

Reflections on Inter-Species Parasitism: A Rejoinder to Gibson, Howard, McDonald, Wellman, and Rea

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We read the reactions to our “Kirtland’s Warbler” article with great interest, and we thank professors Gibson, Howard, McDonald, Wellman, and Rea for their thoughtful responses to it. We will continue employing the Kirtland’s warbler analogy in this rejoinder and organize our comments under four sub-headings: 1) Birds of a Feather? 2) Feathering our own Nests? 3) Species Invasion and Succession? and 4) Bluebird of Happiness? Our intent is not so much to insist that the respondents are wrong about this matter, but to encourage the reader to ponder the implications if it turns out they are.

Birds of a Feather?

It is a long way from Oakland, California’s Mosswood Park to the Oakland Raiders professional football team. Or is it? Dennis Howard began his career in parks and recreation as Mosswood’s Center Director more than 40 years ago, but one of his more recent assignments was representing the Oakland Raiders in a billion dollar lawsuit brought by the owner, Al Davis, against the City of Oakland. Dr. Howard participated in the trial because of his expertise in sport finance; expertise he shares with his MBA students in the University of Oregon’s Charles H. Lundquist College of Business, where he serves as the Philip H. Knight Endowed Professor of Business. Dr. Howard has certainly come a long way in his career, and it is hard to believe this is the same park and recreation professional that looked after Mosswood Park so many years ago.

In many respects, Dr. Howard’s career path parallels that of the larger park and recreation profession over the last four decades. As he points out in his commentary, the profession has branched out far and wide since the 1960s when it focused on public recreation and park management to include a variety of

specializations like therapeutic recreation, commercial recreation, tourism, event planning, convention and visitor bureaus, the hospitality industry, and now sport management. Can these specializations be grouped, studied, and taught under a leisure-centered banner as Dr. McDonald suggests? Or as Dr. Gibson cautions, are the core human service values underlying traditional park and recreation curricula gradually being worn away by our efforts to accommodate the changing interests of contemporary students?

Are sport management majors, for example, a modern version of the “old” park and recreation major, or are they fundamentally different people? Can their academic interests be served in traditional park and recreation programming, management, and marketing courses, or do they require substantially different content and competencies to prepare them for careers in sport? And perhaps most tellingly, are these students primarily interested in sport as a vehicle for human growth and development, or are they primarily interested in sport for its economic and entertainment value? We could benefit from answers to all of these questions before deciding if it makes sense to put out the “welcome mat” for sport management.

Feathering our own Nests?

North Carolina State University’s (NCSU) experience with sport management suggests that pragmatic, forward-thinking administrators can capitalize on the growing student interest in sport by parlaying it into additional departmental resources. As Wellman and Rea recount it, their willingness to host sport management in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management culminated in several new faculty lines to serve sport management as well as additional faculty lines for parks, recreation, and tourism. While Rea and Wellman (Rea preceded Wellman as department chair) were drawn to sport management largely for pragmatic reasons (i.e., large numbers of new students to offset a declining interest in other majors in the College of Natural Resources), they have been rewarded by their College and University for being obliging hosts.

If anything, the growth of sport management at NCSU may be happening too quickly. Sport management is already a free-standing degree program under the park, recreation, and tourism management umbrella. Whether this blended family will remain intact remains to be seen. Though both Wellman and Rea are optimistic about the future prospects for their department, it will be instructive to see how sport management-related events unfold at NCSU. Will students and faculty devoted to sport be content to reside in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, or will they insist at some point on moving into their own nest?

The most recent Zeigler Lecture honoring sport management’s Scholar of the Year gives us a clue. The University of Louisville’s Dr. Daniel Mahony addressed a wide range of issues pertaining to the future of his fledgling academic discipline. Among the issues he discussed was what ought to be the “home unit” for the sport management curriculum. In its published form, Dr. Mahony’s lecture occupies ten pages of the *Journal of Sport Management* (Mahoney, 2008). Conspicuous by their

absence are the words “parks,” “recreation,” and “tourism.” Dr. Mahony’s lecture serves to remind us that sport management’s ultimate roost may well be beyond our control. That, in and of itself, should give us pause for concern.

Species Invasion and Succession?

The University of Florida’s Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management (TRSM) offers a stark contrast to the NCSU example. With approximately one-half of its undergraduate students declaring sport management as their major, and with a new dean bringing in a new department chair whose academic home is sport management, one can only wonder what the future holds for the park, recreation, and tourism components of this storied academic program. Unlike NCSU, Florida’s TRSM Department appears to be on the verge of metamorphosing into something new and different. It is as if a new species of student, faculty, and administrator is about to supplant the established one.

Does this represent the “natural extension” of departments of parks, recreation, and tourism to which Dr. Howard refers, or is this an example of species “invasion and succession?” Is the “brown-beaded cowbird” about to replace the “Kirtland’s warbler” at the University of Florida? Again, only time will tell. But if the latter is the case, what are park, recreation, and tourism educators in Florida’s TRSM Department to do? Should they retool so they will be better prepared to serve the increasing number of sport management students? Should they fight to the finish in defense of those core human service values to which Dr. Gibson refers? Or should they abandon their nest and begin looking for a new perch themselves?

Bluebird of Happiness?

A common theme among the responses to our “Kirtland’s warbler” article is that sport management can be incorporated into traditional park, recreation, and tourism departments, if it is done right. The collective message is that the decision to take sport management under our wing 1) must be driven by more than a concern for student numbers, 2) must be supported by at least two faculty lines dedicated to sport management, and 3) preferably should be grounded in a “niche” strategy. The respondents also suggest that we are better suited to serve sport participation than sport as entertainment. In other words, we are better equipped to prepare graduates for careers in sport programming/management/marketing at Mosswood Park than we are for careers as expert witnesses in billion dollar lawsuits based on their business acumen.

There is also a sense that traditional park, recreation, and tourism students and educators can work with sport management students and educators in promoting human health and well-being through active living. The challenge is to define a compelling common purpose around which to rally otherwise disparate academic and professional interests. The prospect of working together is intriguing, but if such collaboration is to occur, we have to overcome all those antiquated notions of turf protection, territorialism, and “siloeing” which tend to isolate rather than unite academic disciplines and departments. If successful, then perhaps Dr.

Howard is right in substituting the “Bluebird of Happiness” analogy for the “Kirtland’s warbler” and “brown-headed cowbird” analogy. On the other hand . . .

Reference

Mahoney, D. (2008). No one can whistle a symphony: Working together for sport management’s future. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22, 1-10.