

Christine Vogt (Session chair
and lead author of this paper)
Michigan State University

Panelists:

James Absher
U.S. Forest Service

Alan Graefe
Penn State University

Bill Hammitt
Clemson University

Linda Krueger
U.S. Forest Service

Jerry Vaske
Colorado State University

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This year (2007) at the Northeastern Recreation Research (NERR) Symposium, we took the opportunity to reflect on the past 15 to 20 years of recreation research and discuss the opportunities and challenges that might face us in the next decade. The session utilized a panel to entertain four primary questions focused on recreation research. Following a panel presentation with interaction from the moderator, the session was opened to the audience to add to the discussion or ask new questions of the panel. The session was well attended by about 100, including public recreation research directors and staff members (from federal, state, and local agencies), university faculty and students, and private research consultants.

The guiding questions to the panelists were:

- What natural resource/recreation issues are pertinent today and how do they relate to the past and the future?
- What changes have occurred that 1) got us to where we are; and 2) have stopped us from going further than we could have?
- What socio-demographic and policy/level changes have occurred/will occur that may change the way we operate in the natural resource field?
- What theoretical models/frameworks are relevant today and how does that compare to what you studied in grad school (relating to the many graduate students in the audience)?

2.0 PANELIST COMMENTS

The first panelist was Jerry Vaske, a co-founder of the NERR Symposium, professor at Colorado State University, and editor of *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*. He shared a recent meta-analysis he completed on the journal to highlight recreation and resource issues as they have shown in published papers. First, the number of international contributions nearly doubled from the first 5 years of the journal (1996-2000) to the next 5 years (2001-2005). Second, *HDW* authors have examined a wide range of wildlife-related issues including consumptive activities (i.e., hunting, fishing, trapping), nonconsumptive activities (i.e., wildlife viewing, wildlife tourism), and preservation efforts (i.e., endangered species). Third, the major social science disciplines (e.g., social psychology, sociology, demography, anthropology, economics, political science, geography) have been represented throughout the first decade of the journal's existence. Fourth, the breadth of concepts examined (e.g., value orientations, attitudes, norms, behavior, behavior change) spanned the range of key variables that should be included in a journal promoting the application of social science theories to fisheries and wildlife management.

The second panelist was Linda Krueger, a social scientist for the U.S. Forest Service. She has seen recreation become one of several integrative and multi-

or inter-disciplinary topics upon which Forest Service managers and researchers focus. She emphasized the dyad between managers and researchers being critical for sustainability in agencies such as the Forest Service. Emerging topics that she sees receiving greater emphasis (and funding) include:

- Global change – Including studies of climate, recreation (particularly on public lands), fishers, social impacts and demographic shifts (e.g., retirement, migration into resource or amenity areas – her interest is on local communities), and land-use change with an emphasis on urban, rural, and wildland interfaces. She commented that these topics require researchers who can compile social, economic, and environmental discussions and recommendations.
- Forest health – Including studies on biomass and use of fuels from forests; invasive species and their impacts on water and land resources; and fire and disease effects.

The third panelist was Bill Hammitt, a recently retired Clemson Recreation professor. He has seen great interest and need for research on the topic of the interaction of the public and environment. A strong body of research has emerged on place attachment and place bonding in recent years. Place research has assisted in resource management in federal and state resource agencies. Much of this research spans from beliefs to behaviors of humans in a preferred environment. Hammitt sees future opportunities for researchers to think even harder about models and applications for place research. Another topic of current and future interest is in the area of restoration. This research transcends both the natural resources or landscape and the human as emotional, physical, and social restoration. Finally, Hammitt sees more sophisticated analytical tools being used like structural equation modeling. However, while these models often yield a good fit of the data to the theoretical models proposed, the theories/models are often weak at predicting recreation behavior. Today's researchers need to ponder the theories being used and continue to work with these sophisticated modeling techniques to be able to claim greater understanding of the phenomenon they are studying.

The next panelist, James Absher, is a research social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service. He claims we now have a “recreation science” that has been constructed primarily on social psychological theories and concepts. He argues that we need to develop broader perspectives (other disciplines), involve other social scientists (e.g., political scientists), and get “the R-squared higher” (explain more). Along with improved explanatory power, we need to continue to show how recreation science impacts or benefits society. This takes additional skills such as marketing, communications, and public relations. Absher also suggested that the question “what do public lands mean to society” should guide our thinking and work. According to Absher, “as social scientists, we need to make people come alive and be an integral part of multiple management topics!” For instance, currently, the Forest Service seems like “the U.S. Fire Service” as fire is driving the agenda and budgets, while the linkages to tourism, recreation, or leisure are not obvious. Some additional issues of interest are diversity, internationalization, and urbanization. Public lands agencies, and the social issues they manage, need to have better links with a plethora of communities, spanning cultural and political issues.

The final panelist was Al Graefe, faculty member of Penn State and co-founder of the NERR Symposium. He talked about funding in past decades and today. He has experienced limited financial resources from federal agencies, such as the Forest Service and U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, but greater resources and opportunities with state agencies (particularly on studies of use monitoring and carrying capacity). He commented that university professors now face higher requirements to secure external funding to fund graduate student research and development. Another issue related to grants has been applying for OMB approval from the federal government to conduct survey research. He feels that improvements have been made by researchers in terms of the quality of the research (both in substantive topics and rigorous methodologies), more longitudinal research to show trends, and more synthesis of research reports to cover the “body of knowledge” rather than one study.

3.0 AUDIENCE COMMENTS

Next, members of the audience added additional challenges or opportunities that they encounter as a recreation or resource researcher.

Challenges included:

- Dependency on survey research and decreasing response rates in recent years. This is coupled with OMB approval and its requirements to yield high response rates.

Opportunities included:

- We lack (and need) studies on change and its causes and consequences. We could also bring about change rather than just studying change.
- We lack (and need) philosophy or thinking essays about recreation and leisure, resources, or society.
- We lack (and need) funding mechanisms for more innovative and “deeper” methodological inquiry.
- We lack (and need) more research on participatory planning and volunteering as funding for field positions are cut and there is a greater emphasis on citizen involvement.
- We need to make greater progress on integrative social and biological research.

Two individuals provided additional thoughts on this topic of recreation and resource research. Bob Ditton of Texas A & M University added that researchers need to be more in tune with and responsive to decisions that are made from their research findings. He sees that more peer reviews are occurring in the research process (not just when a manuscript is submitted to a journal). He has seen recreation and resource researchers turn to contract research over grant-funded research and suggested we need to return to grant-funded so that more theoretical work can be accomplished. He shared that the “pot of research money” hasn’t increased, but now social scientists are trying to get a portion of that pot. This has created animosity from bio-physical researchers who would rather not share or work with social scientists. Ditton recommends establishing relationships that have long-term potential and developing the skills to be able to endure changing leadership within the agencies. Steve Selin, West Virginia University, closed the session by reporting that efforts are under way to engage a diverse set of stakeholders in developing a strategic plan for “the future of outdoor recreation research and education.” He is in the process of learning more about research agendas in terms of who sets them and how the work is allocated between agencies, universities, and others. He and others in the audience agreed that there is a role for a professional organization to be a contact and partner with agencies in their research and education investments.