Conflict Among User Groups

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Abstract

Conflict among user groups has become one of the most pervasive and perturbing issues facing managers of outdoor recreation settings, particularly in the "West." Public land agencies have had to deal with a steady increase in the number and complexity of situations in which one or more recreation groups has been at odds with each other or with another public land constituency. Perhaps nowhere is there such an increase in the number of users as in caving, which translates to an increase in the number of conflicts. Conflict is typically defined in recreation management as "goal interference attributed to another's behavior" (Jacob and Schreyer, 1980). Because motivations and desired outcomes differ among caving activities, for example NSS cavers may be much more likely than party cavers to seek places where they can escape the sounds of the city, conflict is said to result when the activities of one group restrict another group's ability to achieve it's goal. Amy (1987) describes three general sources of conflict: ***misunderstandings –*** when parties are differently informed about an issue; ***interests*** – in which people want to use the same resource for different things; and ***values*** – in which disputants differ in deeply-rooted beliefs about what is "right." The goal interference model refers almost entirely to interest conflicts, yet one can easily imagine conflicts that arise from misunderstandings ("I thought this area was off limits to recreational caving") or values ("cave photographers tend to sacrifice conservation practices to get the perfect Picture").

Summary

If outdoor recreation conflict is indeed on the rise, there is likely to be several reasons for this. Foremost of these in the continued proliferation of "new" activities that can be enjoyed in dispersed recreation settings. Population growth in both urban and rural areas has led to perceived crowding at many recreation settings, which tends to intensify disputes between constituencies that must share those settings. Recreation conflict mirrors the trends in environmental politics overall—as the political environment becomes increasingly contentious, recreationists have learned to organize activity-focused interest groups that have successfully used the same political and legal tactics as commodity and preservation groups.

When we think of outdoor recreation conflicts, we are likely to imagine disagreements between participants in *two different activities* that are wholly or partly incompatible. Recent examples from outdoor recreation research include: hikers versus mountain bike users (Watson *et al*, 1991), power boaters versus river rafters (Cole, 1989), and cave researchers versus recreational cavers (Trout, 1991); however, conflict can also occur between participants in the same activity. Such conflicts may result from differing ways to enjoy the same activity, as when conservation minded cavers perceive conflict with groups who use caves as a party place, or from disagreements about the management emphasis that should be given to commercially outfitted versus non-outfitted users of caves.

There are also conflicts between *recreation users and other natural resource stakeholders*. A classic example involves conflicts between recreation interests and advocates of commodity land uses. For example, mining companies and mining-dependant communities may oppose plans to designate an area as wilderness or a cave as significant because such designation carries restrictions on mining activities. A variant on this theme that is increasingly common involves conflict between recreation interests and environmental organizations. Such conflicts most often involve groups such as outfitter guides that advocate publication of cave locations and government agencies and cave conservation groups that believe that such listings are potentially the greatest threat to cave resources.

Finally, there are outdoor recreation conflicts between public land managers and their constituents. Managers tend to see themselves as "just doing their jobs" as stewards of the land, or mediators between competing interests, but persons angry over unfavorable solutions to shared-use problems often see managers as being as culpable as those who hold the competing interests. Conflict can also occur entirely within agencies as managers, whose primary responsibility is recreation, disagree with colleagues responsible for commodities or environmental protection.

Jacob and Schreyer (1980) identified four major "factors" which can be used to predict the intensity of perceived conflict and the likelihood conflict will occur. *One such factor* is the personal meanings that people attach to activities; for example, the extent to which an individual's self-concept is linked to the activity. A *second factor* is the significance attached to using a particular setting for a particular activity. Still *another factor* is the mode of experience for a particular activity, since people may be more likely to perceive conflict if their preferred activity involves continued awareness of their entire environment rather than focused attention (a caver rapelling down a 500-foot drop must concentrate fully on the technique). The *fourth factor* is the perceiver's tolerance for life-styles different from his or her own.

Managers have several options for addressing situations of conflicts over shared use of recreation settings. Although we often hear references to "conflict resolution" – it may be more reasonable to refer to these as strategies for "conflict management." The latter term accounts for the fact that recreation use conflicts often cannot go away entirely since they are rooted in fundamental differences over how one should experience the natural environment. It also is consistent with the idea put forth by social theorists that conflict serves a crucial function in the maintenance of societies.

In a sense, all conflicting interests are likely to attempt to "manage" conflicts in ways that can tilt the balance of a dispute in their favor. Lincoln (1990) describes a continuum of these strategies, which vary according to the intensity of the conflict. In order from lowest to highest intensity, these strategies include: inaction, negotiation, facilitation, mediation, arbitration, administrative appeal, judicial appeal, legislative appeal, non-violent civil disobedience, and violence. Public agencies also undertake to manage conflict as part of their legal mandates to balance the needs and interests of multiple constituencies.

Because solutions in this second category are frequently disputed by one or more parties and can be very costly if they prompt administrative or judicial appeals, agencies increasingly promote collaborative decision-making processes that allow the conflicting interests themselves to join in drafting a way to minimize the conflict. Such processes hold promise, but they require managers to have "people skills" that go beyond the traditional leadership skills required of natural resource professionals (Rasmussen and Brunson, 1996), and they must be carefully organized in order to ensure that they are consistent with the Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. Appendix 2).

Definitions

1. Conflict in caving activities or outdoor recreation typically is defined in terms of social-psychological consequences of on-site interaction, following Jacob and Schreyer (1980) who defined conflict as "goal interference attributed to another's behavior" (p 369)

2. A frequently observed phenomenon in recreation conflict situations is "asymmetric antipathy," which is said to occur when one party perceives conflict with another due to goal interference, but the second party experiences little or no goal interference from the first and thus perceives no conflict (for example, Adelman *et al.*, 1982).

3. Recently the Jacob and Schreyer (1980) definition has been criticized for failing to describe the full range of conflicts that center on outdoor recreation.

- There may be occasions when people simply feel that others in a shared setting should not behave as they do, regardless of whether that behavior interferes with their ability to achieve desired outcomes; for example, some people may believe that loud, boisterous behavior in caving activities is inappropriate even if escape is not among their recreation goals (Trout, 1994).
- Jacob and Schreyer's conceptualization focuses on causes and symptoms within the recreation setting itself, yet recreation conflict is often manifested in the policy arena through public debates over appropriate uses of recreation settings or through administrative and judicial actions intended to force or prevent restrictions on one or more user group.
- Much of what is termed "asymmetric antipathy" is in fact two-way conflict in which one group perceives the conflict on-site while the other perceives it off-site as soon as the first group attempts to influence policy to im-

prove its ability to achieve its goals (for example, by imposing restrictions on uses that are seen as interfering with them).

4. Further insight can be found in analyses of non-recreation environmental conflicts. Amy (1987) describes conflict as arising from any of three sources.

- Misunderstanding-based conflicts surface if there is inadequate access to available information or differing interpretations of the information.
- Interest conflicts occur when people want to use the same resources for different things. In the case of caving, visitors may want to use the same cave to pursue activities that are partly or fully incompatible (for example, recreation and research or trail marking and photography).
- Value conflicts are based on differences in the deeply rooted beliefs of user group members regarding proper modes of conduct and/or desirable end-states. Often such activities can be a symptom of higher-order value conflicts, as when "environmentalists" who enjoy cave restoration projects move to communities where party caving is the predominant recreation activity for longtime residents.
- Some experts in the field of conflict resolution (for example Burton, 1990) suggest that only value-based disagreements truly qualify as conflict. Burton refers to the other types as "disputes."

Conflicts Rise to Prominence in Cave and/or Recreation Management

1. As new activities such as speleothem restoration, microbial research, or trail marking have increased in the past decade, so has conflict between groups.

The potential for conflict with other cave users grows exponentially with each new activity at a given site because each user group can have points of negative interaction with participants in all of the other activities.

Exacerbating the situation is the tendency for participants in more traditional pursuits such as cave exploring, photography, mapping, or cave surveying to view those who enjoy newer activities as "interlopers" who do not deserve equal standing in disputes over territory or regulations.

2. Perceived restrictions associated with increased cave usage tends to cause simmering disagreements to intensify into full-blown conflict.

Use of outdoor recreation setting seems to be growing nationwide after a period of stagnation during the 1980s. Nowhere is this more evident than in caves, particularly in fast growing cities in the west and southwest USA.

While sheer numbers of recreationists may be smaller in some rapidly growing rural areas, recreation conflicts in such places can be intractable because new migrants—for whom outdoor recreation often is a chief reason for moving—may pursue different activities than longtime residents who are already distressed by the sudden increase in use of their outdoor backyards and caving areas.

3. Activity-focused interest groups such as the Cave Research Foundation, American Cave Conservation Association, or National Speleological Society use more sophisticated political and legal strategies than the more local or loosely organized caving or recreation groups of the past.

Categories of Outdoor Recreation Conflict

1. The most typical form of recreation conflict is that which occurs between participants in two different activities that are wholly or partly incompatible that must share a cave or recreation setting. There are hundreds of pairs of such activities, but some of the most common ones in caving include:

Participants in scientific activities such as biological, hydrological, or geological research often perceive conflicts with persons who enjoy recreational pursuits. Such conflicts can be extremely contentious. For example, Floyd (1993) developed a model of conflict intensity based on the degree of similarity of competing interest. He later reported (pers. comm.) that his model worked well except in the case of motorized versus non-motorized recreation conflicts.

Inter-activity conflicts often occur if participants in one activity tend to see another activity as promoting reckless or unsafe behavior. Conflicts involving vertical caving often fall into this category, since there are so many different styles, techniques, and types of equipment.

Activities whose participants tend to be especially sensitive to the presence of others (at least in terms of the number of times they appear in scientific or popular articles about recreation conflict) include cave photography, surveying, and many other specialty type activities.

2. Conflicts can also occur *within* activities due to differences in the ways that people prefer to participate in that activity.

Variation in experience levels can lead to conflicts within activities, as more skilled par-

ticipants may prefer not to share areas with groups they identify as less-experienced (for example, Boy Scouts versus veteran cavers)

Experience levels can be correlated with status hierarchies in some caving activities. Classic examples would be researches vs. sport cavers or especially party cavers. Cavers also have disagreements with people who use caves for "non-caving" reasons such as bolting entrances, partying, or cult type activities. Outfitters and their clients may come into conflict with non-outfitted participants in the same activity. In several western caves where caving use is restricted, there are sometimes concerns over the proportion of permits allocated to outfitters and researchers vs. recreational caving.

3. Conflicts also occur between recreation participants and other natural resource constituencies.

The most typical of these involve conflicts between recreation and scientific interests and commodity uses such as crystal harvesting or mining.

Increasingly there are conflicts between recreation users and some environmental organizations. Although preservation groups sometimes oppose some recreation uses, most often these conflicts involve activities that environmental activists see as detrimental to wildlife and other resources. Fears about erosion of "rights" have led to the formation of several coalition type organizations.

Similar kinds of conflicts have arisen between caving interests and advocates for Native American cultural rights.

4. Participants in recreation activities often perceive conflicts with managers whom they blame for decisions that somehow reduce their ability to participate in a preferred activity at optimum times and places. In such cases managers may not see themselves as part of the conflict (though they typically recognize that others are displeased with them). Within agencies, there also can be conflicts between managers responsible for recreation uses and those who focus on other resources.

Factors that Can Enhance the Likelihood of Recreation Conflict

1. While the concept of a recreation or scientific "activity" implies a more or less standard set of behaviors, people may place different personal meanings on the same behavior. These differences in meanings can make persons more sensitive to conflict under certain situations.

- Some people may view their caving activities as a central life interest—a critical source of rewards outside work. Often such persons choose jobs or places to live because they enhance opportunities to participate in that activity.
- Persons who perceive their mode of activity as having higher status—for example, researchers as opposed to recreational cavers, or free climbers as opposed to "top-ropers." Are more likely to perceive conflict with others.
- More experienced participants tend to be more susceptible to conflict.

2. If a person attaches a special meaning to a particular place for engaging in a particular activity, because of its superior qualities for engaging in the activity or because of an emotional "attachment to place," conflicts with other users may be more likely to occur.

3. A major component of a recreation experience is interaction with the natural environment, but some activities allow more awareness of the environment than others. Researchers vs. "speed cavers" for example.

4. Some outdoor recreation participants may have greater or lesser tolerance for diversity in lifestyles. Conflicts over nude caving for example are often rooted in this phenomenon. Long time cavers may be intolerant of people who use stereos in caves or bring in beer or other substances that can increase the possibilities of accidents.

Strategies for Conflict Management

1. Conflicts often are more effectively addressed if the focus is on "managing" rather than "resolving" them. Resolution may be an unrealistic goal for two reasons:

- Conflicts often are rooted in basic value differences, that is, fundamental disagreements about the proper way to experience the environment that are not easily "resolved."
- Many sociologists believe that conflict, rather than being a symptom of dysfunction in society, plays a vital role in the evolution and maintenance of social institutions (Bernard 1983).

2. Strategies to "manage" conflict in a particular direction can be adopted by all competing interests, who may use a wide range of approaches ranging from cooperative persuasion to violence against others.

3. Public land agencies have management tools for recreation conflict that can be employed both on- and off-site. Typically agencies try to first use approaches that do not entail changes in the site or its management. These

are favored because they are inexpensive in terms of dollars, time, and personnel and because they are less controversial among recreationists.

- Education/information campaigns are often the first strategy tried when a conflict arises. Often these focus on teaching proper etiquette, as when cavers are told to confine their travel through a cave to a single path.
- Often educational approaches are coupled with efforts at improved enforcement of existing boundaries of segregated use and/or rules against depreciative behaviors.

4. If education and enforcement fail, managers are likely to adopt strategies that change the physical and/or managerial characteristics of the setting.

- The standard way to do this is to segregate uses. This approach ensures that recreationists have a place where they know their experiences won't be diminished by interference from others. In caving this has been accomplished by installing gates and allowing only one group at a time to be in the cave; therefore, insuring the "wilderness" quality of caving without the interference of others. The disadvantage is that the total area available to participants in all or some activities is reduced.
- For this reason, groups such as the National Speleological Society favor solutions that "design out" conflict, for example, making more caves accessible to spread out visitation.

5. Increasingly agencies seek collaborative solutions to problems of shared use.

- Such processes allow the conflicting interests themselves to join in drafting ways to minimize conflict. For example, if researchers and recreational cavers are able to jointly choose locations for segregated use, they may be able to agree on areas they are more willing to "give up" to the competing interest, rather than having managers choose the sites and face acrimony from all sides.
- These approaches build on theories of procedural justice (for example Lind and Tyler, 1989) which suggest that people are more willing to accept unfavorable outcomes if they had a hand in designing the process by which the decision was made and believe that the process was fair.

6. Collaborative processes hold promise, but they remain largely unproven and pose some new challenges to outdoor recreation and cave managers.

- They require skillful management by people with "people skills" that may be rare within agencies because they surpass the traditional leadership skills required of natural resource professionals (Rasmussen and Brunson, 1996).
- There can be enormous time demands for collaborative processes.
- Some interests shy away from participation in collaborative processes, believing either that their interests are more likely to be served by alternatives to a negotiated settlement, or that they cannot allow their values to be compromised by offering concessions to a competing interest.
- Agencies are leery of violating the Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. Appendix 2). The structure of collaborative processes must be carefully designed to ensure consistency with the tenets of Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C.A. # 4231-61).

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