

# The outdoor recreation – environmentalism relationship

Daniel Wolf-Watz, Mid Sweden University, Sweden, daniel.wolf-watz@miun.se

Environmental sustainability is a common theme in contemporary public debate and research, and it is increasingly used to examine outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism (see for example McCool & Moisey, 2001). This research project focuses on the relationship between outdoor recreation and environmentalism and includes two general questions:

- i) whether and how environmentalism influences outdoor recreation preferences and participation,
- and*
- ii) whether and how outdoor recreation related practices influence levels of environmentalism.

As the project is not yet completed, the paper presents results only relating to the first question but offers suggestions on how to proceed on the second.

## Influence on outdoor recreation

The question of whether and how environmentalism influences outdoor recreation preferences and participation has been the focus of two separate studies. The first study was based on data from a Swedish national survey (see for example Fredman et al., 2008) and took a broad view on outdoor recreation preferences. That study's results show that environmentalists behave differently in various ways when compared to those classified as non-environmentalists. This includes spending more time in the outdoors, claiming closeness to nature as a motive for outdoor recreation participation, possession of a second home as well as referring to outdoor recreation opportunities when choosing residential location. When it comes to recreational activities, environmentalists prefer those with little or no impact on the environment as demonstrated, for example, by their avoidance of extractive (e.g., hunting) and motorized activities (e.g. snowmobiling). Still, the findings were inconsistent in that while environmentalists avoid some extractive and motorized activities, other similar activities, such as fishing and motor boating, were not avoided.

Paradoxically, the study based on the Swedish national survey also found that environmentalists do not hesitate to travel from residential areas for participation in outdoor recreation, despite the ongoing debate on the impact of various transportation systems on global warming. Taking this result as a starting point, the second study went on to examine how environmentalists relate to the outdoor recreation landscape and what processes underlie choices relating to the use of natural settings. Data was gathered by means of focus group interviews with district boards, and a content analysis of the members' magazine, of the Swedish youth organisation Nature and Youth Sweden (Fältbiologerna), which combines a strong commitment to the environment with a great outdoor interest.

Findings show that the organization engages in various outdoor activities, preferably at natural settings characteri-

zed by the landscape qualities of natural quietness, and the absence of other people and other human impacts. These landscape qualities are defined within the organization's communicative contexts, such as the members' magazine and various social gatherings (indoors and outdoors), and reflect a continuing construction of social representations based on the core values and ideas of the organization. In these contexts, landscapes are classified and valued, and places are made by the defining, naming, and the ascribing of shared meanings. Thus, the representations provide a social and spatial orientation by which some recreational choices become more desirable, privileged, meaningful and understandable than others.

Nature and Youth Sweden engage in outdoor recreation to set and distinguish themselves socially and form a group identity. Therefore, it seems to be of importance not only to choose one environment over others, but to ensure a distance to those who represent the latter environments and the downsides of the society that they (environments and people) stand for. By doing this, a spatial and social distance is created to places and people that represent aspects of society that are in conflict with the organization's ideas, values and norms. The places are valuable as long as they maintain their qualities, of which the absence of *the other* is critical.

Nature and Youth Sweden is an urban based organization, and transportation by various modes, including motorized vehicles, is a requirement for visiting the preferred sites, characterized by pristine nature and absence of human influence. In fact, the perceived importance of going to these places for maintaining their identity as environmentalists implies a compromise with some of their environmental values. Still, the organization emphatically rejects air travel, which is agreed upon as being an unacceptable assault on the environment due to its sizeable carbon footprint.

In conclusion, the findings show that environmentalists are distinguishable within outdoor recreation in various ways, including their preferences for activities and natural settings.

## Influence on levels of environmentalism

The second research question of the project is whether and how outdoor recreation related practices influence levels of environmentalism. Within the Swedish outdoor recreation tradition there have always been elements of environmentalism, drawing inspiration from Romanticism and "close to nature"-ideals. This is particular evident when looking at Swedish outdoor organizations for youth where encounter with nature have long been viewed as a means of developing pro-environmental behavior. Moreover, results from a recent study on outdoor recreational habits among the Swedish population shows that for many people spending time in the outdoors implies "an improved understanding of nature's interaction and that all is connected" as well as a "feeling of being part of [this] nature" (Fredman et al.,

2008). Still, research has yet to find a clear causal relationship between encounters with nature and pro-environmental attitudes and behavior (Hockett et al., 2004).

The forthcoming study will examine the relationship between environmentalism and outdoor recreation as a relational process, which includes the interactions between the recreationist, her socio-cultural contexts and the recreational landscape. Using the perspective of Bourdieu (1984, 1990), outdoor recreation participation will be seen as both a practice deriving from the habitus of an individual and, simultaneously, as a way of constructing habitus.

Therefore, in the study it will be theorized that the elusive question of the outdoor recreation-environmentalism relationship requires an understanding of environmental behavior as a construct in constant making. This making occurs within the dynamic relations between individuals and their various interacting contexts, of which outdoor recreation may be one. In this perspective, by the way it facilitates and frames social formation and interpersonal relationships, the recreational landscape is seen as a space of social interaction.

---

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.

Fredman, P., Karlsson, S-E., Romild, U. & Sandell, K. (Eds.) 2008. *Vilka är ute i naturen?*

Delresultat från en nationell enkät om friluftsliv och naturturism i Sverige. Forskningsprogrammet Friluftsliv i förändring, rapport nr. 1, juni 2008.

Hockett, K. S., McClafferty, J.A., & McMullin, S. L. (2004).

*Environmental concern, resource stewardship, and recreational participation: A review of the literature* (No. CMI-HDD-04-01). Virginia Tech, College of Natural Resources: Conservation Management Institute.

McCool, S.F. & Moisey, R.N. (2001). *Tourism, Recreation and Sustainability. Linking Culture and the Environment*. New York: CABI Publishing.