

# Recreational Values of Public Parks

## Introduction: Recreation, Parks and Society

While there may be a temptation to think of recreation as trivial, even frivolous, most of us know better. As paradoxical as it might seem, recreation is a serious matter. The importance of recreation manifests itself in a number of ways. Perhaps the most obvious to readers of *The George Wright Forum* is the philosophical and legal foundation of U.S. national parks as laid down in the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916. While national parks are clearly to be conserved, they are also to “provide for the enjoyment” of the people. This two-fold mission is at the heart of most public parks and related areas. Thus, recreation, in a variety of forms, is vital, even integral, to parks.

The etymology of the word “recreation” is also suggestive of the importance of its role in society. Rooted in the Latin “recreatio” and “recreare,” “recreation” means, respectively, “to refresh” and “to restore” (Edginton et al. 2002). Given the increasing pace and stress of contemporary society, it seems likely that recreation will continue to grow in importance, and that parks will likewise escalate in importance for their role in providing public recreation.

The social importance of recreation is further reflected in the professional activity and literature that has grown up around it. There is a received history of the “recreation movement” in the U.S., a social movement designed to provide the benefits of recreation to all Americans. Students can now earn degrees in recreation, parks, and related fields at over 50 colleges and universities. There are public- and private-sector jobs and careers in recreation plan-

ning and management. And there are professional organizations devoted to recreation, such as the National Recreation and Park Association. A widely accepted definition in the professional literature states that recreation is “an activity that is engaged [in] during one’s free time, is pleasurable, and which has socially redeeming qualities” (Kraus 1990). Thus, recreation is widely seen as having value at the level of both the individual and society.

This view has suggested that recreation might best be understood and appreciated not necessarily as the activities in which people engage, but as the reasons that motivate it and the benefits that it produces (Haas et al. 1980; Driver et al. 1987; Driver 1990; Driver 1996). For example, research suggests that people engage in recreation to satisfy a variety of motivations, such as appreciating nature, learning about culture and history, and enhancing family togetherness (Brown and

Haas 1980). Moreover, participation in recreation might produce a number of benefits to individuals (e.g., advances in physical and mental health, personal growth and development), society (e.g., strengthened family relationships, enhanced community pride, reduction of social deviance), the economy (e.g., increased productivity, reduced health costs), and the environment (e.g., reduced pollution, protection of endangered species) (Driver 1990; Driver 1996; Stein and Lee 1995; Allen 1996).

### The Primacy of Recreation in Parks

This special issue of *The George Wright Forum* outlines a diverse range of values that public parks might serve. How important is recreation among these potential values? This question has received recent research attention in a variety of park and public-land contexts (Manning and Valliere 1996; Manning et al. 1996; Negra and Manning 1997; Manning et al. 1999; Minter and Manning 2000; Morrissey and Manning 2000). As might be expected, human values have been the subject of considerable attention across a variety of academic disciplines (Rokeach 1973; Andrews and Waits 1980; Brown 1984; Bengston 1994; Kempton et al. 1995). While several theoretical dimensions of value have been identified, the focus of this study is on preference-based held values. "Held values" have been defined as "an enduring conception of the preferable which influences choice and action" (Brown 1984, 232). The preference-based component of this concept signifies that value is assigned

through human preference as opposed to social obligation (e.g., societal norms that suggest what people should value) or physical/biological function (e.g., the ecological dependence of tree growth on soil nutrients). Recent commentary suggests that preference-based held values are the appropriate focus of park, forest, and the public-land values research (Bengston 1994; Hetherington et al. 1994). As used in this study, values are specific notions that define "an enduring concept of the good" as applied to parks.

Several classifications of park and related environmental values have been proposed in the literature (Rolston 1988; Rolston and Coufal 1991; Manning 1989; Kellert 1985). Based on this literature, 11 potential values of parks were identified as shown in Table 1. This set of potential park values was designed to be as comprehensive as possible based on review of the literature. (It is interesting to note the papers included in this special issue of *The George Wright Forum* address nearly all of these values.) These potential park values were incorporated into a study of the Vermont state parks. A representative sample of 478 visitors to 37 Vermont state parks was administered a mail-back questionnaire in the summer of 2001.

Two batteries of questions addressed potential park values. The first asked respondents to rate the importance of each potential value "as a reason for having state parks." A six-point response scale was used that ranged from 1 ("extremely important") to 6 ("not at all important").

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**Table 1.** Values of state parks. Column key: 1 = “extremely,” 2 = “very much,” 3 = “moderately,” 4 = “somewhat,” 5 = “slightly,” 6 = “not at all.” In “Mean Score” column, letters indicate statistically significant differences.

Value	Importance						Mean Score
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Recreation (“State parks are places to enjoy outdoor recreation activities”)	64.4	27.9	5.7	1.1	.9	0	1.46 <sup>a</sup>
Aesthetic (“State parks are places to enjoy the beauty of nature”)	60.4	29.5	6.6	2.4	1.1	0	1.54 <sup>b</sup>
Education (“State parks are places to learn about nature”)	31.8	31.6	24.1	7.2	4.8	.4	2.23 <sup>c</sup>
Moral/Ethical (“State parks are places to express our moral or ethical obligation to respect and protect other living things”)	31.0	31.4	19.7	8.3	5.2	4.4	2.38 <sup>d</sup>
Economic (“State parks are places that can enhance the economy through tourism”)	23.2	36.9	23.9	10.8	3.5	1.7	2.40 <sup>e</sup>
Ecological (“State parks are places to protect the environment in order to insure human survival”)	33.6	25.5	18.5	11.3	6.1	5.0	2.46 <sup>e</sup>
Therapeutic (“State parks are places to maintain or regain one’s health and mental well-being”)	24.0	28.2	26.4	11.6	7.1	2.7	2.58 <sup>e</sup>
Historical/Cultural (“State parks are places that are important to the history of this area”)	20.1	28.5	20.1	17.9	9.1	4.4	2.81 <sup>f</sup>
Scientific (“State parks are places to conduct scientific studies on the natural environment”)	16.0	18.7	29.3	19.6	9.6	6.9	3.09 <sup>g</sup>
Intellectual (“State parks are places to go to think because civilization cannot interrupt”)	17.8	19.6	22.2	17.0	16.5	6.8	3.15 <sup>g</sup>
Spiritual (“State parks are places to get closer to God or spiritual matters”)	9.9	14.6	15.8	20.0	20.3	19.4	3.84 <sup>h</sup>

Findings are shown in Table 1. Two conclusions are evident from these data. First, nearly all potential park values appear to resonate with respondents; ten of the eleven potential values received an average rating of at least “moderately important,” suggesting that the evolving diversity of park values included in this study (and

addressed by other papers included in this special issue) is being increasingly recognized in society. Second, there is a hierarchy of values associated with state parks, and recreation is rated as significantly more important than other potential values. The second battery of questions asked visitors to allocate their willingness to pay to sup-

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port the Vermont state park system among the potential park values. (Prior to this battery of questions, respondents had been asked to estimate their maximum willingness to contribute to a fund to support the state parks.) For this battery of questions, the list of potential park values was reduced to ten to simplify burden on respondents. Findings are shown in Table 2, and are similar to those in Table 1. However, using this question format, respondents discriminated among park values to a greater degree, and recreation emerged more strongly as the single most important value of the state parks.

and reserves that can provide many of the same values. What differentiates public parks and makes them necessary? In a society that prides itself on market-based solutions to problems, we need to be clear about which of these values are publicly important and why.

John Dewey (1954) argued that the public interest arises from the consequences of actions. When the consequences of an action or transaction are confined to the individual(s) directly engaged in it, the action/transaction is essentially private. So, if two people have a discussion or make an exchange, their action is private if

Table 2. Allocation of willingness to pay for state parks among park values.

Values	Percentage of Willingness to Pay
Recreation	28.3
Aesthetic	13.9
Ecological	13.5
Therapeutic	8.1
Economic	7.3
Scientific/Educational	7.2
Historical/Cultural	7.2
Moral/Ethical	6.3
Spiritual	4.2
Intellectual	4.1

### Recreation and *Public Parks*

The spectrum of values described above reflects the various purposes or functions that parks can serve within our society. A further qualification must be applied, however: What does it mean for something to be a “public” park? There are, after all, private parks

nobody else is affected. However, most transactions have consequences that extend beyond the individual participants to affect others, often in non-obvious ways. For example, we have a better breakfast because of the principally private transactions of farmers, grocers, and butchers all acting in

their own interests than we would if we were served in a philanthropic spirit. Such transactions are social because they affect others beyond the immediate participants. But Dewey is careful not to conflate the social with the public: “Many private acts are social, their consequences contribute to the welfare of the community or affect its status and prospects” (Dewey 1954, 13). Rather, the dividing line between public and private comes when the indirect consequences of actions are recognized as being so important as to require systematic regulation to either enhance positive consequences or control negative ones. Thus, the public sector is justified in acting when the market fails to produce sufficient quantities of something positive or when the negative effects of market transactions must be mitigated. The public provision of parks is clearly an instance of the former.

So the reason that the public sector intervenes is because private markets sometimes fail to produce enough of something that we consider valuable. We have public schools, public libraries, and public health clinics because we believe that all children should receive at least some education, that it is desirable to encourage the distribution of books and other educational material, and that low-income people should have access to at least a minimal level of healthcare. Almost certainly these goals would not be accomplished if we relied solely on private markets. In the past, public parks and recreation have been cast in the same mold (More 2002). For example, we have public playgrounds because the mothers of the play-

ground movement wanted safe, stimulating, educational spaces that would keep children off the streets and they recognized that public action was required to achieve these goals (Cranz 1982; Taylor 1999). Or we established public campgrounds because we believed it was desirable to encourage citizens to explore America and its natural and cultural history.

This view of parks as public goods has sometimes come under attack by those who challenge the idea that recreation is socially necessary and who argue that the private sector could do a better, more efficient job of fulfilling public recreation demand if it did not face public-sector “competition” (see, for example, Beckwith 2002). This argument is bolstered by the many changes that have occurred since the great eras of park construction in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, cities now have many private play spaces, reducing the need for public playgrounds, and the private campground industry is now a very effective supplier of camping experiences. It becomes imperative, then, that we ask what today’s public parks do that is different from what the private sector does. In other words, why, and for whom, do markets fail so that the public sector needs to step in to provide systematic enhancement?

Perhaps the most obvious example of market failure is with unique resources—there is only one Yellowstone, only one Liberty Bell. If we concede that such resources are central to our national heritage such that it is desirable for all Americans to see them, then it would be inappropri-

ate to have them in the private sector. If they were operated privately (or quasi-privately according to market principles), their rarity would drive up the price, excluding low-income people—as may be happening with the current fee demonstration program in the national parks (More and Stevens 2000). In standard economics, when the supply of something is scarce and the demand is high, the market will signal producers to expand production, and demand and supply would eventually reach equilibrium. But Yellowstone and the Liberty Bell are not widgets—their supply is fixed at one, and it is impossible to expand production in any meaningful sense. Consequently we ask the public sector to oversee their allocation, not to allocate them efficiently to the highest bidders (those most willing to pay), but fairly, so that everyone has an opportunity to visit. Private markets are efficient, but they may not treat people equally (Okun 1975).

Many parks are set up to protect unique resources, but the uniqueness can be problematic because there are so many ways to describe a place—as a landscape, a historic site, a potential location for a chemical plant, a vegetative or soil type, etc.—that virtually any place can be made to sound unique under some description or another (O’Neil 1993). Consequently, we must ask what it is that makes an individual park valuable in and of itself, which returns us to the values discussed above.

Recreation is undoubtedly the most widespread public value associated with parks, as indicated by the state park survey described above. For

many national parks, and for some state parks, the scarcity argument can be cogently made and supported by referencing other values such as historic/cultural, aesthetic, spiritual, and the like. That is, parks such as Yosemite or the Grand Canyon offer recreational activities and experiences in settings that are absolutely unique. If these areas were privately owned and operated, their rarity would cause the price to rise so much that they would be unavailable to much of the general public. Public ownership also helps to ensure the long-term protection of these values by regulating commercial development that could threaten them.

Uniqueness or rarity is also a relative factor that can be locally important as well. For example, lakeshore is an economically valuable resource in many eastern states where lakes often are surrounded by privately owned property. The wealthy have access in many different ways; they may own shoreline property, belong to various clubs and marinas, etc. But as we descend the socioeconomic scale, access through private venues becomes increasingly limited, so public parks along lakes are warranted to preserve lake access for the rest of the public. Many urban parks also preserve green space that can be considered unique relative to the immediate surrounding environment.

In addition to preserving public access to unique aesthetic and historic/cultural resources, recreation also serves other ends that traditionally have been considered publicly important in Dewey’s sense of requiring systematic enhancement. For

example, parks provide family-oriented experiences as well as opportunities to explore nature and learn about the outdoors. In the past, we have considered such activities to be socially desirable and worth encouraging through recreation in public parks.

A similar argument can be made for historical/cultural values, although they were not as highly rated as recreation in the Vermont survey. Colonial sites or Civil War battlefields, for example, are scarce resources. If we want to encourage people to visit these areas to reconnect with their heritage, then these areas properly belong in the public sector where visitation can be encouraged through subsidization. Of course, there are many private foundations and not-for-profit organizations that operate historic/cultural sites successfully. However, since the public funding for museums and other historic/cultural nongovernmental organizations is limited, these institutions have needed to rely increasingly on fees, which again means that low-income people may be excluded. In addition, some parks were initiated by the private sector, but were turned over to the public sector after it was found that they could not be operated at even a “break-even” level (Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site in Massachusetts is an example). For such parks, the choice is public-sector operation or non-existence.

Ecological values may occasionally be justified on the basis of scarcity. Many parks protect habitat for rare and endangered plants and animals. The survey results suggested that people placed moderate importance on this value, yet ranked it more highly

when asked to apportion their willingness to pay. There may be widespread public recognition that this value can be important in specific locations, but that not every park may contain rare and endangered species.

There was also widespread recognition of the economic values associated with parks. Unique natural or historic parks provide an identifiable destination for tourists and are frequently used by the public to stimulate economic activity and financial investment in low-income areas.

The other values—educational, moral, intellectual, scientific, and therapeutic—were not as highly rated, or had mixed ratings between the value measures (though nearly all potential values were rated as at least “moderately” important). This does not necessarily mean that they are not publicly important, however; it may simply be that the population surveyed was not as familiar with them. Spiritual experiences, for instance, may not be commonly associated with parks. Similarly, the scientific values associated with parks may be particularly important to researchers, yet the general public may only be beginning to recognize this significance. Often these values—moral, intellectual, scientific, and therapeutic—involve processes that are not yet fully clear either to researchers or to managers, or to the public themselves. As research identifies the processes involved in each, we may come to a clearer understanding of the role of each, which may make their public importance more readily apparent.

In sum, parks are publicly important because they provide recreation

(and other) services that the market either cannot create or cannot distribute equitably. The different values represent combinations of functions that help us understand the unique role that public parks can play in contemporary society.

### Conclusion

This paper suggests that recreation has taken on increasing importance to the well-being of both individuals and society. Moreover, parks are clearly identified with recreation, and, in fact, recreation may be their most important value as judged by those who visit them. Finally, a number of arguments suggest that much of the recreational value of parks can be realized only when they are owned and maintained by common action through government. History suggests that public use and appreciation (i.e., public recreation) were instrumental in the establishment and growth of parks systems, including the U.S. national parks (Runte 1997; Nash 2001). While an increasing number of values of parks are evolving, recreation remains an important, often dominant, public value, and should remain a vital part of the philosophical and management foundation of parks.

The primacy of recreation in parks has led to several paradoxes that challenge contemporary park management. For example, if parks provide

increasingly important recreational values to society, how can we ensure these values accrue equitably to all members of society? Minority populations are historically underrepresented in the national parks, and this issue will become increasingly important as minority populations grow substantially in the coming decades, and issues of social and environmental justice demand greater attention in public policy (Floyd 1999; Floyd 2001). Ironically, the popularity of parks may lead to “capacity” problems, at least in some places at some times (Manning 2001; Haas 2001). For example, the U.S. National Park System now accommodates nearly 300 million visits annually. While the popularity of parks is a testament to their success and cause for celebration, it may lead to unacceptable impacts to parks and to the quality of recreation experiences. How much and what kinds of recreation can ultimately be accommodated in public parks? A related issue concerns potential conflicts among the multiple values of public parks (Sellars 1997). When recreation affects significant natural, cultural, historical, scientific, educational, and other values of public parks as described in this special issue of *The George Wright Forum*, informed management must balance all these increasingly important values.

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- Robert Manning, School of Natural Resources, University of Vermont, 356 Aiken Center, Burlington, Vermont 05405; [rmanning@nature.snr.uvm.edu](mailto:rmanning@nature.snr.uvm.edu)
- Thomas More, U.S. Department of Agriculture-Forest Service, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, P.O. Box 968, South Burlington, Vermont 05403; [tmore@fs.fed](mailto:tmore@fs.fed)

