Chapter 4: Language in the Recreation World

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Purpose

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz described language as a cultural practice that provides a "template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes" (1973: 216). Language matters because the way we speak becomes the blueprint for how we construct and manage our world. It holds power in framing issues, forming knowledge, and normalizing certain ways of interacting with the environment. The ways that we talk about recreation, including the very term "recreation," reproduce assumptions about people and places while influencing management actions and outcomes. This chapter addresses how language shapes not only recreation and its management, but also sustainable recreation research.

Our purpose is threefold: first, illuminate ways that language shapes recreation management work, particularly as it affects inclusivity; second, make a case for the need for managers to recognize how language influences practice and perception; and third, identify opportunities to better align research on recreation language with agency objectives. As recreation researchers and managers seek to create more just and sustainable recreation practices, let us begin with language that will guide us toward the cultural changes to which we aspire.

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Problem Statement

In "Standing by Words" (1983), Wendell Berry pointed to the faltering state of the human relationship with the environment and contended that if we want to rectify our relations with the natural world—and with each other—we must begin by changing our language. For centuries, humans have adopted language patterns that have mischaracterized our relationship with the environment, describing a "natural" world that stands apart from that which is "cultural" and is managed by humans rather than entwined with our cultural lives. Historically, these assumptions affected how land management problems were defined, and the language reinforced stereotypical myths about both land and visitors. Today, much of the language of land management perpetuates a dichotomous (i.e., people vs. nature) and power-laden (i.e., stewardship over nature) relationship between humans and the environment. These discursive practices have framed outdoor recreation as a bridge between human society and an external natural world, an artificial separation that people

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have learned through discourse. Research shows that children see nature woven throughout their daily life—as something that is accessible, playful, and social—but adults learn to envision a distant form of nature that they describe as more authentic, pure, and solitary (Kellert et al. 2017). As people learn to see themselves as separate from the natural world, they reproduce that belief in their language.

Other problems with language pertain to recreation management in particular. First, people often do not recognize the cultural specificity of their ways of thinking and communicating. Second, we grapple with misunderstandings of what science does and does not do. Third, our language patterns enable social distancing from our ideas. Finally, the language of the audience may not match the language of the managers.

Cultural specificity. Through discourse, paradigms of the past and situated cultural knowledge shape management actions. Bowers (2003) studied how people use root metaphors to frame ideas. These metaphors, such as "data" or "sustainability," become iconic truths, ordering our ways of thinking about the world as these metaphors are imparted through a culture. Thus, words create culturally specific truisms that underlie all communication. To further new ideas, we must shed the belief that language is merely a conduit for sharing objective information, recognizing instead that the metaphors that guide our communications create "situated knowledges" that differ between social groups.

Misunderstandings of science. Challenges also emerge from misunderstandings of what scientific research can and cannot offer land managers. Scientists use specialized language to convey data, information, research findings, and management recommendations. This language can set managers in pursuit of the impossible: stable, science-driven, permanent solutions to complex cultural problems. Moreover, public expectations of what science can achieve create an environment in which managers seek to rationalize political actions through disparate or incongruent scientific data. Science describes systems and relationships but can only imagine future outcomes. It is critical to recognize that scientific knowledge is still initiated, developed, and evaluated through social lenses, and that management decisions are inevitably human actions, no matter how scientifically informed.

Treatments of language as neutral can create the semblance of objectivity in decisionmaking processes, which are based on the value orientations of agencies and their personnel. The frame of science-informed management can overshadow the normative considerations that are inherent in weighing the multiple values and uses in decisionmaking. Which management values take priority in any given area? How are tradeoffs weighed and on what time scale? How are these affected by political whims and cultural trends?

The manner in which we talk about science creates those culturally specific metaphors that shape discourse. Halliday and Martin (1993) showed how science-speak masks human agency by removing actors from sentences. A science writer may take a phrase describing people doing something, such as "people travel off-trail," and transform it into a noun, "off-trail travel," making it a thing rather than a process. This shortcutting disguises individual agency, a framing that may decrease people's motivation to engage. Chenhansa and Schleppegrell (1998) found that when students could not identify an agent or actor in an environmental scenario, they saw the situation as simply an "accident." If researchers and managers want to influence human action, their language must not distance people from complex socioenvironmental problems.

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Social distance. The studies mentioned above illustrate how language promotes distancing from our ideas, presenting both opportunities and cautions for recreation managers. By using distancing language, managers may be able to back away from culturally rooted values that lead to posturing and diminished opportunities for collaborative action, but such language practices may also fail to involve people in affecting change. Engaged citizens who have equal opportunity to participate in the governance of their society form the core of democratic systems. In his discourse theory of democracy, Jürgen Habermas theorized that a deliberative democracy can exist only when citizens engage with ideas prior to decisionmaking, enabling them to set aside their own self-interest and take action on behalf of society. In this theory, our social systems and rational existence rely upon communication that enables all individuals to share and grapple with ideas in the public sphere. Language is the means for creating just societies.

Language of the audience. When using the term "recreation," the language of the audience often does not match the language of the managers. People who recreate rarely describe themselves as recreating, and certainly not as recreationists, a term that transforms action into a noun. An astounding example of the shortcomings of language, the word "recreation" (1) is not used or perhaps understood by people who are recreating, (2) fails to account for the variety of outdoor experiences, and (3) perpetuates an artificial separation between people and nature that has far-reaching consequences in our politics and identity. These linguistic inadequacies can be seen in many terms that permeate the land management profession, such as **wilderness**, **natural or cultural resources**, and even the word **nature** itself. Acknowledging that people carry a range of associations with all such terms will advance a new management paradigm rooted in an understanding that audiences have diverse expectations regarding human-nature interactions. As Blahna et al. (2020) describe in chapter 5 of this report, a more encompassing definition of outdoor recreation would "recognize the variety of connections that people have with natural and cultural landscapes, whether for leisure, lifestyle, livelihood, or health."

Dimensions of the Problem and New Conceptual Approaches

Dimension: language reinforces power relations—
Donna Haraway reminded us that "nature cannot pre-exist its construction," but that our ways of discussing the world create social nature (1992: 296). The things that people say at community meetings create new meanings, as do media coverage, scientific reports, and internal communications. This discourse creates a cultural ideal but is also a display of power over those who do not share the same cultural perception of nature. Efforts to build inclusivity must recognize power systems that pervade social institutions and how they are constituted.

The notion that all people should have equal access to public recreational lands is one such social construct. So too is the empowerment of the government as a legitimate caretaker of public lands. If the forests belong to the nation, this leaves little room for alternative individual or communal claims to the space. For example, the "It's All Yours" campaign on national forests uses language that may be marginalizing to tribal groups who feel that these lands are, in fact, no longer theirs. Language plays a powerful role in reinforcing colonial government authority in managing public lands. Simply by using the term "recreation," we create space for certain activities on the landscape while marginalizing those who work or live, rather than play, on the same land. Language has authority, affecting relationships and, consequently, people's engagement with agencies and outdoor recreation (Orbe 1998).

The ways that professionals use language have ripple effects in communities and workplaces. Allison and Hibbler (2004) studied how the language choices of recreation professionals created barriers to inclusion. One site put on "special" festivities to celebrate diversity alongside traditional programs, and the study showed that "there was an ongoing verbal, and more often nonverbal message communicated of the 'special,' yet marginal nature of such programs and that it was really the purview of the 'ethnic' staff to take responsibility for such programs" (Allison and Hibbler 2004: 272). The use of the word "special" not only created an unintentional culture of exclusion, but it supported additional work for minority staff members, affecting workplace dynamics.

The organizational structure of land management agencies creates rank, delegates authority, and determines who influences decisionmaking. Although all organizations must have common language to survive, the discourses they adopt inevitably integrate cultural associations into the vocabulary. Changes in bureaucratic practices could help reshape how we speak and think about recreation, for these practices become institutionalized as part of organizational culture. For example, language can transfer authority from a person to a position or to an agency as a whole. Note how frequently public discourse conflates the personal "I" with the

agency as a whole (for instance, from a June 7, 2018, news article: "The National Park Service has decided to transport 20 to 30 wolves to Isle Royale"). When do managers speak as a person or a position, when do they defer to the bureaucracy, and how do those word choices shape the power dynamics between communities and agencies?

Finally, the politics of language demand that we scrutinize whose voices speak and whose are heard. When decisions are made about public lands, some citizens have less experience advancing their needs, desires, or agendas. Some groups may be so marginalized that they do not participate, diminishing their power and ultimately offering them fewer opportunities to influence the public landscape. Moreover, deeper and more inclusive forms of public engagement have the potential to make the iterative cycle of meaning-making more productive and equitable, promoting engagements through which individuals are encouraged to think, share, and co-construct meanings, thereby broadening and institutionalizing diverse cultural values through discursive behaviors. New types of relationships between land managers and diverse publics have the potential to reform language and remake institutions, because they will generate the need for a vocabulary that responds to new understandings.

New conceptual approach: support equitable discourses—
Rethinking nature as social nature discursively reminds us that people's lives are entwined with those spaces. By attending to discourse, we may simultaneously find ways to take responsibility for the daily role of language in sustaining systems of power or perpetuating injustices, forging more just and equitable relationships. Changing language can change internal organizational culture and reshape external interactions. Authoritative agencies can approach less powerful groups with humility, expressed through language. Even changing simple linguistic patterns, such as the habit of choosing the pronoun "we" in association with any agency action, invites new actors into conversations. There are tremendous opportunities for researchers and managers, particularly those in leadership and training positions, to study, design, and implement such discursive practices.

Studying the implications of recreation language in terms of how it affects, and is affected by, race, class, nature, urban living, and leisure will enhance this exploration of sustainable recreation research and management. In chapter 3 of this report, Sanchez et al. (2020) point to the gradient on which outdoor activities take place and the critical limitations of traditional recreation research. Do we find new language for the practice and its associated management actions, or can we bring the broad range of outdoor engagements under the term "recreation?" One study identified numerous language approaches that might promote conservation-minded

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voting, such as talking about recreation in terms of specific activities ("traditional" activities such as hiking or hunting, but also so-called "passive recreation examples" such as "simply enjoying nature"), which would help voters picture themselves as land users (Metz and Weigel 2013). When managers listen more closely to the words that people use to describe their relationship with these places, they can respond in ways that affirm those relationships.

Dimension: public participation, communication, and agency discourses—One of the main ways that agencies communicate with the public is through the mandate to provide opportunities for people to participate in planning processes. These interactions take many forms, but generally have a similar characteristic: the public is asked to respond to proposed management actions and plans. In this undertaking, the agency is the originator of the language framing the issue; it selects, names, and describes the issues to which the public is invited to respond. Through this framing, the language used inevitably does more than just reflect or project internally held meanings—it constructs the meanings and value systems into which others are invited "in" to comment. There also persists the risk that agencies are engaging in public participation simply to "check the boxes" of policy requirements in ways that fail to provide real opportunity to create meaningful involvement or change. Through this "politics of policy containment," bureaucratic frameworks narrow and even taint the possible fields for public action (Kuentzel and Ventriss 2012: 416).

Although government agencies employ professionals to help communicate and refine agency messaging, much of the institutional discourse of an agency is adopted through the informal talk of employees and collaborators. Land managers might be less apt to use more colloquial words such as "trees" and "woods" that are more common in the vocabulary of the majority of the population, favoring instead "timber" or "natural resources" (Kellert et al. 2017). Leaders who have spent their entire careers in an agency may struggle to separate agency parlance from more common language to which other groups may connect. The use of this technical jargon influences conceptions of who "belongs" as part of land management efforts, and who does not. People who can talk the talk (and understand the lexicon), have an easier entrance into the conversation and access to a seat at the table.

The legacy of who has controlled the vocabulary and subsequent discourse lingers, and keeps the stage set for the types of expertise that can contribute to public processes. But language and actions do not always correspond. For example, in the mid-1980s, the shift in the Forest Service's motto from words such as "management" to "caring" and "serving" reflected the agency's desire to frame noncommodity uses (Kennedy and Quigley 1998). Researchers found, however, that agency

employees, though personally aligned with the "caring" and "serving" orientation, thought that the traditional prioritization of timber and range still prevailed over other values (such as providing opportunities for recreation) (Cramer et al. 1993). This shows that language adjustments must be more than superficial to change organizational culture and behavior.

New conceptual approach: articulate values in decisionmaking—
To what values of public lands do management agencies choose to give voice? A lack of consideration of which social constructions are perpetuated in land management planning can result in monolithic representations of social phenomena. When societal influences on decisionmaking are clearly articulated, the values and foundations upon which decisions are made can be appreciated by all (Derrien et al. 2015). The Plain Writing Act of 2010 mandated that agency forms and documents be written in a "clear, concise, well organized" manner. In addition to implementing that legislation in earnest, agencies also might attend to, question, and communicate the value basis of their decisions. These values-based decisions could be embraced and given full billing in decision documents and public communications.

Dimension: language of certainty and truth—
The term "wicked problem" has emerged in recent years as a way to characterize issues that are divergent and socially complex, and that lack a singular endpoint or solution (Rittel and Webber 1973). Conceptually, the term reminds us that issues like climate change, poverty, and social injustice are impossible to solve because of their scale, interconnectedness, and human values involved. Our human cognition pushes us to desire perfect solutions for every problem, which inhibits our ability to embrace complexity. We filter information by imagining patterns where no patterns exist, or relying on numbers because they give an illusion of certainty (Cockerill et al. 2017). Thus, people often turn to science, which speaks in quantitative statements, to "solve" issues that must be addressed by social action.

People have long held this faith that managers can solve problems, no matter how complex. Indeed, the public has been shown to be critical of media reports that do not offer solutions to perceived problems (Kensicki 2004). Land management agencies also have thrived on scientific reason: "Since its early roots in Progressive-era conservation, the U.S. Forest Service has championed the paradigm of technical rationality and empirical science as the basis for sound resource management practices" (Ryan and Cerveny 2010: 594). In this new management paradigm, more managers are recognizing that dynamic, complex, uncertain systems require adaptive, values-driven management approaches.

Similarly, in the field of recreation research, patterns persist that push scholars to promote certainty where none exists. Academic publications tend to pair a stated problem with concrete solutions and recommended actions. This reinforces the belief that experts should bear the responsibility of social problem-solving, confounding scientific study and science-generated knowledge with management recommendations that will always be rooted in human judgment and uncertainty.

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New conceptual approach: articulate uncertainty—
In the new recreation paradigm, language practices must shift away from science that reveals how the world works toward nuanced understanding of what scientists can and cannot contribute to management decisions. Moreover, scientists would clearly articulate the limitations of certainty, given how their language shapes political outcomes.

Researchers can adopt language that embraces complexity and conveys how science influences action. Scientists who work in the field must be aware that their words have cultural meanings beyond the scientific literature. Using a term like "restoration," for example, enables the possibility of compensating for misdeeds while allowing people to continue sinning: Why change our behavior if we can simply restore the system? (Cockerill et al. 2017). The term, though descriptive and functional to scientists and managers, is not neutral in its social effect. Adopting language that describes uncertain, dynamic systems paves the way for politics that acknowledge the collective human values entwined with and engrained in environmental management.

Accepting uncertainty is daily practice in the work of environmental managers and can be manifest when communicating about environmental work. Institutional commitment to do so has potential to shift public perception of the work of recreation managers. If managers will not shy away from acknowledging uncertainty in decisionmaking processes, the language of management can more fully recognize that there are tradeoffs in every management action. Most decisions are informed by societal values and cannot be answered through scientific study alone.

Compelling Questions

1. What characterizes the language used in communication about recreation? How does language differ between scientific and management publications, and written and spoken language? Future research should analyze multiple modes of science and agency communications (i.e., management plans, press releases, signs, interpretive programs, and external communication) and identify common practices that may have unintended consequences.
2. What are the measurable outcomes of language choices in recreation work?
3. What can land managers learn from listening to the words that people use to describe their interactions with the out-of-doors?

4. How can agencies more clearly articulate the relationship they want to foster with citizens? Case study research should explore effective language practices in successful collaborations.
5. How are messages received by different communities? How can communication strategies be evaluated?
6. How do interest groups influence recreation management decisions through discourse? Which discourses have more, less, or different effects? Whose interests are represented in public communications and how does this affect management actions?
7. How have (and might) recreation studies embrace scientific uncertainty and express it through language? How does such research language affect management practices?
8. How might an applied language research agenda support improved management practices and decisionmaking?

Conclusions

Communicating with the public is one of the major activities of land management agencies, yet there is very little evaluation of the impacts and effects of language on agency work and public landscapes. How might such assessment be integrated into how organizations do business? By what measures are the outcomes of our language practices evaluated? This chapter has argued for the value of such research and the vitality of language practice as a blueprint for creating an inclusive, accessible, and just recreational world.

Language evolves, and language practices within land management agencies change continually, but the broad cultural shifts that must take place to foster just and equitable discourse will take time. Still, we encourage researchers and managers, particularly as they embark on the pursuit of more sustainable recreation practices, to be bold in trying new language. Listen to how it is received. Observe language use in a systematic way, then evaluate its effects. Take time to find the words that best communicate your message to your audience. Be wary of catch phrases and jargon that shortcut the work of speaking precisely and deliberately. Be unflinching in bringing values-based language into decisionmaking processes, acknowledging the limitations of scientific knowledge. Resist the social pressure to offer tidy solutions to complex problems.

Attention to language practices is about far more than publishing bilingual brochures or translating policy documents. The study of language must push us to create discourses that better serve the public, both by improving relationships between agencies and citizens and by creating agency cultures that work more effectively to steward public land resources.

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