

CONVERGING SOCIAL TRENDS--EMERGING OUTDOOR RECREATION ISSUES¹

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I can't recall when I have attended a national conference with a more clearly defined objective than this one. We are here to document outdoor recreation trends and explore their meaning for the future. The word "trend" appears no less than 45 times in the conference brochure, and the symposium organizers are determined that the proceedings will be "the most comprehensive assessment of outdoor recreation trends ever compiled."

It is a timely objective. Competition for scarce public appropriations and limited private capital will require solid evidence if new programs are to be funded. As professionals we must be constantly attuned to changing trends and able to interpret their implications for the future--especially those of us concerned with the management of natural resources. A forester colleague of mine put it this way: (He was talking about professional foresters, but I believe it applies to all of us here.)

Since our ultimate professional interest . . . is in management of our resources, our ultimate interest is in the shape of the future. For management is decision making, and decisions cannot be made about the past--or about the present, either. Only the future is subject to decision. The context of management lies in the future. (William A. Duerr)

Yet, knowing the truth of that statement, we know also that the future is increasingly difficult to foresee. Perhaps this is because of the speed with which we are approaching the future--a sort of professional "future shock." Perhaps it is because of our preoccupation with present crises and growing uncertainty about the likely outcomes--a loss of faith in the lessons of past experience. One might well

define the current economic inflation as the price of hopelessness; the cost of uncertainty; the economic expression of our unwillingness to plan for a tomorrow that we cannot comprehend.

But, whatever the reasons, we are finding future-telling an increasingly difficult task. Even with vastly improved methods of electronic data analysis and sophisticated planning techniques unknown a decade ago, we are aware that something is lacking in our understanding of the world in which we live, especially in the realm of social phenomenon. I am not alone in this feeling of doubt about our skills in interpreting the future implication of social information.

In the Social Science Research Council's recent annual report, the Council's president, Kenneth Prewitt, admits that social scientists are feeling "a serious and widespread uneasiness" over their inability to provide "intelligible and plausible" explanations for a number of important social phenomena." He lists "stagflation, Johnny's inability to read, artistic creativity, the rise of new religious movements, the causes and conditions of happiness, and radically different rates of economic development," among others. He points out that, while social scientists have adopted quantitative methods in most of their research, rigorous measurement and modeling hasn't provided the depth of understanding expected. As a result, he sees the social sciences "groping toward the humanities" in an effort to find better explanations and new perspectives.

Though not terribly comforting, I think Mr. Prewitt has discovered what most of you have learned from experience as practicing professionals: that no matter how much data you have, or how sophisticated your analytical skills, good decisions cannot simply be computed. It takes something more. Good management is an art, as well as science. And the "art" is a blend of creativity and intuition--the insight to read trends without making them self-fulfilling prophecies; to understand that trend need not be destiny.

I am convinced that this understanding of decision making--and, thus, future telling--is especially important today. Change is coming too fast. Synergy and complexity are generating previously unknown social phenomena. Yesterday's data and last year's trends may, or may not,

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explain today's situation or tomorrow's prospects.

In saying this, you may wonder what I am doing here attempting to explain the meaning of social trends and emerging issues; to talk about a future for which I am suggesting that there may be very little reliable information on which to base forecasts. I should have had the good sense to heed Mark Twain's sage advice that it is "better to remain silent and appear stupid, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." But, on the other hand, why not? Only time can prove me right or wrong.

All this may seem like a lengthy build-up to suggesting that I can't really address the advertised topic. It isn't! Rather, I want to encourage you to do what I will be trying to do in the next few minutes: to participate in this symposium using imagination as much as reason; to depend on intuition as much as analysis; and to trust your insight as well as your data. This is not to suggest that we should be less rigorous in our analyses of the trend information to be presented, or that we abandon our quantitative tools. What I am saying is that even more than our data processing skills, we must depend on our creative abilities as we seek to understand the future.

Enough preamble. Let me attempt some future telling, relying on both facts and fancy. These are ideas you've probably heard before. You may not agree. But I'm not seeking your agreement as much as I am your willingness to speculate with me--your willingness to explore some alternative futures.

A Future of Change

If there is one clear trend today, it is that change is a permanent characteristic of modern life. We are learning the meaning of exponential rates of change in all realms of society. The pace is quickening, and our sense of uncertainty about the future is growing.

We see growing alienation of individuals to systems of centralized decision making, and a steady weakening of traditional social values as our institutions lag in their ability to adapt to technological change. We are frustrated that even our rapidly expanding knowledge of the world in which we live only seems to create more uncertainty. Every new solution suggests even greater problems; today's breakthrough is tomorrow's crisis. In a few decades, the promises of DDT and nuclear power, of saccharin and interstate highways, of PCB's and urban renewal have somehow soured.

Future shock is as common as the common cold, and we have no reason to expect the rates of change in our society to slow down in the near future. The best we can do is to be

flexible; to avoid building institutions and programs than cannot adapt to change.

But let me be more specific by focusing on a few changes that have special significance for outdoor recreation.

The Energy "Crisis"

No change has come upon us with such unexpected force than has the energy crisis. I will not burden you with the statistics that have become all too familiar in the past few years. Nor am I willing to debate the authenticity of this crisis, except to suggest that "crisis" is an inappropriate word to describe the present energy situation. The idea of a crisis infers the problem is severe, but passing. Nothing could be farther from reality. The "crisis" is already past. The situation is permanent. We will be living with reduced supplies and increasing prices for decades to come.

I doubt that I need to interpret the meaning of the energy situation for outdoor recreation. Pleasure driving and long-distance auto vacations will soon become genuine American Graffiti. I doubt, however, that Americans will simply stay home, jogging around the subdivision or playing tennis at the high school. But we'll surely shorten the range of our recreation trips. Recreation vehicles, energy-hungry boats and ORV's may not disappear, but it's clear they will not be the playthings of the average American.

With energy conservation the only realistic way to quickly reduce our reliance on imported oil, we must look forward to some profound changes in the way we live; certainly in the way we play. Whatever you may imagine about the future of outdoor recreation, it had better include some careful thinking about energy--thinking that cannot rely heavily on any past trends.

Changing Life Styles

But even if the energy situation hadn't changed so radically, I think we could still anticipate major revisions in the character of outdoor recreation in the United States. Our life styles are being reshaped by significant changes in demographic patterns and social values.

With the war babies moving into their thirties, our median age is rising toward a projected 35 years in 2000. With later marriage, lower birth rates, more frequent divorce, and rising social acceptance of unmarried women, single Americans will share power with the family in shaping recreation patterns. Coupled with increasing urbanization and restrained auto travel, pressures for expanded recreation opportunities in our major metropolitan areas will be immense. People will have more time off as work weeks shorten and, if current trends continue,

they will spend an increasing share of their incomes on leisure time activities; pushing demands on facilities even higher.

It's not my task to define the recreation pursuits this older, urban, often single American will seek, but the present trend toward active physical recreation seems likely to continue. Concern with personal physical health is evident everywhere: herds of joggers along the Potomac, nutrition charts and diet books at supermarket checkout counters, and relentless TV ads about active living as the road to happiness, sex, and self-fulfillment. It's difficult to sort out whether this new preoccupation with one's body is a reaction to our increasingly unhealthy environment, simply a new form of national vanity created by media hype that looking healthy is half the fun of disco, or something deeper.

Regardless of the reason, I think it's here to stay. And I think it's a deeper social change than we suspect--a change reflecting our new awareness of environmental quality, better health education, and some important shifts in our attitudes toward ourselves and our work.

The Emerging American Women

With increasing numbers of women entering the work force, and with barriers to their assuming roles previously reserved to men gradually eroding, we should see a shift in female recreation interests. Like men, interest in challenging and high risk sports will grow as women seek the psychological relief of such recreation from work pressures. Whether singles or family members, women will also have an increasing influence in deciding on group and family recreation patterns. Old patterns of weekend recreation, backyard sports, and summer vacations dictated by Dad and the kids will give way to shared decisions. In families where the woman's income represents a substantial increase in discretionary income, she will further influence changes in recreation patterns by providing economic resources for new activities.

On the negative side, the emerging role of American women as equal partners with men in work and play could mean a substantial decline in the numbers of volunteers working with recreation organizations. Women have played a significant role in many youth organizations and, unless men now begin to share these volunteer tasks, we can expect decreasing recreation opportunities for youth through these traditional groups.

Changing Work Ethics

Changes in national attitudes toward work and play will not be confined to women, however. Something is happening to our view of work in an

even more profound way. We seem to be losing much of our earlier faith in the American Dream--that hard work will get you ahead; that one's work is the highest expression of freedom and choice in a democracy. Perhaps it is the heavy hand of inflation, coupled with the uncertainties of energy shortages and international tensions. Whatever the genesis, there is a growing sense that our freedom of opportunity--the chance to win a larger slice of the economic pie--is being constrained. If this is true, it has important implications for outdoor recreation.

While recreation was once considered a luxury or, at best, an earned respite from work, it is increasingly becoming an imperative. As opportunities for creative innovation at work are limited by economic constraints, and worker mobility is reduced by mortgage interest rates and transportation costs, recreation will become one of the few remaining realms of life where one can make personal choices. As recreation is recognized as the last chance to exert personal freedom, leisure will increasingly be valued as a civil right. And, as work options are limited, people will begin to define personal success in terms of their leisure accomplishments almost as commonly as we now do our career achievements. When that happens outdoor recreation will become a far more important political issue than ever before. With the possible exception of Robert Moses in New York, few political leaders have used public recreation as an effective political weapon. That may well be changing.

Economic Restraints

This change in the political stature of outdoor recreation could be further accentuated by current economic trends. As Proposition 13 thinking moves from the state house to Capitol Hill, we can clearly anticipate reductions in federal and state spending on outdoor recreation. And this could become a long-term trend as defense and energy mobilization programs command major new budget commitments for years to come. At the very time when rising consumer spending on recreation is expected, this proportional reduction in public spending will intensify user conflicts over facilities. As special interests compete for scarce public dollars and overused recreation sites, political tensions will escalate. For the outdoor recreation industry, however, this may be the golden opportunity for investment in heretofore publicly-supported facilities, with little fear of competition from free government areas.

Converging Trends?

These, then, are some of the broad social trends which will influence the future of outdoor recreation. But what do they add up to, in terms of specific recreation issues that those of us here must grapple with in the future? The answer to that question will, hopefully, emerge in part

during this symposium. And rather than a single set of answers, I expect we will find that there are several possible scenarios, depending on the kind of future we want and seek as a society.

Let me suggest but one such scenario, in an attempt to address the specific topic assigned to me in the title of this address -- "converging social trends." If the trends I've touched upon in terms of energy, life style changes, and revised work ethics do converge, what is the probable outcome in human and social terms?

The country I envision will be one characterized by individualism, by special-interest group power, and by political and social regionalism. In sum, a nation considerably more decentralized than we have known for decades. Let me take these three characteristics one at a time.

First, we can expect people to place great importance on individualism; on unrestrained freedom of personal thought and action. This idea has been developed in some depth by Alvin Toffler in his new book The Third Wave. He foresees a new "de-massified society" where the computer will smash the mass culture of today; where the mass media will lose control as individuals at video terminals will select information and computerized, one-at-a-time custom manufacturing will make it possible to tailor-make almost anything.

While I am uncomfortable with Toffler's high-technology scenario, I am persuaded that the kind of individualism he suggests is on the rise. As the civil rights movements of the past few decades reshape our cultural attitudes, the acceptance of personal diversity will pervade society. People everywhere are rapidly becoming more accepting of others' values and life styles and they are seeking their own distinctive identities through clothing, home furnishings, career changes, alternative family styles, and, increasingly, through their recreation pursuits. Not only are they seeking unique and diverse forms of recreation in order to escape the anonymity of mass culture, but they are aspiring to new levels of achievement previously reserved for amateur fanatics and professional athletes.

What this means for the recreation industry is not completely clear. Perhaps it will mean less faddishness, with fewer major shifts in national recreation interests. Perhaps it will mean public support for a much wider range of recreation activities and deeper commitments to excellence, with growing demands for better quality facilities and equipment than in the past. But whatever these trends mean for the recreation industry, or in terms of consumer behavior, I am convinced that they will have

important political implications.

The Second aspect of the decentralized society will be a strengthening of special interest group power. In a way this seems to be a contradiction of the growing acceptance of personal individualism I've just described. But rather than reflecting personal prejudice and interpersonal conflict, however, the rapid growth of special interest groups reflects a reaction to centralized authority; to the power of big government and big business. The result may well be a struggle between interest groups as they compete for public monies, facilities, or land use control, but the real impacts will be felt in Washington, not among the minorities who lose a particular battle.

In the long run, the impact of this special interest infighting will be that timely and critical political decisions will be increasingly difficult to make at the national level. Coupled with the steady weakening of broad-based political parties, special interest power will make it impossible to build majority constituencies for enlightened national policies. We already see the Congress unable to develop comprehensive policies for energy, for the reorganization of natural resource agencies, or for a systematic classification of remaining roadless areas on public lands. And as Congress and the executive branch are further paralyzed by conflicting special interest group pressures, we can expect the already enormous backlog of litigation clogging the courts to increase. A recent example is the district court decision in California throwing out the Forest Service's environmental impact statement for RARE II, a ruling that could effectively nullify the entire RARE II program and send the problem of wilderness classification back to the Congress. If that happens, we will see the biggest special interest alley fight over natural resources in history.

The list of potential user conflicts is almost endless. Wherever a strong special interest group seeks special consideration, and resources are limited, conflict will be inevitable. Win-lose fights in the courts and legislatures will be common. Whether wilderness advocates against snowmobilers, the contests will be heated. Urban based conflicts will be even more common as limited open space and parklands are sought by team and court sport groups for expanded facilities. Wetlands will be another arena for conflict as preservationists battle recreation groups for limited shore and water resources, especially for previously polluted waters now clean enough for recreation development or wild area reservation.

These conflicts will further fragment the already shaky coalition of conservation and environmental interests in the Nation, weakening the ability of national organizations to mediate conflict and guide compromise bills through

Congress. The trend toward decentralization will be inexorable once it gets moving.

On the positive side, however, the growing power of special interest groups can be viewed as the product of people's willingness to become involved; a reflection of their willingness to make a commitment to a cause with a group of likeminded enthusiasts. And, while the early impacts of this new era of special interest power may seem destructive of traditional American regionalism with its corresponding high level of local political involvement.

A New Regionalism

I'm obviously getting on thin ice to suggest that all the fact and fancy I've employed so far leads to such a single-minded convergence of forces, but the logic of such a scenario is compelling. Energy costs will certainly be a powerful force in reducing interregional transfers of resources, people, and commodities. Life styles appropriate to the southwestern United States, for example, will no longer be transferable to New England simply by an advertising blitz or corporate franchising. Nor will it be possible for the federal government to ignore regional energy limitations. New policies will have to be built on a sound understanding of unique regional needs, and designed to strengthen state and local institutions essential for policy implementation. Special interest groups will block federal initiatives unresponsive to their local constituents, making recognition of regional distinctives a national imperative.

I am convinced, therefore, that the future of natural resource management -- and the management of outdoor recreation resources -- will be decided at local, state, and regional levels. It has to be. That is where ecosystems, land use patterns, and cultural values come into focus in sufficient detail to make meaningful decisions possible. That is the level where special interest groups might be able to find common ground in terms of people's values and the economic realities of day-to-day living.

I personally find such a trend toward regionalism exciting. We might, as a people, be forced again to discover that special "sense of place" which defines our relationship to one another and the land where we live. This rediscovery of our "sense of place" -- this new regionalism -- need not be a return to local isolationism or parochialism. For, as Rene Dubos has suggested, we must "think globally and act locally." We must be fully aware of the national and global context in which we live. We must take full advantage of modern communications and electronic information processing to understand the limits and

opportunities of our special place. But, when it comes to making decisions about how to respond to outside forces and local capabilities, we will take action on a regional basis and ultimately at a very local level. It's a sort of "small is beautiful" philosophy tempered by a realistic awareness of global forces. It's a practical expression of our "sense of place" in action terms.

Lest you think I am painting a picture of a new Brigadoon, regionalism will have its own set of special problems and issues of significance for outdoor recreation. Struggles over basic questions of property rights will intensify as user groups contend for access to water and land resources. As new owners of increasingly smaller parcels of land in many regions post their lands against public use we will see new initiatives to limit property rights, especially as land values soar and public acquisition budgets are reduced. Contests between various user groups with specialized facilities needs will likewise intensify as federal revenue sharing programs are eliminated and local governments withdraw from recreation program management.

But because of decentralized modes of personal and political decision making, patterns of outdoor recreation will vary across the Nation. Distinctive regional identities will re-emerge with their own unique playtime and sport preferences. In addition, energy limitations and other emerging regional cultural values will influence outdoor recreation interests, merging into identifiable styles of living that will exert a powerful influence on where people seek to live and work.

The head of Vermont's Agency of Environmental Conservation, Brendan Whittaker, once speculated about such trends something like this: Places like Vermont, where energy limitations will be severe and where environmental awareness is high, will attract a certain kind of person. Other areas, where energy is relatively cheap and people value old-fashioned consumer patterns, will attract different types of people. Thus, he speculated, Vermont may be relatively poor in growth-economics terms, colder, cleaner, and populated by rugged individualists who value their environmental amenities and are willing to cut firewood. Other areas, perhaps in the southwest, will be warmer, richer, and dirtier, populated by people who prefer large cars, air conditioning, and electric heat, and who are too busy "to smell the roses."

In either place, those of us concerned about outdoor recreation will have our jobs cut out for us. We will have to be prepared to respond to local and regional differences; to adapt national policies and programs to regional patterns; and to reinterpret the meaning of past trends from yesterday's mass society. It will be hard, but fun. Our clients will be less fickle and unpredictable. They will be seeking higher quality experiences and more durable,

well-designed facilities and equipment. They will be well informed about their sport or activity, and prepared to support agencies or companies with whom they agree through effective special interest political organizations.

Whether or not you agree with this brief scenario for tomorrow; whether you like it or not, I hope I have provoked you to think about some better alternatives. If this symposium is to be more than a recitation of data about trends, and more than an exercise in projecting the past on a straight line into the future, you will have to employ your creative abilities to the limit. The future is not waiting out there to be discovered. It doesn't yet exist. It will be no better than we can imagine; no better than we are determined to make it. Trends may enlighten our understanding of the alternatives, but they will be destiny only if we insist.