

Legends and Legacies

Writing About Water and Recreation

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It seems to me that thinking, writing, and sharing thoughts around water-based recreation requires achieving shared understanding of both water and recreation. Having spent most of my adult life in Alaska my approach to both concepts may be somewhat different from how many others think about water-based recreation.

Many of us (maybe most of you reading this) have had personal, possibly life-changing experiences around water, possibly sailing, canoeing, kayaking, rafting, paddle boarding, surfing, or simply sitting on a sandy beach or by a quiet lake or stream. The experience may have been contemplative or exciting and challenging. The activity may have required physical skill and may have been physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging. Often these experiences lead to a strong identity with or connection to a particular activity, and frequently a particular place. Engaging with water creates experiences and memories that connect people to each other and to places on the landscape. This connection to place and activity can be the key that motivates us to take action to help preserve and protect the quality of special places. People tend to care about what they know and have personal experience with. Personal connection and engagement are critical to stewardship and the political engagement necessary to assure future high quality water and water-based recreation opportunities.

Recreation happens in and on both fresh water and salt water. In Alaska we are fortunate to have many inland lakes and rivers, and most people probably live within a short distance of a freshwater pond, lake, stream, or river. In the United States we are blessed with thousands of miles of coastline, and many of us in Alaska have had recreation experiences with salt water. Salt water supports a variety of types of recreation along the coasts and for residents and visitors to Hawaii and Alaska. Fresh water and salt water support many species of fish, shellfish, plants and seaweeds and other food sources that provide opportunities for fishing and gathering as well as observing nature.

Another form of water recreation occurs in winter when many parts of the country experience frozen water in the form of ice and snow, both providing opportunities for a variety of forms of recreation. Winter recreation activities include ice skating, cross-country and downhill skiing, dog sledding, and winter camping. In both winter and summer, access to recreation activities can be an issue because of private property, limited road or trail access, or unsafe ice or avalanche conditions.

Water is something people are fascinated with and can and do rally around. People of all ages can become active as citizen scientists and stewards in activities as diverse as taking water samples or water temperature readings, beach and river bank cleanups, documenting shorebird die offs along shorelines, or even in eliciting and documenting stories from recreation users. These activities provide opportunities for people to engage with family, friends, and neighbors in giving back to society and can be easily incorporated into recreation activities. Feeling useful and making a contribution rank high in determining how happy people are, especially retired people who no longer contribute to society and community through an 8-5 job. Citizen science and stewardship projects provide an outlet for creative expression and shared concern for our fellow citizens and our world. These shared activities also provide an opportunity to understand and experience firsthand how the natural world works. Increased knowledge and understanding of the way things are and why helps us better understand the consequences of our actions so we can make decisions based on personal wisdom and thus become better stewards in our daily lives.

You may have noticed that March 22 was World Water Day, a day to celebrate water. A month earlier, February 23-24, a workshop on Human Rights to Water was convened in Vatican City. One product of the workshop, the Final Declaration on the Human Right to Water (http://www.pas.va/content/accademia/en/events/2017/water/final_statement.html) was signed by participants including Pope Francis. The declaration highlights issues including lack of access to drinking water (important for recreation), sanitation (also a recreation concern), and continued inequality of availability and quality of resources. The declaration also addresses the lack of access to safe water, pollution of water sources and the impacts of droughts and floods on food production and supply and the spread of pollution-related diseases. The declaration states, "Many cultures, societies, and religions of the world recognize water as a spiritual and material principle of life...." The declaration goes on to recommend inclusive approaches that demonstrate collective responsibility in caring for the common good. "Everyone is called to participate actively in caring for our common home.... Science, culture, politics, and technology all have a part to play in achieving societies of justice, solidarity and equality...."

This declaration sets the stage for establishing three research priorities surrounding water: 1) sources of pollution and maintaining water quality; 2) effects of climate change, including floods and drought; and 3) human and environmental health. Each of these has implications for individuals and communities and requires increased awareness and action at all levels. Collaborative learning and constructive dialogue, possibly building from the workshop on Human Rights to Water or local issues and concerns, may help to draw attention to, and encourage action on, these issues that affect us all, especially those of us in the recreation community.

Shared identity of those with an affinity for water activities and a connection to place can act as motivating factor to take action in preserving places and opportunities that are important and imperiled. One challenge will be how to engage inner-city dwellers and new comers who may lack personal, positive experiences with water. Inner-city efforts to engage youth in outdoor activities is a good place to start.

Another way to engage people across the spectrum of ages and economic and social strata is by recognizing the contributions that water features make to community and individual health. Water encourages physically and mentally challenging activity and provides for relaxation and recovery from hectic schedules. Incorporating water-based recreation into community and workplace health care programs could be a way to work upstream, so to speak, in curbing health care costs by providing options for maintaining

active, healthy lifestyles. Little or no special equipment is required for walking or running along a shoreline, coastline, or river bank. Water provides a natural attraction that many people are naturally drawn to. Creating opportunities for people to actively engage with others in water-based activities, and an awareness of opportunities, provides a path toward recruiting recreation participants and advocates for sustaining the water quality and quantity that life depends on. This is an opportunity for parks and recreation providers to team up with community health care providers to get the word out and increase awareness and opportunities for participation.

I would like to challenge researchers and administrators to think about how we define recreation. I'm not sure we have to agree on a definition, but I'm suggesting that it may not be as easy as seeing a group of people fishing and determining that they are engaged in a recreation activity. We often assume it is engaging in a leisure activity, but can we tell by observing an activity if it is leisure or recreation or something else? I would suggest that recreation is defined by the person who engages in the activity and it is not as straightforward and simple as we might think.

In Alaska, for example, Alaska Natives and other rural Alaskans may be subsistence hunting, fishing, and traveling by watercraft side-by-side with folks who define their own participation in the same activities to be recreation and not subsistence. Natives and non-Natives alike may consider the same activity, say gathering clams, both recreation and subsistence, depending on the situation and timing, or they may even consider that they are engaging in both at the same time. American Indians and people from other cultures may have activities that someone without the same background would consider recreation, yet the participants themselves do not think of the activity that way. This makes studying recreation and subsistence uses, particularly in Alaska, challenging, especially if you are depending on research techniques based on observation. In Alaska there are often different seasons and limits depending on whether a person is engaging in subsistence activities or recreational hunting or fishing. Thus, whether a person is recreating or participating in a subsistence activity may have different legal ramifications.

I would like to challenge researchers to explore how participants define their engagement in a recreation activity. From my perspective, personal benefits can only be defined by the person participating in the activity. As researchers we need to be creative in how we elicit the *why* behind participation. As managers, only when we have a good understanding of the *why* can we manage a place for the best experience. As climate change manifests itself by altering the physical conditions around many water features it will be even more important to understand the *why* as we continue to find ways to experience and celebrate water. Recreation can provide a vector for becoming active as citizen scientists who help gather data important to understanding changing conditions and the *why* behind recreation participation and change.