

ORRRC AT 40!

DIVERSITY IN AMERICA'S PARKS AND OUTDOORS

"In the range of activities, as well as the total, nonwhites engage in outdoor recreation less than whites. The nonwhite rate of participation is markedly lower in water sports and in camping and hiking; it is higher in playing games and walking" (ORRRC Report to the President, p. 28).

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OUTDOOR RECREATION FOR AMERICA

A Report to the President and to the Congress by the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission



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Published in 1962, the report of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) paid little or no attention to issues of diversity and under-represented minority audiences in outdoor settings. Set against the backdrop of the American Civil Rights Movement these reports did, however, touch on current participation and non-participation rates among nonwhite audiences. While the civil rights movement in America helped promote a widespread and more accurate awareness of color in American life, the issues surrounding minority involvement in outdoor recreation continued to go unnoticed. In addition, dramatic changes in U.S. immigration after 1960, from predominately white European to Hispanic and Asian immigrants¹ made understanding minority perspectives more important than ever before. This changing face of immigration not only impacted every major cul-

tural and social institution in the country but it also impacted the conditions relating to economics and education.

As the United States continues to evolve into a more ethnically pluralistic society, the agencies entrusted with providing outdoor recreation opportunities must increase their attention to visitor diversity in order to better serve all of the American public. In this article we focus on two things. First, we explore the progress that has been made in explaining minority indifference regarding parks and outdoor recreation, and in so doing we will highlight a few current trends in the parks to broaden the appeal of our nation's treasures. Second, we suggest some of the actions that are necessary in order to achieve the democratization of the American outdoors. It is worth noting here that minority indifference to

1. From 1901 to 1910, 2 million immigrants came to the U.S. from Italy and 50,000 came from Mexico; from 1991 to 1997, 1.8 million immigrants came from Mexico and 54,000 from Italy (Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 119th Edition).

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS: Throughout the year *Parks & Recreation* is highlighting sections of *Outdoor Recreation For America* in an effort to bring a valuable spotlight to the history of our profession and our community. We hope you will take to heart what our own history provides us and use its offerings to better yourself, your community, and our parks.

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national parks and outdoor recreation is largely unexplored by researchers due in part to the perceived apathetic attitude of certain groups. While the lack of universal appeal of our nation's park system continues to be a source of embarrassment for the Park Service, research has yet to determine the definitive reasons for this lack of appeal.

Progress in Explaining Minority Indifference

Once America was a microcosm of European nationalities, today America is a depiction of the entire globe. Traditionalists distinguish between a multi-racial society (which is acceptable), and a multicultural society (which they deplore). They argue that every society needs a universally accepted set of values, and that new arrivals should therefore be pressured to conform to the mentality upon which U.S. prosperity and freedom were built. Bloom, in *Closing of the American Mind*, writes,

"Obviously the future of America can't be sustained if people keep only to their own ways and remain perpetual outsiders. The society has got to turn them into Americans. There are natural fears that today's immigrants may be too much of a cultural stretch for a nation based on western values".

Similarly, Julian Simon (1989), professor of business administration at the University of Maryland states, "The life and institutions here shape immigrants and not vice versa." These comments

focus our thinking on what it means to be an "American" and on our decision-making about how to refer to the various cultural groups that reside within the borders of the U.S. The metaphors we use to illustrate U.S. cultural diversity are continually evolving. For example, the early "melting pot" metaphor eventually gave way to one of "cultural pluralism." If how we describe ourselves continually changes, one can easily expect that intercultural and inter-ethnic social contact will continue to perpetuate cultural differences among recreation user groups. These differences, for example, occur in attitudes, behaviors, patterns of use and non-use, expectations of opportunities, and interactions with management practices.

Much of the research in the area of minority involvement in the outdoors has centered on understanding whether differences that exist among ethnic and racial groups are due to innate and/or inherited cultural traits, or whether they relate to other environmental factors. Shortly after the ORRRC reports were published, two predominant explanations for these differences developed. The hypotheses of marginality and ethnicity are still used today and in fact, are often considered over-used in some research circles. Nonetheless, these hypotheses remain relevant to these discussions. Briefly, marginality holds that low participation in outdoor recreation (specifically

wilderness) results from limited access to socio-economic resources stemming from historical patterns of discrimination. The ethnicity perspective focuses more on how cultural factors (as distinguished from economic factors) relate to how people form outdoor recreation preferences (Floyd, 1999).

By reducing non-involvement to socio-economic or cultural differences, much of the research has overlooked another important perspective that may influence minority interest in outdoor recreation. Discrimination, both actual and perceived, remains relatively unexplored by researchers. The various forms of discrimination and how they ultimately affect choices about activities and sites for recreation remain unclear. For instance, discrimination can arise from interpersonal interaction with other visitors (individuals or groups) or with agency personnel within a given area. The perceptions of other visitors may have a powerful influence on levels of perceived discrimination by minority members. To illustrate, the following excerpt was taken from a letter to the editor in a 1994 magazine published in response to an article advocating diversity in National Parks:

"...bringing in blacks and Latinos from the ghettos will only contribute disproportionately to vandalism and other criminal activities, including robbery, murder, drug trafficking, and gang activity" (Lange, 1994).

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More efforts are needed to document the effects of visitor attitudes, perceptions among minority members, and the impact institutional forms of discrimination have on the appearance of minority indifference regarding parks.

Actions to Be Taken

A recent investigation into the involvement of underrepresented groups with the National Parks (i.e., Rodriguez & Roberts, 2001) revealed a growing interest on the part of the Park Service to generate greater participation in and accessibility to the National Park System. Some of the new strategies involve:

- Engaging a broader spectrum of people in park planning
- Breaking down the existing barriers to creating new and innovative partnerships — leading to more community support and involvement
- Addressing issues of equity regarding services provided to minority communities
- Creating community liaison positions within the park
- Stimulating and facilitating community participation in park protection and enhancement
- Implementing community education projects and programs developed by the NPS and its partners
- Seeking innovative ways of meeting community needs without compromising park resources and values.

Determining community needs and establishing innovative programs that support those needs inside the parks (e.g., camping as therapy for abused women; facilitating important Native American traditions and ceremonies) would clearly begin to break down existing barriers. However, not enough of this type of community assessment

is happening in our parks. Unfortunately, a lack of effort to reach out in creative ways to these missing segments of our society still exists and is sometimes purposeful whether admitted or not. If parks are to be relevant into the 21st century, they must attempt to serve community needs that are consistent with the mission and goals of the parks.

Another way that agencies can help represent community diversity is through workforce enhancement. Diversity recruitment was not considered 40 years ago, yet today it is conscious and deliberate. Professionals must bring diverse perspectives to the table to insure that the range of community values is represented. Increasingly, outdoor recreation and park agencies have begun to develop and implement diversity action plans and recruitment initiatives in a way that is intentional and receptive to a wide-ranging audience.

In the aftermath of last year's terrorist attacks of September 11, Thomas Kiernan, President of National Parks and Conservation Association wrote

"The billowing ash of our destroyed buildings may obscure the physical view for a time, but no act of terrorism will dismantle what all of the park system's monuments and memorials represent: the fabric of American society, our open, democratic processes" (Kiernan, 2001).

After giving some thought to these words we would whole-heartedly agree that our nation's parks do collectively represent the American experience, but this reflection must constantly change and evolve with the changing nature of today's American society. The pressing nature of the problems associated with outdoor recreation was a matter of

deep concern for members of Congress over 40 years ago. Today, problems still exist; and though they may be different, they are still as varied and as complex. The indifference towards natural resources and recreation opportunities in the nation's parks is deeply rooted in some Americans and represents multiple emotions such as feeling unwelcome, suffering the effects of negative cultural perceptions, lack of positive role models, poor marketing efforts, and/or the insult of token inclusion. We must move beyond doubts and uncertainties to formulate strategies that continue to invite ethnic minorities to enjoy the great outdoors. No deposit? No return. A little effort goes a long way and ultimately all Americans will benefit.

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