

Outdoor Recreation Behavior

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Interest in outdoor recreation behavior as a problem for social science research began in the 1950s and the 1960s and has seen steady growth over the past 30 years. This line of research was bolstered by the establishment of high quality outlets for publishing research results, specifically the *Journal of Leisure Research* in 1969 and *Leisure Sciences* in 1977. Most publications on outdoor recreation have a strong management emphasis. Two recent books are noteworthy for the behavioral orientations they provide concerning visitor management: Manning's (1986) *Studies in Outdoor Recreation*, and Shelby and Heberlein's (1986) *Carrying Capacity in Recreation Settings*.

Understanding outdoor recreation behavior requires the development of conceptual models and theories that show the relationships between behavior in parks and other factors that affect such behavior. To do this we must first place the study of outdoor recreation behavior within the context of social science in general. We begin by recognizing that the study of outdoor recreation behavior is an emerging field in the social sciences that has a strong orientation to solving planning and management problems. As a result the approaches taken have been eclectic and tend to deal more with applied than pure research problems. Outdoor recreation as a field of study is eclectic as theoretical orientations, conceptual models and methodologies are borrowed from a variety of traditional social science disciplines (e.g., economics, sociology, psychology, geography, etc.) and adapted to outdoor recreation problems. The problems studied, for the most part, are practical. That is, they are related to such concerns as visitor use issues, issues of equity in allocations, and issues concerned with the implementation of resource management programs. When more pure research problems are studied, the results are usually discussed in a context of providing information that can be used to solve management problems.

The predominantly applied nature of outdoor recreation research is not nearly as critical a problem as its eclecticism. Applied research may be a necessary first step in any emerging field of study and is useful in clarifying issues and indicating the more fundamental problems that must be solved. A more serious problem is how to make sense of the multiplicity of approaches used in the study of outdoor recreation behavior. We need to ask: How can we organize the various approaches so that their contributions and limitations to understanding outdoor recreation behavior can be discerned?

A useful model may be developed by considering two criteria: the unit of analysis and the factors that affect behavior at that level of analysis. The unit of analysis is the

object that is studied (Kraus and Allen, 1987, pg. 112). The objects of study in outdoor recreation can be individuals, social groups or social aggregations. With individuals we may be concerned with each person as an independent organism, the *Individual Actor*, or with socialized persons who respond to actual or perceived influences of others, the *Socialized Actor*. Social groups and networks are smaller sets of persons who interact among themselves in face-to-face relations, the *Social Group/Network of Actors*. Social aggregations are larger sets of individuals or social groups that possess similar characteristics but do not interact through face-to-face relationships. Here we may consider economic aggregation, the *Economic Segments of Actors*, or socio-economic aggregations, the *Socio-Economic Classes of Actors*. In this conception the behavior of the actor(s) is dependent upon the influence of, or is the direct result of, other influencing factors and conditions.

The factors and conditions that influence behavior in outdoor recreation are numerous and usually subsumed within broader conceptual categories. As a simplified example we can take each of the object orientations presented above and for each consider an important conceptual category of influencing factors. For the *Individual Actor* an important factor affecting behavior is motivation. Different physiological and cognitive states are seen to influence and direct behavior towards achieving a desirable state (Driver and Tocher, 1970; Knopf, 1983). An important independent variable related to the *Socialized Actor* is density (crowding). The numbers of other people occupying a site, and the *Socialized Actor's* subjective perception of this situation as being crowded or not, may facilitate behaviors to reduce contacts or to seek more contacts (Shelby and Heberlein, 1986; Anderson and Brown, 1984). For *Social Groups of Actors* the size of the group is an important independent variable. Group behavior for an activity may have an optimal group size. Too few or too many members may preclude a group from performing optimally (Heywood, 1987). For example, one person cannot have a tennis game, while ten persons on one court would constrain optimal performance. The behavior of *Economic Segments of Actors* is often described by their demands for activities, settings and experiences. An economic segment would be described by some pattern of similar characteristics such as disposable income, free time or travel distance to parks and recreation sites (Kim and Fesenmaier, 1990; Bergstrom and Cordell, 1991). For example, segments with high disposable income but limited free time may be more likely to travel to distant resort settings than segments with low disposable income but greater free time. Lifestyle is an important factor related to the behavior of *Socio-Economic Classes of Actors*. The lifestyle of a socio-economic class would be described by some pattern of similar characteristics such as age, occupation, and family status (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1975). Some socio-economic classes may be more likely to exhibit certain behaviors than other classes. For example, young married professionals with no children may be more likely to downhill ski than middle-aged, blue collar

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workers with teenage children.

In the development and study of outdoor recreation behavior the clear cut distinctions made above, for illustration sake, are not always so clear. Similar factors affecting behavior may be related to more than one unit of analysis. The important point is, however, that visitors to parks and recreation areas behave the way they do in response to personal needs and outside pressures. We can gain a clearer understanding of the effect of these factors and conditions on visitor behavior, and the relation of visitor behavior to park purposes and goals by considering the appropriate unit(s) of analysis.

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Understanding Interpretive Clientele

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Interpretation, a process of non-formal environmental education and visitor communication services in leisure settings is highly dependent on understanding visitor behavior. Whether at a museum in Columbus, Ohio, on a cruise ship to Alaska, or in their favorite national park, visitors seek out specific information. Likewise, organizations hosting the visitor seek to provide additional information. A blend of theory and practice standards from leisure science, communications, education and marketing provide a basis for understanding, responding to, and, in many cases, directing visitor behavior.

Interpreters have long sought to use marketing strategies to identify the wants and needs of the visitor. At the same time the mission of the organization and the environmental prerequisites of natural and cultural resource sites must also be met. To do this, researchers and practitioners are constantly seeking to better understand their clientele.

Moore and Gross (1985) compiled an annotated bibliography which provides an easy reference to much of the interpretive research conducted between 1978 and 1984. A portion of the research conducted since then has been reported in *Legacy* (formerly *Journal of Interpretation*), *The Journal of Environmental Education* and *Visitor Behavior*. ERIC, a mechanized information search system available through most university library systems, is an efficient method for searching environmental education literature.

One of the unifying themes found throughout the literature is that visitors, functioning in a leisure mode, participate in resource based activities and utilize the communication services of the host organization. Because of these factors, the understanding of leisure science is paramount if one wishes to study visitor behavior as a means of improving interpretive services.

Machlis and Field (1985), working from a Weberian sociological framework, edited a book that exemplifies the utilization of behavioral perspectives to guide interpretive research in leisure settings. The authors, in addition to providing insight into the theoretical bases, focused their observations on the behaviors of various market segments who visit leisure settings – children, family camping groups, elderly, Japanese tourists and cruise ship travelers. A primary finding in each study was that market segments behave differently, thus requiring different services and different interpretive approaches.

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