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Carruthers Den Hoed, Don

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Unpacking the privilege knapsack: creating park experiences that foster social diversity

Don Carruthers Den Hoed, M.A.
Kananaskis Country – Alberta Parks

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Abstract

Mainstream or even upper-class and affluent audiences are often the core targets of park experiences and are usually the types of people engaged in program design and delivery. Similarly, wilderness parks themselves are increasingly expensive to visit and management often relies on limited and conventional assumptions about how, why, and when people recreate. The rapidly changing face of Canadian and Albertan society begs for a new understanding of the relationship between parks, park mandates, and the sections of society who may not be included in current park experiences.

This paper will explore the roots of environmental education and the intrinsic connections between stewardship and social justice. With a lens grounded in diversity scholarship, it will challenge current and future programmers, planners, and managers to “unpack their privilege knapsacks” and create wilderness experiences that reach beyond income, culture, and ability to create truly inclusive parks. The paper will also ask if parks, as social institutions, can be catalysts for broader social change by promoting social diversity alongside biodiversity.

Keywords

diversity, demographics, stewardship, social justice

Parks are recognized as a key part of Alberta’s culture, but it can not be taken for granted that they will remain so in our evolving culture. The recent increase in new Canadians, the rising prevalence of disabilities, the increased profile of aboriginal communities, and the changing nature of youth are just some of the factors altering the face of Canadian society and altering the nature of park experiences. The following points from various Statistics Canada (2006) reports help frame the picture of diversity in Canada, and offer a perspective on just how diverse park users could be:

- 16.2% of Canadians are visible minorities, and by 2017 about 20% of Canada’s population could be visible minorities. There were 251,600 immigrants to Canada in 2006 (the highest number since the 1980s) and 83.9% of these people are from non-European countries. And, one in five Canadians doesn’t speak English or French as a first language.
- 13.6% (almost 450,000) Albertans have disabilities, even more among seniors where 30% of 65-75 year-olds and 55% of individuals 75 and older face limitations. And, this senior population is increasing rapidly and demands recreation opportunities that accommodates them (Skratskins, 2007).
- 3.8% of Canadians are aboriginal (1,172,790). The First Nations population represents tremendous diversity itself, with 615 individual Nations and 10 distinct First Nations language families in Canada. Yet, the Aboriginal unemployment rate is 12.1% in Western Canada (2.5 times the non-Aboriginal rate).
- Finally, youth between 13 and 25 – poses a real challenge for park managers. In 2006, 31% (10,000,000) of Canadians were under age 25, down from 48% in 1978. And youth are changing – park agencies must consider whether they have what it takes to catch the attention of a technologically connected generation.

(Statistics Canada 2008)

The makeup of the groups represented in these points would simply be trivia, except that their participation in parks—or lack thereof—will influence future political support for parklands. This is compounded by the fact that park visitation is decreasing all across North America (Eagles 2001), and those who do visit parks are hardly representative of the diversity of Canadian society. Russel, Bell, and Fawcett (2000) explain:

Environmental [park] education needs to come to terms with the ‘monoculturalism’ that pervades it. Part of the challenge is to recognize that different cultures may value different bodies of knowledge and different ways of knowing. Another part of the challenge is to create spaces for a diversity of approaches to and understandings of teaching, learning, and being (207).

Inclusive park programming that fosters diversity among users is essential to maintaining the relevance of parks and protected areas among Canadian society now and in the future. Further, the scope of these excluded (or disengaged) groups represents an untapped source of park volunteers, visitors, staff, and advocates.

Barriers to participation

Understanding the barriers new Canadians, persons with disabilities, aboriginal Canadians and youth face when trying to access parks is an essential starting point on the path to engaging and inviting these individuals to participate. The most interested and enthusiastic individual cannot be nurtured as a steward if parks remain inaccessible. Leisure constraints research by Jackson (2005) describes a “stable and virtually universal range of categories of constraints to leisure, typically consisting of:

1. costs of participating.
2. time and other commitments.
3. problems with facilities.
4. isolation (sometimes subdivided into social isolation and geographical isolation).
5. lack of skills and abilities” (7).

These points identify areas where inclusion efforts can start removing barriers, such as ensuring affordable programs and accessible facilities, and can perhaps reveal reasons for the overall decline in park participation among existing users. While many of these barriers can only be addressed on an individual level, isolation for example, Alberta Parks could easily address the lack of skills and abilities by sharing information about opportunities in parks. Information services are a core service of the department, and as such are a key avenue for getting people involved. So at a minimum, inclusion must start with a concerted effort to increase knowledge of parks among the general public in order to foster inclusion. As Falk (2005) expands,

The fact that resources exist is not sufficient. The individuals in a society must be aware that those resources exist, they must know how to access those resources, they must be able to effectively and efficiently utilize those resources once accessed and they must have guidance in knowing how to mix and match resources to best effect. *This needs to be true of all citizens, not just the privileged few. At the moment, quality [park-based] learning opportunities are not widely available to all of the world’s citizens; not even to many in the most privileged of societies* (p. 276).

The opportunity to increase participation in parks simply by making people aware of the resources that already exist is tremendous. Despite this, very few park systems are actively making an effort to invite participation from marginalized groups (Darrah, Magil-Evans, and Adkins 2002, 546). In a study by Wilderness Inquiry in Minnesota, the researchers found that, despite legislation, funding, and even implementation of multiple inclusive initiatives, very few organizations or individuals were aware of the opportunities available. As the researchers characterized the state of affairs, “a lag appears to exist between efforts made in recent years to increase the availability of outdoor recreation opportunities [...]

and adequate publicity about what and where these opportunities are” (Wilderness Inquiry 2001, 4). Certainly in Minnesota, and likely across the continent and in Alberta, the current state of affairs with regards to communicating with excluded groups is akin to throwing a party without sending out any invitations, then wondering why nobody came.

Recognizing Privilege

Someone who is not a new Canadian, aboriginal, person with a disability (yet), or youth (anymore) can never put themselves completely in another perspective. Recognizing our own struggles or advantages helps frame the experiences of others as they try to access parks and looks beyond typical us/them descriptions of issues. It is a key to entering into genuine inclusive dialogue that critiques current practice, identity, attitudes, and theory (Freire 2004; Mclean 1997; and Rioux, Furrie, Miller, and Bunch n.d.). Before this dialogue can be started, advantage and privilege must be critiqued, and practitioners need to ensure they are on solid and appropriate ground before inviting new groups to participate in parks. As the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship, and Multiculturalism Education Fund Advisory Fund Committee (2000) challenges that “our goal is to create a society where equality is fostered, where people can participate fully and where there is no discrimination, it means we must do more than develop awareness of human rights and diversity. *Our organizations and attitudes need to transform in order to meet this goal...*” (4, emphasis mine). This collaborative and open relationship cannot exist when groups or individuals are not invited to contribute to the dialogue about an issue, activity, or event. (Sidorkin 2002). Nor can this dialogue exist without people in power reflecting on their own privilege (Gilbert 1986).

Identifying privilege

Work by Hull (2003) hypothesized that there is often a sort of “indexing” or “framing” of oneself as “identity issues of necessity connect to issues of power, indexing one’s position in relation to other individuals and groups socially and economically” (5). McIntosh (1988) describes this process in terms of white privilege and her efforts to come to terms with her own unique vantage point:

I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks (1).

Once someone is aware of their relative positions and privileges they can work to eliminate or overcome these barriers, and to participate fairly in open-minded dialogue with other marginalized members of society. Turning McIntosh’s concept on myself—a white, middle-class, able-bodied male—and “unpacking my privilege knapsack” as she suggests, reveals many places where my advantage is a disadvantage for others. For example:

- I’ve never been stared at because of the colour of my skin, or the object I was sitting in
- I can visit any website, walk into any visitor centre, or talk to anyone in the service industry and expect to converse in my own language
- I can camp in any facility, in a tent or trailer or cabin, without needing assistance
- I can apply for any job in Alberta and be confident that my skin colour, ability level, and ethnicity will probably be the same as the person interviewing me.
- I can climb a mountain or go canoeing without people exclaiming how amazing that is for someone like me...

Acknowledging that others have valid and unique perspectives starts with acknowledging ones own perspective. My list is much different than another’s, but recognizing each other as unique individuals can foster appreciation for difference and for the struggles we all face (or don’t face). Just as each element of an ecosystem needs to be acknowledged and preserved, the divergent voices and perspectives of individuals have to be recognized as a valid way of looking at and living the world. As Gardner states, “I think we’re built with different kinds of potentials, and whether they realized depends on what’s available in society” (Gardner in Paul 2000, 2). In an industry that has no problem seeing a park, a tree,

or a river from the point of view of a bear, a hawk, or a fish, success should be swift and the rewards great.

Benefits of diversity to parks

It might be disputed whether parks agencies are appropriate venues for work on social inclusion due to their seeming focus on the natural world, not people. On a surface level, the environmental mandate is enough: ensuring park programs engage as many population segments as possible reflects the pressing need for environmental action in today's world of climate change and habitat loss. If people are not given an opportunity to experience nature first-hand, and in ways that connect to them as individuals, it is unlikely they will take action toward preservation. In the quest to foster stewardship, all park education programs should be inclusive and should recognize the perspective of – and barriers faced by – individuals and groups. (Thomson and Hoffman n.d.; Power to be society 2003; Ballantyne 2005; Falk 2005; Faris 2003; Hull et al 2003).

Bearing in mind the previously mentioned barriers and the simple solution of increasing communication with marginalized groups, this action is most often—and most appropriately—carried out as an extension of park education programs currently available within the network of parks and protected areas. The roots of environmental education and interpretive theory support this role, as well as the association with park education in general. The Belgrade Charter of 1975, one of the foundational texts of environmental education, states that:

The principal audience of environmental education is the general public. Within this global frame, the major categories are:

1. The formal education sector: including pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education students as well as teachers and environmental professionals in training and retraining;
2. The non-formal education sector: including youth and adults, individually or collectively from *all segments of the population*, such as the family, workers, managers and decision makers, in environmental as well as non-environmental fields

(UNESCO 1975, 3, emphasis mine).

The nature of parks as informal settings where learning encounters are experiential, positive and voluntary is perhaps the greatest reason to pursue inclusive park programming. As Ballantyne and Packer (2005) explain,

Informal education settings [like parks] provide important opportunities for the promotion of environmentally sustainable attitudes and behaviours that are rarely possible in more formal contexts. They allow learners to engage with and in the environment, to observe the evidence and effects of environmental mismanagement, and to explore and construct their environmental knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours in personally relevant and meaningful ways (290).

Benefits of diversity for society

Despite the compelling mandate to engage diverse users as a means to promote stewardship of the natural world, parks are about *both* people and nature. Parks are seen internationally as a contributor to society through the many recreation and education opportunities they provide. The *National Recreation and Parks Association* defines the role of parks as: “better health, more jobs, cleaner environment, good citizens. That’s what parks and recreation is all about” (Lose 2002, 2). Falk (2005) expands this view of parks as more than just places: “adults go to settings such as national parks...to satisfy their intellectual curiosity and to fulfill their needs for relaxation, enjoyment, intellectual stimulation and even spiritual fulfillment” (265).

It is not just enough that parks protect the environment—as stewards of the province’s cultural and

natural heritage, there is a mandate for Alberta Parks to ensure all citizens can access nature (Alberta Community Development 2005). The Alberta Recreation and Parks Association's (ARPA) Diversity Position Paper: "Focus on Inclusion" (2002) reflects this in calling for specific action to "ensure the availability of meaningful opportunities for a full range of leisure and recreation participation for all citizens" (2). And inclusion in wilderness settings can create tangible and lasting benefits for *all* members of society (Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, and Lais 2000; Brannan et al 2000). The National Therapeutic Recreation Society (2002) suggests that the key is the growth fostered by inclusion itself: "two things are abundantly clear: people with disabilities grow from participation [in outdoor recreation programs] with those who don't have disabilities, and people without disabilities grow from the same" (79). This growth is essential for creating lasting change in society, and can have a profound effect on an individual. Anderson, Schleien, Lais, Seligman, and McAvoy (1993) relay one such transformative experience for a person without disabilities who gets involved with an inclusive program:

'Now that when I'm in daily life encountering someone with disabilities, there is just something else that I feel. Just something that wasn't there before. I have a little more inclination to make sure that person is treated fairly, whether it's physical or seeing what the environment is doing to them, more so than I paid attention before' (19).

Connecting to nature is what makes life worth living for some individuals. Not having access to wilderness in these cases can be a tangible source of exclusion, a concept echoed throughout Wilson's seminal ecology text *Biophilia* (1984). Suzuki and McConnell (1998) theorize this need for connection to nature in *The Sacred Balance*: "The evolutionary context of human history make it plausible that the human genome—the DNA blueprint that makes us what we are—has over time acquired a genetically programmed need to be in the company of other species" (177).

These benefits of inclusion to individuals are important, but benefits to communities and society as a whole are even more so. Diverse communities are the ultimate goal of this paper and, just as a natural ecosystem benefits from diversity so do communities. As Capra (1996) explains in his work on social ecology,

In ecosystems the complexity of the network is a consequence of its biodiversity, and thus a diverse ecological community is a resilient community. In human communities, ethnic and cultural diversity may play the same role. Diversity means many different relationships, many different approaches to the same problem. A diverse community is a resilient community, capable of adapting to changing situations (303).

This sentiment is echoed, and expanded upon, by Suzuki and McConnell (1998), who attribute our survival as a civilized species to diversity. "Just as genetic diversity within a species and a variety of species within an ecosystem allow single species or whole ecosystems to survive in the face of changing conditions, so diversity of traditional knowledge and culture have been the main reason for our success" (138). Whether this diversity truly exists in society is a topic for another paper, but it can be stated with confidence that parks have inherent benefits to individuals on spiritual, psychological, social, and physical levels (Suzuki and McConnell 1998, 25). Denying these benefits to anyone is unjust at best, inhuman at worst.

Conclusion

So there is a unique relationship between environmental education and social justice, and a unique opportunity to connect these topics under the banner of environmental justice. As Russel et al (2000) challenge,

Traditionally, environmentalism and environmental education have represented the voice and vision of the white middle-class, despite decades of activism by other communities. The environmental justice movement links environmental degradation with social injustices like racism, sexism, and classism and its insights vastly enrich the scope of environmental education (207).

Parks are a venue for a variety of environmental education approaches—formal, interpretation, free

choice, and so on—each of which has a mandate to promote connection, stewardship, and sustainability by promoting biodiversity (UNESCO 1975 n.d.; Thomson and Hoffman n.d.). These concepts reflect the main tents of inclusion, which calls for connection, compassion, and relationship building among human beings by promoting diversity. Freeing the voices of those who are currently unable to participate in a dialogue with nature and allowing them to be heard by mainstream park users who generally take for granted their ability to participate in that dialogue will increase everyone’s connection to nature and to each other. As a result, park education programs will not only continue to foster stewardship and work towards the preservation of biodiversity in the natural world; they will also become agents for social understanding and change.

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