Reasonable Illusions: Participatory Planning and Protected Areas

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Abstract: Popular images of protected areas are among the best known images in the world. They are composed in equal part of myth, hype and rare glimpses into incredible places. These images, of peaceful unchanging areas, disguise the bitter debate over the real purpose of protected areas, and our continually changing relationship with nature and wild places.
The use of participatory approaches to plan and manage land, water, and conservation-based interventions is now well established. Today, few projects in natural resource management are funded unless they contain substantial components of community involvement. This is especially true in protected area development where participatory approaches form the entry point for working with local communities and user groups. Despite the increasing numbers of participatory initiatives, few initiatives remain uncontested or non-controversial. This paper offers seeks to suggest why the popular image, a reflection of social values and influences, is important to visitor management in protected areas as a unifying factor.

This essay offers some loosely organised comments arranged around the subject of protected areas. The essay seeks to suggest why the notion of protected areas as a social construction is important for visitor management. In order to establish a context for this essay, let us begin with two caveats. First, what we offer here are personal observations based on our experience with state parks in Florida. Second, we are also attempting to draw attention to the general way we think (and talk) about protected areas through the mirror of the wilderness concept. Though different from one another, both 'protected areas' and 'wilderness areas' are essential elements of protection (Aplet, 1999; Barry, 1998). Wilderness is the idea and place where the concept of protection reaches its highest expression. The concept therefore affects all management decisions and actions in protected areas.

On Wilderness

Having worked with and in parks for several years, we realise that the notion of wilderness as man-made nature can be problematic. The concept 'wilderness' is highly valued in society (Manning and Valliere, 1996) as an apparently natural phenomenon, not dependent on human thought or obvious human constructs such as experience, recreation or leisure. Flora, fauna, land and space, however, are all found in parks, wilderness, forests, wildlands and protected areas. These designations are based on the interpretations and needs of human beings, and do not reflect an objective reality. Our view is that the concept of a social construction forces us to confront the extent to which we impose our own meanings on the physical world.

Wilderness is created from the interplay of thought, language and cultural practices. For example, the image of Yellowstone National Park is one of the best known in the world. The popular image of the world's first national park is composed of equal parts myth, hype and rare glimpses of the incredible wonder of the place. The awe, and in some cases reverence, inspired by its landscapes continues to dominate our ideas of, and about, protected areas. All protected areas are established, and measured by this image.

Popular images lead to popular places, and popular places suffer a different fate. Protected areas inevitably become sites of clash and contradiction. Every popular place that has been "discovered" is a vortex of different needs and desires. At some point a choice has to be made between integrity of place, local quality of life, and imposed popularity that brings "progress" and change that may or may not support local interests. One could argue long and hard about when, or even if, the boundary between the "unspoiled" and the "popular" is breached in any one place. Our continually changing relationship with nature and wild places, and our altered preconceptions about them bring complex emotional and political conflicts (between people and place or people within a place) to play.

Despite this, the basic purposes of protective designations have not changed. What has occurred is that changes in population, income, transportation, leisure time and recreation have altered the demands placed on protected areas. Their managers are often caught between the contradicting goals of preservation and protection

for specific purposes and benefits, and the need to provide use and enjoyment for this generation of users. As a result, judging whether a protected area actually fulfills its role is far more complicated than knowing whether a protected area is sufficiently large and representative to sustain desired ecological attributes in the long-term.

On Nomenclature

Because of places like Yellowstone, protected areas are among the most strongly imagined pieces of our cultural heritage. Along with individual experiences, there are cultural and symbolic images, such as Yogi Bear, that become a part of the popular place image. In addition, the constructed images can also include family stories, postcards, the poster at the local travel agent's office, the neighbour's video of their visit, and a thousand and one small anecdotes that are a part of our lives. All these provide us with an underlying agreement about what wilderness means. Whether as proponents or opponents, we understand that the wilderness image frames the debate about the (social and physical) boundaries. Because of all the ways in which these images intrude on our consciousness, it should come as no surprise that visitation to these places continues to increase. As visitors, we search for a glimpse of the wonder, and a chance to embrace the imagery.

Before considering visitation, we need to consider the wilderness definition. In one definition, it is a pristine environment free from any human impact. By this definition, wilderness no longer exists in the Northern Hemisphere (Vitousek, 1999). Wilderness may also be defined in legislative terms. This definition recognises wilderness as an area affected primarily by the forces of nature. Here, wilderness is an area of unmodified naturalness that is of a size and remoteness that makes protection from change feasible. Because ecosystems presuppose that the whole is greater than the sum, wilderness defined in ecosystem terms makes a great deal of sense.

The use of ecosystem terminology reflects the scientific foundation of conservation. First, it provides agreement about characteristics (rather than appearances), and second, it provides a suitable vehicle for discussions about large-scale protection. Yet, in a curious way, the confusion in the public debate suggests that the scientific terminology is not well understood. Why is this? An ecosystem has intrinsic characteristics; yet often lacks a unifying principle. The elimination or addition of components continually changes the system. It is difficult to argue that certain components are essential, and claims that equate change with destruction are rarely supported. The problem here, as we see it, is that if the ecosystems cannot be destroyed or preserved, it is not at all clear how visitors to them can be managed.

On Visitors

Tourism has always been an important use of protected areas. In quantitative terms, a tourist, and thus tourism, is usually defined as a person who travels for non-business reasons for a distance of over 50 miles and overnights away from their usual place of residence (Gunn, 1991). In many areas, the managers of the protected areas are also responsible for tourism management. However, the market for tourism is increasing, and today many more (direct and indirect) stakeholders are involved, resulting in many types of tourism and multiple definitions. From the various existing definitions for tourism, we think that there are two important points that have ramifications for successful visitor management. First, there is the view that visitation is an individual human experience that some anthropologists theorise is actually a ritual human, cultural experience (Graburn, 1983). The second view is that tourism is an export economic activity.

As an experience: The individual dream of a future experience at a place other than home or office motivates people to travel. When people are in the time and space of this extraordinary, mystical place, the rules of their ordinary lives are usually suspended. They have high intensity, deeply moving experiences, and it is the guaranteed repeat of the experience that brings them back a second time, or inspires them to "spread the word" about a destination.

As an economic activity: Tourism can also be viewed as a unique export economic activity. Its uniqueness lies with the nature of the activity. Rather than shipping goods and services to the purchaser, the purchaser comes to the point of origin to procure and experience them. This phenomenon often leads to the many undesirable externalities -congestion, pollution, and crime - that occur at tourism locations.

From these, the fundamental elements of visitation management are formed. They are experienced by local residents and visitors in the visitor domain (Winterbottom, 1993). Local residents are part of the experience. Their culture contributes to a sense of place. About the visitor, Winterbottom remarks: "The truly successful visitor destination is one that is concerned more with visitor quality than quantity. The quality visitor is the one that is most likely to repeat the visit and to respect the visitor environment - both natural and man made". Winterbottom defines the visitor domain as the location where tourist facilities are clustered. For protected areas, we believe this is too narrow a scope. Because of the popular image, the visitor domain in protected areas includes those elements, located both within the boundaries and outside of them that enable us to enhance appreciation of the resource.

Addressing the visitor domain is critical to enabling proactive visitor management. The concept allows us to define boundaries is space that

might otherwise not be recognised as legitimate by multiple stakeholders. It acknowledges that tourism in protected areas has implications for the areas around them. Furthermore, it encompasses the economic aspects of tourism, and allows an even distribution of the benefits. The challenge of tourism management is for obtaining consensus, not on the issues that cause the least disagreement, but on the strategies and objectives, that produce the best results.

On Public Involvement

Public involvement in protected areas provides a framework for addressing conservation issues within a social and political context. A context that is often polarised over not only what constitutes a desired future, but is also characterised by "messy", interrelated problems. What we have are situations that cannot be dealt with in isolation of other problems. Today, more than ever, it is important to co-ordinate efforts to manage tourism in protected areas, and ensure participation by key stakeholders.

The state park system in Florida has chosen to address these challenges through the public development of park specific management plans. We have found, that where these participatory initiatives have worked, it is because of individuals and groups that have seen the benefits of working collaboratively based on:

- Development of an agreed vision;
- Identification of all the stakeholders;
- Establishment of the partnerships that need to operate;
- building a consensus on the future direction;
- development of the actions needed to achieve the agreed direction; and
- undertaking an implementation plan.

In this process, the most complicated part is the first. To have an agreed upon vision, there must be a culturally accepted definition for protection.

What is a protected area? Answers to this question depend on the specific region and goals outlined for a particular area. The definition depends on social preferences or the natural values to be preserved. Added to this is public perception - the personal interpretation and knowledge of protected areas by the general population. To define the range of existing public perceptions, some polarised stereotypes are presented. First, some people believe that protected areas are playgrounds created for the benefit of the recreational user groups. These people resent and discount the protective aspects. Another group values them as a means of gaining income from tourists. This group wants to see as much development as possible and often feels threatened by increased public involvement. A third group is conservationists, who see protected areas as the basis for conserving natural resources and biodiversity. The fourth group views them as a disruption to their way of life and traditional values. This groups is fiercely protective

of historic access and use rights, and is often wary of the changes that tourism can bring to the local community. In short, though all protected areas have an objective reality as physical places, what makes that reality is based on personal cognition, emotion, values and experiences.

All of these perceptual positions are valid. Combined they are integral to defining the visitor domain. Participatory planning enables us to recognise this inherent conflict, and still attempt to bridge the gap based on an accepted (compromise) vision of and for a place. At the same time, the confusion over the terminology has left us with an ephemeral representation - ecosystem - that is not beneficial to the harnessing of social considerations. To ensure the success of participatory planning initiatives we must be clear on social, cultural and political reasons of why these places are special. Furthermore, their place image must be accepted, and it must be popular.

On Visitor Management

The fact that many of us are uncomfortable with the concept of culturally constructed protection makes agreement on future strategies and objectives much harder. The use of scientific terminology undermines, in many respects, the kind of thinking that presupposes the boundary imposed by the protective designation. If an ecosystem lacks a central unifying principle, then what is the goal of visitor management? We are losing the image of that otherworldly place that offers respite from our daily cycle. To put it in another way, if we cannot create an image that is agreed on by all of the stakeholders, how can we discuss the placement of limits on use?

Here we would suggest that the popular image of protected areas is a visitor management tool we need. It is crucial for defining the visitor domain and for visitor management. It connects some people to wildland values, is a social force, and carries a constructed historical reality that has consequences. The process of creating and sharing meaning from "wilderness experiences" requires language, metaphors of self, nature and most importantly, the cultural frameworks supplied by the popular image.

Traditionally, management was concerned with human impacts to wilderness recreation experiences and to the plants and soil directly affected by this recreation, principally in campsites and trails. To mitigate these, managers generally had little compunction about closing campsites or re-routing trails. These actions are localised and do not impinge on most visitors' perceptions. In this manner, the last three decades have seen multiple attempts to quantify and optimise visitor management in protected areas. Yet, most managers today face a set of problems that are largely the result of significant long-term impacts. Few people would disagree that inside protected areas, weeds,

pathogens, feral animals and pollution from external sources are as significant as tourism and recreation (Buckley and Pannell, 1990). The combination of these with the small-scale, traditional interventions, new recreation forms and increased visitation are calling into question the ability to maintain the wilderness recreation experience.

For example, many of us would say that for a wilderness experience, minimum area requirements are conditional, and depend on explicitly framing the desired condition. The general conceptual model is that user densities affect user perceptions of crowding that in turn, affect user trip satisfactions (Graefe et al., 1984; Manning 1985). If the goal is the provision of solitude for recreationists, the number of visitors dispersed within any one visitor's "viewscape" is the determining factor as determined by topography, and proximity to anthropogenic structures. Nevertheless, we live in a society where increased and increasing human density is a given. Whether you are walking down the street, sitting in traffic or waiting to enter a park there is almost always a mass of people surrounding you. If you accept that wilderness is socially defined, then a wilderness experience while surrounded by two hundred people can have the same inspirational aspects of the solitary wilderness experience. Furthermore, if we use the popular image as a measure, we can simultaneously define the experience through a series of socially affected expectations.

In this context it is revealing how the mundane affects the sublime. In *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey described park rangers "going quietly nuts answering the same three basic questions five hundred times a day: (1) Where's the john? (2) How long's it take to see this place? (3) Where's the coke machine?" The toilet comes first, the coke machine a close third. We mention this in recognition of a fundamental human need, whether those humans are in a cathedral, a shopping mall, or park. Moreover, it is an often neglected reality. In all the time we argue over aesthetic sensitivities, carrying capacities and complex demands on even more complex resources, most visitors will ask comfort level questions first - and they may ask no others. If the questions are answered, and a basic comfort level provided we have already succeeded. By providing the basics, we give visitors the freedom to form their own version of the popular image. We have given them a chance to embrace the myth and the hype, and allowed them a rare glimpse into the wonder of a place.

In taking this forward, one of the options available as a visitor management tool is this: instead of trying to establish a range of acceptable visitor caused disruptions, we must re-establish the representational image. This is that one element that all stakeholders can be accept and understand. Only then can we manage visitors in and around protected areas. Only then can we get acceptance

for use limits. This view is both broader in scope and narrower in focus than current definitions.

Furthermore, because protected areas are first and foremost, social constructions, participatory planning offers a way of obtaining consensus and agreement on the objectives and strategies that produce the best results for both stakeholders and the environment, while attracting visitors. That this is often a compromise vision, is a given in this type of process. The implication is that every visitor related conflict in the history of protected areas, and therefore, every suggestion of conflicts yet to come, can be traced to some compromise of the popular, ideal, image. To an erosion in the public acceptance of popular image and its socially inspired aspects.

In Conclusion

Combined, participatory planning and the image of a place inevitably connect us with the cultural and historical forces of societies. If you live in the US, the words and images created by John Muir, David Thoreau, Wallace Stegner, Aldo Leopold and Theodore Roosevelt define the political debate. For protected area management, ecosystem approaches, ecological management, social carrying capacity and conflict management reflect specific culturally bound facts and values.

Currently, tourism offers one of the best prospects for conserving wild places in most parts of the world. It is not an ideal tool for conservation, though in the short term, it is perhaps the only one with sufficient political and economic reach to be effective. Participatory planning offers a means for harnessing and shaping this social power. Tourism is a means to ensure conservation, and the partnership of conservation and political power is not, nor will it ever be, easy. In this context, it is also important to remember that management represents a vehicle for accomplishing goals. It is not a goal unto itself. The only way in which we can productively use this social power (to the benefit of protected areas) is by tempering our illusions.

In this sense, in terms of visitor management, the future of protected areas depends on a return to their past. We must return to the concept of protective designation as a social construction with implications on popular images and public imaginings. We must do so because the place image and its public acceptance allow us to define the characteristics of tourism in any locale. The management of stakeholder expectations through the popular image and a participatory process enables the achievement of reasonable social solutions for protected areas. The management of expectations is important here because for any given problem in a protected area, there will never be a permanent solution (to find that one correct answer). We can only establish temporary resolutions (to find more or less useful responses)

that are fulfilled the matching of the personal experience with the popular image.

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