

One Park, Many Experiences: Socially-Explicit Improvements to Recreation Management Frameworks with Application to Taiwan.

James D. Absher

Ph.D., Research social scientist, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USDA—Forest Service, 4955 Canyon Crest Drive, Riverside, CA, 92507 [USA](#).

e-mail: jabsher@fs.fed.us, phone: 951-680-1559.

Abstract

Park management frameworks developed in the US (e.g., VERP, etc.) are being applied in other countries, notably Taiwan. The social forces that drive visitor experiences and how they are reflected in practice are very important in these new contexts. The diversity of meanings, types of experiences desired or expected, and the ways to gauge “success” are highlighted. I review a couple of recent VERP applications, propose an expanded sociological basis for expanding VERP, reflect on the Taiwan situation, then propose a “meta-analysis” to better understand the role of social science in this process. Notably I make VERP more socially explicit by proposing a scientific approach that yields data on the underlying sociocultural milieu of park visitors. This expanded social ecology results in modified or additional indicators and standards. More specifically, I argue that current applications of VERP are a coarse fit to the facts of social production and local culture, especially in diverse settings. My emphasis is on developing a sociologically robust strategy and a “meta-analysis” that will assure a better set of measures and a close fit to the on-the-ground experiences and community-based governance. This includes study of individual, community and agency-level concerns. Key points are suggested to assure the indicators and standards chosen are plausible and functional. Social science to support planning frameworks can be expensive and time consuming. We need to be sure the visitor management approach fits the setting and the inherent (park specific, time specific) experience issues. An expanded, socially-explicit VERP framework broadens the circle of relevance and improves the scientific part of the cycle of management.

Introduction

People come to the parks, forests and protected areas for a wide variety of reasons. At times these objectives are specific and at times they are quite vague in the minds of the visitor. Often site conditions in the form of natural conditions, facilities and other people affect the experience. Serendipity and ad hoc adjustments to behavior are quite common. The activities they pursue can, at times, be detrimental to the resource base and to the experiences of others, and one of the main aims of a management framework is to ameliorate or prevent such losses or inefficiencies. Facilitating appropriate uses is the other major aim. Although it is not possible to do so, an ideal management system might be one that provides for each visitor’s needs at each point in time. Fortunately the production of satisfying recreational experiences occurs under a wide variety of managerial schemes. At the root of the issue here is that each recreation trip is basically a string of phenomenologically rich interactions and the policy and management frameworks should, however

coarsely, take this into account. Inherent in the governance system is the choice of which aspects of the in situ experiential production process to emphasize and by extension, which to ignore. And although social science information has been integrated to many of the schemes there is still a lot of managerial decision making in them. My approach here is to focus on one of the most commonly used schemes, the VERP management framework, review the type and role of the social data it typically uses, and apply a broadly sociological approach to enhance that scheme so that the fit to the user populations (both current and potential/future) can be more assured.

Visitor Management Frameworks

Various visitor management frameworks have been proposed and a few have achieved common usage. Of particular note are those that have been developed by the USDA Forest Service and the US National Park Service. Earlier forms such as the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) have been supplanted by other broad form planning processes such as the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) framework (USDI NPS 1997). Some aspects of the original ROS formulation have been retained, notably the idea of a spectrum of experiences. VERP relies on defining condition classes as geographically distinct subunits of the park, and especially apropos here, the use of indicators and standards as the key operational detail of the plan. Although there have been some attempts to define other schemes that are more specific to a particular setting or incorporate additional steps or inputs, the VERP process is arguably the one framework which is most widely used today. This is in part because the National Park Service (NPS) has chosen to integrate this framework into its ongoing park planning efforts (Hof and Lime 1997) and in part because it builds on earlier efforts such as Visitor Impact Management (VIM) or Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC). Because this history is very well documented elsewhere (cf. McCool et al. 2007) I will not provide a lot of detail about this progression of ideas except as it bears on my core thesis.

In short, the VERP process is one that builds on the ideas in the earlier frameworks and develops a set of condition classes that encapsulate an area’s managerial intent, then defines indicators and standards to accompany each class. Of note here are the first steps that convene interdisciplinary and public involvement teams that may lead to the incorporation of public concerns and administrative limitations that may guide visitor management. And although typically a range of recreation experiences is part of the “desired future conditions” these are usually very broadly stated and generally limited to “type, amount and temporal distribution of visitors” (McCool et al. 2007:p. 95). In turn these are linked to management zones, i.e., specific park areas are classified in such a way that the desired social conditions (as defined previously) are assigned to each type of area. Developing indicators and standards occurs for each of these zones. The end result is a very well organized set of indicators to monitor for success (or failure) to an agreed upon standard.

It is also important to note that the scope of the overall management process that includes VERP is often broader than just visitor management. It might address conservation issues such as endangered species or invasive non-native plants or animals, or physical impacts from use such as degradation of water quality or facility loss (e.g. trail deterioration). Combining ecological and social factors might be especially true for wilderness areas or park units where preservation of nature or landscape features is considered a dominant

purpose for the site (Landres et al. 2009).

VERP Examples

At Mount Rainier National Park the VERP process includes a series of objectives and carefully defined indicators and standards (Rochefort and Samora 2010). VERP Indicators for this park encompass natural resources, visitor experiences, and cultural resources. The visitor experience indicators include “encounters with other parties,” “campsite isolation, and “campsite size and density.” At Yosemite National Park a similar set of indicators are being defined and monitored (Pettebone et al. 2010). So although one stated objective is to “estimate the quality of the visitor experience” the metrics chosen are largely based on a crowding or congestion assumption, e.g. use of automated trail counters and vehicle volume. Bacon (2010) further revealed that their concern for visitor experiences has led to a set of measures designed to assess who the visitors are (sociodemographics), what they do (broad activity types) and where, when and how many visitors in a site or zone, and with what effects on other indicators (e.g., social trails)?

Expanding VERP

Although useful, and arguably necessary, this sort of data does not reveal much about visitor concerns, satisfaction, preferences, etc. Other studies will be required to get at those issues, and of course they may not be part of the monitoring process. Let me be clear. I do not wish to impugn these efforts as somehow unimportant. On the contrary, these parks are doing as much, or more, to address visitor experiences as most parks in the system. Their inclusion here is meant to convey that this is the state of the art in application of VERP and provides a kind of baseline for the concerns and suggestions that follow.

In choosing the objectives and the subsequent indicators the researchers and managers at Mount Rainier and Yosemite are making judgments and assumptions about the key elements in the recreation experience. At times these are stated as administrative or legal requirements, e.g., in the Wilderness Act of 1964 or in a park general management plan. But usually they are broadly stated objectives that are given a reality by those who implement the VERP process (Moore 2006; McCool and Stankey 2004). In any event it is unclear whether current visitors agree with the philosophical and practical assumptions made about their experience. The usual feedback is in public meetings and comments on drafts of a plan, not on a scientific basis directly from visitors. Visitor surveys are often recommended as part of the monitoring program but often are not done for one reason or another. And it is this rationale and its sociological underpinnings that I wish to focus on next.

Inherent in this process are some possible questions about the applicability and suitability of VERP to a range of settings (Haider 2006). Relying on public input during the planning process is a weak way to develop accurate measures of future experiential production. That is, the broadness of this step assures that some of the park’s larger purposes and significance are included, but it is not the same as an assessment of the probable or desired visitor experiences themselves. That would suggest the need for a much more detailed visitor assessment akin to gauging market demand or the product development step in a corporate setting. In part the public

input step is both welcome and necessary to assure the public purposes of the park are in focus. Without more social science work VERP does so in a way that cannot fully inform the demand side of the visitor experience, or assure recognition of the social reality of all visitors. Instead the direction goes toward defining the supply-side: detailing the zones available for various broadly defined uses. Moreover, the relationship between these zones or classes and actual experiential outcomes would involve additional visitor surveys and monitoring which is rarely done, and hence the extent of this problem is relatively unknown scientifically and subject to conjecture, if not administrative abandonment, once the plan is accepted. Third the social, cultural and political factors that underlie visitors’ experiences might be of questionable relevance in other settings, especially where social forces and administrative procedures differ, e.g., in other agencies, at other levels of government, and especially in other cultural (if not national) contexts.

All of these possible problems do not detract from the usefulness of VERP in US-NPS settings although I would argue it can be improved substantially with better articulation of sociologically rich data throughout the process. It is of greater concern where the governance structures and cultural differences exist that would make a socio-politically explicit form of VERP desirable. In short VERP is a very good scheme as far as it goes. It is not the articulation with agency or park objectives, nor the desire to include some public participation, in the process that is being questioned, but rather the lack of a sociologically adequate account of the visitor experience itself, which seems to have been glossed over or short changed in VERP as practiced. This is in part due to a lack of resources to engage in social science, in part a shortfall in vision to be more experientially (demand-side) oriented, and in part due to the assumptions built into VERP and its close analogs as management frameworks that are closely linked to mandated planning practices and agency regulations and nonetheless have very little known relationship to visitor experience outcomes.

Sociological Approach

Without digressing too far let me describe some of the underpinnings that might inform a more socially explicit visitor management framework. Of particular concern for me are the communities of interest and place that make up the visitor population and the various frames of reference they use to form an experience. Each visitor brings with him/her a complex array of preferences and social norms, and values that are not usually well represented in traditional VERP style frameworks. But more than just individual attributes they are social facts, arising from and contributing to the ongoing experience production we refer to as —recreation outcomes.” Because these traits are diverse in any society, the communities of interest and self-identities of the visitors cannot be accurately measured solely with physical indicators. What goes on out there in the park is too fluid, too dependent upon the individual involved to be so simply encapsulated. I seek to overcome some of these issues by using a slightly different set of assumptions about the people we serve through park management, or at least alter our social science approach to incorporate their lifestyles and the meanings that impel, and emerge from, a recreation visit. My point is that experiential quality is a socially produced outcome and management needs to incorporate these social facts better.

The common approach in natural resource management in the US is to regard social data as part of a larger enterprise dependent upon a narrow structural-functionalism. Following in the footsteps of the ~~hard~~ "hard" sciences policy makers and managers seek a deterministic model that will afford a level of certainty that ~~given~~ "x, y will result." Or we track categories of visitors that have a strong basis in policy or law (e.g., gender or ethnicity) but only weak predictive power for the outcome of interest (quality outdoor recreation experiences). In order to develop a more complete socially dependent outcome model, research must address three areas of concern. First there is the institutional sphere, especially the agency's legal mandates, policies and procedures. Second is the individual recreationist, or visitor if you prefer, and the attendant norms, preferences and decision-making schemas. Third is the socio-cultural milieu within which both of the above operate. In particular cultural differences, values, structural and socioeconomic factors are critical to explaining observed or anticipated behaviors. People act upon personal and social pressures and may do so quite differently in various places around the world. Societies differ, as do individual responses to the setting itself. The power to act is in the recreation activities and draws upon all of these forces, often in an unseen, but not unimportant, way. The park as a recreation resource is defined by them in a very practical way. In this sense a park exists because of it defining laws and policies but relies on a much more complex set of forces to produce the visitor experiences on a day to day basis. Somewhat tautologically perhaps we might define these park resources by the power of the visitors.

Social Theory

The main underlying concepts and theories I wish to bring into this discussion are sociological. First I want to remind us of the importance of newer formulations of structuralism, especially as it goes beyond a ~~physics~~ "physics of functionalism" that predominates much of our recreation research (including much of my own work). Based in the traditions of Weber, as reinterpreted by Giddens (2009), the visitor behaviors that are observable in a park are the outcome of a dynamic process wherein individuals respond to internal intentions, motives, values and norms. But the experience is not predetermined by these psychological and normative factors. Instead, s/he acts them out onsite through a structurally regulated social ~~reproduction~~ "reproduction" that is based on agency and motives (Giddens 1984). The social order, which includes recreation activities and individual satisfactions, only has effects on people ~~is~~ "insofar as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do" (Giddens 1991).

The upshot is that recreation experiences are partly pre-determined by individual and social forces (e.g. the choices to come to park or to hike a certain trail) and partly determined by what happens on site (e.g., to stay longer because they discover the beach is unexpectedly beautiful or decide to stay longer with family). This fluidity in behaviors is, to some extent, in the manager's control and to some extent it is not. It is all important to the experience enacted and the meanings and satisfactions that accrue to the individual or to the groups to which they belong.

Further sociological work by Bourdieu (1991) directs us to not only look to the individual as an independent actor but also to consider

the ways in which the fields of action for each individual are governed by other salient institutions or communities, such as family or some part of their social context. This involves the park agency, local community groups, larger government entities, etc. Bourdieu’s park visitor would be one who is presented with a rather complicated mix of ~~–fields~~” (e.g., setting’s social and physical features, other ~~–imposed~~” or extant referentials known to the visitor) and, consciously or not, this visitor draws upon his or her ~~–habitus~~” or way of life (i.e., norms and preferences s/he uses for response and action). Like Giddens, Bourdieu would caution us that ~~–social science is not a social physics~~” because people, unlike particles, can change the principles that structure a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 101–2). The relationship between structure and person as agent, is the ~~–habitus~~,” a system of durable dispositions that are an embedded sense of the world and how to react to it. Moreover, as an internalized and learned force, the habitus is also mutable. And finally because every situation is a bit (or a lot) different habitus is transposable to new settings (i.e., we act on what we know from other situations judged to be similar or applicable, even if not exactly the same) (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 53; see also Sallanz and Zavisca 2007). This latter point is especially true for parks where tourism or diverse visiting populations are found. And these days that seems to be most parks.

Managers are challenged to get to know the kinds of world views visitors might have, and to better understand the likely action sequences that will ensue under certain environmental, social or administrative conditions. Once in the setting the perceived social conditions—administrative rules or other people present—are responded to with guiding principles forged into an emergent habitus—durable, transposable and mutable. A scientific understanding of the operative social order is important but less so than having the managers understand the same as she forges efficient and effective use regulations and directs other resource management tasks. A lot of scientific work has been done to look at aspects of this complex social dynamic. For instance, we have studied place identity and attachment, we have studied messaging systems, and we have begun to look at cultural differences in park use. And a lot of socially explicit studies and protocols still need to be developed and tested in different contexts.

Framework Expansion

Thus while a broadly defined recreation activity (e.g. hiking) may be a convenient focus of management it is an understanding and use of the park as a social system (values to habitus as above) that will assure a primary management goal of satisfied users. We need to use social science to understand the visitors and their behavioral preferences and tendencies. How coherent, mutable or transposable is an activity? And how can we measure that? Aggregations, whether activity or socially defined, are important but might vary substantially from place to place or from season to season. For instance, if hundreds of people use a small lake on a summer afternoon and some want to fish and others want to swim it is uncertain if the social norms will self-regulate the situation. Perhaps they will—civility and order will occur, perhaps they won’t. The capacity of the site and its outputs (nominally a ~~–quality~~” recreation experience) depend on the ability to sort all those people out—perhaps some are foreign visitors whose cultural norms are very different, perhaps a few suggestions or regulations on an entrance message board will suffice. Perhaps nothing will help short of law enforcement presence. Recognizing

the possibilities for conflict or confusion will be one aim of social science in such a park. Many linked concepts, such as congestion or density, personal attitudes and norms, administrative rules, and insight into how these will be used by the visitors, are part of the scientific model that an expanded framework must address. The types of indicators reviewed above will be a foundation upon which this can be accomplished: a necessary but not sufficient set of indicators to more accurately and fully model the park as a socially explicit regime.

In the sociological terminology presented above, I emphasize that a fully functional management framework must address the complexity of the setting as a landscape and as a sociocultural fact. A recreation visit is comprised of a series of individual actions (or reactions) that are based on habitus and field, and society regulates or governs these to some extent through institutions—i.e., their policies, regulations and procedures—such as park management actions or community partnerships. Notable work has been done that makes these community connections more explicit and scientific (Kreuger and Williams 2007; Kreuger et al. 2008)). In their view meaning can be mapped spatially even if they are rather intangible, and consistent with Giddens and Bourdieu, typically a place will not have a single set of meanings held by everyone (Greider and Garkovich 1994). Additional inventory techniques will be needed, especially ones that are sensitive to the social or group differences in meanings.

Overall this approach makes VERP more complex but does so in a way that devolves power more democratically and fully (Moore 2008). If such power is to be decentralized—put into local actors' hands—a concern raised by Lachapelle et al. (2004) may be apropos here. Self governance relies upon overcoming feelings of inferiority, vulnerability and lack of transparency. Power is the ability to create rules and shared norms, to make decisions and generally be part of the management and administrative processes in an ongoing way. An expanded VERP program addresses these aspects as well.

The techniques to accomplish this expanded vision for VERP are many, and my goal here is to begin the process with a commitment to the study of the park as a multi-faceted resource. The visitor management framework thus needs to engage the experiential production process as a set of interconnected social facts and forces—and not rely on a more atomistic “social physics” that do not take into account this dynamism, or worse ignores it altogether in favor of a governance scheme that only focuses on the political and administrative dimensions (laws, policies, etc.). It is not wrong to focus a lot of attention on those landscape scale elements of the recreation setting, but it is incomplete to do so. It will be more successful to seek out the meanings that visitors and local communities have for the park and engage them in a more truly democratic process of management.

VERP for Taiwan

The hierarchy of relevancies proposed above and the sociological factors envisioned are fairly universal in the abstract sense, albeit based in western, continental philosophical thought. However one is left to question how these ideas about structure, values, attitude, power, habitus, etc. are operative in a foreign setting. Just how do you begin a study where culture and administrative functions are very different? And what is the effect of westernization? Haider (2006) and others

(e.g., Farrell and Marion 2002; Moore et al. 2003) have cautioned us on the blind importation of US models and procedures. Research on Asian, especially mainland China and Taiwanese, parks is instructive (Han 2006, Huang and Bao 2007). Han suggests that Asian cultural differences are large enough that it is good to question the use of American formulations on Chinese park management schemes. While some aspects such as the avoidance of unnecessary impacts (especially ecological ones on the resource base or to built features such as trails) are close enough to Chinese traditions and that value differences may not be very problematic especially in a westernized touristic setting. (Although you are still left to wonder how locals regard these issues.) If park objectives are reflections of an institutional frame that is not particularly western (e.g. Chinese notions that rely on more humanist traditions) implementing even a basic VERP protocol may require greater reliance on situated meanings and articulation of park objectives with the local culture(s) that created and sustain the park.

Lin and Xie (2007) suggest that using VERP uncritically may be premature. They concluded that Asian managers should move to a more dynamic framework, like VERP, and pay more attention to contextual issues such as the development of capacity indicators, among other issues. Their work suggests that the transition I envision will be bilateral: the first aspect is to recognize the practicality of a VERP-style framework, and then second to expand and apply it in a culturally sensitive way. Park managers may be in a familiar if old-fashioned role, that of a seeker of the connections for visitors to the park features and experiences, and as a facilitator of outcomes that are uniquely Chinese, even if rather different from western thought such as “nature as self” or “harmonious goals.” What we see as conflicts or congestion may be acceptable distractions or even positive affirmations of the importance of place as a cultural construct (e.g., as representatives of a mass consumption culture). Or perhaps visitor’s values have become very westernized at times and may bring into the park divergent sociocultural issues. Western trained scientists cannot presume to know the answers to this speculation and must seek dialogue with local scientists, managers and visitors to define and study this aspect.

Meta-analysis

After reviewing the development and use of frameworks such as VERP in the US context and then thinking about their practical applications in other settings, especially ones as socially and culturally different from the west as Taiwan, I am struck with the inability of a simple application of VERP to Taiwan to capture the complexity of park management issues. I conclude that there is a need for a kind of meta-analysis. Largely because of reliance on larger planning frameworks that are informed by broad scale resource management concerns VERP as practiced falls short of a full integration of the social facts of recreation as a lived experience. The sociological work of theorists such as Weber, Giddens or Bourdieu led me to assert that we can improve the VERP frameworks with additional social science data and models that are socially more explicit.

A fundamental first step will be to engage visitors (actual or potential) in a sociologically substantive way that will obtain a deeper understanding of their “*field and habitus*,” i.e., preferences, values, and behavioral decision routines and tendencies. Beyond the common social psychological studies of place, etc. (all valuable of course) we might look to social marketing, customer service, and other scientific techniques used in similar public service sectors.

Second, we need to enhance the community involvement processes beyond the sort of input obtained from public meetings and comment periods to assure locally defined needs and meanings are included. This might involve sociological studies with community meetings, advisory councils, local leader engagement, interviews with nonprofit support or use groups, and other ways a community might be defined.

Third, we will need to incorporate into our social science repertoire some focus on governance that might improve the articulation among the various actors in this now more complex model of recreation ecology. The *habitus* of agency staff, community partners and local leaders will adapt, accepting and acting on diverse ideas from one another.

All three aspects represent a move toward a more socially-explicit, science-based management framework. Moreover the role of the scientist (or manager for that matter) is to understand those choices and actions and inform policy and regulatory decisions.

Improving Framework Application

The rather abstract concerns above suggest a series of touch points that might be used to assess the adequacy of a particular implementation of a recreation framework. The meta-analysis checklist is directed at scientific improvement but also serves as a checklist for managers in other settings who wish to adopt VERP (or something like it) for their park is presented below. By asking these fundamental questions and obtaining answers from social science the fit from theory/framework to application will be much stronger and the results more accurate and durable. Social scientific factors to enhance VERP are both theoretical and empirical and may be summarized in three levels of relevance:

1st Individual level frames & action schemas. The traditional focus on the visitor is not lost, just expanded with a more dynamic sociological theory. How well do you know the visitors?

2nd Community level involvement: Activity groups may have particular points of emphasis for resource utilization, and geographic neighbors may have particular interests in tourism or other socioeconomic outcomes (e.g., types of use, regulatory changes). Are you well connected to the local community and the various user groups?

3rd. Governance at an institutional or agency level: Extant policies are usually taken into account at the outset. Yet some particular localized differences may exist, or there may be some administrative latitude or processes particular to the culture or political leadership (In the US federal agencies often get attacked for overbearing local interests). Have the

policies and procedures of the larger agency been incorporated strategically so that compliance to broad social goals is maintained, yet in a way that does not supplant or abrogate local interests, and perhaps even incorporate or adapt to them?

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