

A place-based approach to building partnerships with recreational resource users

Po-Hsin Lai, University of Newcastle, Taiwan, po-hsin.lai@newcastle.edu.au;
Yi-Chung Hsu, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan

Introduction

As the largest land-based national park in Taiwan, Yushan National Park encompasses a highly mountainous landscape of 105,490 hectares in size. Mt. Jade Main Peak, which is 3,952 meters above sea level, is one of the most significant park features and represents the highest mountain in the nation and Northeast Asia. Every year about 35,000 hikers visit the Main Peak and this accounts for 77% of annual visits to the park's ecologically sensitive areas. Management issues have arisen due to concerns about recreational impacts on the fragile alpine ecosystems found on segments of the most popular trail leading to the Main Peak and potential conflicts among recreational users of the area. Our study examined three stakeholder groups involved in the use of hiking trails located within the ecologically sensitive areas of Yushan National Park. The purpose was to gain a better understanding of the values, beliefs and interests that each group ascribed to Yushan, and draw implications for developing partnerships between these groups and the park service.

Literature review

A place represents more than a geographic location. It is also a socially constructed entity imbued with plural meanings (Stokowski, 2002; Williams & Patterson, 2007). From a social representation approach, reality is reconstructed and represented by individuals and thus becomes integrated into their value system (Abric, 2001). The processes of representation allow individuals to incorporate the objective characteristics of an entity, their previous experiences arising from interacting with the entity, and their belief and value systems into the production of a representation. Through these processes, plural representations of the same social object are created by persons varied in their social, historical, cultural, and personal connections with the object, that, in turn, guide their orientation toward it (Howarth, 2006). While most national parks were established with two seemingly clear goals, conservation and public enjoyment, balancing between these goals has proven to be challenging because different stakeholders represent national parks differently. These representations may guide their behaviors in the parks and responses to park related issues (e.g., resource uses, collaborative management), and, therefore, facilitate or impede sustainable park management.

Methods

Informants were recruited based on their experience use history associated with Yushan National Park and motivations behind their visits, two factors contributing to how individuals view their relationships with recreational places (Hammit, Backlund, & Bixler, 2004). Forty-two

study participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling, and categorized into three groups. The first group comprised ten less experienced hikers who visited the ecologically sensitive areas within the park primarily for leisure and recreation, and were less committed to mountaineering. The second group consisted of sixteen experienced hikers who belonged to various non-profit mountaineering clubs, had visited the area at least numerous times for recreation, guiding tours, or mountaineering training, and were highly committed to mountaineering. Sixteen professional hikers who had frequented the area primarily due to their role as a tour guide or porter were highly involved in mountaineering, and lived entirely or partially on the services they provided for various non-profit or for-profit mountaineering entities were included in the third group. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to prompt informants to provide detailed accounts of the meaning they ascribed to Yushan National Park.

Results

Three of the most recurrent themes from the interviews were Yushan National Park as (i) a place of significant environmental features, (ii) a place of easy access, and (iii) a national park managed for conservation and public enjoyment. The topographic feature of the Main Peak as the highest mountain in the nation and Northeast Asia was prominent among inexperienced hikers when describing the meaning of Yushan. Frequently, this feature of the Main Peak was expressed as representing the national identity of Taiwan and had played a major role in motivating inexperienced hikers' visit to the area. Ascending the Main Peak marked a significant milestone in the life of many informants in this group. Although this representation of Yushan was also endorsed by experienced and professional hikers, a broader array of features (e.g., ecological, geological, geographic, meteorological) that characterized various locations and phenomena within the park was also identified by these two groups.

The major differences between the hiker groups as well as the major differences between these groups and the park service rested in the remaining two themes. Well-maintained hiking trails, especially the most popular trail leading to the Main Peak that facilitated easy access to the area were appreciated by the most inexperienced hikers. The infrastructure installed by the park service to improve access and ensure hiker safety was, however, regarded by many experienced and some professional hikers to be in conflict with their ideal image of mountains as a setting to escape to wilderness and confront challenges. Moreover, easy access and the increased availability of commercial entities that provided guiding services and logistic supplies had signifi-

cantly increased the number of hikers and tour guides who had no or insufficient mountaineering training or did not acquire mountaineering ethics. This growing phenomenon was contradictory to what was conceived by many experienced and some professional hikers as mountaineering that required a certain level of skill and knowledge and respectful attitudes toward mountains. Meanwhile, this issue was less problematic for many professional hikers who suggested that commercial mountaineering services provided a mechanism to ensure inexperienced hikers' safety and better regulate their environmental impacts.

Yushan as a government managed place for conservation and recreation has a representation agreed upon by most of our informants. However, park management was viewed

by many experienced and some professional hikers as restricting public access and hindering hikers from expressing their aspiration for their attachment to mountains. This is because of implementation of a fixed daily entry quota to protect ecological and recreational values.

Stakeholders' representations of Yushan are incompatible with the management objectives of the park service can lead to uncooperative attitudes and behaviours toward park regulations. Mechanisms focusing on negotiating and reconciling differences in stakeholder representations and reinforcing their shared values will be needed for mutually trusting and collaborative relationships to be cultivated.

Abric, J.-C. (2001) A structural approach to social representation.

In Deaux, K. & Philog Ne, G. (Eds.) *Representations of the social: Bridging theoretical traditions*. Malden, MA, Blackwell.

Hammit, W. E., Backlund, E. A. & Bixler, R. D. (2004) Experience use history, place bonding and resource substitution of trout anglers during recreation engagements. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36, 356–378.

Howarth, C. (2006) A social representation is not a quiet thing: Exploring the critical potential of social representations theory. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45, 65–86.

Stokowski, P.A. (2002) Languages of place and discourses of power: Constructing new sense of place. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 34, 368–382.

Williams, D. R. & Patterson, M. E. (2007) Snapshots of what, exactly? A comment on methodological experimentation and conceptual foundations in place research. *Society & Natural Resources*, 20, 931–937.