



What is Outdoor Recreation?

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At a State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) citizen input meeting, everyone wholeheartedly agreed that there was a need for more outdoor recreation—until people started listing specifics. As such things as “soccer fields”, “wilderness areas”, “basketball courts” “RV campgrounds” “skateboard parks” “long distance hiking trails” and “Frisbee golf” were suggested, audience members began to bristle. Some audience members felt that some of those activities were not “Outdoor Recreation” while others did. So what is outdoor recreation? What formal and research derived definitions are out there?

The above example of the SCORP meeting gone sour is not an uncommon occurrence for planners who run public meetings. An obvious and common sense meaning of the phrase “outdoor recreation” is a recreation activity participated in outside. Almost every great basketball player honed their skills on an outdoor neighborhood court. Yet, formal basketball games are always played indoors. Is basketball outdoor recreation?

Another common definition of “outdoor recreation” is recreation that is dependent on natural resources. Examples of these activities include backpacking, equestrian trail riding, birding, hunting, and canoeing. None of these can be effectively done indoors and require significant expanses of land, or at least some wildlife habitat.

Because of the confusion discussed above with the term “outdoor recreation”, some recreation professionals have begun using the term “wildland recreation”. “Wildland” is spelled as one word and your spell checker will try to correct it. But, there is much gray area with this definition. Can you make an argument for including golf in this definition? Is not part of the golf experience appreciating the natural landscape as a backdrop to the course and experiencing the wildlife that darts across the fairway? If golf is not an outdoor recreation activity, then how would one justify scenic driving as outdoor recreation? Can rock climbing be considered outdoor recreation now that as many participation hours are logged on indoor climbing walls as on cliff faces? Is someone participating in outdoor recreation if they are whitewater kayaking on a water flow, created through pumps with simulated rocks that can be quickly moved with hydraulics? And, what about that couple who watch birds at a bird feeder in the winter from the warm comfort of their living room window? What examples can you come up with that come close but don’t necessarily fit this definition of outdoor recreation?

In the 1980s, researchers tried to come up with groupings of recreation activities by asking large numbers of people to rate recreation activities on several different characteristics. A statistic called cluster analysis was used to group recreation activities that were similar based on people’s opinions. Unfortunately, different studies produced different results, and some groups of activities were initially puzzling. What label would you put on a group of activities that included going to the orchestra, sail boating and playing polo? After dozens of studies, with conflicting results, researchers abandoned this line of research, or at least the attempt to find one single best way to categorize a wide range of recreation activities.

Maybe the answer is that having multiple ways of categorizing recreation activities is what may be most useful to managers. Outdoor or wildland recreation activities are often categorized as “appreciative”, “consumptive” or “risk” recreation. Appreciative recreation activities include birding, wildflower hikes, astronomy, butterfly watching, etc. Nothing is taken from nature, and these activities generally require knowledge of nature to participate.

Consumptive activities are similar to appreciative recreation, but include removing something from nature. Hunting, fishing, mushroom collecting, insect collecting, wild edible foods, fossil hunting, and gem and mineral hunting are all examples of consumptive activities. Again, knowledge of nature to participate in the activity is part of being a competent participant.

Risk recreation includes activities perceived by society as being potentially life threatening. These activities often involve speed, but one of the slowest moving recreation activities I can think of is always included in this group. Perceptual distortion (slowing down of the passage of time) and adrenaline are part of the risk recreation experience, along with extreme focus. Developing physical prowess is usually necessary while knowledge of nature is less important. Although rock climbers (that super slow activity) often know a lot about geology.

These three terms (appreciative, consumptive and risk) are often used by academics and recreation resource managers in their decision making. Again, there are gray areas in this three part classification scheme. For instance, with million dollar liver transplants being associated with hunting for wild mushrooms, some might classify it as a risk recreation instead of as a consumptive activity. Many activities do not quite fit in any category or depend on the style of participation. For instance, touring or cross-country mountain biking may be little more than a quicker way to get to the waterfall. It could even be considered merely a mode of transportation. Downhill or freeride mountain biking involves speed and extreme focus and is typically categorized as risk recreation. How would you classify (and reclassify) sailboating?

Recreation managers wishing to make decisions about the provision of recreation activities may use an existing categorization scheme or develop their own to fit their organization’s management philosophy or market demands of the region they are working. A strongly conservation oriented organization might choose to emphasize activities that require knowledge of nature to participate. An organization focusing on health and wellness might choose to privilege activities that are muscle powered. Another agency focusing mainly on what visitors’ desire might provide for a range of activities systematically chosen from the appreciative/consumptive/risk classification. A park system in Amish country might choose to focus on activities that require little or no technology or mechanical equipment.

The answer to the question “What is outdoor recreation” is that there is no one best answer. Managers need to examine their mission, market demands, and the wants and needs of the communities they serve. Then choose (or create) a definition and resulting classification system for outdoor recreation activities that is most helpful in making responsive management decisions.

This is one of a series of “white papers” on a myriad of topics including recreation, visitor awareness/satisfaction and the role of Outdoor Education.

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