

# Social Science Research: Essential Tools for Managers

Melody Webb

THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY  
and  
GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK  
*Moose, Wyoming*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1982, at the Third World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas in Bali, the participants acknowledged a shift from the approach that a park should be protected *against* people, to the approach that it should be protected *for* people. Thus, if protected areas are for people, then they and their tangible contributions are also worthy of research. The field of "science" that researches people is social science. Those resources that represent the tangible aspects of culture with significance and integrity are called *cultural resources*.

Social science and cultural resources are important management tools. They can be used to study local populations and learn what is important to them. By recognizing the significance of local history and culture and by preserving tangible resources, managers can develop a rapport with and support from local communities. When managers find something in a local culture worthy of preservation, they increase that culture's self-esteem. When local communities believe that managers are interested in them as people and important to the protected areas, they will support the policies and practices of the managers.

Traditionally, site managers have accepted the concept of national significance but have resisted the concept of local significance. Although national laws provide for the preservation and protection of locally significant cultural resources, well-meaning managers—eager to “restore” a natural area—frequently neglect and even willfully destroy such resources. If managers recognized the value of local significance in winning local constituents and valuable political allies, they might apportion more time, planning, and management to these poorly managed resources. In short, managers need to perceive social science and cultural resources as assets, not liabilities.

### **SOCIAL SCIENCE AND CULTURAL RESOURCES**

To most protected area managers, social science means sociological and economic studies. But social science also includes the disciplines of history, anthropology, historic architecture, historic landscape architecture, and curation. Sociology, economics, and social anthropology study contemporary peoples; the others study past events, cultures, and settlements and their associated sites, structures, landscapes, and museum collections.

Cultural resources, like natural resources, occur in nearly every protected area in the world. Unlike many natural resources, they are non-renewable: once their significant material aspects are gone, they are lost forever. Good site managers try to minimize the loss of historic material and maximize the expression of historic character—those attributes that are most important for public appreciation.

Managers of protected areas generally acknowledge that research of natural resources is important. But research must be comprehensive—all-inclusive. To focus only on the flora and fauna minimizes the effec-

tiveness of the manager. In addition, past cultures provide additional resources that enhance national pride and offer greater understanding of national events. More important, all research—whether it is natural or human-related—is ultimately and intimately linked.

For research to be of value to site managers, it must be useful. Just as scientific research inventories natural resources, social science research inventories cultural resources. It also evaluates their significance to local and national populations, examines the needs and values of the local communities and the visiting public, and offers data for planning and management decisions. These data can assist site managers in confronting bogus charges of elitism and negative cost-benefit studies. In fact, with social science studies, managers can turn hostile landowners into strong constituents.

### **SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

Sociological studies help managers learn more about their visiting public. Visitors can be educated to support protected areas in the nation's political and budgetary processes. They pay taxes and entrance fees, spend money in local communities, and become an “industry” potentially compatible with the protected area. They can also be detrimental to the environment and destroy, inadvertently or deliberately, what should be saved.

These studies collect fundamental information on visitors, their activities, and their use patterns. They explore visitor expectations, values, and interests. They address overcrowding issues. They examine special populations, such as older people, foreign tourists, handicapped visitors, and minority groups. Finally, they assess what recreational opportunities should be provided, what constraints should be applied to protect the natural and cultural

resources, what should be done to avoid conflicts among visitors.

### **ECONOMIC RESEARCH**

Most managers find economic studies among the most valuable. Economic analyses demonstrate precisely how much, where, and in what ways protected areas contribute to the business development, employment opportunities, tax base, economic stability, and overall well-being of local communities and local-area economies. Such studies are effective in countering potentially harmful development forces.

These studies produce comprehensive economic analyses to quantify the value of protected areas. They assess how protected areas affect local and regional economies, measure intrinsic values, and rate community values and a protected area's contribution to the quality of life. They also examine regional tourism travel patterns and assess tourism's economic impacts.

Most protected areas have tried to avoid exploitive tourism incursions and encourage the more compatible ecotourism. Economic studies have found, however, that ecotourism does not always channel economic benefits back to the protected areas or local communities. They have also shown that, for ecotourism to work effectively, carrying-capacity limits are important to maintain the quality of the visitor experience.

### **SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

In tandem with sociological and economic studies, managers should consider anthropological studies. Social anthropology and ethnography offer tools to help understand local peoples and how they use protected areas. By working systematically with local communities, anthropologists identify resource and planning issues and the effect on them of protected-area policies. For example, the subsistence patterns or

the recreational uses that a local community have impact the protected area. In turn, policies restricting the consumption of wildlife or the equipment used for recreation affect the community's quality of life.

Anthropological research studies all aspects of a local group's culture and how it uses the protected area. They assess physical use as well as spiritual—hunting trails and place names to songs and religious landmarks. Information is gathered on harvest techniques and traditional uses of sites, structures, objects, and landscapes. These studies assess the importance of the natural and cultural resources for the culture's social, economic, and political systems.

By knowing a local culture, managers develop insights into working with them. They learn how local peoples perceive the protected area, how they use it and why, and how to turn adversaries into supporters without harming the resources.

### **HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

The most fundamental study to learn about an area's cultural resources is a comprehensive regional history. It provides greater understanding of national events, human motivations, and cause-and-effect relationships. Equally important, it surveys, identifies, and evaluates the significance of most cultural resources, such as buildings, structures, and landscapes. The regional history should not be limited to the boundaries of the protected area, but should seek continuities and patterns of past activities that bind the protected area to local populations. Moreover, a well-written narrative history can sensitize the site manager to past cultures whose non-renewable resources—tangible and intangible alike—should be protected. For the pragmatic manager, historians can trace the evolution of park issues—poaching, developmental in-

trusions, pollution—and evaluate the effectiveness of management action in dealing with them. For the natural-resource manager, historians can track changes in natural resources through time, allowing the manager to understand ecological processes more fully.

### **ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

Archeological resources can be any surviving physical evidence of past human activity, representing both prehistoric and historic time periods. They are found above and below ground and under water. All are inventoried, studied, and preserved.

Each protected area should have an archeological field survey to locate, describe, and evaluate the nature, characteristics, and estimated scientific value of its archeological resources. The survey may cover all or part of a park and should precede any planning or development activity. While archeological resources should be left undisturbed if possible, excavation can be justified for protection, research, interpretation, or development. The emphasis, however, should be on preservation and avoidance of sites—not excavation.

Archeological sites provide information on past civilizations and cultures that can only be obtained from buried resources. Some of these cultures were pre-literate, and archeology offers the only data and interpretation for understanding such lost worlds. But archeology can also add dimensions to cultures whose written history did not include details on how people lived together in individual houses and villages. Archeology yields knowledge that would otherwise be lost.

### **HISTORIC ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH**

Historic structures are constructed works consciously created to serve some human activity. They

include buildings, statues, dams, ships, tunnels, roads, and prehistoric ruins. Research identifies and evaluates historic structures. It also defines historical integrity, character, and the causes of material deterioration. Historic structures can be restored and used as museums or adapted and used for administrative purposes.

Prior to restoration or adaptation, however, historical architects and historians should research the history of these structures. This research should document developmental history based on both documentary research and structural examination.

Preserving and restoring historic structures require the skills of historic craftsmen. These specialists have learned carpentry, masonry, and ironwork as it was taught in the past. They can duplicate in materials, design, and workmanship an elaborately carved door or a structurally complex arch. They work in tandem with historical architects to preserve the world's most famous structures, as well as remnants of vernacular architecture. Often these craftspersons learn traditional skills and techniques that can be used to preserve the historic structures. Through the preservation of cultural structures of local significance, protected area managers can develop rapport with local populations and win their reciprocity.

### **CULTURAL LANDSCAPE RESEARCH**

Cultural landscapes are complex resources that contain both cultural and natural resources. In fact, cultural landscapes are expressions of human adaptation and use of natural resources over time. Managing a landscape as a cultural resource begins with identifying its character-defining features, both natural and cultural, and understanding them in relation to one other through time.

Cultural landscapes recognize both the natural resources and the

culture that molded them. By identifying and preserving these landscapes, managers prove their sincerity and sensitivity to local communities. The traditions and customs that shaped the land are recognized and valued. In turn, visitors are charmed by the authentic look and feel of the land, reinforcing both the culture and its preservation.

### **MUSEUM COLLECTIONS RESEARCH**

The last type of cultural resource that should be researched and managed is museum collections. They comprise archeological artifacts, biological and paleontological specimens, and historic objects of human activity. Research ensures the appropriateness of a collection, validates the authenticity of objects, analyzes them for proper care and treatment, and determines appropriate furnishings for historic structures. The museum collections of each protected area should define the limits of the collection based on the purpose of the area. Once museum objects are acquired, they should be accessioned to establish legal ownership. Then the objects should be cataloged and conserved if necessary. If objects are to be used in exhibits or furnished historic structures, appropriate plans should provide for their preservation and security.

Museum objects are used in interpretive exhibits, furnished historic structures, and scientific research collections. They add depth to the knowledge of earlier ecosystems and cultures. Through museum collections, researchers can study the details of ordinary life of a culture or the complexities of biodiversity.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Most research will make the tasks of management easier. When there are political and economic pressures, research can provide the data that support uncomfortable management decisions. While scientific

research can show the effect of people on natural resources, social science research can help managers understand the people—both the visiting public and the local resource users. This knowledge can be used to educate people about their impact on resources and to mitigate the impact of the protected area on their culture and lifeways.

Social science research can counter opposition to protected areas. It can show managers how to “market” protected areas, how to develop ecologically sensitive tourism, and how to accommodate to the needs of local communities.

Through the preservation of significant cultural sites, structures and objects, protected area managers can refute charges of insensitivity and ignorance of local cultural values. Thus, managers will use research results if they find them useful, accurate, and responsive to their needs.

Researchers, however, can ensure that managers will apply their research if they take a few pragmatic steps. First, their research reports should be readable. Scientific jargon should be avoided. It may be necessary to write one report for scientists and another for managers, emphasizing scientific accomplishments in one and managerial recommendations in the other. All graphics should be meaningful. Figures with columns of numbers that require statistical training for their interpretation are useless to the busy manager. Researchers should provide frequent oral briefings to managers and their staffs. Managers need a constant flow of data to manage resources—for them, some is better than none and sooner is better than later. Moreover, by keeping the manager apprised of research results, the manager becomes a participant in the project and more willing to apply the results and support funding. Researchers should also consider working with interpreters to

ensure that current research results are funnelled into interpretive programs. Finally, researchers should provide viable recommendations to managers. While they should not alter professional findings to fit political needs, they must take into account the socio-economic aspects and political realities of protected area management.

Thus, the social scientist, in particular, offers skills, knowledge, and results that enhance the comprehension of local issues. With the recognition and preservation of local cultural resources—achieved through the talents of the social scientists—the site manager converts potential enemies into champions of protected areas.

#### NOTE OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author presented a version of this paper at the Fourth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas in Caracas, Venezuela, in February 1992, representing The George Wright Society. She wishes to acknowledge members of the U.S. National Park Service Task Force revising the Cultural Resource Management Guidelines (NPS-28) for insights and perspectives. Richard H. Briceland's Superintendents' Memorandum Series on Social Science also offered valuable information and guidance.

