

The Evolution of the Concept of Visitor Use Management in Parks

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Approaches to the use of public parks evolved considerably over time. The earliest parks in Europe were created for the exclusive use of the privileged classes of society. As time progressed, common people gradually obtained access for use, but only under strict supervision of the authorities. When the concept of setting aside special lands spread to North America, the parks created by government had an explicit goal of widespread public use. However, the earliest park management agencies adopted the authoritarian approach held in Europe.

In the 20th century massive increases in the availability of inexpensive energy led to societal prosperity and extensive individual travel, thus leading to increased visitation to parks. Starting in the 1960s the use of these public parks became very large, and concern about negative social and environmental impacts grew. Emerging public consciousness demanded more responsive park management agencies. About the same time the concept of ecology emerged, with its message of the importance of natural environment systems in parks. The increases in visitation and the power of the concept of ecology stimulated governments into massive expansions of park systems in North America, and worldwide.

The park managers with a background in forestry understood that each forest had a certain productive capacity. The notion of carrying capacity in parks began to take shape - initially defined as the environmental limits necessary to support populations of species. This concept expanded to include humans and the limits of their use of parks. As a result, this resource-based concept of carrying capacity was adopted as a framework for the first management of park visitation.

The concept of carrying capacity is straightforward for a farm or a forest with a relatively simple production system. The goals are clear and productive processes obvious - produce a crop. Parks are much more complicated, with multiple and often competing goals and productive processes. Parks have ecological, social, economic and cultural roles in society. The carrying capacity concept was too limited for the task of visitor use management with its simple question, "How many is too many?" Alternatives were necessary.

Interpretations and refinements of carrying capacity for visitor management were subsequently developed. Two widely used concepts were Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) and Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). Both developed in the USA, within the context of a wealthy populace undertaking high levels of travel to public lands. The crowding in many parks created a demand for a management response. Both LAC and ROS cite the issue of visitor use levels and crowding as a fundamental area of concern. They were therefore used as the management response.

The development and refinement of the various visitor management systems, such as LAC and ROS, benefited from strong university programs in park management in the USA. Such programs were notably absent in many countries.

The LAC concept is a progressive refinement of the more limited carrying capacity concept. LAC answers the question, "What are the acceptable biophysical and social conditions in a park?" With the LAC framework management concentrates on the determination of the desirable goals for a park, then adopts the actions necessary to attain these goals. The LAC success is partially due to its strong emphasis on public involvement in the identification of the acceptable biophysical and social conditions for a park. It also explicitly recognizes that capable management is necessary if the stated goals are to be attained. Therefore, management must adapt to the public-determined goals. This management approach helped crack the authoritarian approach of many park agencies.

The ROS process identifies a range of recreation opportunities in a given landscape, typically ranging from a core wilderness area with limited use, through a zone with some intensive recreation to a periphery containing widespread activities of many types. It is often portrayed as being similar to the Biosphere Reserve System, with a core area and successive layers of landscape types around the core. The process looks at the biophysical attributes, managerial attributes, and social attributes of the system that produce the recreational opportunities. This method was heavily influenced by the peculiar US legal framework of legislated wilderness areas surrounded by other federal lands, themselves in a rural landscape matrix.

In the 1990s the limitations of the US management systems became apparent during attempts at their application worldwide. Other considerations became prominent, such as park finance, pricing policy, service quality, community involvement in tourism, community impacts outside the park, and tourism industry management. In wealthy countries park visitors are voting citizens. Citizen visitors demand that governments provide the resources necessary to manage to the level deemed suitable by the visitors. However, many governments were not able to provide the financial resources to manage parks to the level desired by First-World tourists. Therefore, other sources of funds were needed for management, and the most obvious source was the tourists themselves. The park systems of Eastern and Southern Africa were the first to develop successful park management systems dependent upon the finance provided by fees and charges generated by the tourism flows. Interestingly, they were also successful in having the tourists' positive feelings towards the parks turned into foreign aid contributions from their home

countries. Many of these systems function with operating funds from tourism income and capital funds from foreign aid. This system requires an agency to be more client-focused. The idea of developing a management system that involves finance as a critical component of visitor management is spreading globally from Africa.

As concepts of financial management spread through parks, other business concepts entered into management. Starting in the 1980s, industrial manufacturing emphasized product quality closely tied to consumer satisfaction with the product. Strangely, this idea of client satisfaction with a service was slow to enter park management. However, a few parks and a few park systems started to systematically measure the satisfaction of their clients with the environments and services provided by the park. At least one agency, Parks Canada, formally adopted a service quality goal, with a quantifiable measurement device to determine the attainment of that goal. The emerging concept of client satisfaction is closely tied to the allied concept of financial self-sufficiency based upon tourism. Satisfied customers are much more likely to return, to provide positive messages to others, to pay appropriately for services, to donate money, and to follow the rules.

As park visitor management became more mature and more sophisticated, the art of management training needed to change. Many universities developed training programs to emphasize leisure studies, tourism and business management as core proficiencies within park management programs. This trend is most obvious in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. Some agencies, such as Parks Victoria in Australia, became active in encouraging local universities to develop programs suitable for the next generation of managers. Strangely though, numerous countries still train their park professionals as if ecology was the only priority of park management.

Park managers utilize a complicated series of permits, licenses and concession agreements with the private sector for the provision of visitor services. These range from individual tour operators obtaining a permit to guide tourists through a park, to a specially-trained company given a license to provide specialist services to visitors, to a service company with a monopoly in the provision of products and services. Virtually all parks have such arrangements, and the services provided are often critical to the experience of the visitor. For example, the vast majority of guiding services, consumer products, prepared foods, transportation, groceries, souvenirs, arts, crafts, literature, and information are provided by the private sector. Most of the money generated by park tourism flows through the private sector due to the income derived from the charges for these products and services.

The profit-oriented, private sector involvement in visitor services requires a correspondingly large management capability within public sector park agencies. The rules underlying access and licenses need careful development. The tendering of contracts requires efficient and competent processes. The monitoring of license stipulations is necessary. Many agencies find that their involvement with private sector permits, licenses and concessions is one of their most problematic responsibilities. There is a notable lack of scholarly review of this important function of the parks, and as a result, a paucity of literature. No independent review of the advantages or disadvantages

of various approaches has been done, and there are no international guidelines on the subject. This area of park management requires substantial work in the future.

As more parks are required by government policy to become financially self-sufficient, emphasis is shifting towards consideration of visitor management within a business context. The focus is shifting from simply limiting numbers, to a much more sophisticated approach using public involvement in goal setting, visitor satisfaction consideration, and competent financial management. Some agencies have achieved the structural ability to function like a private company, with internal revenue management as a key aspect. Several governments provide a government-appointed body to serve as the agency's Board of Directors.

Many park agencies are moving towards increased involvement with the various visitor services that were formerly the exclusive purview of the profit-oriented private sector. This is due to the attraction of the income available through the sale of consumer services and products to the park visitors. Some agencies have developed a high degree of sophistication in this regard. One prominent example is the Niagara Parks Commission in Canada. This park agency manages the environment and tourism along the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. It provides virtually all the tourism products and services for the 16,000,000 visitors each year. This includes a range of restaurants and stores, a money-changing operation, specialized recreational services, roads, parking, mass transit, and frequent special events throughout the year. Only one prominent activity, a boat ride on the Niagara River to the base of the Falls, is operated by a concessionaire. The Niagara Parks Commission is financially self-sufficient in both operating and capital funds due to its sophisticated tourism management operations with its very high volume of tourism.

In a few cases, park agencies use a proxy group, such as The Friends of the Park, to provide many aspects of visitor services. The Friends is a membership group providing many of the visitor products and services formerly provided by the profit-making private sector. All profit is directed to park projects deemed valuable by the Friends' group. The Friends' group provides valuable opportunities for local groups and businesses to become involved in a park in a fashion not available through the typical government agency model of management. For example, local communities, aboriginal groups, stores, lodges, hotels, community groups, and many concerned park visitors can contribute to the park through the Friends' group.

There are numerous parks with too few visitors. For example, the Province of Ontario in Canada has 272 provincial parks. Only 106 parks are operational, that is with staff and visitors. The remaining 166 have no staff, no visitors and little on-site management. This issue of paper parks is all too common. Such parks were created to satisfy demands for ecological representation, with no commitment to staff or management. The scarcity of visitation means that no public constituency develops to demand appropriate level of government commitment to management. The lack of visitation also means there are no locally-generated funds either. Some park agencies partially address this issue by pooling tourism funding, where high-income parks provide subsidies for those with few visitors and low incomes.

The management of visitors evolved considerably through the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 21st century the emphasis in visitor management will occur in several important areas. Visitor management will become much more sophisticated, with principles derived from service management applied to parks. The visitors will be treated more like clients, with their needs and wants given higher priority. Agencies will develop more sophisticated management approaches, capturing stronger benefit from the cash flow generated by park tourism. Professional management training will move beyond resource management to leisure, service, and business management. The transfer of information and management principles will occur widely and quickly. Ecological management concerns will be dealt with under the principles of biodiversity conservation or ecological integrity, two ideas currently competing for prominence, rather than the older, more simplistic carrying capacity concept. There will be better integration of the ecological, social, economic and cultural roles of parks within broadly-based policy, planning and management structures.

There is a move to consider park visitors not as visitors to a park, or even as clients of an agency, but as owners of the park. The entire focus of management changes when those who work in a park or service the public's needs consider that they are dealing with the park's owners.

Many agencies will become much healthier as they gain higher degrees of finance and higher levels of public satisfaction. Financially self-sufficient agencies with a satisfied public clientele are in a strong political position. Such agencies are in a much better position to tackle the very considerable problems of environmental and cultural conservation that will also grow in this century. Financial contributions from tourists increase the capacity of park management to provide service to the public and to protect the environment, with consideration of increased financial independence, more staff, political independence and more sophisticated management approaches.

However, the public good concept of parks can not be ignored. The protection and management of parks for the public good demands that central government provide some of the funds because all people in a society benefit from parks, whether or not they visit a park.

One of the challenges is to transfer the experience in visitor management, typically held in park in the developed world, to parks in the developing world. Given the increasing visitation to parks and the growing importance of parks tourism to many economies, it is essential to increase the level of expertise in visitor and tourism management in most park systems, and especially so in the parks in developing countries.

The next century will see a reduction in the growth of parks. Fewer new parks will be created. The world will move from the park creation phase into the long-term park management phase. Visitor management will be one key to the successful protection of the ecological, social, economic and cultural values of parks.

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