

Use of Public Lands and Open Space for Recreation: Connecting with Diverse Communities

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"If you came to help me, you are wasting your time and can go home. But if you see my struggle as part of your own survival, and have come because you understand that your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Introduction

The passage above is from an Aboriginal Australian woman and consists of words that seek action. The United States is not alone in striving to engage people of diverse backgrounds when it comes to providing opportunities for a quality outdoor recreation experience. People of color, particularly in the U.S., have substantial connections with the land often based on their histories, typically stemming from both their country of origin and in America. This fact notwithstanding, commonly held perceptions by some ethnic groups as well as their white counterparts would suggest that minorities have little background with, or interest in the natural world. For instance, social trends show an often deep and profound connection to the land yet, culturally, there are numerous sub-cultural as well as self-imposed personal constraints limiting outdoor recreation experiences.

Explanations and remarks such as “it’s a white thing, my people just don’t do that” or “I can barely afford to feed my family so packing for a picnic in the park is not a priority” are testimony to some of the issues and challenges often faced by people of diverse backgrounds. Factors such as one’s age, education, ethnicity, and socio-economic status for instance, are real forces in people’s lives often influencing their recreational patterns and preferences regarding venturing into the “great outdoors”. As a result, understanding constraints and current needs is often a good first place to begin when it comes to community engagement.

After listening and learning, one of the most essential responsibilities of land managers is to provide visitors and potential visitors with the information needed to both access, find their place in the out of doors, and enjoy use of open space. This often means working extra hard to reach everyone who might benefit from the wide-ranging programs and services. This notion of “everyone”, however, can be daunting to land trust managers especially when it comes to new users and/or immigrant populations as part of the surge of “changing demographics”.

If the commitment and resources are in place, then ensuring opportunities are accessible and programs are relevant becomes an enormous, yet valuable responsibility. While the “why” behind this is important and has become more commonly accepted among conservation leaders and land management agencies, the “how-to” is often less understood and, at times, more challenging to implement.

The suggestions for engaging diverse communities, as offered in this article, can be successful if there is a commitment beyond “good intentions”. This is not to say well meaning professionals

don't get stuck; the issue is both simple and complex, but it should be remembered that it can be an enjoyable process just the same. That is, embracing different perspectives about natural resources and recreational use of open space is as satisfying as it is necessary if we are to gain the support required for open space protection whether through public ownership, conservation easements, or any other form of land management. And, we should celebrate small successes and progress.

Developing Trust

“As our Nation grows more diverse, the need to reach out to all segments of society particularly the underserved populations and communities, becomes more pronounced” (Forest Service, 2001, p. 2). This cannot occur successfully without first developing a level of trust with the communities you are trying to reach. To build stronger linkages between resource conservation efforts and outdoor recreation programs for a diverse constituency, a fundamental practice is to establish key community contacts and ensure communication occurs in the most appropriate, most effective way (Forest Service, 1998; Roberts, 2007).

In general, connecting with diverse constituents should occur through fostering relationships and cultivating rapport (Sachatello-Sawyer & Fenyvesi, 2004). Programs being considered should be planned with the community you want to serve, whenever possible, not for them. Part of how this occurs is through “building bridges”. While this may sound like a cliché, talking candidly about differences, especially, may help with cross-cultural understanding and ultimately enhance awareness leading to greater belief in your intentions.

One of the most critical ingredients of this subject is the fact that underserved communities, for example, have gotten used to broken promises. This has occurred with both non-profit organizations and federal land agencies alike. Along these lines, what typically results is the very groups we are trying to reach begin to feel abandoned as a sense of long-term commitment falls by the wayside. By applying the simple strategy of not promising anything you can't deliver, your organization will earn the respect desired as you authentically strive for positive changes (Gwaltney, 2003; Sachatello-Sawyer, B. & Fenyvesi, 2004; Roberts, 2007). What is the “bottom line?” Trust and relationships must be built over time.

The Issue of Access

Given the nature of land trusts and other conservation lands, some areas have extremely limited public access for the protection of sensitive or endangered plants and wildlife, or to allow damaged ecosystems the chance to recover. Hence, many protected areas are under private ownership and this limits access as well. In many cases, landowners as well as non-profit groups may work together to open up various lands to the public for recreation often in the form of hiking, camping, wildlife observation, hunting, fishing, water sports, and other responsible outdoor activities. This is often with the assistance of community groups or government programs.

What has occurred over the years, however, is that some community groups get left out. Conservation groups have public events, meetings, opportunities to involve the public yet rarely ask themselves “Who is not here?” And, certain community members ask themselves “Why

weren't we invited to the table?" This is distinct from people invited who elect not to show up; the aim here is to bring attention to the fact some individuals or groups are simply not included in public input decisions whether subconscious or conscious.

How, then, will we stimulate a "green vote", for instance, if there's lack of access to the open space we manage, cultural disconnects with our organizational values, or misunderstandings about the policies that are instituted based on years of tradition. Some ethnic minorities have expressed concern that parks and public lands have "too many" rules and puzzling or hard to understand value systems. For instance, Leave No Trace, wilderness use policies, fishing regulations, parking rules, or even "appropriate" music volume, are traditions that may not be seen as relevant to certain cultural groups. Additionally, unjustifiable attention by law enforcement towards targeted users creates a level of discomfort that causes more challenges for everyone.

All these factors, and others, vary from community-to-community and land managers should "first seek to understand, then to be understood". While such principles and best practices assist with managing and maintaining pristine natural environments, education must also be coupled with access. Through a process of cooperation, more benefits will be realized in the long run and are often as important as the programs themselves.

Legislative support for open space

Ethnic minority and low-income communities have been among the biggest supporters of bonds for green space, clean air, and clean water in the past several years. For example, the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40) had strong minority support. This measure "allows the state to sell \$2.6 billion of general obligation bonds to conserve natural resources (land, air, and water), to acquire and improve state and local parks, and to preserve historical and cultural resources."

According to the Trust for Public Lands, "More than 56% of those residents voting approved the bond, one of the largest conservation funding measures ever passed by a state." Furthermore, of this 56%, overwhelming support was from racially diverse communities. That is, Proposition 40 passed with the support of 77% Blacks, 74% of Latinos, 60% Asians and 56% of non-Hispanic White voters. This has also helped dispel the myth that people of color "don't care about the outdoors." Support from voters with an annual family income below \$20,000 and with a high school diploma or less were the highest supporters among any income or education levels. Despite this extraordinary end result, 64% of Californians say poorer communities have less than their fair share of parks and recreation opportunities (García, Flores, & Hicks, 2004).

Important questions include: "How does your community vote for important open space and protected area legislation? Has your organization determined the most effective means of communicating these essential governmental acts ensuring prospective users comprehend the implications? Do potential new users know how any given political vote affects their family and local community in terms of "relevance" and the connection to recreational opportunities?

More diverse populations might engage in programs and pursue opportunities presented to them if information is provided in a way that combines benefits and values of participation with why these laws are so crucial for all people, not just a privileged few.

Organizational tools

Gwaltney (2003) offers five basic concepts he notes are “critical to making positive and sustained change” in multiple areas of diversity. While his paper relates to the National Park Service, his model supports action items that any organization might be inclined to execute. These concepts include: eliminate excuses, create accountability for poor performance and recognize superior performance, provide tools and resources necessary for success, track results, and “go the extra mile”.

As pointed out by Gwaltney, there is a difference between difficulties to be resolved and the excuses that create institutional barriers to progress. Without accountability from all levels of staff within an organization, it’s easy to perpetuate the “same ole’ same ole”. Furthermore, performance that does not show forward movement in meeting organizational diversity goals should be dealt with and exceptional staff/employee performance ought to be acknowledged. Next, when it comes to truly embracing diversity, even the best and brightest professionals need help; providing training, tools, resources, evaluation, etc. can mean the difference between frustration and confidence.

Then when it comes to tracking results, this is often where organizations fall short. Evaluation and measuring outcomes is sometimes perceived to be arduous; evidence speaks louder than words and if organizations don’t have the internal capacity to track outreach efforts there are many consultants who can assist. Create a baseline, develop benchmarks, and determine if you value your vision enough to reach your goals.

Finally, Gwaltney notes managers must be prepared to “go the extra mile” for diversity to truly be part of an organizations daily culture. Shifting our way of thinking and doing may, perhaps, be our greatest challenge to achieving the change we wish to see and experience. Organizations should also share lessons learned around difficulties and challenges. Subsequently, personal and institutional knowledge will expand.

A dozen sample strategies for engaging diverse communities¹

According to the U.S. Census, by 2050 there will be a majority-minority population (Census, 2008). Breaking down barriers that may exist is not only the right thing to do, it’s purely good business. There are literally hundreds of strategies that are known to be tried and true and an equal number of programs that exist based on both research and experience. This brief list is a sample of suggestions to assist organizations with enhancing their diversity efforts and working towards becoming more culturally competent.

1. Strive to overcome linguistic, cultural, institutional, geographic, and other barriers to meaningful participation in outdoor recreation activities.
2. Develop bilingual conservation education literature and programs as part of your efforts to effectively engage new/non-traditional users. Hire/engage bilingual staff and volunteers whenever possible.

3. Increase representation on Board of Directors and/or staff to enhance area where you might be lacking (e.g., ethnicity, gender, people with disabilities, etc).
4. Integrate tribal representation in a manner that is consistent with the government-to-government relationship between the U.S. and tribal governments, the Federal Government's trust responsibility to federally recognized tribes, and any treaty rights. *Author note: Don't hesitate to engage tribes that may not be "federally recognized" given the perpetual exclusion of many tribes today in Government programs.*
5. Include visible examples of employment and program participation by ethnic minorities, women, older/senior citizens, and youth in pictures and other visuals (e.g., brochures) as well as audio public information materials and relevant media sources.
6. Develop a commitment to the employment of youth at the high school and college/university levels in seasonal or intern programs. Include this as part of a strategic plan. Assure high quality supervision, mentoring, and meaningful work experience.
7. Consider the possibility of providing financial support through scholarships, stipend programs, hourly wages, and/or other arrangements to culturally diverse high school and college/university students, with the intent of eventually bringing them into your workforce.
8. Support various community-based organizations through cooperative agreements that have large minority membership. Support minority and women-owned businesses through purchasing of products and services you might need.
9. Connect with diverse communities based on their preferred modes and sources of communication. Understand and properly consider language issues in your planning.
10. Bring diverse students together from different schools to explore shared environmental issues and use critical thinking necessary to foster building healthy human and natural communities (*Author note: conservation programs are no cure for acute societal issues yet by nature, these programs emphasize group processing and communication skills*).
11. Collaborate with minority serving institutions (or other groups of interest) on funding proposals to create new programs or recreational opportunities for using open space.
12. Provide diversity/cultural sensitivity training for your staff, and Board of Directors, and/or volunteers.

¹ Various sources adapted for this list of strategies. See work cited and supplemental resources provided.

Concluding thoughts

Why does all this matter? What are the likely impacts to open space lands and conservation efforts if the growing segments of our population do not value the natural environment the way we'd like them to? The key is they don't have to value the land they way we want them to, nor should they. Education is essential; yet providing a quality recreational experience is vital. Understanding community needs and desires is equally important. Support will follow and, for those who are developing a conservation ethic, this too will surface.

Conservation organizations and land trusts must consider implementing management plans that will ensure the fair distribution of the benefits of open space lands, enhance human health and the environment, promote economic vitality for all communities, and engage full and fair public participation to determine the future of these lands.

Ethnic minorities have made remarkable contributions to the conservation of natural resources across the country. Although he focuses on African Americans, Stanton (2002) makes salient points that can relate across cultures. He notes that unfortunately, due to past laws, discrimination and segregation, the contributions of people of color have not been well represented in history books or in the popular media. Furthermore, many scholars, in recent years, have substantially increased the body of knowledge involving history, achievements and contributions of various cultural groups. Yet the “story” of these people in organizations and programs relating to the conservation of our natural heritage is not widely known, let alone recorded. This applies to numerous ethnic groups and “change”, while attempted, has really just begun to move beyond the template of tradition.

While traditions are noteworthy to maintain, this is indisputable, conservation organizations and land managers must begin by understanding every community has their own set of shared beliefs and agreements where they live, work, and play in nature. Assumptions can have unintended consequences. As also noted by Jacobson, McDuff and Monroe (2006) in their book *Conservation Education and Outreach Techniques*, abundant examples for engaging diverse communities exist. Professionals merely need to step up and act more effectively, and with intention. Providing access, information, and opportunities for recreational use of open space to people from diverse backgrounds will bring about a more sustainable future for all of us.

A few questions for consideration

1. Has your organization determined whether you value diversity, is it a priority, and how will you prioritize what needs to occur to create change and expand opportunities?
2. What audience or stakeholders are you trying to reach and do you know their backgrounds, desires, interests and current conservation practices (if any)?
3. Do you understand how to communicate with the diverse populations and potential participants in your area? Does your traditional means of communication work for all of your new and/or potential participants? If not, has it been determined what needs adapting?
4. Are you effectively using non-traditional means, networks, or partners to reach out to non-traditional populations?
5. Regarding the communities you want to serve, do you know what they care about and what their immediate needs are?
6. What diversity programs, projects and/or initiatives planned have been accomplished? Is the process on track? If not, have you assessed your work, addressed missteps and setbacks or revisited our plan?
7. Have you examined the different levels of decision making in your organization? And, have requisite changes needed (if any) been discussed?

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USDA Forest Service (1998, March). Unlocking the barriers: Keys to communicating with under-served customers. Washington, DC: USDA Forest Service, Office of Communications, Office of Outreach.

Supplemental Sources

Association for Environmental & Outdoor Education / Diversity in Outdoor and Experiential Education:

This site offers a wealth of information regarding articles, organizations, events and opportunities, training/professional development, multicultural EE providers, books/magazines, museums, exhibits, lesson plans and teaching materials all highlighting diversity.

<http://aeoe.org/resources/diversity/index.html>

Center for Diversity and the Environment: “...Provides strategic direction on diversifying the environmental movement...provides information about efforts, organizations, people, research and strategies that are diversifying the environmental movement.” <http://www.environmentaldiversity.org/>

Consultation on the Outdoors for All: Diversity Action Plan: This Plan “encourages making opportunities for disabled people, people from black and minority ethnic communities, young people and people from inner cities to enjoy the countryside and green spaces. The Diversity Action Plan asks questions about how we can help to give more people the opportunity to enjoy the countryside and green spaces. At the moment many people don't have the chance to enjoy the outdoors or don't think it's a place they can enjoy spending time in.”

<http://www.diversity-outdoors.co.uk>

Minority Environmental Leadership Development Initiative: MELDI is a “project at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment. The project aims to enhance the leadership and career development opportunities available to minority students and minority environmental professionals. The project seeks to provide information that will help more minority students embark on careers in the environmental field. It is also designed to help minority students and professionals in the environmental field take advantage of networking and mentoring opportunities.”

<http://www.umich.edu/~meldi>

National Hispanic Environmental Council: NHEC “seeks to educate, empower, and engage our community on environmental and sustainable development issues; encourage Latinos to actively work to preserve and protect our environment; provide a national voice for Latinos before federal, state, and nonprofit environmental decision-makers; and actively assist Latinos to pursue the many career, educational, and policy opportunities in the environment and natural resources field:

<http://www.nheec.org>

New America Media - Expanding the news lens through ethnic media:

<http://news.newamericamedia.org/news>

NAM Directory 2008: “A bridge to America's ethnic media and communities.”

http://news.ncmonline.com/news/view_custom.html?custom_page_id=263

Outdoor Industry Association, Outdoor Foundation, Research: The Hispanic Community and Active Outdoor Recreation: <http://www.outdoorfoundation.org/research.hispanic.html>

Rising to the Challenge: Strategies for enhancing diversity within environmental organizations. 2004. Environmental Diversity Working Group. Fort Washington, MD: The Kenian Group (Consultants) *Strengthening Organizations through Diversity*. <http://www.keniangroup.com>

Stewardship Council - Established in 2004 as part of a Pacific Gas and Electric Company Land Settlement: <http://www.stewardshipcouncil.org>

Youth Investment Program: http://www.stewardshipcouncil.org/youth_investment

Student Conservation Association (Celebrated 50 years in 2007): National Urban and Diversity Program <http://www.thesca.org> / Cultural Resources Diversity Internship Program in partnership with the National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov/history/crdi/internships/intrnCRDIP.htm>

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