
Special Issue Introduction

Visualizing Leisure

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This essay defines the visual approach through a review of leisure-related literature and draws insights from scholars across the social sciences. Visual leisure is the collection of several approaches to research that recognizes the relevance of vision to ways we make sense of leisure in our lives. It is not about more data or incremental advancement, but on providing a different kind of data that repositions research questions in ways that verbal or numeric information are not able to do. Visual leisure has tremendous potential to democratize research through an expanded accessibility of data, an enhanced transparency of argument, and an empowerment of lay people in research-based policy and planning processes. Problems with both visual literacy and representation of leisure contexts are developed as central motivations for producing this special issue.

KEYWORDS: *Visual imagery, crisis of representation, lived experience.*

Visual imagery has had a long yet under-stated history within leisure research. More than three decades ago in the first issue of *Journal of Leisure Research*, Elwood Shafer and colleagues developed a model to predict visitor preferences for natural landscapes based on responses to photographic imagery (Shafer, Hamilton, & Schmidt, 1969). Since that time, the uses of visual imagery in leisure research have been slow to develop. Only recently has visual imagery re-emerged and has been adapted to a diverse set of questions. Few other approaches have the same potential to reinvigorate our search for understanding and development of the practice. The potential contribution of visual images is not centered on more data or incremental advancement. Visual leisure research provides a different kind of data that repositions research questions in ways that verbal information is not able to do. As part of the repositioning, visual leisure has tremendous potential to democratize

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research through an expanded accessibility of data, an enhanced transparency of argument, and an empowerment of lay people in research-based policy and planning processes. The relevance of leisure research is strengthened, and bridges are built between researchers and practitioners, due to new lines of communication being opened. Visual leisure affords the exploration of strategies for dialogue among researchers, planners, citizens, and other groups of people.

The purposes of this special issue are to recognize the contribution of visual imagery to leisure research, and to illustrate the potential of visual leisure to address emerging research questions. Our essay defines the visual approach through a review of leisure-related literature and draws insights from scholars across the social sciences. Problems with both visual literacy and representation of leisure contexts are developed as central motivations for producing this special issue. While we encourage a wider application of visual images in leisure research, the use of visual imagery is not without its challenges.

Increasing Visual Literacy

Conducting research with visual images is not new to leisure studies. Since the 1980s, photographs have been used routinely to measure the scenic quality and visual attraction of leisure environments (Brown, Richards, Daniel, & King, 1989; Jones, Patterson, & Hammitt, 2000; Nasar, 1987; Phillipp, 1993; Ruddell, & Hammitt, 1987; Schroeder, 1983; Vining, Daniel, & Schroeder, 1984; Westphal, 2003). Visual images have been instrumental in studying visitor perceptions of on-site social and bio-physical conditions (Behan, Richards, & Lee, 2001; Hammitt, 1981; Manning, Valliere, & Wang, 1999; Schroeder, & Anderson, 1984; Shelby & Harris, 1985). Image-based research has provided insight to the influence of photographs for shaping memories of tourist experiences (Markwell, 1997) and to ways in which visual media reflect and reproduce discourses of power (Bolla, 1990; Cohen, Nir, & Al-moeor, 1992; Mellinger, 1994). Photography also has provided a means of representing children's leisure and their use of leisure environments (Cunningham & Jones, 1996). In short, the leisure research community has worked with visual images in a diversity of ways and has appreciated the insights that would not have been garnered without visual imagery. Nevertheless, the accomplishments made through visual approaches are not widely attributed to using a visual approach. In addition, although the leisure literature has developed some lines of research that recognize visual dimensions as relevant to understanding leisure, the field has been reluctant to fully integrate visual dimensions across the range of topics. However we are optimistic about the potential to build on the legacy of visual leisure research in order to see leisure from new perspectives.

Use of visual evidence in the physical and life sciences is a comparatively ordinary occurrence, yet such evidence in the leisure journals is rare. For example, over the past 15 years of *Journal of Leisure Research* there has been

just one issue that contained an article presenting visual images other than maps or diagrams. This rare occurrence of visual presentation within our published literature is not an accurate reflection of its history within leisure research. It has served several functions in the collection of data, design of methods, and documentation of the research process. Yet even though visual imagery has worked its way into many of our research processes, collectively we have found visual imagery to be secondary when presenting the substance and methods of our published research. In her argument for a reflexive methodology of leisure research, Dupuis (1999) suggests that we need to be more honest in the portrayal of our research process. By extending her argument one could claim that use of visual imagery and its influence on our knowledge base is one of the "naked truths" of leisure research.

Visual imagery is a dominant aspect of western culture, and has a powerful influence on our leisure. Visual imagery whether through photographs, television, magazine advertisements, video games, and so forth, is a central feature of everyday life (Bloustien, 2003). Images have become significant "cultural symbols" epitomizing the ways in which we experience and interpret life events (Natharius, 2004, p. 2). Several scholars have argued that our everyday life is so saturated with visual imagery that "distinctions between the real and the simulated become blurred" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 284). Indeed, "hyperreality" has been explained as a social reality in which the continual barrage of visual data leads to an inability to distinguish image from reality within one's daily routine (Boorstin, 1964; Bruner, 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). It is not always clear if our thoughts and behavior acquiesce to the appeal of the images we see, if images are simply reflections of ourselves, or if images act as a dominant narrative representing normative visions for behavior. To fully understand leisure, the relationships between visual simulation, imagery, and social reality need further exploration.

Research that explores the translation of visual imagery into meaningful information is connected to "visual literacy" (Fransecky & Debes, 1972; Gombrich, 1972; Messaris, 1994). Natharius (2004) states his premise simply as "the more we know, the more we see" (p. 240) and suggests that visual literacy is enhanced through personal experience and acquisition of knowledge. Stated differently, the meanings of images, whether photographs or other forms of visual media, are social constructions whose cultural contexts enable interpretation (Harper, 2000). They make sense to the degree we connect them to past experiences, existing knowledge, or other known images (Natharius, 2004). Visual literacy in research entails a sensitivity to visual imagery and recognition of its potential to yield new insights. To be visually literate suggests a level of competence in applying visual methodology and interpreting the contexts of visual data (Pauwels, 2000). Researchers considering visual approaches need skills to critique the contributions and limitations of visual methodology.

There is not a history to promote visual literacy within leisure research. Neither is there an active resistance to it. There is an overwhelming, yet

curiously unnoticed, bias toward the verbal and numeric. The collective acquiescence to the verbal and numeric framing of research acts as blind spots for progress in understanding leisure. From various directions, several leisure researchers also have recognized problems with traditional approaches and actively encouraged the development of new methodology to understand the problems of leisure (Dupuis, 1999; Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002; Outley & Floyd, 2002; Parry, 2003).

Several authors of this special issue champion the insight provided by visual imagery. Manning and Freimund (this issue) identify the contribution of visual images to measure standards of quality in outdoor recreation and argue that visual images "represent a more powerful and elegant means of communication with respondents than detailed and technical narrative descriptions" (see also Hall & Roggenbuck, 2002). Klitzing (this issue) indicates that access to marginalized groups is often difficult, and demonstrated that use of photographs reduced feelings of intimidation and facilitated trusting relationships with participants. Loeffler (this issue) discussed the diversity of benefits that came from her photo-elicitation study, including their use to capture "a greater level of detail than the participants could retain by themselves" and as a post-research impact to "rely on the photographs in times of stress or lowered self-esteem to remind themselves of the powerful and moving times they had while outdoors." We believe that most aspects of culture are intimately connected to visual imagery, and that raising the relevance of visual literacy within the leisure research community is bound to yield new insights, provide access to leisure contexts that previously had gone unnoticed, and re-position the stalemates of traditional questions.

What is Visual Leisure?

The latent visibility in leisure research is out of step with fundamental changes in society. More than 30 years ago, Gombrich's (1972) discussion in the *Scientific American* observed that we live in a visual age in which images have become central features of contemporary life. He argued that visual images are a symbolic language of their own yet the amount of attention devoted to understanding both images and their implications has been disappointingly small. Since Gombrich's observations, other disciplines have recognized, if not embraced, the potential of visual images to advance thought. Anthropology, sociology, psychology, communication studies, to name a few social science fields, have developed journals and other outlets to highlight contributions of visual research. In contrast the leisure research community has been slow to visualize leisure, and reluctant to explore visibility as an instrumentality and object of leisure research.

Visual leisure is one of many forms of representation. It is the collection of research approaches that recognize the relevance of vision to ways we make sense of leisure in our lives. The use of words and numbers are traditional ways in which we present our research, and ultimately, represent leisure. Visual leisure is not directed at countering these traditional ways, but meant to enhance our ability to conceptualize people's leisure and to im-

prove communication with the way we represent people's leisure. Visual imagery is accessible to most people and affords a more public dialogue about our research than traditional methodologies. While the photograph has been dominant, image-based research is not limited to representations produced by the camera. Along with words and numbers, visual leisure incorporates representations derived from vision—photographs, films, drawings, computer-calibrated images, and so forth—as being essential elements in the research process. There are a variety of philosophical positions and a diversity of research questions in visual approaches to research, and each of them challenges the verbal and numeric bias of our literature by asserting the potential for knowledge to advance when we see pictures. A visual approach to leisure can be both self-sufficient and complementary to other approaches. Such approaches may involve visual materials (images) to directly answer questions about leisure, as well as images used in ancillary ways to extend findings from other sources.

Visual leisure is not just about methods or techniques; nor is it about visual imagery detached from theory or practice. Visual leisure is a distinct way of knowing. It is about the authority of researchers in relation to the people we study, and the conceptual processes in which we come to understand leisure. A stand-alone collection of pictures of people at leisure does not qualify as visual leisure research. Visual leisure is distinguished from photojournalism just as ethnography is distinguished from journalism—the data is collected with a theory and practice in mind (Becker, 1998). The research process gives rise to the intentions and social contexts of the image (Harper, 1998). These intentions and social contexts are represented in ways that illuminate leisure theory or practice (cf., Hagaman, 1996).

Each of the articles within this issue develops a framework to understand roles played by visual imagery in the contribution to knowledge. For examples, Manning and Freimund (this issue) anchor their use of visual images in the effectiveness of visitor management techniques. Through their discussion of research on planning frameworks in outdoor recreation, we come to know their need for visual imagery and its contribution to knowledge. From a completely different perspective, Martin (this issue) examines race relations through the visual imagery of mass media. He situates his analysis of magazine advertisements within a perspective sensitive to power relations between White and Black Americans. In both of these articles, if the theoretical or managerial frameworks were not developed, the relevance of using visual imagery would not be apparent nor would the contribution to knowledge. The goals of visual approaches to leisure research require connections to theory and practice which is usually addressed by explicit development of the intentions and social contexts of our images (Banks, 2001; Bolton, Pole, & Mizen, 2001; Harper, 1998).

Representation of Lived Experience

Over the past decade, the leisure literature has enhanced its array of philosophical approaches to research and expanded its capacity for knowl-

edge (Henderson, 1990; Weissinger, 1990). Any given issue of current leisure journals may contain examples of research covering several distinct paradigms having their basis in constructivism, critical theory, or post-positivism, to name a few (see Lincoln & Guba, 2000 for further development of various paradigms). This growing appreciation for alternative paradigms is indicative of our anxiety for approaches that adequately describe (or explain or capture) the experiences and realities of people's leisure. The anxiety amongst leisure researchers is a reflection of a broader crisis within the social sciences about any account that claims to have directly or completely captured someone's lived experiences and social reality (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). The "crisis of representation," a term coined by Marcus and Fischer (1986), had been brewing for many years and refers to the gap between the lived experience of people we study and the inability of our research to fully portray such experiences (see also Harrison, 2002a; Richardson, 2004). The increasing interest in paradigms other than those linked to positivistic traditions is partly due to this crisis in representing people's lived experiences.

Leisure experiences have traditionally been assessed through some layer of abstraction detached from experiences actually lived by people. In positivistic traditions, experience assessments typically provide information about a summary or appraisal of experiences, and are not meant to reflect the unfiltered experiences of life. For example, the Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scales require one to recollect their leisure experience and to summarize their experience across a variety of items by reporting some degree of achieving a generalized experience, say, "being with friends" as one of several categories of experience. The target of most traditional approaches, such as the use of REP scales, is not to depict leisure experiences as they are lived, felt, or made sense of by the people being studied. In other words, such approaches assume that one person's "being with friends" is the same as another person's meaning of "being with friends" (for further discussion of lived experience see Schwandt, 2001, pp. 84-86). Although there is still significant work to be done using scales to assess some generalized level of experience, there is a growing interest amongst scholars to understand the *meanings of leisure* and ground them in the life world of the people we study (Allison, 1988; Gobster, 2002; Klitzing, this issue; Patterson, Watson, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 1998). The point being made is not to disparage the use of universal scales in leisure research, but to distinguish the goal of using such scales from qualitative or meaning-based approaches directed at representation of lived experiences and social contexts of leisure. Visual research has potential to capture aspects of lived experience in ways that would not be possible with other methods.

The crisis of representation is part of a larger intellectual movement (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Geertz, 1988) and is concerned with several aspects of research, including inventing the "Other" through our methods and interpretation of findings (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000; Schwandt, 2001). This crisis has led many researchers to engage the people we study to play more

significant roles in the research process, including having an influence on research designs, verifying findings, and guiding the application and interpretation of study. In other words, approaches to research are being developed that recognize meaning is co-produced between researchers and participants, and typically position participants with more influence regarding their representation (Denzin, 2000). In photo-elicitation or other methods for self-directed image creation, rather than the researcher deciding the places and people to depict, the participants do. There is a fundamental shift in authority between researcher and participant during the implementation of such methodology suggesting an enhanced ability to represent lived experiences: (1) The researcher becomes less central, less powerful, with a less defining role regarding the life world of the people and communities we study, (2) Participants function as, and more likely to view themselves, as collaborators in research rather than objects of study, and (3) The data generated are grounded in the culture of interest since it has been selected by those who live and experience it (Bolton, Pole, & Mizen, 2001; Harper, 1998, 2002).

This shift in authority between researcher and participant allowed Klitzing (this issue) to characterize functions of leisure for women living in a homeless shelter. She argues that stress in a homeless shelter is unlike other kinds of stress addressed in academic literature. Through a photo-elicitation technique, Klitzing developed a trusting rapport with participants. She drew on her personal relationships to situate leisure within the chronic stress of people living on the margins of society. As Klitzing indicates, the photographs were essential to allay fears of being objectified by a research process, and encouraged a level of comfort with the research process (in which they knowingly engaged). Without the participant photography, including the trust engendered by the method that led to access of participants, Klitzing would not have been in a position to voice the nuances of stress, coping, and leisure in the homeless shelter she studied.

Photographs, as a common type of imagery in visual research, function to negotiate boundaries between external reality and social experience. Harrison (2002b) suggests that there are two potentially compatible approaches for using them in research: (1) photographs as documentation of reality, and (2) photographs as lacking meaning by themselves and needing interpretation. A widely held belief about photographs is that they are proof that something happened (Cronin, 1998). We can not argue that the referent of the picture (i.e., whatever is depicted) once existed and serves to document a past reality. However to what extent does the image represent someone's lived experience? It plays a role as referents to lived experiences but this should not be mistaken for representing lived experiences (Banks, 2001, pp. 1-12; Cronin, 1998; Ruby, 2000; Walker & Kimball-Moulton, 1989). Banks problematizes the "reading" of photographs or other visual images by arguing that "reading" to some extent implies that the 'message' being read lies within the visual image, that it is speaking to us and that all we need to

do is listen" (p. 10). He continues to argue that visual images can not be fully understood without accounting for the intentions of the "creator of the visual image and his or her audience" (p. 10; see also Harper, 2000).

Within photo-elicitation research, lived experiences are represented through a discussion of the social context of the image. More than any other method of representation, photographs frame our lived experiences as sequences of events and invite us to think of our past situations as stories that lead to, or include, the taking of the photograph. The photograph acts as a "slice of time" and records "a tangible image for the future of what will be the past" (Walker & Kimball-Moulton, 1989, p. 157; see also Cronin, 1998). Through conversations evoked by photographs, lived experiences may be represented in the stories told about feelings, meanings, and making sense out of the depicted scenes. To be sure, the stories evoked by photographs are representations of lived experiences and not considered the same as the actual lived experiences (Fay, 1996).

In her study of outdoor adventure experiences, Loeffler (this issue) indicates that photographs served as "a memory trigger" that "sharpened the participants' ability to tell narratives of their experiences." She argues that people at leisure "are involved in an act of meaning making" and that photographs facilitate the creation of meaning to organize and understand the lives of participants (cf., Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). The strength of photo-elicitation to represent lived experiences is that it positions participants in a comparatively empowered role in the representation of themselves, and its effectiveness in stimulating memories of past situational contexts. For these reasons, photo-elicitation holds promise to diminish the gap between the experiences of people we study and our ability to portray such experiences for leisure research. To be sure, there are some groups of people who may not be comfortable with the technology that produces visual images, and these strengths would not be applicable.

In their study of place attachment to local landscapes, Stedman, Beckley, Wallace, and Ambard (this issue) indicate that land management agencies are also struggling with the crisis of representation. With citizens "demanding a voice in the management of special places," public involvement has become a central part of decision-making processes and a high-priority responsibility for practitioners. The research of Stedman and his colleagues suggests the potential for resident employed photography to represent the multi-layered meanings of public places (cf., Stewart, Liebert, & Larkin, 2004). An important part of representation is the audience to whom one is speaking. Along with researchers or decision-makers as audience, residents of the community could serve as audience in a process leading to social learning (Hunnicut, 2000; Kruger & Shannon, 2000) and strengthening community-based trust and social cohesion (Glover, 2003).

Problems with Visual Representation

Photo-elicitation, and other self-directed visual portrayals, still have their problems and do not escape the crisis of representation. Arguably the cam-

era is just another objectifying tool brought to bear on communities, marginalized groups, or other targets of its framing (Bolton, et al., 2001). The adage "the camera never lies" reflects the general ability of visual images to provide seemingly objective evidence with potential to essentialize people and communities (Winston, 1998). However visual researchers should be vigilant to build the context for the pictures—Who took them? Why were they taken? Who is the audience? It is just such contexts that provide a critical foundation to interpret the meanings behind visual images, and understand the voices represented by the research. The importance of social context to interpret visual imagery has been reaffirmed by many leisure researchers who use photographic methods (Chenowith, 1984; Cherem & Driver, 1983; MacKay & Couldwell, 2004).

In a similar vein, we should be vigilant to critique photographs and other images for people and places excluded from view of the camera or other tool used to depict. A bias toward highlighting and accentuating positive or extremely negative experiences is common when recording social events (Miller, 1999). Left unchecked, visual representations could reinforce predetermined or predominant values or modes of experience (cf., Shaw, 2001). As Loeffler (this issue) asks in her study of outdoor adventure experiences, "What moments get lost from memory because they don't fit a master narrative?" Martin's (this issue) critique of advertising content throws light on those less visible in images set in the out of doors. These authors remind us that while one set of images is in view, another is absent, hidden, or distorted. So while the promise of visual images is great, getting past difficulties associated with representation presents an ongoing challenge.

Clearly there are technical issues involved with use of imagery. Cameras are bulky and not always easy to coordinate in a research process. Cameras result in images that require organization. The images are often linked to interview texts; the linking of text to images, and conducting the analysis has its cumbersome moments and technical hurdles. The use of drawings also has its technical hurdles. Researchers need to design contexts for their creation, link the drawings to text, and assess the implications of them. Regardless of the source of the visual image, at some point each image needs electronic filing and integrated within the text of manuscripts and reports. Such manuscripts can be so large that currently they are unable to be sent as electronic mail. In addition, through the review processes for this special issue, we found that some visual images have copyrights and belong to corporations or other organizations. Martin (this issue) used magazine advertisements for his data, yet due to copyright infringements was unable to publish them. These technical problems are not insurmountable, they are just distinct to visual leisure and may appear unorthodox and risky.

There also may be ethical problems in visual leisure. Although copyright laws clearly state who owns the image, outside of legal frameworks for copyright, ownership rights to the image are not clear. Human subject review boards often require signed statements from participants that clarify ownership, and usually prefer the researcher's institution to be the designated owner. Yet if trust and the building of personal relationships are relevant to

one's research, participants may discuss pictures or photographs of people and places they do not want exhibited. Such ethical problems are not insurmountable, but need negotiation and judgment.

Although we have emphasized photographs within this discussion, other visual representations are useful in leisure research. Drawings, as a kind of visual image, do not have connotations of representing an external reality and have potential to play roles in representation processes. In her study of children from various cultural backgrounds, Yuen (this issue) employed self-directed drawings as a way for children to communicate aspects of their leisure experiences. The drawings evoked more details about their experiences than children not using drawings, and reduced the pressure for participants to conform to experiences of others. Yuen suggested that the uniqueness of each child's drawing was matched by distinctive stories told by each child. Self-directed drawings facilitated independent thought and resisted conformity in the representation of lived experiences.

There are numerous other kinds of visual images besides drawings and photographs relevant to understanding leisure. Our discussion was framed by those images and methods of which we are familiar. We wish to emphasize, however, that the visual approach should not be wed to a particular technology. Rather, we encourage researchers to become more aware—visually literate—in terms of contexts in which a visual approach might engender perspectives not provided through other means.

Leisure research is generally directed at representing places and people other than ourselves. Our theory and methods are contexts in which we construct Others and represent the people we study. Leisure research questions increasingly are tied to values, identities, and meanings that are difficult to articulate and require a process capable of negotiating their development. The provocative set of papers in this special issue provides a compelling case that visual approaches to leisure research have potential to identify the complexities of values, identities, and meanings.

Conclusion

Although the challenges facing visual leisure research are still coming to light, the future shows promise for a broadened scope of application. As testimony to this promise, the work of Gobster and Westphal (1998) is an inspiration to visualize leisure. In their comprehensive project to understand residential perceptions of the Chicago River, they used several methods (focus groups, interviews, and a drawing exercise) to assess connections between the river and community life. In the drawing exercise, residents were given a box of crayons and asked to draw the river as it flows through their neighborhood. Participants also were told to complete the sentence "I am the Chicago River in your neighborhood; I am. . ." Two examples of their drawings and responses to "I am. . ." are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Although the results of the focus groups converged with other methods used by Gobster and Westphal (1998, pp. 5-37), the drawings provided in-

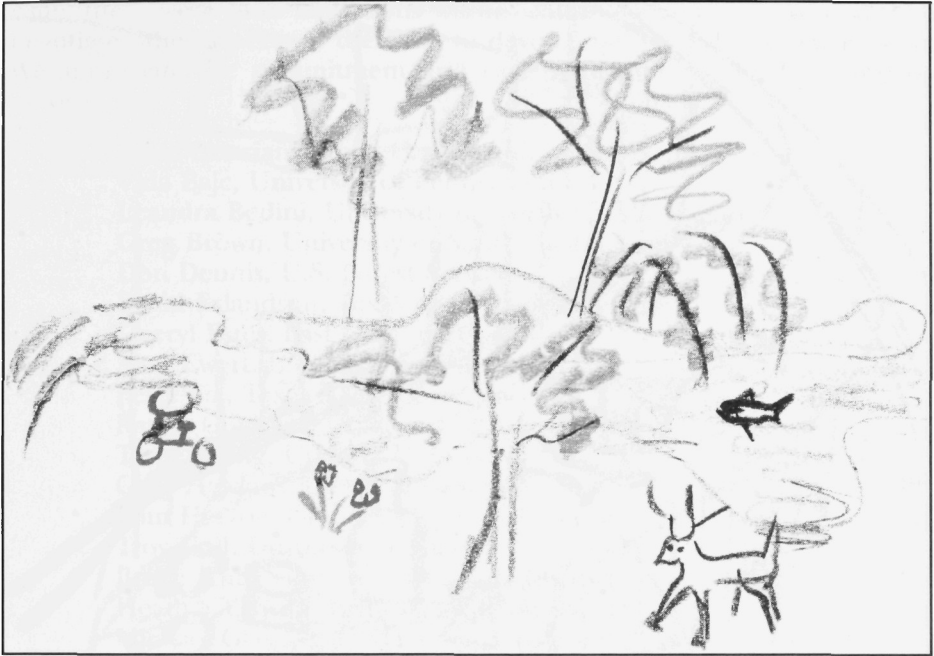


Figure 1. Drawing by a resident who lives near the Chicago River at a north suburban locale. The resident reported “I am so happy that so many people come to sit by my banks and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. I am happy that I have fish for people to catch. I wish that there could be a way to clean up a little.” From *People and the River* (Gobster & Westphal, 1998), used by permission.

sight on the shared meanings of the river held by neighborhood residents in ways not captured through other techniques. The collective identity among the residents was not as evident from traditional techniques that generally focused on individual use and personal benefits of the river. The drawings elicited a different set of meanings affording Gobster and Westphal new perspectives on residents' perceptions. In addition, Gobster and Westphal (1998) reported that negative perceptions and emotions were articulated particularly well by the drawing exercise. They state “by giving voice to the river, people were able to personify the effects of pollution and mistreatment using such emotional terms as pain, illness, hurt, rape, and death—words that powerfully convey what stacks of statistics about water quality seldom can” (p. 19) and that the drawings demonstrated a high level of concern for the Chicago River.

The drawing exercise also allowed Others to learn from one another. Participants were comfortable exploring their perspectives by talking about their drawings. It removed a confrontational edge from the public dialogue, and facilitated residents to listen and learn from one another. Rather than



Figure 2. Drawing by a resident who lives near the Chicago River at an inner city locale. The resident reported “I am so dirty, I stink, and I am tired of people throwing all that trash in me, and children play in me even though they know I am dangerous. And so many rats, they die here and pollute my water. I wish the city would clean me up.” From *People and the River* (Gobster & Westphal, 1998), used by permission.

functioning in traditional roles where researchers represent Others, Gobster and Westphal allowed Others to represent themselves (Kruger & Shannon, 2000). Gobster and Westphal’s research would have had different results, and arguably a diminished impact, without the use of visual imagery. This example, as well as articles in this special issue, demonstrate the significance of giving reflection and greater consideration to use of visual imagery in leisure studies.

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