

A Case Study of Culturally Appropriate Conservation Education

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Objective

Create culturally appropriate conservation education materials for Hmong Americans, including new refugees and elders with little proficiency in English, as well as the broader, multigenerational Hmong community. This case study discusses an organizational response from the USDA Forest Service, in partnership with others, to better serve the Hmong American community.

Description of the Organizations

Local, state, and federal governments. Hmong-serving nonprofit mutual assistance agencies.

Major Problem/Issue/Concern and Contributing Factors to the Problem

Hmong refugees began to arrive in the United States in 1975 following the war in Vietnam and Laos. Laotian Hmong had been secretly recruited and armed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) beginning in the early 1960s to fight the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies. When the United States troops withdrew from Vietnam and Laos and the pro-American Royal Laotian government collapsed in 1975, Hmong fled persecution and annihilation from the new communist regime, seeking safety in refugee camps in Thailand and eventually coming to the United States.

A distinctive aspect of Hmong culture—both traditionally and continuing today—is a deep connection with the natural world. Unlike many ethnic groups in the United States, members of the Hmong community are heavily involved in natural resource-based recreation activities. Their participation in activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering edible plants is disproportionately high relative to their share of the U.S. population (Bengston, Schermann, Moua, & Lee, 2009).

Public land managers in the United States have struggled to effectively serve the Hmong community for several reasons. First, there are low literacy rates and few English speakers among elders. The Hmong had no written language until the 1950s, and access to schools was limited in their remote mountain villages in Laos and in the refugee camps in Thailand. As a result, literacy rates are low in the middle and older generations—those who are often out hunting and fishing. Some elders are unable to read park signs

or hunting and fishing regulations, creating significant communication challenges for park personnel. Second, there were no hunting and fishing regulations in their homeland in Laos. Also, little or no distinction was made between public and private lands (Bengston et al., 2009), although most Hmong who have lived in the United States for a long time have learned and adapted to U.S. recreation laws and regulations.

A third issue is that the Hmong community has a distinct set of norms related to outdoor recreation that sometimes conflicts with the recreation norms and traditions of the dominant White culture. Consistent with their traditional practices in Laos, many Hmong feel more comfortable and secure hunting, fishing, camping, picnicking, and gathering in large groups. The practice of large groups of Hmong who hunt together—combined with language barriers, a lack of familiarity with recreation rules among a minority of Hmong, and many instances of racism directed at Hmong recreationists—have resulted in occasional clashes with White recreationists, property owners, and conservation officers. Finally, there is virtually no research literature on Hmong and outdoor recreation, and therefore little to help inform and guide recreation managers in serving this distinct ethnic group.

Administration/Managerial Implications of the Problem/Issue/Concern

The challenge that recreation managers face is serving the Hmong American community: 260,073 persons of Hmong origin live in the United States, although this is likely an undercount (Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2012). Although found in all corners of the United States, the three states of California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181), and Wisconsin (49,240) account for about 80% of the U.S. Hmong population. Despite significant advances, Hmong Americans are one of the most disadvantaged ethnic groups in terms of income and educational attainment (Xiong, 2013).

Agency Response

In partnership with members of the Hmong community, the USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station, and the University of Minnesota developed a project to create culturally appropriate conservation education materials for the Hmong community, including elders and others with little proficiency in English as well as the broader, multigenerational Hmong community. The approach involved two parts. First, interviews with Hmong natural resource professionals from across the United States revealed many concerns and educational needs. In these interviews, key conservation education messages specifically for the Hmong community were identified.

Second, partnering with members of the Hmong arts and theater community, we created a video titled *The Wildlife and Wilderness Exploration Show* with a variety of entertaining and educational segments to convey messages about conservation. This approach was a modern twist

on Hmong cultural traditions: Hmong people have a strong oral tradition in which storytelling and folktales are used to entertain and teach (Schermann et al., 2008). In contemporary Hmong American culture, videos distributed in digital video disc form (DVDs) have become a frequently used form of entertainment and cultural learning as the practice of traditional storytelling has declined.

The video includes five segments that focused on these conservation education messages:

- Responsible use of public lands
- Rules and guidelines for gathering wild plants
- Hunting and fishing rules and safety
- “Leave no trace” camping and sanitation principles
- Fire safety and prevention

Between the video segments, musical interludes featuring a diversity of Hmong musicians, singers, and a spoken word artist reinforce the educational messages.

The DVDs have been distributed to individuals at events such as Hmong New Year celebrations around the country and have been distributed to community organizations. DVDs have also been distributed to local, state, and federal land management agencies, environmental education organizations, and nature centers in states with large Hmong populations. The video has been shown on public television in Minnesota and California, and the audio track has been played on Hmong radio programs. The video and its messages have been enthusiastically received in the Hmong American community and received a variety of press (e.g., Lynn, 2011).

To supplement the messages about legal gathering of wild plants, a large-format picture-based poster was created with photos of commonly collected wild plants. Good harvesting practices and special considerations when gathering the plants were written in English and Hmong alongside the plant photos.

Self-Reflection

Throughout the course of this project, we learned several lessons about developing culturally appropriate educational materials and approaches that can be applied elsewhere. First, we learned that we had to work closely with members of the Hmong community, not only involving them every step of the way but following their lead to ensure that the most important messages were identified and that they were communicated in memorable and culturally harmonious ways. The messages identified by Hmong natural resource professionals were different than would have been identified by those outside the Hmong community. Many of the ways in which these messages were communicated in the video were unique to Hmong culture,

such as through a traditional folktale and skit in which squirrel ghosts teach hunters about fire safety in their dreams.

Second, we discovered that partnerships with the Hmong community should be viewed as long-term efforts that require a substantial investment of time. When we began this work, we had a different project in mind, but slowly, over time, the work shifted and changed because of our ongoing dialogue with Hmong natural resource professionals, members of the Hmong arts community, and other Hmong partners. The process of intercultural dialogue and collaboration cannot be rushed.

Third, we learned that cultures are constantly changing and adapting, particularly immigrant and refugee communities as they experience acculturation. This created a need to appeal to and communicate with a wide range of community members, adapting and blending traditional elements with modern. Therefore, we strove to incorporate the dynamics of sociocultural change in the design of the educational materials and approaches.

Finally, it became clear that one size does not fit all. The conservation education needs of members of the Hmong community are unique. In contrast to many other ethnic groups in the United States, members of Hmong communities are engaged in nature-based activities at disproportionately higher rates (Bengston et al., 2009). The educational need in this case is to help maintain, expand, and inform this participation, which is an important part of maintaining the heritage and traditions of many Hmong. We learned that culturally appropriate environmental education must be tailored to specific ethnic communities.

Additional Resources

- Bengston, D. N., Schermann, M. A., Moua, M., & Lee, T. T. (2009). Listening to neglected voices: Hmong Americans and public lands in Minnesota and Wisconsin. *Society and Natural Resources*, 21(10), 876–890. Retrieved from <http://www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/36085>
- Bengston, D. N., Schermann, M., Heu, F., & Moua, M. (2012). Culturally appropriate environmental education: An example of a partnership with the Hmong American community. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, 11(1), 1–8. Retrieved from <http://treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/42190>
- Lymn, K. (2011). Film helps Hmong ease into outdoors: It's meant to help with cultural and language barriers on hunting, fishing. *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 16.
- Pfeifer, M. E., Sullivan, J., Yang, K., & Yang, W. (2012). Hmong population and demographic trends in the 2010 Census and 2010 American Community Survey. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 13(2), 1–31. Retrieved from <http://hmongstudies.org/PfeiferSullivanKYangWYangHSJ13.2.pdf>

- Schermann, M. A., Bartz, P., Shutske, J. M., Moua, M. K., Vue, P. C., & Lee, T. T. (2008). Orphan boy the farmer: Evaluating folktales to teach safety to Hmong farmers. *Journal of Agromedicine, 12*, 39–49.
- Xiong, Y. S. (2013). An analysis of poverty in Hmong American communities. In M. Edward Pfeifer, M. Chiu, & K. Yang (Eds.), *Diversity in Diaspora Hmong Americans in the twenty-first century*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/3477570/An_Analysis_of_Poverty_in_Hmong_American_Communities
- USDA Forest Service YouTube Channel links to the Wildlife & Wilderness Exploration Show:
- Conserving public lands, Introduction: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYM5oXrydJo>
- Hunting regulations and safety: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-jf1dxwCNY4>
- Fire safety and prevention: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8EA-tuoN9vA>
- Gathering wild plants: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caHBe-tHooko>
- Leave no trace: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEBhRpdOgU8>