Minority Participation in Outdoor Recreation

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Introduction

The demographics of the United States are changing at a rapid rate. The 2000 Census shows that the United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. The Census Bureau projects that by 2050, racial and ethnic minorities will compose about half of the country's population. Furthermore, by 2050, racial and ethnic minorities will account for nine out of every ten citizens added to the population. (Stanfield, 247) The growth of the minority population has very important implications for the outdoor recreation managers. In order for the public lands to continue to be successful, public land managers must be responsive to the changing needs and values of an increasingly diverse citizenry. If managers are to be responsive to the changing population, they must work to attain a more complete understanding of their needs and values.

Traditionally, racial and ethnic minorities have been under-represented as visitors to national parks and other outdoor recreational areas. In a recent survey of a cross-section of the American population, it was found that 32 percent of Whites had visited a national park in the past two years. On the other hand, only 13 percent of Blacks surveyed reported visiting a national park in the past two years. (Stanfield, pg 247) As the racial and ethnic composition of the United States continues to change, it is critical for public land managers to understand the reasons why minorities tend to be under-represented in outdoor recreational areas. By understanding the reasons behind this trend, managers will be able to
adjust their management techniques to incorporate racial and ethnic minorities into outdoor recreational settings. Conversely, if racial and ethnic minorities continue to be substantially underrepresented in national parks and similar outdoor settings, it will threaten the long-term support of public land management.

Minority recreation behavior first came to the attention of social scientists and public resource professionals in the 1960’s and early 1970’s. During this era, the United States was undergoing great social upheavals and citizen groups charged that civil unrest was due, to a great extent, to the inequitable distribution of recreation resources. (Johnson, pg. 1) Social scientists and public resource professionals took note of the under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in outdoor recreational settings and sought to find the reasons behind this trend. From the studies concerning race/ethnicity and outdoor recreation, three major hypotheses emerged to explain the under-representation of minorities in outdoor recreational settings. The marginality hypothesis suggests that the historic discrimination has caused minorities to lack the economic and educational resources to visit parks and other related areas. The ethnicity/subculture hypothesis purports that traditional outdoor recreation areas might be outside of the cultural value system of racial and ethnic minorities. Finally, the discrimination hypothesis posits that blatant and/or institutional discrimination may discourage minorities from visiting recreation areas.

**Marginality Hypothesis**
The marginality hypothesis posits that the differences in racial and ethnicity representation in outdoor recreational settings are due to socioeconomic factors such as limited resources. Outdoor recreational activities are relatively expensive; people must pay for things such as food, equipment, lodging, and park entrance fees. Beyond the explicit costs of outdoor recreational activities, people must also pay the opportunity costs such as time off of work. The marginality hypothesis states that, due to socio-economic status, many minorities are unable to partake in these activities. This theory identifies that historic racial/ethnic discrimination created barriers to full participation in the nation’s major social and cultural institutions by minorities. Factors such as a lack of discretionary income, low employment and occupational status, and lack of access to desired facilities prevent minorities from engaging in outdoor recreational opportunities. Statistics from the 2000 census showed that, on average, White people make $9,481 more per capita than African-Americans. (Stanfield, pg. 248) The marginality hypothesis has also looked at educational attainment, because awareness of outdoor recreational opportunities is often associated with individuals or groups with higher levels of education.

Studies of the marginality hypothesis usually involve looking at participation rates in outdoor recreation activities amongst different racial/ethnic groups, while controlling for socio-economic factors. The marginality hypothesis asserts that differences in participation levels are related to socio-economic factors; thus, in the absence of socio-economic differences, racial/ethnic groups are expected to participate at similar levels. If findings support this expectation,
then the study is interpreted as support for the marginality theory. Results from such studies have shown mixed results.

The marginality hypothesis offers some insight on the reasons behind the differences in outdoor recreation representation between various racial/ethnic groups. However, the theory also has several shortcomings. The theory examines how historic discrimination might effect minority representation in outdoor recreation, but it fails to consider the role of contemporary discrimination on participation. Another flaw in this theory is that it doesn’t explain cases in which participation levels are different when socio-economic factors are equal amongst racial/ethnic groups. A third problem with this theory is that it doesn’t explain on-site use patterns, when under-representation is not a problem. These loopholes in the theory have caused social scientists to explore other possible explanations for differences in use-levels between racial/ethnic groups.

**Subculture/Ethnicity Theory**

Studies of the marginality hypothesis compare outdoor recreation representation when socio-economic factors are held constant between racial/ethnic groups. If differences in participation continue to occur after controlling for socio-economic variables such as income and education, then the differences in participation must be the result of some other factor. The second major hypothesis concerning differences in representation provides a possible explanation for such findings. The subculture/ethnicity theory attributes variation in participation levels to cultural differences. The theory proposes that variation
between racial/ethnic groups in recreational behavior stems from differences in cultural norms, values, and social practices. The theory argues that the same values that attract White people to outdoor recreation activities do not hold the same appeal for minorities. In a frequently cited article about the ethnicity hypothesis, Meeker suggested that White people view parks as places for refuge and escape from the stress of urban life. On the other hand, African-Americans and Native-Americans do not show the same enthusiasm for parks and wilderness because such places serve as reminders of their subjugation and oppression. (Meeker, 1973)

The ethnicity theory also looks at how subcultural influences can be processes that lead to the preservation or maintenance of ethnic identity. (Floyd, 1999) Certain leisure activities and sites might be viewed as unacceptable because they do not reinforce a racial/ethnic group’s collective identity. Similarly, some researchers have argued that leisure could play an integral role in maintaining subcultural identity in a multi-cultural society. (Floyd and Gramann, 1993) Since decisions about leisure activities are made without the constraints and pressures to conform that are found in work, school, and other environments, it is possible that ethnic differences will be more strongly reflected in the decisions concerning such activities.

The ethnicity hypothesis does have its flaws. In spite of the attention on cultural factors, the hypothesis does not offer direction for identifying and measuring specific variables that influence visitation and park use patterns. Studies supporting the ethnicity hypothesis demonstrate that use patterns
between various racial/ethnic groups are similar after controlling for socio-economic factors. However, the theory is flawed because, once socio-economic factors are removed, it simply attributes the differences between the participation of racial/ethnic groups to cultural factors. The theory fails to identify the specific aspects of racial/ethnic culture that actually affect participation.

**Assimilation Theory**

Another theory has been developed that also looks at how culture factors into decisions concerning outdoor recreation use patterns. The assimilation theory looks at how changes in culture may influence minorities to participate in outdoor recreational activities. The concepts of both cultural and structural assimilation have been researched in studies concerning outdoor recreation. Cultural assimilation refers to minority groups acquiring the cultural characteristics of the majority group, such as language, diet, and religion. (Gordon, 1964) Structural assimilation expresses the extent of social interaction between majority and minority groups in primary (family and friendships) or secondary (work, school, or residential) social groups. (Floyd, 5)

The assimilation theory posits that as minorities are assimilated into the majority culture, their recreational use patterns will be similar to those of the majority group. Applying the assimilation theory to national park visitation, the theory would expect that as members of a minority group acquire cultural characteristics of the dominant culture, or associate with majority group members, their visitation patterns will resemble that of the majority culture. This
theory is promising for studying Hispanic-American and Asian-American groups with unique cultural characteristics, such as foreign language, foreign birth, and recent immigration experiences. It remains unclear as to how the assimilation theory applies to African-Americans or Native-Americans.

The assimilation theory has been met with skepticism by many researchers for being both “ethnocentric and patronizing.” (Alba and Nee, 1997) The theory is based on the premise that assimilation is both inevitable and desirable. Many of those that support the theory believe that the socio-economic status of ethnic minorities would improve once their ethnic cultural traits were replaced by mainstream American values. The assimilation theory assumes that, over time, ethnic minorities will progressively lose their ethnic uniqueness and blend into the American “melting pot,” or that ethnic minorities will lose their distinctiveness by conforming to Anglo American standards. (Yetman, 1985)

Despite its connection with prejudiced viewpoints, the assimilation theory remains an important concept for understanding cultural influences on outdoor recreation behavior. Re-examining certain implications of the assimilation theory has led to other concepts such as selective acculturation and segmented assimilation. Selective acculturation signifies the strategic retention of core ethnic values and practices among ethnic minorities, while still adopting certain mainstream cultural traits. (Gramann, 1993) Segmented assimilation acknowledges that the United States is both a multi-cultural and socio-economically stratified society, which creates a variety of possible assimilation outcomes. (Portes, 1996) These two concepts require further research, but offer
potential insights into the outdoor recreation use patterns of various ethnic groups.

**Discrimination Theory**

By crediting racial/ethnic group under-representation simply to socio-economic and cultural factors, the marginality and ethnicity hypotheses and the assimilation theory all ignore another important factor that may influence minority participation use in the outdoors. The third major theory concerning racial/ethnic minority participation in outdoor recreation activities is known as the discrimination theory. This theory posits that discrimination is a barrier to greater minority participation in outdoor recreation. Discrimination, either through perception or actual experience, wields a negative affect on participation by racial and ethnic minorities. Discrimination may result from interpersonal interaction with other visitors or with agency personnel within a recreational area.

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted concerning the discrimination theory. In the limited studies that have tried to examine the relationship between discrimination and minority recreation use patterns, the results have either lacked substantial empirical evidence or a comprehensive analysis of how discrimination actually affects participation. To understand the effect of discrimination on racial and ethnic minority recreation use patterns, researchers would need to identify the types and range of discrimination within recreational settings. Discrimination must be examined at many different levels including the individual or interpersonal level and institutional discrimination. Furthermore, studies must research minority responses to such discrimination;
for example: displacement, non-participation, or altering social groups. Future research will provide a clearer picture of the effects of discrimination on minority use patterns and provide possible solutions to alleviate the problem.

**Motivation for Outdoor Recreation**

It is important for outdoor recreational managers to learn what techniques can be utilized to attract more minorities to national parks and other outdoor recreational areas. One of the interesting tenets of the discrimination theory is that structural discrimination is the cause for the under-representation of minorities. In this case, structural discrimination refers mainly to prejudice in terms of the opportunities and facilities provided in an outdoor recreational area. Different racial/ethnic groups may have different preferences in terms of the outdoor recreation activities in which they like to participate. The discrimination hypothesis suggests that current outdoor recreational areas may be more conducive to activities in which Whites like to participate more than activities in which minorities like to participate.

If structural discrimination is actually part of the reason that racial/ethnic minorities tend to engage less in outdoor recreational activities, then it is pertinent for outdoor managers to have a better understanding of the activities preferred by minorities. Several studies have been conducted on the differences between racial/ethnic groups in terms of their motivations for participating in outdoor recreation. These studies, in fact, have noted major differences in the values and priorities of various ethnic/racial groups.
A study done by Floyd, Outley, Bixler, and Hammitt examined how ethnicity/race may affect environmental preferences. The researchers surveyed 1200 Black and White middle- and high-school students to study their preferences in outdoor recreation. The study found that the desire for modern comforts had in inverse relationship with the desire for wildland environments. Furthermore, the study showed that a preference for wildland environments is correlated with a preference for wildland activities. The results from the surveys indicated that Whites have a stronger preference for wildland environments than Blacks. Thus, White people are more likely than Black people to engage in wildland activities.

The results from the study done by Floyd, et al. have been supported by studies performed by other researchers. A study by Dwyer and Hutchinson discovered that African-Americans tended to prefer developed facilities and conveniences more than Whites. Their surveys indicated that 53% of African Americans showed a strong preference for developed facilities, as opposed to 24% of Whites. Conversely, 57% of Whites showed a strong preference for preserved natural areas, compared to only 27% of African-Americans.

A study done by Walker and Deng researched the differences between Whites and Chinese in terms of motivations for outdoor recreation. The study was performed in a Canadian National Park that laid in close proximity to both large Chinese and White populations. Members of each racial group were surveyed to determine their motivations for engaging in outdoor recreational activities. The study found that people’s motivations for outdoor recreation was
correlated to their value system. Chinese people tended to prefer activities that coincided with values of group membership and humility/modesty. On the other hand, White people tended to prefer activities that coincided with autonomy/independence.

In 1990, Irwin, Gartner, and Phelps conducted a study comparing differences in environmental preferences between Whites and Hispanics. The study, performed at a New Mexico campground, found that both Whites and Hispanics preferred minimally developed campgrounds. However, the group ethic groups had different interpretations of development. Those surveyed were asked to list their priorities in facilities and design when choosing a campground. White people listed quiet surroundings (24%), privacy (14%), water (14%), and space between campsites (13%) as their major priorities. On the other hand, Hispanics listed toilets (39%), camping space at each site (25%), water (14%), and fire rings (8%). Furthermore, Whites tended to prefer being far away from other campers more than Hispanics (67% vs. 28% respectively). (Irwin, et al., 1990)

Other studies have been also been conducted concerning racial/ethnic differences in terms of motivations for outdoor recreational facilities. The overwhelming evidence provided by these studies show that there are, in fact, differences in outdoor recreation preferences between Whites and minorities. Overall, White people tend to be willing to travel farther to get to outdoor recreational areas. They also tend to prefer less developed facilities and place a higher value on the solitude of natural areas. In terms of activity preferences,
White people showed a stronger preference for activities that encourage independence such as camping and hiking.

While there are intricate differences among the different ethnic/racial minority groups, some generalizations can be made about the outdoor recreational preferences of minorities as a whole. Unlike their White counterparts, minorities tend to be less willing to travel far distances to engage in outdoor recreational activities. Also, once at outdoor recreation areas, minorities show a stronger preference for better maintained facilities and modern comforts. As for recreational activities, minorities tend to show a stronger preference for activities that involve group participation. Minorities are more likely to engage in activities such as picnics, BBQs, and ball playing.

How to Promote Increased Minority Participation

Outdoor recreational managers must use information to develop ideas to increase ethnic/racial minority participation in outdoor recreational activities. Research concerning the motivations behind participation in outdoor recreation can help managers design facilities that encourage higher minority participation. However, aside from making changes to park facilities, there are several other possible techniques to encourage minority participation.

The Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) composed a report which listed possible actions that could be taken to encourage minority participation. Here are some of the strategies that the commission suggested to bolster minority participation:
• Engaging a broader spectrum of people in park planning
• Breaking down the existing barriers to creating new and innovative partnerships – leading to more community support and involvement
• Addressing issues of equity regarding services provided to minority communities
• Creating community liaison positions within the park
• Stimulating and facilitating community participation in park protection and enhancement
• Implementing community education projects and programs developed by the National Park Service and its partners
• Seeking innovative ways of meeting community needs without compromising park resources and values

(ORRRC, 2002)

These strategies would do a lot to encourage increased minority participation in outdoor recreational activities. The strategies listed encourage minorities to have more involvement with planning and upkeep of outdoor recreational areas. This gives minorities a larger stake in natural areas and, thus, provides greater incentive for minorities to utilize them. Another important strategy presented by ORRRC is to educate people about national parks and outdoor recreation. Once people, especially children, are more knowledgeable about outdoor recreation, they will have a stronger desire to engage in outdoor recreational activities. For example, if a child is taught about the wonders of a
national park, then they will obviously have a greater desire to visit the park and experience the excitement themselves.

Aside from the strategies presented by ORRRC, several other techniques may be utilized to encourage high minority participation. One possible technique would be to establish national parks and other outdoor recreational areas closer to minority/urban populations. Studies have concluded that minorities are less willing than Whites to travel far distances to engage in outdoor recreational activities. The costs of traveling may be prohibitive for many families and, thus, prevent them from participation. Thus, by placing outdoor recreational areas close to minority populations, these areas become more accessible and people are more likely to utilize them.

Another possible strategy is to lower the costs associated with outdoor recreation. For example, parks could lower their entrance fees as means to entice more visitors. Furthermore, other costs associated with visiting outdoor recreational facilities can also be lowered to foster increased participation. Lowering costs for things such as hotels and campgrounds may entice more minority participation. The marginality hypothesis cited lack of income as a reason for the under-representation of minorities in outdoor recreation. Moreover, studies have shown that minorities have a stronger preference for modern comforts. Thus, by lowering the costs of hotels at national parks and other such areas, minorities would be more inclined to visit such areas.

A final strategy would entail increased minority representation at national parks and other recreational areas. These areas could hire more
rangers/employees representing ethnic/racial minority groups. Ethnic/racial minorities may feel more comfortable associating with employees of their own ethnicity/race. Another possible technique is to establish more parks that address the history and culture of racial/ethnic groups. The history given in many national parks does not include minority involvement. Thus, minorities may not be interested in visiting national parks to learn about another race’s history and culture. By increasing the representation of ethnic/racial minorities at national parks and other outdoor recreational areas, recreation managers will encourage increased minority visitation and participation.

Conclusion

Researchers have proposed various theories concerning the under-representation of minorities in outdoor recreation. Many studies have been conducted to test the validity of these theories. Thus far, these studies have proved to be inconclusive about the precise reasons for the lack of minority participation. However, I believe that it would be wise not to look at one particular factor as being the cause for this trend. Rather, it would seem that all of these theories have some validity and there are a multitude of causes for the under-representation of minorities in outdoor recreation. Thus, outdoor recreational managers must employ a wide variety of techniques to encourage greater minority participation. One of the more important actions that can be taken is to educate minorities, especially children, about outdoor recreational experiences. This will give them added interest to engage in outdoor activities.
Another important strategy is to allow minorities to become more involved in outdoor recreational areas through planning, employment, or management. This will provide ethnic/racial minority groups with greater incentive to visit such areas. Techniques such as these will be crucial for outdoor recreational managers in the future. As the minority population continues to increase in the United States, it will more important to try to encourage increased participation from minority groups. The legitimacy of the National Park Services and like organizations may eventually hinge upon their ability to attract minority participation.
Bibliography


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