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Emerging Opportunities for Commercial Recreation

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Emerging Opportunities for Commercial Recreation

Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to acknowledge the Kingdom Trails Association and the greater Burke, VT community for their cooperation and support for this project

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 (Koeberer, 2011). Trail-based recreation which has traditionally been offered by the public sector is now becoming an opportunity for private sector endeavors. One major limitation to private sector provisioning of trail opportunities is the availability of public land for these types of endeavors and the careful planning and management involved (T. Tierney, personal communication, January 17, 2013).

However, the formulation and development of partnerships between private land owners and a trusted outside entity has greatly increased the acreage, accessibility, and potential for development and maintenance of regional trails. One group that has pioneered this effort and has become very successful is the Kingdom Trails Association (KTA) in northeastern Vermont.

KTA provides 110 miles of superb trails over seven square miles. They span 57 different private land owner parcels and two public state forest sites. Beginning simply as an idea 1990, it has become a major tourism draw for the region, attracting over 56,000 visitors a year and economic impacts of more than \$5.6 million to the community. The trails offer opportunities for Nordic skiing, snow shoeing, and skate skiing in winter and spring, and mountain biking, walking, equestrian uses and running in the fall and summer.

This paper has two main goals. The first is to describe how a new approach to outdoor recreation supply is emerging, and the second is to provide a process map that others may use as a guide in order to develop a similar endeavor, be it commercial or otherwise.

2.0 Methods

Nine 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 and development, as well as gathering an understanding of community perceptions of KTA. Interviews were conducted with KTA staff such as the founder, and the executive director, with key informants such as trail developers and land owners, with local business members in lodging and real estate, and the local chamber of commerce (Table 1).

Questions aimed at KTA staff were designed to best understand the history, development, and process, of developing their trail system. Questions also gathered important information regarding the potential pitfalls and impacts of developing a similar trail system in other communities. The main goal was to understand this unique recreation provisioning method. As interviews progressed it became clear that this could be a new approach to recreation servicing and questions also gathered information to provide a protocol or “steps to success” to help others who may be inclined to develop a similar type of entity.

Table 1. Positions and key information provided during interviews of Kingdom Trails Association and various stakeholders

<u>Position</u>	<u>Key Information</u>
KTA Founder	KTA history, process, pitfalls
KTA Executive Director	Inner workings, community outreach, trail growth, future plans/concerns
Trail Builders	Trail development, community networking, approval process
Local Landowners	Benefits of partnership, early perceptions of KTA
Real Estate Agents	Contributions of KTA to community, change in KTA's role over time
Chamber of Commerce	KTA role in community, contributions to local business

When interviewing constituents, questions were developed to capture community perceptions of KTA. These were an attempt to understand the process of trust building and acceptance that the community experienced during the developmental and growth stages of KTA.

Some information was gathered via conversational interviews and key themes noted, while other interviews and follow-up were conducted via written correspondence (i.e., email) or additional phone conversations. 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

Data collected from the Lyndon State College surveys show that 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.

3.1 Kingdom Trails History and Development

Kingdom Trails has an interesting history that could provide valuable information for the commercial recreation field. Though classified as a non-profit organization, their business approach, growth, and decision-making closely align to private enterprise tactics. This history is summarized here and based upon interviews conducted during this project.

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.

Subsequently, the association realized they needed to operate with more business savvy and 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 length. In 2001, by use of press kits and grant proposals, their publicity grew dramatically. Map purchase price was subsequently 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. Next was the addition of a redesigned map and the hiring of 3-4 summer staff to handle trail work and ticket sales, along with one full time trail manager. 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, map, and a new groomer for winter ski trail grooming. They also 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. They also partnered with Burke and Darling State Forests, extending onto public lands.

One major contribution to the reach of the trail system occurred in 2010 when they connected their network to the local ski resort, 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 resort.

3.2 Process of Partnered Recreation Provisioning

From the interviews a process map was developed to identify steps for creating a similar type of endeavor in a similar type of region for these activities. This was developed based upon input from all informants and was an attempt at combining input to reflect the needs of the trail developers as well as community members, local businesses, and landowners. These steps are listed below in a typical chronological order of completion, as well as supporting quotes from key informants.

It is important to note, however, that these steps were developed based upon this specific situation and may not parlay into other regions with different activities, social, environmental, or economic issues. For example, the KTA region of northeastern VT has several large tract land owners, with a keen sense of the value of outdoor recreation as well as an agenda for the benefits that low impact tourism can have on the region. That is not to say that over 20 years ago this was the collective thinking, for it had to be cultivated over time with careful planning and action.

1. Formulate core leadership - leadership should be a small (3-5 member) group, and dedicated to a shared vision. As a new endeavor that will hinge on private landowner access, it is important to establish trust and credibility early on.

“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 because this provides an anchor for the project.

“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. If possible, establish trust with long time residents to act as an ally. By developing a 501(c)(3) status with legal liability information you can release landowners of responsibility and alleviate associated fears. A commercial business can do this with waivers and/or revocable license agreements.

“I tell people if you are starting out and need to get landowner permission, do not send the (trail) 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. Other local businesses 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 trail system that is small enough that high quality can be achieved. It is best to offer a small amount of well-built trails than to over extend your resources and offer a large amount of lower quality 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, and 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. New visitors do not know what you are offering or who you are. Initial 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 often many types of support for new trails via federal, regional, and local grants.
9. Limit your 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.

“By using a revocable license agreement a landowner and business should be able to protect themselves in the advent of a mishap” (Attorney, Portsmouth, NH)
10. Draw business as soon as you are ready. Marketing, online efforts, social networking, and special events, will all help with this.
11. Build your work force. Hire interns, volunteers, managers, and trail crews as needed.

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 (and) 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. This was an essential relationship that emerged during the interviews conducted for this project. For example, different stakeholders such as *town officials*, *business owners*, and *visitors*, may all have differing attributes such as *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.

4.0 Conclusions and Implications

First of all, it is important to note that these findings were based on data collected in a small, rural region of northeastern VT. Also the key informants were a very small sample and there is potential for bias based on the predominantly white, private landowner status of the key informants. Applying these steps directly to say, an inner city recreation site would likely not work due to vast differences in physical, social, and economic environments.

Development of a trail network that includes a multitude of private landowner partnerships, public state agencies, and a private resort is no simple task (Moore, 1994). 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 (T. Tierney, personal communication, January 17, 2013). Finally it is the dedicated core group which ultimately sets the tone, and formulates the path of action over the life of the network.

If this type of recreation provisioning is a growing trend, it would serve any organization well to utilize the steps outlined here as a guideline, and adapt them to their particular needs, community, and circumstances. It is important to note that this was outlined for a small, rural community, with low tourism visitation 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 type of leadership that has guided them.

4.1 Future Concerns

The Kingdom Trails are not all a tale of great success with little concerns. These interviews have shown that as the trails 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-productive. 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, in which commercial business has a keen interest. 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 ensure 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, dogsledders 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 a 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 in a new, unique way. 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, this new type of recreation provisioning may become an attractive alternative for many communities.

5.0 Citations

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Figure 1. The inner circle of core leadership, middle ring of stakeholders, and outer ring of attributes involved in the KTA partnership efforts for trail network development

