

# The Effects of Neo-Conservatism on Park Science, Management, and Administration: Examples and a Discussion

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## Introduction

A GROWING NUMBER OF SCIENTISTS ACKNOWLEDGE THAT SCIENCE IS CULTURALLY MEDIATED, affected by the hegemonic structures and powers that exist in Western society. For example, Proctor (1991) suggests that societies' overt actions and policies advance the interests of certain special-interest groups over others, intruding into even so-called "pure" science through consciously choosing which topics are studied and how the results are interpreted. Explicit examples related to protected areas are provided by Chase (1986) and Wilkinson (1998), who describe in troubling detail how park scientists and managers were asked, among other requests, to obscure research results and make public statements contrary to their professional judgment. The latter author concluded that science is forever a hostage to political meddling (see also Behan 1997).

But there are also less visible effects of politics; often politics exercises its power not on but *through* dominant institutional structures, priorities, and practices. Almost invisibly, this latter type of influence implicitly and systematically legitimizes hegemonic institutions and practices, making it difficult for the status quo to be questioned or changed (Harding 1992). Yet it seems difficult for park managers and scientists to acknowledge that resource management issues are inherently based on values, and are thus both directly and indirectly influenced by political ideologies (McCool and Stankey 2003; Rohde 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to challenge park scientists, managers, and administrators to acknowledge the influence of political ideology on park issues. More specifically, I wish to describe and analyze

the impact of one particular political ideology—neo-conservatism—on protected areas. After defining and reviewing the importance of neo-conservative thought in contemporary Western nations, I identify common policies and practices of neo-conservatives, focusing on economic policies associated with fiscal conservatism, and their impact on park planning and management. Examples from Ontario, British Columbia, New Zealand, and the United States are used to illuminate how fiscally conservative policies affect park research, management, and administration. Finally, the shared histories and characteristics of these case studies are reviewed.

## The rise of neo-conservatism

Following the horrors of World Wars I and II, Western nations enjoyed a consider-

able and sustained increase in their residents' standard of living, disposable income, leisure and vacation time, and consumption patterns. Keynesian economics relied on an expansionist welfare state to create and maintain this post-war prosperity, and citizens became accustomed to increasing levels of government intervention (i.e., spending) in areas of economic and social policy (e.g., health care and unemployment).

By the 1970s, this sustained economic growth had stagnated, with inflationary pressures and increased unemployment beginning to erase the gains in economic growth and discretionary incomes. At first, government responded to these problems by increasing spending, as this had been an effective policy in the past. However, the world economic system had changed: with increased globalization, capital became more internationally mobile, new labor markets in developing nations were operating, and nation-states could no longer sustain completely independent fiscal policies. High inflation led to high interest rates, which meant nations had to use a growing proportion of their national incomes to service the debts caused by this increased government intervention. The spiraling taxation required to support increased government spending became a central concern:

These government responses to the fiscal crisis triggered intense hostility toward taxation and fuelled the belief that a failure to restrain government expenditures would, inevitably, require even more taxes. Consequently, cutbacks to government expenditures began to be implemented, first for programs designed to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged, but eventually also for universally accessible

social programs (Harrison and Johnston 1996: 163).

Thus, due to structural changes in economic and social conditions in the 1970s, neo-conservatism began to rise in many Western nations. Margaret Thatcher (first elected in 1979) and Ronald Reagan (elected in 1980) are seen as the major leaders espousing the doctrines of neo-conservatism in the West. They, like most neo-conservatives, used an amalgam of classical economic liberalism (i.e., fiscal conservatism) and moral conservatism to establish their economic and social doctrines. Rather than using the traditional Keynesian policies of government intervention and regulation (i.e., the use of "big government" through taxation), the neo-conservatives championed "small government," decreased individual and corporate taxes, and increasing reliance on the free market and individual choice to drive economic growth (Green 1987).

Just as Keynesian policies infiltrated various political parties earlier in the twentieth century, these neo-conservative fiscal policies began to spread throughout the political spectrum. That is, while neo-conservative fiscal policies began at the right end of the political spectrum, most political parties—left, center, and right—began to adopt these economic policies (see Gandesha 2000). As a result, fiscal conservatism very quickly diffused throughout Western nations from the early 1980s.

### **The impact of neo-conservative policies on park agencies**

As noted above, the Keynesian welfare state had used an increasing amount of government funding (and taxation) to control

social problems, including the spiraling demand for municipal, regional, and national parks. Parks and protected areas were created and developed in response to the boom in outdoor recreation and increased leisure and discretionary income during these years of sustained economic growth. When conservative fiscal policies were established, spending on environmental issues and ministries did not escape the considerable budget cuts and downsizing that dominated this agenda.

In 1995, Mike Harris in Ontario became the first neo-conservative provincial premier elected in Canada. One review of the decline of the Ontario Ministry of Environment concluded that “the neo-conservative ideology of Mike Harris’ Conservative government accounts for the major retrenchment of [the ministry in] the late 1990s” (Krajnc 2000: 111). Operating expenses at the ministry fell by 68% between 1991 and 1998, while ministry staff were cut by 40% between 1990 and 1997 (Krajnc 2000; O’Connor 2002). This reduction in staff and funding, together with the elimination of programs, privatization and devolution of services and activities, and the move towards industry self-regulation of environmental practices all compromised the ability of the ministry to provide in-house scientific expertise, set environmental standards, and monitor and enforce environmental problems (Waterstone 1997; Krajnc 2000).

These cuts also affected public safety. Justice Dennis O’Connor (2002) noted that these budget cuts were both directly and indirectly connected to the Walkerton tragedy, in which seven people died and over 2,300 were infected from drinking contaminated water in a small Ontario town. Similarly, budget cuts to the Depart-

ment of Conservation in New Zealand were to blame in part for the death of 14 college students, after an unsafe viewing platform collapsed in the Cave Creek area of Paparoa National Park. Judge Graeme Noble, who authored the report of the Commission of Inquiry on this event, concluded that the victims “were all let down by faults in the process of government departmental reforms.... In my opinion, it is up to governments to ensure that departments charged with carrying out statutory functions for the benefit of the community are provided with sufficient resources to enable them to do so” (Noble 1995: 93).

A similar series of budget cuts unfolded in the province of British Columbia, Canada. While governments doubled the size and number of protected areas in B.C. from approximately 6% to 12% of the provincial land base, severe cuts were made to the relevant ministries. In addition, the provincial government disassembled B.C. Parks as a separate government agency; park management is now simply one thread within the Environmental Stewardship division of the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection. Between 2001 and 2005, the operating expenditures for the Environmental Stewardship division fell from CDN\$83.5 million to \$50.8 million (a 40% decrease), and staff numbers decreased 31% from 1,298 to 897 (Recreation Stewardship Panel 2002). This was in addition to substantial cuts made in the 1990s.

As in Ontario, the B.C. government incorporated neo-conservative values in protected areas, primarily through the creation of a “business approach” to agency administration and the use of increased and new user fees to help offset funds lost in budget cuts. The province’s new vision for park management reflected neo-conservative

doctrines by cutting ministry operating budgets and staff, focusing on potential revenue sources, increasing existing user fees and adding new fees, and referencing the use of partnerships to introduce private-sector philosophies into park management (Recreation Stewardship Panel 2002).

In the United States, similar forces were at work from the beginning of Ronald Reagan's first term in 1980. After years of budget and staff cuts, many park agencies cut maintenance and replacement of park facilities (e.g., roads, trails, and water treatment plants). Desperate for funding (Hill 1997), most park agencies and environmental groups welcomed the establishment of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program (RFDP) in 1996 as a means of improving the recreation infrastructure within parks. Over 300 sites within the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are now allowed to collect fees for entrance and/or goods and services, and retain the majority (80%) of these fees at the site. These fees are used almost exclusively to fund use-related functions of the parks (Luloff et al. 2000).

Although there was considerable, broad support for the RFDP when introduced, opposition to the program has significantly increased, and much research has attempted to assess the impact of these fees (see Puttkammer 2001). While most research—primarily funded by the land management agencies—has focused on surveying user perceptions of the fees, a more critical research agenda has begun to assess the potential effects of this fee project (More 2002). There are concerns that monies collected from the user fees (the Forest Service alone collected almost US\$124 million during the period 1996–2000) will, *inter alia*,

lead to: (1) continued decreases in government allocation to park agencies, (2) a “double taxation” problem (both taxes and user fees pay for these areas), (3) agencies focusing their attention on revenue generation and the use function rather than the preservation function of parks, (4) displacement, particularly among low-income users, (5) commodification of outdoor recreation experiences, and (6) additional ecological and social impacts from increasing amounts of users and new forms of recreation (Martin 1999; Bengtson and Fan 2000; Puttkammer 2001; More 2002; Anderson and Freimund 2004).

The direction taken by the above governments has been adopted by a number of countries and jurisdictions, most of which have used the so-called business or corporate approach to park administration and management in response to chronic underfunding of park agencies (e.g., Searle 2000; van Sickle and Eagles 1998; Buckley 2003; Ostergren et al. 2005). This approach is a direct result of the growth in neo-conservatism in numerous Western governments. That is, budget cuts and the business model reflect the primary foci of fiscal conservatism outlined earlier: (1) cuts to government expenditures and staff numbers to compensate for decreased taxation; (2) resultant outsourcing of scientific and other planning and management activities; (3) incorporating private-sector principles (e.g., competition, partnerships with the private sector, and revenue generation) within the public sector; and (4) a reliance on user fees to offset decreased budgets.

### **Implications of neo-conservatism for park science, management, and administration**

Political ideology affects science and

decision-making in numerous ways: some are explicit, others implicit (Harding 1992). Explicit examples include providing research funds for topics specifically matching and supporting ideology (or, conversely, withholding funds for research challenging ideological approaches); choosing individuals or organizations known to have similar political ideologies to conceptualize, conduct, and interpret research; ignoring research findings that do not support existing or future management actions; and interpreting research to fit current political ideology. These and other covert politicizing of science and management occur at any point of the political continuum, from left to right.

Political power is also exercised in less visible and explicit ways, as encultured science works through hegemonic forces such as political ideology. The examples provided from Ontario, British Columbia, New Zealand, and the United States in this paper demonstrate that neo-conservative policies have had significant economic and social impacts. Downsizing in both the private and public sector has been shown to lead to various unintended consequences, including problems with staff morale, increased workloads, loss of institutional memory, and the loss of needed knowledge and skills (consultants often must be hired to replace fired workers) (e.g., Mishra et al. 1998; Marks 2002). In relation to protected areas, government reorganization of environmental and park-related agencies since the 1970s has been remarkably consistent: 30–50% decreases in government allocations and staff numbers have been common, and this readjustment has led to, *inter alia*: (1) decreased staff morale; (2) inadequate staffing to fulfill all statutory requirements, leading to safety and liability issues; (3) an

increased emphasis on revenue generation (particularly through user fees) and commercial activities in protected areas; (4) a decreased ability to conduct necessary data collection, enforcement, and monitoring activities in parks; (5) increased amounts of public–private partnerships; and (6) greater overall administrative and management attention towards the use function of parks.

The rise of neo-conservatism has been the major force in park agencies around the world adopting a “business approach” to park administration and management, thus paving the way for an increased reliance on revenue generation to help compensate for significant budget cuts and the resultant issues noted above. Recreation activity-based special-interest groups have recognized this increased vulnerability of park agencies and have used this opportunity to emphasize the use function of protected areas, as user fees are the most frequent and efficient means of generating revenue in protected areas. These approaches and methods were not chosen at random: rather, they each reflect the ideology and philosophy of neo-conservatism. Other options are available, but these options do not reflect the political ideology *du jour*, and so are routinely rejected.

## Conclusion

A common series of events has occurred in many parks and park systems throughout the world, particularly within Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. First, park agencies (like many other social agencies) had been underfunded for a considerable amount of time. Park managers were forced to cut back maintenance and research: most parks and park systems were unable to maintain the infrastructure needed to deal with rapidly increasing recreation

and tourism, and did not have the capacity to fund or undertake the scientific research necessary to manage parks.

When the relatively sudden shift from a Keynesian to a neo-conservative economic and political system occurred, beginning in the early 1980s, park agencies were extremely vulnerable to the additional budget and staff cuts that resulted from this new fiscal policy and political ideology. Park agency budgets and personnel were further reduced, often by 30–50% or more, often within a five- to ten-year period.

Among other responses (e.g., divesting or closing individual parks), the primary response was a significant increase in revenue generation. Revenue generation, and the overall adoption of a business model for government agencies, was at the heart of neo-conservatism, and park agencies around the world were quickly transformed to fit this new model. User fees were relied upon to contribute the vast majority of revenue, and many park agencies have moved from generating approximately 15% of their total budget to levels approaching 40–50%. It is unclear what affect this increased reliance on user fees will have upon parks and park agencies, though it seems likely that parks will find it difficult to wean themselves from such critical funding sources. And their success in generating revenue makes it less likely that government appropriations will increase in the near future, especially as the public supports user fees in protected areas (Ostergren et al. 2003).

More recently, because of the safety and liability issues that have arisen through this chronic understaffing and underfunding, the increased recognition that many parks and park systems cannot meet their statutory obligations, and increased government

spending in social issues, some countries have seen small increases in park agency funding (e.g., New Zealand and Canada). Yet these small budget increases do not begin to compensate for past budget cuts, and still leave park systems unable to meet most or even all statutory obligations. Park-based research and monitoring of social and ecological conditions remain particularly problematic.

There is no question that park agencies—from the municipal to federal levels—have become increasingly reliant on commercial activities and more vulnerable to increased privatization in the last 30 years (Crompton 1998). What is often lacking, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Anderson and Freimund 2004), is a focused attempt by agencies and independent researchers to empirically and critically assess the short-, medium-, and long-term implications of increased commercial activity in protected areas. As previously noted, government agencies are often reluctant to study or fund research that may be critical of existing political ideologies and their associated policies, and researchers must be careful not to be too critical if they wish to maintain relations with these agencies (More 2002). As a result, the impacts of neo-conservatism may remain hidden and invisible for the near future.

In this paper, I have suggested that the rise of neo-conservatism and the concomitant adoption of fiscal conservatism by a wide range of political parties in the West have been at the heart of the increased commercialization of park science, management, and administration. It behooves park advocates to better understand the principles of neo-conservatism and more critically assess its impacts on protected areas.

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