

Outdoor Recreation: A Latin American Perspective

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Introduction

According to Manning, outdoor recreation "should be considered within a three-fold framework of concerns: the natural environment, the social environment, and the management environment" (1999, p.296). As a North American researcher this approach is applicable to developed western countries of the north hemisphere, but not to other realities such as the Latin American.

The following essay will explain Manning's framework, extend its scope to adapt it to the Latin American context and then consider the impacts of social and technological change on outdoor recreation. The first part then focuses on understanding Manning's framework to study outdoor recreation. First, by defining what it is understood by outdoor recreation and how it can better be comprehended. Second, the three concerns of the framework are analysed and related regarding their importance. Third, a fourth concern is proposed to adapt the framework to the Latin American context. After analyzing the framework and adding a new concern to it, social and technological changes are discussed to discover possible influences on the different environments. The discussion centres on the New Environmental Paradigm as an example of social change and the use of Internet and air travel as the technological changes and how these changes affect the four environments of outdoor recreation.

Understanding Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor recreation relates to all activities undertaken in the leisure time of people, but with the unique characteristic of doing such activities in open areas. Outdoor recreation is commonly referred to as resource-based recreation which then implies the use of natural resources as those open areas where recreation is experienced. Taking into

consideration the activities performed in an open setting is only one approach to understand outdoor recreation. Even though it is an initial approach in defining outdoor recreation it is not the only one.

Due to this relation with a natural resource, Manning includes in his framework to understand outdoor recreation the natural environment (1999). "The natural resources of an outdoor recreation area often are a principal focus of visitors, and outdoor recreation agencies often are charged with maintaining some degree of protection for natural resource values and processes. Information on the extent, location, and quality of the natural resource base therefore is important in outdoor recreation management" (Manning, 1999, p. 282). Not only is it important to consider the natural environment because it is the context in which outdoor recreation takes place, but also it goes back to its genesis. The first studies on outdoor recreation were ecologically oriented (Manning, 1999). This was due to the fact that the early managers of outdoor recreation, hence managers of natural areas, were trained on biological disciplines or fields of study (Lime, 1972a, Hendee and Stankey, 1973 as cited in Manning 1999). This past reality of the United States and other countries is still a present situation in most, if not all, natural protected areas in Latin America. A quick look to the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) of Mexico website (www.conanp.gob.mx) in its job descriptions requests experienced people with biological backgrounds, for managerial positions. Even though Mexico has over 117 natural protected areas not a single job position in the structure of the CONANP exists regarding recreation or tourism issues. This situation relates to the management environment considered in Manning's framework which will be described in a later section of this paper.

Another approach to define outdoor recreation is "in terms of motivations and benefits rather than participation in activities" (Manning, 1999, p. 280). According to Manning to consider the motivations and benefits obtained by recreationists or visitors "in outdoor recreation will lead to a more fundamental understanding of visitors and more successful management" (1999, p. 280). "Understanding of outdoor recreation is deepened when it is viewed from a 'behavioural approach', emphasizing why people participate in recreation activities and the experience and benefits attained" (Manning, 1999, p. 3). The principle behind this assumption is that if the management of a park knows what

experiences are sought by visitors, related to their motivations and benefits obtained, the activities offered in a park can change, but the experience type and quality remains the same or even improves. Through this last statement a relationship is found, now between the social and management environment of Manning's framework.

This behavioural approach to understanding what outdoor recreation is, takes us to explain the second environment in Manning's framework, the social environment (1999). "Inventory and assessment of the social environment involves a determination of what types of experiences are desired by the public from the area under study" (Manning, 1999, p. 284). The social environment considers not only the whole spectrum of different types of experiences desired, but must divide them according to different segments or niches of people present in the setting. This segmentation permits further analysis and also better management decisions on how to distribute or use the natural setting to improve visitors' satisfaction, another relationship or implication for the management environment. Segmentation is also important for marketing purposes.

The management environment has been referred to in this discussion, but what is the management environment? "The way in which an outdoor recreation area is managed affects both the condition of the natural resource base and the types of recreation experiences provided. In addition, management often is constrained by various institutional dictates. The management inventory and assessment process should determine both potentials and constraints" (Manning, 1999, p.284). The relation between the management, the social and natural environments with its corresponding implication has already been discussed, but a new element is mentioned by Manning the "institutional" dictation (1999). The management environment relates to the agency that is in charge of administrating the natural area. Such an agency is funded by the national government most of the time, and the budget allocated to it as well as the political importance of conservation at the time are potential constraints to it.

Not only politics and budgets are potential constraints, there is also the undeniable presence of a law related to natural protected areas. While in most western countries such as the United States and New Zealand the basis of the national park system is conservation and public use and enjoyment of the areas (NPA, 1980, NPSA, 1916). In

developing nations, where the bulk of the remaining world biodiversity exists such as in Mexico the natural protected area system has the main objective of preservation, conservation, restoration and just barely mentioned for recreation activities (LEGEEPA, 1988). This situation regarding the legal system of natural protected areas in developing countries has two outcomes relating to recreation. First, recreationists are not allowed to perform any type of activity in the area. Second, the legal framework is somehow bent or ignored by the same government to permit recreation or tourism. If analyzed the other way round the recent pressure by tourism interest in natural areas has pushed the natural protected areas system to permit the recreational activities through a paid concession.

Until this point, the essay has concentrated on describing Manning's framework to understand outdoor recreation. Such framework takes into account three interrelated environments as it has been discussed: the natural, social and management. This framework is useful to understand what outdoor recreation is, and also has great value from a management perspective. Even though it is applicable to the North American and other western countries contexts, it is the belief of the author that such a framework of only three environments cannot be used for other realities such as the Latin American, taking Mexico as an example.

The Cultural Environment

A natural protected area where outdoor recreation takes place in developing countries has a fourth environment not considered by Manning's framework which is the cultural environment. Such cultural environment considers the presence of local communities, the ownership they have over the land and the cultural value related to the land. Mexican legislation considers this environment when it states that the establishment and management of a natural protected area will promote the participation of local inhabitants, owners, local government, indigenous people, and other social organizations for the benefit of the local communities and to assure the protection and preservation of the ecosystems and their biodiversity (LEGEEPA, 1988). Most of the Mexican's government actions towards conservation follow this legal framework, but when politics and economic priorities override the need for local participation rather

arbitrary actions are performed like the displacement of the community of Lucio Cabañas from the Montes Azules biosphere reserve (Medellin, R.A., & Von Bertrab, A., 2003).

The presence of indigenous people, people that conserve their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions or a part of them, in natural protected area add a cultural value to the setting. A value given to the natural environment by the indigenous people as a result of their vision regarding mother nature, the land as a living organism and the value of certain landmarks. The relation with the land by indigenous people and campesinos (mestizo peasant farmers) in Mexico has a totally different worldview from the western utilitarian view over the land. National park systems are an invention of the western civilization that in its predatory evolution of the world had to save some areas from destruction. In developing countries where there still is a significant presence of indigenous people this cultural environment becomes a priority in understanding and managing natural protected areas.

Land ownership in Mexico is another element to consider in this cultural environment. Since 1936 in an effort to give a piece of land to all campesinos in Mexico the government created a land ownership system called the 'ejido'. The ejido was a territory divided in private owned land and public owned land for the benefit of the local campesinos. Each campesino was owner of a piece of land, but could not sell it, only inherit it. The public land was under the supervision of a campesino committee and could be used by everyone and also could not be sold. Seventy percent of the land in Mexico was under these land system until 1990, were constitutional reforms allowed the sale of land, which have brought other social problems to the rural areas and its inhabitants. The important issue here is that most of the land is still owned by campesinos including land which is now considered under protection. This situation must then be taken into consideration when analyzing natural protected area in Mexico. This is another reason to include the cultural environment to the framework to understand outdoor recreation for its applicability in developing countries.

The relationships of this cultural environment with the other environments can be many. Management must provide a participatory framework that will ensure their conservation

efforts while respecting the culture, economic activities, and political structures of the local communities. These conservation efforts related to the extractive activities of the locals, for example, can be negotiated to change through the presentation of other viable economic activities such as ecotourism. Such a tourism enterprise will bring face to face locals with visitors and new social adaptations will occur, and the relation between the cultural and social environments can be seen. Visitors must follow a stricter code of conduct which not only respects the natural environment, but also the cultural environment.

Manning's framework has then been analyzed and extended to be useful in other contexts besides the North American one. Such a framework now includes the following environments: natural, social, managerial and cultural. Some of the relationships between these environments have been discussed to argue their importance. The new framework proposed to understand outdoor recreation and help the management of natural areas is presented in diagram 1. In this outdoor recreation framework not only are the environments observed, but also the relationships between them.

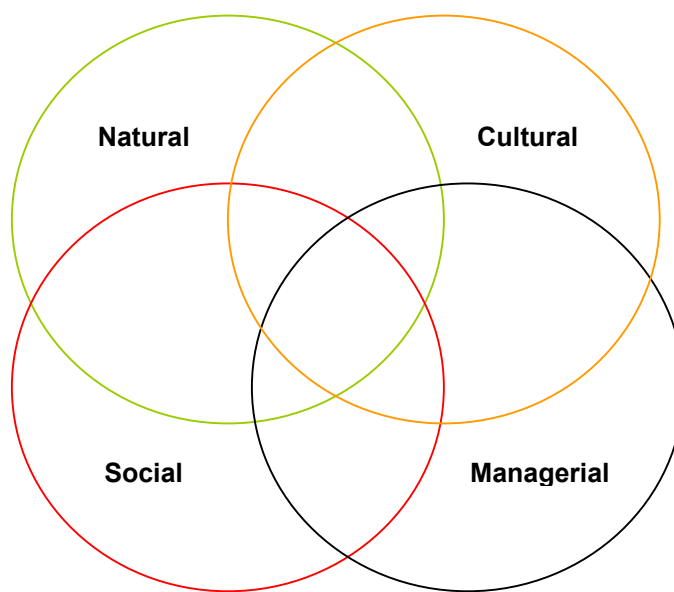


Diagram 1: Outdoor Recreation Framework

The Effects of Social and Technological Change

Now that a comprehensive framework has been proposed to study outdoor recreation the following stage of this essay is to pinpoint the effects that certain social and technological changes have on outdoor recreation. The social change presented in this essay to describe and analyze its effects on outdoor recreation is the 'new environmental paradigm' (NEP). In regard to the technological change, communication and transport are viewed of prime importance. An initial short description of the change is presented and some effects are then reflected upon.

The whole environmental movement in western countries starting around the 60s with its evolving issues during the decades has created an alternative set of beliefs and values called the "New Environmental Paradigm" (Albrecht et al., 1982). This paradigm "asserts the desirability of restricting growth, of protecting the integrity of ecosystems, and of securing more harmonious relationships between man and nature" (Albrecht et al., 1982, p. 39). The new understanding about the balance of nature, the need to limit growth, to protect nature and create a new relationship between man and nature has been quite a breakthrough from the old progressive, "no limits to growth" also known as the dominant social paradigm thinking of the post war decades. Even though the change might not be radical concerning peoples' consumption patterns, it has certainly created a new feeling of need and wants to be close to nature.

The search for a "natural encounter" has grown even more since the 80s and 90s with the appearance of new types of tourism such as ecotourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism and other resource-based recreational activities. This new "natural consciousness" has paradoxically made it even harder to achieve conservation targets due to the demand on natural areas. Ironically the greatest demand appears to happen in natural 'protected' areas. Demand tends to rise in a particular natural area once it has been considered by the proper government agency as national park or biosphere reserve. This trend on the usage of resources has increased the undertaking of outdoor recreational activities and different visitors, with different motivations and experiences, has made the study and management of outdoor recreation much more complex and

challenging. Visitors impact not only on the natural environment, but also the cultural environment. The effects felt by a social change such as the “New Environmental Paradigm” are felt in all four environments of the outdoor recreation framework.

Technological change regarding communication and transport is closely related to the social change described above. New communication media such as the Internet has encouraged the promotion of diverse settings to practice outdoor recreation and transport technology such as aircrafts has permitted recreationist reach farther destinations around the globe. Here the same paradox of conserving and using a natural setting is faced with and taken into a whole new global dimension. Websites created by agencies managing national parks can enhance visitor appreciation and promote off-site environmental awareness. Local communities are starting to use the Internet thanks to non-governmental and governmental agencies to promote their conservation efforts and looking for the tourism dollars to sustain their new way of living. Outdoor recreationists can now reach distant destinations, thanks to air travel, to fulfill their adventure and natural encounters. Hence communication and transport technology is broadening the diversity of natural settings to experience and the cultural and managerial environments are facing new challenges.

Conclusion

This essay has made an effort to define outdoor recreation. The first attempt was through the assumption that outdoor recreation meant activities performed in open spaces. These open spaces are most of the time related to natural areas and more commonly to natural protected areas. This first attempt presented the natural environment of a framework proposed by Manning to understand outdoor recreation. The second attempt to define outdoor recreation was through the understanding of visitor’s experiences and benefits. This second attempt introduced the second environment of the framework which is the social one. As inferred in both attempts the presence of a third environment was introduced which involved the management or agency in charge of managing the natural setting for its conservation and visitor (social) enjoyment. A fourth environment, cultural, was included into the framework to adapt it to developing countries contexts. An example was drawn from Mexico to argument the

usefulness of such environment to understand outdoor recreation and its implication for the management.

As a second part of the essay the social and technological changes were reviewed and how these changes affected the present and future of the environments of outdoor recreation. The social change considered was the 'New Environmental Paradigm' and how this change can be a possible trigger to the increase and diversity of outdoor recreation opportunities. On the other hand communication and transportation technologies changes were discussed focusing on the use of Internet and air travel. It was shown that these technological changes have enhanced possibility to be close to nature, but above all making it possible to experience before hand and taking the recreationist to far away natural destinations.

Further study is required to justify the proposition of a fourth environment, but even without empirical data the approach to promote local involvement in conservation efforts is a reality all over the world and mainly in developing countries. It seems that no government action or non-governmental organization projects can survive without this cultural element.

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