

A Brief History of Outdoor Recreation in the American West

by Curt Meine, Ph.D., Coordinator, International Crane Foundation

“W

e near the end of the century's trail.” Especially for outdoor enthusiasts, the metaphor is impossible to resist.

The trek has been long and adventurous, sometimes exhilarating, sometimes grinding, continually triumphant and tragic. We may wonder how the experience has - or has not - changed us, how deeply or superficially the journey has impressed itself on us.

What awaits us at trail's end? Will we come out into the valley of the new century with inviting prospects of further delights? Or will we suddenly realize that we are deep into perilous country, crawling with Y2K bugs, drenched with the rain of bursting economic bubbles, with no apparent route of safe passage?

At such times, it never hurts to take a momentary rest, to reflect upon the long walk behind us, to consider the promise and peril of the way ahead.

Assessing the Explosion

Those who monitor social trends can provide detailed results from studies and surveys that track the explosion of interest in outdoor recreation over the last several decades. However, within the longer context of the last century or so, only a few statistics really matter. Around 1900, the population of the United States was somewhere around 100 million; we now number somewhere around 260 million. (We will leave aside for the moment the growth of the human population in the rest of the world.) In 1900, the life expectancy for American men stood at 47, for women 49; men now live, on average, to the age of 73, women to 80. In 1900, the American automobile fleet consisted of a few prototypes weaving their way between trolley cars and horse carts; we now have more vehicles than people, and the total fleet size is growing faster than the human population. Gas prices (as of this writing, at least, in Kansas) stand at 93 cents per gallon. In short, there are more of us, we live longer, we have more wealth, and we get around more inexpensively, individu-

ally, and easily.

Everything else is details.

But a few details are necessary and helpful. Since 1960, the U.S. Forest Service has been tracking changes in outdoor recreation activities. The most recent report of the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, compiled from surveys in the mid-1990s, confirms what informal observations suggest. Outdoor recreation is booming. Participation in “non-consumptive” activities, such as bird-watching, is increasing more rapidly than the more “consumptive” activities. Demand is expected to rise due to our longer lives, the emigration of retirees, and the general economic prosperity of our times.

But to place our times in some perspective, we need to go back further in time, to the first serious considerations of the development of recreational “resources” and of the relationship between recreation and conservation.

The Four Ages of Modern Recreation in the West

Looking at recreation as an important economic activity in the American West, we can distinguish distinct stages in its development, based on the cultural trends, as well as the materials, equipment, and modes of transportation, that distinguished them. Although not definitive, this informal identification of different eras may help us to get a handle on our own times.

1) The Victorian Age. This period begins in earnest in the aftermath of the Civil War, peaks perhaps around 1900, but lasts into the early decades of the 20th century. During these years, those of relative wealth and leisure are able to travel to the “megacharismatic” locales of the West. Following precedents set in the east - in the Catskills and in the Adirondacks, at Niagara Falls and at Hot Springs - tourists travel west as railroads open the way. They journey to see the fabled West, to hunt big game, to visit the redwoods and the canyons and the high peaks.

Every era has its emblems. For the

Victorian recreationist, the key technologies were the cross-continental railroads and the telegraph lines. The politics were marked by the unlikely alliance of the great railroad empire builders with preservationists. Ironically, of course, the rails that brought the tourists also brought waves of settlement and allowed for the exploitation of the minerals, arable soils, waterways, timber, wildlife, and forage grasses of the open range.

As the era's high point, we might choose the paintings of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, the photographs of William H. Jackson, and the securing of the nation's “crown jewel” national parks at Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Glacier. As low points - tragic reflections of these achievements - we might choose the alienation and dispossession of the Indian nations, and the slaughter of the bison. As an ultimate expression of the era's uneasy alliances, we might picture arch-preservationist John Muir joining railroad baron Edward Harriman on the epic Harriman Alaska Expedition in 1899.

2) The Age of the “Beauty Engineer.”

We can name this era, beginning roughly in the 1890s and lasting into the 1930s, in honor of Arthur Carhart, the first full-time landscape architect to be hired by the Forest Service, where he was promptly labeled “the beauty engineer.” During these years, American attitudes toward the American land might be said to have moved “from Homestead to Olmsted.” Americans increasingly saw land as more than a mere commodity and treasure-trove. When the era began, the public domain - having been wrested from its original inhabitants - was being allocated to all comers (especially, of course, those with political connections). By the era's end, symbolized by passage of the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 and the federal retention of the last of the public domain, the full spectrum of land conservation professions was in place.

From the perspective of outdoor recreation, the key characteristic of the period is

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Self-Efficacy

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overwhelmed with fear will reduce anxiety and increase confidence.

Let's look at an example. You are instructing a basic, top-rope rock-climbing class and make efforts to select easy routes where most of the participants will succeed (performance accomplishment). You select a student to climb one of the routes, someone who you feel has a good chance of making it and would be a good role-model/peer for the rest of the group to observe (vicarious experience). You offer encouraging words as the student climbs up the route (verbal persuasion). The belay rope is kept snug, not allowing for a long fall (emotional arousal). Hundreds of applications and opportunities to raise self-efficacy in outdoor adventure situations can be identified and used in a positive way to enhance personal growth.

A word of caution: Situations have been observed in which well-intentioned professionals have inadvertently used the methods that can influence self-efficacy in a less-than-productive way. Challenge course practitioners can make high-element experiences more difficult by allowing a participant to model behavior (for instance, freezing in place) that is then copied by those following. Additionally, outdoor professionals are often misled into believing the efficacy of verbal encouragement - we believe we can talk a fatigued or scared individual into doing amazing feats. It should be repeated, therefore, that the most powerful method of raising self-efficacy is to create opportunities for mastering techniques and having success experiences.

Assessing Self-Efficacy: Will I know it when I see it? Self-efficacy tends to be domain- and situation-specific. Mountain climbers may have a strong sense of self-efficacy concerning the ability to acclimate and do well at high altitude, yet have little confidence pulling plastic at the local indoor climbing gym. People with high self-efficacy will tend to exhibit the following behavior:

Select Difficult Tasks: Individuals with high self-efficacy will attempt challenging and often risky adventures. They are not satisfied with commonplace recreational pursuits.

Persistence: Efficacious individuals will not give up easily. They will keep working on the problem until it is solved.

Transfer of Experience: Success breeds more success. People with high self-efficacy in one domain will often attempt to

generalize or transfer that sense of self-efficacy to other areas of their lives.

A Final Thought: Understanding methods that influence and increase self-efficacy can be a powerful tool. As a profession, outdoor practitioners are often criticized for not caring to or taking the time to make connections to research done in the behavioral sciences. Self-efficacy theory can help bridge that gap. Use the word self-efficacy instead of self-confidence and see what happens - you may startle your peers and impress your supervisors. Understanding self-efficacy can help you create an "I think I can" attitude throughout all aspects of your life. 享

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Troubling Finances

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my afforded the various Forest Service Regional Offices is rooted so deeply in the system.

Although he acknowledged that no one has lost their job over the lack of financial accountability, Dombeck has implemented some changes. A Chief Financial Officer was hired, new Deputy Chiefs installed, and 130 accountants and financial control staff employed to try to rectify the problem. In three of its reporting units, the practice of shifting incurred costs from one category to another has been discontinued. But a 1997 effort to install new software failed because the Forest Service signed-off on the software and installed it without testing it. That has led to another round of setbacks in efforts to standardize accounting and reporting procedures.

When pushed to say when he would have his financial house in order, the Chief said, "Not in a year or two." He compared the Forest Service to General Electric, which took 10 years to turn around. But some in Congress are losing their patience. Representative Walden, a new member of

the subcommittee with a banking background, told the Chief that if the FDIC had found irregularities in the bank like those in the Forest Service, the bank would have only a few months to make things right or would suffer severe consequences. But the Forest Service is not a local bank regulated by the FDIC. The Forest Service is a resilient federal agency with, excuse the pun, deep roots. And although their budgets may suffer in the short-term, federal bureaucracies have a way of outlasting their critics. After all, it was 1991 and George Bush was President, when the IG issued his first adverse opinion on the Forest Service's financial statement. 享

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the gradual and grudging inclusion of recreation as a subsidiary activity on lands devoted to the utilitarian conservation goal of sustained yield (of timber, water, and forage). This, in turn, reflected the beginnings of the automobile culture, the rise of what was called the "good roads movement," and the epic moment, in the mid-1920s, when the American public first became more urban than rural. In 1908, when Teddy Roosevelt convened the landmark Governors' Conference on Conservation of Natural Resources, outdoor recreation merited little attention. By the mid-1920s, however, the government was organizing a series of National Conferences on Outdoor Recreation.

The key technological innovation of the era was the mass-produced automobile. The period saw, too, the rise of popular outdoor sporting magazines and the widespread use of concrete, rubber, aluminum, and other novel materials. In politics, Roosevelt made the "rigorous outdoor life" a national craze. The later "fishing presidents," Coolidge and Hoover, stimulated greater consolidation of recreation and conservation interests (exemplified by the rise of the Izaak Walton League). Although preservationists lost the struggle to keep Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy valley dam-free in 1913, the growing power of recreational interests led to the era's high point: creation of the National Park Service in 1916. A low point? A good choice might be the image,

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ineradicable in our collective memory, of motor tourists driving through a tunnel carved through the heart of an ancient sequoia.

3) The Age of Industrial Tourism.

Edward Abbey popularized the term "industrial tourism," and captured its dilemmas on paper. With the changes in modern life, wild places became our refuges, even as we have

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become their leading threat. Beginning at the end of World War II and still continuing today, this period has seen the emergence of outdoor recreation as a mass industry. Recreation has become fully accepted into the family of "multiple uses" on public lands, although the family relationships have grown increasingly problematic. Economic boom times have rendered ever harsher the contrast between protected wild lands and exploited lands, between our recreational space and our work space.

The key technologies of the era have created that contrast, even as they allow us to avoid its glare. Technological innovations have served to collapse time and space (more and more automobiles, air travel, outboard motors, oil tankers, and interstate highways); to maximize convenience (Coleman stoves and lanterns, fiberglass, graphite, nylon, kevlar, and the other sub-species of synthetic fibers); and to filter and reproduce experience (the TV and the movies, the instamatic camera and the minicam). In politics, environmentalism complicated the relationship between those devoted mainly to the pursuit of outdoor pleasure and those for whom outdoor experiences were woven into a larger philosophy of sustainable living.

For emblems, we might choose one of Ansel Adams' more monumental images, or perhaps John Denver's breakthrough hit "Rocky Mountain High." A high point? Perhaps passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (1980). A low point? One is tempted to cite the amazing proliferation of professional bass-fishing tournaments until one learns of the apparently growing problem of cheating in bass-fishing tournaments.

4) The Post-industrial, Post-modern Age. We come now to more familiar territory. Beginning in the early 1980s and accelerating constantly, outdoor recreation is now seen as a critical sector within a more service-oriented, globalizing, high-tech economy and culture. Recreational activities are increasingly seen essentially as an entitlement, driven by intensified media-generated interest and aided by ever more

sophisticated generations of accouterments. Transportation technologies further annihilate time and space - as a recent New York Times article headlined, "More Americans are Getting Away From It All This Winter: Good times, cheap gas, and confidence stoke wanderlust."

We grapple still with the repercussions of one new technology after another: computers and the Internet, cell phones and pagers, cable TV and instant credit, jetskis and snowmobiles, GPS and ATMs and ATVs and SUVs. If we could manage to step back, we might choose as an emblem the emergence of rock climbing as a competitive sport, unimaginable just a few years ago and complete with all the trappings of the modern media age.

As a high point, we can consider how these forces have begun to allow the most

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heavily resource-dependent and exploitative economies to initiate transitions toward a more balanced existence. Low points abound: The exploitation of new age crystal mines, perhaps, or the tragedies broadcast from Mt. Everest. The ultimate expression is surely yet to come, perhaps in Salt Lake City in 2002.

The story of the long hike of outdoor recreation in the American West is obviously much more complicated than this curso-

ry account suggests. This review focuses mainly on a subset of activities that have come to dominate our definition of outdoor recreation, and that take place largely on public lands using public resources. It neglects quieter activities, such as gardening, that take place close to home. It serves mainly to illustrate basic trends: Compared to a century ago, there are vastly more of us, we are vastly more mobile, we have all but severed the ties to our local landscapes or local conditions, and we are creating and filling ever more specialized recreational niches.

Looking Down the Trail

All who care about wild places, especially in the American West, must confront the fact that history has bequeathed us with both promises and perils. There is, of course, no knowing what the path ahead holds, but we would do well at least to define the hopes and fears we carry with us.

First, the promise. For the environmentally attuned - and who does not consider themselves so these days - the hope is that the rise of a more recreation-dependent economy in the American West will replace or help to transform the older, resource-depleting extractive industries that have dominated the landscape for decades; that this will help to revive local economies and put them on a more sustainable track; that this will bolster political support for the embattled public land management agencies; and that recreation will prove to be a benign form of development and will nurture a deeper attachment to and concern for Western landscapes in all of their beauty, diversity, and majesty.

Now, the peril: that this new economy carries its own ecological and economic

risks; that the public land agencies may be courting folly and are poorly prepared to handle the increased load of legal, administrative, and scientific responsibilities that will come with next high wave of recreational uses; and that there will be hidden social costs to communities that invest their hopes and their very identities so heavily in a recreation-based future.

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Debates on these points are now being heard. But let us rest, for just one moment more, against the rock of time, and think about still deeper promises and perils.

The deeper promise, implicit in our arguments, is that as individuals and as an evolving culture, we can create, in Wallace Stegner's enduring phrase, a "society to match its scenery." We hope that this unprecedented cultural transition will reconnect urban people to the landscapes from which they are largely alienated, and that it will allow rural people to develop a healthier and more symbiotic relationship to the land. We trust that our own leisure activities, and the leisure economy we create with it, will be more virtuous, more attuned to its surroundings, more economically just, more at peace with the land.

The deeper peril, also implicit, is that recreation, far from being our salvation, will prove to be only one more extractive industry that regards the land as a commodity. We fear that by building a playscape instead of a workscape, we actually risk even more profound alienation from the land. We suspect that although this burgeoning economy may buy votes, budget appropriations, and some momentary self-fulfillment, it will provide no closer a bond to the land than any other industrial-era enterprise. And an even scarier thought lurks: if leisure and recreation cannot save our souls, or our landscapes, what other choices remain?

At least one choice, perhaps. To find it, we can return to the literal meaning of recreation. The aim of outdoor recreation, by common consent, is to find satisfaction in our interactions with the wild world. We have proceeded on the assumption that such satisfaction will automatically come through increased consumption, and that the job of planners, managers, manufacturers, publicists, marketers, distributors, policy-makers, and lawyers is to increase the opportunities for such consumption. For most of our history, we have tested that assumption, and now we test it to the hilt.

But we may now need to consider a radical assumption - that satisfaction does not flow automatically from increased consumption, but rather from increased responsibility. With that assumption, another path opens up. In one of his more trenchant statements, conservationist Aldo Leopold took to task the recreationist "who never grows up, in whom the capacity for isolation, perception, and husbandry is undeveloped, or perhaps lost. He is the motorized ant who swarms the continents before learning to see his own back yard,

who consumes but never creates outdoor satisfactions." That was in 1938. The accusation, if we are honest with ourselves, is even more uncomfortable to read today.

To create outdoor satisfactions. Those few words go a long way toward explaining our dilemma, and illuminating the promise and peril ahead. What a different world this would be if we had spent as much time over the last century creating such satisfactions, rather than consuming them. What a different world it will be a century hence if we can somehow assume that responsibility and become, not ever more intense consumers, but

restorers, of that which we profess to love. We love the wild. Do we love it enough to re-create it, and not just recreate within it? 享

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Aurora University

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cated that after being accepted at several schools across the country, she chose Aurora because of the opportunity to teach others. "I have learned more than I could have ever imagined," said Borden. "I was drawn to Aurora University because so many of the other schools I looked at offered 'practical' programs where you improved

recreation administration and experiential education positions each year. Graduates have served as executive directors of park districts, camps, outdoor adventure centers, therapeutic settings, and campus recreation programs. They have become association executives, business entrepreneurs, college professors, and consultants.

Aurora University's assistantship program truly reflects real-life education that can be applied on the job every day. It also

Aurora University's Recreation Administration students, faculty, staff, alumni, and their cooperating agency supervisors have created a successful cooperating graduate assistantship experience. The Recreation Administration Program places over 95% of their graduating students in recreation administration and experiential education positions each year.

rock climbing and guiding skills," added Marci Birkes. "I figured that I could work in the field and get that experience. Aurora University offered skills in the behind-the-scenes management which is what I wanted."

Participating agency directors also have high praise for the program. According to Mario Parente, Executive Director of Oakbrook Park District, "The graduate assistants from Aurora University bring new ideas and enthusiasm to our organization each year. Their contributions help to energize our staff and enable us to offer programs we could not do without them."

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demonstrates how colleges and universities can team with professionals in the field for the benefit of students and the profession we share.

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