

RECREATION TRENDS - A FUTURE LOOK
"SO WHAT? - IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RECREATION PROFESSION"¹

Roger A. Lancaster²

The art of "crystal-ball gazing" is not an exact science. While it is very useful to discuss what life will be like in the future, and rather fun, I might add, a review of the multitude of materials prepared 20 to 30 years ago about life in the 1980's found little that was all that accurate. The projections that were most on target tended to be those educated guesses about "things" - such as transportation devices, home products, recreational equipment, etc., plus those that could be projected from a specific, sophisticated data base such as demographic projections. The judgments on the future that tended to be the most off the mark were those that dealt with the intangibles - such as individual and societal attitudes. Much of the attitudes presented in Orwell's 1984 are certainly far from the reality of today, and it is doubtful if our current attitudes are going to change enough in the next four years to make Orwell's prophecies come true. This is to be expected, for the intangibles are very difficult to measure. Indeed, to measure changes in attitudes requires sophisticated, complex, long-term research. Most of us lack the time, money, and even inclination to engage in this type of research over an extended period. Perhaps some of the best research on this topic has been in the area of sexual behavior - the interest being generated, perhaps, by the joys inherent in the subject matter.

However, it is in this area of the intangibles -- the attitudes, hidden individual behavior, the "human climate," as Philip Lesly refers to it - that the recreation and park profession is going to have to study more closely in the future. There is today a massive shift in the attitudes and posture of the public, and I quote Lesly, (1:2):

The survival of all institutions depends on how this new human climate is managed. The only way anyone can have a say about the future is to learn to manage

the human climate. Of all the factors that determine how our system works, the least understood is now clearly the most important-- the people factor.

With this in mind, let me give a cursory response to the question that is the title of this talk in the program "So what?: implications for the recreation profession." If we can't manage the human climate; if we can't project and analyze future human climates; then all of the trend projections on the tangibles - the number of people who will be hiking, skiing, boating; the number of parks, campsites and amount of open space we will need; the amount of recreational equipment and number of RV's purchased - may not matter one iota. This is not meant to debase the need for understanding tangible trends; nor is it meant to demean the value of this symposium. What it does mean is that the future of the recreation profession, especially those in the public arena, will be very dependent on the ability of the professional to understand, analyze, and manage the human climate, not only of their own staff, but the public which they serve and to whom they are accountable.

At present, the ability of the recreation profession to deal with the human climate is very limited. We suffer from knowledge gaps. I see relatively few papers on this topic in the program; we lack the skills. Few professional preparation programs deal with this topic in a meaningful way. While we say we are in the "people" business, in reality we are more concerned about carrying capacity, numbers of people participating, grass, trees, and buildings; the tangibles which we can touch and see, and are the easiest to manage.

Yet, there are series of trends and issues today which over the long-term (the next 20 to 30 years) will force us away from dealing with only the tangibles if we want to survive as a profession. While some of these issues might be considered in the "tangible" domain, all of them affect the "human climate." Time does not permit me to go into depth on all of them; however, I do want to spend some time on at least three of these issues.

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²Director of Research, National Recreation and Park Association, 1601 Kent Street, Arlington, VA.

The first of these is an overwhelming conservatism that I see sweeping throughout the land. The shift in political posture from the left-of-center to the right-of-center is manifested in such recent events as:

- the "back to the basics" movement in education;
- the refusal by many states to consider the ERA, and a rescission in some states of the Amendment;
- the growing anti-abortion movement;
- the current "Jaws II" initiative in California and the Proposition 13 syndrome, which I see extending to many other states and cities in the upcoming elections;
- the resurgence of the Republican Party led by a presidential candidate who epitomizes conservatism; and,
- the current attempts by the Carter administration to balance the federal budget by slicing billions out of social programs, including parks and recreation.

The fiscal constraints engendered by such conservatism strikes right at our ability to provide quality recreation and park experiences to the public whom we serve.

The root cause of this conservatism may be what I would call a "me first" syndrome. A syndrome which we have not seen in this country for some time and one which has led to lessen the value placed on social programs more than any previous time in this century. The idea of being my brother's keeper, providing services for the public good, and just about anything that resembles a social welfare program, including recreation, is now falling on deaf ears. The taxpayer is revolting; he is more interested in himself than the other person, and if such attitudes continue, then at the risk of being a seer of doom, I do not see much light at the end of the tunnel for public park and recreation services.

The fiscal conservatism of the "me first" attitude will affect public recreation and park systems in two basic ways. The first is that we are going to be asked to do more with less money and when you combine that with the effect of the energy situation, where more and more people are going to require more and more recreation and park services closer to home, we are being put between a rock and a hard spot. Secondly, the "me first" attitude plus the overwhelming desire of decision makers to improve the economy is going to create some extremely tenuous conflicts on the use of any available open space that we have. The search for new

energy sources on existing parkland, the use of land for industrial and commercial development rather than open space and parkland, are going to be battles that we in the park and recreation movement are going to have to face square on, for land lost in such short-term skirmishes will be lost forever.

How recreation managers deal with this aspect of the human climate in the future is open to much discussion and debate. What is known, is that if we had been able to foresee the implications of this shift and adjust our management style accordingly, then we might not have found ourselves in such a dire predicament.

The second major issue is one that I've already mentioned in passing - the energy crisis. While this might be considered a "tangible" factor, it does have an "intangible" tinge that will impact on the human climate.

We know that our oil supply is running out; it is not an unlimited resource. We can be relatively certain that in time there will be regulations and restrictions placed on the use of petroleum products. Indeed, it's entirely possible that energy-consuming forms of recreation, such as all of RV's, may be among the first affected. We also know that alternative energy sources are currently available or are technologically feasible, but are not economically feasible. These are all tangible factors.

The intangible factors revolve around people's behavior in times of the reduction of petroleum-based energy. The role of the recreation professional in managing the human climate under such conditions is two-fold.

First, the recreation professional will, like everyone else, be expected to take a part in conserving energy. Undoubtedly, there will be mandatory conservation measures imposed on from high. However, I am convinced that only through modifying human behavior will this nation ever reach the point where it has an effective energy conservation program. To this end, the recreation professional should be taking steps to modify the behavior of his/her staff in terms of energy conservation education. As such, the recreation professional has a responsibility to utilize these resources to modify public behavior towards energy consumption.

The second intangible factor related to the energy crisis has to do with people's leisure behavior. I firmly believe that in spite of reduced energy resources in the future, people will still search for outdoor recreation experiences. What will change will be the mode they use to pursue these experiences, and the settings in which they take place. Many of these changes have been discussed during this symposium, and must be heeded by the profession, with due caution

given to short-term "fads."

Of greater concern to me, however, is the fact that as people find they cannot escape to the Minnesota backwoods to enjoy hiking, they will turn to settings closer to home, but with the same set of expectations as to what they should receive from the experience as they previously had in their trip to the backwoods. Obviously, the dilemma posed by this situation may never be able to be fully resolved. Yet, the greater the ability of the professional to manage the human climate, the closer he/she will come to a solution.

The third major issue that I see developing is that of a changing clientele. A look at almost any demographic statistical analysis shows that we are becoming an older nation. The children born in the baby boom of post World War II America are now rapidly approaching middle age and by the end of this century will be counted among our senior citizens. To top it off we have almost reached the point of zero population growth, and if you combine this factor with the prospect of many of us being senior citizens in about 30 years, then we are faced with a society that is much, much older and as a result will have many different needs than the society of today. An implication of this for the recreation professional is that the services we provide will, as a result of the changing character of our society, be quite a bit different than what we know today. For example, it is possible that many of our high risk programs will no longer be in vogue. Then many of our more strenuous outdoor recreation pursuits, such as mountain climbing, may decrease in popularity simply because fewer people are capable of either physically or economically pursuing them.

Along with an older society will be a more highly-educated population. A college education is now becoming the general rule rather than the exception. But, along with the obvious benefits of a higher education, come some pitfalls which will become more apparent in the future and have some definite implications for the recreation professional.

We have been taught in our society that a college education will bring certain rewards. It is the epitomy of the "Great American Dream." However, in an era of limits and shortages, the mass overbuilding of expectations is running on a collision course with those institutions who simply can't produce. The feelings of entitlement generated through raised expectations is leading people to take matters into their own hands. It is part of the "me first" syndrome mentioned earlier and may account for the self-fulfillment of expectations through shoplifting, embezzlement, and other antisocial acts. It also is leading to a complete distrust of our social institutions, especially govern-

ment, and is resulting in more and more power groups making claims on whatever resources are available. Each of these power groups is clamoring for top priority and is using its weight and voice to claim essentiality.

The implications of this situation to the recreation profession are again perhaps best stated by Philip Lesly. In this setting of priorities and struggle for power, he believes: (1:6,7):

The police forces will be maintained, fire protection will continue, the streets will be kept free of garbage and rats, the schools will be kept open, water will be pumped and the transit system will operate unless our society collapses. But as of now, the public does not see such a grim necessity for maintaining (public park and recreation) budgets or allocating gasoline and fuel oil to keep the parks and playgrounds open or enable people to reach them. Life without outdoor recreational facilities and music and libraries may become grim and heartless, but that is not as evident as how savage life will be if the forces are denied that now demand their exalted expectations be fulfilled.

The result - - on the course we are now heading - - will be that the elements having little visible power or clear-cut value to society will not only be outpaced, but may be squeezed out of existence.

To bring a very current perspective to this issue, let me quote Amitai Etzioni, a professor of sociology at Columbia University and currently a senior advisor to the White House (2:54):

America is in the midst of a grand dialogue. We are choosing between a reindustrialized society and one emphasizing quality of life, in which greater understanding of self, of relations to others, and more communing with nature are stressed.

If we opt for quality of life, we will gradually lose our economic strength until in 10 or 15 years we're going to be like a South American country; we will become a "siesta society" in which there is less drive and less productivity. There are signs of this now. Our railroads, bridges, and highways are deteriorating and look ever more like those in Latin America.

If we choose to reindustrialize, then we will be able to come to grips with our number 1 problem: the loss of productive capacity, which lies behind inflation, lack of adaptation to the energy problem and other ills.

As things stand today, one of the weakest voices is that of public recreation and parks. It is becoming starkly clear that unless your group quickly establishes its essentiality, you face a grim spiral of decline. The human climate is rapidly turning against you and your capacity for influencing it is eroding. You may be running out of time to establish your case while all around you others are shouting and making it harder for you to be heard.

There are many in the audience whose response might be - so what; let the private sector take over, they can do a better job!

My response to these reactions is that while I welcome more involvement by the private sector in the provision of recreation and believe strongly in private/public cooperation; I am not convinced that we can totally relegate all leisure services to private industry. It must be remembered that the prime objective of private enterprise is to make a profit, and like any other business, those products that don't sell are pulled from the shelves. Yet, it might be these very same products that are vital to an individual's leisure needs. Nevertheless, if we don't heed what Lesly says - if we don't learn how to deal with the human climate - then the only option that may be open to public recreation and park agencies is to turn everything, including research, over to the private sector.

These, then, are just a few of the major issues that I see confronting us. While most of the issues are with us today, the cyclical nature of life leads me to believe that such issues are trends that we can see increasing in importance over the next quarter of a century.

How will the recreation professional be able to cope? Let me close with some random thoughts:

1. The "me first" syndrome is not necessarily bad. Indeed, the striving towards individuality, if accompanied by leisure literacy, could lead to the ultimate goal of the recreation professional - to work himself out of a job. Such literacy will only come about, however, if the professional views his role more as a facilitator, enabler, and educator rather

than simply a provider of opportunity.

2. The recreation professional must become more in tune with the social issues of the time and their implications for the provision of future leisure services. In this light, such tasks as long-range planning must begin to take into account not only the tangible factors, but also the intangible aspects of the human climate.

3. The recreation professional must begin now to justify his existence and essentiality in more human terms. This will involve, among other things, an evaluation and analysis of leisure services and leisure experiences relative to their effect on the individual, and their effect on the economy, health, and productivity of society.

Finally, while it may appear that I've painted a picture of gloom, I don't want to appear as if all is lost. Indeed, such social trends may provide us with the opportunities to be the creative individuals we think we are. Less federal money may force us to be more creative in establishing linkages with the private sector. Less staff may force us to be more creative in using volunteers, a growing leisure experience for many people. Less facilities may force us to be more creative in identifying and using the unidentified public and private resources that exist in our communities.

LITERATURE CITED

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