

Nature-based Recreation and Latino Engagement in Boulder County, Colorado: Moving Towards Increased Social Equity

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Introduction

COMMUNITIES ALWAYS HAVE CHALLENGES, but as the demographic shift in the USA continues towards a minority majority (Caucasian population less than 50%), the need for communities to be inclusive of all its citizens is becoming greater. Latino (ethnic category of people who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino) populations are growing, and local government agencies need to increase their ability to work with and serve this community. More specifically, local nature-based open-space park agencies need to be cognizant of this change and work towards increasing Latino use in their parks to ensure long term support of their programs and land base.

Background

Boulder County has many progressive local governments, which, through various smart growth policies, have helped create an overall prosperous community that values the environment, economic vitality, and social equity. Boulder County local governments understand the value of their policies relating to having dedicated public open-space to assist in land use development and the need to concentrate growth in existing municipalities. Acquired public open-space lands can also provide direct recreational benefits for its citizens utilizing these nature-based parks.

Nature-based outdoor recreation in the USA is predominantly a Caucasian activity. Boulder County is no different. One local example of this is Boulder County Parks and Open Space where a 2010 visitor study showed Latino use at three percent when the U.S. census information showed the Latino population at 14% in Boulder County (Boulder County Parks and Open Space 2010; U.S. Census Bureau 2010). If a segment of the population is not accessing the open-space resource proportionally, then there needs to be some effort by the government agency to reach out and be more inclusive.

Research question: How can Boulder County nature-based open-space park agencies engage the Latino community to better understand their nature-based recreational needs and desires?

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Methodology

This research seeks, through interviewing park and non-park agencies, to broaden understanding of the local government's engagement of Latino community members in relation to nature-based recreation. It examines agency practices of inclusion for nature-based park and open-space recreation in Boulder County. These in-depth interviews are qualitative. The research was designed to find ways to assist agencies in engaging the Latino community. The study tried to learn the degree to which the agency has strategies for engaging the Latino community; what agency data exist on Latino community park use and agency perceptions of Latino interest in and access to recreation; and whether current methods being utilized contribute to increased Latino community park access and use. This research is exploratory. It seeks to obtain new knowledge on possible ways to respond to Latino preferences for nature-based recreation in Boulder County.

I decided to interview park and non-park people that were directly engaging Latino populations or had positions in an agency that had the potential to be engaging the Latino population in Boulder or nearby counties. Park interviewees were from nature-based agencies. I looked at non-park positions to see if additional insights could be gained in understanding engagement methods from agencies that probably had been doing engagement longer than most open-space park agencies. Each category of respondents had nine interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured as an informal conversation about what they do to be inclusive, with the intent to build on the positive aspects of what they are doing.

The interviews averaged about 45 minutes in length and were digitally recorded. Responses were considered to be individual opinions and not agency positions. The responses were analyzed for common themes by using the Community Capitals Framework. The framework uses capitals (resources invested to create new resources over a long time horizon) working together to create sustainable communities that have healthy ecosystems, vital economies and social inclusion. The capitals considered included natural, cultural, social, human, political, financial, and built (Flora and Flora 2008).

Results

I coded interview comments into the capitals related to three main areas of engagement and facility preference: what works, what hasn't worked, and what we should do more of if we had the resources. Deciding on the appropriate capital to list the comment was challenging. The Community Capitals Framework is about the relationship among all the capitals, and it can be hard to show the interconnectedness of the capitals in analysis. Tables 1–3 are an abbreviated summary of research responses with the capital utilized, and associated number of responses.

Discussion

Interviewees mentioned multiple times that engaging the Latino community is “hard.” The success stories are related to the agency's ability to connect with the Latino community. Increased knowledge (human capital) of park opportunities by Spanish speakers is very much needed, but feeling welcomed, understood, and heard requires agencies to be focused on growing other capitals (cultural, social, and political). Built capital will be committed in a more inclusive fashion as agencies have a greater understanding of the needs of the Latino community. Lastly, in terms of parks, natural capital plays a critical role in providing the venue for contact and park use to occur in the first place.

Social capital is required. Nature-based agencies have not had great connections with Latino populations. Most of agencies' partners have been from recreation and environmental groups that are predominately Caucasian. As one respondent stated, there is not a representative group for picnickers. Relationship-based partnerships can increase the connection between open-space

What Worked Summary Responses	Capital	Frequency
Collaborations/Partnerships	Social	16
Education and Outreach Focus	Human	7
Bilingual Skills in Some Positions	Human	4
Spanish Materials and/or Translation	Human	4
Communication/timing approach difference (requires extra effort)	Cultural	9
Family Oriented	Cultural	6
Provide Incentivizes (reduce barriers)	Cultural	4
Mission Based and Actively Working Toward Inclusion Through Social Engagement	Political	7
Accommodate Easy Family Access With Infrastructure like Tables/Shade/Restrooms to accommodate Large Groups	Natural/Built	8
Water Sites for Parks	Natural/Built	6
Fishing	Natural/Built	4

Table 1. What worked, summary responses.

What Hasn't Worked Summary Responses	Capital	Frequency
Need Partnerships/Trust	Social	3
Latino Community Does Not Engage or Understand Standard Anglo Methods of Outreach	Cultural	9

Table 2. What hasn't worked, summary responses.

park agencies and Latino populations. Forming relationships needs to be understood as a long-term effort. An agency cannot just find a representative Latino to be involved in a specific planning project. The connection has to be deeper.

A wide range of human capital strategies were suggested by respondents. This shows an agency has to do more than just provide Spanish materials to reach Spanish-speaking populations. It is more than just providing information to educate; staff skills and knowledge also have to be grown so that appropriate interaction can take place. Many open-space park agencies have education and outreach programs, so it is necessary to consider what changes can occur in their current programming that could better inform the Latino population.

Another respondent stated, “The family is the base of everything.” This cultural insight may be understood at one level by a park agency, but the implications may not be easy to grasp. Open-space park agencies’ staff members are primarily Caucasian, born and raised in the United States, where nature-based recreation is largely thought of as done in solitude or in small groups. A family orientation drastically alters that perspective, and it overflows into other agency norms that could be problematic for a population that is family-oriented, such as, public planning meetings held at night, programs that cannot accommodate a broad age-range of participants, and park facilities that are not really designed for families (long narrow trails as an example). Latino culture, such as art and history, could also be utilized as a way to reach out to this group.

Strong governance is a term that is used more in understanding an ideal relationship between a government and the people it serves. Political capital, and the understanding by the local government

Should do More of Summary Responses	Capital	Frequency
Collaborations/Partnerships	Social	19
Build and Have Cultural Compentant Staff	Human	8
Education and Outreach Focus	Human	4
Spanish Materials and/or Translation Ability	Human	4
Family Oriented	Cultural	3
Engage Through Community Cultural Celebrations, Art, and Latino history	Cultural	3
Program/Facilities Interesting to Latino Community and Agency Has Commitment Towards Inclusiveness	Cultural	2
Mission Based and Actively Working Toward Inclusion Through Social Engagement	Political	17
Program/Facilities Interesting to Latino Community and Agency Has Commitment Towards Inclusiveness	Political	3
Boards Are Representative of the Community	Political	3
Larger Group Areas That Have Higher Use Can Have Impacts on Other Users, and Increase in Maintenance and Resource Concerns	Financial	3
Accommodate Easy Family Access With Infrastructure like Tables/Shade/Restrooms to accommodate Large Groups	Natural/Built	8

Table 3. What agencies should do more of, summary responses.

authority that it needs to be more inclusive, has a profound effect on what can be accomplished toward being more inclusive. While participants stated that no policies existed that specifically aimed toward Latino populations, an agency’s mission, and its leaders perspective can strongly influence how an agency strives to be inclusive. Most nature-based agencies in Boulder County have advisory boards. Having more diverse boards could assist in making inclusiveness a greater focus for nature-based park agencies.

Built and natural capital are highly correlated in nature-based park agencies. Built facilities provide the access to the sought-after natural environment. Latino populations in Boulder County seem to be drawn towards water-based, shaded, family-oriented facilities. Exploring more opportunities related to these types of facilities could increase use by Latino populations.

Creating more family-oriented facilities has financial implications for agencies. As with all management decisions, there are costs associated with implementation. It will be a change for agencies that currently don’t have many facilities desired by the Latino population. Financial constraints are probably not going to be the overriding issue in terms of a local Boulder County park agency deciding to provide more Latino friendly facilities. Deciding to provide more of these facilities is really related to changing the culture of an agency, encouraging it to step beyond what it is currently doing to engage a segment of the population it is not currently reaching sufficiently.

Success will be about the interplay of all these capitals. Local Boulder County open-space agencies vary widely in their commitment to being inclusive of the Latino population. Engage-

ment efforts, if undertaken, are relatively recent. The agency's ability to improve will require interaction across all of the capitals. One example is the ability to create trust between an agency and the Latino community. Human capital is needed to build staff's ability to communicate with Latinos, and the Latino community will need to have a better knowledge of open-space recreation opportunities. Social capital will need to be utilized in forming partnerships and relationships with Latino-trusted groups and people.

These efforts need to be ongoing and long term. Political Capital is needed along with Social and Human Capital. It requires a continued effort and commitment of resources to obtain greater inclusiveness, which does require a political commitment to make sure it is happening.

Moving towards inclusiveness: Develop a plan

Open-space agencies should develop an inclusiveness plan that outlines goals, and strategies for reaching those goals. A plan will set the course towards being more inclusive, and will keep the need to be proactive in this area highlighted for the agency. Such a plan must be reviewed by agency departmental leadership, advisory boards, and elected officials. The plan should consider the following:

- Engagement is different. Outline strategies to use in planning and agency programs. You have to go to Latinos, build programs slowly, and find areas of interest to the Latino community. An accompanying marketing approach may incorporate such things as flyers at places where Latinos are, being aware of the timing of events, and determination of whether there is a need to provide incentives for attending.
- Build relationships/partnerships with existing groups and individuals that can bridge between them and your agency.
- Increase staff skills related to engagement. Designate staff members who are going to lead this effort in your organization. Look at ways that all staff can learn and be encouraged to develop skills in talking and engaging with Latinos. Assess if there are ways to make sure encounters by staff in parks are less formal with Latinos (not just rangers talking about rule violations). Having informal conversations will create a connection to the Latino community. Look at ways to increase hiring opportunities for Latinos in your organization.
- Provide Spanish materials. Create and have available brochures about your organization that are more than just a straight translation of English documents. During planning efforts, provide translated documents online and at public meetings.
- Increase knowledge and awareness of parks. Have a different marketing approach. Focus on providing information related to your parks that are more family oriented or have water nearby.
- Look at using community events, local Latino history, and art as areas for engagement. Utilize community events for feedback on planning that would be of interest to the Latino community. Look at ways that Latino history and art can be used to connect with the Latino population.
- Programs and facilities offered by the agency need to be interesting to the Latino community. Latinos have an appreciation of the outdoors, so look at ways to encourage the use of the more passive recreation oriented open-space facilities. Possible ways to do this would include wider shorter trails near trailheads that have family oriented picnic facilities.
- Agency leadership that is focused on being more inclusive and making sure that agency staff, programs, and facilities meet the needs of Latinos better. This can take place at

many levels: agency planning actively seeks input of the Latino community, education and outreach programs are designed for families and are offered in Spanish, and when new facility options are considered that the agency make them more family or large group oriented.

- Education and outreach agency programs actively work at targeting the Latino population. This should be done with partnerships so the agency can develop the skills and trust needed to engage the Latino community. Programs should be available for the whole family, which requires being able to work with and accommodate both children and adults at the same time.
- Family oriented facilities located near water need to be developed or enhanced. The Latino population enjoys nature-based opportunities, so open-space agencies need to look at shaded stream corridors and pond areas that can be developed to meet their needs.

Creating an engagement plan and moving towards increased engagement of the Latino community would be following direction given by various operating comprehensive plans (Boulder County municipalities and Boulder County as an agency) that highlight a desire to be socially equitable. These high-level planning documents do not provide direct goals in how to meet this desired state, but creation of a inclusiveness engagement plan that is supported by an open-space agency will move an agency closer to the goal of being more socially equitable.

Conclusion

This study is consistent with current literature and best-practices knowledge available on engagement and nature-based recreation preferences for diverse communities. Overall, open-space park agencies need to look at greater inclusiveness in a holistic approach. Boulder County has had a strong environmental and preservation focus in the past, but needs to move towards a more sustainable future that also addresses social equity in a greater way. Local governments can be more proactive in their approach by demanding that their agencies or departments are actively engaging all of their citizens. An inclusiveness engagement plan created and being acted upon by their open-space park agency would be one way to bring them a step closer to having social equity for all of their residents.

Other considerations

Most of the open-space park agency employees interviewed did not have use numbers broken down by demographics. Agencies need to look at increasing their capacity to understand who their users are and what they are doing. This information can assist decision makers in understanding the need, and will also show progress that is made over time.

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