

BRIDGING RACE AND GENDER DIVIDES IN FOREST RECREATION

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Abstract: Today, state and federal resource management agencies struggle with the need to build constituent bases among the growing minority populations. In light of that fact, the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW)® program did a two-year study to look at ways to involve more minority women in its workshops. A national conference was held to examine barriers to participation by minority women in outdoor recreation and develop strategies for overcoming those barriers. The lessons from that conference led to the testing of two pilot concepts.

Introduction

Men and women represent roughly the same proportion of the total population. Yet, it has long been recognized that the number of women involved in outdoor recreation activities is disproportionately lower than the number of men. For example, a 1996 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey concluded that only 13 percent of males and just one percent of females over age 16 in the U.S. population had hunted that year. Of the 35.2 million anglers identified by the study, 73 percent were males and 27 percent were females (U.S.D.I. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1996). Family commitments, lack of partners, lack of transportation, and not knowing where to go to participate all have been identified as factors limiting the participation of women in outdoor recreation experiences (Henderson, et al., 1988).

Research shows that, unless an individual is introduced to hunting and fishing as a child, he or she is unlikely to participate in those activities as an adult (O'Leary et al., 1987). Women are less likely to have received such training as children than their male counterparts (Rusch, 1986). Participants at a 1990 conference entitled "Breaking Down Barriers to Participation of Women in Angling and Hunting" (called Barriers 1) identified 21 barriers to the

participation of women in such activities. Fourteen of those barriers were related to the lack of educational opportunities for women. As a result of Barriers 1, Dr. Christine Thomas of the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, in conjunction with several others, began a program of outdoor skills workshops for women called Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW)®. Weekend-long BOW workshops are designed to be offered in cooperation with fish and wildlife agencies and organizations. Participants in these workshops can receive training in a variety of different areas including shooting sports, hunting, fishing and non-harvest outdoor skills. From its inception, the BOW program has met with tremendous success. In the year 2000, more than 100 BOW, and spin-off "Beyond BOW", programs were offered in 46 states and seven Canadian provinces, serving almost 10,000 women. The BOW program has a wide array of corporate, organization, and agency sponsors and is endorsed by the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Yet, despite its success in reaching out to women in general, it was recognized that ethnic minorities were underrepresented in the constituency of the BOW program. Only 6-7% of BOW participants were from ethnic groups.

Involving Minorities

In an attempt to involve larger numbers of minority participants in Becoming an Outdoors-Woman, program coordinators identified minority recruitment as a top priority of the BOW program. Grants were developed to initiate research at the College of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin Stevens – Point, to identify barriers to minority participation, develop strategies to overcome those barriers, and test those strategies.

To assess barriers and identify strategies, a conference was held in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in October 1999. Patterned after the conference that had launched the BOW program a decade before (Barriers 1), "Introducing Women of Color and Low-Income to Natural Resource-Based Recreation: Barriers and Strategies" (Barriers 2) brought together 33 people from 11 different states. One-third of the participants were from ethnic groups. Numerous barriers to minority participation were identified, most of which carried two central themes. First, "I didn't think you meant me." In other words, because of where and how BOW programs were promoted, and because of the appearance of promotional materials, people in the ethnic populations did not believe they were "invited". Second, "There is nobody here who looks like me." In other words, when minority participants do attend programs, they would feel more welcome if other participants or instructors were from their cultural groups.

Four strategies were developed to address the thematic barriers that had been identified: Diversify Publicity and Promotional Materials; Issue Specific Invitations; Create Role Models; and Target a State or Federal Agency. The first two strategies were designed to address the "they don't mean me" question. Promotional materials, web pages, and news releases were modified to be more culturally inclusive. In cooperation with BOW partners at Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPW), an attempt was made to provide a one-day

BOW program in the largely Hispanic community of San Antonio, Texas. TPW staff designed brochures that featured women of color, spoke to local groups, and advertised in venues in the Hispanic community. These efforts were not successful in attracting a sufficient number of participants to offer a program. However, they provided new insights that might be used to modify the approach in a subsequent program offering.

To address the strategy of creating role models, in cooperation with the Missouri Department of Conservation, BOW hosted an instructor training session aimed at recruiting minority instructors for Becoming an Outdoors-Woman programs. Three African-American women and four African-American men participated in this program. They will be active role models in future BOW programs in Missouri and surrounding states. The messages: "They do mean me," and "Others do look like me," even the instructors.

The fourth strategy of targeting a state or federal resource management agency for BOW programming was based on two premises. First, these agencies tend to have significant minority workforces, due to their adherence to affirmative action policies, thus providing the target audience. Second, since these agencies often serve constituencies interested in natural resource-related recreation, their employees would benefit from experiencing such activities to broaden their understanding of the people they serve. BOW representatives took the idea to the USDA Forest Service Regional Office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They presented the concept to the Regional Forester and his administrative staff. With their administrative support, a presentation was made to Regional Office personnel, inviting them to participate in a one-day BOW workshop, sponsored by their employer, that would be offered during the work-week as a professional development session. As would be anticipated, this was the most successful program, ever, in attracting minority participants to a Becoming an Outdoors-Woman event. Most importantly, in a post-participation survey, a significant majority of the participants rated the program as a very positive experience, expressing a high degree of interest in participating in future programs.

Conclusions

The lessons learned from these activities can be applied to a variety of future efforts to make recreational programming more culturally inclusive. Of greatest importance are promotional materials and efforts that are obviously inclusive, "inviting" participation of minorities and "meaning" it, and including culturally diverse role models and fellow participants. We must understand that the first steps in reaching these new constituents will require intensive effort and successes will be "measured". But, modest early successes have the potential to grow exponentially as a critical mass is developed. For many public agencies and private enterprises involved in outdoor recreation, whose "traditional" constituencies are declining, these new constituents may prove to be a very important group.

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