

Recreation in the ME or is it WE Jungle.

**New Zealand Recreation Association Annual Conference
Auckland 15 -17 November 2006**

Bevan C Grant PhD
Department of Sport and Leisure Studies
University of Waikato

At this years Thinking Recreation symposium I was inspired by the enthusiasm delegates shared for debating, rather than seeking solutions to, a range of issues such as youth deviance, physical inactivity, resource allocation, and managing the environment. However, it was the discussion about some of the invisible influences on our work that really aroused my curiosity. In particular, the thought-provoking workshop by Robyn Cockburn on Systems Theory inspired some critical 'thinking about recreation'. In his review of the symposium published in the 06 Spring Issue of Australasian Parks and Leisure, Geoff Canham said that this (i.e. Systems Theory) session "drew the most feedback and stimulated much discussion long after it ended". It was evident many delegates had a desire to look beyond the pragmatics of recreation although this can pose challenges of the intellectual kind. I recall one delegate saying, "I liked the session on that theory but it can be frustrating when talking about something that seems quite vague even though you know it relates to what happens in your work." Although ideas such as those espoused by Systems Theory are complex and often seem a little distant from the reality of our work, they are useful in helping explain something about the *why* and *what* we do.

For this presentation I have chosen to use the conference theme, recreation in the urban jungle. Unfortunately, there is no 'blue print' on how to plan for recreation for like the jungle, recreation is part of a very complex ecosystem. It is influenced by the demands of the creatures (i.e. people) and subjected to the influence of political, economic, social, environmental and cultural factors – of which we (i.e. recreation professionals) have little if any control. Hence, when modifying old or planning new ventures it is not unusual to encounter turmoil and spend considerable amounts of time negotiating about such things as space, allocation of resources, the ambiguity of regulations, proportion of tax dollar directed towards recreation, policy development, matters of safety, environmental impact and so on. This is made more complicated by an overlap and sometimes competition between and within the public, private and voluntary sector. It is not an exaggeration to suggest recreation in the 21st century is anything but straightforward. For the remainder of the presentation I am going to focus mostly on two parts of the recreation ecosystem; the creatures and consumer culture. Throughout the presentation I will share some thoughts about the way these two parts of the recreation ecosystem might influence how we, recreation professionals, might go about planning for and managing recreation in our respective jungles. (i.e. communities).

The Jungle Creatures

We know the make up of creatures in the jungle is changing. Not only are there more creatures but on average they are getting older, more ethnically diverse, have higher levels of education, more concentrated in urban environments, in better health than past jungle dwellers, and technological proficient. The role of the female creatures is continuing to change and challenge the way parts of the once male controlled ecosystem functions. However, numerous inequalities still exist and this means many of the creatures are disadvantaged with regards to the types of recreation in which they are able to engage.

There are numerous ways to classify and group the creatures but this should be done with caution for such classifications can over-look many of the unique qualities of individuals within each group. In spite of the shortcomings, recognising some of the characteristics of specific groups can be

useful when planning for new initiatives. To provide a context for my presentation, I am using the following four groups: the Millennial Generation/Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation.

The Millennial Generation or Generation Y This generation are born to consume, gadget obsessed and technologically literate, possibly over stimulated by the media and the lines between authentic and virtual are often blurred. There is a strong desire to creating an identity, individuality, and a continual questioning about 'who am I'? In some ways they are growing-up very fast, the nature of their play is vastly different to previous generations, tend to resist authority, have uncertain futures, have fluctuating social values, many are emotionally isolated, but are avid consumers. There is a preoccupation with self and the material world – stickability with any one activity is questionable. They are seen as a problem as well as exuding excitement and hope. More interested in celebrities than issues, demand and receive more than their share of attention. Sometimes referred to as the raging teens with role confusion waiting for their hormones to settle down.

Generation X Sometimes considered the establishment years (education, job, family) and can experience a time of being economically disadvantaged. They are generally self-centred, cynicism is alive and well, depend a lot on their parents, and are use to flexible families. Many (particularly the younger sector) are described as being flighty, lippy, impatient, often over-indulge and expect immediate results. It is considered OK to challenge authority. They prefer a flat work place structure and expect to have a good work-life balance. Many are at risk of life disruption due to occupation restructuring and dissolution of relationships is quite common. They are good spenders and key players in the consumer market - including excessive consumption on gadgets for leisure and recreation. They want it all, power, wealth and the best jobs but they underestimate the cunning of the older creatures in the jungle.

Baby Boomers Gave us flower power, rock'n'roll and computer science as well as environmental degradation, social breakdown and rampant selfish consumption - they have a thirst for stuff and the good life is explained in consumerist terms. A distinctive characteristic is individualism, non-conformist and less trusting of those in authority. They have showed little desire for collective influence although they were born at a time when the idea of community was strong. They are savvy at negotiating their way through constant social and economic change. Brand literate but not brand dependent. Most are satisfied with their life and have considerable freedom and independence – redefined family - many will become the sandwich generation –support parents and kids and/or kids of the kids. In the later stages the body experiences a number of changes - midlife crisis - some reassessment of 'who am I'. This occurs in very different ways for men and women. There is apprehension about the end of employment and being labelled as 'old' – negative connotations.

Silent Generation They were hard working, economically conscious and tended to be trusting of authority. Some concern about connection to the community and stagnation but there is an emergence of 'new' lifestyle choices - view their future with optimism - not over the hill but taking the hill by storm. You here terms such as WOOPIES – Well of Older Persons, OPALS – Older people with Active Lifestyles, Skiers – Spend Kids Inheritance, GLAMS – Grey Leisured and Moneyed. Have a strong set of moral obligations and appreciate routine. Because of their age they're connected with negative connotations of being old but many are challenging the stereotypes and adopting a lifestyle that redefines what it means to be 'old' – good for us! It is not easy to turn 'grey into gold'. They know 'old' is out and 'young' in! They are very malleable and many make numerous adaptations to their life – they are very discerning consumers – know that value of a dollar! With the passing of years some of this generation become lonely, financially dependent and have a functional limitation. Nevertheless, the vast majority live independent and fulfilling lives until the end. They acknowledge the inevitability of death but still seek to create a meaningful present and future - find ways to manage the naturally occurring physical, social and psychological

entropy. Their recreation interests often dwindle, particularly those of the physical kind and they are given little attention in the market place – but this is changing – older population.

Concluding Thought. Not every body fits the mould for there are considerable differences within each group as well as some overlap between groups. Nevertheless, it is important to know a little about each group because this provides a basis for considering what is important when planning for any form of recreation – be it creating an opportunity or providing a service or product. Age also tells us something of the social and political influences on a persons life, what shaped their values, opportunities, type of activities available, expectations about the role of the public and private sector, and how s/he may have been socialised towards any form of recreation.

Consumerism and Consumer Culture

Consumerism is the way of life in the 21st century and this has resulted in a noticeable tilt in the balance values from the social to economic. Everything is for sale. To set the scene for discussing this part of the ecosystem I have chosen to read a poem written by one on my students who was trying to express something about his views of recreation and leisure in a consumer society.

I Want to Belong

Why don't they just do ...
Don't they know what I want
I would do that if they did this.
There's not time to just hang around
Waiting for some one to organise me.
Why wait - I want it now,
I'm not a puppet waiting for my strings to be pulled
But then again, I am a just puppet, one of many.

It is THEY, yes THEY who provide the opportunities.
THEY have the goods, and
THEY want me to pay and play.
I respond accordingly – but in my terms
Or is it their terms?
I'm just an insignificant part of the circus
Seeking gratification for self.

I never think about being controlled
But like you, I know I am
Governed by time-warp rules.
I like to play but am conscious of being
Manipulated by conglomerate's dreaming
How to confuse my already confused mind,
To relieve me of my hard earned cash.
It's tough living in the 21st century.

A.S.T 2006

As the poem illustrates, there is a constant struggle between ME and WE, control and freedom, being done to and doing it by self, immediacy and satisfaction, desire and consequence. It also highlights that we live in a time when diversity and difference are to the fore and practices of the past counts for little. Rational recreation is not so much old fashion but less relevant as the shift from recreation being mostly a public good to private enterprise gains momentum. In the 21st century it is difficult to work outside the values of a global society where profitability has become the guiding principle for much of what we do. For better or worse, many of the social,

environmental and personal benefits are over shadowed by the discourse of economic rationality. In a consumer society everything (i.e. products and services) has a price tag – nothing is free.

Much of what we do is related to providing opportunities for the pleasure of the creatures in our respective jungles so they can escape, socialise, fantasize, be creative, learn new skills, engage in some form of physical activity or interact with the environment. In doing this we talk about customers, productivity, entrepreneurship, competition, sustainability and profit. To survive we must invest wisely in order to reap the greatest return (be it a social or economic return). What we offer is customized to suit the ever-changing market – tailored for pleasure of the prospective consumer (Godbey, 2004). As Franks (2001) said in his book *One Market Under God* - everything is commodifiable – and some of our offerings in recreation that once had a strong social value have become McDonaldised (Ritzer, 2000). As a consequence the consumers are more demanding and expect memorable experiences whether their involvement be passive or active, solitary or with the masses, in a constructed or natural environment, costly or free (in both time and money).

The suitability, stability and sustainability of what we offer as recreation is ultimately dependent on the quality of our goods and services and whether or not these are in tune with the mood in the jungle. The creatures have a desire to graze on a wide range of familiar as well new experiences that provide instant gratification and long-term benefits. How we, the providers, try and keep the consumers satisfied may have less to do with meeting their real needs and everything to do with satisfying their emotions - the feel good factor (Reiter, 2004). But in order to engage they must have free time and/or spending power (Roberts, 1999) and this means in a competitive market those with the resources become the targets – this is where the profit lies. As a result many groups are marginalized or placed on the fringe and excluded from a great deal of recreation.

Knowing what to provide for the respective creatures and how to provide this can be fickle and even when due diligence is given to planning, marketing, pricing and so on there is still a considerable amount of risk with regards to getting it 'right'. The targets we plan to strike (i.e. the purpose of our endeavours) are not only becoming more difficult to define but they are also more diverse and are constantly moving. In many instances it is the experience, not the thing that is important and so as providers we endeavour to manipulate the consumer's thoughts and create a need – touch their emotions so they feel a desire to purchase or engage in an experience irrespective of the need. In essence, needs are created. It is therefore, not surprising leisure and recreation are becoming more closely linked with spending money rather than engaging in deeply satisfying experiences (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). The focus is on selling the experience – something with a perceived value – possibly a real value. A good example of this can be found on the following website www.redballoondays.co.nz that makes selling the experience the focus of a business.

What we offer has a limited shelf life in a consumer culture so there is a need to keep modifying an existing service and/or product as well as creating something new. A good example of modifying a 'product' has occurred with mass recreation. Much on what's on offer has reinvented itself in a new kind of environmental ambience where the experience is fragmented into a series of products and/or services and packaged to fit under the umbrella of a theme or event. This reflects a move from mass to niche (Critchler & Bramham, 2004). Examples of this are evident at events like the home and garden show, craft fair, boat show, some sporting occasions such as endurance events, the Big Day Out, Round the Bays Fun Run, Special K Triathlon, and food and wine festivals. There has been a shift from a shared or community focus to a more personalised experience – the WE to ME.

The creatures we deal with are savvy and seek recreational experiences that will satisfy their functional as well as symbolic needs. In essence this means being able to do the things they want to do in a way that suits their needs and being connected with things that matter to them – reaffirming one's identity. In order to satisfy this need the creatures, young and old, will sift through the

proliferation of information about activities, services or products to know what's on offer and the conditions under which the experience supposedly occurs. From this over indulgence of information they will construct a perspective of what to expect should they choose to engage. Making a choice is a complex process and one currently attracting considerable interest in market and consumer behaviour research. The meanings in the material are embedded in the range of images and communicated through words, symbols and pictures. These create an illusion that seems authentic, stimulates the emotions that triggers a desire which then might become a need. Our consumers may not always make rational decisions but they are discerning and if the products and/or services are deemed to be unacceptable for whatever reason or there is little if any emotional connection then the ideas you promote will quickly fade away. And if this happens you may also fade into oblivion – you'll become an extinct species in the recreation jungle.

What the creatures seek is not merely an activity or experience but a style of life with a range of positive personalised consequences – it's becoming more about ME (Horne, 2006). They crave for opportunities to escape the mundane aspects of their daily life so we generate the feeling of a 'need to consume' even though the experience will not necessarily result in greater happiness or satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Nevertheless, tapping into the emotional state of the consumer feels in control even if this only illusionary – but it gives the feeling of autonomy (Diller, Shedroff & Rhea, 2006). Of course, the reason for doing this as a provider is to make a profit.

The market place is swamped with alternatives from which to choose (McLean, 2006). However, greater choice can provide a false sense of autonomy, freedom and empowerment and more importantly unwanted needs (Szmigin, 2003). But the issue is not so much about choice, but the excess choice for it is ME, the consumer, who has to unravel the need from desire, match the cost (in time and money) against the potential and evaluate the potential benefits to SELF. Irrespective of personal circumstances and constraints all creatures in the jungle have a yearning to consume. Hence, they become increasingly dependent on an external source for their pleasure and this helps to ensure recreation – be it through the private or public sector - maintains it's place in the jungle (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Where there is money to be made means competition and this ultimately leads to a need for protection via regulations for both provider and consumer (e.g. walkways, pools, plazas, playgrounds, skateboard parks, city parks, festivals, concerts, events). But as you know, regulation breeds' bureaucracy and this can end up with regulation capture where the consumers needs sometimes become secondary to those of management or the provider. Much of what occurs has becomes standardized, benchmarking supposedly gives assurance – best practice emerges - 'cowboy' operators are eliminated - protection and control is paramount and commonality becomes the norm Terms like vision statement, quality assurance and customer satisfaction become 'catch phrases' and a part of the everyday language as we fall into line with the consumer world in endeavouring to help provide for and maintain a balance in recreation ecosystem.

All that occurs in the jungle is not left entirely to chance or market forces for much of the power remains with the creatures – the consumers. They have expectations and irrespective of class, age, culture or creed, one thing consumers (that is us) expect is a quality memorable experience –value for money and commitment of time. Being 'just satisfied' will no longer suffice. As providers, what we are aiming for is to offer something that yields the greatest sense of satisfaction and happiness for the consumer as well as a good economic and social return. According to Godbey (2004) this might be best achieved in the future by focusing our attention on managing meaning rather than people, things or the resources. Now that's food for thought.

Reflecting on some of the main points about consumerism that influence recreation:

- Pleasure - desire to 'graze' – dependent on market

- Profitability is a guiding principle
- Everything is commodifiable with a price tag
- A yearning to consumer – manage meaning
- Limited shelf life - new products - consumer satisfaction
- Consumption important - functionally & symbolically
- Economic implications greater than social capital
- Emotional connection - autonomy, power, identity
- Purchase experience - value for time and/or money
- Increase in regulation, protection and/or control

Conclusion

Although consumerism is not a new concept, the way this influences behaviour and values of the different creatures suggest we may need to rethink aspects of our respective roles as providers of recreation. The meanings associated with recreation are far from uniform and there are some formidable but exciting challenges looming on the horizon. In thinking about this, I am inspired by the ideas the late George Torkildsen expressed in the 5th edition of his book titled, *Leisure and Recreation Management*. He suggested that the spirit of the world (or our jungle) it is not possible to change what we do by more money, facilities, or bureaucracy. Rather he argued it will require all our imagination and ideas, confidence and vision - a willingness to critique, challenge and move beyond our current practices.

If recreation in a consumer society becomes entrenched with primarily providing opportunities and services for the pleasure of others there is no doubt that some of the things we do in the ecosystem could be under threat. Although it is difficult to ignore the consumerist mould that currently dominates the way we work and play, it might be worth giving greater attention to rethinking some aspects of recreation in the jungle. We need to realise that in any ecosystem no creature – not even the providers of recreation – whether you be in the public or private sector are guaranteed immortality. Long may our work continue to be valued so we not only maintain a place in the ecosystem but leisure and recreation continues to have an important role in the lives of the creatures in the jungle. Our destiny is partially in our hands.

References

- Critcher, C., & Bramham, P. (2004). The devil makes work. In J. Haworth & A. Veal (Eds.), *Work and leisure* (pp. 34-50). Hove, UK: Routledge.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1997. *Finding flow: The psychological engagement of everyday life*. Harper Collins, New York.
- Diller, S., Shedroff, N., & Rhea, D. (2006). *Making meaning: How successful businesses deliver to meaningful customer experiences*. Berkely, CA: New Riders.
- Frank, T. (2001). *One market under God*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Kelly, J., & Freysinger, V. (2000). *21st century leisure: Current issues*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kelly, J., & Godbey, G. (1992). *Sociology of leisure*. State College, PA: Venture Pub.
- Godbey, G. (2004). After the anthill was stomped: The customisation of life and leisure. In K. Weiermair & C. Mathies (Eds.), *The tourism and leisure industry: Shaping the future* (pp. 1-16). New York: Haworrh Press.

Horne, J. (2006). *Sport in consumer culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

McLean, D. (2006). Philosophy and leisure. In Human Kinetics (Ed), *Introduction to recreation and leisure* (pp. 37-49). Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics.

Reiter, A. (2004). The hybrid consumer of leisure squeezed between fun and maximization, chill out, and other radical search for inner values. In K. Weiermair & C. Mathies (Eds.), *The tourism and leisure industry: Shaping the future* (pp. 173-180). New York: Haworth Press.

Roberts, K. (1999). *Leisure in contemporary society*. Wallingford, UK: CAB International.

Szmigin, I. (2003). *Understanding the consumer*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.