

If Leisure Research is to Matter II

Peter A. Witt
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University

KEYWORDS: *Future of research, practitioner-research relationships, research priorities*

My journey as a member of the research community began some 30 years ago. Influenced by Drs. Mike Ellis and Doyle Bishop, my doctoral study days were filled with the excitement of being part of two different research groups and moving from research questions to developing methodologies, analyzing data, and subsequently developing papers for publication. I knew I had arrived as a true researcher when I finally had my own data set to "mine" and from which I could publish. It was not long before my name appeared as first author on a published paper (Witt, P. A. & Bishop D. W., 1970: Situational antecedents to leisure behavior). Life was good. I was hired for my first academic position (University of Ottawa), more publications followed, and in due course I was awarded the rank of associate and then full professor (oh happy days!).

Through the exhilaration of undertaking research, the agony of re-writes, or worse yet having a manuscript rejected, it seemed to me I had gotten out of my doctoral studies and subsequent academic involvements what I had sought: I was an accepted member of the community of scholars.

However, in the back of my mind lurked a concern that I have wrestled with for all the years from then to now: to what end do we pursue research? Depending on who you ask, their career stage, or their mood, a number of answers have been offered to this question, including: to test theory; to solve problems; because it is fun; to achieve tenure and promotion so we can move on to something important; to gain raises; to achieve status in the minds of our colleagues, etc.

I have heard all of these reasons expressed (and excuses) during the 23 cumulative years that I have been involved as an editor of four different journals (including *JLR* and currently *JPRA*). Some motivations have had more positive impacts on manuscript quality than others. With some manuscript submissions, I have been reminded of the two tourists who were eating a meal together in a restaurant. One remarked: "this food is terrible," to which the other replied: "yes, and in such small portions."

One of the problems with research in our field is that too often the portions are too large! Articles are often produced that are of marginal qual-

Dr. Witt, Department Head and Professor, may be reached at Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-2261, email: pwitt@rpts.tamu.edu.

¹I have always admired Tom Goodale's book chapter titled, "If leisure is to matter," and am pleased that I finally have a chance to adjust the phrase for my own purpose.

ity (some may argue that includes this one!), and there are so many of them produced. The irony is that we consistently hear that most practitioners and academics do not read a lot of what is written. We can decry the lack of curiosity, professionalism, and responsibility this implies, or perhaps people only spend time reading what appears to be relevant to their frame of reference. In other words, a lot of people might not be reading because what is available to read does not matter. From a practitioners point of view, if we pay attention to the questions practitioners are asking on NR PANET and at conferences, it is clear that much of what is researched and published is of little consequence to them, or if of consequence produced in a format that makes determining applicability a major translation exercise.

From all of these experiences comes the following top ten list (Here I guess I am supposed to credit David Letterman) of things I would wish for research in parks and recreation in the new millennium. I have included "wishes" related to publishing, along with those related to undertaking and teaching about research, because all are critical to the research enterprise and making research matter.

- More research that matters (to someone beyond a tenure and promotion committee). Whether theory building or theory testing, or curiosity as the major justification, research that does not matter is a luxury we can not afford (I realize that deciding what matters is a subjective issue. However, there are real problems in the world that require real actions and solutions in short run...we may want to argue at the margins, but basic quality of life issues clearly matter and demand our attention.)
- More research questions that emanate from collaborative relationships with practitioners.
- More results that inform practice.
- More collaborative efforts with practitioners to identify best practices and characteristics of programs and practices that work.
- More efforts to combine practitioner and researchers at research-oriented conferences and practitioner-oriented meetings. For example, the Leisure Research Symposium exists as a separate event within the NRPA Congress with little interest shown by practitioners in what is being discussed and little interest by most researchers in finding an audience beyond the research community. There have been baby steps taken to bringing the research and practitioner communities together, but most of these efforts are small in scale and structured in a way to have little or no impact.
- More research reporting that is clean, crisp and understandable, and reporting that is accessible to decision makers and people who can apply the lessons learned from the results. JPRA's substitution of an executive summary in place of an abstract was undertaken to increase the accessibility of information to potential practitioner readers. Requiring authors to fully discuss meaning and implications for the world of application and practice should be a requirement for every journal in our field. Efforts in Parks and Recreation to provide a Research Into Action section to inter-

pret the practical meaning of articles in the Research Update section is well intended, but gives the impression that research reporting is separate from interpretation of meaning for practice. The research updates themselves should be implication and practice oriented.

- Less research driven by the fear of perishing and more driven by a passion for making a difference in the world. Too many of us have spent our time trying to raise our status within university circles rather than in the world of practice.
- Fewer preliminary studies with weak samples and/or poor methodologies which conclude by stating the need for more and improved research (that the author rarely pursues!). And more researchers with research programs rather than the mindless production of disconnected and unrelated studies.
- More efforts to teach undergraduates the relevance of research, how to read (consume) research, translate research into action, and reject outcomes of poorly done research (i.e., not all published research is valid and worth paying attention to).
- Reform of university systems to recognize that conducting research is an unnecessary activity for certain faculty. Broadening the definition of scholarship to include quality teaching will relieve the need to publish mindless research by faculty who lack the interest in and skills to undertake quality research. It will allow faculty at primarily teaching institutions to use their time to become quality teachers.

Some readers will view my comments and feel off the hook because journals like *JLR* and *Leisure Sciences* are not intended for practitioners, should not be judged by the relevance of their research, and are really about broader societal issues of "leisure." I do not agree with this point of view: the demand for relevance, problem solving, application and meaning is present whatever the journal.

Another excuse offered for the lack of relevance is the perceived lack of focused funding from local park and recreation agencies for research dealing with park and recreation issues. One would bet that the existence of a stream of funding from these agencies would command the attention of the university community—if the money were there, it would talk. We can see the impact of targeted funding in the area of youth recreation oriented research. When the NRF/NRPA made \$200,000 available over a six year period, a number of researchers responded with creative proposals for research and evaluation projects. This limited amount of funding has sparked a stream of papers (mainly in Parks and Recreation and JPRA) that has the potential to contribute to practice—what we need is more of this type of funding and the guarantee that top researchers will respond to the challenge.

We can also see the impact of targeted funding in the area of outdoor recreation research supplied by outdoor recreation agencies. Thus, it is not surprising that a strong link exists in this area between research and practice.

The customer has demanded relevance and applicability and researchers have responded. Who pays the bills drives the agenda.

The bottom line:

- We need to come down from the ivory tower and join the mundane world of everyday issues by undertaking research that emanates from and improves practice.
- Practitioners are interested in research, but not the kind that too often the research community undertakes or considers useful.
- There are many researchers who are honored by the research community but who are virtually unknown by practitioners. In a similar way, there are heavily researched topics that do not appear to deal with high priority areas in the world of practice.

Rabel Burdge some years ago wrote that leisure research efforts should be divorced from departments of parks, recreation and/or leisure studies (never could understand why we need both recreation and leisure in the titles of some departments). Part of the rationale was that leisure and its implications were broader than what applies to park and recreation practice. TRUE! But, to divorce the majority of research from park and recreation practice seems foolhardy. Yes, much of leisure behavior is private, individualistic and done at home, etc. Yet, park and recreation practice is still an area that should demand the majority of our attention.

References

- Witt, P. A., & Bishop D. W. (1970). Situational antecedents to leisure behavior. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 2(1), 64-77.