Conflict in Outdoor Recreation: A Theoretical Perspective

Gerald R. Jacob and Richard Schreyer

ABSTRACT: *The causes of conflict among users of outdoor recreation resources have received little attention from recreation researchers. Knowledge of factors responsible for conflicts might assist recreation planners' attempts to reduce future instances of conflict and help management focus its conflict resolution efforts. Building a theory of conflict is the first step in systematically procuring such knowledge. A theoretical interpretation of conflict and identification of its characteristics within outdoor recreation are presented. Four causes of user conflicts are proposed; ten propositions link these concepts to conflict. While operationalized terms and hypotheses are not presented, the theoretical propositions provided are intended to guide their development.*

KEYWORDS: *Conflict, outdoor recreation, recreation behavior, recreation management, recreation resources.*

AUTHORS: Gerald R. Jacob *is a consultant with the firm, Entrada Associates, Inc., Salt Lake City;* Richard Schreyer *is Associate Professor, Department of Forestry and Outdoor Recreation, Utah State University.*

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Introduction

The tendency to view conflicts among recreation resource users as a simple case of one activity versus another is shared by managers and researchers alike. While concerns about conflicts between hikers and trailbikers, power and sailboats, skiers and snowmobilers increase, there has been a lack of effort pointed toward what is meant by the term "conflict." Does it mean all hikers hate trailbikers? Does this mean skiers and snowmobilers can never use the same areas? Is it really just a question of motor versus muscle?

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Research has tended merely to describe conflict situations, with few attempts made to systematically define and study basic causes of conflict situations. Often the symptoms of conflict, such as fights and vandalism, are confused with their causes. Interpretations of conflict as an inter-activity phenomenon have stifled analysis and creative approaches to conflict resolution.

This article aims to stimulate a more systematic examination of conflict's behavioral dynamics and origins. Research more effectively builds a body of knowledge when some commonly held beliefs can coordinate and give meaning to otherwise disjointed individual investigations. The authors hope this discussion of conflict will be useful for giving coherence to future investigations while suggesting theories and hypotheses that might unify the many disparate concepts of recreation behavior. Though this article does concentrate on conflicts among users of recreation resources, it also has implications for understanding sources of conflicts between resource users and managers.

A Definition of Conflict

For an individual, conflict is defined as goal interference attributed to another's behavior. This definition assumes that people recreate to achieve certain outcomes–goals. Discrepancy theory equates dissatisfaction with the difference between actualized and desired goals (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Conflict, then, can be viewed as a special class of user dissatisfaction, where the cause of one's dissatisfaction is identified as another group or individual's behavior.

Goal interference does not necessarily imply goal incompatibility. People with the same goal may still conflict over the means of attaining a goal, or because opportunities for goal attainment are limited (Deutsch 1971). However, conflict as defined here is not the same as competition for scarce resources. People who lose a permit or find facilities filled do not necessarily experience a conflict. In such cases where personal ignorance or bad luck are blamed there is no conflict. Therefore a second key term in this definition of conflict is "attributed." The source of goal interference must be identified. An individual must be willing to make the link between goal interference and another person's behavior for a conflict to exist. This may occur in two ways: 1) Another person's behavior can actually alter the desired social or physical components of the recreation experience. 2) No one else may be responsible for the goal interference and scapegoating occurs. Scapegoating is the process whereby feelings of personal frustration or failure are projected onto another, thus displacing the locus of responsibility (Allport 1958). It is important to recognize that conflict as goal interference is not an objective state but must be understood as an individual's interpretation and evaluation of past and future social contacts. Social contact, defined as knowledge of another's behavior, is a necessary condition for conflict. Contact can be direct–meeting someone face to face–or indirect, such as seeing a tent on the other side of the lake.

Because of its abstract nature, operationalizing the concept of conflict presents many difficulties (Fink 1968). Conflict should be seen not as a static yes-

no condition but as a dynamic interaction. For example, a conflict which begins as asymmetrical (i.e., one type of user feels conflict resulting from the presence of a second type of user, though the reverse does not hold) can evolve toward symmetrical interference where not only do sailboaters hate waterskiers but the feeling becomes mutual. Conflicts also vary in intensity with the importance attached to the goal being obstructed.

The desire to maximize personal satisfaction can result in a tendency to re-evaluate the goal affected in response to a conflict (It really wasn't that important, anyway). This tendency to downplay conflict suggests that a generalized expression of recreation (dis)satisfaction alone is not a reliable indicator of user conflicts. Studying the effects of conflict situations upon subsequent recreation behavior may provide a clearer picture of the relationship between conflict and satisfaction.

The nature and extent of user interaction should be a major focus in understanding conflict. When people are questioned about conflict, it is often not clear whether their evaluation is based on personal experience or on information obtained from newspapers, gossip, or other sources. Further, all indicators might reveal a high potential for conflict, yet the actual number of reported conflicts may be deflated because of low user densities and/or few opportunities for social contact.

Major Factors Behind Outdoor Recreation Conflicts

Using case studies, existing literature and interviews with recreationists in conflict situations, we have derived four major classes of factors which produce conflict in outdoor recreation:

1) Activity Style-the various personal meanings assigned to an activity.

2) Resource Specificity-the significance attached to using a specific recreation resource for a given recreation experience.

3) Mode of Experience-the varying expectations of how the natural environment will be perceived.

4) Lifestyle Tolerance-the tendency to accept or reject lifestyles different from one's own.

Any one factor is sufficient cause for conflict, but a conflict will most likely entail a combination of them.

Both resource specificity and activity style are characterized by the following three concepts: central life interest, status, and evaluations of quality. Slightly modifying Dubin and Goldman's definition (1972), central life interest is defined here as the preferred behaviors and behavioral settings manifested when a

person is given the choice. The individual may feel little ego involvement in other mandatory behaviors, such as work, which are viewed only as the means for realizing the central life interest (Dubin and Goldman 1972); whereas selecting a recreation place or activity (or both) as one's central life interest indicates that they provide major sources of personal rewards.

Recreation presents one's values and lifestyle for others' inspection. In the process of constructing a self-image and sense of individuality, connotations of high or low status may become attached to the recreation place and activity style adopted.

Evaluations of place and activity quality are an essential part of recreation behavior and decision-making. Standards of what makes a high quality recreation experience evolve and thus define requirements for goal achievement. The abstract notion of quality can be assessed as the (activity or resource's) capacity to facilitate goal achievement.

1. *Activity Style*

While the concept "activity" implies a more or less standard set of behaviors, various personal meanings can be attached to the same behavior (Burch 1965). Rather than adopting common sense activity categories when examining conflict, the concept "activity style," defined as *the personal meanings attached to the set of behaviors constituting a recreation activity,* is used. As they result in contrasting standards of behavior, personal meanings--not the recreation activities themselves–are the source of conflict.

Intensity of participation: The activity as central life interest. Personal involvement in an activity varies. For some, the activity is the focus of leisure or even central life interest, a critical source of rewards outside of work. At these higher intensities of involvement, a person's identity and satisfaction with life are intimately tied to participation in the activity. Interpersonal relationships, social values and skills are intertwined with the activity (Bryan 1977). Many others' commitments are less intense; the activity lies at the periphery of their leisure, perhaps only occasionally practiced. If conditions prevent participation, another may be substituted. Intense involvement in one activity may be foregone for a more diverse set of interests, making a conflict in any one activity less threatening to the individual's well-being (Dadrian 1971). Intensity of participation is not so much a matter of how long one has been a participant but how important the activity is to the individual.

People with an intense activity style, i.e., the activity is a central life interest, are more likely to apply specific norms of proper behavior to other participants (This activity *should* be done this way). As one example, in LaPage and Ragain's study (1974) of campers, "bandwagon" participants were often perceived as less friendly, disrespectful and blamed for increasing use pressures and crowding. The participant's perceived casual involvement indicates a lesser evaluation of the activity's importance. Therefore, (Proposition 1) *the more intense the activity style, the greater the likelihood a social interaction with less intense partici-*

pants will result in conflict. As mass demand threatens personal identification with an activity and leads to the perception that growing use "cheapens" the experience, specializations may be introduced to recapture unique, personal forms of participation (Bryan 1979). Consequently, *status* and *experience quality* distinctions evolve to distinguish the intensely from the casually involved.

Status. Status hierarchies in recreation are often based on equipment and expertise possessed. Requirements for admittance to an inner circle of devoted participants maintain its exclusiveness (West 1977). The latest equipment and exclusive designs are highly visible symbols of status within the activity. While high status equipment may be correlated with a sophisticated knowledge of the activity, it is often purchased in the belief that "the bigger the boat, the better it makes the captain." Obtaining high status and being identified with the elite are recreation goals for some participants. However, expertise–the possession of practical skills–establishes a less permeable and purchasable status position. This is particularly true when the expertise is applied toward an increasingly challenging or difficult means of participation (White and Schreyer 1979).

Status has both internal and external referents. The status conscious participant depends upon visible demonstrations of skill and equipment where the attendant spectators serve as an external reaffirmation of the activity-style's value. But certain participants may not accept the status referents; for instance, others with equal skill or equipment may see the "hotdogger" showoff as crass. Such participants define the activity as a private affair, a matter of proving something to no one but oneself (Devall 1973). Proposition 2: *When the private activity style confronts the status conscious activity style, conflict results because the private activity style's disregard for status symbols negates the relevance of the other participant's status hierarchy.*

Status based intra-activity conflict occurs when a participant desiring high status must interact with other viewed as lower status (Proposition 3). Interactions of this sort signal an erosion of the activity style's high status connotations.

Finally, *conflict occurs between participants who do not share the same status hierarchies* (Proposition 4). A status conscious participant seeking to fulfill one particular definition of status is rejecting the value of other status symbols; thus one evaluates even the high status members of another hierarchy as being of low status.

In short, conflict occurs between different status hierarchies, within the same status hierarchy, and between participants who pursue or reject status as a recreation goal.

Range of experience and definitions of quality. For any activity various definitions of a quality experience may exist; they constitute the third element of activity style. Evaluating the quality of an experience requires making comparisions. Occasional or novice participants possess few experiences on which to

base their judgment and defer to the status quo as their standard for comparisons; or they generalize their expectations so that virtually any outcome will maintain satisfaction (Schreyer 1976). A beginning kayaker may not know a river without powerboats, so freedom from encounters with them is not part of the definition of a quality experience. Such participants are unlikely to experience conflict; they have a tolerance for conditions other, more experienced participants see as indicating a lower quality of experience (Nielsen et al. 1977).

Participants who formulate and apply specific standards of what makes a quality experience are more sensitive to behaviors of people *within as well as outside of an activity.* Proposition 5: *The more specific the expectations of what constitutes a quality experience, the greater the potential for conflict.* Less resilient definitions of quality often result in demands for limitations on the number or kinds of incoming users. Experiences formerly defined as high quality often become seen as commonplace when affordable, sophisticated technologies increase access and reduce participant skill requirements; therefore, part of being a higher status participant also involves behaving in accordance with a specific, accepted definition of the quality experience.

To summarize: People with specific expectations are more conflict-prone than those with undefined or very general expectations. People intensely involved in a recreation activity are prone to conflict because, while their goals are well defined, only a small number of participants know or defer to the strict behavioral guidelines necessary for goal achievement. This is particularly true when such persons interact with others in differing activities, who may be following very different conceptions of appropriate behavior. Further, the intensely involved face the dilemma of having to interact with neophytes, yet also must realize that if everyone were to adopt their activity style, its connotations of higher status would be diluted.

2. *Resource Specificity*

The Great Plains may symbolize loneliness, a swimming hole one's childhood, the desert a useless land. Such interpretations of physical resources may be common to whole cultures while others are highly personalized (Tuan 1974). Recreation experiences are built around personal and cultural evaluations of resources which establish a normative order of behavior associated with the recreation place, and which outline how it should be used (Lee 1972). Conflict occurs when a person or group challenges the normative order with a different evaluation of the recreation place. Such a break with the "accepted view" threatens traditional recreation experiences associated with that place.

Those conflicts involving varying definitions of place are described by the concept resource specificity–*the importance an individual attaches to the use of a particular recreation resource.* The importance of a specific recreation resource as the place for leisure pursuits varies with 1) a person's range of experience which affects the evaluation of the resource's physical attributes as unique or common, 2) feelings of possession and the role of a place as a central life interest, and 3) its connotations of status.

Evaluations of resource quality. Past experience heavily influences the evaluation of a place's physical attributes (Fitch 1965). Persons familiar with a certain recreation place may tend to see its qualities as commonplace and visit primarily because of convenience. Others less familiar with the environment may see the same recreation place as possessing unique qualities uncommon in everyday experience (Mercer 1971). Whether tourist or local, the appreciative visitor is sensitive to behaviors indicating a lack of respect for this uncommon recreation place–"these people don't appreciate this place–all they want is another bumper sticker." Proposition 6: *When a person who views the place's qualities as unequaled confronts behaviors indicating a lower evaluation, conflict results.* The latter is seen as denigrating the valued, personal, and potentially emotional experience associated with the recreation place.

Sense of possession: Place as a central life interest. A second aspect of resource specificity, possession by knowledge (Lee 1972), also affects the visitor-place relationship. A person well acquainted with a recreation place has well-defined expectations about the variety and type of experiences to be found there. Standards of behavior appropriate for users of the place are known. Cases of recurring use could be motivated by simple convenience but it is also possible that an affective attachment for the place has developed over time. While its physical qualities may not be evaluated as unique, the place comes to embody memories and traditions. In this way it becomes a central life interest, a focal point of recreation participation. A sense of possession becomes manifest in the expectation, "I should have a say in how this area is managed" (O' Leary 1976). In the eyes of such recreationists, "outsiders"–those unfamiliar with the place–are not qualified to say how the resource should be used, nor should they be allowed to take over places used by the traditional user (Driver and Bassett 1975). Proposition 7: *Conflict results with users with a possessive attitude towards the resource confront users perceived as disrupting traditional uses and behavioral norms.* Again, this conflict has little to do with activities themselves it could occur between first-time and long-term resource users or between divergent classes of users, such as sightseers and hangliders in a National Park (White 1979).

Status. Knowledge may be the basis for a status hierarchy among users of a recreation place. Similar to activity, high status is associated with knowing special opportunities, a place's "secrets," and its past. Experiences associated with the spot no one has ever heard about have obvious value for the individual attempting to display a unique, intimate relationship with the place. Protection of knowledge is an effective barrier preventing the lower status users from emulating the elite (West 1977). But status requires displaying the knowledge, which eventually communicates it to others. Guidebooks written by "insiders" are another force breaking down barriers between categories of users as the knowledge of the experience becomes common. *Conflict occurs for high status users when they must interact with the lower status users who symbolize a devaluation of a heretofore exclusive, intimate relationship with the place* (Proposition 8).

3. *The Mode of Experience*

A major component of recreation experiences is interaction with natural environments. Goal achievement can depend upon the user having a specific sensory interaction with the natural environment. Some sensory stimuli are more prone to be interfered with than others; the presence of one environmental stimulus can pre-empt sensing another. Thus users are more prone to conflict if their goals depend upon these susceptible stimuli. This third source of conflict is labeled the mode of experience. It attempts to explain why, under identical conditions, stimuli such as the sounds of motor vehicles are sources of conflict for some recreationists and not others.

Modes, or ways, of experiencing an environment are described here as a continuum ranging from unfocused to focused. The unfocused mode is an experience of environmental generalities, overall spatial relationships, the lay of the land but not its particulars. Movement, fleeting images, and broad, sweeping impressions characterize this mode (Jackson 1957). Yi-Fu Tuan would describe this as the experience of space, embodying feelings of freedom and spaciousness (Tuan 1978). The fact that some trailbikers prefer backcountry trails and not gravel pits points to the importance placed on interacting with a natural environment. In the unfocused mode, movement and viewing the scenery are recreation goals. But movement precludes concentrating the senses for detailed examination of the environment; as a result, specific sensory inputs are relatively unimportant. In even more unfocused experiences, the sensation of movement itself may be the primary recreation goal and is fulfilled with some "roller-coaster ride." In this context, so long as movement is unhindered, conflict does not result. Many recreationists oppose zoning and boundaries as restriction on one's "sense of freedom." This is an important recreation goal for some, and illustrates how actions taken to enhance one type of user's experiences (e.g., use restrictions) can work counter to the satisfactions of another type of user.

At the other end of the continuum, an individual in a focused mode points the senses on specific entities within the environment. Movement must be interrupted so the visitor can pause to more closely examine the natural environment. Stones are picked up, balsam needles smelled, berries eaten and birds identified, making an intimate knowledge of the place and its inhabitants central to the recreation experience. Focusing depends upon complex input of sensory details associated with the recreation place, resulting in intolerance of those stimuli which threaten this perceptual process. This is more than a question of man-made versus natural stimuli. Many intermediate possibilities exist between the extreme case of the gravel pit dirtbiker and the crosscountry hiker who hates trails; for example, the crosscountry skier who does not mind encountering one or two snowmobiles. However, as the mode of experiencing an environment becomes more focused, an individual produces more rigid definitions of what constitutes acceptable stimuli and is increasingly intolerant of external stimuli. Moving along the continuum from unfocused towards focused is analogous to going from low conflict prone to extremely conflict prone modes of experience. *When a person in the focused mode interacts with a person in the unfocused mode, conflict results* (Proposition 9). Furthermore, the greater the gap between two recreationists along the unfocused-focused continuum, the greater the potential for conflict. An important question is raised: Does an individual

select recreation activities in order to engage in a wide variety of these modes or are lifestyle-related patterns of recreation participation built around a narrow range on this continuum?

4. *Tolerance for Lifestyle Diversity*

In a society of diverse and contradictory worldviews, the solitary individual wishes to be reassured that there are others who share the same goals, values and personal philosophies that make up one's lifestyle. The voluntary recreation group is an important source of self affirmation that reinforces confidence in the rightness of one's lifestyle (Burch 1969). Few people seek a recreation association that challenges and contradicts their basic values.

American society has always contained a myriad of social groups and outlooks; while tolerance for such diversity is often not practiced, it is part of our political philosophical heritage. Various conformity pressures which maintain group cohesiveness in outlook and behavior also reinforce the distinctions between one's own group (the in-group) and the different lifestyles of out-groups (Dion 1973). Group norms aimed at reinforcing distinctions between in–and out-groups become dangerous when they encourage the false generalizations of ethnocentric thinking (Allport 1958). In such a frame of mind out-group members are evaluated as weird, morally inferior, or inscrutable; they are viewed as a threat to the in-group's goals and the integrity of its lifestyle. In extreme cases, attempts are made to limit or prevent out-group access to a resource. *Unwillingness to share resources with members of other lifestyle groups is an important source of conflict in outdoor recreation and society at large.* Conflicts caused by intolerance for lifestyle diversity indicate that basic societal clashes make their way into recreation settings.

To avoid an overdose of social contact, people simplify life's complexities by relating to other people as categories, though the rigidity with which one applies these categories varies (Lauer and Handel 1977). That man is a snowmobiler; she is a skier. What do these categories imply about their members? How do people interpret these categories? Recreation in-groups and out-groups represent categories an individual establishes on the basis of perceived or imagined lifestyle similarities and differences, including inferred activity styles and resource specificities. Inferences about another's mode of experience may lead to value-laden evaluations, such as declaring the experience of the birdwatcher "more worthwhile" than that of the snowmobiler.

Many subtle lifestyle qualities are implied when a group label is put on a person. With the label comes a symbolic set of values whose range varies inversely with one's willingness to construct a stereotype. Two themes common to recreation related stereotyping are described below.

Technology and resource consumption. A machine may symbolize human manipulation of the physical environment, an urban, technological society, transmuted Nature, or goods to be consumed. Major lifestyle differences are associated with one's evaluation of the machine's connotations. Escape from technologically induced stresses and a momentary return to a simplified existence in a pristine environment are common reasons for recreating (Driver and Knopf 1976). Many people view the person with the trailbike, motorboat or riding the snow machine as symbolic of a society that arrogantly exploits and consumes resources. While the machine may be an uncomfortable reminder of what one is trying to escape, for others it is the means of escape (Jackson 1957; Martin and Berry 1974).

Knopp and Tyger (1973) found that crosscountry skiers and snowmobilers have different resource consumption orientations. The machine-oriented recreationist also holds a more traditional set of values: confidence in technology's solutions to problems, a utilitarian view of resources and rugged individualism (Knopp and Tyger 1973; Martin and Berry 1974). Perceptions of out-groups' philosophies of resource consumption are also expressed in urban-rural contexts. The Ford 250 pickup with a Savage lever-action in the gunrack symbolizes the redneck hunter for the big city, foreign car owner. From the rural point of view, foreign car owners are equated with "Sahara (Sierra) clubbers" trying to lock up resources.

Prejudice. Ethnic, racial, and social class distinctions also may foment lifestyle-based conflicts. Especially in urban areas, people with a low tolerance for other lifestyles cause racial and ethnic tensions. Groups can pursue the same activity, following the same rules, and yet conflict still results (Vernon 1976). In these cases goal interference is generalized across all out-group behaviors, i.e., "they" can do nothing right. Recreation goals cannot be attained with the out-group present. The primary recreation goal, association with one's own kind, must first be met.

Tolerance for lifestyle diversity has two components. First, people perceive differences between their own and an out-group. Second, these differences must be evaluated. Proposition 10: *If group differences are evaluated as undesirable or a potential threat to recreation goals, conflict results when members of the two groups confront one another.* People intolerant of lifestyle diversity are more prone to conflict, especially as the number and variety of people desiring access to recreation resources increases.

Conclusions

Existence of the four major factors described in this paper does not necessarily mean that a conflict exists. For example, the resource may be large enough to make social contacts among conflict-prone individuals rare. However, the degree to which these factors are present represents the extent to which the *potential* for conflict exists. Once the necessary condition of social contact is met, there will be a conflict. To the extent that empirical research supports these factors as causes of conflict, identifying the "conflict potential" of various recreation resource clientele could be a valuable input for the recreation planning process. Specific locations where high degrees of user interaction are likely could also be evaluated for associated conflict potential.

Certain limitations of this discussion should be recognized. Personality variations will no doubt influence the manifestations of the factors, but at current levels of refinement of this approach, their consideration could introduce complications greater than their explanatory contribution. It should also be noted that conflict is a dynamic social interaction which can go through several stages. Asymmetrical disruptions of the recreation experience may lead to the stereotyping of out-groups which provokes the symmetrical conflicts of political interest groups. However, the subject of interest group conflict resolution has not been touched because such an account would have to address an awesome array of institutional, political and legal constraints affecting resolution strategies. These and many other conceptual relationships have purposely not been discussed to avoid cluttering this preliminary sketch.

Left to smolder, recreation conflicts promise to be much more than mere brushfires. Once recreationists have allied themselves with interest groups and causes, conflict resolution becomes a costly political and legal process over which the resource managers may have little control. Therefore it is imperative that the potential for conflict be recognized at a stage where preventative actions may be taken. Unfortunately, the tendency to define conflict as confrontations between activities has left the sources of recreation conflicts unrecognized. In failing to recognize the basic causes of conflict, inappropriate resolution techniques and management strategies are likely to be adopted. This article offers some concepts and propositions which may prove useful in the attempt to diagnose and manage conflict in outdoor recreation settings.

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