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(Re)Centering socioenvironmental justice: *Thinking about co-management of and access to parks and protected areas in the United States*

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Abstract

An international group of graduate students utilized the 2021 George Wright Society Student Summit to come together and discuss potential practices to bolster socioenvironmental justice implementation within the United States National Park Service (NPS). Focusing on accessibility and co-management perspectives, this group reflected on various definitions of terms, historical contexts of the Park Service nationally and globally, and how partnerships are essential to inclusivity and relevance building. This led to further discourse about potential methods of incorporating socioenvironmental justice aims into specific areas of NPS by reviewing its current practices and global case studies surrounding accessibility and co-management of protected areas. Major conclusions emphasize streamlining definitions surrounding access, accessibility, and co-management; understanding that co-management is not a monolithic framework but one dependent on local communities; continued recognition of historical exclusions of marginalized peoples; and embracing partnerships by providing stakeholders with equal positions of power, authority, and access. This thought piece aims to catalyze discourse surrounding a potential transition toward more inclusive co-management practices within US protected areas, while still remaining true to the missions and goals of their respective organizations. We recognize and do not intend to discredit any of the work that NPS and other organizations have produced towards improving sustainable co-management strategies, but rather suggest that there is always room for improvement. In doing so, we offer some potential strategies and big picture notions to be mindful of when engaging in socially just co-management practices.

Keywords: co-management, accessibility, relevance, collaboration and partnerships, inclusion, parks and protected areas, national parks

Introduction

The national park system of the United States is a source of immense pride for countless Americans and has been adopted as a global model for the conservation of natural landscapes. Since 1916, the system has been run by the National Park Service (NPS) which, according to the latest version of its mission statement, “preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations”

(NPS 2021a). The Park Service emphasizes that this is possible via cooperating with partners and stakeholders to implement preservation of both natural and cultural landscapes while also providing high-quality outdoor recreation experiences. This mission statement has grown and evolved since its conception, but contains two key objectives: the first being to preserve resources in perpetuity, and the second being to collaborate with different entities to allow for equitable access

and benefits associated with the various types of parks and protected areas (PPAs) that NPS manages. Such objectives speak to the need for an inclusionary and participatory approach to PPAs, setting a standard of excellence for this country's national park system, as well as for PPAs globally.

As NPS moves into the twenty-first century, it aspires to create a comprehensive understanding of historical injustices, and bear true ownership of its history. NPS has expanded on previous efforts to increase its definition of parks, from a primary focus on remote areas of scenic beauty, to a more inclusive view encompassing urban areas that have historical and cultural significance (Manning et al. 2016). But systemic racism, climate change, political tensions, and increased visitation have plodded alongside NPS into the new millennium, and require innovative solutions. In the years leading up to and including its centennial in 2016, NPS began to address some of these more complex, systemic issues woven into the fabric of the United States in hopes of creating more relevant and adaptive public places. NPS has since taken strides in working towards diversifying staff, truly celebrating all American people, and being more inclusive as we uplift our dynamic and changing society (Manning et al. 2016).

Expanding the definition of what national parks “should look like” necessitates examining the narrative of who the National Park Service serves and how its PPAs should be managed. In doing so, critical issues of access and management begin to arise and require the consideration of questions such as: Who are these PPAs meant for? What does “accessibility” actually mean? Who should have a say in how cultural resources are managed? Is a government-first way always the best for tackling PPA-related problems? How can NPS be more relevant to the people it serves? This paper explores concepts and frameworks around increasing a culture of inclusion in PPAs run by NPS. Much of our discussion revolves around the history of national parks, co-management, accessibility, collaboration, relevancy, and partnerships.

Co-management and accessibility: Definitions and discussion

As NPS navigates historical issues of participation and inclusion in PPAs, the concepts of co-management and accessibility become key components in discussions of socioenvironmental justice. These concepts, however, are subject to interpretation and may only function as empty rhetoric if not well defined by all partners in the management process (Arnstein 2019). There has been debate over the term “citizen participation” given that these words often are used to claim that all perspectives

were considered while making it possible for only some to benefit (Arnstein 2019). For example, Tipa and Welch (2006) argue that engaging in co-management has been problematic for Indigenous communities given that the state perspective on resource management does not align with or acknowledge traditional knowledge. Therefore, when employing co-management and accessibility in PPAs, these terms must be defined and agreed upon by all partners.

Co-management is a strategy that centers the inclusion of different actors in PPA systems, being defined as a “sharing of public responsibility and authority” (Lane-Kamahele 2016: 119). This definition moves away from centralized, top-down models and aligns with polycentric governance approaches in which different collaborative stakeholders make decisions (Shultis and Heffner 2016). An important aspect of co-management is partnerships with different actors, including non-governmental organizations and other third parties (Lane-Kamahele 2016).

Some issues regarding co-management (or the lack thereof) stem from an exclusionary approach towards conservation, reflecting a dichotomous concept that separates humans from nature. Such an approach historically has led to a top-down management model of PPAs in the United States, which often requires restrictions on the use of resources and the removal of people from landscapes. The negative social outcomes of this approach have compelled debate within the conservation literature for over 20 years as social scientists and others increasingly call for a PPA model that accentuates community development and reflects socioenvironmental justice discourse. It is widely accepted that in order for PPAs to be successful, conservation efforts must incorporate social dimensions. Recent social science literature calls for a grassroots, inclusionary model that provides social and economic benefits to local communities, as well as ownership and involvement in PPAs, and this is the trend globally (Shultis and Heffner 2016).

Partnerships with local and/or Indigenous communities are crucial to the advancement of socioenvironmental justice in PPAs worldwide. When employing co-management as an inclusion strategy, we must ask ourselves: what groups have historically been marginalized in protected area designation? Do they share the same idea of what co-management looks like? Is it akin to what those who hold power envision? Agreeing on definitions of collaboration and creating partnerships with vulnerable communities ensures that power is evenly distributed (Arnstein 2019). The advancement of socioenvironmental justice in PPAs is not only about the distribution of power

or management collaborations, but also about ensuring that these natural and cultural landscapes are equally accessible to the diverse range of people living in the United States.

Accessibility to PPAs can take many meanings: from understanding financial and, physical barriers as proximate causes that keep potential visitors away, to addressing senses of belonging and restrictions on uses of resources within PPAs that ultimately prevent people from seeing themselves as PPA visitors at all. Access to resources is especially relevant in cases where PPA designations have restricted resource use by neighboring Indigenous communities, often making them unable to use traditionally valuable natural and cultural resources (Shultis and Heffner 2016). Reaching the goal of equity in visitation and enjoyment of PPAs requires an understanding of the diverse perspectives of historically excluded groups on accessibility. When contemplating issues of accessibility, we must understand who PPAs have catered to and who benefits from the management of these public places. The history of intentional exclusion of African Americans from national parks within the United States is evident. However, NPS has made strides to acknowledge these past injustices and there are ongoing efforts—primarily from grassroots groups—to ensure that diverse groups within the United States can equally enjoy PPAs (UGA Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources 2020). To promote access and diversity in the national park system, there is a need for co-management practices and partnerships with different stakeholders to be as dynamic and diverse as the communities that can and will benefit from more equitable engagement.

History of NPS partnerships and management efforts

Most NPS sites protect both natural and cultural resources. Of the first ten national parks designated, nine were preserved for their outstanding natural and “wild” characteristics. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” This is how policymakers should define “wilderness,” but the implication of this statement—that the earth and environment are unaffected by humans—is an inherently Western concept, one that erases historical, often BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) ties to these landscapes (Minteer and Manning 2016). However, the practical effect of this legal definition is that the federal agencies who manage designated wilderness areas in the United States allow visitors to trammel the land with a variety of uses.

After the establishment of NPS, the agency expanded to steward historic and other cultural sites, shorelines, and urban settings across the United States. This expansion created a need for partnerships and collaborations with other federal agencies, local governments, private industries, non-profits, and stakeholder groups as means to develop a beneficial co-management process for all involved. Historically, NPS has depended on partnerships to manage natural and cultural areas for recreation and conservation purposes. Community collaboration efforts in the 1960s and 1970s introduced partnerships to share ownership of space and place with local communities, which then produced legislation such as the National Trails Systems Act. The introduction of national heritage areas in the 1980s, which currently focus on broader representation of local communities in partnership with NPS, should have allowed for underrepresented groups and descendant communities to participate in management and interpretation of land or places that are culturally significant (Barrett and Mitchell 2016). Although these long-term guidelines for co-management and partnership processes for collaborative groups are in place, genuine use of community-based programs and levels of accessibility related to these partnerships could be lower than desired by the stakeholders.

Adaptive co-management

Although still in its infancy, adaptive co-management (ACM) is one potential alternative for PPA management. Ryan Plummer and David A. Fennell—through years of being forerunners in co-management PPA research—have provided a convenient, conceptual introductory framework for ACM, looking at the possibility of integrating it into current sustainable tourism and PPA management practices technically, ethically, and pragmatically. They offer several definitions of adaptive co-management, all of which involve elements of ongoing revision of management strategies within a collaborative framework. Moreover, they emphasize that this system relies on governance, not government, whereas the former “involves the full range of individuals and organizations involved in policy decisions and implementation” (Plummer and Fennell 2009: 153). They claim that ACM perfectly adapts to complex situations that involve multiple levels of connectivity and cooperation between institutional managers and local communities (Plummer and Fennell 2009). As community input is already integrated into some planning and restoration projects on public lands, transitioning into ACM would not be completely alien to PPA managers.

Yet the emphasis on ACM being best applied in “messy” or complex situations and the goal of an even power dynamic between managers and community members,

may make adoption of ACM too difficult of a transition to make. National parks in the United States currently hold a borderline-mythic social status, which a transition to ACM could tarnish as it would bring up unsavory histories of eminent domain and racial segregation. Yet these issues—which are ubiquitous across the nation—are increasingly brought to light and discussed within NPS as it furthers its 2016 centennial goals of increasing visitation diversity while celebrating the myriad histories of the country’s citizens.

Global perspectives on co-management

One unintended benefit of the globalization of the exclusionary “Yellowstone model” (which is responsible for the eviction of countless communities for the sake of conservation) is that a plethora of research projects aim to reincorporate those communities via different co-management types. Based on a multi-phase study of Ghana’s Mole National Park that included a wide range of people (e.g., PPA managers, municipal authorities, and multiple resource users from a third of the local Indigenous communities), Soliku and Schraml (2020) focused on perceptions of outcomes based on two co-management types. Results found that community resource management areas (CREMAs) gave the most power to the local communities in developing and implementing rules regarding use of natural resources, while protected areas management advisory units (PAMAUs) functioned as state- managed PPAs that utilize stakeholders and local community members as consultants. CREMAs allowed for the dissemination of knowledge about sustainable natural resource management and good farming practices, so that the communities did not need to rely on the strictly conserved natural resources inside the national park. Moreover, socioeconomic outcomes such as increased tourism occurred under CREMAs, and overall resulted “in more inclusive and participatory decision making” (Soliku and Schraml 2020: 118). Comparing these results to current NPS practices, such as the National Environmental Policy Act planning process, the Park Service’s current system of co-management more closely resembles the PAMAU system. PPA managers that intend to fully integrate the park into the local community should apply CREMA—not PAMAU—techniques of power distribution and management objectives.

As aforementioned, definitions of terms are imperative to providing intended outcomes. Plummer and Fennell stress the importance of *adaptive* co-management, whereas Soliku and Schraml utilized specific sub-types of co-management that transpose power dynamics between institutional systems and local constituencies. Tipa and Welch (2006) explain that slight differences

within co-management definitions have exacerbated engagement issues for Indigenous communities. Cooperative management, collaboration in management, and management by community drastically differ in terms of how they are perceived, thereby reinforcing the importance of community and stakeholder engagement and shared leadership roles at all levels. Moreover, PPA co-management outcomes should include “the preservation of cultural identity; recognition of the right to access, use, develop, and protect resources; self-determination; and the use of traditional environmental knowledge” (Tipa and Welch 2006: 387–388). American national parks have the capacity to offer these outcomes to their constituents.

Current NPS co-management and inclusion practices

Inclusion and co-management occur when different entities collaborate (in this case, NPS and other stakeholders) to produce, provide, and present knowledge and resources. While NPS has a problematic history, it also offers multiple stories of successful co-management and collaboration. Particularly with regards to Indigenous representation and narratives, certain parks engage in co-management practices with Native communities not simply because it is the “right thing to do,” but because it builds a more equitable, just, and relevant park (Lane-Kamahele 2016).

In 1974, the Native Hawaiian community around the Honokōhau settlement collaborated with Congress on a federal report to “establish a park that would perpetuate Native Hawaiian culture, community, resources, and their spirit” (Lane-Kamahele 2016: 120). This *Spirit of Kaloko-Honokōhau Report* resulted in the creation of Kaloko-Honokōhau National Historical Park, a collaborative effort that critically empowers and honors the Native Hawaiian community, specifically the Honokōhau settlement. Additionally, NPS has taken strides in co-management approaches with numerous Indigenous groups nationwide. One example occurs at Everglades National Park, where the history of the Seminole, Calusa, and Tequesta tribal groups is shared, while another comes from the Grand Canyon, where over 4,300 archeological resources are being co-managed by eleven traditionally associated tribes and ethnic groups as a way to preserve this rich, cultural heritage. To encourage emotional and intellectual reclamation and protection of sites that glorify American military campaigns against Native American tribes, in 1991 NPS renamed Custer Battlefield National Monument as Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument following the insistence of Native peoples. Additional examples include Native American involvement in the management, creation, and

interpretation of Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site and Washita Battlefield National Historic Site (Lane-Kamahele 2016). These examples of co-management approaches with Indigenous groups not only indicate past success, but can inform future holistic management strategies.

Facing issues of overuse and degradation of resources that visitation directly causes at PPAs, NPS collaborated with five other governmental agencies to create the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council, and subsequently a Visitor Use Management (VUM) framework (Cahill et al. 2016). This VUM framework represents a holistic way of managing PPAs so visitor experiences are not compromised, nor is the integrity of pristine, natural resources. The VUM framework is an adaptive strategy that each PPA can use for a variety of different visitor use -related issues. Created in 2016, the framework's main purpose is to assist practitioners in sustainable management by:

- Identifying desired conditions for resources, visitor experiences and opportunities, and facilities and services;
- Gaining an understanding of how visitor use influences achievement of desired conditions; and
- Committing to active/adaptive management and monitoring of visitor use to meet overall goals (Cahill et al. 2016: 33).

Critical goals of the VUM framework include creating definitions pertaining to visitor use-related terms, creating an adaptable framework that works for many management situations, and working toward tangible monitoring strategies and solutions for complex issues (Cahill et al. 2016). While federal agencies created this framework, it is commonly used by a wide array of resource practitioners, and places heavy emphasis on stakeholder engagement and involvement throughout. Collaboration is always an ongoing process, but these stories and adaptive management frameworks are particularly useful when considering how NPS can evolve to become more inclusive, sustainable, relevant, and socially just within American society.

In an effort to make NPS more socially just and accessible to all, it created an office of Relevance, Diversity, and Inclusion (RDI). NPS defines RDI as follows:

- Relevancy is achieved when all Americans are able to establish a personal connection to the National Park Service parks and programs, and find meaning and value in the mission of the National Park Service.
- Diversity represents the practice of actively

incorporating people of different backgrounds, perspectives, thoughts and beliefs throughout the organization to ensure that NPS is advantaged by the best thinking possible. Diversity represents the wide range of visible and invisible differences and similarities that make each of us unique.

- Inclusion is the practice of intentionally building a culture that is flexible, values diverse ideas, and embraces the meaningful participation of all. (NPS 2021b).

Of the three terms, “relevance” has been one of the most notable goals of the agency, and yet the least clear. Relevance has been described as “an elusive, ideal state” that needs a goal and a recipient—relevance to what (goal), for whom (recipient) (Perry 2018). Perry emphasizes that relevance or “connections that resonate with shared goals of the public” parallels other ideals such as “freedom, liberty, and justice” (p. 24). Since these concepts constantly evolve, “relevance may be considered more of a journey than a destination, needing continual inputs and refreshment” (p. 24). Little research has occurred on how explicit and overlapping these goals need to be in order to achieve relevancy. Previous relevance-related research mostly examines visitors’ motivations, constraints, and access to urban parks (Perry, 2018). These other concepts are a proxy for relevance, and do not encapsulate the full meaning of the term. Generally, there is a cursory understanding of what relevance means in the context of parks and protected areas. Finally, the question of whether relevance requires physical visitation remains unanswered. Previous research and the NPS definition seems to indicate that visitation is not necessary to achieve relevance, however, this has not been studied in the field. Society must ask itself if it is enough for public lands to be *relevant* to all, or should they also be *inclusive* for all.

To go beyond relevance and foster diverse and inclusive national parks, NPS sought to increase diverse engagement through programs, partnerships, and employment practices (NPS 2021b). Despite these efforts, visitation and participation of BIPOC communities in outdoor recreation still lags. Therefore, in addition to efforts such as those listed above, NPS might consider partnering with diverse communities through social media groups such as Latino Outdoors, Outdoor Afro, and Unlikely Hikers.

Online communities through social media represent a wide array of advocacy groups ranging from individual influencers (e.g., Pattiegonia, Vasu Sojitra), to activity- and culture-specific groups (e.g., Brown Girls Climb, Hunters of Color), to local meet-up groups for BIPOC outdoor recreation (e.g., Here Montana, PDX Climbers

of Color), to national meet-up groups (e.g., Outdoor Afro, Latino Outdoors). All of these groups contribute their own narratives, increase visibility of BIPOC and people with disabilities in outdoor recreation, and provide a virtual community of support, and some offer in-person meet-up excursions as well. Recent research shows that stories shared through online groups such as Latino Outdoors are disrupting the dominant, white narrative of rugged individualism and solitude, and create a new, more inclusive narrative and relationship with national parks (Flores and Kuhn 2018). Through online communities such as Latino Outdoors, the shifting narrative and recreation preferences of diverse cultural groups becomes increasingly visible. Additionally, through groups like Latino Outdoors, previously noted trends for Latinx recreation preferences are changing to more active, “adventure” activities such as snowshoeing, hiking, rock climbing, and bird watching (Flores and Kuhn 2018). Partnerships with local and national social media advocacy groups would allow NPS to learn from groups rewriting the narratives of national parks from a grassroots level that is relevant to them. As opposed to acculturating culturally diverse groups to adopt white, able-bodied-dominant narratives and values surrounding national parks, these partnerships would allow the Park Service to include diverse narratives and values as being relevant in addition to those of the dominant culture.

Concluding thoughts

We have a long way to go, but NPS has taken strides in adopting more socially just management practices that include the local communities and BIPOC peoples who were historically removed and segregated from the traditional white, wealthy PPA visitors. Studying global examples of ACM and other subtypes of co-management, as well as expanding common definitions of access and accessibility, should be the next steps for all public land managers, not only those within NPS. Previous suggestions for diversifying PPA visitation were perfunctory, focused on short-term goals, and often included recommendations that would put the burden of explaining messy historical race relations on the few NPS staff of color.

In order for NPS to effectively embrace socioenvironmental justice as a principle in their mission, it must continue the recognition of historical exclusion and injustices committed against marginalized peoples. NPS must also embrace a genuine culture of inclusion and partnerships with local communities, and especially with BIPOC.

When addressing socioenvironmental justice by employing the concept of co-management as a strategy, NPS

must first acknowledge that this concept may be interpreted differently by the diverse stakeholders involved with the national park system. In order for this strategy to adequately address socioenvironmental justice, stakeholders need to agree on these important definitions and on the best mechanisms to arrive at effective and just co-management. NPS must be careful not to use this concept as rhetoric, but instead take truly tangible steps towards achieving it.

Increasing collaboration and co-management with local, ethnic, and Indigenous communities will also result in increasing relevancy, diversity, and inclusion within PPAs. This not only benefits the communities in question, but also assists NPS in fulfilling its mission statement “to preserve, unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.”

Regarding accessibility to PPAs, we need to constantly ask ourselves who is *not* visiting and why. Accessibility is a complex term that has numerous meanings, spanning from park facilities being compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, people having adequate transportation to PPAs, and even people physically feeling welcomed, safe, and accepted within PPAs. While each PPA is unique and has its own management plans and issues, it is critical to keep the large questions surrounding accessibility in mind. In order to remain relevant, NPS must adapt to a changing society and consider the multiple facets of accessibility. NPS must look inward to understand its history, injustices, and stories of success, as well as globally to understand how others have grappled with these questions and overcome issues related to access and management. Otherwise, PPAs will continue to cater to a stagnant, homogeneous audience instead of the full range of future generations.

Author contributions

All authors equally contributed to the conceptualization and writing, therefore leading to the implementation of alphabetical attribution.

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