

Social Groups and Parks: Leisure Behavior in Time and Space

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I have been asked to comment on a reoccurring theme in sociological research on leisure behavior in parks. I will do so focusing on research on social groups in time and space. It might seem a bit bold to emphasize time and space as fundamental concepts in our understanding of leisure behavior associated with parks. Yet I believe time and space cuts across our growing knowledge of people and social behavior in these outdoor recreation settings in three important ways. First, the sociological scholarship on people and parks has matured tremendously through time, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. I will review what I think are key findings during this period in a progressive manner. Secondly, time and space as variables help explain both regularities of social behavior in parks as well as variations in the patterns and rhythms of park going. I will illustrate the importance of these two variables with appropriate examples. Finally, along this brief and reflective journey, I will argue combining the social group (fundamental organizing principle of leisure behavior) with time and space has led to numerous practical/applied recreation management models.

Opening the Door

Prior to the 1960s, little systematic attention was given to understanding leisure behavior on public lands set aside to provide recreation opportunities. Leisure scholarship was more than not an academic exercise pursued by philosophers, historians, economists, sociologists, and others to understand leisure as phenomena, the meaning of leisure in everyday life, leisure and sport, and variations on such themes. The impetus for a new direction in leisure research emerged with publication of The Outdoor Recreation Review Commission report (ORRRC) in the mid-1960s (Burdge and Hendricks, 1973, Burdge, 1974). The ORRRC series draws attention to rapid rise of the great outdoors for recreation and the importance of federal public lands as places to play, relax, hike, camp and drive for pleasure. ORRRC provided baseline information on the characteristics and distribution of the population descending on the outdoors, but more importantly provided the legitimacy and impetus for systematic research on social behavior in leisure

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settings. Many have cited the emergence and contribution of organized university programs responding to the call for leisure research. But once parks and forests became primary venues for people and their leisure lifestyles, there became a need for sound theoretical information on leisure behavior and application of that information to guide park management. In my opinion, the emergence of federal agency research programs first the U.S. Forest Service and then the National Park Service provided this early leadership. These agency programs established the formula for studying the social group and then using principles learned, to build management models to manage people at leisure on public lands.

Emergence of the Social Group

The 1970s represents a transition period, a benchmark if you will, when students of recreation behavior moved from emphasizing visitor numbers, volume of use and visitor days to the configuration or assemblages of the parties spending leisure time in parks and forests. Two important articles changed our way of thinking about people, social behavior in parks. First is the article by Bill Burch (1965). His treatise on family camping provides one example of a new generation of research translating the purely academic into useable knowledge for public land management. Family camping provides a perspective on the social group as the primary organizing social unit influencing leisure behavior. The family as one type of social group is a unit where norms, customs, rules and social conventions are practiced on public lands. Family camping also offers a glimpse in the use of time and space in the organization of leisure behavior. Personal symbols convey one family camping unit's spatial arrangements and where territorial boundaries ends and another begins. Time is likewise acknowledged in terms of the daily routine. Preparation of meals, wood gathering and tales of the wild perpetuate family bonding and the role relations of one member to another.

A second article by Neil Cheek (1971) *Toward A Sociology of Not Work* outlines the difference in the organization of work and not work. He contended the social organization of work revolves around the social person while the social organization of not work revolves around the social group. In these two articles, the social group then becomes a defining point for studying leisure behavior on public lands and the subject of Burch and Cheek's articles spawned an entire generation of research on the social behavior of groups in a variety of leisure outdoor settings.

Creating Social Order: Social Groups and Recreation Places

Expanded research on social groups in the context of those places where leisure participation takes place such as parks, park roads, visitor centers, trails, campgrounds etc., established for us two additional principles. First, the organization of leisure behavior not only revolves around the type of social group in which leisure participation occurs but the mix of social

groups present in a recreation place at any one time. And second, the nature of human adaptation in a given recreation setting will occur within the framework of social group participating, the mix of social groups present and the characteristics of the recreation place such as a national park or forest.

Time and Space further the importance of Social Group in Recreation Places

Research in the 1970s culminated with the examination of these three defining factors of recreation behavior, namely the social group, the combination of social groups present and characteristics of place (Field and Burch 1988). The implication is simple, space as place is ever present element in the fundamental interaction and interdependence among humans. This is true whether we are attempting to understand the basic social relations among two or more individuals in a home, café or sitting on a park bench; explaining the social order of a beach (Edgerton, 1979); describing the social organization of a campground (Devall, 1973); or measuring the carrying capacity of a public park.

Time is likewise important to the organization of leisure behavior. The present or absence of social groups in a park varies by time of day, month or season of the year. Often joggers and walkers, dominate early morning hours, mothers with children mid day and teenagers in late afternoons. Time as patterns and rhythms is also illustrated in research on park going. As examples local groups are found in parks during distinctive seasons of the year, wilderness groups vary their trips by days of the week and season of the year in the high country. In all, time and place (space) influences the social organization of leisure. Pat Stokowski (1994) in her book entitled *Leisure in Society: A Network Structural Perspective* does an excellent job of summarizing these areas of research and the contribution to knowledge in leisure studies. Finally toward the end of the 1980s, sociologists once again returned to basic elements of human habitat (local residence and local region) to examine the interplay of social group and geographical factors influencing the choice of recreation activity and recreation environment. This work stimulated the human ecological examination of parks, and adjacent regions as social landscape systems (Bultena and Field, 1980, Machlis, Field and Campbell, 1981)

Application of Knowledge in Park Management

During the 1970s and 1980s, the style of recreation research illustrated here dominated leisure inquiry associated with parks. Social organization of leisure behavior within social groups and recreation places-space characteristics including the timing and pacing of recreation participation has directly led to the application of knowledge in two areas of recreation management. They are interpretation (the communication of natural and cultural history to recreation visitors) and carrying capacity. In the former, an entire aca-

demic field was transformed and the practice in the field reinvented. The characteristics of social group, the environment in which the social group was participating in a recreation experience became the focus of the development of new interpretive strategies, interpretive techniques and practices (Machlis and Field 1992). In the case of carrying capacity research on forest lands, the linkage of social group and characteristics of the recreation place spawned the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Clark and Stankey, 1979), a dominate management framework employed in parks.

Reestablishing Leadership in Leisure Research

In this essay, I have briefly highlighted one area of research that in my opinion has transformed the way we think about people, social behavior in park environments. I likewise acknowledged the initial leadership of two agencies who set the tone for a generation of social scientists conducting research on public lands and who contributed a knowledge base defining a field of inquiry. The 1990s have been an indecisive period concerning leisure research. At present, such inquiry is disjointed not only in these agencies but in the academic community as a whole. Why has the sociological inquiry into recreation research all but vanished? I offer a few thoughts. First, behavioral research on leisure appears to have lost favor with traditional funding sources. Second, there are few systematic programs of leisure research, programs designed where there is an extended time period allocated to investigate social behavior and recreation places. Third, social science professionals who would normally conduct research on people in parks have turned their attention elsewhere. With new emphasis on ecosystem management there is growing attention to gateway communities and landscape scale research where the theme is a broader natural resource agenda. In summary, the advancement of knowledge on social behavior associated with people in parks appears stalled. The social science research community studying parks and forests must combine their interests in leisure behavior in parks and broader interests in rural development and protected area management. A multi dimensional effort at both macro and micro scales is recommended. National surveys documenting recreation trends must be linked with visitor use studies on sites and address unique regional natural resource issues. Regional recreation and tourism surveys examining social dimensions of public lands in the context of land use at a landscape scale must be linked to rural development and gateway communities. In other words, an integrated and comprehensive program of research is required to advance social science knowledge on leisure behavior and contribute to the natural and cultural resource management of parks in the 21st century. There are tremendous opportunities here, if social scientists will accept the challenge and commit to it.

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