

Improving the Role of the Recreationist in the Conservation of Parks and Protected Areas: a conceptual discussion of recreation-sensitive conservation

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Abstract: Natural area recreationists enjoy a bittersweet relationship with resource management and environmental conservation initiatives. Although parks and protected areas exist, in part, for the enjoyment of the public, recreational activities have the potential to cause numerous negative impacts on the environment. Park managers have responded in a variety of ways such as through legislation enforcement, recreation management techniques, education, or by encouraging the public to participate in conservation programs. However, one aspect of public participation that has not received much attention is participation that explicitly recognizes the recreationist's pursuit of their leisure activities in order to provide an appealing alternative for recreationists to participate in conservation efforts. Such *recreation-sensitive conservation* will require a shift in how the recreationist and their activities are viewed by both managers and recreationists. This paper will provide the conceptual background and rationale for continuing social research investigating how parks and protected area managers can enhance the role of the recreationist in conservation.

1. Introduction

Having undergone a number of transformations and debates, including earlier ideas of "wise use" (1), recent conceptions of environmental conservation often incorporate, but are not limited to, notions of the maintenance of biophysical resources, considering floral, faunal and geological diversity, with the allowance of acceptable human use and environmental change. Parks and protected areas play an important role in the pursuit of environmental conservation, herein referred to as conservation, but face a variety of pressures that in many circumstances severely compromise the environmental conservation agenda. One source of reprieve from this pressure may include increasing public involvement in the conservation of parks and protected areas. This paper will discuss the role of the recreationist, as a subset of the public, in contributing to conservation and explore how these contributions can be enhanced. It will do so by presenting general public participation theory and the need to understand the recreationist

as the basis for recreation-sensitive conservation, followed by the provision of examples, potential implications and final reflections. As part of continuing social research, this paper will hopefully provide the conceptual basis of much discussion and reflection regarding the relationship between recreationist and conservation, as well as the role of parks and protected area managers as participants in this relationship.

2. Public Participation

The public has become involved in resource management through activities such as volunteering, planning, policy development, and lobbying among many others (2). For example, public volunteers often participate in monitoring the weather, bird and fish populations, water quality, and an abundance of other topics (3,4). In fact, public involvement has enjoyed a long and important history of shaping parks and protected areas, as well as conservation in general (5,6). One reason to encourage this involvement is to develop resource management decisions that consider a breadth of potential knowledge, political contexts and social values (6); or, to better define the problem and gain access to information outside of the scientific community (1). This increased understanding is particularly important given the diverse challenges facing parks and protected areas, such as rising recreational use, pollution, development, loss of species, decreased funding and subsequent lack of necessary personnel (7,8,9). In addition, public involvement has been suggested to garner critical public support, a sense of ownership, trust and acceptance for resource management decisions (1,6).

Overall, resource management has defined a particular niche in which the public is able to participate in conservation. This is done for good reason in order to ensure "quality" or rigorous information that can be effectively used by management or researchers (10,11) or to focus participation towards specific management issues (6, 12). In addition, resource management agencies have established or adopted the necessary infrastructure - economically, politically, and administratively - to incorporate these forms of participation. However, such a niche is likely to discriminate against those publics that do not conform. One of the most salient examples of this are the difficulties encountered, whether attitudinal, technical or otherwise, in acknowledging the value and incorporating indigenous peoples into traditional resource management practice (1,13,14). Recreationists may experience similar difficulties. It can be argued that management defined participation niches only appeal to a minority of the recreationist population that may be willing to sponsor the time, energy and money necessary to participate in these conservation initiatives, beyond just compliance to regulations and in spite of support for environmental conservation. Even this participation may be tenuous given the realities of individual burnout or dissatisfaction with the project (15,16). Less conservation-active recreationists may simply be hesitant to contribute in the ways that management has conventionally provided, especially if it means an imposition on their leisure time; a point that will be discussed in more detail later.

3. Understanding the Recreationist

To address concerns regarding the exclusiveness of management defined participation niches, the recreationist as a specific sub-set of the public needs to be better understood. In the context of this research, recreationists include those individuals more appropriately

referred to as natural area recreationists whom recreate in parks and protected areas and can often be categorized in association to the type of activity performed such as hikers, bikers, hunters, anglers, birders, among many others. Although recreationists can be further subdivided within each of these activities, it is sufficient to understand that they are leisure active, or in the process of performing their leisure activity. Importantly, recreationists are motivated towards their leisure or recreation.

Recreationists derive, or pursue, a wide variety of benefits from their leisure activities in relation to the physiological, psychological and social aspects of an individual's life, such as skill development, improved health, solitude or spirituality, among many others (17). Parks and protected areas serve as important venues for these recreation and leisure activities (9,18,19,20,21). However, recreationists have to pursue their leisure activities in what they often perceive to be limited and increasingly fragmented periods of time away from other non-leisure activities or between competing leisure opportunities (22,23). In addition, the pursuit and participation in recreation may require a high investment on the part of the individual in order to negotiate successfully through a variety of constraints that may be encountered. (24). Consequently, recreationists may not want to participate in traditional conservation opportunities at the expense of their leisure, even if it is as noble as the conservation of parks and protected areas.

4. Recreation-Sensitive Conservation

Efforts to involve the public in resource management have not explicitly addressed or maintained the recreationist's identity or accommodated the recreationist's leisure activities. In addition, recreationist participation in conservation has often been delegated to either compliance with established rules and regulations or to limiting their own negative impact, both of which are enhanced through education programs. Although park managers are sensitive to recreationists by creating space for their activities, the opportunities managers provide for recreationists to participate in conservation are not as accommodating to these same leisure activities. This situation is by no means a weakness, but it does leave room for discussion of how to develop and enhance recreationist participation in parks and protected area conservation. Ultimately, there should be an alternative conception of participation that appreciates or becomes more sensitive to the importance of leisure for recreationists.

Such is the basis of *recreation-sensitive conservation (RSC)*¹, which is better defined as *the consideration of recreationist behaviours, motivations and abilities in contribution to, or participation in environmental conservation*. Recreation-sensitive conservation provides another way of engaging recreationists for conservation that does not necessarily compromise an individual's pursuit of their recreational activities by addressing recreationists on their own terms, in their own space. It allows the design of the participation niche according to the goals and abilities of both park managers and

¹ Recreation-sensitive participation (RSP) as the term originally presented in the SAMPAA IV conference has since been revised. Recreation-sensitive conservation (RSC) focuses the multifaceted notion of participation specifically towards participation in conservation, which is the purpose of this particular paper.

recreationists. An elaboration of RSC will now be developed with the use of examples, as well as a discussion of its importance and potential implications.

5. Examples

Although labeled differently, RSC is not a new idea since it joins a host of broader sensitive participation initiatives, most notably but not limited to those involving indigenous or local peoples and their culture (25); managers becoming more sensitive to the needs and abilities of the community. In addition, a variety of recreationist examples exist that demonstrate or at least implicitly incorporate the intentions behind RSC. Christmas bird counts, as a monitoring program, displays management efforts that appreciate recreationists and their activities, and have been and continue to be very successful (26). Programs such as this one allow recreationists to contribute without dramatically removing them from their leisure activity, and it is through these leisure activities that recreationists gain the ability or information to contribute. Indeed, such initiatives as creel surveys, report-a-poacher, and even the intentions behind ideal forms of ecotourism are a testament to RSC as the recreationist's potential to contribute to environmental conservation is through their recreation activities. In contrast, conventional participation opportunities such as an involvement in management plans or policy development often places recreationists in a context separate from their activity, which requires greater initiative on the part of recreationists in order to contribute or participate. Even the presence of recreationists in parks and their associated user fees as providing the necessary political and economic rationale to justify support for environmental conservation (27,28,29,30) tends to disassociate recreationist contributions from their leisure activities.

Obviously, public participation in resource management or conservation can arise in a variety of forms, but considering recreationists as a leisure-active subset of the public has distinct implications in how recreation-sensitive participation is operationalized. Even still, recreation-sensitive participation could include a wide range of activities such as informal policing, monitoring rare species, locating injured wildlife, or providing information on inappropriate and beneficial recreationist behaviours. As a result, it is difficult to provide specific examples because recreation-sensitive participation is more of a management strategy or philosophy, rather than identifiable to any specific program.

6. Importance of Recreation-Sensitive Conservation

Why pursue RSC and what can recreationists offer managers and conservation are both pertinent and valuable questions that need to be addressed. Initial responses will undoubtedly draw upon the recreationist's sullied, and in most circumstances deserved reputation as a negative influence on the integrity of parks and protected areas. Recreationist efforts to obtain benefits from the environment have been performed with such effectiveness or carelessness that they have often been thought to exploit and abuse the environment. The breadth of negative impacts is extensive including such occurrences as over-hunting, vegetation trampling, erosion, wildlife harassment and poaching, among numerous others (27,31). Even the recent Panel on the Ecological Integrity of Canada's National Parks (9) has noted recreation, or visitor use, as a major contributor to the degradation of the nation's parks and protected areas. In response to

these ongoing concerns, a diversity of recreation management techniques or strategic plans have been developed to mitigate these negative impacts (20,32,33). However, it seems that society's preoccupation with the abuse of the natural resource has hampered our ability to envision any positive aspects regarding recreationist influence on the environment, which is only exacerbated by the acceptance of a natural environment as devoid of human influence (34). Understanding and then fostering these positive recreationist contributions will likely assist conservation.

Improving recreationist participation in conservation has been viewed an excellent means to assist park and protected area managers (35), where one way this can be achieved is by considering the recreationist as a source of knowledge. Similar to indigenous peoples, recreationists likely have a wealth of knowledge and experience in regards to the areas in which they recreate, even if it is relatively shorter term in comparison to knowledge developed over human generations. A favorite trail or fishing hole and years of park visitation all speak to opportunities where recreationists can develop awareness and understanding about their environment. Even their presence on the landbase puts recreationists in an excellent position of reconnaissance that increasingly fewer managers are able to enjoy. In addition, many outdoor enthusiasts now possess high levels of formal education and expertise (21), which may be comparable to that of park managers.

It is critical to realize that less active in conservation does not necessarily imply less supportive of conservation efforts. A variety of sources have documented high public support for conservation efforts and environmental issues, including what can be inferred from the extent of use and importance of nature in the public's lives (18,19,21,36,37). Unfortunately, this surveyed support has not automatically resulted in comparable environmental action on the part of respondents or at least has done so inconsistently (37). As suggested earlier, one reason for this discrepancy between support and action may be the real or perceived difficulties created by following conventional forms of participation, or the motivation to satisfy other goals such as the immediate recreational experience. Recreation-sensitive conservation provides a means to facilitate and foster the expression of this potential environmentally supportive ethic.

In addition, RSC addresses the notion of enhancing lasting support for conservation initiatives. Increased sensitivity to the recreationists' pursuit of recreation implies a reduced need to significantly change recreationist motivations, thus avoiding the difficulties associated with such an endeavor (37,38). Further, RSC intends to capitalize and encourage existing "self-determined" recreationist motivations towards recreation and conservation, where self-determination has been identified as a critical component of lasting behaviour (37). Failure to at least consider recreationist motivations towards their leisure may result in a failure to incorporate these individuals, voluntarily, in any conservation initiative. A similar parallel can be drawn from a variety of international development initiatives that have been compromised because they had not considered existing behaviours of the local community, as well as the community's capacity or desire to participate, in spite of the development programs' apparent benefits (39). Trying to strictly mold participation or behaviour into particular management programs may presume that what these cultures or recreationists do now has no value to the same

conservation agenda. By recognizing potential contributions, and by appreciating recreationist motivations and behaviours, park managers may better address the potential to increase recreationist participation, as well as enhance the sustainability of such participation.

7. Implications of RSC: What RSC should and should not do

Recreation-sensitive conservation will not replace existing recreation management techniques or planning procedures. Established limits regarding the intensity of use and the areas in which recreationists can recreate are necessary and effective management tools to protect the environment. A corollary of this idea is that RSC does not grant license to recreate anywhere, even though it presents a position of recreational activities offering benefits for conservation. The potential negative environmental impacts resulting from recreation are extensive; however, in areas that have been deemed appropriate to support recreation, RSC provides an opportunity to improve recreationist-conservation relations (e.g. imparting of knowledge). Consequently, it is intended to complement and supplement current resource management practice.

In addition, RSC will not appeal to all recreationists, in spite of efforts to become more sensitive to their motivations and abilities. On some level, there will need to be some form of interaction or information exchange between manager and recreationist, which may still prove to be too intrusive for a few recreationists. However, RSC should appeal to many more recreationists including those that had previously been less conservation-active, as well as those already active in conventional conservation initiatives. This greater appeal is critical since the number of individuals being considered may be quite significant. Using the recent Gallop poll's evaluation of support for the environmental movement as an approximate measure, the number of non-active but environmental sympathetic recreationists could be as great as 55% of the population, in comparison to 16% of the population as active in environment issues, or 5% as unsympathetic (36). Although these percentages should not be applied directly to the case of recreationists, they do provide a compelling perspective of the need and great potential that may exist from considering less conservation-active recreationists.

Recreation-sensitive conservation should also address recreationists on a new level of responsible recreation where everything that they do is recognized to have some influence on the environment, whether positive or negative. Many management practices, such as zoning or regulations operate within a compliance model that does not foster genuine recreationist participation or awareness. For instance, once use limits have been established, they are, for all intents-and-purposes, removed from recreationist influence or involvement. In addition, the dependence on compliance reinforces the notion, to some extent, that recreationists are allowed to do whatever they have *not* been told they should *not* do. The complexity of this double negative is critical because it implies that park managers assume responsibility to determine what are not appropriate behaviours and activities, which places them in a managerially necessary but often politically difficult position. This is particularly true with the development of new technologies and recreationist behaviours (e.g. rise of extreme sports). However in establishing these limits, managers clearly outline and potentially limit the responsibilities of recreationists.

Alternatively it has been suggested that “a positive approach is possible and preferable to an endless array of signs informing users of what they cannot do” (40). Recreationists should be recognized and encouraged to shoulder greater responsibilities, to not only minimize their negative impact on the environment, but to also act as better environmental stewards and understand circumstances for when this is possible. How can recreationists assume this greater responsibility, or should they, if they are addressed primarily as rule-followers?

When natural area recreationists and their activities, are implicitly perceived and managed as an impediment to environmental conservation, there is little room to consider them as a positive influence or to consider their activities as potentially beneficial to conservation. Recreation-sensitive conservation encourages a different approach or philosophy that can be used by park managers when assessing, developing and implementing conservation programs. Although RSC has limitations in the extent to which it can be applied (i.e. cannot be perfectly non-intrusive to the recreationist), the operationalization of the intentions behind it should enhance the success and quality of many participation programs.

8. Final Reflections

If park and protected area managers continue to accept the challenge of improving public participation in conservation, they may profit from incorporating research that appreciates recreationist motivations for being in parks and protected areas. In addition, there may be great utility in pursuing the notion of what recreationists do, or are capable of doing, while they are recreating may actually be beneficial for conservation. Although, presenting the position that recreationists and their activities can contribute to conservation this research does not condone recreating anywhere, or in places that are deemed inappropriate. What this research does do, is suggest a means in which recreationists can contribute to conservation in areas that have already been designated suitable for recreation by virtue of traditional management planning.

The basis of the recreation-sensitive philosophy has been implicitly adopted by a number of initiatives, but could be further developed and integrated into a variety of environmental management practices. Instead of suggesting that much more work is needed from an already overburdened management population, this research suggests a need to first consider and explore an alternative conception of natural area recreationists and their activities. Ultimately, it is the ensuing discussions and the inevitable challenges to the assertions presented in this paper that will advance the concept of recreation-sensitive conservation and will yield a variety of existing and potential examples. It is possible that this positive perspective towards recreationist contributions is limited in its application; however, until otherwise concluded by research, and not by expectations or prejudice, there remains great potential for recreationists to contribute to conservation. Until this recreation/conservation relationship is fostered, both the manager and the recreationist may not recognize the extent of potential benefits recreation may offer conservation.

Arguably, improving the role of the recreationist will first require a change in how recreationists are perceived and eventually involved, or involve themselves, in the conservation of parks and protected areas, on behalf of both park managers and recreationists. It is through the appreciation of present and potential recreationist contributions, as well as recognizing the importance of leisure to the recreationist, that any direct contributions to conservation will likely be enhanced. Finally, as Cronan (41) states and seems appropriate in this circumstance, "most of our serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it."

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