

## OBLIGATIONS INHERENT TO THE CREATION OF LEISURE SPACES: WHAT CAN THE HISTORY OF SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK TEACH US?

Ben Amsden  
Department of Park, Recreation,  
and Tourism Resources  
Michigan State University,  
131 Natural Resources Bldg  
East Lansing, MI 48823

---

**Abstract:** When a local park is designed, built, and managed there is an obligation to the various social groups who live nearby (Field, 2000). It would stand to reason that the same could be said of a larger, more rural park site, such as a national park or designated wilderness area. What then, are the ethical obligations held by those in power who create large natural resource-based recreation spaces? The establishment of Shenandoah National Park in the 1920's and 1930's created a resource that today is one of the most heavily used recreation sites in America (Sheaffer, 1999). Its development was unique, however, in that instead of setting aside unused wilderness lands, it reclaimed inhabited land (Reeder, 1978). This reclamation led to the forced dislocation of many of the mountain residents, who had lived on and farmed the Virginia mountains for generations. Throughout the discourse of obligation there breathes the following questions: was this forced relocation in Shenandoah National Park an example of the hegemonic elite exercising their power and marginalizing the less fortunate? Would relocation from the mountains improve the welfare of those affected? If so, what were the social and cultural costs of this improvement? To answer these three questions, and address the resulting connections to obligation, this paper will view the creation of Shenandoah National Park through the three contextual lenses of leisure research: the social, the economic, and the political (Kelly, 2000). The political context will examine power and voice, and the obligation to observe those voices. The economic context will consider the obligations toward the welfare of the people. Finally, the social/cultural context will examine the impact of this relocation on the norms, ideas, and ways of life of the park's residents. Although

displacement and eminent domain are no longer appropriate during the park creation process, state and local governments are still custodians of certain obligations as developers of leisure spaces. An investigation of these obligations will help serve those custodians, reminding them that no matter what the manner of acquisition, care needs to be taken to facilitate the inclusion of everyone, regardless of location and class.

---

### Introduction

When a local park is designed, built, and managed there is an obligation to the various social groups who live nearby (Field, 2000). It would stand to reason that the same could be said of a larger, more rural park site, such as a national park or designated wilderness area. What then, are the ethical obligations held by the government agencies in power that create large natural resource-based recreation spaces? Furthermore, how can an understanding of these obligations help developers and managers?

The establishment of Shenandoah National Park in the 1920's and 1930's created a resource that today is one of the most heavily used recreation sites in America (Sheaffer, 1999). Its development was unique, however, in that instead of setting aside wilderness lands, it reclaimed inhabited land (Reeder, 1978). This reclamation led to the forced dislocation of many of the local mountain residents, who had lived in and farmed the Virginia mountains for generations.

A consideration of the discourse regarding obligation yields the following questions: was this forced relocation in Shenandoah National Park an example of the hegemonic elite exercising their power and marginalizing the less fortunate? Would relocation from the mountains improve the welfare of those affected? If so, what were the social and cultural costs of this improvement?

To answer these three questions, and address the resulting connections to obligation, this paper will view the creation of Shenandoah National Park through the three contextual lenses of leisure research: the social, the economic, and the political (Kelly, 2000). The political context will examine power and voice, and the obligation to observe and heed those voices. The economic context will

consider the state-held obligation to maximize the welfare of the people. Finally, the social (cultural) context will examine the impact of this relocation on the obligation to maintain the norms, ideas, and ways of life of the park's residents.

Although displacement and eminent domain are no longer appropriate means of acquisition during the park creation process, state and local governments are still custodians of certain obligations to nearby residents as developers and maintainers of leisure spaces. An investigation of these obligations will help serve those custodians, reminding them that no matter what the manner of acquisition, or the subsequent management, care needs to be taken to facilitate the inclusion of everyone, regardless of location, class, and power.

### **Shenandoah National Park Background**

Today, Shenandoah National Park (SNP) encompasses almost 300 square miles of mountaintops, valleys, and ridgelines (Sheaffer, 1999). In the 18th and 19th centuries, farming, logging and mining contributed to economic prosperity in the area. Decline began in the early 20th century, when blight destroyed most of the native chestnut trees. As the population dwindled, the heavily damaged area began the long process of reverting back to forest land (Sheaffer, 1999). As the region's environment improved, and as the automobile became an important factor in vacation travel, tourist pressures on the entire Appalachian region began to increase (Lacey, 1991).

In central Virginia, tourism existed long before the completion of the SNP. Facilities such as George Freeman Pollock's Skyland Lodge and Black Rock Springs Hotel began to attract more and more people every year (Lambert, 2001). This increased interest in using the region for recreational purposes paved the way for the idea of a national park that would not only provide recreation opportunities for nearby areas such as Washington DC, but would also serve to restore the heavily damaged land. This enthusiasm was a considerable boon to the private fundraising that took place during the early stages of the park's development, and lessened reluctance towards the proposed relocation of the mountain residents.

When the park was authorized in 1925, almost 450 families of varying socioeconomic

backgrounds inhabited the area (Reeder, 1978). They were an "unorganized, nonhomogenized, tiny minority" with little political influence (Lambert, 2001). By the time the park opened in 1935, most of these residents had agreed to relocate outside the park boundaries (Sheaffer, 1999). This relocation, however, was not without controversy. While some residents saw the relocation as an escape from dire poverty, other residents fought (within the boundaries of the law) to keep their homes. Still others threatened violence, and as a result were forcibly removed (Lambert, 2001). To make matters worse, many people received no compensation for land on which they had been tenants or squatters for generations (Reeder, 1998).

### **The Political Context: Power and Voice**

According to Datillo and Williams, inclusion and the facilitation of self-determination are important obligations inherent to the development and delivery of leisure services (Datillo & Williams, 1999). An important element of this self-determination is the ability to make choices free from external influences or interference (Datillo and Williams citing Wehmeyer, 1999). The foundation of this ability to control our existence is based on two important concepts, power and voice. It appears that the mountain residents who were evicted found themselves without either during the debate over the creation of the park.

#### ***Power and Voice***

Power can be defined as "the ability or capacity to perform effectively" (American Heritage Dictionary, The, 1985). Similarly, voice is defined as "any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs" (Hirschman, 1970) Despite the fact that there were variations in education, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status (Reeder, 1978), many of the mountain residents found that the institutions in place at the time silenced their voice, and limited their power. For example, Virginia law dictated that illiterate people with less than \$250 of taxable property could not vote. Furthermore, more than half of the mountain families had no equity at all, meaning that they were squatters or tenants (Lambert, 2001; Reeder, 1978). With no voting rights, and no property rights, residents found themselves without the necessary tools to make their own choices "free from external influence" (Datillo and Williams citing Wehmeyer, 1999).

### ***The Obligation to Listen***

The political context is one of the most complicated leisure contexts, because those who make decisions usually have competing interests in mind. In the case of the SNP, increased visitation and outside support for a new park area from affluent tourists may have influenced political agendas, shifting the government's focus away from its obligation to consider the voice of the people who would be directly affected by the park's development. Despite any potential conflict, it is imperative that developers and managers of recreation space give equal weight to all voices, even the ones without power. To further connect this to a leisure context, Karen Fox adds: "Leisure thinking becomes a locatable political practice that demands the presence of people who represent the plurality of the world and who are capable of publicly assessing and critiquing the practices, beliefs, scholarships, and values of leisure from multiple locations" (Fox, 2000). The "leisure thinking" that took place during the development of the park was not inclusive of a plurality. In summary, the relocation was indeed a marginalization of a less fortunate class, and the obligations of inclusion and the facilitation of self-determination were ignored.

### **The Economic Context: A Fresh Start**

From an economic standpoint, the developers and managers of a recreation space have an obligation to create economic opportunities for nearby residents, or at the very least replace opportunities that have been taken away. Furthermore, there is also an inherent obligation of sustainability - the development of a resource which meets the requirements of present day while allowing future generations to meet their own needs (Swinnerton, 1999).

### ***New Opportunities Through Tourism***

Much of the poverty throughout the Appalachians was not the result of a poor work ethic. Due to a lack of arable land and poor farming techniques, by 1930 many of the farms in the region were declared unfit for agriculture (Jolley, 1969). Additionally, the land was rendered useless by the exploitive mining practices of the century before (Jolley, 1969). The good news for the mountain residents was that the growth of the tourism industry in the area created new opportunities.

George Freeman Pollock's Skyland Lodge provided jobs, medical care, money and, via the entertainment programs, provided the locals a view of a different world (Reeder, 1998). The construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline drive provided many opportunities for work, as did the participation of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the construction of the park (Jolley, 1969; Lambert, 2001). In addition, many tourist visitors occasionally provided money and other goods. There was some criticism, however, that this altruism was fostering a begging mentality among some of the locals.

### ***Relocation***

Of the nearly 500 families still living in the park, almost 300 were chosen to participate in a federal program to relocate them to areas that could provide suitable educational, medical, and agricultural opportunities<sup>1</sup> (Reeder, 1978). The state taught many of the residents modern methods in home-making and agriculture, and provided free health care for five years.

A select group of older residents were allowed to stay in their homes within the park for the remainder of their natural lives<sup>2</sup>. For others, the relocation arrangements allowed them to pay the government five dollars a month as rent for the first year of residence in their new homes, with long-term purchasing options available afterward. The arrangements were structured so that the residents would wind up paying less than it cost the government to build the homes (Lambert, 2001).

### ***New, sustainable opportunities through collaboration***

Economically, it seems difficult to argue that the state of Virginia ignored its economic obligations to the mountain residents. The collaboration between the state and the residents, evidenced by the provision of home-skills education programs and affordable housing, helped fulfill an important obligation to replace lost opportunities to

---

<sup>1</sup> Of the 465 families, 64 required no assistance, a few elderly residents were given permission to stay, 293 participated in the program, and the rest went on welfare (Reeder, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, the number of older residents in the park dwindled quickly - most were gone by 1945. The last one, Annie Shenk, died in 1979 at the age of 92 (Lambert, 2001).

participate in the growing tourism industry by “building understanding [through the process of] fostering exchange of information and ideas...providing a mechanism for resolving uncertainty” (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). By providing relocation areas that were in close proximity to suitable economic activity, the state was attempting to replace the lost economic opportunities and reduce the inherent uncertainty. Additionally, the obligation to develop sustainability was met via the education on modern life that was provided to the residents.

It should be noted, however, that while the obligations outlined in this section seemed to be upheld by the state, there is another, more post-modern view to consider which states that economic efficiency should not be measured using the criteria established by the dominant, powered view. What the state considered to be in the best interest of the people might actually have (inadvertently) entailed very high social and cultural costs. The next leisure context to be examined will address the cultural costs of this improvement.

### **The Cultural Context: A Changing Identity**

The idea of picking people up and moving them into predetermined areas with the idea that they will be better off is inherently troublesome. One of the most significant elements in one’s identity is their home, and their familial foundations. Further nestled within this identity are norms and ideas. Throughout history, many social groups have been forced to give up their homes, solely for the benefit of a more powerful group. In the case of the mountain people of the SNP, some (including some of the residents themselves) would argue that the benefits of the relocation would outweigh these considerations. While this is a complicated issue whose resolution is difficult at best, it is still possible to illuminate the social obligations of the state.

### ***Maintaining Cultural Identity***

The following quote from Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (cited in Allison, 2000) succinctly outlines the social justice obligation:

“As doers and actors we seek to promote many values of social justice in addition to fairness in the distribution of goods: learning and

using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings; participating in forming and running institutions, and receiving recognition for such participation; playing and communicating with others, and expressing our experience, feelings, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen”.

Put more simply, the social justice obligation involves providing an opportunity for people to share their experiences and become involved in the society around them, while allowing for them to maintain their cultural identity. Care needs to be taken, however, to assure that cultural identity is not jeopardized by requiring that people fit in. For the mountain residents, life after the relocation was indeed a substantial adjustment, and anecdotal evidence from the Ida Valley, Virginia, relocation community provides an example of the potential misunderstanding of cultural identity: “People laughed when some of the mountaineers relocated at Ida Valley dragged their bathtub outside and used it to scald hogs in at butchering time. But it was just a matter of values and priorities: they needed something to scald hogs in a lot more than they needed something to bathe in” (Reeder, 1978).

This example also demonstrates the pressure that the mountain people were under to become assimilated into a more modern society. Over time, the new surroundings and the new value structures in which the mountain people were immersed most likely influenced their values, and so their uniqueness, their cultural definitions and their ways of life began to be suppressed and were eventually lost altogether. This change, since it was not allowed to happen within the course of normal social evolution, is decidedly a heavy cost in terms of social capital.

Over time, the community and culture of the mountain residents slowly disintegrated. As they began to become assimilated into their new situations, many people opted not to stay in the government-provided housing (Lambert, 2001). While the transition to “lowland” life may not have been inherently difficult, the loss of cultural identity is always unfortunate.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This investigation of the relocation of the mountain people in Shenandoah National Park has

served to illuminate the obligations inherent to the creation of large natural resource recreation spaces. Within the three contexts of leisure studies, the obligations become apparent:

*Political Context* - There is an obligation to give equal weight to all voices, regardless of power, race or class.

*Economic Context* - There is an obligation to create economic opportunities for nearby residents, and replace opportunities that have been taken away. Additionally, there is also a secondary obligation to develop a sustainable resource.

*Cultural Context* - There is an obligation to provide an opportunity for people to maintain their cultural identity, and not be forced to fit in, or be forced to adopt a set of established norms and identities.

In the case of the SNP, the state of Virginia and the United States Congress ignored most of these obligations. They overlooked the fact that the mountain residents, due to their situation, were powerless and voiceless, and therefore were left out of the planning process. They placed the residents in situations where their cultural identity was jeopardized. Furthermore, the residents were subject to misunderstanding and ridicule, most possibly resulting in a suppression of, and eventually a loss of, their culture. The state did, however, attempt some good by placing the residents in an area where they would have easier access to education, jobs, and medical care.

What can be done to insure that all obligations for all people are met in the future? Eminent domain may not be an acceptable or appropriate method of land acquisition anymore, but the question is relevant for consideration in leisure service delivery and management situations. For example, the lessons regarding the obligation to provide for equality in terms of voice could be useful to a park manager in an urban setting. "It is not uncommon to plan a recreation program ignoring differences in age, race, class, cultural heritage, and abilities" (Fox & van Dyck, 1997). Hopefully, an understanding of the lessons learned during the relocation of the Blue Ridge Mountain residents will prevent a similar situation from occurring again.

From an academic perspective, it is equally important to apply these lessons to the issues and problems of today. To further this goal, perhaps

additional research in more contemporary settings will provide specific insights and methodologies. Additionally, there is little documentation besides the anecdotal which specifically details the opinions of those who live in close proximity to recreation spaces. In the case of the SNP, this is a human resource that is rapidly disappearing. It would be fascinating to ask the question: what exactly was taken away? Darwin Lambert, in his book "The Undying Past of Shenandoah National Park" (2001), writes eloquently of the potential feelings of yearning for a time gone by, a culture lost forever:

"Yet those park-land mothers and fathers who are still with us, and the park-born children, too, long grown up now, have a longing that won't quit. They remember the mountain spring, the cold water so pure and sparkling forever flowing. They remember the nut trees and the berries, the trout in the streams, the taste of the squirrel and maybe 'possum and coon and groundhog. The cabbages grew bigger up there, and the apples tastier. Though life was sometimes hard, they could do what they had to do when they felt like doing it, not when some schedule imposed on them. The freedom was greater there, and the security was far more dependable than outsiders ever seem to have understood."

## References

- Allison, M. T. (2000). Leisure, Diversity, and Social Justice. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32(1), 2-6.
- American Heritage Dictionary, The. (1985). Houghton Mifflin.
- Datillo, J., & Williams, R. (1999). Inclusion and Leisure Service Delivery. In E. L. Jackson & T. L. Burton (Eds.), *Leisure Studies - Prospects for the 21st Century*: Venture Publishing.
- Field, D. R. (2000). Social Groups and Parks: Leisure Behavior in Time and Space. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32(1), 27-31.
- Fox, K. M. (2000). Echoes of Leisure: Questions, Challenges, and Potentials. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32(1), 32-36.

- Fox, K. M., & van Dyck, J. (1997). Embrace The Wrongs That We Have Committed and Celebrate That There Is Time To Start Anew. *Journal of Leisurability*, 24(3), 3-22.
- Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*: Harvard University Press.
- Jolley, H. E. (1969). *The Blue Ridge Parkway*: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Kelly, J. R. (2000). The "Real World" and the Irrelevance of Theory-Based Research. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32(1), 74-78.
- Lacey, M. J. (Ed.). (1991). *Government and Environmental Politics*: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lambert, D. (2001). *The Undying Past of Shenandoah National Park*: Roberts Rinehart Inc.
- Reeder, C. a. J. (1978). *Shenandoah Heritage - The Story of the People Before the Park*: The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club.
- Reeder, C. a. J. (1998). *Shenandoah Secrets - The Story of the Park's Hidden Past*: The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club.
- Sheaffer, L. (Ed.). (1999). *Shenandoah National Park (12 ed. Vol. 7)*: The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club.
- Swinnerton, G. S. (1999). Recreation and Conservation: Issues and Prospects. In E. L. Jackson & T. L. Burton (Eds.), *Leisure Studies - Prospects for the 21st Century*: Venture Publishing, Inc.
- Wondolleck, J. M., & Yaffee, S. L. (2000). *Making collaboration work : lessons from innovation in natural resource management*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

**Pages 110-115 in:**

Murdy, James, comp., ed. 2004. **Proceedings of the 2003 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium**. Gen. Tech. Rep. NE-317. Newtown Square, PA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northeastern Research Station. 459 p.

Contains articles presented at the 2003 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium. Contents cover planning issues, communications and information, management presentations, service quality and outdoor recreation, recreation behavior, founders' forum, featured posters, tourism and the community, specialized recreation, recreation and the community, management issues in outdoor recreation, meanings and places, constraints, modeling, recreation users, water-based recreation, and recreation marketing.

---

---

Published by:  
USDA FOREST SERVICE  
11 CAMPUS BLVD SUITE 200  
NEWTOWN SQUARE PA 19073-3294

July 2004

For additional copies:  
USDA Forest Service  
Publications Distribution  
359 Main Road  
Delaware, OH 43015-8640  
Fax: (740)368-0152

---

---

Visit our homepage at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/ne>