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**Mike Weed**

Institute of Sport & Leisure Policy, School of Sport & Exercise Sciences

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## **Olympic Tourism? The Tourism Potential of London 2012**

There has been a burgeoning interest in the phenomenon of sports tourism in recent years. This paper discusses the nature of 'Olympic Tourism' as part of the sports tourism phenomenon, focusing particularly on opportunities and challenges in relation to the London Olympics of 2012. It discusses the potential volume and types of Olympic tourism and concludes by highlighting the need for effective planning to 'leverage' the positive impacts of the 2012 Games. It identifies the establishment of sustainable policy networks for sports tourism in the UK as potentially being one of the most significant legacies of the 2012 Games.

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Dr. Mike Weed

Centre for Olympic Studies & Research (COSaR)

Institute of Sport & Leisure Policy, School of Sport & Exercise Sciences

Loughborough University

Loughborough

Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, UK.

Tel: +44 1509 226369 / Fax: +44 1509 223935 / eMail: [m.e.weed@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:m.e.weed@lboro.ac.uk)

**Dr Mike Weed** is with the Centre for Olympic Studies & Research (COSaR) and the Institute of Sport & Leisure Policy in the School of Sport & Exercise Sciences at Loughborough University. His research interests lie in all aspects of the relationship between sport and tourism. He is author (with Chris Bull, Canterbury) of *Sports Tourism: Participants Policy and Providers* (Oxford: Elsevier).

Although now overshadowed by the bombings on July 7<sup>th</sup>, July 6<sup>th</sup> 2005 was a joyous day for London and the UK as the city celebrated beating the favourite Paris to win the race to become the host for the Games of the XXXth Olympiad in 2012. Trafalgar Square was overrun with both overseas and UK tourists who came to watch and celebrate the IOC announcement. Stratford in East London, one of the world's most multicultural places, a fact not lost on IOC members, held a party to celebrate the area's regeneration over the next seven years. But what, in tourism terms, will the Olympic Games offer London and the UK?

### **Sport and Tourism**

In a four-year 'systematic review of sports tourism knowledge', Weed (2004) noted the year-on-year growth of sports tourism publications in refereed journals from just five in 2000 to 22 in 2003. Implicit in these publications is a recognition that sports tourism is a significant cultural, social and economic phenomenon (Weed & Bull, 2004). While statistics about sporting elements of tourist trips are notoriously difficult to extrapolate, Collins and Jackson (1999) conservatively estimated that, at the turn of the millennium, sports tourism was worth £2.5 billion annually to the UK.

Weed and Bull (2004) conceptualise sports tourism as 'derived from the unique interaction of activity, people and place' – but what does this tell us about the tourism potential of London 2012. We know that sport is an important tourism phenomenon (Collins & Jackson, 1999) that provides *people* with exciting and stimulating tourist experiences (Hinch & Higham, 2005). We know that London is arguably the world's foremost city tourism destination, providing a vibrant multicultural *place* for domestic and international visitors. Finally, we know

that the Olympics is the world's premier sporting event, providing travellers with varied active, passive and vicariously experienced *activities*. Consequently, London 2012 will see the interaction of sport as a tourism draw with London as a world city and the Olympics as the world's premier sports event, thus providing the potential for a wide range of highly significant benefits.

### **What is Olympic Tourism?**

The simple view is that Olympic tourism comprises the visits of spectators, athletes, officials and dignitaries during the Games themselves. However, this is far from the full picture. The IOC announcement on July 6<sup>th</sup> is the 'B of the Bang' for the UK tourism industry, the start of a tourism phenomenon potentially lasting 15-20 years and leaving a lasting legacy for the organisation and co-ordination of UK tourism. Potential pre- and post-games tourism may arise from sports training tourism, sports event tourism, sports participation tourism and tourism with sports content (see Weed & Bull, 2004, for details on these sports tourism types). For example, the East Midlands Development Agency estimate that Loughborough (a University town 120 miles north of London) could benefit by £5-10 million as international teams seek to utilise the University's extensive sports facilities and expertise in the 5-6 years before the Games. This may seem an excessive estimate, but the Great Britain team spent £1million on their pre-Athens Olympic Games training camp in Cyprus in 2004 (Cotton, 2005). The run up to 2012 will see traditional ideas about warm weather acclimatisation reversed, as athletes seek to acclimatise to the UK's often inclement, and always unpredictable, weather and environment.

As London 2012 approaches, previously inconsequential sports competitions throughout the UK will become significant international events as athletes seek to experience UK conditions. This will inevitably stimulate a growth in travelling sports spectators as international athletes who may previously have preferred to compete in warmer conditions flock to UK based events, making the UK the centre of international sporting competition, particularly in the 3-4 years before the Games.

Recreational sports participants will want to train and compete at venues that are part of London 2012, and this is likely to continue well after the Games have taken place. The London Marathon, already over-subscribed, is likely to experience a considerable increase in prospective entrants of all abilities who wish to say they have run the Olympic course. General tourists visiting the UK will want to tour Olympic venues and facilities, both before and after the Games. With creative marketing, 'iconic' Games performances can become the subject of visitor attractions for many years to come. London will experience a cultural boost as an Olympic city, particularly if there is a continued emphasis on its multicultural character as 'a city where people of any nationality can find a fellow countryman' (London 2012 Candidature File).

If the idea of a post-Games tourism boost seems unlikely, consider the experience of Barcelona. In 1990, two years before hosting the Olympics, Barcelona experienced 1.7 million visitors – by 2001 this had increased to 3.4 million. The Games had significantly increased the city's number of tourist beds, yet average occupancy rates had still increased from 70% to 85% during this period (Sanahuja, 2002).

## **Capitalising on (Leveraging) Olympic Tourism**

Despite Barcelona's positive experience, benefits are not guaranteed. The 1996 Games in Atlanta were an organisational disaster, and there is no evidence of any post-Games tourism boost. While 30 year debts, as experienced by Montreal, are history, the tourism and economic benefits of Olympic Games do not materialise out of the ether. They must be planned for, and specific strategies must be put in place to 'leverage' (Chalip & Green, 2001; Chalip & Leyns, 2003) these benefits.

For the last decade I have been writing about sports tourism policy in the UK (eg Weed & Bull, 1997; Weed, 2001; Weed, 2003). Throughout this time research has consistently shown that policy-making agencies for sport and for tourism have shown considerable reluctance to work together. London 2012 provides these organisations with an opportunity to establish mechanisms and networks to promote, facilitate and provide for Olympic tourism in the run up to 2012, and for sports tourism long after. The establishment of such mechanisms and networks may be the most enduring tourism legacy of London 2012.

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