

The Future of Recreation Research in Post-Utilitarian Resource Management

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Abstract: Recreation research appears to be in a state of transition. Some of this is due to the decline of the root metaphor, utilitarianism, which guided resource management during most of the 20th century. The purpose of this presentation is to report on some preliminary efforts to assess the current status of recreation research and develop a strategic plan for future research. As background the presentation outlines some of the societal changes that appear to be driving the transition and reflection. These include changes in demographics and migration, styles and roles of local and national governance, and the professional communities of practice in both agencies and universities. These changes have contributed to a broadening and blurring of the recreation research agenda and greater emphasis on program accountability. Discussion of specific strategic directions in recreation research is organized into three themes: rethinking traditional topics, investigating emerging topics, and building capacity for knowledge utilization and management.

Keywords: recreation research, knowledge management

Introduction

In this presentation I want to address two overarching questions. First: *What are the contours of change affecting recreation resource management?* In particular what are the changes to the institutional environment that supports and utilizes recreation research? The short answer to this first question is that larger social forces (such as globalization) have challenged the basic metaphor that guides natural resource inquiry. This means we must ask anew: what is the phenomenon we wish to understand, what counts as knowledge, and how do we determine the right or best course of action? In my mind all are in flux in this era of post-utilitarian resource management. I will only have time to briefly describe these changes, but I hope to establish some basic context for the second, primary question: *What impact do these changes have on recreation research and recreation management?*

The contours of Post-utilitarian Resource Management

How are we rethinking the root metaphor for understanding the recreation and the human-nature relationship? Over the past 15 years there has been a seismic shift in the foundations of resource management. Gifford Pinchot's utilitarian multiple-use has given way to something that might be called "adaptive, multi-scaled, collaborative ecosystem management." This shift has consequences for recreation resource management. In various writings, I have tried to contrast the commodity or utilitarian view of nature with alternative ways of thinking about human-environment relationships, particularly social-cultural approaches (See Williams, 2004). In the commodity or utilitarian approach the goal is to understand and map the biophysical properties of resources and their associated economic and behavioral utilities. This involves identifying and quantifying individual preferences for biophysical and cultural attributes of a landscape. The goal of the socio-cultural approach is to understand and map the social, symbolic, and/or expressive meaning of a place or landscape. This view, while acknowledging utilitarian meaning (economic/behavioral utility) of the landscape, in addition seeks to understand the culture and history of the people who regularly occupy and use a landscape. It also recognizes that place meanings are often contested by the various stakeholders and their actions in that landscape.

Our commodity production metaphor sees value conflicts as technical problems that can be resolved by technical means, through some algorithm to maximize social welfare. Within the post-utilitarian metaphors of communities and citizens, resource management problems are social-political value conflicts with no technical solution, but we can hold out hope for more collaborative solutions.

This basic change from a commodity production orientation to a collaborative systems orientation has been accompanied by some major rethinking within the institutions of resource management. These include changes in demographics and migration, styles and roles of local and national governance, and the professional communities of practice in both agencies and universities. These changes have contributed to a broadening and

blurring of the recreation research agenda and greater an emphasis on program accountability.

What are the broader social forces driving these changes in natural resource management? We can blame *globalization* as one of the major forces driving the broad and complex phenomena of social change of which collaborative systems management is but one part. First, people live differently in a global age with enormous impacts on leisure and tourism (to get a glimpse of the sweeping changes that come with globalization it is worth looking at Thomas Friedmann's new book *The World is Flat*). As one small example, I have been studying second home communities to better understand how local amenity landscapes are affected by complex patterns of migration that globalization makes possible. The expanded mobilities we see today have enormous impacts on places like Colorado, a state made infamous for hosting globetrotting celebrities in resort towns like Aspen and Vail (to see what I mean drive past the Aspen airport and gape at the acres of private jets parked there).

Second, global trends have also challenged traditional styles and structures of governance. Globalization has given new life to the old debate on devolution of authority to the local level. But returning to the globetrotting Aspenites, globalization has greatly complicated the definition of a local citizen. Who counts as a local when we can so readily circulate as tourists and residents among multiple places? I find myself asking devotees of devolution: Who then are the locals that we should defer to in natural resource decision making? Another dimension of changing governance is suggested by the likes of Newt Gingrich. He describes our politics as shifting from contesting cultural values to holding government accountable for performance. Federal agencies are certainly facing an accountability shake-up and these efforts demand better measurement of results, something to which recreation social scientists can contribute.

Finally, globalization is an underlying force behind the shift from expert, top-down management styles to more collaborative, team building styles. In a flat world, traditional hierarchical structures of problem solving are being replaced by more distributed and collaborative approaches. Not only does globalization level the playing field, it also democratizes expertise, recognizes local knowledge and experience, and takes a more humble and adaptive approach to problem solving. Newer models of organizational behavior now emphasize the "learning organization" and active "knowledge management." To be successful an organization must become more reflexive, more attentive to what it knows and doesn't know, what it can learn from its own actions, as well as how to cultivate and manage its existing knowledge – the knowledge that resides in its people and practices. It gives credence to local knowledge and takes a more modest view of expert knowledge. In this new environment, recreation researchers in forestry programs have been drawn into applying their social science skills to new topics of collaboration, partnerships, planning processes, and the impacts of social and ecological disturbance (both sudden in hurricanes and wildfires and more subtle as in biotic – both human and nonhuman -- migrations and relocations).

The Future of Recreation Research: A Post-utilitarian Agenda

All that I have discussed thus far is really just background for opening up the “hallway debate” that I sense is already taking place within various natural resource recreation programs in land grant universities. Is recreation research becoming obsolete in the post-utilitarian age? Is it being subsumed by human dimensions research? What are the implications of post-utilitarian resource management for recreation research? What form or focus should recreation research take within post-utilitarian resource management? My goal here is to point us to the issue I see brewing and to begin a wider professional discussion about it.

First, is recreation research being subsumed by human dimensions? Certain university programs have adopted or are considering name changes to better reflect their “human dimensions” research activities, including the University of Montana, University of Idaho and Colorado State University, and Utah State University. Similarly, my own institution (Rocky Mountain Research Station) now presents itself as addressing “Human Dimensions,” which it describes as “investigat[ing] the relationships between people and their natural resources, and the present and historic role human culture plays in ecosystems.” Noticeably absent are all of the traditional multiple-use topics like recreation and range management. Research programs are now described with labels like: Water, Riparian, and Aquatic Ecosystems; Vegetation Ecology and Management; Disturbance Ecology; Fire Research; Wildlife and Fish; Air Quality; and Wilderness. Even timber management has been replaced by Vegetation Ecology and Management. So, are we seeing some fundamental realignment in natural resource education and research to match the emerging post-utilitarian ethos? If commodity production focused on silviculture and timber management is being replaced by disturbance ecology and vegetation management, is a transformation of recreation research far behind? And do we really care? Does it matter what labels we put on things?

Among recreation researchers I sense a growing malaise about where recreation research is headed these days. This new age of collaborative ecosystem management brings changes in the nature and direction of research problems that require us to rethink and retool in some cases, and give new meaning and justification to what we have been doing in the past. We need to adapt recreation research to this new context. But as the old commodity/utilitarian paradigm wanes, a real consensus on what the new paradigm demands from us has yet to emerge. It is as if recreation research has reached a certain plateau with many splintered trails leading off in uncertain directions. There is less clarity among us these days about what the pressing questions are than there once was. And many of these trails are harder to distinguish from what we now describe as human dimensions, paths that for many researchers, seem to be more inviting, more promising, or simply more lucrative.

Let me add to this conversation by giving an outline of what a *post-utilitarian* vision of recreation research might look like. Much of this comes from my own reflections working for the Forest Service, as well as on what I see as its recreation *and* human

dimensions research needs. And in a more specific sense it is informed by my recent participation on a team organized to take a strategic look at recreation research in the Forest Service.

Traditional Research Emphases

Understanding Recreation (and Other Forest) Customers. This has been and continues to be an important focus. As a research community we are well grounded in social psychology and related applied fields like marketing and communications. But I see a need for significant changes from what I would call a goal-directed or commodity production model inspired by social psychology, consumer behavior, and marketing from the 1970s and 1980s toward a meaning-based or social-cultural model anchored in qualitative sociology, anthropology, and human geography. This shift also involves greater use of critical perspectives questioning how and why some people are served better than others.

For example, take the topic of recreation experience and benefits as a dominant organizing research topic. In addition to our traditional focus on service delivery (e.g., recreation satisfaction, preferences, market segmentation etc.), understanding recreation customers includes pricing and their distributional impacts, recreation use estimation and supply/demand forecasting, reaching underserved customers, and inter-activity conflicts. All these topics have been around, but in the post-utilitarian context the focus shifts somewhat to capturing a broader understanding of recreation values and meanings by focusing on social construction of experience, the role that recreation plays in identity formation and maintenance, the importance of ritual and symbols, attachments etc. In addition, we should be looking to who is being served and who has the power to shape management direction. Similarly, we must be careful to not define recreation customers too narrowly or literally. We need to look more at subsistence users, non-commodity commercial users, adjacent land users, amenity migrants, and second home owners.

Improving Visitor Management. This is another topic where recreation researchers have shown leadership, in large measure because of our emphasis in social psychology. We have a strong tradition of exploring communications and other social influence strategies aimed at design, education, communication, persuasion, and behavior modification to increase environmental learning and rule compliance, control impacts, and reduce damage and vandalism. Still, in the post-utilitarian era, this topic is being expanded to areas not traditionally seen as the province of recreation research. There are at least two expanded fronts to this topic. One involves research on enhancing the acquisition, use, and exchange of information within the public (i.e., improving communication among stakeholders and with and among agency personnel). Here we might include such topics as the public understanding of science as well as understanding the role and value of local knowledge in resource decision-making. The second front includes research on organizational behavior and interactions; that is describing the interactions (communications) and communication strategies within and among organizations and interests including decision-making, workforce characteristics, values and skills, and public participation, etc.

Emerging Research Priorities

Mapping Social (values) Changes Across Time and Space. Whereas understanding forest customers is a traditional topic for utilitarian era management, mapping social changes across space and time is a good example of a post-utilitarian focus. Rural areas with an abundance of natural amenities are undergoing rapid demographic transformations. Migration, urbanization, and rural restructuring and development have enormous impacts on communities, individual lifestyles, and the sustainability of nearby forest and rangelands. Similar changes are being felt in urban proximate areas in the mountain west. Research is needed to better understand and predict the changes that are taking place and how these are related to recreation and its impact on the national forests and grasslands (i.e., linked to questions of sustainability). Research should be pursuing two basic strategies. One is to draw on Census and related secondary data to understand the social changes taking place across the landscape (at the regional, county, and sub-county levels). The other is to develop a survey approach to better understand changing attitudes, values, and lifestyles and their geographic distribution. There is a need for systematic studies to fill the gaps in available Census and secondary data, which miss much of the attitudinal (psychological or subjective) data. Such a program might draw periodic stratified samples of county residents and to conduct detailed survey analysis on public attitudes towards various land management issues.

Managing Amenity Uses and Values for Landscape Sustainability and Restoration. With the advent of collaborative ecosystem management, greater emphasis should be given to holistic and integrated management of recreation within a systems model. The commodity production model does not give us sufficient insight as to how to *fit* recreation within broader and often conflicted landscape goals, which generally include ecosystem restoration (e.g., vegetation and wildlife) as well as sustainability. As recreation and amenity uses have increasingly become the dominant uses of public multiple-use lands, the need to understand their impact on biophysical systems has grown. Moreover, as other more *extractive* uses of national forests have waned, recreation and tourism play an increasingly critical role in sustaining economic and social conditions in adjacent communities. An expanded program of research is needed to address the contribution and impact of recreation and tourism on ecological, social and economic sustainability at various geographic scales. This involves some of the traditional investigations of social, economic, and ecological impacts, but with greater emphasis on understanding these impacts in a more holistic context. One example is the emergence of place-based planning and related efforts to map social ecology for land management planning and access management (roads, trails, wilderness, and interface zones). Perhaps most important is a more complete mapping of landscape value conflicts, not just among recreation users but also across various ecological, traditional, and commercial values.

Developing More Collaborative Planning and Decision Tools. One issue recreation researchers have not addressed with much vigor is revisiting and revising management tools developed in the multiple-use era to make them fit these more collaborative,

adaptive, and multi-scaled times. Because most current recreation management and planning tools were developed in the era of utilitarian resource management, they were largely organized around technical data gathering and analysis with relatively little public input. Both the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) and the revised Scenery Management System (SMS) are prime examples. They are designed to render a resource inventory based on resource analysis and expert judgments. Both attempt to describe public perceptions and values, but these are generally based on the expert's opinion. And even if social data are collected these still do not allow stakeholders to participate in the classification of lands themselves. The challenge we face in post-utilitarian resource management is to revise these tools to allow greater collaboration with stakeholders.

Knowledge Management

Cultivating Case-Based Knowledge. As I have already implied a top priority within post-utilitarian recreation management is to address the question: How do we negotiate among competing recreation uses of the same piece of land by multiple stakeholders (and I wouldn't limit this to "recreation use" as almost all forest planning problems come down to how to negotiate uses and allocations across multiple stakeholders)? This will be very helpful with process/conflict problems especially when they boil down to negotiating competing values and uses of a specific piece of real estate. What I am trying to get at is that we need to develop techniques and skills for managing natural resource conflicts, which are by definition not technical problems but wicked ones. Wicked problems benefit from developing, learning from, and teaching case studies. My suggestion here is that we develop and teach case-based knowledge of successful and unsuccessful management. This kind of approach is more common in various professions or communities of practice (e.g., law, medicine, business, planning, etc.). I think the problem has been that as a field we have too often taken "science-based" decision making to mean "natural science" based (i.e., technical) decision making and as a result under invested in the ways in which professions and communities of expertise learn and build their capacities to deal with so called "wicked problems" where there is no technically correct answer.

Developing Information Systems Capable of Monitoring Recreation Program Outcomes and Impacts to Resources. Like the point about case based knowledge, what surfaces from the management side is often not so much a need for "science" (as in tested theoretical propositions about how X influences Y) but a need for specific and timely "social information" (as in attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of various populations) tied to specific resources, landscapes, or policies. One of the functions of social science is to develop, refine, and validate concepts, measures, and procedures for collecting relevant social information. But without timely and ongoing collection of socially and geographically rich data, an understanding of the underlying concepts is not particularly helpful to management in and of itself. To use an analogy from natural science, scientists have studied and learned about the role of dissolved oxygen in aquatic ecosystems, but without specific information on the levels of dissolved oxygen in a particular ecosystem at various points in time, general scientific understanding of the function of dissolved oxygen in ecosystems is of limited help to the resource manager.

What managers need from research is help building and utilizing a managerially relevant information system. Management agencies are heavily invested in biophysical information collection and research programs put considerable resources into building and improving these systems and helping managers use them. A relatively modest but continuing investment in social information systems (along the lines of National Visitor Use Monitoring system currently used by the U.S. Forest Service) could benefit the public land management and other public and nongovernmental partners. The information would be valuable for doing forest planning and NEPA analyses, measuring ecosystem services (benefits) and regional impacts of recreation and tourism, identifying who is and is not being served by the public lands, and monitoring agency performance as increasingly mandated in accountability initiatives such as the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA) 1993. More importantly, as we move to more adaptive and collaborative decision models, there will be a growing need to monitoring results and outcomes.

Of the two information management suggestions I have just offered (developing case-based knowledge and building an information system) I personally have more interest in the former, but that is just me. On the other hand, I think the latter fits more easily into our “natural science” model of technical problem solving and is, therefore, a somewhat easier sell within natural resource agencies. One could argue, however, that an information system rightly understood would include a system of case based knowledge, so these two approaches to knowledge management are not necessarily competing proposals.

A third dimension to knowledge management, however, is to focus on strengthening the institutional capacity for knowledge utilization and collaboration. Fundamental to post-utilitarian resource management is the need to build a vibrant community of practice in which managers receive education, training, and the benefit of organizational learning through the shared practical experiences of fellow managers. Research plays a critical role in this by developing a professional literature and a wealth of expertise that practitioners can turn to for education, training, and advice. But without managers thoroughly schooled in this knowledge, it is unreasonable to expect very effective application of what already exists within the body of research literature.

Conclusions

Most of the field’s intellectual capital is organized around and invested in management sciences. These sciences were well suited to the utilitarian paradigm, but more limited for post-utilitarian research. The latter requires more emphasis on macro-scale social theory and qualitative methods. These theories and skills are developed more strongly in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, and human geography to name a few, but I also see more derivative fields such as communications and consumer behavior taking up these perspectives. These fields are increasingly relevant to the problems that post-utilitarian models of management present.

The universities and agencies have not generated a strong community of practice for recreation resource management. Managers are rarely trained in the social sciences and knowledge developed by researchers. Research can facilitate training and workforce development for gathering and interpreting relevant data and research, and applying analytical frameworks to guide recreation management efforts on the ground.

Perhaps the critical question is how effectively a recreation research agenda is being adapted to the new managerial context of post-utilitarian resource management. In that regard, our traditional focus on researching customer preferences, experiences, and satisfactions (in which preferences are seen as immutable) must be augmented by more social-cultural models that focus on: (1) context, how recreation uses and values fit within broader human and biophysical systems in which they are embedded; (2) understanding social differences and different systems of meaning and the social processes that create, structure, and transform contested natural resource values and meanings; and (3) social and ecological changes or disturbances, how to organize management systems to deal with uncertainty, and how to adapt to these changes and always emerging new information.

In sum, we need to focus not just on the basic phenomenon of recreation and human relationships to wildlands, but even more fundamental questions that come with our greater maturity of effort: What counts as knowledge and how do we determine the right or best course of action in a given situation? All these questions must be re-examined in the light of larger forces shaping peoples lives and the institutions charged with stewardship of the public wildland estate.

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