

CULTURAL "FOGWEED" AND OUTDOOR RECREATION RESEARCH

by WILBUR F. LaPAGE, *Recreation Specialist, Durham Research Laboratory, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, Forest Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Durham, N. H.*

ABSTRACT. A critical look at outdoor recreation research and some underlying premises. The author focuses on the concept of culture as communication and how it influences our perception of problems and our search for solutions. Both outdoor recreation and science are viewed as subcultures that have their own bodies of mythology, making recreation problems more difficult to define and to resolve.

EDWARD deBONO, physician and author of several books on the subject of how people think, argues that "... there are fields in which progress has been held up for ages because of the dominance of obstructive myth-like concepts ... a convenient term for such concepts is 'fogweed,' because they grow readily on fertile soil and quickly obscure ... furthermore, enriching the soil with more information only strengthens the fogweed" (*deBono 1969*).

A more accurate description of the state of outdoor recreation understanding, and the effect of the past decade's research, would be difficult to imagine!

Outdoor recreation is the classic case of a field choked with "fogweed." Dr. deBono's "fogweed" is, I suspect, simply the generic name for a great many species of habit-forming and hallucinogenic plants. Excessive exposure to the weedy field of outdoor recreation results in a variety of commonly recognized ailments such as a blind insistence upon treating correlates as causes: "More income, more leisure, and more travel, must always mean greater individual participation in outdoor recreation."

Another sure symptom of fogweed over-exposure is the pleasant fantasy that there are no causes and no effects. Everything is tautology: "recreation produces good citizens" and, of course, "good citizens recreate"; "people don't pay much to use a public park"; and "people won't pay much for their outdoor recreation." And almost all fogweed victims eventually suffer severe delusions, such as the idea that "outdoor recreation demands are generated by a mass return-to-nature motive."

And so the myths continue, despite their inability to provide us with any useful social understanding of outdoor recreation. They flourish in the face of authoritative reports such as Herbert Gans' statement that "... I do not believe that outdoor recreation is more environmentally favorable in terms of mental health values than other environments, or that there are significant relations between outdoor recreation, physical fitness, and mental health" (*Gans 1962*).

We seldom question any of our most basic outdoor recreation premises until someone like Philip Foss reminds us that there is "... no apparent reason in logic or equity why a private landowner should be asked to pay the cost of providing hunting

opportunities for the public" (*Foss 1966*). And, if you doubt that there are real costs involved, just look at the bill for vandalism that occurs every hunting season! (*Bennett 1969*).

Perhaps our cultural beliefs do not have to stand the tests of logic and equity, but simply those of time and repetition! Because public attitudes toward outdoor recreation are so profoundly shaped by these and similar subjective, and often emotional cultural "facts," we in recreation research and recreation resource management should benefit by a better understanding of how culture pervades our perceptions of leisure, outdoor recreation, and science.

"CULTURE IS COMMUNICATION"

Although there are more than 160 different definitions of culture (*Berelson and Steiner 1964*), there is a common thread of agreement that culture is "learned and shared behavior." If culture is learned, then culture must also be taught (even if not consciously). It follows, then, that "culture is communication" (*Hall 1970*).

The utility of this concept becomes increasingly obvious as we begin to identify the many nonverbal forms of communication that are used by people having a shared culture, such as facial expressions, body language, seating arrangements, the professorial gown, the thickness of one's office rug, and many, many, more.

Anthropologist Edward Hall has identified 10 "Primary Message Systems" by which culture is learned, and 9 of these are not dependent upon a spoken or written language. For example, members of different cultures are likely to have different perceptions of territoriality, and therefore different reactions to feelings of crowding and different needs for privacy. A 200,000-acre wilderness may seem like an extravagance to some, while for others it is a cultural necessity.

Similarly, temporality, or time awareness, varies from culture to culture; as does bisexuality, expressed in different sex roles in other cultures. Our cyclical approach to time utilization and our beliefs about appropriate sex roles strongly influence how we perceive leisure and the uses we make of it.

There are even cultural differences in the ways in which people learn how to learn. Some cultures stress "doing" as a principle of learning, while others do not; and Western cultures are much more likely to stress logic than rote or memory. And once people have learned how to learn in a given way, it is extremely hard for them to learn in any other way (*Hall 1970*).

We are, therefore, products of specific cultural and subcultural systems, even to the ways in which we think, the problems that we advance as being worthy of study, the methods by which we examine those problems, and the solutions that we propose. It should not really surprise us that middle-class researchers with middle-class concepts of leisure and resources consistently find that outdoor recreation is predominantly a middle-class activity! Could they have found otherwise? Both upper and lower classes have ample reasons to avoid designated outdoor recreation areas.

A classic example of this cultural blinding of thought processes is the true story of the skyscraper that was built with too few elevators. Elevator delays at the beginning and end of the day were causing problems of employee dissatisfaction and even resignations. Numerous solutions were proposed, such as installing more elevators, speeding them up, stopping them at alternate floors, and staggering working hours to reduce the load. But the solution finally selected was neither a technical one or a direct assault upon the problem. Mirrors were installed in the corridors around the elevators, and the office workers became so preoccupied with looking at themselves (and stealing a glance at others) that no one noticed the long wait for the elevators any more (*deBono 1969*).

By a seemingly simple shift in problem definition, in this case from one of mechanical inadequacy to one of human impatience, a costly solution was avoided. Perhaps none of our problems in outdoor recreation can be so easily solved. But at least the example illustrates the desirability of trying to redefine the problems.

Some problems have been known to disappear upon redefinition. Perhaps that pervasive planner's dilemma of "how can we meet the outdoor recreational needs of

today's and tomorrow's generations?" is just a wisp of fogweed?

Redefining an accepted "problem" is, of course, easier said than done because "culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants" (Hall 1970). I suspect that cultural blinding becomes most pronounced through training in our professional subcultures, if we may judge from the impressive number of major advances that have come from outside their field of specialization (Burnett 1966):

- Of three discoveries essential to modern surgery, none was discovered by a surgeon!
- Of four important railroad devices, none was invented by a railroad man!
- The motel, that most successful innovation in innkeeping, was not developed by traditional innkeepers!
- The great movie chains did not pioneer the drive-in movie!
- And paperback books were not the brainchild of the existing publishing houses!

Two of the major developments in outdoor recreation of the past decade also came from outside. Just a few short years ago nearly everyone equated camping with canvas and public parks. Today, there are more than 10,000 commercial campgrounds, more than 30 chains of franchised campgroupings, and over 300 manufacturers of trailers, motor homes, and other types of camping vehicles.

Changes such as these reveal one of culture's most interesting aspects. And that is, despite culture's automatic tendency to communicate a positive view of the status quo, our cultural beliefs are constantly changing in both evolutionary and revolutionary ways. Philip Kotler, in his book "Marketing Management," suggests that we are in the midst of change in some of our most important cultural values, such as a shift from self-reliance toward reliance upon government, from hard work as a good in itself toward the easy life, from religious convictions toward secular convictions, from husband-dominated homes toward

wife dominated homes, from parent-centered homes toward child-centered homes, from independence toward security, from parental values toward peer-group values, from saving toward spending, from postponed gratification to immediate gratification, and from respect for the individual toward dislike of individual differences (Kotler 1967).

THE EIGHTH PRIMARY MESSAGE SYSTEM

For many years, outdoor recreation proved to be a popular way of expressing such cultural values as thrift, hard work, and self-reliance. Today, we also see outdoor recreation reflecting the more contemporary values of conspicuous consumption, immediate gratification, peer-group acceptance, and the easy life. This suggests that outdoor recreation is, if not a battle ground, at least a focal point for cultural clashes.

Appropriately, in Hall's hierarchy of primary message systems, *recreation* falls between *learning*, No. 7, and *defense*, No. 9. A visit to any of today's crowded parks and recreation areas can readily provide a vivid experience in learning about other people's rights while defending your own.

As I read them, the tirades of one outdoor interest group against another are clearly ideological: back-pack campers versus recreational vehicles; trail scooters versus those who go into the woods to get away from noise and air pollution; rural-bred hunters versus urban-bred hunters; and snow vehicles against an assorted band of hunters, hikers, and cross-country skiers! Mass recreation, once firmly allied with conservation interests, is increasingly being cursed along with industrial polluters and other desecrators of the landscape.

Outdoor recreation is a means of expressing so wide a range of cultural values that the question of "how long it can go on being all things to all people?" underlies all of our research and planning efforts.

At any campground, we may interview people for whom camping provides a release from the competitiveness and status-consciousness of modern society, and others

who find in camping a new way to communicate dominance and superiority. Sharing any fishing hole we can find fishermen who are competing with nature by using light line, barbless hooks, and releasing their catch, alongside others who compete on the basis of the most fish brought home and, perhaps, given away. Our trails are increasingly peopled with machine users and machine avoiders, each challenging the other's territoriality.

These are the kinds of conflicts that really delimit society's demands for outdoor recreation. And yet we continue to find outdoor recreation analysts who persist in a simple-minded pursuit of the promise of more leisure, more income, more mobility, and more people—as though the outdoors has an endless capacity to absorb conflict.

More and more cracks are beginning to appear in some of the long-accepted foundations of outdoor recreation planning as the evidence mounts that the average American does not have all the leisure that he is supposed to have (*Linder 1969; Burck 1970*), that his participation may actually be declining (*LaPage and Ragain 1970*), and that his recreational forays into the wild rarely have anything to do with a return to nature.

The return to nature, or the "Arcadian Myth" as Peter Schmitt calls it, is probably the most influential of our outdoor beliefs (*Schmitt 1970*). Simply stated, the "Arcadian Myth" is the belief that goodness and strength flows from the land and that rural living is vastly more suited to the human condition than the artificiality and complexity of urbanized areas. In one form or another, this belief has been the theme for countless books, the thesis of much serious (if inconclusive study, and the popular explanation for such social phenomena as urban crime and delinquency, urban decline, suburban growth, and outdoor recreation demand.

This same concept in words and in pictures sells a lot of outdoor equipment. Or does it? The buyer of the light-weight back-pack outfit and the buyer of the \$20,000 motor home are equally likely to be expressing an extension of our pioneer-

ing subdue-the-wilderness ethic—which is something else entirely.

Since those who endorse a return-to-nature theory of recreation demand choose to ignore how the outdoors is used, and concentrate only on the fact that it is used, the concept is little more than a tautology. Values inferred from the behavior rather than measured independently are gratuitously used to explain that same behavior.

The net gain in understanding provided by a tautology is zero. In fact, it may even be less than zero if it should encourage less than adequate recreation management, risky investment of public and private funds, and a false sense of security that a seller's market exists!

The return-to-nature reflects a philosophy that behavior responds more to environmental pressures than to the individual's free will. Many outdoor recreation researchers may be revealing their own philosophies in their numerous multiple-regression analyses that use environmental data to explain the variation in park visitation rates and in individual recreation participation frequencies.

A more philosophically neutral cultural belief that also influences much outdoor recreation thought is the mistaken idea that leisure is the opposite of work. This leads to all sorts of unfortunate image-opposites as a result of the persistent Protestant work ethic which equates work and with good attributes, character building, dependability, honesty, and thrift. Of course, the more physically demanding the work, the stronger the implied attributes.

I recall reading, a few years ago, an observation in the *READER'S DIGEST* about a first-grade test. One item in the test showed two drawings—one of a man chopping wood, the other of a man reading a book. Students were asked to circle the picture that showed a man at work. One little girl circled the reader and was marked wrong. What the teacher failed to understand was that the child's father was a professor who read at work and chopped wood for relaxation.

Fortunately the work-leisure dichotomy is disappearing. At a 1964 recreation education conference in Syracuse, the keynote speaker stated emphatically that leisure is

not idleness; that it is not the opposite of work (*Tolley 1964*). At a conference on Leisure in America at Philadelphia, in 1963, one of the conference summarizers expressed the group's consensus that "recreation is a field of life standing along with health, education, work, welfare, and religion in bringing 'human wholeness' to man" (*Charlesworth 1964*).

A recent National Academy of Sciences conference report continued this same theme by introducing recreation as a "social institution" (*National Academy of Sciences 1969*). However, the work-leisure dichotomy still clearly influences the ways in which Americans live, and it colors (with social acceptability) the recreational motivators that they report to researchers.

The Arcadian Myth and the Protestant Ethic are only two of our cultural beliefs that can influence research goals, research findings, and outdoor recreation planning. There are, of course, many more, including the myths of increasing leisure time, increasing per-capita participation in recreation, and the myths of perfect planning, perfect accounting, and perfect market knowledge (*LaPage 1970*). And these, taken together, compel us to treat the future as our subservient colony, predicting its needs, acquiring land, and planning for its orderly development.

In designing campsites, for example, our perfect market knowledge tells us to plan "big sites with vegetation between them," because "people want lots of room and privacy" when they camp (*Hopkins 1966*). And yet numerous studies during the past 10 years have suggested that sociability, more than outdoor resources, provides the main motivation for camping (*Etzkorn 1964; Burch 1965*).

Our professional compulsion to plan constantly conveys the message that tomorrow's problems are more important, more amenable to solution, and more attractive to study, than are today's problems. And because today's problems are too urgent for research, millions of dollars are spent annually in the pursuit of such perfect planning myths as the idea that public acquisition equals resource protection.

THE RATIONALITY OF RECREATION RESEARCH

While the fogweed of leisure and outdoor recreation makes the research task difficult conceptually, the mythology of science can be just as crippling procedurally. The myths of "scientific freedom," "scientific objectivity," "scientific omnipotence," and the idea that there are some "grand theories" just waiting to be discovered that will readily simplify complex behavioral phenomena, along with some widespread misconceptions about social and statistical "significance" are a few of the more devastating species of scientific fogweed.

A recent LIFE magazine article nicely summarizes the mythology and the reality of science:

One expects scientists to provide the truth, scientists being dispassionate men who can eliminate prejudice and emotion and tell us what is really going on here. But one learns that at the sticking point, science breaks down, and the scientists are sometimes wrong, frequently biased, and usually incapable of agreeing among themselves.

From the number of popular anti-science books that have appeared during the last year or two, we can assume that at least a vocal minority is communicating its distrust of science! A number of problems for recreation research, including a lack of public support and a reduced willingness to cooperate with researchers, may result. A common complaint seems to be based upon science's cherished "objectivity." There is, for example:

"... A growing reaction against science and technology ... a mounting feeling that science and technology create a cold, artificial, impersonal, dehumanized, and even monstrous world ... a revolution against the machine and everything machine-like and ... a revolution against a system ... a revolution on behalf of the individual and individualism, against the invasion of privacy ..."

(*Waldo 1968*).

Outdoor recreation research may already be reaping some of the rewards of this new scientific revolution. Refusals to cooperate with researchers—to be interviewed, for example—though still infrequent, seem to

be more common today than they were 3 or 4 years ago!

There is some legitimate question about how much scientific freedom actually exists with the scientist's subcultures constantly communicating their expectations to him. The "publish-or-perish" admonition, true or not, is the expression of a powerful cultural norm that effectively limits scientific freedom.

Subtle but apparently very effective communications within the subculture of outdoor recreation agencies clearly influence the types of research that will be conducted and supported.

I recently examined two lengthy bibliographies of outdoor recreation studies. These bibliographies listed 25 papers and reports on the problem of counting visitors at recreation areas. Twenty-three of the papers were by agency-employed scientists. Although the other two were done by university personnel, one was a cooperative study with a federal agency, and the other was done by an ex-Forest Service scientist.

Since public recreation agencies measure success by counting heads (*Goodale 1967*), the conclusion from this disparity in problem recognition between agency and university scientists should be obvious. That conclusion seems to be saying something about scientific freedom.

The logic behind which problems are selected for study, and the methods that will be used to study them, can be very convincing if not always rational. Logic and rationality are not synonymous; in fact, even paranoid thinking is quite logical once you accept its irrational underlying premise (*Braden 1970*).

There are sound (If you accept the underlying premises) reasons for studies that will yield better estimates of recreationists. A park manager may be receptive to these studies if he happens to see in them a better way of: (1) identifying distributional problems and overloads, (2) justifying additional employees and new services, and (3) justifying new rules and regulations to protect the resource and the visitors (*LaPage 1967*). The highly debatable underlying premise is that we have to play the numbers game to do any of these things.

With today's emphasis upon environmental quality, it may be that there are more efficient and more appropriate ways of achieving these ends.

Perhaps the most scientific of the underlying premises is the exaggerated concern for representivity through better user-counts and more complete visitor rosters, at the expense of a frequently inadequate concern for the phenomena being sampled and measured. Here we see the fogweed of scientific objectivity in full bloom.

Nose-counting studies, tests of different procedures for raising the level of use of wilderness trail registers, and comparisons of the data collected by interview and mail questionnaire all share an assumption that better sampling means better research. Unfortunately the premise is incorrect.

No list is ever complete. But, more important, no list can contain the important small-group and situational elements that create most outdoor experiences. An after-the-fact response, framed in the privacy of one's home, is likely to be much different than one that is drawn from shared opinions around a wilderness campfire! If we really hope to learn the why of different forms of outdoor recreation, we are going to have to use appropriate units of observation. And, I suspect, the on-site-group is in most instances the appropriate unit, despite its formidable sampling problems.

Probably the single most troublesome piece of scientific fogweed is that perverse word: *significant*. "Statistical significance of a correlation coefficient, or a regression coefficient, merely means that there is a pretty good chance that it is in fact a number different from zero . . . One should not exaggerate the worthwhileness of a coefficient simply because it probably differs from zero" (*Ehrenberg 1970*).

Statistical significance says nothing about the adequacy of sampling, and nothing about the validity of the measuring tools used. And since sampling and measurement are generally acknowledged to be the two major problems of recreation research, "significant" relationships, at this stage of the game, must be regarded as the beginning of understanding and analysis, not the end.

For sound research planning, I would gladly swap all the "highly significant" correlation coefficients of the past 10 years for a handful of good case studies that yielded some solid conceptual insights to build on.

FOGWEED AND THE FUTURE

It may be trite, but it is still true that many of our problems are due to communications failures—either too little or too much. Usually the charge is "too little communication," or a failure to communicate at all. If we regard all of culture as communication, then possibly many of our problems may arise from too much communication—an informational over-kill. We have literally talked some of our problems into existence.

Whenever a group of experienced outdoor recreation administrators are discussing their problems of counting people, or of soil compaction in campsites, it takes a rare research consultant to admit that he can't see the problem. Perhaps, at first, he doesn't. But subtle social pressures will eventually force him to see the problem with the same set of blinders that they wear. Obviously, if a real problem does exist, this sort of acculturation is destined to reduce the number of possible solutions,

because he will then also see their barriers to problem solving.

And then, while the researcher goes off to wrestle with the administrators' problems, they may go into another huddle with their information specialist to draft a bigger and better promotional campaign for next year.

An awareness that culture is communication is not, by itself, going to help solve any problems. But, it does stress the realization that problems are seldom what they seem to be upon first inspection. The administrator's concern for the condition of his resource is not equivalent to the condition of that resource. It is, more nearly, his impression of its physical condition exaggerated by his apprehensions for the future; both of which contain more than a pinch of fogweed.

The challenge of recreation research, it seems to me, is not how to minimize or maximize the amount of information received, or even how to process it more efficiently. The challenge is to recognize the fogweed. Stated another way, the challenge is really to disprove Kenneth Boulding's half serious definition of science as: "the process of substituting unimportant questions that can be answered for important questions which cannot" (*Boulding 1956*).

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