Social networks and visitor management: A review of land an agenda for future research

Patricia Stokowski[1]

The concept of "social networks" has received increasing attention in contemporary thinking about society and natural resources. The general concept of a network has been broadly used to describe actual or potential interconnections of people, ideas, environmental settings, physical linkages (such as transportation networks) or functions (such as exchange or helping behaviors). This paper focuses specifically on social networks, and offers an overview and analysis of social networks research related to people and agencies in natural resources contexts. Examples will be provided to illustrate the interactional and structural criteria of social networks, network analysis methods, and applications of social networks theorising in outdoor recreation and tourism. The intent is to provide a broad overview of historic and contemporary theorising and research about social networks, and to ask how social networks research might inform research related to visitor monitoring and management in natural resource-related contexts, especially in parks, outdoor recreation, and tourism settings.

In conducting research about social networks, scholars typically study three components of social systems: (a) the interactions of a set of social actors (individuals, collectives); (b) the linkages or relationships connecting actors, through which information, resources, affection, social support, and power, flow; and (c) the emergent structures of linked social roles and positions that result from social interactions, which can be visualised as webs or relationships. The analysis of social network patterns can help answer questions about how social actors (individuals and groups) strategically use social relationships and linkages to enact behaviors that accomplish desired goals.

Early applications of social networks research in outdoor recreation and tourism were described by Stokowski (1994), but other topics and applications for social networks study have emerged over time. Though much of the recent social networks research in natural resources-related disciplines seems specifically oriented to environmental governance questions (Bodin & Crona 2009; Prell, Hubacek & Reed 2009), studies of social networks have broad relevance for many kinds of social systems and many levels of analysis. For example, Bodin and Crona (2009: 367) note that social networks contribute to all kinds of collaborative social behavior "by facilitating, (i) the generation, acquisition and diffusion of different types of knowledge and information about the systems under management…, (ii) mobilisation (but maybe the spelling stands if it is a quote?) and allocation of key resources…, (iii) commitment to common rules among actors fostering willingness to engage in monitoring and sanctioning programs…, and (iv) resolution of conflicts…."

It is the contention of this paper that decisions about visitor management and monitoring in outdoor recreation and tourism could be more fully informed, justified, and implemented with an understanding of the social networks in which visitors, managers, businesses, agencies, and communities are enmeshed. Contrary to some traditional approaches to visitor management and monitoring (which have tended to focus primarily on the qualities of individuals – their numbers, motives, preferences, attitudes, behaviors), social networks research represents a perspective that focuses on the qualities of social interactions and relationships that foster recreation and tourism participation and support managerial decision-making. Social networks research can help turn attention away from individualistic, cognitive models and towards more complex, interdependent models of both visitor participation and behavior, and managerial action. Additionally, while social networks may appear to be fixed in time and space, they are always

[1] PhD, Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, 305 Aiken Center, 81 Carrigan Drive, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, USA, Patricia.Stokowski@uvm.edu

emergent and malleable, and thus they can help illustrate various stages and levels of social process related to group formation and dissolution, managerial approach, trans-boundary relations, on-site interactions, and discourses of power, among other topics.

Social networks are relevant to our research precisely because social behavior is relational. Individual and collective social actors, linked across social networks, come to think about the world in certain ways, share ideas and information and influence, make decisions for recreation and tourism participation, and initiate behaviors, based on their roles and positions in social networks. Some research questions associated with social networks in outdoor recreation and tourism contexts include analysis of collaboration and conflict in resource-based agency networks, stakeholder roles and power in natural resource controversies, discourse networks in community tourism planning and tourism development, information and education exchange in manager and visitor communication networks, and business and non-profit network relations for natural resource advocacy and protection. Ultimately, the aim of research about social networks is to help us raise questions about the forms and functions of social behavior and social process in outdoor recreation and tourism contexts, and to derive lessons for more effective visitor management and monitoring in recreation and tourism places.

References

Bodin, O. & B.I. Crona. (2009). The role of social networks in natural resource governance: what relational patterns make a difference? In: Global Environmental Change 19, p 366-374.

Bodin, O., Crona, B. & Ernstson, H. (2006). Social networks in natural resource management: what is there to learn from a structural perspective? In: Ecology and Society 11(2): r2. [online] URL: http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol11/iss2/resp2/

Larsen, J., Urry, J. & Axhousen, K.W. (2007). Networks and tourism: mobile social life. In: Annals of Tourism Research 34(1), p 244-262.

Lauber, T.B., Decker, D.J. & Knuth, B.A. (2008). Social networks and community-based natural resource management. In: Environmental Management 42(4), p 677-687.

Prell, C., Hubacek, K. & Reed, M. (2009). Stakeholder analysis and social network analysis in natural resource management. In: Society and Natural Resources 22(6), p 501-518.

Stokowski, P.A. (1994). Leisure in Society: A Network Structural Approach. London: Mansell.

van der Duim, E. (2007). Tourismscapes: an actor-network perspective. In: Annals of Tourism Research 34(4), p 961-976.