



The practice of mountain biking in the Serra de Collserola Natural Park. A controversy mapping

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SUMMARY

The CiMColl research project analyzes in depth the practice of mountain biking in the Collserola Natural Park, delving into the various disputes associated, in order to draw up a controversy mapping. The resulting knowledge aims to nurture academic discussions around the leisure uses of natural environments but also to contribute to the public debate so as to enhance policy-making and public management.

PRESENTATION

The Collserola Natural Park is a key territory guaranteeing the biological metabolism and the metropolitan ecosystem services. Yet, it is also one of the natural spaces with greater anthropogenic and social pressure of the region. Mountain biking is one of the most popular leisure activities allowed in the park, which contains 207 km of adapted cycle tracks. However, the public debate about the *Special plan for the protection of the natural environment and the landscape of the Serra de Collserola Natural Park* (PEPNat) – approved in 2021 – has given rise to legal and political disputes around the restrictions on the practice of mountain biking in single-tracks and protected areas due to their ecological values. Besides, conflicts also arose regarding the frictional coexistence with other uses with regards to the prevention plans tackling fire risks in the face of the climate emergency, among others. These manifold disagreements, far from being a mere clash of interests between stakeholders, constitute a clear example of a *sociotechnical controversy*; that is, a sociopolitical context of knowledge uncertainty and political disagreement in which experts are not able to impose a technical solution.

CiMColl envisages two major complementary work packages. The first one wishes to learn more about the practice of mountain biking in Collserola. To do this, a range of research methods are deployed. Among them, the statistical and cartographic exploitation of existing data as well as the creation of new knowledge through a survey, systematic observation work and *ride-along* ethnographic interviews. The second one aims to analyze the different disputes in order to undertake a *cartography of controversies* (Surat & Tari, 2021; Venturini & Munk, 2022) as a methodology seeking to build a genealogy of the disagreement as well as a map of the agencies, relationships and interests at stake related to the dispute. The preliminary results will be discussed in collaborative workshops in the form of hybrid forums (Callon et al. 2009) so as to enrich the technical and political debate, to set commitments between actors and to nurture possible action plans.

STARTING POINT

The change of habits of the metropolitan population along with the disruption of different technological changes - assisted motors, hydraulic brakes, safety elements - have facilitated the rise of mountain biking in Collserola. Such an increase of the number of cyclists, among other users, adds more pressure and difficulty to comply with the conservation objectives of the Natural Park but also among the different users of the park. Most of these disputes have overwhelmed the area of purely scientific and technical discussion and have become public issues. Such disputes have also made new voices and new relationships emerge, multiplying and making the elements of the debate and the issues at stake more heterogeneous and difficult to disentangle.

So far, we have initially identified up to three disputes that serve as a starting point to focus the analysis of the subsequent controversy:

- The anthropogenic pressure of cycling on the natural ecosystem of Collserola both in terms of direct and indirect soil erosion - especially in the footpaths - or the effects on flora and fauna - especially in the nature reserves -.
- The risk associated with the increase in the number of visitors to the park, specifically those arising for reasons of safety, evacuation and the risk of fires, particularly accentuated in recent years as a result of the effects of the climate emergency.
- The discomfort shown by users on foot of Collserola in encounters with the practice of mountain biking, especially due to the presence on footpaths and paths as well as the excessive speed of bicycles, limited to 20 km/h in the whole park.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given this context, the realization of these disputes and the lack of specific knowledge to scrutinize them, the following research questions arise:

- What is the current knowledge and what is the state of art regarding conflicts arising from mountain biking in other parks and natural environments ?
- What is the profile of users who practice mountain biking? What are the main characteristics of their practice? What is their motivation?
- What is the framework for discussion and what are the disputes? Who are the spokespeople for the interest groups? What are the arguments of the different actors? What are the elements at stake in the conflictual situations?
- What has been the response of the administration so far? What are the possibilities and what are the limitations?

RESEARCH AIMS

We can clearly identify two general aims (GA) of the research project.

GA1. To analyze in depth the characteristics of the sportive and recreational practice of mountain biking in the Collserola Park through the exploitation of existing sources and to

generate new complementary information through the implementation of various research methods.

GA2. Explore the disputes of a socio-technical nature in the environment of mountain biking in the Collserola Park in order to identify and describe the relationships at stake, the agencies, the interests, the arguments and the effects through the *controversy mapping* in order to build a repository of open knowledge - narrative and graphic - that helps to enrich the public debate and that contributes to the making of technical and political decisions for the management of the park.

Four **specific aims** have been planned in order to link them to the different work processes:

SA1. Analyze the practice of mountain biking through existing sources

SA2. Generate new specialized knowledge

SA3. Analyze the socio-technical disputes around mountain biking in Collserola

SA4. Encourage collaborative work and participate in public debate

WORK PACKAGES

In order to achieve the objectives of the project, a mixed method and multimodal approach is proposed that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques, traditional methods of analysis with more innovative methods of analysis but also of representation and public discussion of the results.

A. Exploitation of existing sources of information for the analysis of cycling practice and associated disputes

A.1. Statistical exploitation and cartographic representation of existing data [SA1]

A.2. Analysis and representation of social network data for sports activity registration [SA2]

A.3. Documentary and hemerographic analysis around disputes [SA3]

B. Generation of new quantitative and qualitative knowledge through field work

B.1. Systematic observation of cycling practice [SA2]

B.2. Survey on mountain bikers [SA2]

B.3. *Ride-along* interviews delving into certain socio-demographic profiles [SA2]

B.4. In-depth interviews with social agents [SA2; SA3]

C. Mapping the controversy

C.1. Preparation of the preliminary documents for the cartography of the controversy [SA3]

C.2. Collaborative analysis workshops [SA3; SA4]

DELIVERY MATERIALS

The materials that will be presented as part of the call, to be delivered in June 2024, are:

1. **Scientific and technical report.** Full report of the results of the analysis of the cycling activity as regards the final result of the mapping of the controversy.
2. **Executive summary of the results.** A short document with the most prominent issues.
3. **Annex I. Report on the mountain biking activity in Collserola.** An expanded version presented with the outstanding results arising from Work Processes 2 and 3.
4. **Appendix II. Graphics and cartography.** The main graphic and cartographic materials will be presented in an A3 format for analysis and observation.
5. **Annex III. Report on the discussion and debate process of the participatory workshops**
6. **Academic papers.** To be drafted during the research project but published afterwards.

RESEARCH TEAM

Albert Arias Sans, PhD. Geographer. Specialized in urban and metropolitan tourism. His academic works revolve around the dynamics of urban tourism, mobilities and the analysis of controversies. He currently coordinates the Visitmob project as a postdoctoral researcher at the URV, and is an associate professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Barcelona. He is the Principal Investigator of the CiMColl project [Barcelona Science Plan 2020-2023]. [More info.](#)

Wilbert den Hoed, PhD. Geographer. Specialized in urban mobility. Marie Curie Postdoctoral Researcher at the Geography Department of the URV. He is a member of the Territorial Analysis and Tourism Studies Research Group (GRATET-URV) and is a visiting researcher at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and the University of Manchester (Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing). He leads the ENTOURAGE project which investigates urban transformations related to active mobility, with a special interest in tourist cities and the impacts on the aging population. [More info.](#)

Tomas Sanchez Criado, PhD. Anthropologist. Specialized in *Science and Technology Studies*, Ramon y Cajal researcher in the CareNet research group at IN3-UOC. In recent years as Senior Researcher and Head of the Multimodal Urban Anthropology Laboratory at the Humboldt University of Berlin where he has combined research around the material politics of care and functional diversity and the effects on city design with research towards collaborative experiments in participation and co-design of urban policies. [More info.](#)

Aina Molist Niubó, BA in tourism from the CETA University School (a center attached to the UdG) and is a student of the University Master's in Urban Tourism where she is completing her Final Project as part of the CiMColl project.

VAIC Mobility i **CAAVA** fulfill the functions of the technical office for the cartographic and infographic treatment of the data and results. [VAIC](#) | [CAAVA](#)

CiMColl, as part of the Young and Emergent Research Call, is supervised by two tenured senior researchers:

Dolores Sánchez Aguilera. Full Professor of Regional Geographic Analysis at the University of Barcelona. PI of the 2017SGR1509 Territorial Analysis and Regional Development Group ([Anterrit](#)).

Israel Rodríguez-Giralt. Associate Professor of the Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the Open University of Barcelona. Co-PI of 2017SGR1576 Care and Preparedness in the Network Society ([CareNet](#)).

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