Ecotourism is a form of tourism that occurs in largely untouched natural environments. Due to its potential to impact the environment, ecotourism is designed in a way that extends positive impacts on the region through conservation, economic stimulus to the host destination, cultural appreciation, visitors’ satisfaction, and education on the importance of conservation (Bien, 2006; Brandon, 1996; Thomas, et al., 2013; WTO, 2004). Sport ecotourists often engage in sports like rock climbing, mountain biking, skiing, and trail running as they seek challenging endeavors and landscape yet to be conquered. These rural, remote environments are sought for the beauty, terrain, challenge, and adventure they provide (Costa & Chalip, 2005; Robertson, et al., 2014). What is largely unknown, is the impact sport ecotourists have on these pristine environments.

Sustainability indicators provide a foundation for the planning, management, and monitoring of tourism activities (Thomas et al., 2013; WTO, 2004). These indicators provide information on the impacts of tourism development on the environment and socio-cultural conditions, as well as the economic benefit on host destinations, otherwise known as the triple bottom line (Bien, 2006). Using these indicators as a framework, this study explored the juxtaposition of hosting a mass sport event that requires a challenging, natural landscape and the efforts of the event organizers to provide sustainable ecotourism. Therefore, researchers chose the Grand Circle Trailfest to examine the triple bottom line of sustainability. Researchers used the World Tourism Organization (WTO) indicators to examine the triple bottom line of this US National Park-centered 3-day trail running event.

Using a qualitative design, researchers collected event materials, photographic imagery, participant observation, and conducted in-person interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) to examine the sustainable practices of the event. Semi-structured interviews of 18 participants probed for the perceptions of sustainable practices (i.e., environmental, socio-cultural, economic) of the Trailfest. Two investigators ran the course to observe participant behavior and the sustainable practices of the event. Photos and field notes were recorded during the run. Finally, the investigators took hundreds of photos of the: (1) general environment, (2) participant behavior, and (3) various event sites.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Using the WTO indicators as a starting framework, a thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017) was conducted to analyze the interviews, event materials, and photos. The data were coded into the 11 core WTO indicator categories. To ensure data quality, researchers established intercoder reliability and agreement (Campbell et al., 2013), triangulation using other data sources, and a search for alternative explanations (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Given limited space to explain qualitative work, the method and analysis will be discussed.

The researchers are currently analyzing data. Preliminary findings indicate positive sustainable practices by the event. However, there are clear elements of risk, a need for sustainable action, and a necessity for a means to better identify these actions. These findings expand the work by O’Brien and Chalip (2008) by extending the model of economic and social leverage to include environmental leverage (Chalip, 2018). Additional theoretical and practical implications will be discussed during the presentation.