

Engaging Latino/a Communities in National Park Programs: Building Trust and Providing Opportunities for Voice

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between National Park Programs and Latino/a Communities. We argue that what is missing in traditional approaches are authentic efforts that invite, involve and include in ways that develop genuine *confianza* (trust) and *respeto* (respect). Using Senecah's "Trinity of Voice" as an analytical guide and organizing framework, this

article draws from literature in fields such as Ethnic Studies, Latino/a Studies, Environmental Communication, Environmental Studies, and Natural Resource Management to provide new perspectives and best practices associated with engaging Latino/a communities with nature in general and National Parks. In particular, we suggest engaging techniques such as the use of non-traditional media, partnerships, staff recruitment, and the creation of a community advisory board.

Keywords: National Parks, Trinity of Voice; Trust; Respect; Latino/a Communities

1. Introduction

The concepts of race, ethnicity, and culture have come to the forefront of social science and natural resource management over the last several decades to address growing issues of diversity and engagement with nature. Topic areas such as attitudes, preferences, participation patterns and styles, constraints, meaning (e.g., nature, experiences), and general resource recreation behavior associated with diverse racial and ethnic groups have seen an increase in focus and legislation aimed at increasing outdoor participation such as the Healthy Kids Outdoors Act (H.R. 3353/S. 1802), and the No Child Left Inside Act (H.R. 2547/S. 1372) of 2011. A result of this research has indicated a need for federal and state resource management agencies to better engage minority communities.

Responding to this need, in recent years the National Park Service (NPS) has sharpened their focus regarding outreach and engagement of minority audiences, specifically the Latino/a population. However, according to a survey of National Park visitors released in 2003, Latinos accounted for 27%, compared to 36% whites, 29% Asians and 13% African Americans (Solop, Hagen, & Ostergren, 2003). This percentage is still significantly less than their representation in the general population.

A growing number of studies have focused on Latino/a public attitudes, park use patterns and outdoor recreational preferences (Gramann, Floyd, & Saenz, 1993; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Chavez, 1992; Ewert, Chavez, & Magill, 1993; Lopez et al. 2005; Weber & Sultana, 2013; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Cronan et al., 2008). Other studies have addressed how to extend the reach of the NPS to minority communities and better engage diverse populations (Rodriguez & Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2007; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2008; Stanfield et al. 2005). Simply providing an opportunity and a program is not sufficient for authentic engagement. Strategies to truly engage the Latino populations in outdoor recreation must incorporate what Chavez (2000) calls the “I” triad: invite, involve and include (Chavez, 2000). However the “I” Triad is only successful if it is developed with genuine trust or *confianza* and genuine respect or *respeto*, two key components for successful engagements with Latinos (Chavez, 2000; McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Williams & Florez, 2002). Building on recent literature, this article examines the relationship between National Park Programs and Latino/a Communities. We argue that what is missing in traditional approaches are authentic efforts that invite, involve and include in ways that develop genuine *confianza* (trust) and *respeto* (respect). The concepts of *confianza* and *respeto* play an important role in any social relationship with Latinos. Using environmental communication scholar Sue Senecah’s (2004) “Trinity of Voice” as an analytical guide and organizing framework, this article draws from

literature in fields such as Ethnic Studies, Latino/a Studies, Environmental Communication, Environmental Studies, and Natural Resource Management to provide new perspectives and best practices associated with engaging Hispanic communities with nature in general and National Parks in particular. Section 2 of this article further explains key aspects of the Trinity of Voice; access, standing and influence and outlines suggestions for authentic engagement. Section 3 summarizes the importance of providing authentic engagement between natural resource professionals and Latino audiences. Section 4 suggests recommendations for further research.

2. Trinity of Voice: Cultivating Confianza (Trust) and Respeto (Respect)

Sue Senecah (2004) introduces the practical theory of “Trinity of Voice” - access, standing and influence as an effective standard to analyze environmental policy development, address citizen’s needs to have a meaningful role in determining the political future of their communities, and engage communities in socially legitimate programming. Voice, argues Senecah, is comprised of three critical elements; *access* to information, education and assistance to actively participate in decision-making; *standing* or civic legitimacy, which builds trust and translates into respect; and *influence*, the authentic ability to influence decisions (Senecah, 2004).

Access to information and data are at the core of involvement of people and communities (Cox, 2006; Depoe & Delicath, 2004; Kinsella, 2004). Access also refers to appropriate support such as resources and may also include education, training and capacity building (Burger et al., 2010). While access alone is not enough, it forms the basis for voice and is critical to any policy development process. Standing, or civic legitimacy involves respect and the authentic consideration of stakeholder’s perspectives. It is the inclusion of individuals as equals in the decision-making process, whose knowledge is socially, culturally and politically legitimate. Access and standing are mutually dependent on each other and necessary to achieve influence. Influence does not mean that participants get what they want. Rather it refers to the respectful consideration of the concerns and ideas of all participants and the ability to determine the outcome of a policy decision.

The trinity of voice theory argues that when access, standing and influence are present in policy and program development, it establishes trust, which is the foundation for building socially legitimate policy development and effective programming (Senecah, 2004; Beierle & Cayford, 2002). Trust is cultivated by the open sharing of correct information, involvement in decision-making and the ability to influence decisions. Further, trinity of voice creates ownership of not only the process and policy decisions but also community programs, thus strengthening relationships between those involved (Senecah, 2004; Walker, Senecah, & Daniels, 2006). Members of the Hispanic community who have a sense of ownership in local park programs gained through a “trinity of voice” (access, standing and influence), will be more likely to utilize park services and engage in park programs. Using Senecah’s trinity of voice as an analytical and organizing framework for our discussion, we focus on ways to overcome barriers faced by the Hispanic community, outline strategies to engage Hispanic communities with park programs, provide voice, and create genuine *confianza* (trust) and

respeto (respect).

2.1 Access

The dimensions of access to programs and services (e.g., availability, affordability, and acceptability), must all be considered when developing strategies to foster program participation among racially and culturally diverse participants (Allison, 1992; Hong & Anderson, 2006). In a recent article in High Country News on national parks, providing better access to parks to unrepresented groups was stated as a key factor to addressing the changing demographics of America (Peterson, 2014). Providing Hispanic communities with better access to parks and park programming means reaching out to them in a meaningful and genuine way. Social marketing aims to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences members by offering a package of benefits, reducing barriers, and focusing on the target population's needs and wants with regards to the behavior. Successful social marketing emphasizes involving the target community, tailoring messages specifically, and creating partnerships among diverse groups (Duyn et al., 2007). Building on social marketing research that emphasizes influencing behavior and drawing from literature in the fields of leisure studies, environmental communication, environmental science and resource management, education, and Chicano/a studies, we suggest developing an education and outreach communication plan that outlines a media campaign using social and traditional media outreach. For example, using Spanish language radio and newspaper to publicize NPS events and programs will attract more Latino/as to National Parks. Although some techniques and approaches are appropriate for all Latino communities, it is important to distinguish among different Hispanic sub-groups and modify your outreach plan so social marketing techniques are at a grass root community level (Lopez et al., 2005; Whitt-Glover, Crespo, & Joe, 2009; Williams & Florez, 2002). Latinos encompass considerable diversity across and within different subgroups, it is important to pay attention to the national origins of these communities. A 2007 Pew Hispanic Center report found that 51 percent use their family's country of origin to describe their identity while 24 percent use Hispanic or Latino to describe themselves (Waldinger, 2007). It is important to consider that Hispanics are not a monolithic group but actually represent various ethnic groups with different cultures that have different needs based on their social, historical, political and linguistic histories.

Research on successful targeting of Hispanic communities reveals that the most effective means of information exchange is informal word of mouth promotion by a trusted member of their community such as a role model or cultural leader (Byrne, 2007; McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Duyn et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2004). One cannot underestimate the face-to-face and "word of mouth" interactions with Latinos. This communication method is an effective outreach strategy that produces long-term results. By producing one satisfied park-goer who is considered trustworthy in the Latino community, they will persuade other doubtful community members to visit the National Parks (Leveron, 2004).

Latino community members recognize the value of traditional media (radio and TV) in community campaigns but want media messages to include culturally appropriate information and advice in their native language on channels that use those languages and feature people that

“looked like them” (Council, 2004; McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Duyn et al., 2007). Print materials are not as effective as radio or television in outreach efforts, however print strategies such as advertisements on the sides of busses or in Latino/a magazines used in combination with other media outlets can have a positive impact (Byrne, 2007; Lopez et al., 2005; Wong et al., 2004).

Within the past decade the use of new media (internet, YouTube, social networking sites) to reach targeting audiences has increased dramatically. The internet has become a viable means to strengthen cultural connections, discuss important issues and promote healthy behavioral choices among Hispanic community members (i.e. sites such as www.mundonet.com or www.hisp.com) (Gonzales, 1996; Pergams & Zaradic, 2007). Outreach efforts that make use of the Internet and other new media strategies such as YouTube videos that promote park use and programs or social networking such as Facebook will become a necessary part of any successful outreach campaign.

Tailoring the message sent to Hispanic communities is as critical as the medium you choose. Understanding the cultural relevance of families, health, religion and environmental concern and building on positive opportunities for engagement will be more successful with this population (Ramirez et al., 1995). Stories that involve local people engaging with park programs are most effective. All outreach material must be in both Spanish and English. Even members of the Latino/a community who are fluent in English will appreciate and recognize the efforts of the park to engage their community, ensuing trust and respect for their cultural differences (Council, 2004; Byrne, 2007; Lopez et al., 2005; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2008). When translating material it is important to do a cultural translation, as important messages may become lost or meaningless in literal translations. A few changes in signage and park facilities would give community members access to parks and allow them to use local parks in a meaningful way. Further, having a staff person who is bilingual and Latino will make Latino park visitors more comfortable and it gives them a sense of reassurance that the National Parks values language and ethnic diversity in the natural environment. (McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Chavez, 2000).

Access for Hispanic community members also refers to physical access to the park. In 2003, University of Southern California produced a trail use survey report of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. The authors identified lack of transportation as a major barrier for Hispanic communities and suggested the development of an integrated public transportation service to facilitate greater access and reduce the dependence on cars. For example the National Park partnered with LA Metropolitan Transit Agency to promote public transportation routes and encourage use. Also, Augustus Hawkins Park in south Los Angeles partners with the Transit Agency allowing people to access parks via weekend shuttle from certain neighborhood parks (Byrne, 2007; Byrne & Wolch 2009; Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2008).

Research highlights large family centered activities as the most common use of parks for Hispanic communities. Latinos use parks as social gathering spaces such as family reunions, picnics, religious festivals, cultural celebrations and community gatherings (Cronin, Shinew, &

Stodolska, 2008; Peterson, 2014; Stodolska, Shinew, & Li, 2010). In fact, they view parks similar to plazas in Latin America as an important social space outside their home. One of the reasons Latino's prefer outdoor recreation sites with larger-sized picnic tables and barbecue grills under shaded areas is because of their strong family orientation that includes multiple generations and extended family members. They also preferred sites near rivers because it reminds them of their homelands in Latin America. One study of a picnic area in the San Bernardino Mountains found that Latinos were recreating in average group sizes of 15, and when they found inadequate facilities, they relocated themselves with their own tables and grills near the creek, thus making their own sites (Chavez, 2000). The "Latinization of parks," is a term coined by Latino scholars to explain how Latinos are transforming parks, trails, and open spaces for group social events (Mendez, 2005; Diaz, 2005; Valle & Torres, 2000). These "gathering" type activities are most common, yet many parks do not have the facilities to accommodate such activities. Park officials should consider these alternative use patterns of Latinos when designing programs and provide more facilities such as larger areas for family gatherings and benches in shady areas close to river streams or lakes would address this cultural use and provide incentive for Latino families to use park services (Byrne, 2007; McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Duyn et al., 2007; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2008).

2.2 Standing

Senecah (2004) uses the term standing to mean "civic legitimacy" that connotes an equality and respect for cultural and multiple perspectives. To have standing is to be placed on equal ground, listened to and addressed in a dialogical manner. We suggest one way to achieve and provide standing to underserved communities is to create environmental programs that address and demonstrate respect for the Hispanic culture.

National Park programs should be tailored to the unique cultural and socio-demographic characteristics of each community and sensitive to individual factors such as time and financial constraints. Activities should be focused, hands-on, purposeful and inclusive. In the Hispanic culture the welfare of family or group is commonly emphasized rather than individual. Hence, group- dominated (instead of individualistic) programs that engage extended families, church and neighborhood communities will be most successful (Program, 2003; Lopez et al., 2005; Council, 2004). Further, Hispanic community members have strong ties to church and community (Lopez et al., 2005). Co-sponsored programs by the park and local churches could reach community members and engage them in a manner consistent with their culture and beliefs.

A strong reoccurring theme in Chicano/a Studies scholarship is the love that Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants have for nature and the value they place on teaching their children about the environment (Lopez et al., 2005; Byrne, 2007; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2008). A program that gave community member's the opportunity to share or hear stories from their own people related to park use and nature would help build a green identity for Hispanic communities by drawing on tradition and cultural norms (Lichterman, 1995). Park management should work to enhance the long-standing historical and cultural

environmental ethic that exists in the Latino community by developing conservation education literature and on-going programs as part of their efforts to effectively engage new/non-traditional users (Green et al., 2002; Ramirez et al., 1995; Pergams & Zaradic, 2007; Duyn et al., 2007).

Staff recruiters need to be sensitive to Latino parents concerns about personal safety and fears of crime and animal attacks, especially if their child is camping overnight at a National Park. One summer camp study found that Latino parents would consider sending their children to a summer camp if they had regular communication with them (Lukanina, 2008). This “open door policy” is an example of building trust, confidence and reassurance with Latino parents about their children’s safety (Magana, Hosty, & Hobbs, 2006).

A second approach to engage under-represented communities and promote standing is to create partnerships with existing cultural organizations, local schools and religious organizations. For example, a community based program called “La Vida Caminando” was designed for Latino families in San Joaquin, California to encourage physical activity and prevention of chronic illnesses (Grassi et al., 1999). This program was largely successful because it formed partnerships with local community groups and created a local advisory committee in charge of designing culturally relevant activities, Spanish language classes and “family friendly” events. This grass root approach would allow the park service to work directly with local community leaders and gatekeepers to create alliances with local groups and reach targeted communities. Through these alliances the park can learn how to overcome social barriers and better engage Latinos in park programs (Council, 2004; Lichterman, 1995; Lopez et al., 2005; McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Duyn et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2004).

Local schools and universities provide a particular unique opportunity to create alliances and reach out to Hispanic communities. Park programs can work with schools to create internships or scholarships through existing programs such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) providing a meaningful experience for Latina/o youth and young adults. Finally, the park can consider the possibility of providing financial support through scholarships, stipend programs, hourly wages, and/or other arrangements to culturally diverse high school and college/university students (Program, 2003; Whitt-Glover, Crespo, & Joe, 2009; Taylor, 2007). By creating partnerships with organizations that already have alliances with non-traditional minority audiences that represent and celebrate their culture, the National Park can genuinely engage with and demonstrate respect this underserved community providing standing as a necessary element of voice.

2.3 Influence

The third component of the trinity of voice is influence. Influence is the outgrowth of access and standing. For community voice to truly be realized, community members must have a direct influence on policy and programs that impact them. Authentic engagement means that park programs are done “with” not “for” the Latino community. This means that members of the Latino community are involved every step of the way. They need to be more than an advisor, but a partner in developing shared agendas, action plans, and methods of evaluation. Promoting and expanding the role of Latinos in key environmental decision-making bodies would provide

the necessary influence, give them a voice, and provide ownership over park programs. Williams and Flores (2002) argue that Hispanic community members want to be involved in local park programs and would participate in key decisions if asked. Involvement and influence in decision-making of Hispanic community members with park programs could take many forms. One form suggested by the literature is to increase representation of Hispanics on the Board of Directors or to create a specific advisory board with the tasks to:

- Identify historical and cultural themes and events that are complimentary to the Hispanic experience,
- Expand parks historical perspective to include the California Hispanic experience,
- Advise on developing park designs that compliment Hispanic recreational and leisure lifestyles,
- Assist in public communication/outreach efforts,
- Recommend employment recruiting techniques to reach Hispanic community,
- Advise on the use of Spanish language in selected facilities / signage (cultural translation),
- Get Hispanic community directly involved in general plan for facilities,
- Host a conference with diversity and recreation as a central theme,
- Identify Hispanic organizations/ non-profits to act as coalitions.

(Byrne, 2007; Lopez et al., 2005; McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Whitt-Glover, Crespo, & Joe, 2009; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

The literature also suggests one way to directly involve the Hispanic community is to rethink how the park service defines pools of applicants for jobs. Increasing the number of non-white staff employees and embarking on a program to recruit Latino park staff and volunteers would give a sense of ownership to the community. (Whitt-Glover, Crespo, & Joe, 2009; Ramirez et al., 1995; Byrne, 2007; Lopez et al., 2005; McChesney, Gerken, & McDonald, 2005; Taylor, 2007). Placing greater emphasis on recruiting and training professionals from various racial and ethnic populations will not only allow those going to parks to feel that their cultural values are respected, it will increase cultural sensitivity among current professionals creating a healthier working environment. (Li et al., 2008).

3. Key Findings for Authentic Engagement

This paper draws from an interdisciplinary perspective to create legitimate opportunities for “authentic engagement” between natural resource professionals and Latino audiences. It has been suggested that providing opportunities for better access to parks, creating partnerships with local cultural leaders and community organizations, and allowing members of the Latino communities to directly influence park policies and procedures will create an authentic voice for the Latino community. Latino communities have an intuitive sense; half-hearted efforts and shallow engagement will be considered insulting and will further alienate community members.

In order for NPS Latino initiatives to be successful they need to be designed with genuine confianza and respeto. It is important to remember that confianza and respeto cannot be assumed. Genuine engagement with Latino audiences involves deliberate and intentional effort from resource agencies, as well as an openness and willingness to think outside the box. It will take time and dedication among staff members but it will lead to an increased level of participation, authentic experiences, and stronger community relations.

4. Recommendation for Further Research

This paper provides insight towards authentic engagement with Latino communities. However, these methods have not been tested empirically. As such we recommend further research on reasons for low participation among Latino/as in National Park Programs and outdoor recreation in general. While cost, safety and transportation are some barriers that have been identified, more research is needed on how imagery, signage, identity, monuments that recognize historical figures, culture or “whiteness” of parks may also be contributing factors to the low participation. Additionally, more research is needed on innovative and creative projects that effectively motivated and engage Latino/a youth, the park’s next generation of stewards. It is recommended that new park initiatives consider the value of recruiting Latino/a youth for employment and ambassadorship programs to provide a trinity of voice based on access, standing and influence.

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