

Welcome Address

Linking People to the Outdoors: Connections for Healthy Lands, People and Communities

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I greatly appreciate you inviting me to provide the welcome address at this important conference. The following are a few observations I have made regarding the symposium topic and the presentations to be made.

- ♦ There is widespread public recognition of the positive contributions to the quality of life resulting from participation in outdoor recreation. The general public links recreation to overall happiness, family unity, health, improved educational opportunities, deterrence to crime and substance abuse.

Outdoor recreation is a pervasive leisure-time “use” across the nation (although there are variations by region, income, and race). In fact, 9 in 10 Americans (87%) participated in an outdoor recreational activity over the past 12 months.

Data show, however, a recent downward trend in the frequency of participation, particularly among young adults. In other words, 18 to 29 year olds are now less likely to be frequent recreation participants (19%) than Americans between the ages of 30-44 (24%) or those 45-59 (22%). Four in 10 young adults are likely to engage in recreation either less than monthly or never. A downward trend in the average number of activities in which people participated was also noted. (2003 Recreation Roundtable)

This decline in recreation participation along with **INACTIVE BEHAVIOR and LIFESTYLES** ties in with a larger societal (global) problem, **OBESITY**. Many medical professionals consider obesity to be the major health issue of the 21st century and see that it is clearly linked to **INACTIVITY**. Being overweight and obesity in children is epidemic. Approximately 22 million children under 5 years of age are overweight. In the U.S., the number of overweight children and youth doubled in the last 2-3 decades; similar weights are being observed worldwide, including developing nations where an increase in westernization of behavioral and dietary lifestyles is evident. Unfortunately, **OBESITY IN CHILDHOOD IS A KEY PREDICTOR FOR OBESITY IN ADULTHOOD**. (Deckelbaum, & Williams, 2001).

People who are obese have 30 – 50% more chronic medical problems than smokers or drinkers. Health complications linked to obesity such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, stroke and certain cancers raise an individual's healthcare costs by 36% and medication costs by 77%. Less physical activity, more hours in front of the TV, and a car-obsessed culture were all cited as significant causes of the U.S.' growing obesity problems.

- ♦ Some researchers advocate for large-scale changes in policies and planning to reduce the prevalence of obesity. They recommend that policy makers, researchers, educators, businesses, urban planners, and public entities work together to provide funding for physical activity infrastructures (such as recreation facilities and trails); launch mass media campaigns on nutrition and physical activity; establish car-free zones in business districts; and require health insurance companies to give financial incentives for participation in weight-loss and exercise programs (Nestle & Jacobson, 2000).

NRPA is involved in this effort. It has allied with *Sports Illustrated* to place 18 full-page ads promoting the benefits of parks and recreation during 2003-04. “This strategic positioning effort will focus on healthy lifestyles and livable communities through the tagline (*It Starts in Parks!*).

A number of the SARR presentations address health and healthy lifestyles for individual and communities. There are presentations that address urban trails, active living and physical activity; healthy communities, trails and heritage routes (urban trails is an important national topic); while other presentations look at psychological health – park patronage and the elderly (another societal issue that impacts our work); healthy leisure participation, quality of life perceptions; and indigenous peoples' healthy connections to the land – and some of the motivations and constraints to involvement.

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- ♦ A large number of session themes and presentations address another societal issue -- **diversity** – particularly ethnic/racial diversity. These well documented societal changes in ethnic/racial diversity and the differences in outdoor recreation participation by ethnic background are noted. Disparities in participation rates still prevail -- a general finding is that while White Americans participated in an average of 5.2 different outdoor recreation activities, this compared with 2.3 for African Americans and 3.5 for Hispanic Americans.

Findings from the studies indicate that we need to understand much more clearly, not only who our visitors are, but their needs and wants, their interpretations of the land and how access can be increased. The role of those who manage those lands must also be examined, as it is often the case that the staff at outdoor recreation sites, wildlands, represent dominant gender and ethnic/racial groups. Previous studies (Tierney, Dahl, and Chavez) have found that visitors are more likely to visit undeveloped lands if there are people like themselves who work there.

There are sessions about “minority” use patterns with a focus on constraints (such as safety concerns, childhood socialization, lack of marketing) (3); Hispanic American views on stewardship; x-cultural examination of urban park use across 6 different ethnic/racial groups; leisure access; including ethnic groups in decisions about recreation provision; and then a roundtable discussion about how race and racism create challenges -- specifically the ways in which racial positions and racialized perspectives influence our thinking and practice in linking people to the outdoors.

Other forms of diversity are addressed – for example, disability and the perceptions of visually impaired participants in sea kayaking.

- ♦ Another societal concern focuses on the **family** and **family relationships**. 88% of parents believe that participating in outdoor activities strengthens family relationships (Nat’l survey of parents with children ages 4 - 14). Parents ranked camping as the #1 ‘great outdoor family experience’ followed by hiking (14.5%), bicycling (13.3%), and fishing (12.8%).

Outdoor recreation participation by families with children is generally above the national average, and families with one or more children under the age of seven are the most active. Most popular activities are swimming, picnicking, tent camping & walking, fishing & camping, bicycling, wildlife viewing, and horse-riding.

The poster session: *FamCamp: Creating Quality Time for Families* directly addresses the issue of families, while other presentations indirectly include families in their scope of study.

- ♦ Shifting the Focus from **FOR WHOM** to **BY WHOM**, we look at the agencies, their managers and staff – and some of the ways in which they work together to provide services to their publics.

Focus on Partnerships – Working Together to Help Link People to the Outdoors. There are many presentations address the importance of working together and the different ways in which to do so, using specific programs/projects to illustrate those collaborative ventures. Utah Trails; theUnity Project to use the outdoors to create community; regional recreation connections; opinions about corporate sponsorship; collaboration/ partnership regarding race/ethnic minorities and outdoor recreation and tourism resources; visitor and resident preferences and differences; and partnerships between universities and a federal agency.

Other presentations look at relationships with the public - for example, trust with communities; moving relationships from satisfaction to loyalty; addressing the public’s need for information; and dealing with public opinion.

- ♦ Tourism – “Federal lands are magnets for recreation.” There are in excess of one billion recreation-related visits to federally-operated sites annually. Families are *over-represented* among visitors to sites managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Forest Service, and National Park Service sites, while younger adults (18-29 years) are *over-represented* among visitors to national forests and park sites. There is ethnic/racial variation in visitation to federal lands, as many extant studies show.

SARR presentations look at cross-national comparisons (Spain, Scotland, US, Mexico); tourism and community connections; water-based recreation – user and surrounding community issues; tourism simulations; and the impact of wildfires on tourist behaviors

Theories and Frameworks

- ♦ Means-end theory to explore the linkages in an outdoor adventure context

- ♦ Conceptual model of human-bird interaction (Intermediate interface between the bird watchers and the birds and their habitat)
- ♦ Affect Control theory to examine meanings associated with sea kayaking
- ♦ Political ecology perspective (Green... around the gills) to analyze findings of focus group research with lower income Latinos
- ♦ Inter-organizational collaboration theory

Methodologies

- ♦ Computer-assisted content analysis to examine the views of Hispanic Americans expressed in Spanish-language news articles about federal land management agencies and issues. Data source – Ethnic News Watch – an online full-text database that included newspapers, magazines, and journals of ethnic, minority, and native press. (Unobtrusive method; not burdensome to community members; new window into perspectives of racial and ethnic communities; easy to update an analysis and monitor changing perspectives and issues)
- ♦ More qualitative methods used (interviews; in-depth case study based on semi-structured format; participant observation; document analysis (Collaboration- Makopondo))
- ♦ Content analysis to identify themes re: protest against natural area restoration in urban area forest preserves – Chicago and SF; newspaper articles and editorials, transcripts from public hearings; stakeholder group fact sheets and correspondence; and reports and plans
- ♦ Presentations at SARR that address ways to make those linkages include FAMCAMP, neighborhood to outdoors, communities of color in the outdoors and others.
- ♦ The challenge of linking still exists. We need to work on these in future research and conferences.