

Research on Parks and Protected Areas A Consultant's Perspective

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The Consultant Role

Consultants are typically brought into a research initiative when there is a problem to solve, our work therefore is often applied science. Our work must be sound technically, reputations are built on this. Furthermore, we are often called on to present expert testimony in legal environments. In an Environmental Assessment Municipal Board hearing, or in public policy reviews for example, our work may be supporting the case of project proponents or assisting groups who are in opposition to a given undertaking. Either way, research must be defensible.

Often today consultants work is also being used to support new forums for decision making; that is, new approaches which replace or try to complement traditional governance and the confrontational, legal aspects of our systems. In emerging forums for community involvement and stakeholder participation in decision-making, the consultant can provide valuable background information, The research can be used as educational material and/or to clarify available choices and potential impacts of those choices.

Communicating Results

Public demand for involvement in decision making has also led to greater emphasis on communicating scientific research through appropriate text, images and a variety of other media. Study results often must effectively reach both public and technical audiences. Furthermore, as the public becomes better informed, information needs change and differences in information needs may become less pronounced. We should not underestimate the capability of the general public to question and understand research initiatives. There is always a need to consider the audiences before embarking on research.

Multi-disciplinary Research

An ecosystem approach to resource management and policy development may be defined as one which embodies the following six characteristics:

- a) the geographic area of concern based on natural system boundaries and community relationships, not solely on political jurisdictions;
- b) it is based on holistic and interdisciplinary research;
- c) decision making is democratic and inclusive;
- d) cross scale issues are addressed to ensure that there is co-ordination across time and spatial scales;
- e) implementation models are adaptive, promoting a mechanism for learning and building resiliency in natural and social systems; and,
- f) an ethic of sustainability is reflected, in which quality and integrity of human and natural systems underlies the initiative.

All of these characteristics provide topics which could be explored in this discussion of research for parks and protected areas. One area in which we as private sector consultants are trying to make progress is the development of interdisciplinary research.

Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinary research (some refer to it as trans-disciplinary or cross disciplinary, to me they are all fundamentally the same) is essential to move our planning processes and policy implementation toward an ecosystem approach. Consultants who take a "problem solving" approach have internalized this in their work. Gartner Lee is a consulting firm specializing in environmental planning, ecological sciences, geosciences and engineering. Our approach emphasizes the value of drawing on a range of disciplines, research techniques, and experiences in order to create a research approach that will meet the needs of our clients.

The work that the Environmental Planning group within Gartner Lee tends to undertake often involves co-ordination of many disciplines in order to meet the requirements of a planning process. This may mean for example, building a framework for evaluating the impact of a policy or undertaking on the natural and social environments. We would co-ordinate, facilitate and assess public and agency input and develop recommendations on mitigation to address a range of issues. Some of our most interesting work deals with the interface between resource policy and human needs and expectations.

Case Study: Snowmobiling and the Environment

The Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) contracted Gartner Lee to conduct an environmental study of the full range of snowmobile activities. The goal of the study was to allow the OFSC to better understand the positive and adverse effects of snowmobiling. This case is an interesting example of how expertise developed through the field of impact assessment can be applied to a proactive planning context.

University, Government, and Private Sector Research Partnerships

In considering the research needs for parks and protected areas, we would like to explore the benefits of structuring research which builds on the expertise and resources available through universities/government and private sector firms. Economic realities are necessitating that we find efficient ways to produce timely, sound research. More exchange between all three parties and opportunities to work co-operatively may move us in this direction.