

Hmong Americans: Issues and Strategies Related to Outdoor Recreation

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Introduction

Immigration is an increasingly important factor in US society. According to the US Census Bureau, the foreign-born population increased by 57 percent from 1990 to 2000 and accounts for almost 12 percent of the US population as of 2005. The bureau's 2005 American Community Survey found that the rapid pace of immigration during the 1990s has continued. The arrival of about 1.5 million legal and illegal immigrants and about 750,000 annual births to immigrant women each year accounts for three-fourths of all US population growth. The impacts and extent of immigration become more obvious as immigrants bypass traditional gateway cities and states and move to communities that have seen little immigration in the past.

Immigrants are remarkably diverse in terms of culture and country of origin, and there are often striking differences between groups. For example, the Census Bureau distinguishes 16 separate Asian groups, most with different languages, histories, cultures, and recreational styles. This paper examines the case of one of these groups, the Hmong, with a distinctive recreational style and unusually active participation in some outdoor recreation activities. The story of Hmong Americans exemplifies many of the opportunities and challenges that recreation managers face in responding to the needs of ethnic and racial minorities, particularly recent immigrants.

Background on the Hmong

The Hmong are an ethnic group from Southeast Asia and China. Almost all of the Hmong who now live in the US originally came (or their parents or grandparents came) from small villages in the mountains of Laos. Laotian Hmong were quite isolated until they were secretly recruited and armed by the US CIA in the early 1960s to fight the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies (Hamilton-Meritt, 1993; Warner, 1998). When the Americans 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, seeking safety in refugee camps in Thailand.

Hmong refugees began to arrive in the US in the years following the war in Vietnam and Laos. The first Hmong refugees arrived in 1975 and the number of refugees peaked at about 27,000 admitted to the US in 1980. The largest Hmong populations are in California (65,345), Minnesota (46,352), and Wisconsin (38,814) (US Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey, Hmong alone ethnic identification). All other states have a combined Hmong population of only 32,754.

Yang (2001) documents the significant accomplishments in education, political participation, business, and government that Hmong Americans have achieved in a short amount of time. The US Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey confirms the recent advances of Hmong Americans. But overall, the Hmong lag significantly behind the general population and most other ethnic minority groups in many social and economic indicators, such as median household income, per capita income, families in poverty, educational attainment, etc.

Hmong Americans are culturally distinct from the general US population, as well as from other Southeast Asian groups (Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian). Hutchison (1993) 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.” (p. 88)

Another distinctive aspect of Hmong culture—both traditionally and continuing today—is a deep connection with the natural world. Unlike many ethnic groups in the US, the Hmong are heavily involved in natural resource-based recreation activities. Hmong participation in activities such as hunting and fishing is disproportionately high relative to their share of the US population.

Critical Issues and Organizational Responses

There are five critical issues and challenges—ranging from low literacy rates to a recent influx of new Hmong refugees—that recreation planners, managers,

and policymakers must face to effectively serve the Hmong community, and possibly other immigrants as well. This section describes these five issues and gives examples of the responses from natural resource management agencies in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California. These are selected examples of responses from the three states with the largest Hmong populations, not a comprehensive listing of responses.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) has been a leader in reaching out to the Hmong community—its Southeast Asian (SEA) Program was initiated in 1993, although some activities had begun in 1990. This outreach program serves the Hmong, Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian communities. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI DNR) has also developed outreach efforts to the Hmong community in recent years. In California, the USDA Forest Service sponsors an environmental education based program called the Central California Consortium (CCC). The CCC has reached out to the Hmong community in the San Joaquin Valley since 2000 through a variety of programs and activities (US Forest Service, 2008). There are common threads in their outreach to the Hmong and the issues associated with immigration.

The first issue is that there are low literacy rates and few English speakers among elders and new refugees. The Hmong had no written language until the 1950s, and access to schools was limited in their mountain villages in Laos and in the refugee camps in Thailand. As a result, some elders and new refugees are unable to read park signs or hunting and fishing regulations, creating significant communication challenges for park personnel. A second related issue is a lack of knowledge about the laws and regulations governing outdoor recreation in the US. There were no hunting and fishing regulations in their homeland in Laos, and little or no distinction was made between public and private lands. While most long-time Hmong Americans have learned and adapted to US recreation laws and regulations, some of the newer refugees have not.

To address these two critical issues, the MN DNR SEA Program and the WI DNR conduct training workshops in the Hmong language on fish and game laws, firearms safety, and other topics. But the need for such workshops is overwhelming, and the demand for training often outstrips the supply. For example, only one WI DNR employee works expressly to educate Wisconsin's 14,000 Hmong hunters, and only half of his time is dedicated to this activity. The Minnesota and Wisconsin departments of natural resources have also produced printed and audiovisual materials in the Hmong language, including instructional videos, brochures, and some signs.

A third issue is that the Hmong have a different set of norms related to outdoor recreation that sometimes conflict with mainstream recreation norms and traditions. The concepts of leisure and recreation were largely unknown in traditional Hmong culture, although this is changing with acculturation (Funke,

1994). Consistent with their traditional practices in Laos, many Hmong feel more comfortable and secure hunting, fishing, camping, and picnicking in large groups (Price, 1995). 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 some instances, White hunters feel crowded out from areas where they have traditionally hunted by large groups of Hmong. In addition, there were different attitudes toward acceptable use of land in refugee camps in Thailand (e.g., littering was common and considered generally acceptable because someone else would pick it up). These practices, combined with language barriers and a lack of familiarity with recreation rules among a minority of Hmong, have resulted in occasional clashes with White recreationists, property owners, and conservation officers. Longstanding tensions have become more severe as a result of the shooting of six White hunters by Chai Soua Vang in northwestern Wisconsin on November 21, 2004 (see: *Hmong Today*, 2005; *Associated Press*, 2005). This incident has had a profound effect on the Hmong community, including increased harassment of Hmong recreationists and some Hmong deciding to quit hunting or fishing to avoid potential conflict (Bengston et al., 2006).

There is no easy solution to this clash of recreation traditions and cultures. The main organizational response to this issue has been the creation of Hmong liaison positions to serve as bridges and information conduits to the Hmong community. The MN DNR was the first to create such a position, but the WI DNR also has a Hmong liaison and the USDA Forest Service's CCC has two Hmong liaisons in California. The liaisons reach out to the Hmong community in a variety of ways, including building formal working relationships with community groups, conducting environmental education programs, attending job fairs and giving presentations on employment opportunities, organizing and carrying out cultural training sessions on Hmong culture and traditions to DNR staff and the general public, translating educational materials into the Hmong language, presenting information on Hmong radio programs, participating in Hmong New Year celebrations, setting up stations at local Hmong stores to provide information on current rules and regulations, participating in the annual Hmong National Development Conference, and so on.

Fourth, a final wave of new Hmong refugees have arrived in the US since 2004. More than 15,000 Hmong arrived in 2004 and 2005 from the last camp in Thailand, the Wat Tham Krabok Buddhist temple, which has now been closed to Hmong refugees. Almost half of the adult Hmong immigrants are expected to start hunting (*Hmong Times Online* 2005). As mentioned earlier, most new refugees do not speak English, and they often lack basic knowledge about public lands and how to use them. The organizational response required to meet the needs of these new refugees includes greater outreach efforts and

classes on a wide range of topics in the Hmong language for the new refugees. But to date, a lack of resources has limited the response.

Finally, there is virtually no research literature on Hmong and outdoor recreation, and therefore there is little to help inform and guide recreation managers in serving this distinct ethnic group. The lack of research is inconsistent with the cultural and economic importance of outdoor activities and natural resources to the Hmong and poses challenges for meeting the needs of their community.

One response to this lack of research has been a recent USDA Forest Service study (and a planned follow-up) to learn about the needs and concerns of the Hmong community related to public lands (Bengston, Schermann, Moua, & Lee, 2006). In this study, focus group participants revealed deep cultural and personal connections with the natural world and the great importance of public lands to many Hmong Americans. Favorite public lands evoked both pleasant and painful memories of their homeland in Laos. Hunting, fishing, and gathering activities on public lands have high subsistence value to many, but perhaps of deeper significance is the role of public lands in maintaining Hmong culture. Participating in activities on public lands gives Hmong a sense that they are preserving their culture by connecting with aspects of their traditional way of life and the beliefs and values associated with it. But the focus group participants also discussed profound problems and concerns. Harassment and racism directed at Hmong on public lands are common. Tensions are high, and the public lands that Hmong have sought out to relieve stress are now stressful places themselves. 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.

The experience of the Hmong appears to be part of a larger pattern of intercultural and interracial tension experienced by many other ethnic and minority groups (for reviews of race, ethnicity, and natural resources see Gramann, 1996, and Schelhas, 2002). Given the growing number of immigrants in our increasingly diverse society, it is more important than ever that recreation managers and policymakers understand the cultures and concerns of ethnic communities in order to serve them effectively.

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Diversity and the Recreation Profession: Organizational Perspectives

Revised Edition

Edited by

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and
Ingrid E. Schneider



Venture Publishing, Inc.
State College, Pennsylvania

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State College, PA 16801
Phone: 814-234-4561
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Production Manager: Richard Yocum

Manuscript Editing: Richard Yocum, George Lauer, and Christina Manbeck

Cover by StepUp Communications, Inc.

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 2008933091

ISBN-10: 1-892132-80-X

ISBN-13: 978-1-892132-80-2