at the foot of Mount Hermon in the

Israeli Golan Heights. The study examines the potential of Ein Qiniyya to become an international sport tourism destination while involving the local community in the development process. In this article, we review the multidimensional benefits of sport and physical education and demonstrate how these benefits constitute an essential foundation for sustainable sport tourism development.

2. Sport benefits: A multidimensional perspective

The research literature indicates that sport and physical activity offer a wide range of benefits across the physical, mental, social, and cognitive dimensions of human life (Opstoel et al., 2020). These benefits are not limited to a specific age group or fitness level, but are relevant to the entire population, from children to adults.

In the context of sports tourism, understanding these benefits is essential for two main reasons. First, it provides the theoretical basis for justifying public investment in sport infrastructure and physical education programs, which are necessary preconditions for the development of sport tourism. Second, it enables policymakers to understand how involving the local community in sports activities can serve as a lever to both improve residents' quality of life and strengthen the tourism product.

As Hautbois and Desbordes (2008) note, sport has become, in recent years, a phenomenon of great scale and influence. It constitutes an important resource for the development of local contexts and national economies. Simultaneously, Trudeau and Shephard (2010) and Anderson-Butcher (2014) emphasized the contribution of sport to community well-being at both the individual and collective levels (Hautbois & Desbordes, 2008; Trudeau & Shephard, 2010; Anderson-Butcher, 2014).

3. Physical education: The foundation for building a sporting community

Physical education is a central component of the school curriculum, helping students develop physical skills, knowledge, and positive attitudes toward physical activity (Mitchell & Walton-Fisette, 2021). However, the importance of physical education extends far beyond the school walls, serving as the foundation for a community's sporting culture.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the close relationship between quality physical education and physical health. Davis, Roscoe, and Bull (2005) highlighted the contribution of regular physical activity to chronic disease prevention, improved cardiovascular fitness, and maintenance of healthy body weight. Haskell (2007) published the updated recommendations of the American College of Sports Medicine, emphasizing the need for at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week for adults (Davis, Roscoe & Bull, 2005; Haskell, 2007).

In the context of children and adolescents, research emphasizes the importance of physical education as a lever for long-term health. Dwyer (1983) found that daily physical activity among primary school students contributes to their overall health. Kirk (2005) emphasized the importance of early learning experiences in physical education for lifelong participation in sport, arguing that positive attitudes formed at a young age form the foundation for sustained sporting involvement (Dwyer, 1983; Kirk, 2005).

Norton (2003) added an important dimension to this research by emphasizing the role of parents in shaping their children's physical activity patterns. This finding reinforces the argument that developing a community sporting culture requires a comprehensive approach that involves all age groups and community institutions (Norton, 2003).

Jansen and colleagues (2008) presented a model of school-based intervention to reduce overweight and inactivity among children aged 6-12, demonstrating that structured

physical education programs can be an effective tool for improving public health. These findings are particularly relevant for rural communities such as Ein Qiniyya, where access to health services and sports facilities may be limited.

Pickup, Haydn-Davies, and Jess (2007) emphasized the importance of physical education in primary school as a critical stage in the development of physical literacy. Constantinides, Mantalvo, and Silverman (2013) found that physical education taught by specialist teachers yields better outcomes than that taught by generalist teachers, highlighting the need to invest in professional physical education teachers as part of the community development strategy (Pickup, Haydn-Davies & Jess, 2007).

4. Mental and social well-being: The benefits of sport beyond the body

Beyond the physical benefits, the research literature points to a significant contribution of sport and physical activity to mental and social well-being. Stewart-Brown (2012) demonstrated that sport can improve mental and social well-being through stress reduction, increased self-esteem, and greater social interaction.

This aspect of sport is particularly important in the context of sport tourism, as it indicates that sport is not merely a physical activity, but a complete social and emotional experience. When local community residents enjoy the mental and social benefits of sport, they become authentic ambassadors of the sport tourism destination, conveying to tourists a sense of belonging and a healthy lifestyle.

4.1 *Personal and social development*

Opstoel (2020) conducted a comprehensive literature review on personal and social development in physical education and sport, finding that participation in sport activity contributes to the development of social skills, personal responsibility, and self-confidence. These findings are consistent with the research of Gordon (2010) and Li (2008), who examined the model of personal and social responsibility in physical education (Gordon, 2010; Li, 2008; Opstoel, 2020).

Baena-Extremuera, Granero-Gallegos, and Ortiz-Camacho (2012) examined the effect of an adventure education program on classroom satisfaction, physical self-concept, and social goals, finding significant positive effects across all domains. Driska and colleagues (2017) investigated psychological changes among adolescent wrestlers during an intensive training camp and demonstrated that organized sport contributes to the development of mental resilience and social skills. (Baena-Extremuera, Granero-Gallegos, Ortiz-Camacho, 2012; Driska, 2017; Petkova, Galily & Pilyavsky, 2024).

4.2 *Community involvement and citizenship*

Pancer and colleagues (2007) investigated the relationship between community and political involvement among adolescents, finding that participation in community sports is a significant predictor of civic involvement in adulthood. This finding is particularly important for understanding the potential of sport tourism as a catalyst for comprehensive community development.

Manzano-Sánchez (2021) examined the relationships among school climate, responsibility, and prosocial and antisocial behavior, finding that physical education programs that emphasize personal and social responsibility reduce violent behavior and promote prosocial

behavior. Fernández-Rio and Suarez (2016) demonstrated that innovative sport activities, such as parkour, can serve as tools for developing social skills and cooperation among primary school students (Manzano-Sánchez, 2021; Fernández-Rio & Suarez, 2016).

Sport, therefore, constitutes a powerful mechanism for building social capital within a community. When a local community develops a rich sporting culture, it creates strong social networks, a sense of belonging, and mutual responsibility, conditions that are essential for successful sport tourism development. As González-García (2018) noted, involving the local community in sport tourism development is essential to ensuring the industry's sustainability (González-García, 2018).

5. Cognitive and learning benefits of sport

One of the most surprising findings in research on sport and physical education concerns their contribution to cognitive development and learning. Hardman (2014) found that sport can improve cognitive and learning abilities by enhancing concentration, memory, and problem-solving skills (Hardman, 2014).

Trudeau and Shephard (2010) conducted a comprehensive review of the relationship between physical activity and brain health, as well as academic achievement, among students. Their findings showed that regular physical activity improves cognitive functions, including working memory, attention, and cognitive flexibility. Shephard (1997) added important findings on the relationship between physical activity in the curriculum and academic performance (Trudeau & Shephard, 2010; Shephard, 1997).

5.1 *The neurological basis*

Diamond (1998) provided the neurological basis for understanding the relationship between physical activity and cognitive function, emphasizing how an enriched environment, including physical activity, affects brain anatomy. Jensen (1998) developed a brain-compatible teaching approach that emphasizes the importance of movement in learning. Hannaford (1995) added that movement is integral to the learning process and that learning does not occur solely in the head (Diamond, 1998; Jensen, 1998; Hannaford, 1995).

Barr and Lewin (1994) examined the integration of the kinesthetic sense with cognitive skills, finding that learning through movement improves understanding and memory. These findings reinforce the argument that physical education is not merely an addition to the curriculum but an essential component of the overall learning process (Barr & Lewin, 1994).

5.2 *Physical education and academic achievement*

Tremarche, Robinson, and Graham (2007) found a positive relationship between physical education and test results in primary school. Tremblay, Inman, and Willms (2000) investigated the relationship between physical activity, self-esteem, and academic achievement among 12-year-old children, finding significant positive correlations. Lindner (2002) examined the relationship between physical activity participation and academic performance, reinforcing earlier findings (Tremarche, Robinson & Graham, 2007; Tremblay, Inman & Willms, 2000).

A particularly important finding emerges from the research of Hervet (1952) conducted in Vanves, France, and of Caifas and Taylor (1994), who showed that expanding physical education hours in school, even at the expense of academic instruction hours, does not impair students' academic achievement. On the contrary, when no decline in achievement was

documented, this means that students learned more per unit of study, thanks to the positive effect of physical education on concentration and learning abilities. This argument strengthens the justification for increasing physical education hours in schools as part of the community development strategy (Hervet, 1952; Caifas & Taylor, 1994).

Melnick, Sabo, and Vanfossen (1992) examined the educational effects of participation in interscholastic sport among youth, finding positive effects on motivation, school belonging, and academic achievement. These findings reinforce the argument that investment in sport and physical education constitutes an investment in the community's human capital (Melnick, Sabo & Vanfossen, 1992).

6. Implications for community-based sport tourism development

The findings presented above indicate that sport and physical education constitute powerful tools for comprehensive community development. In the context of sport tourism, several important practical implications can be identified.

6.1 *Building a local sporting culture*

Sustainable sport tourism development requires, first and foremost, the building of a strong local sporting culture. This means investing in high-quality physical education programs in schools, establishing sports facilities accessible to the entire community, and developing community sports events. As Kirk (2005) and Keegan (2013) emphasized, positive sporting experiences at a young age are key to lifelong participation in sport (Kirk, 2005; Keegan, 2013).

6.2 *Improving quality of life as a tourism asset*

When the local community enjoys the physical, mental, and cognitive benefits of sport, this is reflected in the settlement's overall quality of life and atmosphere. Sports tourists seek authentic destinations where sport is part of the local lifestyle rather than merely an artificial attraction. A healthy, active, and vibrant community is itself a unique tourism product.

6.3 *Developing local human capital*

The cognitive and learning benefits of sport contribute to the development of the community's human capital. Residents with higher cognitive and learning abilities are better able to function in the tourism industry, which requires high-level communication skills, problem-solving, and customer service.

6.4 *Strengthening social cohesion*

The social benefits of sport, as described in this article, help strengthen social cohesion within communities. Strong social cohesion is a necessary condition for successful sport tourism development, as it ensures cooperation among various stakeholders and public support for the development process.

7. Case study: Ein Qiniyya as a sport tourism destination

Ein Qiniyya, a Druze village of approximately 2,100 residents situated at the foot of Mount Hermon, provides an interesting case study for applying the principles presented in this article. The village is located in an area of immense tourism potential, with breathtaking landscapes, proximity to major tourist sites, and a rich cultural tradition (EQLC, 2022; IAA, 2019).

The Ein Qiniyya Local Council is working to develop the village as a sports tourism destination while involving the local community in the process. Among other initiatives, new sports facilities are being constructed, including a football stadium with a hotel, a sports hall, a swimming pool, and cycling paths. Concurrently, plans are underway to increase physical education hours in schools and to develop awareness of sport training among residents (Mugrabi, 2022).

The PEAK-TO-PEAK event, an international ultra-trail marathon connecting the peaks of the Golan and Hermon, serves as a successful example of the integration between sport tourism and community development. The event involves the local community in organizing, hospitality, and the enjoyment of economic benefits, and creates multicultural connections among communities in the region (Goldfish, 2022).

8. Conclusion

This article has reviewed the multidimensional benefits of sport and physical education and demonstrated how these benefits constitute an essential foundation for sustainable sport tourism development. The findings indicate that investment in sport and physical education is not merely a contribution to public health, but a comprehensive strategy for community and economic development.

The physical benefits of sport, as described in the research by Davis (2005) and Haskell (2007), contribute to a healthier community. The mental and social benefits, as described by Stewart-Brown (2012) and Opstoel (2020), strengthen social cohesion and social capital. And the cognitive benefits, as demonstrated by Trudeau and Shephard (2010) and Hardman (2014), contribute to human capital development (Davis, 2005; Haskell, 2007; Stewart-Brown, 2012; Opstoel, 2020; Trudeau & Shephard, 2010; Hardman, 2014).

When these benefits materialize in a local community, a solid foundation is created for sustainable sport tourism development. A healthy, cohesive, and educated community is capable not only of hosting sports tourists but also of offering them an authentic, unique experience that cannot be replicated.

The case of Ein Qiniyya illustrates how these principles can be implemented in practice, in a rural community seeking to develop itself as an international sport tourism destination. The success of this endeavor depends first and foremost on involving the local community in the process, and on ensuring that village residents are the first to enjoy the benefits of sport and physical activity.

Future research is needed to empirically examine the relationship between community involvement in sport and the success of sport tourism development, and to develop practical models for implementing this approach in additional communities.

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