

## Listening to Neglected Voices: Hmong and Public Lands in Minnesota and Wisconsin

DAVID N. BENGSTON

USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station, St. Paul,  
Minnesota, USA

MICHELE SCHERMANN, MAIKIA MOUA, AND  
TOU THAI LEE

Bioproducts and Biosystems Engineering, University of Minnesota,  
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

*Natural resource managers need to understand the cultures and concerns of ethnic minority communities in order to serve them effectively. The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group that is heavily involved in natural resource-related activities but has been largely overlooked by social scientists. We conducted a series of five focus groups with Hmong Americans in Minnesota and Wisconsin, exploring their experiences and perspectives on public lands. Our participants revealed deep cultural and personal connections with the natural world and the importance of public lands to many Hmong. But we also heard about profound problems and concerns. Perceptions of racism, discrimination, and harassment from public land managers and other agency personnel, recreationists, and private landowners are common. Participants had many suggestions for improvement and insights regarding the special needs of new refugees who arrived in the United States in recent years.*

**Keywords** environmental racism, focus groups, Hmong, Minnesota, public lands, Wisconsin

Natural resource managers and policymakers need to understand the cultures and perspectives of ethnic minority communities in order to serve them effectively. But gaining this understanding is often difficult and complex. Significant variability exists

Received 29 November 2006; accepted 6 April 2007.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance and cooperation of the Hmong Community and Cultural Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin and the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Eau Claire, Wisconsin. We also thank all the Hmong focus group participants in Minnesota and Wisconsin for generously sharing their experiences, insights, and time. We thank Josee Cung, John Dwyer, John Schelhas, Herb Schroeder, Tzianeng Vang, and three anonymous reviewers for many helpful comments on an earlier version of this article, and John Shutske for his support and encouragement throughout this study.

Address correspondence to David N. Bengston, USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station, 1992 Folwell Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108, USA. E-mail: dbengston@fs.fed.us

among and within racial and ethnic communities (McAvoy et al. 2000), and the broad ethnic groupings typically reported by social scientists may not be helpful or may even be counterproductive. For example, several researchers have concluded that lumping Asian Americans into a single category for the purpose of analysis is not defensible in light of the striking differences between various Asian groups (Anderson et al. 2000; Dunn 1999; Okazaki and Hall 2002; Winter et al. 2004). The U.S. Census Bureau distinguishes 11 major Asian populations (Reeves and Bennett 2004), but research information and guidelines for natural resource managers are seldom available at this level of detail.

In this exploratory study, we focus on Hmong Americans,<sup>1</sup> perhaps the least studied and understood Asian ethnic group in the United States. The origins of Hmong people are not clear, but it is known that Hmong people lived in China about 5,000 years ago (Quincy 1995). Over the centuries they migrated to southwest China, where they have coexisted with the Chinese for thousands of years, although often not peacefully. Eventually, some Hmong migrated from China into what is now Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (Michaud 1997).

The Hmong who lived in the mountains of Laos were relatively isolated until they were secretly recruited and armed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the early 1960s to fight the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies (Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Warner 1998). When the Americans abruptly withdrew from Vietnam and Laos and the pro-American Royal Laotian government collapsed in 1975, the Hmong fled persecution and annihilation from the new communist regime. An estimated 30,000 Hmong were killed during the war, about 10% of the Hmong population in Laos (Duffy et al. 2004), and about 15,000 died attempting to reach safety in Thailand (Wain 1981). Other estimates put the death toll during and after the war at up to one-third of the Laotian Hmong population (Faderman 1999).

Laotian Hmong refugees came to the United States in the years following the war in Vietnam and Laos. A small number arrived in 1975, followed by about 750 the next year (Yang 2001). The number of Hmong refugees grew rapidly in the late 1970s and reached a peak of about 27,000 admitted to the United States in 1980. The Hmong American population has continued to grow over the past 30 years due to the arrival of additional refugees and high birth rates. About 15,000 additional new refugees arrived in the United States from Thailand in 2004 and 2005. The Hmong are now the third largest Southeast Asian group in the United States after Vietnamese and Cambodian, with the largest Hmong populations in California (65,095), Minnesota (41,800) and Wisconsin (33,791) (Hmong National Development, Inc., and Hmong Cultural and Resource Center 2004). The concentration of Hmong in these states is due largely to a significant secondary migration within the United States, as Hmong families sought to re-form their kinship-based society. All other states have a combined total of only 28,742 Hmong.

Yang (2001) documents the significant accomplishments in education, political participation, business, and government that Hmong Americans have achieved in a short amount of time. But overall, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Hmong Americans lag significantly behind the general population in many social and economic indicators. Fennelly and Palasz (2003, 103) note the "acute disadvantage of Hmong residents" compared to other immigrant groups in Minneapolis and St. Paul. For example, even though they have been in the United States longer than other immigrant groups, the Hmong were least likely to have graduated from high school, with 66% of Hmong adults possessing less than a high school education.

Hmong Americans are culturally distinct from the general U.S. population, as well as from other Asian and Southeast Asian groups. Hutchison (1993, 88) summarizes these differences as follows:

Among the important cultural differences between the Hmong population and the American mainstream are a strong emphasis on family and communal relationships and responsibilities, a strong pro-natal culture which permeates all aspects of family and community life, and a commitment to preserving cultural traditions among the first generation now growing up in the United States.

Another distinctive aspect of Hmong culture—both traditionally and continuing today—is a deep connection with the natural world. Natural resource-related activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering edible plants are important cultural and economic activities for a relatively high percentage of Hmong. Lack of knowledge about hunting and fishing regulations among a minority of Hmong hunters and anglers, language barriers, and traditional Hmong hunting practices such as hunting in large groups have resulted in occasional clashes with hunters, property owners, and conservation officers (Price 1995).

These longstanding tensions have become more intense recently as a result of a tragic hunting incident in Wisconsin on November 21, 2004 (see *Hmong Today* 2005; Associated Press 2005). Chai Soua Vang was found sitting in a deer stand on private land and was confronted by a group of white hunters. The chain of events that caused this confrontation to become violent are under dispute, but the result was the fatal shooting of six of the white hunters and wounding of two others by Chai Vang. This incident sparked racially charged harassment of the Hmong communities in Wisconsin and Minnesota (*Asian Week* 2005).

The objective of this study was to listen to the Hmong American community and learn about its members' experiences, perspectives, needs, and concerns related to public lands. By "public lands" we mean all types of land that governments manage for people to use, including city parks and recreation areas, county and regional parks, wildlife refuges, state parks and forests, and national parks and forests. The ultimate goal is to help land managers, planners, and policymakers become more responsive to the needs of Hmong and to better serve the Hmong community. Although this is an exploratory study and therefore is not intended to explicitly test theory, it is informed by the theory of environmental justice and our findings add to the body of knowledge about environmental racism in a context that has not previously been studied.

The following section summarizes the limited literature related to Hmong and natural resources in the United States. This is followed by a description of the focus group methodology and analysis of the textual data. Next, the main themes that emerged from analysis of the focus group transcripts are presented. Finally, conclusions and implications for natural resource managers are discussed in a closing section.

## Review of Literature

Although traditional Hmong use of natural resources in Southeast Asia has been studied by ethnographers and others (e.g., Cooper 1984; Ireson 1996; Tomforde 2003; Tungittiplakorn and Dearden 2002, and studies cited therein), only a handful of studies have examined Hmong Americans' use of natural resources. An examination

of the 33 bibliographies on a wide range of topics compiled by Pfeifer (2006) revealed a paucity of literature on Hmong Americans' relationship with the environment and natural resources. This lack of research is inconsistent with the cultural and economic importance of natural resources to the Hmong. The following paragraphs briefly summarize the sparse literature related to hunting, fishing, gathering, and outdoor recreation and leisure.

In their Southeast Asian homeland, the Hmong were known as passionate and skilled hunters (Quincy 1995). The Hmong have strong traditions of subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering special forest products, traditions that have continued for many in the United States (Price 1995). Hutchison (1993) reported that more than 60% of Hmong households in Green Bay, WI, participate in hunting and fishing, double the participation rate of the general population of Green Bay. Consistent with their traditional practices in Laos, many Hmong feel more comfortable and secure hunting and fishing in large groups (Price 1995).

A study of Hmong dietary change found that consuming fish serves important cultural functions in the Hmong American community and that the act of fishing helps to ease the shock of adjusting to a new culture; it serves as a link to the past and helps to maintain ethnic identity (Story and Harris 1989). But many studies have raised concerns that fishing in contaminated waters, lower awareness of fish consumption advisories, and higher levels of fish consumption by ethnic minority groups have created potential health risks (cf. Peterson et al. 1994; West et al. 1992). Hutchison and Kraft (1994) found that Hmong residents of Green Bay consumed 90% of the fish they caught and that these consumption rates were above the average for this area. They concluded that there is a basis for concern that some Hmong may be consuming fish in excess of levels recommended by state health advisories.

Very little research has examined the gathering activities of Hmong in the United States. Hmong in Laos gathered a variety of wild roots, tubers, fruits, vegetables, and herbs for subsistence (Ireson 1996). Koltyk (1998) reported extensive gathering of edible plants by Hmong families in Wausau and Madison, WI, including mushrooms, nuts and berries, wild apples, edible flowers, fiddleheads, watercress, and various greens and herbs. Plants were collected in the countryside, along roads, in parks, and within local neighborhoods. The main purpose of gathering was for subsistence consumption rather than commercial sale, but families often combined gathering work with leisure.

According to Dunn (1999), there is a lack of basic data concerning the outdoor recreation and leisure behaviors and preferences of Asian Americans relative to other minority groups. This is especially true of the Hmong. Hutchison (1993) noted that the Hmong use of public parks, often involving large groups of extended families for long time periods, is similar to the park use of Mexican-Americans and other Latino groups in Chicago. In a small study of Hmong recreation at U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lakes in California, concern about the safety of Hmong visitors and racist comments made by other visitors were mentioned by informants (Dunn 1999). Unfortunately, the study only had two Hmong informants, who were husband and wife. Another study examined Hmong leisure and recreation based on interviews with leaders and members of the Hmong community in the Chico and Oroville areas of California (Funke 1994). The concepts of leisure and recreation were found to be largely unfamiliar to the Hmong and many did not appreciate Western recreation activities and associated values, although this appeared to be changing with acculturation.

## **Methodology**

We conducted a series of five focus groups with Hmong Americans in late 2005 through early 2006, one in St. Paul, MN, two in La Crosse, WI, and two in Eau Claire, WI. All of these communities have significant Hmong populations. Focus groups were deemed to be more appropriate than individual interviews given the strong cultural orientation of collectivism (as opposed to individualism) in Hmong society. Each focus group had between 9 and 12 participants and we followed standard focus group practice (Krueger and Casey 2000) with adaptations for Hmong culture. Separate groups were held for men and women in La Crosse and Eau Claire (the St. Paul group had one woman participant), because of gender roles in Hmong culture. Although gender roles have changed significantly since their arrival in the United States, Hmong women still tend to defer to men (Cha and Dunnigan 2003; Faderman 1999), and past experience has shown that focus groups with Hmong men and women are dominated by the men (Schermann et al. 2006). The focus groups were moderated by male and female Hmong public health professionals who had past experience and training in focus group methods, and they were held in familiar, comfortable locations.

Recruitment of participants was done through community connections of the Hmong focus group moderators and community leaders. For example, the moderator would call a community leader in an area with a Hmong population and inquire about the possibility of having a focus group on this topic with Hmong in that city. Community leaders would then recruit participants for the focus groups through word of mouth and verbal announcements. Recruitment was done verbally because many older Hmong and new refugees cannot read English or Hmong, and thus would be excluded from participation if we had relied solely on written announcements. In addition, inviting participants verbally is a more culturally appropriate method of recruitment. Participants received a \$50 gift certificate to a local sporting goods store.

The St. Paul focus group was made up of younger participants (in their 20s and 30s) and was conducted in English at their request. The four Wisconsin focus groups were conducted in the Hmong language. Participants in the La Crosse focus groups generally came to the United States during the early refugee waves and settled in Wisconsin. About half of the Eau Claire group was new refugees who came to Wisconsin from Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand within the previous 12 months, and the other half were long-time residents. All participants were given a consent form (which was read to them in Hmong) and were assured of confidentiality.

The focus group discussions were structured around a set of 10 questions. Opening questions designed to get participants thinking about public lands explored the activities they enjoy, favorite places, and what is special about those places. Next, transition questions probed positive and negative experiences participants have had while using public lands and what was good or bad about these experiences. A set of key questions focused on needs and concerns related to public lands, ideas about what could be done differently in managing public lands to better serve the Hmong community, and the special needs of new refugees. Finally, closing questions asked about the most important topic that had been discussed and whether there was anything that should have been discussed but was not. The discussions lasted about 1½ to 2 hours and were followed by a catered lunch with Hmong food. Immediately after the participants left, the moderators and other researchers

debriefed in order to capture important issues and themes that emerged while they were still fresh. Our focus group moderators transcribed the recorded discussions and translated the Hmong discussion into English for analysis.

Open coding was used to identify ideas and themes expressed by participants, an approach that is well suited to capture rich themes and uncover unanticipated issues (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Briefly, this involved repeated and careful reading of the text by two coders, with each coder separately developing an outline of important and recurring themes, reconciling differences between the outlines, and cross-referencing each theme back to the original text. Analysis was facilitated with ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development 1997) qualitative text analysis software.

We strove to create an open and relaxed environment in our focus groups. All of the discussions were facilitated by skilled Hmong moderators who had the trust of the participants. This and other details of the focus group method (e.g., recruitment, location, appropriate food, gender of moderators) created an atmosphere that encouraged participants to share their genuine thoughts and feelings about the Hmong experience on public lands. These perspectives are not often shared with social scientists or other non-Hmong. Our focus group participants greatly appreciated being listened to and having an opportunity to express their views.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Activities*

Participants described a wide range of activities they enjoyed on public lands. These included most of the activities that would likely be mentioned by any group, except that some of the women mentioned gathering edible plants and there was a strong emphasis on extended family and community gatherings, such as the Hmong New Year celebration. The most frequently mentioned activities, in order of frequency of mention, were “family fun” (i.e., our label for nonspecific family activities), fishing, hunting, hiking/walking, and picnicking/barbecuing. A typical description of activities on public lands was: “My family likes the park. During the summer we go there a lot because I have a lot of younger children. We like to go hiking, biking, camping, fishing—but we don’t go much because with the younger children we’re afraid of the water. But we really like the park.”

### *What’s Special About Favorite Public Lands?*

An array of favorite public lands was mentioned by participants, including city, county, regional, and state parks and forests in the local area (typically within a 2-hour drive). Several people brought up national forests, but in general federal lands were not as accessible or visited regularly. When asked what was special about their favorite public lands, participants talked about places that were relaxing and peaceful, allowed them to be close to nature, were close to home, reminded them of Laos, and where they receive less harassment and discrimination. A woman described the way in which visiting public lands relieves the stress of everyday life: “No wonder why men like to go hunting, because they say when they are outdoors they forget about everything. When you get there, it is like they say. You don’t remember about the stress at home.” The prominence of peacefulness, relaxation, and stress reduction as qualities of Hmong favorite places on public lands is similar

to the main themes expressed by members of the majority culture about special natural environments (Schroeder 2002).

When discussing lands that remind them of their homeland in Laos, the memories were often bittersweet because these places also reminded them of loved ones who died or were left behind:

There is a campground in the park that the elders like because when they were fleeing it would have been a place where they would have rested. This open area in the forest reminds them of these times and makes them sad. When you get there, it reminds you of all the people you had to leave behind.

Several participants mentioned that they prefer public lands where the managers or others are welcoming and treat them with respect and kindness: “The owner [manager] of this park is a lot nicer than other parks’ owners; that is one reason we like going.” The desire to find places where they feel welcome and where there is less harassment is similar to the outdoor recreation experiences of African Americans, Hispanics, and other ethnic and racial groups (see Gramann 1996, and studies cited therein).

### *Positive and Negative Experiences*

Positive experiences described by our participants were universal in character, similar to the good times that many people experience on public lands, e.g., enjoyable times with one’s family, teaching little brothers how to fish, and seeing the Northern lights for the first time. A number of women described good experiences on public lands as being with their children and families: “When your family is together it is a happy time.”

Although participants described good times on public lands, conversations about these experiences were scant compared to discussion of negative experiences. Negative experiences revolved around incidents of racism, discrimination, and harassment from public land managers, recreationists, and private landowners. The following quotes illustrate the types of comments expressed by Hmong men about discrimination from public land managers:

They need to select people with a “good heart” as officers. They would be much kinder and gentler towards the Hmong. Past officers have been unkind and mean to the Hmong. Always remember that Hmong are here because we lost our country and have to be here. Don’t hate Hmong.

I like fishing and it is like that with fishing too. They discriminate against us Asians also. They check our licenses, but they do not ask as frequently with the white people.

Harassment from other recreationists was also frequently mentioned as a negative experience. This included the use of racial slurs and other verbal harassment, attempts to bully or intimidate, and—as shown in the following quotations—attempts to steal fish and game from Hmong anglers and hunters:

The third time we went hunting at 72 and we shot another buck and they tried to come again to steal the deer just like before. He said,

“You Hmong do not know the rules of hunting. This deer was mine and you shot it.”

My brother and us, we went fishing. Later, there came a couple. They lied to us that they were rangers and said “We are rangers. You need to give your fish to us and your license to us.” So we said, “If you are rangers, please show us your badges. Do you have badges to prove it?” So they said, “We don’t need to show you guys. We are telling you we are rangers.”

The men in our focus groups tended to describe harassment from non-Hmong recreationists, usually related to hunting and fishing. Women were more likely to mention harassment from private landowners, often related to gathering special forest products. Encounters with private landowners near public land were described as tense and often involved verbal harassment and angry confrontations. Many women mentioned being yelled at by landowners: “I mean if you just go near their land, they do not like you and yell at you. This has happened to me many times.” Two women mentioned landowners sending out their dogs to scare them away.

An incident that was especially disturbing to participants was the targeting of Hmong children for verbal harassment at a park in La Crosse by a man and two teenaged boys. This incident was discussed at length by both the men and women and was cited as an example of increased harassment in the wake of the Chai Soua Vang case. Another incident of harassment directed at Hmong children involved a woman who lived next to a city park in La Crosse: “She threw rocks at the children, yelled at them to go away, that they would die, yelled that they should go back to Laos because Hmong are bad. Yell and yell.”

### *Needs and Concerns*

In addition to widespread concern about racism and harassment, focus group participants expressed a variety of other concerns and needs. Low literacy rates were often mentioned as a problem for Hmong using public lands because many elders and new refugees are unable to read signs or books of rules and regulations. One of the men estimated that about one-third of Hmong hunters are unable to read the rule book and they therefore rely on those who can read to give them accurate information. Some participants worried about the accuracy of this secondhand information. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources offers special classes for Hmong in hunting education and firearms safety through its Southeast Asian Outreach Program, but there is a need for more classes and more teachers (*Hmong Times Online* 2005). Similar classes are offered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Problems with signage were also frequently discussed, beyond the ability of some Hmong to read them. Signs explaining the entrance fees and rules of public lands were considered confusing and too small to notice for those unfamiliar with such signs. There was confusion about the boundaries separating public and private lands due to inadequate signage, as well as confusion about the rules and laws governing each type of land:

There are some parts of public land that you don’t know are public land. It’s not marked at all. And then you wander off and you don’t

know it is private land. It's not well marked at all. And if someone just comes up and says, "Hey you are on private land. Get out of here." Most of the time they are nice, but sometimes they are really mean.

Fear of the possible consequences of accidentally trespassing on private lands was high among our participants. One new refugee stated, "We are afraid that we might trespass onto private land. Will private landowners allow us to step on their land? Because there are many laws in America, it seems as though whatever you do is wrong."

A variety of other concerns were discussed by participants. Several women expressed anxiety about their children's safety around water. Some of the apprehension about water was due to traditional Hmong beliefs about spirits in lakes, and some was due to concern about safety for children and adults who may not know how to swim. One woman stated: "Fishing involves water. The water is not your friend. It can be your enemy. When you go fishing you need to get life jackets for the kids."

Some of our participants brought up the need for a land ethic and expressed concern about trash left on public land, overuse of natural resources, deteriorating quality of public lands, and the condition of the natural world that will be passed on to future generations. The problem of user fees being too high for some families, especially new refugees, was also brought up. A small number of participants mentioned inadequate parking and unsanitary restrooms, but these concerns were at the bottom of the list for our focus group participants.

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

Many suggestions were offered for better meeting the needs of the Hmong community and improving their experiences on public lands. A high priority was cultural training for public land managers about the Hmong and other minority groups. This suggestion was made many times. One woman stated: "And they have to have training for the managers, park managers, about the Hmong—to understand the Hmong more. So when they see us, they will not hate us and not ask, 'Who are these Hmong?' I think that is really crucial." Participants expressed the belief that cultural training would help land managers and others be more open minded and reduce bias. Some discussed misperceptions about the Hmong they have heard from whites. False and negative beliefs about the Hmong have long circulated in the Midwest (Mitchell 1987).

Another frequent suggestion was for land management agencies to hire more ethnic and minority employees, including Hmong. For example, one participant suggested hiring minorities to meet and greet people at state parks, to make minority visitors feel welcome, and to solicit suggestions from them. Someone else stressed the importance of Hmong park employees to help ensure that Hmong elders and others who are not fluent in English know the rules and know how to use the parks appropriately.

Many participants suggested a variety of types of training for Hmong, including classes on hunting safety and rule changes for hunting and fishing. As mentioned earlier, the Departments of Natural Resources in Minnesota and Wisconsin do provide training on these topics for the Hmong. But many of our participants were either unaware of these classes or expressed the need for wider availability of such

classes. Women also brought up the need for separate classes for women because of the different ways in which they use public lands: “There needs to be specific training. For the women who are gathering greens, how do you go and gather? . . . If there is training for hunters that only targets men. But women do not know about private lands.”

Participants recognized that public land management agencies would likely be unable to meet all the needs for training and that Hmong must also train themselves: “In addition, even if we have training, if we do not train ourselves, we will always get caught up in conflict. We need to train ourselves and not wait for others to train us.” Some suggested that Hmong leadership must take a more active role in promoting responsible use of public lands, which is consistent with the importance of community and clan leaders in Hmong culture. A community leader wondered whether the Department of Natural Resources could report the number and type of Hmong fish and game violations—but not the specific names of violators—to the Hmong community organization: “I want the rangers to document how many Hmong people have violated the laws and the time and date it happened and report it back to the Hmong community leaders so we all know. That way we can go educate ourselves so we don’t repeat the same mistake again.”

Other suggestions included the need for improved and more signs to explain the rules, including signs with pictures or symbols for those who cannot read. Participants wanted the rules to be made explicit to avoid misunderstandings and conflict. For example, several women described an instance in which they were angrily told to leave a city park because they were too close to a park shelter that had been reserved by someone else. They left to avoid conflict but wondered about the boundaries around a rented shelter and the fairness of their being forced to leave even though they were a considerable distance from the shelter. Several people volunteered to help translate for Hmong who don’t speak English if there is a communication problem with land managers. A solution offered for the problem of unaffordable fees was to have occasional free days for low income visitors.

Finally, two suggestions that were repeatedly made by our participants were that people (1) not assume that all Hmong are guilty of breaking the rules because of the actions of a small minority, and (2) speak kindly to the Hmong rather than getting angry and yelling. Many of our participants felt that the Hmong were unfairly stereotyped as rule breakers and they were saddened or frustrated by this: “The most important is that if one person is at fault to not apply this to all Hmong—that Hmong are lazy and do not clean up. Don’t discredit the name of Hmong because the majority are not like this.”

### *Special Needs of New Refugees*

About 15,000 Hmong have come to the United States in recent years from Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand. A total of 4,972 new refugees came to Minnesota in 2004 and 2005 (Minnesota Department of Health 2005) and more than 3,000 to Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services 2005) Almost half of the adult Hmong immigrants are expected to start hunting (*Hmong Times Online* 2005). Our participants had great concern for these new refugees and wanted us to understand their special needs. First, they told us that new refugees

often lack basic knowledge about public lands and how to use them. Common themes were the absence of hunting and fishing regulations in their homeland in Laos and different attitudes toward acceptable use of land in refugee camps in Thailand: “What they do back there [in Laos or Thailand], they can’t do here. They don’t know that. Nobody tells them. So they go to a park, they say, ‘Oh, we did this back there. We can do this here.’ It’s different.” As an example of the lack of basic knowledge, a new refugee in one of our focus groups wondered if Hmong needed special permission from the authorities in order to use public lands.

Participants frequently mentioned the need for special and intensive training for new refugees, especially about the rules of hunting and fishing, hunting safety, and distinguishing between public and private lands. Many of the new refugees were worried about accidentally breaking the rules, and long-time residents were concerned about conflict that could arise from new refugees’ lack of knowledge. A strategy suggested for ensuring that new refugees receive accurate information was to train the “anchor family,” i.e., the Hmong family that helps ease the transition of new refugees into American society: “They need to contact the anchor family. Whatever information they get, right or wrong, it is from that anchor family . . . Like if you go fishing, where can you go, how many can you keep, where can you go for hunting deer, hunting squirrel . . . specific for new refugees. Because if they just listen to anchor families, they may get misinformation.”

Several participants also suggested pairing up new refugees with experienced and trained mentors or “buddies” to teach them the rules and regulations: “If we paired them up with someone who’s been hunting in the U.S. for a while, this mentor must know the rules as well so they can show the new refugees how to hunt. If there are some American mentors, since they worry about us the most, they would be even better mentors.” Others stressed the importance of communicating with new refugees about the use of public lands through the local Hmong community association. Like the anchor families, these organizations were viewed as vital communication links for new refugees.

The low income of new refugees was seen as a potential barrier to their participation in some activities on public lands, unless the Hmong long-time residents who invite them to go are able to pay for licenses, fees, and other expenses. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of treating new refugees with kindness and patience. A new refugee stated:

We want those owners to warn us nicely that we are on private land so we won’t do it again next time rather than just yell harsh words at us. They shouldn’t tell us to ‘go back to our own country’ or treat us like dogs . . . We are already upset and angry that we don’t have a country of our own, yet here in America, everywhere we go, they always yell at us and look down on us!

### *The Elephant in the Room*

The Chai Soua Vang case was the “elephant in the room” throughout our focus group discussions. Although we did not ask about this case, participants were eager to discuss its repercussions on their use of public lands. At times, the focus group

moderators had to rein in the conversation and remind participants that the broader implications of this case were outside of the purview of our study.

Several participants mentioned the need to be more cautious and walk away from potential conflict. They have generally taken this approach in the past, but the heightened tensions make conflict avoidance imperative. Many people expressed the view that harassment of Hmong—in the communities in which they live as well as on public lands—had increased. One man remarked on the difference in the way in which Hmong were viewed by whites after the shootings, saying that “even our bosses looked at us differently.” A surprising finding was that, at least in some situations, white hunters were fearful of Hmong and therefore more respectful after the Chai Soua Vang incident:

In the past, I have gone hunting with my husband many times and those Americans were mean to us. We are Hmong so they are mean. We have started going again this year and it seems like they are afraid of us now. They see us and they make way. Before if they saw us they would want to come and attack us . . . but since this has happened if you go hunting and they see Asian people, they're scared and will excuse you.

Several long-time residents expressed deep concern about the potential for “another Chai Vang incident” involving new refugees. They described the new refugees as “stressed out” and “the sons of deceased Hmong soldiers who fought in the war in Laos.” Participants worried about the possibility of a new refugee suffering a mental break down and losing control if someone were to verbally assault and point guns at them. One man implored, “You must go and tell everyone about this.”

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Our participants revealed deep cultural and personal connections with nature and public lands. Favorite public lands evoked both pleasant and painful memories of their homeland in Laos and were valued in many ways. Hunting, fishing, and gathering activities have high subsistence value to many. But perhaps of deeper significance is the role of public lands in maintaining Hmong culture. Participating in traditional activities on public lands gives Hmong a sense that they are preserving their culture by connecting with aspects of their time-honored way of life and the beliefs and values associated with it (Kolytk 1998). The importance of this connection is suggested by an early study that found an increase in the mental well-being of Hmong adult males who were involved in activities such as hunting and fishing, activities that were part of their childhood socialization and represent an opportunity to relive cultural experiences from their past (Westermeyer et al. 1984). Large family and community activities on public lands help maintain the core Hmong values of familism and collectivism.

We also heard about profound problems and concerns. Harassment directed at Hmong on public lands is common. These problems have existed since the Hmong first arrived in the United States but have intensified after the Chai Soua Vang incident. Tensions are high and the public lands that Hmong have sought out to relieve stress are now stressful places. Several people mentioned that they have quit hunting or fishing because of harassment or the potential for conflict: “So I have decided not to go hunting anymore because there are a mix of good and bad people, short

tempered and patient people, who all carry guns so there may be conflict in the forest. So I have decided not to hunt anymore.”

This study found evidence of the various forms of environmental racism that are often discussed and investigated in the environmental justice literature (e.g., Liu 2001; Bullard 2005). Most obvious was the overt racism of individual discriminatory acts directed at Hmong Americans on public lands. Our focus group participants also expressed perceptions of institutional or structural racism, such as the failure of public land management agencies to provide appropriate services to Hmong Americans and the significant underrepresentation of Hmong and other minority employees of these agencies. Finally, we found perceptions of white privilege, an often ignored but underlying form of racism, defined as “the hegemonic structures, practices, and ideologies that reproduce whites’ privileged status” (Pulido 2000, 15). For example, in places where whites traditionally hunt or fish on public land, our participants told many stories of white recreationists claiming that Hmong were intruding on “their land” and that they had no right to be there. The pervasiveness of environmental racism we found and the unique circumstances of Hmong Americans suggest the need for in-depth investigation from an environmental justice perspective.

The experiences of Hmong on public lands appear to be part of a larger pattern of intercultural and interracial tension experienced by many other minority groups (see Gramann 1996 and Schelhas 2002 for reviews of race, ethnicity, and natural resources). Solutions to these problems will take much time and effort on the part of public land managers in partnership with Hmong leaders and the Hmong community. A woman in one of our focus groups pointed the way for lasting solutions when she used the Hmong idiom “hot peppers in their hearts,” which refers to a burning anger or quick temper, in a plea for patience, forgiveness, and understanding:

We know that there are hot peppers in their [white Americans’] hearts, so when they meet conflict, they need to be more calm and speak calmly. If they get too hot, the pepper is going to take over . . . They need to remember why Hmong are here. We Hmong have peppers in our hearts too because of Americans; that is why we are here. So when we have done something wrong, that they be more forgiving . . . When tempers rise things happen.

## Notes

1. Not all the participants in our study were American citizens: Hmong came to the United States with refugee status and some later became naturalized citizens and others were born here. But for ease of exposition, descendants of Hmong ancestry who are now residents or citizens of the United States are referred to here as “Hmong Americans.”

## References

- Anderson, J. A., D. J. Blahna, and D. J. Chavez. 2000. Fern gathering on the San Bernardino National Forest: Cultural versus commercial values among Korean and Japanese participants. *Society Nat. Resources* 13(8):747–762.
- Asian Week Staff Report. 2005. *Hmong hunters are up for new season*. *Asian Week*, 11 November. [http://news.asianweek.com/news/view\\_article.html?article\\_id=c8c02c2f6d25d141395df877c19682a9](http://news.asianweek.com/news/view_article.html?article_id=c8c02c2f6d25d141395df877c19682a9) (accessed 14 May 2007).

- Associated Press. 2005. *As deer season opens in Wisconsin, tensions remain a year after the killing of 6 hunters. The New York Times*, 20 November.
- Bullard, R. D. ed. 2005. *The quest for environmental justice: Human rights and the politics of pollution*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
- Cha, D. and T. Dunnigan. 2003. Hmong of Laos and the United States. In *Encyclopedia of sex and gender: Men and women in the world's cultures*, eds. C. R. Ember and M. Ember, 452–464. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Cooper, R. G. 1984. *Resource scarcity and the Hmong response*. Republic of Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Duffy, J., R. Harmon, D. A. Ranard, B. Thao, and K. Yang, with contributions from P. Herr. 2004. *The Hmong: An introduction to their history and culture*. Cultural Profile No. 18. Washington, DC: Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Dunn, R. A. 1999. *Asian–American recreation at two Corps lakes in California: A Hmong case study*. Natural Resources Technical Notes Collection (TN REC-12), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Research and Development Center, Vicksburg, MS.
- Faderman, L. (with G. Xiong) 1999. *I begin my life all over: The Hmong and the American immigrant experience*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Fennelly, K. and N. Palasz. 2003. English language proficiency of immigrants and refugees in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. *International Migration* 41(5):93–125.
- Funke, W. H. 1994. *An exploratory study of American Hmong and Mien perceptions of and preferences for recreation*. Master's thesis, Recreation Administration, California State University, Chico.
- Gramann, J. H. 1996. *Ethnicity, race, and outdoor recreation: A review of trends, policy, and research*. Misc. Paper R-96-1. Washington, DC: Natural Resources Research Program, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
- Hamilton-Merritt, J. 1993. *Tragic mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the secret wars for Laos, 1942–1992*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hmong National Development, Inc., and Hmong Cultural and Resource Center. 2004. *Hmong 2000 Census publication: Data & analysis*. Washington, DC: Hmong National Development, Inc.
- Hmong Times Online*. 2005. Aiming for acceptance: Southeast Asian program helps hunters find common ground. 1 October. <http://www.hmongtimes.com/main.asp?Search=1&ArticleID=244&SectionID=36&SubSectionID=182&S=1> (accessed 14 May 2007).
- Hmong Today*. 2005. Chai Vang: The last chapter. 17 November. <http://www.hmongtoday.com/displaynews.asp?ID=2076> (accessed 14 May 2007).
- Hutchison, R. 1993. Hmong leisure and recreation activity. In *Managing urban and high-use recreation settings*, ed. P. J. Gobster, 87–92. General Technical Report NC-163. St. Paul, MN: USDA Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station.
- Hutchison, R. and C. E. Kraft. 1994. Hmong fishing activity and fish consumption. *J. Great Lakes Res.* 20(2):471–478.
- Ireson, C. J. 1996. *Field, forest, and family: Women's work and power in rural Laos*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Koltyk, J. 1998. *New pioneers in the heartland: Hmong life in Wisconsin*. New Immigrants Series. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Krueger, R. A. and M. A. Casey. 2000. *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Liu, F. 2001. *Environmental justice analysis: Theories, methods, and practice*. Boca Raton, FL: Lewis.
- McAvoy, L., P. L. Winter, C. W. Outley, D. McDonald, and D. J. Chavez. 2000. Conducting research with communities of color. *Society Nat. Resources* 13:479–488.
- Michaud, J. 1997. From southwest China into upper Indochina: An overview of Hmong (Miao) migrations. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 38(2):119–130.
- Minnesota Department of Health. 2005. *Refugee health statistics*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Health. <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/refugee/stats/index.html> (accessed 14 May 2007).
- Mitchell, R. 1987. The will to believe and anti-refugee rumors. *Midwestern Folklore* 13(1): 5–15.

- Okazaki, S. and G. C. Nagayama Hall. 2002. The who, what, and how of Asian American psychology. In *Asian American psychology: The science of lives in context*, eds. G. C. Nagayama Hall and S. Okazaki, 3–12. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Peterson, D. E., M. S. Kanarek, M. A. Kuykendall, J. M. Diedrich, H. A. Anderson, P. L. Remington, and T. B. Sheffy. 1994. Fish consumption patterns and blood mercury levels in Wisconsin Chippewa Indians. *Arch. Environ. Health* 49(1):53–58.
- Pfeifer, M. E., compiler. 2006. *Hmong studies bibliographies*. St. Paul, MN: Hmong Studies Internet Resource Center. <http://hmongstudies.org/HmongBibliographies.html> (accessed 14 May 2007).
- Price, D. 1995. Hunting and fishing in a new land. *Minnesota Volunteer* 58(341):8–17.
- Pulido, L. 2000. Rethinking environmental racism: White privilege and urban development in Southern California. *Ann. Assoc. of Am. Geogr.* 90(1):12–40.
- Quincy, K. 1995. *Hmong, history of a people*, 2nd ed. Spokane, WA: Eastern Washington University Press.
- Reeves, T. J. and C. E. Bennett. 2004. *We the people: Asians in the United States*. Census 2000 Special Reports, CENSR-17. Washington, DC: US. Census Bureau. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-17.pdf> (accessed 14 May 2007).
- Schelhas, J. 2002. Race, ethnicity, and natural resources in the United States: A review. *Nat. Resources J.* 42(4):723–763.
- Schermann, M. A., J. M. Shutske, R. C. Rasmussen, S. M. Jenkins, C. S. Vang, and M. Lor. 2006. Characteristics of children's agricultural tasks in Hmong farming communities. *J. Agromed.* 11(3/4):121–132.
- Schroeder, H. 2002. Experiencing nature in special places: Surveys in the North-Central Region. *J. For.* 100(5):8–14.
- Scientific Software Development. 1997. *ATLAS.ti short user's manual*. Berlin, Germany: Scientific Software Development.
- Strauss, A. L. and J. M. Corbin. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 2nd ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Story, M. and L. J. Harris. 1989. Food habits and dietary change of Southeast Asian refugee families living in the United States. *J. Am. Dietetic Assoc.* 89(6):800–803.
- Tomforde, M. 2003. The global in the local: Contested resource-use systems of the Karen and Hmong in Northern Thailand. *J. Southeast Asian Stud.* 34(2):347–360.
- Tungitti-plakorn, W. and P. Dearden. 2002. Hunting and wildlife use in some Hmong communities in Northern Thailand. *Nat. Hist. Bull. Siam Society* 50(1):57–74.
- Wain, B. 1981. *The refused: The agony of the Indochina refugees*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Warner, R. 1998. *Shooting at the moon: The story of America's clandestine war in Laos*. South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press.
- West, P. C., J. M. Fly, F. Larkin, and R. M. Marans. 1992. Minority anglers and toxic fish consumption: Evidence from a statewide survey of Michigan. In *Race and the incidence of environmental hazards*, eds. B. Bryant and P. Mohai, 100–113. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Westermeyer, J., J. Neider, and T. F. Vang. 1984. Symptom change over time among Hmong refugees: Psychiatric patients versus nonpatients. *Psychopathology* 17:168–177.
- Winter, P. L., W. C. Jeong, and G. C. Godbey. 2004. Outdoor recreation among Asian Americans: A case study of San Francisco Bay area residents. *J. Park Recreation Admin.* 22(3):114–136.
- Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services. 2005. *Health screening information for Hmong refugees from the Wat*. Madison: Wisconsin Dept. of Health and Family Services. <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/international/refugee/hmonginfos.htm> (accessed 14 May 2007).
- Yang, K. 2001. The Hmong in America: Twenty-five years after the U.S. secret war in Laos. *J. Asian American Stud.* 4(2):165–174.