

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE IN PARK MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Since the establishment of national, provincial and state park systems in North America in the late 1800s, social science research has played an important role in answering park management questions. Research in geography, history, archaeology, political-science and other disciplines, has often provided valuable information that has shaped park policy and the wise management of park resources. This presentation examined the definition of social science in the context of park management.

INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that many of us would not be here this evening if we did not have an interest in parks and their importance in sustaining social values. As a society we define our activities, processes and measures of success based on our underlying core or social values. Understanding and working with this human element is the work of elected officials, park managers and social scientists.

This symposium is about bringing together a cross section of individuals and their interests representing federal and provincial governments, the academic community and the private sector to discuss social and economic questions facing park managers today. This forum is intended to reflect upon historical and contemporary social science research and to discuss the barriers and paths of opportunity that exist to promote this science and make it more effective in answering pressing park management issues.

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN PARK MANAGEMENT

One of the barriers that has plagued social scientists for generations has been in changing the perception of their work as 'soft science' which less significant than natural science. It is unfortunate, that social scientists still must work to market their expertise more effectively outside of their disciplines and encourage decision-makers to integrate social science research and recommendations into park policy and management planning. The dialogue between natural and social scientists needs to improve to encourage more interdisciplinary collaboration between planning team members. In general terms, park managers often perceive values as something that can be inventoried, such as wildlife species or geological features, while to social scientists, values are intrinsic to people. In speaking with

other provincial and national park colleagues a more concerted effort is required to include social scientists onto planning tables and teams, such as forest and park management planning teams and in mainstream decision-making.

In the academic world, social science needs to receive a higher profile at universities and colleges in the faculties of environmental and resource management. This would go a long way in recruiting and hiring staff that have trained capabilities in answering 'social' questions pertaining to park management.

To the misfortune of park managers, the public is not a homogenous community – the public has multiple opinions and values. Values in social science are cultural ideas of what is desirable, right and appropriate. Values can only be determined from people's thoughts and behaviours and this is the primary reason why planning processes are intended to be open and have numerous opportunities for public involvement.

Social science under the jurisdiction of park agencies such as Ontario Parks, Parks Canada and the U.S. National Park Service includes the disciplines of economics, geography, psychology, political science and sociology. Economics can assist park managers in park economic impacts, the costs and benefits of park policies and management options, and the role of parks in national, provincial and regional tourism. Geography is the analysis of the distribution of people, resources and culture. Geography can assist park managers through historical settlement patterns, regional development and human impacts on park resources. Psychological studies can assist park managers in visitor experiences, interpretative media and communications. Political science concentrates upon institutions of government from the federal to municipal level and can benefit park managers through studies of public participation in park planning, the role of communities and interest groups, and improving organizational effectiveness. Sociological studies can reveal demographic trends, visitor behaviour and public opinion regarding park policies and management decisions. Archaeology and cultural anthropology focuses on prehistoric and historic peoples and their relationship with park resources.

Conducting research is essential to improving our understanding of often complex social systems related to how people perceive of and behave in parks. It also requires significant resources and a multi-year commitment. In today's fiscal environment, few organizations can sustain the effort required to conduct credible social science research on their own. Success depends upon increased collaboration amongst researchers and support from government, university, industry and the private sector.

In my experience there are four types of social science research that are associated with park agencies. First, 'Basic', or what some scientists call pure science, is science that may not be *physically* conducted in a park, but may be beneficial in providing a new understanding of social phenomena that may have an effect on a park ecosystem. Second, 'Applied Science' is generally more site or park specific, provides baseline information about a park environment, and is important to providing information useful to decision-making regarding specific resource management issues. Third, 'Commercialization of Science' has also been evident in several park agencies over the past decade. Greater collaboration between government and private sector tour agencies has attempted to meet the tourist needs of

'active learning' and 'authentic' experiences, while meeting the research objectives of parks. Smithsonian tours in the U.S. and a new venture here in Algonquin, *Delta Grandview's Nature Trails Citizens Science Project* on Lake Opeongo are two examples. The fourth type of social science is 'Interest Group' or 'Advocacy Science'. This type of research is generally intended to advance the cause of special interest groups in influencing the decision-making process through a 'scientific' process. This may include studies conducted to enhance position papers on a number of management and policy issues.

For park agencies in North America social science research contributes to many program areas. They include interpretation, marketing and communications, park operations, research and planning:

Interpretation: Social science contributes to the way in which people learn effective methods of engaging visitors and educating them about the park environment;

Marketing and Communications: Social science provides guidance on how people can be better informed through internet, tabloids, lure brochures, images and other media. Social marketing research efforts concentrate on changing behaviours and attitudes of park visitors such as the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* initiative undertaken by Parks Victoria (Parks Victoria, 2004) and the *Engaging Canadians* strategy of Parks Canada (Parks Canada, 2000); and,

Planning: Public involvement is very important in the acceptance, support and success of management actions; over the past 25 years there have been significant improvements in the extent, approaches and mechanisms for public involvement in influencing decision-making – for example, the *Environmental Bill of Rights* (Government of Ontario, 1993), the *Environmental Registry*, and park and forest management planning.

Every one of these areas requires a good understanding of societal behaviours in order to maximize interest, support and implementation of park management actions.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READINGS

- Government of Ontario. 1993. *Environmental Bill of Rights*. SO 1993, c28. Amended to 2002, c.24. Queen's Printer: Toronto, Ontario.
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