

Fear and loathing in the forest: Immigrant perceptions and experiences of natural area recreation in New Zealand

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Research on the participation of immigrants in outdoor nature-based recreation pursuits demonstrates that immigrants and ethnic minority groups have lower participation rates (Gramann & Allison, 1999). However, there is a call to go beyond participation rate research and explore the meaning and significance of participation or non-participation in recreation (Carr & Williams, 1993). Similarly, we also need to explore the mediated nature of engagement with outdoor recreation sites and to ask how the intersection of social place and geographical space informs inclusion or exclusion along ethnic lines (Darby, 2000).

New Zealand is similar to many Western societies in that immigrants from non-Western societies are now significantly represented in the population. Research and anecdotal data indicate that their outdoor nature-based participation rates differ from the settled majority, as do their perceptions of these natural habitats. Their lower participation rates are often contrasted with higher participation rates amongst settled New Zealanders. But research here to-date has not explored why these differences exist.

Understanding how and why people interact with space necessitates exploring how gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity produce and reproduce space and place and how power relations map leisure space/s. Not belonging – or being out of place and conversely belonging to a place and space, has been explored by various researchers empirically and theoretically. Darby's (2000) research, for example, illustrates how walking in the English countryside is deeply political, underpinned by a geography of inclusion and exclusion along class, racial and historical lines. Ethnic minorities such as Blacks and Asians have low participation rates in walking groups and do not commonly walk in the countryside alone. Following Lefebvre (1991), our analysis explores how social place intersects with geographic space and how gender, class and race shape the nature and the navigation of these spaces.

This paper draws on the qualitative component of a mixed method study conducted in the cities of Wellington and Auckland, New Zealand, which explored how new immigrants engage with non-human nature in protected areas – national and regional parks, their perceptions of these areas and what the implications are for the provision of leisure experiences in these spaces and places. In-depth, face to face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 recent immigrants who resided in the cities of Auckland and Wellington, both major immigrant destinations in New Zealand. Participants in the interviews were self-selected through a prior postal survey, and included people from: China (5), Colombia (1), Korea (1), Japan (1), South Africa (2), England (2), Russia (1), Zimbabwe (1), Tokelau (1), India (3), Philippines (4), Indonesia (1), and Samoa (2).

These interviews provide an opportunity for some tentative observations about what shapes immigrant experiences of outdoor nature-based recreation and what mediates understandings of national and regional parks in New Zealand.

The migrants' stories reported here provide a window on human/non human relationships in New Zealand society. Recent migrants in New Zealand bring with them environmental values and expectations of what recreational participation in outdoor nature based settings should and might entail. For some new migrants these relationships metaphorically parallel their settlement experiences. For many, the New Zealand landscapes are exotic and fear-filled places. For others, coming from places where the outdoors is a signifier for poverty and danger, they are places to avoid. For many they are simply uninteresting, creating challenges for how landscape 'managers' can create connections between these new citizens and New Zealand's natural places. This may particularly apply to those who come from societies that have different conceptualisations of the human/nature relationship e.g. Chinese migrants draw on their own philosophical traditions shaped by Confucianism and Daoism which stress the need for the cultivation of nature – whereas the dominant paradigm they encounter in New Zealand's park landscapes is one of ecological integrity, and naturalness at all costs. For immigrants, engaging with a new or 'alien' habitat such as a national or regional park can be problematic if their philosophical socialisation challenges dominant Western notions of what constitutes nature, the wild or a park and prescriptive understandings of what human relationships with 'nature' should entail. The migrant accounts in our study reveal clearly that the ability to find points of connection with the landscape is central to integration into a new society. Engagement with national and regional parks is a reflection of the politics of integration for new settlers in New Zealand society. This engagement is shaped by prior socialisation, ethnicity/race, class and gender and parks as social institutions reflect the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Sadly, for some, their descriptions of New Zealand parks and where they stand in relation to them tell us that there is no place or space for them.

Migrant perceptions and experiences of these natural habitats also throw into relief assumed givens about the role of national parks and the social and cultural function that these institutions fulfil (or could fulfil) in New Zealand society. Our research raises a number of important questions about the provision of outdoor leisure opportunities and also about the politics of the environment in New Zealand. It demonstrates that human/non-human relationships are not politically neutral, people do not see spaces and places through the same lens – there is no singular nature only a diversity of natures (McNaughten & Urry, 1998).

Differing cultural conceptions can directly challenge natural resource management which is shaped by dominant cultural conceptions which are typically unquestioned and taken for granted. There is no generic user in a multicultural society, but these institutions often presume there is. Increasingly pluralistic societies, such as New Zealand need to embrace broader and more critically reflective understandings of these places and spaces as sites that produce and reproduce social inequity, particularly if these places remain central to sustaining our habitat.

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