

Community Based Research for an Urban Recreation Application of Benefits-Based Management¹

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Abstract: Benefits-based management is an approach to park and recreation management that focuses on the positive outcomes of engaging in recreational experiences. Because one class of possible benefits accrue to the community, a philosophical framework is discussed suggesting that communities are themselves the primary sources, generators, and repositories of knowledge. Communities are valuable sources of information about their own needs, and are important players in benefits-based management. A strategy is described to provide an overview of the needs of two communities within the city of Portland, Oregon, and the usefulness of this information to implementing a benefits-based management approach.

Park professionals believe in the value of the forest and parklands we study, research, and manage. The enjoyment and benefits that the public gains from these sites and the services provided are strong professional motivators. But somehow that conviction does not translate fully to the community at large. Perhaps community groups do not maintain the same beliefs as park managers. Despite our best efforts at public participation our management plans are still criticized by the media and the courts. And despite the joy and satisfaction of our programs, budgets have been frozen or diminished as other priorities take precedence.

Benefits-based management (BBM) is an attempt to reverse this trend by providing a clearer understanding and documentation of the recreation management process and outcomes and by giving the community voice in the planning process. Benefits-based management aims to explicitly identify the unmet needs of the community, to develop specific time-bound management objectives that guide planning and programming to help meet these needs, and then to measure the outputs, or societal benefits, of an agency's management.

Social scientists from the Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station of the USDA Forest Service and their associates have begun trial implementations of benefits-based management across the country (Lee and Driver 1992). One of the urban pilot programs for benefits-based management is being conducted in conjunction with the Bureau of Parks and Recreation in Portland, Oregon.

Portland has a reputation as a very livable city, partly attributed to its extensive urban forest and park system. The Bureau of Parks and Recreation, under the guidance of its director, Charles Jordan, seeks to provide essential social and cultural opportunities to the whole range of Portland's population. Jordan, in summing up how parks and recreation services are more than just fun and games, appeals to social science researchers to provide the missing statistics and charts needed to convince decision-makers that the supporting role of parks and recreation is an essential part of the holistic solution to the challenges of the 90's that are facing our society (Jordan 1992). Benefits-based management is part of this effort to document the benefits to society.

Benefits-Based Management

A benefits-based management approach focuses on the effects of a recreational activity rather than on the activity itself. Park and recreation providers frequently concentrate only on the provision of activity opportunities. The successful classes and programs of a previous year are commonly used to simply replicate a defacto policy decision for future years. Facilities, staff abilities, and resource constraints also determine which opportunities are offered. These decision making processes focus on the provision of recreation activities and on the number of people who participate in them.

Benefits-based management is different. Rather than concentrating on the mechanics of providing the recreation opportunity, it explicitly defines the outcome of the experience. In effect it shifts emphasis from the supply side and into the demand side of recreation. But BBM goes beyond simple exhibited demand for park and recreation opportunities because it looks at the needs of the people rather than just what they demand. Our customers' specific recreational wants are shaped by their awareness of the possibilities and the known outcomes of these options. But this knowledge may be limited. They might also temper their demands by their own realistic appraisal of the daily constraints on their lives. But our clients do know their own needs. They can identify the problems and pressures in their lives, for which they would like some antidote. Our job as professionals is to find the activity and setting that provides them that antidote. This method is the heart of the benefits-based management approach.

The shift from an activity-based management approach to a benefits-based approach has been echoed in the attention of research. Initial efforts were focused on counting the number of people and the number of activities, as well as settings and resources they would require and consume. As attention shifted to an experience-based approach, the quality

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of the experience rather than the quantity was important. According to the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum planning framework, managers would concentrate on the provision of physical, social and managerial conditions optimal for a particular type of recreational experience. A benefits-based approach goes a step further and identifies not only the psychological and experiential outcomes of the experience, but also the flow of benefits to individuals, groups, communities and society in general.

Our knowledge of the general benefits of recreation is quite advanced, particularly as documented in the wilderness literature (Driver and others 1987 1991a, Schreyer and Driver 1989). Driver and others (1991b) define a benefit as a change that is viewed to be advantageous - an improvement in condition, or a gain to an individual, a group, to society, or to another entity. However, the techniques for specifying and measuring the consequences of the provision of specific park and recreation resources are not well-defined, nor is the appraisal of the value of these consequences to particular individuals, groups and society. The benefits-based approach seeks to specify clearly-defined, measurable, time bounded objectives. More particularly, management seeks to provide specific benefits at specific areas to targeted segments of the community within specific time periods. This approach is similar to MBO--"management by objectives."

One challenge of a benefits-based management approach is to turn to the community to help them identify their needs. We need to go out into the community and ask the targeted audience (e.g., single mothers) what they feel they need, how we can meet those needs, and what we can do for them. Significant effort and skill is required to become immersed in, and a part of, the specific target community. Consensus on the needs and concerns of the community is a necessary step, as well as the mobilization of support for any innovations.

An Application in Two Portland Communities

As a trial application of benefits-based management we attempted to go to the local communities in Portland to help them identify their needs. Because our focus was on community benefits, our methods were anchored within a philosophical framework that regards the community as the holder and source of knowledge. Our role as researchers is to help give voice to, and to gather and document that knowledge. As Sommer (1990) stated, "The researcher who seeks to understand or change a place must know and respect its spirit, the constellation of attributes that sets it apart from all other places."

But our knowledge is itself socially constructed and constrained by the evidence generated by our research efforts or provided to us. The standards of what constitutes evidence is not only a product of the scientific community but also of the community in which the knowledge originates. Indeed, the standards of evidence are relative and dynamic since they are developed in the process of gathering knowledge.

Implicit within the above discussion is the notion that communities are the main generators, sources, stores and acquirers of knowledge. Thus our research must be anchored within those communities. This method is in marked contrast to a more individualist approach, which maintains that the self and self-knowledge are the only reality. A more communalist framework is neither objectivist in the sense that every knower sees a universal, objective truth, nor is it relativist in which everyone's knowing is the truth. Rather because everything we sense is shaped and mediated by the influences, practices and traditions of the socio-historical context, we should focus our attention on the community. As Nelson (1993a) explained, "My claims to know are subject to the knowledge and standards constructed by the various communities of which I am a member; indeed, I have the ability to know only because there are such communities, and both my communities and I will judge my claims by reference to communal standards and knowledge."

Thus, the question is one of not only what is known but who knows. Science can be seen as a dynamic process of society to construct and re-construct knowledge. Science can aim to make sense of, explain, and document the experience and features of our world. A communalist approach allows for evidence and reasonable belief without certainty. Our theories and understandings are underdetermined by the evidence we collect. Future experiences and experiments may lead to different conclusions. Furthermore, all the evidence we collect is a product not only of the community under study but also of the larger system of a priori assumptions, theories, practices and standards of evidence. These aspects of research change, and so we should also expect our understandings and theories to change. Coherence and explanatory power could become important criteria for assessing the reasonableness of these products of research.

Furthermore, our sensory experiences are neither objective nor direct. They are insufficient to discriminate a universal or best truth or theory. Our perceptions are shaped and moderated by our social and evolutionary heritage. Our senses have adapted and been refined to allow us to survive. We filter, organize and are differentially sensitive to those aspects of our total environment which are most adaptive and useful for our existence. Additionally, much of our sensory experience is mediated through socially constructed and meaning laden signs, such as language, numbers, icons, and myths. The idea of the independent, objective observer as a credible notion of science is increasingly difficult to accept.

Indeed, the individual exists embodied and situated within the specific social and historical context of the community. Personal identity does not exist outside the social roles and pressures implicit in interactions with others. Although some would say that social roles do not determine identity (Cochrane 1989), character and personal meaning are embedded in the social milieu. As MacIntyre (1981) suggests "... the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. Not only do we interpret ourselves in the context of the community and its traditions,

but the experiences that have shaped our characteristics are themselves shaped by traditions. We are not passive receivers of knowledge; rather we actively construct meaning and knowledge from within the community.

However, the notion of a community is itself not well defined. Political and geographic boundaries are rarely appropriate. Indeed, the community should be self-defined. MacIntyre (1981) suggests the following requirements for community: a common sense of tradition and ritual; shared histories and common stories and myths; a common conception of good such as shared purposes or goals; and shared values and principles reflecting perhaps a common religious background. Much of this stems as a result of birth, legacy and family relations as well as geographical or physical proximity. However, these factors may also arise from work, leisure and lifestyle commitments.

The definition by McMillan and Chavis (1986) is appropriate: "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." That commitment also has costs in terms of limits on individual expression, mobility and privacy. Similarly, although communities provide psychological support, they also physically and psychologically coerce. But as Anderson and others (1988) suggest: Given the choice, many Americans chose to think of themselves in terms not only of individual, but community, identities.

Nelson (1993b) defines "a group or community that constructs and shares knowledge and standards of evidence" as an epistemological community. These standards then allow individuals to organize their experiences. The epistemological communities are frequently a function of shared projects and purposes, reflecting perhaps the notion of community mentioned above. Thus, individual knowing is derivative and dependent on the communities knowledge: you or I can only know what we as a community know or could know. Epistemological communities are wide ranging, overlapping, ever-changing and also quite fuzzy at the boundaries. For example, the group of scientists in a laboratory or sub-discipline, or who collaborate on a project, generate knowledge as a community, but are difficult to definitively bound in any given time or place.

Data Collection

Portland is an ideal location in which to pilot test a benefits-based management approach. The city has an excellent reputation for its livability and high level of provided services. The city and its people are committed to the outdoors and are proud of their park heritage. Although Portland has a high proportion of whites, ethnic and racial diversity among the different districts of the city is still prevalent. For the purpose of this study, two lower-income suburban communities were chosen. We felt that the main outcome of our research efforts at this stage was the documentation of

the community context in which we could implement benefits-based management.

We used a variety of strategies to help us understand and explain the experience and features of these two communities. Our attention was focused on two community centers, one from each neighborhood, which would serve as the programmatic center for the implementation of benefits-based management. Initially, socio-economic data was collected for the service area neighborhoods for the community centers (Johnson 1993). Historical accounts of the growth of the area and current neighborhood planning documents were also used to inform researchers. More current topical issues were collated through the use of newspaper archives.

However, the bulk of the research efforts was aimed at documenting the current values of the community. Participant observation techniques, where the researcher takes an active role within the community, allowed access to otherwise undocumented knowledge. In addition to spending time interacting within the community and the community centers, the researchers also had standing within the Bureau of Parks and Recreation. In addition to describing and coming to an understanding of the communities, we sought to identify the organizational context and possible opportunities and constraints for the implementation of the pilot test of a benefits-based management approach. The researchers were therefore invited to attend both management and community meetings.

A variety of focus groups were held with general community members, community leaders and with those involved in various current community planning efforts. Individual interviews and personal accounts were held with key informants. These informants were identified using a snowball technique whereby each informant was asked to identify others who played significant roles in the community and who therefore should be contacted. A range of community leaders, including church leaders, business leaders, social workers and store holders were interviewed. Each session lasted between 1 and 2 hours and focused on describing the community, its uniqueness and its problems today. Researchers returned to some informants to check and validate their findings.

Some Example Findings

The Mt. Scott community in southeast Portland had traditionally been a family neighborhood of mainly British and Northern European descent. Although considered a lower-income and economically depressed area, the majority of houses were owner occupied family homes. Even though only 44 percent of the people had resided in the same house since 1985, many considered Mt. Scott particularly stable. Frequent mention was made of second and third generation families who had lived in the same house, as well as the frequent return of young parents to the home and community in which they grew up. Several community leaders considered this close kinship and insularity a problem. The community

expressed a commitment to maintaining the status quo and a tendency to resist change. New members, particularly those of another ethnic group, struggled to feel welcome and part of the community. Some community members felt besieged by more general societal pressures. The city's community center, considered by many to be the focal point of the neighborhood, was uniquely placed to help the community meet these challenges. It has been a source and symbol of community pride.

The needs of the Mt. Scott community seem to focus around the family. Child care needs were substantially unmet. Further, the community maintained that many adolescents have little connection or responsibility toward the neighborhood. One long-term solution is to work with the very young. By attracting them to the community center at an early age, the goal has been to build loyalties and patterns of behavior that will last through their adolescence and into adulthood. This is particularly relevant to the Mt. Scott neighborhood, given the preponderance of single-mother households and the need for more childcare for the very young children. An organized child care program, for example, would not only bring the young children back into the community center and neighborhood, it would also involve the parents. They too would become aware of the resources and opportunities available. And frequently older children of the same family also become involved. Parallel classes might be proposed for those parents who do have the time available. Research on shared leisure experiences has demonstrated such positive outcomes as increased family satisfaction, family interactions and family stability (Orthner and Mancini 1990).

The Eliot community in northeast Portland, in contrast, has had a long tradition as a center of African-American activity, but is now facing an uncertain future. Urban renewal programs and civic construction have driven away many local businesses. Cheap but attractively located houses have been bought by mainly white, first-home buyers and speculators. As the percentage of owner-occupiers has dropped, there has been less attention to property maintenance. The Eliot community has a very strong church presence, to which many turn for leadership. The churches are working on community problems, such as the high violent crime rate, much of which is carried out by juveniles. Church leaders have also worked with the Bureau of Parks and Recreation in sharing resources and facilities to provide better recreational opportunities for youth.

The community has been eagerly awaiting the recent re-opening of the Matt Dishman Community Center. People have been waiting for an indication of whom the community center will serve. Many local neighbors had thought the community center was theirs, a high quality facility to serve their needs. However, they are now seeing an influx of people from outside the neighborhood. The new members on the other hand see the center as a regional resource, a magnet that attracts outside communities. A common theme from many community leaders was the hope that the

community center could serve as a neighborhood connection. As a family center it could become a source not only of recreational activities for both boys and girls but also of information and help for the parents. It could become the hub of the neighborhood, a gathering place where everyone feels welcome. The community center could also become a showcase of neighborhood pride and achievements. Members of the Eliot community often mentioned the need to instill a greater sense of historic and cultural place among their young people. A mentoring program has been suggested that would allow community elders to pass on some of the traditions of the region and community to younger members. Such a program would also help provide personal contact, commitment, and guidance to the sometimes wayward youth. Mentors have been reported to help lower high risk behaviors such as drug abuse and teen pregnancies, and raise school related performances (McPartland and Nettles 1991). The mentors themselves would become a core representing most facets of the community, and would gain leadership skills from their training. A mentoring program would serve as the vehicle for bringing back the people to the community center.

The Bureau of Parks and Recreation is ideally suited to help meet some of these needs identified within these two communities. Its mission statement mentions the aim of enriching people's lives, in which recreation is only one piece of what is needed for a balanced and healthy community. The organizational context and constraints to implementing programs and services to meet these needs is documented elsewhere (Borrie and Roggenbuck 1993). The Bureau of Parks and Recreation aims to institute specific time bounded objectives for the needs of the two communities. The impacts and outcomes of the services provided will be measured as an indicator of their success. As a trial benefits-based management approach, we hope to develop both quantitative and qualitative measures of the clearly defined benefits. For example, the success of a mentoring program in the Eliot community could be examined by measures of incidence of problematic behaviors of youth participants, and by evaluations of the sense of belonging and attachment within the community. Other benefits being examined include environmental learning outcomes as a result of programs designed to meet the environmental education needs of the communities.

Conclusion

By focusing on the perceived needs of the community, benefits-based management both empowers and informs the clients of our park and recreation services. As a management and research task, it is shifting the focus from expert driven, generalized policy and planning objectives to more local concerns. If our aims are to truly make a difference in the lives of the communities we serve, then benefits-based management and community based research are appropriate tools that should be further developed.

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