Commentary: a decade of American RTS geography

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Abstract

Research on recreation, tourism and sport, conducted by geographers in North America (US and Canada) from 1988 to 1998 was compiled and the resulting bibliography can be found on the WWW at: <http://www.geog.nau.edu/tg/contents/v1n4refs.html/>. The context of North American geography is one of considerable diversity, though somewhat insular in subject matter. In addition to many general introductory and overview books and articles, much of the focus of recreation and tourism geographic research in North America has been applied rather than theoretical. This has been changing in the 1990s as the volume of research, especially on tourism topics, has increased considerably and more authors are publishing in leading general geography journals.

Keywords: recreation geography, tourism geography, sport geography, North America, bibliography

Introduction

The new millennium provides an opportunity for reflection on the past and speculation on the future. Thus, it seemed an appropriate time to revise the 1989 compendium, Geography of America (Gaile & Willmott 1989), which included a chapter on the geography of recreation, tourism
and sport (Mitchell & Smith 1989). A summary version of the revised recreation, tourism and sport chapter (forthcoming in 2000) is presented here. The focus is specifically on research published since the first edition of *Geography in America*. It is important to note that only a few references are cited in this summary, and mostly only those of very recent vintage. The full and more comprehensive review will appear in the second edition of *Geography in America*. However, even the references cited in that version will have been reduced by almost half from the original first draft. To provide the maximum service to scholars and authors, the entire original bibliography has been posted on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.geog.nau.edu/tg/contents/v1n4refs.html. This website will be periodically updated to provide a reference point for geographic research on recreation, tourism and sport geography.

**Methodology**

To develop the bibliography upon which this review was based, the publications and journals in Table 1 were searched for works from 1988 to early 1999 authored by North American (USA and Canadian) resident geographers or about North America by others. Five journals were added that did not appear in the earlier review by Mitchell and Smith (1989). In addition, recent editions of *Current Geographical Publications* and *Books in Print* were similarly reviewed. Because sport geography, the smallest of the subdisciplines, was the least represented in these journals, further assistance was obtained from Dr Thomas Rumney (SUNY-
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The North American context

The approximately 7000 member Association of American Geographers (AAG) encompasses a vast array of 49 specialty groups focusing on topics from the cryosphere to sexuality. Due to sheer numbers the diversity of research topics and methodological debates tends to cover the full spectrum of geography. A recent review of the employment market for geography PhDs found a fairly balanced demand for human (31%), physical (25%) and environmental/regional geographers (23%) (Gober 1998). The remaining positions were for geographic information systems (GIS) PhDs, which was also a common skill sought in many physical and environmental geography positions. Thus, while theoretical discussions may dominate in the leading North American geographical journals, applied and technical aspects of geography tend to be the focus of the discipline's relevance at the local level.

This dichotomy has also influenced the development of recreation, tourism and sport geography (RTS) publications, with an historical tendency of their being more applied in nature and less participatory in the larger disciplinary debates. This was true, despite the relatively large membership in the RTS specialty group of the AAG (200 members in the late 1980s). In the 1990s, however, the RTS specialty group has grown (280 members in 1999) and RTS geographers in North America, and in the US in particular, have started to be more vigorous in publishing in leading disciplinary journals.

Another characteristic of North American geography, especially as practised in the US, is that it has been more insular than academic geography in many other countries. Again, this is largely due to size and is a characteristic shared with US society in general. Surprisingly few North Americans participate in international geographical meetings, even when they are held in the US. Similarly, few from outside North America regularly attend the AAG's annual meetings. Of the 4283 attendees at the 1998 Boston meeting, only the UK produced a sizeable overseas contingent (299 attendees), followed by participants from Germany (19), Australia (12) and Israel (11) (AAG Newsletter May 1998). Thus, while scholars from outside North America are well known through their research contributions in the literature, there has been far less collaborative work between them and North Americans than there potentially could be. While it is common for scholars to be primarily focused on their home turf, many opportunities for comparative studies that offer broader results and applications are often missing from North American
The exception to this occurs when North American geographers travel overseas for short-term research experiences. On the other hand, the large size of the North American academic market draws significant numbers of overseas scholars, many of whom maintain close ties to their homelands and the international community of scholars, thereby enriching higher education in North America.

In discussing North American geography, including RTS geography, a major distinction needs to be made between the academic context of Canada and that of the US. Canada's population is 11 percent that of the US, but only about 7 percent of attendees at the 1998 Boston AAG meeting were Canadian residents. Recreation, tourism and sport geography has also played a more prominent role in the leading geographical journals of Canada than has been the case in the US, and Canadian geographers have been far more active internationally than have US geographers. As significant as these differences are, due to space and editorial limitations they were not taken into consideration for purposes of the summary reported here.

A summary of geographic research on recreation, tourism and sport in the 1990s

General books and articles

The number of recreation and sport papers presented at the annual AAG conference over the past decade has remained fairly stable. Tourism papers, however, have increased substantially since 1988, continuing a trend since the 1970s. The literature review corroborated this with far more tourism publications than recreation and sport publications. Since 1988, there have been scores of books and general articles on the geography of tourism. Many books, both authored and edited, covered the entire field of tourism geography, usually in an introductory manner (e.g. Hudman & Jackson 1998), while other books addressed specific themes, such as sustainable tourism (Hall & Lew 1998) and economic geography (Iaonnides & Debbage 1998). Among journal articles there were many that examined the linkages among leisure, recreation, and tourism, ties between ecology and tourism, reviews of tourist attractions, and methodological approaches in tourism (Smith 1994).

In comparison to tourism, fewer geographers have contributed consistently to the broader field of recreation and leisure studies, which tends to be dominated by psychologists, sociologists, and kinesiologists. In particular, Ed Jackson of the University of Alberta has addressed various aspects of patterns of leisure participation (e.g. Jackson & Henderson 1995). Others have examined recreation marketing, leisure and the
environment, and climatic influences upon recreation (Konrad 1995). Many general overview articles on the subject of parks, both in North America and abroad, have been written by geographers. Like tourism, sport geography may be considered a subset of leisure and recreation research. Significant North American books that covered sport geography in a general sense included *The Theatre of Sport* (Raitz 1995) and *Atlas of American Sport* (Rooney & Pillsbury 1992).

**Management and planning**

Reflecting the applied nature of much RTS geography, articles and books related to the management and planning of recreation and tourism comprised a significant part of the RTS literature in the 1990s. There is also a large body of applied RTS research in this area that was not included in this review. Much of the recent literature on tourism management and planning has centred on the concept of 'sustainable tourism' (i.e. the application of sustainable development principles to tourism). One major book on sustainable tourism with a significant North American emphasis has appeared (Hall & Lew 1998), while several articles have debated whether such forms of tourism are truly sustainable, or alternative, or ecologically friendly. More narrowly focused planning articles included those on the destination life cycle and planning, convention planning (Getz et al. 1998) and community planning (Murphy 1995). More narrowly focused economic works included studies of regional economic impacts, tourism employment, cross-border shopping, and tourism multipliers (Wall 1997). Marketing is one of the largest applied areas of tourism research which, with a few exceptions, few geographers have contributed to.

In the 1990s, environmental issues related to tourism have also been framed in the context of ecotourism. Much of the ecotourism literature was destination-focused, such as articles on Thailand (Hvenegaard & Dearden 1998) and other places in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Because of their small size and vulnerability, islands have been major venues for tourism management and ecotourism research. A very small body of studies has focused more specifically on physical geographic aspects, such as the impacts of environmental changes upon recreation and tourism destinations (e.g. Mieczkowski 1995).

Management and impact assessment in parks has long been a cornerstone of geographic studies of outdoor recreation, and remain important components of the discipline today. Avoidance of potential user conflicts is a chief goal in many of these studies, though the range of research on recreation management issues is considerable. General literature was found to focus on distinct geographic realms, such as rivers and mountains. More work, however, consisted of site-specific experiences and lessons,
including recreation resource compatibility problems in various states and provinces and major destinations, such as the Grand Canyon (Morehouse 1996). Research on the management of urban parks included articles on greenways, access and equity issues (Talen 1997), and the changing role of modern urban parks (Mitchell 1995; Young 1995).

Another long-term research thrust in recreation geography has been in the inventory and valuation of recreational resources. This research has focused both on the resources themselves and also the recreational user (i.e. the supply and demand of recreation). In terms of the inventory of supply, articles have focused on GIS and recreation resource mapping (e.g. Welch et al. 1995), while demand studies have looked at urban recreationists, recreation expenditures, and ethnicity and recreation behaviour.

**Patterns**

Three types of patterns were identified in the research: travel patterns, historical patterns, and patterns of perception. The study of travel, or the movement of people over space, continues to be a significant geographic research theme in both tourism and recreation and is examined in a variety of ways, some of which include the spatial analysis of travel patterns (Ioannides & Debbage 1997), economic impacts of travel and pilgrimage tourism. Historical studies examine both slices of the past as well as the evolutionary development of recreation, tourism and sport. Examples included articles on various place studies, historical aspects of wilderness (Squire 1995), and the history of national parks. Some historical studies overlap with perceptual studies in tourism geography, which were noticeably less common in the 1990s than they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of this research was devoted to perceptions of destinations, although perceptions of tourism and its impacts were also addressed.

**Tourism destination studies**

One aspect of tourism geography research that has not changed is a major emphasis on destinations studies – both as specific sites and broader physical or political regions. Typically, such studies assess tourism development patterns or impacts within given areas, and many are descriptive rather than statistically or methodologically framed. This latter issue was a major criticism of tourism research in its early years, and while the situation has improved since then, a theoretical basis is still often lacking. Many of these tend to be more contemporary and anecdotal in nature in comparison to the management and historical place studies noted above. Some studies focus on a state, province or foreign country, such as village tourism
in Bali (Long & Wall 1996), while others take a physical region, such as the Rocky Mountains, as their topic. More dispersed territories, sharing culture more than physical cohesion, are also covered, such as Indian reservations (Lew & Van Otten 1998), Route 66 (Mariolle 1996), general ‘border tourism’ (Timothy 1995), and tourism impacts resulting from popular movie settings (Riley et al. 1998).

Specialized tourism

Narrowly focused theme destinations have become perhaps the growing segment of the tourism landscape and tourism marketing today. Specialized tourism includes a broad range of tourist interests, such as culture, heritage, religion, resorts, retiree programmes, farms, festivals and events, gourmet activities and casino gaming, among others. In terms of cultural tourism, North American geographers have placed particular emphasis on heritage tourism and indigenous peoples (e.g. Hovinen 1995; Butler & Hinch 1996), and exotic environments, such as the Canadian Arctic (Milne et al. 1995). Resorts, particularly seaside resorts, comprise one of the oldest research thrusts in tourism geography. While some resort studies were more general in scope, most could easily be categorized under the regional and place studies due to their focus on specific places. Wall (1996) and Getz (1993) summarized conclusions from their extensive work on resort communities and tourism business districts, respectively. Resort morphology studies comprised a noticeable segment of the research (e.g. Mitchell 1996) and retirement communities and amusement parks comprised a small, but growing field (e.g. d’Hauteserre 1999).

Casino gambling is another form of specialized tourism that has received significant interest from geographers in recent years since it became legalized in various locations (Meyer-Arendt & Hartmann 1998). Special events and conventions have been less studied by North American geographers, though significant exceptions to this exist (Janiskee 1996; Getz 1997; Olds 1998).

Sport studies

By far the greatest volume of literature in sport geography was dedicated to individual sports. In terms of the total number of articles reviewed, American football was the most researched sporting activity, followed in order by baseball, golf, and snow skiing. A sampling of topics discussed in the football and baseball articles include player recruiting, regional differences in media coverage and stadium landscapes. Some physical geography studies were undertaken, such as meteorological impacts on
the trajectory of hit baseballs (Kraft & Skeeter 1995). Golf articles often
described the current situation in specific places, while other works were
more analytical, including research on golf supply and demand and an
analysis of golf course microenvironments. Snow skiing, the last of the
four dominant topics of research, included articles on the impact of global
warming on ski areas. The literature review found a few articles on other
topics, including fishing, ice hockey, stock car racing, and endurance sports,
among others. Surprisingly, basketball received almost no attention.

Discussion and conclusions

Research on leisure topics in the context of North America, as described
above, has had a mixed history. In the US in particular, leisure and recrea-
tion studies have historically been considered frivolous and not worthy of
serious academic study, especially within the discipline of geography. This
situation has been less true in Canada and elsewhere, which may have
resulted in some of the world’s leading tourism and recreation geographers
being non-Americans. Because of the slow rate with which American
geography has come to accept the rising role of recreation and tourism in
contemporary society, many recreation and tourism geographers have allied
themselves with interdisciplinary colleagues in non-geography centres of
tourism and research – a pattern seen in many other countries
as well (Hall & Page 1999). Because of the conservative nature of academic
geography in the US, it is anticipated that this trend towards employment
in interdisciplinary tourism programmes will continue into the near future.

The applied nature of much geographic work in recreation and tourism
has also contributed to their historic lack of prominence in the discipline’s
journals. Working as consultants to local communities, regional govern-
ments and the private sector, while reflecting the importance of leisure in
contemporary American society, has kept recreation and tourism geogra-
phers less involved in the more theoretical debates that guide much of
the discipline’s larger development. Recent proposed changes to the
structure of the AAG’s two principal journals may change this situation,
but North American recreation and tourism geographers also need to
make a stronger effort to raise the subdiscipline’s profile. Recreation and
tourism geographic research could also benefit by expanding its theoret-
ical basis to include new ideas from closely aligned areas of economic
and cultural geography, where social theory and the geography of
consumption, for example, offer considerable potential for informing
leisure research.

In the post-industrial landscape that has come to characterize North
America, leisure, recreation, travel and sporting activities have taken centre
stage in the lives of many, if not most, people. At the same time, travel
and exploration (arguably a form of tourism) form the basis of the geographer's fascination with places, and are often viewed as a shared characteristic among those who have heeded geography's calling. Because of this affinity to geography, those geographers who have pursued research interest in recreation, tourism and sport have historically been at the forefront of these interdisciplinary arenas. To bring RTS geography closer to the core of geographic research in North America, research in the subdiscipline needs to become more conceptual, international and integrative, and less descriptive, parochial and fragmented. The trends of the 1990s indicate that more rigorous methodologies and more integrative approaches are being employed, holding promise for a vibrant future for recreation, tourism and sport studies in the geography academy.

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References


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