

One Dog or Another: Tugging at the Strands of Social Science

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On the cover of *Nature and the Human Spirit: Toward an Expanded Land Management Ethic* is a painting of an old woman at the edge of the Badlands designing quillwork on a buffalo robe. Each time the woman gets up to gather more wood for the fire, her wolf dog unravels all the work she has done so that when she returns she must start over. According to Lakota legend, if the old woman ever finishes her quill work it will be the end of the world (Driver, Dustin, Baltic, Elsner, & Peterson, 1996).

The practice of social science is not unlike designing quillwork on a buffalo robe. As new strands of learning are woven into the fabric of policy and practice, one dog or another looks for an opportunity to unravel them. This means social scientists, too, must sometimes begin their work anew, and it is easy to imagine that if they ever complete their assignments it will be the end of the world as well.

The "dog" in this case is Tom More, a research social scientist in the USDA Forest Service. His "'The Parks are Being Loved to Death' and Other Frauds and Deceits in Recreation Management" (in this issue) tugs at four strands of social scientific thought underpinning much contemporary recreation resource management: 1) the idea that outdoor recreation environments are being "loved to death" and that their use must be restricted; 2) the idea that public sector agencies must adopt private sector strategies to survive in times of fiscal austerity; 3) the idea that benefits-based management is the best approach to delivering park and recreation services; and 4) the idea that sustainability ought to be the *summum bonum* of recreation resource management practices.

Whether More's tugging results in an unraveling, or whether the four strands hold firm, is a judgment best left to each reader. For my part, I focus not so much on what More says in his polemic, but on what he doesn't say. I focus on what appears to be the source of his snappishness.

More's argument can be distilled to the following: 1) he observes that there is great economic disparity in the United States and that the distance between the haves and have-nots is widening; 2) he observes that public agencies, largely out of concern for their own welfare, are aping the financial practices of the private sector, resulting in the haves getting even more while the have-nots get even less; 3) he argues that benefits-based management

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caters to the haves while neglecting the needs of the have-nots; and 4) he argues that an overarching concern for sustainability is a ruse for protecting the interests of the haves, again at the expense of the have-nots.

To make matters worse, More sees social scientists and practitioners alike as unwitting apologists for a government beholden to special interests—interests he categorizes as users, legislators, management agencies, and researchers. He goes on at great length to describe how these interest groups, driven by a hunger for money and power, shape and mold the conduct of social science, including the definitions used in formulating research questions, the questions asked, and the use to which answers to those questions are put. Much of this criticism is not new. The idea that social science is value free has been challenged repeatedly. What is new is More's intimation that it's all part of a twisted plot to keep the lower classes in their place.

His remedy for this sorry state of affairs is functionalism, what he describes as a clear articulation of public agency goals and objectives, such that planning for parks and recreation is guided by "top line" rather than "bottom line" thinking (Schultz, McAvoy, & Dustin, 1988). What he's really calling for is a soul search, a reexamination of our field's *raison d'être*. In the absence of deep reflection on first principles and fundamental purposes, he fears outdoor recreation planning and policy is merely a reactionary process governed by special interests. While I think there is an element of truth in what More says, calling the field's current practices "fraudulent" and "deceitful" is a stretch. It is more likely that the interest groups to which he refers each suffer from their own form of myopia that makes it difficult for them to see beyond their own immediate self-interest. When it comes to the grand scheme of things, they can't see the forest for the trees.

What really intrigues me, though, is the fire in More's belly. Clearly, he sees himself as a champion of the disenfranchised, as someone who thinks the park and recreation profession ought to be looking out for the less fortunate in a way it currently is not. He is peeved because he believes those who should care don't. Why is it, I wonder, that he feels this way? I presume it's because he believes parks and recreation ought to be treated as a public good. From his writing, he obviously is disturbed by the fact that some people are denied access to outdoor recreation opportunities because of their inability to pay or because their particular brand of recreation isn't "high-minded" enough. And he stewes over what the gradual privatization of the public estate portends for those at society's margin. This unnerves More, because he apparently believes in the democratizing power of parks and recreation and in its corresponding potential to engage and perhaps even unite the citizenry. Furthermore, he seems to believe this function ought to be a cornerstone of professional service (There, I've said it. I've said outright what More did not say for himself.).

I am, as it turns out, a kindred spirit. I, too, think parks and recreation ought to be treated as a public good, that park and recreation opportunities ought to be available to all at little or no charge. I, too, think user fees for access to public recreation ought to be eliminated, that such access ought to be guaranteed through taxes. I, too, am down on fee demonstration pro-

jects and their associated research—research seemingly carried out only to ensure that the inevitable is made palatable. Finally, I, too, think the park and recreation profession ought to conduct itself in a way that champions the disadvantaged. I say these things not as a social scientist, but as an advocate, a lobbyist, a professor who has a certain quillwork of my own in mind that I would like to see on display. Make no bones about it, I, too, am just another “dog” waiting for his day.

There are, however, two fundamental differences between us. First, while More tries to get at what ought to be by challenging what social science says is, I make my arguments largely independent of the “facts” of social science. I philosophize. Second, More is biting the hand that feeds him. He is a bonafide risk taker, a Forest Service employee tugging at strands of social scientific thought that have been woven in large part by his own colleagues in the Forest Service—from carrying capacity to the limits of acceptable change; from visitors to customers; from tax support to user fees; from the outdoor recreation opportunity spectrum to benefits-based management; from visitor satisfaction to ecosystem sustainability. Consequently, irrespective of the merit of More’s arguments, I’m afraid he is one “dog” that’s in for a kicking.

I have always felt social science is a far messier business than natural science. That’s because the subject of social science—the invisible part of people—is more open-ended than the subjects of natural science—minerals, plants, animals, and the human body. This open-endedness leads to all kinds of problems when it comes to measurement. For example, Tom Goodale and I have taken issue with one of the fundamental definitions upon which much of the benefits research is based—the definition of the individual (Dustin & Goodale, 1997). Goodale and I don’t really believe there is any such thing as an “individual,” that each of us is part of something larger. We are thus troubled by the idea of “individual benefits.” Indeed, in our minds there can be no such thing as an “individual benefit.” There can only be social benefits. Benefit theorists, on the other hand, would likely disagree, and simply say their work is based upon a different conception of the individual. In effect, they would say to us, “Yes, but . . .” and we would say to them in turn, “Yes, but . . .”

My general reaction to More’s paper is of this kind. I want to say “Yes, but . . .” to almost everything he says. When he chides conservationists for being elitists who want to foist their own vision of a preferred future onto others, I want to say “Yes, but . . .” When he quickly dismisses future generation arguments for conserving natural resources, I want to say “Yes, but . . .” When he says, “in the private sector, the firm is sovereign. Its sole responsibility is its own welfare,” I want to say “Yes, but . . .” Again and again, I am left hungry for a fuller accounting. In sum, I find More’s paper more inciting than insightful. But that, as I understand it, is the purpose of a polemic—to stir the pot.

Given More’s dislike of fuzzy concepts, I also think it is fair to ask just how clear functionalism is as a management tool. He contends that functionalism is quite distinct from what drives benefits-based management, yet

both claim to be grounded in systems theory. He declares further that “the explicit goal of benefits research is to justify budgets by persuading legislators and others of the value of recreation . . . ,” while “the functionalist approach, by contrast, seeks to identify the purposes that recreation serves in order to set appropriate policy.” I can just hear Bev Driver’s retort. “I simply disagree. The explicit goal of benefits research is to identify the purposes that recreation serves in order to set appropriate policy *and* to justify budgets by persuading legislators and others of the value of recreation. The benefits approach *is* a functionalist approach.” More would then reply, “Yes, but . . . ,” to which Driver would reply.

This back and forth feeling I get when reading More’s paper reflects a problem I often have when people come from very different starting points in talking about what should or should not be done about the very same thing. We too often assume everyone comes from the same place, or that if people are coming from different places, that we understand the nature of those differences, when in fact we do not. So we end up not really communicating with one another as much as we end up talking at one another.

Being clear about where we are coming from in our approach to recreation resource management is a recurrent theme in More’s writing. I agree. We need to monitor continually the assumptions underlying our points of view and try our best to make them explicit. In so doing, it is easier for others to understand us, even if they disagree with us. At least such disagreement can then be based upon a clear delineation of our differences, and not just upon confusion over one another’s terminology.

Let me close by saying that More, disputant and friend that he is, has given me much to ponder. While I find some parts of his argument more bombastic than compelling, what matters is that he has forced me to rethink my positions on several issues. We all need to be nudged into doing this from time to time. Otherwise, as More cautions, we get bogged down in the minutiae of day-to-day existence and lose sight of the big picture. When it comes to social science quillwork, there are always going to be loose ends and tattered corners for one dog or another to sink her or his teeth into. We should welcome this tugging, because when the strands hold firm, we can be more confident of the design’s integrity, a confidence that is particularly hard to come by in the social sciences.

References

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