

RECREATION TRENDS: INDICATORS OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY¹

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As you probably know, tomorrow is Earth Day-80, the 10th anniversary of the original Earth Day, so it is certainly appropriate that we talk these next few days about environmental quality and the relationship of outdoor recreation to that quality. However, perhaps the title should be more of a question such as: Are recreation trends indicators of environmental quality? Or do recreation trends follow environmental quality trends?

Maybe they should, but I think it is probably not so! For example, we have had many new environmental laws in the last decade, and much significant progress towards environmental improvement. But recreation trends haven't included a commensurate recognition of the importance of recreation, nor of an enhancement of the quality of the experience! In fact, the trends in outdoor recreation have been towards a reduction of the environmental quality! Overcrowding, reduced services, limited expansion of facilities and programs have all been leading to degradation of the social environment or quality of the recreation experience.

Further, recreation management has not been keeping up with the level of management we had attained 20 years ago! Our use is increasing rapidly, but I'm afraid that our management expertise is not! In addition, our clientele is changing and our response has been to react in terms of old norms rather than provide leadership to dampen or reverse the change. As a consequence, quality of experience is slipping.

In the past, we simply provided more opportunities and the quality of the experience went up because our users were either experienced or had backgrounds that allowed them to participate easily and fully. In the future as we continue to urbanize, we will probably have to teach people what is available, where it is, how to reach it, and how to participate-- in addition to providing quality opportunities. And providing the opportunities will also be more difficult since there will be more people, more conflicts, more impacts, and probably relatively less resources to work with.

This leads me to conclude that we must do more in the future than we have in the past to influence the direction of future recreation trends. We need to establish some trends for management (Management trends) to insure that the pattern of future recreation trends will clearly indicate increased environmental quality rather than decrease it. As you move through this symposium, I hope you will keep that possibility in mind; and to help you with that, I will suggest some management trends that I feel are needed. Some of them are responses to trends you will be discussing here at the symposium. Others are efforts to influence our future trends.

Probably we all subscribe to the philosophy of improving the quality of the recreation experience. We subscribe, but we have had trouble producing the quality. What is needed are some better ways to manage for that quality. Coupling that with the obvious changes in clientele, or potential clientele, that can be foreseen, and the need to strengthen management, leads me to believe that the field of interpretation needs to be one of our management trends. It can help to improve the quality of the experience by helping users participate and by helping solve management problems, and by providing user-feedback systems which develop real ways of talking to users and measuring satisfaction and involving the public in our actions in educational ways. I would include here development of measures of how well we are meeting our goals, and also measures to identify factors that influence user participation.

Much of this kind of information could be of great value to the private sector as well as public suppliers of recreation, and this leads to another management trend. We must somehow involve the private sector more in the supply of natural resource-based outdoor recreation. Most public recreation administrators have offered this goal for years, but it appears to me that the trend doesn't predict fulfillment of that goal. For the most part, we are probably no further ahead than we were 20 years ago. Consequently we need to:

- (a) Reduce public sector competition with the private suppliers of outdoor recreation opportunities. We in the public sector have been slow to fully consider the possibilities of pricing, location, and substitutability in relation to reducing competition.

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(b) Encourage more complete recreation packages for private sector operations while keeping in mind our goals for high quality experiences in natural resource-based outdoor recreation. An example here would be more summer use of winter sports sites, complete with interpretive programs.

(c) Help make private land more accessible. Basically, of course, it must be profitable or otherwise beneficial to the landowner. Consequently, we need more attention to tax incentives, to reduce liability, and again, to reduce competition from the public sector. We might also consider enabling legislation to provide more flexibility for public sector use of private professionals in design, inspection, and consulting.

We also need to develop a management trend towards more professionalism in our recreation managers. They need to make better use of what's gone before, and have a better knowledge of the techniques and aids that exist for management. They will also be learning more of what is happening in the profession and with users--and they will need to know more about why and how to influence it. And they will need to learn how to develop more economic analyses to determine cost-effectiveness--of dispersed recreation, for example.

Monitoring must be a management trend. It's a legal requirement now under many of the environmental laws. It's also going to be a necessity if we are to know whether we are, in fact, really providing those quality experiences. We will need to monitor user satisfaction and participation and demands, of course, but also we need to monitor professional performance, and we must learn to monitor or determine need as well as demand. Our ability to identify and monitor that difference will be a measure of our expertise as recreation professionals! We must, to some extent, be willing to make determinations of need and then influence trends by designing to meet those needs.

But probably the biggest management trend of all is the need to quantify the social (non-economic) values of natural resource-based outdoor recreation--or at least develop ways to demonstrate that value. I believe there is, in fact, a relationship between the quality of our outdoor recreation and environmental quality or the quality of life in America. But we need measures of that quality and that relationship, and measures of the value of that recreation. We must develop output measures that can be converted to targets so that we can demonstrate recreation's relative importance with the other renewable resources--and to allow us to manage for quality.

Now you may feel there are already adequate measures of value. Certainly the "willingness-to-pay" concept is one good way to develop value of recreation, but it can measure only that element of need that the user recognizes. That is, if we recognize the relationship of natural resource-based outdoor recreation to some of our social needs, then our willingness to pay for that recreation can establish a value. But often, in fact probably in the majority of cases, recreationists do not fully recognize such relationships. Consequently we recreation professionals must take the lead in identifying those relationships and in demonstrating the true value and importance of outdoor recreation to the American people.

We must identify that outdoor recreation can provide social values, and demonstrate that it offers alternatives to the pressures of urbanization, specialization, and modernization. During this symposium, you will be looking at trends in urbanization and the pressures they generate, and I imagine you'll be discussing possible changes that may take place in cities to reduce those pressures and to reduce the need to leave the cities temporarily to escape the pressures. And certainly fuel constraints may also influence the ability to go very far in search of natural resource-based outdoor recreation. But I expect that the need for such recreation--and in remote areas--will continue high during most of our careers.

So this brings me to my final management trend.

We have to think in terms of energy-efficient recreation and establish a management trend where-by we can help to make the more remote, rural, natural resource-based outdoor recreation opportunities more accessible to urban populations.

We will need:

- new and creative transportation planning,
- utilization and creation of new public transportation,
- coordinated vacation packages that involve many levels of suppliers, many of whom have historically not worked together, and
- innovative ways to make existing equipment or facilities more usable.

When we couple this with the interpretive efforts I spoke of earlier, we can make quality outdoor recreation opportunities available to urban residents including the special populations.

So in closing, I would encourage all of you to play a more active role in determining the future recreation trends so that they may indeed become indicators of environmental quality.