

Chapter 3: Recreation Opportunities and Human Connections on Public Lands: Constraints That Limit Recreation Participation

José J. Sánchez, Lee K. Cervený, Dale J. Blahna, Francisco Valenzuela, and Mike Schlafmann

The way we think and talk about relevancy now includes thinking about how we can be more relevant to new audiences in underserved populations—and, frankly, in the changing demographics of the entire country. So it's not just geographic, it's much larger than that. A major component of that is also internal. As an agency we ourselves need greater diversity of voices, backgrounds, and experiences.

—Jonathan Meade, National Park Service Northwest Region
deputy director (Dennehy 2016)

Purpose

This chapter will investigate who are the visitors and nonusers of outdoor recreation opportunities, and what factors influence or inhibit forest visitation. Additionally, it will focus on identifying a research agenda that links the cultural ecosystem services of outdoor recreation with issues of diversity and cultural and social constructs in the actual delivery and use of this public service, and develop management strategies to better increase visitation rates on nonusers.

Problem Statement

Ecosystem services are benefits that a landscape provides in terms of human values or outcomes (see Blahna et al. 2019 for additional information). Outdoor recreation is one of the most widely recognized ecosystem services provided by national forests, grasslands, parks, refuges, and other public lands. In 2016, the Outdoor Industry Association reported that almost half (49 percent) of Americans participated in at least one outdoor activity, which equates to 144 million outdoor participants (Outdoor Industry Association 2017). Their study also reports that 73 percent of participants were White; however, this group accounts for only 61

¹ **José J. Sánchez** is a research economist, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station, 4955 Canyon Crest Drive, Riverside, CA 92507; **Lee K. Cervený** and **Dale J. Blahna** are research social scientists, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, 400 N 34th Street, Suite 201, Seattle, WA 98103; **Francisco Valenzuela** is director of Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness Resources, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southwestern Region, 333 Broadway SE, Albuquerque, NM 87102; **Mike Schlafmann** is a public services staff officer, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Mount Baker–Snoqualmie National Forest, 2930 Wetmore Avenue, Suite 3A, Everett, WA 98201.

percent of the U.S. population (USDC CB 2018). Traditionally underrepresented groups, particularly Hispanic and African-American segments of the population, do not participate in recreation activities on public lands at the same rate as non-Hispanic White population groups (Crano et al. 2008, Outdoor Industry Association 2013, Tierney et al. 1998). Previous research has focused on barriers to outdoor recreation for underrepresented groups (Crano et al. 2008, Roberts and Chitewere 2011, Schwartz and Corkery 2011). Some of these findings cite a lack of access to public or private transportation, insufficient financial resources, or lack of outdoor experience as primary reasons for not visiting the outdoors. Furthermore, other studies have found outdoor participation barriers for minorities to include perceived or real discrimination (Blahna and Black 1993, Byrne 2012, Chavez 1993, Roberts and Chitewere 2011); personal safety (Byrne 2012, Johnson et al. 2001); and having less attachment to outdoor recreation areas (Johnson 1998).

Social equity is directly related to the democratic principle of justice (Gooden 2014). In sustainability science, intergenerational equity, issues of social exclusion, and the need to reconcile social justice with environmental sustainability are important issues that must be addressed to achieve social resiliency (Gibson et al. 2005, Martin 2017, Rogers et al. 2008, Thomas 2013). Federal, state, and local land management agencies need to understand and identify how to better serve a more diverse U.S. population.

Dimensions of the Problem

By 2044, the United States is expected to become a majority-minority country, with less than half the population then being classified as non-Hispanic White (Colby and Ortman 2014). As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, public land management agencies need to consider different management strategies to increase participation in outdoor recreation for nontraditional users. The Outdoor Industry Association (2017) identified the most popular U.S. outdoor recreational activities as (1) running (18 percent); (2) fishing (16 percent); (3) cycling (15 percent); (4) hiking (14 percent); and (5) camping (14 percent). However, these popular outdoor recreation activities and leisure patterns can potentially change because diverse racial and cultural groups may have different outdoor recreation preferences, pathways, social trends, and traditions of connecting to the outdoors. For example, Hispanics reportedly prefer to recreate in outdoor areas that accommodate large groups and provide amenities such as cooking grills, picnic tables, access to clean water, and trash cans (Chavez 2002, Chavez and Olson 2009). And some ethnic minorities prefer to participate in activities that reflect their cultural heritage, such as gathering special forest products for food or crafts (Anderson et al. 2000).

In addition, climate change can potentially have an impact on outdoor recreation activities enjoyed by some underrepresented groups. For example, a trend toward hotter and drier conditions in parts of the nation may result in fewer or shorter duration opportunities for access to water resources. This potential shift may be a negative impact for Hispanic communities, as their primary recreation activities tend to be near streams, lakes, or other water bodies (Chavez and Olson 2009, Garnache et al. 2018). Understanding use rates, patterns, and preferences of underrepresented groups and low-income users, as well as barriers that limit their use, may help decisionmakers better serve these communities. However, underrepresentation of minorities has been an enduring problem for land management agencies in the United States, suggesting the need for policy and management changes to address existing inequities.

Barriers and Challenges

Outdoor recreation may be highly socially and culturally constructed, and language and terminology can reinforce the dominant norms that shape who visits public lands and what activities are endorsed or encouraged (Armstrong and Derrien 2019). Social class (wealth, power, and privilege), race, and gender all have contributed to an elite-driven model of conservation decisionmaking, with upper- and middle-class White men and women defining the norms for proper and even best outdoor recreational pursuits (Taylor 2016). Current patterns of outdoor recreation use, how recreation is defined or socially constructed, what we understand the values of recreation to be, and common knowledge about recreation may all contain cultural bias that is hidden in plain sight. Agencies responsible for the provision of recreation services often lack racially and ethnically diverse leadership and consequently may not be sensitive to the needs of diverse American publics (Gooden 2014). Issues of poverty may create barriers to participation that are difficult for public land managers to address. Furthermore, the limited availability of public green spaces in cities, which often are not accessible to minority or low-income populations, makes it difficult for underrepresented groups to participate in local- or neighborhood-scale outdoor activities.

The issues above can become manifest in general agency cultural and institutional barriers to diversifying recreation access and participation (Boone et al. 2009). Land management agencies have struggled for decades to reach underrepresented populations with little success. Agency policy and practices that have become normalized often reflect a White, middle-class orientation toward recreation. One example of this is the lack of accessible information about permits, passes, or fees required to use public lands, creating potential barriers to entry.

Moreover, trail signage and other public information typically appears only in English. Another example is a “one tent per site” policy as well as group size limits in day-use or designated camping areas. This policy implicitly favors small groups and nuclear families and presents a burden to large-group, extended-family visitors. Moreover, recreation policies that emphasize natural settings, dispersed use, and solitude, as opposed to activities that favor large groups and socializing, may inadvertently select against recreational preferences of ethnic minorities (Blahna and Black 1993, Gobster 2002). For example, the San Bernardino National Forest near Los Angeles set a commercial price level for permits to pick bracken fern fiddleheads, but the vast majority of participants were gathering fiddleheads for lifestyle (primarily Korean pickers) or recreational (primarily Japanese pickers) purposes (Anderson et al. 2000). Most pickers regarded the permit price as unfair and some thought it reflected a bias against Asian visitors to the forest. There have even been documented examples of overt racism and prejudice exhibited by park and forest managers (Blahna and Black 1993, Chavez 1993).

Another agency barrier that limits diversifying recreation participation is an emphasis on what happens inside the boundaries of parks, forests, or refuges. Euphemistically, this is referred to as focusing inside the “green line,” and it can limit an agency’s ability to reach out, understand, and tailor recreation opportunities to urban, tribal, and other underserved communities. Although it seems obvious that agencies focus management actions inside their own boundaries, that orientation is fundamentally at odds with an agency’s desire to reach out and serve traditionally underserved populations (Collins and Brown 2007).

New Conceptual Approaches

Recreation managers may consider leveraging cultural diversity and the richness these cultures contain by developing approaches that engage with diverse cultural groups and connect them with their public lands. Approaches may include reducing barriers in the external environment, addressing the values of senior public administrators, creating a more diverse workforce, and creating learning opportunities for underserved populations, particularly at key stages in childhood, to learn about their public lands and how to enjoy, care, and work for them. Focusing on empowering and building social capital in these communities helps assure that their recreational and other preferences are being met, which can help managers improve outdoor recreation participation for these underserved communities by improving their relationship with public lands and building community with public lands at its

heart. See Armstrong and Derrien (2020) for more information on how language affects inclusivity.

There are some recent examples of how the Forest Service and nongovernmental organizations have been proactive in developing new approaches to improve access and increase participation of underserved communities to public land. For example, in a 2016 collaboration with a variety of community partners in the Los Angeles area, the Forest Service conducted a transportation pilot project. They operated a weekend shuttle bus from the Gold Line light-rail station in Arcadia to Chantry Flat in the Angeles National Forest to promote visits to the forest in a more engaging, convenient, and environmental way. The success of this pilot program led to a 6-month project (April to September 2018) to link the Pasadena Transit bus route and the Gold Line in Pasadena to hiking trails in the San Gabriel Mountains (Chen 2018). Furthermore, the nonprofit organization, Latino Outdoors, is active in many cities in the nation, providing diverse and family-focused outdoor recreation opportunities and connecting to the outdoors by using social media and storytelling to increase access to public lands (Flores and Kuhn 2018). Latino Outdoors brings Latino families and youth to the natural environment to build a sense of belonging and greater understanding of environmental awareness. From 2014 to 2018, Latino Outdoors grew from one person to 180 volunteers; 44 volunteers are leaders who have organized outings in 14 states across the country (Flores and Kuhn 2018). These types of local partnerships, community involvement efforts, and outreach approaches can potentially help public agencies improve access to outdoor recreation opportunities.

In general, agencies may seek resources and partnerships outside their boundaries to understand and attract visitors from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Collaboration with nontraditional partners (e.g., churches, ethnic groups, social welfare agencies) will serve the needs and interests of nontraditional visitor groups and help communication and engagement efforts. In addition, efforts to diversify the natural resource agency workforce and assess existing promotion pathways for all workers will address concerns about institutionalized and normalized practices that unintentionally reinforce the dominant paradigm. There is a large body of literature on social equity and environmental justice that has been applied only marginally in natural resource and public land management fields. Concepts from this literature may be applied to help land management agencies better meet current and future needs to diversity visitor participation on public lands.

Compelling Questions

Some of the research questions we would like to address are:

1. What are the impacts to public welfare in underserved communities that are infrequent participants in public lands recreation? What are the economic and political effects of this low participation now and in the future?
2. How do we bridge the gap between creating a diversity of recreation opportunities and the lack of diversity in outdoor recreation participation? How do we provide opportunities that cater to entry-level recreation participants with little previous experience in the outdoors?
3. What are the impacts to or implications for outdoor recreation participation and support as the U.S. population grows and becomes more diverse?
4. What expectations will various ethnic groups have for outdoor recreation experiences and settings? What is the “disconnect” with opportunities being provided?
5. What can public agencies do to better serve the needs of visitors from diverse backgrounds?
6. What are the outdoor recreation activities or management strategies that can help increase participation of underrepresented groups? And where geographically are the best or emerging opportunities for change?
7. What are the effects of forest landscape changes on outdoor recreation visitors (visits, demographics, activities)?
8. What are some of the barriers and opportunities to outdoor recreation participation among low-income and underrepresented groups?

Synthesis

As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, and preferences to outdoor recreation activities change, new trends make it difficult to manage public lands. Better understanding of the changing recreational preferences and barriers of underserved communities can help managers increase access to outdoor recreation participation by improving the relationships of these communities with public lands. Social science research and management case studies are needed to study this phenomenon to develop successful management strategies.

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