Understanding Outdoor Recreationists Using the Recreational Specialization Framework

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Explain the utility of recreation specialization as a tool for understanding diversity among outdoor recreation participants.

Changes in number of Americans (16 years +) participating in outdoor recreation: 1980-2011

- Hunting
- Fishing
- Wildlife watching

2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation


*Sports Illustrated*, January 19, 2004

Freezing rain. Gale-force winds. Rodents in the sleeping quarters. Lousy food. Rampant flu. Just another day in the Big Year

BY MARK OBMAŚCIK

HILL OF A FEATHER
The binoculars called "Wishy Washy" Laurens at Miller's Day

IN THEATERS OCTOBER 14
everyone is searching for something
Birdwatchers are a diverse group of recreation participants.

In a nation-wide study, Stephen Kellert (1985) reported that only 30% of American birdwatchers (18 years of age or older) used binoculars and only 4% said they used a field guide.

Punch line

Only a small fraction of people who observe birds are skilled and serious about birdwatching.

What does specialization mean?

- **Specialist** describes an individual who devotes him or herself to a specific occupation, area of expertise, and so on.
- **Specialize** means to “train in or devote oneself to a particular area of study.”
- **Specialization** connotes a specific occupation, a branch of study, or a field of research to which people dedicate themselves.
“In the research reported here the idea is explored that fishermen can be arranged along a continuum of experience and commitment to the sport from the beginning recreationist to the specialist, that distinctive preferences and behavior attend sportsmen at each level.” (1979, p. 30)

Bryan’s ideas about specialization

- Goal was to facilitate understanding of “within-sport” variability
- “A continuum of behavior from the general to the particular, reflected by equipment and skills used in the sport, and activity setting preferences.”

Theoretical range of specialization/seriousness within activities

Bryan’s ideas about specialization (Continued)

- Along the continuum there are characteristic styles of participation that can be represented in the form of a typology (system of classification)
- Participants along the continuum differ in terms of behavior, skill, commitments, motivations, setting preferences, place attachment, and other facets of involvement
Bryan’s ideas about specialization (Continued)

- Typology represented typical stages of involvement through which individuals progress
  - Specialization is a developmental process
  - Underlying assumption that end product of progression is an elite or privileged status

Three key dimensions of specialization

- A focusing of behavior
- Acquiring of skills and knowledge
- Tendency to become so committed to the activity that it becomes a central life interest

Application of specialization to birdwatching:
What experiences and amenities are attractive to different kinds of birdwatchers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Birders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Averages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Days spent birding last year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birding trips taken last year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birds identified by sight</td>
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<td>Birds identified by sound</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of importance/involvement</td>
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<td>Centrality to lifestyle</td>
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</tbody>
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* Scale ranged from 1 to 7

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003
Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Casual birders (35%)
  - Relatively unskilled and uncommitted to birding
  - May lack basic birding equipment
  - Combine birdwatching with other outdoor recreation activities, shopping, visiting small towns, and visiting historic sites

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003

Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Interested birders (41%)
  - Not very skilled but highly interested in birding
  - Not particularly focused on listing
  - Will probably require guides or leaders to help identify birds
  - Interested in combining birdwatching with other activities

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003

Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Active birders (14%)
  - Relatively skilled and participate far more frequently than other birdwatchers
  - Committed to birdwatching
  - Not particularly interested in shopping, visiting small towns, and comfort amenities

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003

Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Skilled birders (10%)
  - More narrowly focused than the other birders: are highly selective and specialized in terms of their interests
  - Interested in observing target birds
  - Need little help in identifying birds
  - Not overly concerned about opportunities for shopping, comfort amenities, and other outdoor recreation opportunities

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003
How is specialization related to participants involvement in conservation and organizing activity?
Importance of studying specialization?

- Sensitizes us to range of career trajectories that attend people's involvement in outdoor recreation activities
- Provides a tool for understanding differences among outdoor recreation participants
- Helps resource managers understand why groups make demands for resources
- Explains potential sources of conflict among outdoor recreation participants