

Comment on Dustin and Schwab Article “Consider the Kirtland’s Warbler”

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In responding to Dustin and Schwab’s paper (this issue) in the tradition of reflexive thought, I will provide a context for my comments by describing my educational background. My Bachelor’s degree is in physical education from a British university. In the British system at that time there was no distinct dividing line between sport studies and leisure studies as these subjects did not exist as distinct degrees. So as part of physical education we studied leisure, community leisure provision and the countryside (outdoor recreation). So coming from this background it was a complete surprise to arrive in the US in a department of sport and leisure studies where recreation and leisure were already beginning to be eclipsed by the increasing specialization of sport sciences. Sport sociology, my major was also beginning to decline. However, my advisor encouraged us to study leisure and tourism as viable career alternatives. Thus, coming from a different educational background from many of you gives me a foot in both camps, so to speak. During the early growth in sport management, I thought that these programs belonged in the recreation departments as my conceptualization of sport management was compatible with leisure services management. However, as I became more involved in sport management, there are two issues raised by Dustin and Schwab that I would like to address. One issue is the mindset of the majority of sport management students compared with what Dustin and Schwab identify as the human services orientation of traditional recreation and physical education students and professionals. The other issue is the definition of sport.

Regarding the first issue, the mindset of sport management students, I agree with what Dustin and Schwab. However, I also ask, is it as simple as a difference in philosophy between recreation and sport management or are there other factors involved? Since we lost our therapeutic recreation program at Florida, I have noticed a lack of interest in debating social issues in my classes, even at the graduate level.

While I could blame some of this on the sport management students enrolled in my classes, I can also level the same criticism at many of the tourism majors as well. Many of our undergraduate students claim they are event management or hospitality majors and they do not see the relevance of many of our core classes. At the graduate level, tourism doctoral students “suffer through” a leisure theories class that they do not see as relevant to them. They certainly do not want to hear that tourism is a special form of leisure. So while I agree with Dustin and Schwab’s observation that sport management students lack a human services orientation, I would also say that the issue is much bigger than this. This same mindset is pervasive among students who we consider to be our majors. I think sport management degrees do have the potential to swallow us up not solely because they are in our nests, but because we need to do some introspective thinking about the future of recreation and leisure studies programs.

So what do we do? Here I would like to invoke Shaw’s (2000) question, “If our research is so relevant, why is nobody listening?” (p. 147). We could equally say, if our field is so relevant, why is nobody listening? Why are there so many students opting to major in sport management, tourism, event planning and so forth? Is it a generational mindset where the goal of a degree is to make money and not an education? Thus, we might conclude “times have changed,” although if it is about the money then an entry-level recreation major is likely to earn more than a sport management major and have better prospects! So how can we make ourselves relevant again? The answer to this question is bigger than I have space for right now, but is one that we need to work on in relation to the future of our field and one that has some urgency before we become Kirtland’s warbler.

The second issue relates to the definition of sport and may be one we can deal with more easily. Chelladurai’s (1992) distinction between the management of spectator and participant sport is insightful. If we in recreation see ourselves as connected to sport at all, it is in the realm of participatory sport. Unfortunately, few in sport management recognize anything exists outside of professional and college level sport. Perhaps the origins of this are based in the coaching bias of many of the physical educators who largely comprised the first generation of sport management faculty. Another explanation is the status and prestige accorded to sports such as football, basketball, baseball and hockey which are structured as corporate entities, even on college campuses (Sperber, 2000). Are the students and the new generation of sport management faculty (who increasingly have sport management degrees) attracted to the glamour of these sports and therefore, tend to disregard participatory level sports? If the answer is yes, this may account for the continued growth in sport management programs. However, I do not think we can discount the historical split in this country between physical education and recreation as the origin for many of the attitudes on both sides of the debate. I remember being told in my first years at National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Congress that “sport was not leisure and as such did not belong in the Leisure Research Symposium (LRS).” I find it quite interesting now to see so much research at the LRS on physical activity. While much of this growth has been fueled by

funding, I also see opportunities in this trend as a way of raising our social relevance as well as providing a chance to find a common ground with sport management programs. There is a growing minority in sport management who has always held a broader conception of sport (Frisby, 2005; Frisby, Crawford & Dorer, 1997; Green & Chalip, 1997; 1998). Moreover, some sport management faculty are competing for the same funding in Active Living. These funding requests require cross-disciplinary teams, so perhaps this might be an area in which recreation and sport researchers could work together and adopt a philosophy towards sport and leisure that is much more akin to the one found in the United Kingdom.

Another growth area that requires knowledge and cooperation from both sport and recreation is sport tourism. I have written elsewhere arguing that to adequately understand sport tourism related phenomena necessitates a knowledge of at least two literatures, sport and tourism. If you define tourism as a special form of leisure, we can add the leisure studies literature as well (Gibson, 1998, 2004). Certainly, this academic year (2007-08) has been marked by job searches in both departments of recreation and sport management seeking faculty who have expertise in "both sides."

Thus, while I do share some of Dustin and Schwab's concerns that unchecked, sport management may threaten the future of recreation programs, I also think there are opportunities for positive change as well. The focus of many sport management programs on elite level spectator sport largely from a business perspective may not only undermine our focus, but it also contains the seeds for sport management's demise as well. Ethically, how long can we graduate as many students in sport management who have such a narrow focus and for whom job opportunities are scarce? Moreover, similar to the situation faced by many tourism scholars in this country, the sport industry does not often reach out to the researchers in these areas for research and advice. The tourism and sport corporations tend to use the commercial consulting agencies for research. Hence, without dramatic change in the focus of the sport management field, I also question their long term sustainability. Perhaps, instead of treating them as the enemy and contributing to the demise of our programs, we in recreation need to explore the common ground that we have in participatory sport and physical activity so that we can both play a major role in some pertinent social issues, such as (i) the inactivity of people at all stages of the life course; (ii) the loss of social capital and the breakdown of community; and (iii) the increased pace of life and lack of an ethic of self care through leisure (recreation, sport and tourism).

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