

# **Symbolic Estates as Determining Factors in the Leisure Preferences of Minorities in the East Bay Area of Northern California (Or Why Blacks Do Not Use Regional Parks)**

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## **Introduction**

The notion of parks for the conservation and/or appreciation of nature has been with us since the days when parks were hunting grounds for the nobility. Gradually, as society became urbanized and people's contact with nature dwindled, the need for conservation became more apparent. In 1872, the US Congress designated what is now Yellowstone National Park as "a public park for the enjoyment of the people" (Nash 1982:108). Since then, we have seen the notion of parks being implemented not only in the form of national reserves, but also in the forms of city and regional parks.

Today, every community that thinks of itself as an urban center has a park. One can find parks across the US in towns with populations of only a few thousand to large metropolitan centers. The geographic focus of this paper, the so-called "East Bay Area" bordering the eastern edge of the San Francisco Bay, has forty-one regional parks and an even larger number of city parks. Of these regional parks, several are within thirty to forty-five minutes of residential areas and contain, among other things, reconstructed Indian villages, coal mines, California native plants, and historic merry-go-rounds. Park users are also free to participate in such activities as archery, bicycling, fishing, hiking, or birdwatching. Indeed, the East Bay Regional Parks offer twenty-nine different outdoor activities for park users.

Although the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) in its publicity materials encourages East Bay residents to become part of the East Bay parkland "tradition," minorities, who form a sizable portion of the East Bay population, are not part of this tradition. The aim of this paper is to examine why minorities, and blacks in particular, do not utilize East Bay regional parks.

## **Reasons for Minority Nonuse**

Perhaps it is best to examine this question by first considering reasons for nonuse. The EBRPD's report, *Recreational Preferences of Minorities in the East Bay Area* (n.d.), summarizes interviews with fifty-five black, Hispanic, and other community leaders, which were conducted to determine why minorities do not use the park system and to find ways to encourage greater utilization. By limiting its interviews to middle-class community leaders, the report reflects the thoughts of spokespersons who may be unrepresentative of the majority of East Bay community members. Nevertheless, the report suggests six broad reasons for minority nonuse of regional parks, which are as follows:

- (1) *Cost.* The fees for some park facilities are too expensive for lower-class minority members to afford.
- (2) *Location and harassment.* Most of the regional parks are located in or near white neighborhoods. Therefore, minority members feel they are given "undue attention" by park rangers and that nonminority park users are hostile toward them as well.
- (3) *Lack of information.* Minority residents are less informed about the regional park system than are non-

minority residents.

(4) *Transportation*. Many lower-class minority residents do not have adequate private transportation to reach a regional park. The public transportation system linking residential neighborhoods to park areas is inefficient.

(5) *Incompatibility of park activities/facilities with minority interests*. Activities offered by the park system, such as hiking or camping, do not appeal to minorities.

(6) *Preferences for leisure-time activities*. Other recreational activities, such as visiting friends or playing in team sporting events, may take greater precedence in minority communities.

Perhaps the most important factor influencing minority nonuse of the East Bay regional park system is the last. As Graburn notes in "Tourism, Leisure, and Museums" (1982:4-5):

"All cultural groups have shared symbolic estates<sup>1</sup> derived from their particular heritages . . . But the different groups in our North American society may share little of this store house of symbols and knowledge . . . and the sense of differentiation (cultural and natural) [is] powerfully enhanced by material and symbolic items passed on at home or as a member of a local based identity group, or formal and informal ethnic organizations."

The questions for this paper thus become: What is the shared definition of "leisure-time activity" for blacks in the East Bay Area? What are considered to be appropriate locations for this activity? Why are regional parks considered to be inappropriate locations for leisure?

### What, Where, and Why Not

Minorities in the East Bay Area possess their own symbolic estates, derived from historical events, perceived ethnic roots, life experiences, and material expressions. These symbolic estates are manifest in their leisure preferences. Interviews with three black residents of the East Bay Area, as well as participant observation by the author, himself a black resident of the East Bay, show that city parks are utilized with greater frequency than regional parks because the former are more conducive to "leisure" as defined by black residents.

According to one informant, blacks in the East Bay enjoy "music, [roller-] skating, dancing, and sports," all of which are carried out more easily in city parks. For example, two of the Bay Area's largest parks, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and Lakeside Park (Lake Merritt) in Oakland, limit motor-vehicle traffic so that individuals may roller-skate; as a result, significant concentrations of black roller skaters can be found in these parks at any given time. Similarly, blacks often attend the free concerts offered by some of the East Bay Area's city parks. Lakeside Park, for example, has a free concert every Sunday throughout the summer. One black resident of Oakland, who is also a welfare recipient, mentioned that she visits city parks "almost every day in the summer," but that she would go to regional parks more often "if they had one of those groups singing up there." The use of the phrase "up there" has a triply poignant meaning in this case. Not only are most of the EBRPD parks in the hills, away from the flatlands where blacks live, but most upper-middle class whites live in the hills near these parks, and, of course, the topography of elevation directly reflects the social hierarchy of the upper, middle, and lower classes.

The same woman noted that she attends virtually every baseball game in her neighborhood park—either as a player on women's teams or as an observer of men's games. She also goes there to meet friends—spending at least an extra hour before or after the three- to four-hour multiple game period involved in some form of social interaction.

As with concerts and roller-skating, team sporting events promote social interaction. Social interaction, it appears, is an integral component of the East Bay minority definition of "leisure time." One informant, a black middle-class resident of Oakland, concurred with the EBRPD's findings that blacks prefer team sports. "If you have a basketball court, you are probably going to see more blacks there," he said, "and you are probably going to see blacks play pass football, [whereas] whiteys will play frisbee." But "playing team sports" in and of itself is less meaningful than the fact that team sports, as opposed to the dualistic frisbee game, require groups, and group-oriented activities promote social interaction.

Social interaction may be viewed as a leisure activity in and of itself, and East Bay city parks are viewed by black residents as an appropriate place to carry out this activity. One informant said "people go to parks to meet others." He said, for example, that his son's friends come from across town to meet at Lakeside Park. From there, they may go to someone's house, a party, or a night club, or they may simply stay in the park, listening to music, talking, and drinking.

City parks are conducive to these spur-of-the-moment, informal gatherings for two reasons. First, city parks tend to be conveniently located near residential neighborhoods and open later in the evening than regional parks. Second, and perhaps more important, if social interaction is perceived as a leisure activity per se, then individuals are likely to go where they will meet familiar faces. This is much more likely to occur in a city park than in a

regional one.

Indeed, when two informants were asked what would attract blacks to regional parks, they both answered that there needs to be “something happening” there. Although difficult to define, this notion of “something happening” includes not only recreational activities and social interactions, but also ambient “action”—e.g., vendors trying to sell their goods, kids break-dancing to the music of a portable stereo, dressed-up men cruising through the park at five miles per hour in their Cadillacs and Buick Electras, groups of friends sharing a joint or drinking beer on the lawn, kids and toddlers in the company of their parents throwing food at birds.

Such activities reinforce the cultural differentiation of the black community, or at least some local segment of it. Black culture is literally being cultivated in the city park, where, in a few years, the toddler throwing food at pigeons will be break-dancing, the break dancers will be drinking beer or sharing a joint, and the beer drinkers will be driving Cadillacs. All the “happenings,” in one way or another, reinforce, enhance, and pass on the symbolic estates of the local group from one generation to the next.

### **Creating a Regional Parkland “Culture” for Blacks**

Although it appears that city parks—as locations for music, dancing, skating, visiting, team sports, and “happenings”—may fulfill the leisure-time expectations of East Bay Area black residents, the question remains: Is the enculturation process limited to city parks, or can regional parks accommodate this cultural production as well? Or, to use the EBRPD’s words, can black usage of regional parks become a “tradition”?

This section will reanalyze the purported factors for minority nonuse of regional parks to determine their validity. Additional factors for nonuse of regional parks, as noted by informants, will also be analyzed.

#### *Cost*

According to middle-class community spokespersons cited in the EBRPD report, minorities do not have the financial means to visit regional parks. According to informants, however, the cost associated with visiting a regional park is not prohibitive. Most regional parks have either no or minimal entrance fees, the only costs pertaining to the rental of specialized equipment or facilities.

With respect to the latter, some activities offered by the regional park system may require a substantial amount of money. For example, the cost of renting a boat or horses for riding may be prohibitive for lower-class minorities. However, as one informant stated, one can always find a way to afford an activity that one truly enjoys. In other words, just because one is poor does not mean that one cannot afford to rent a boat in a regional park twice a year.

A more important factor may be the accumulated costs associated with group activities, which blacks prefer. If four or five friends decide to go horseback riding or to rent a boat, they will need four or five horses or a larger boat, which will cost more per hour. Thus, the types of special but costly leisure-time activities offered in the regional park system may not appeal to black community members, who may value the social interaction associated with the activity more than the activity per se.

#### *Location and Harassment*

Most of the regional parks are located far from black neighborhoods and in or near white neighborhoods. Does the location of parks near white neighborhoods and the potential harassment by law enforcement officials prevent blacks from going to these parks? Responses to this question varied.

On the one hand, the most middle-class informant stated that he did not care where a park was located; as long as the area was designated a park, he said that he had as much right to use it as anybody else. On the other hand, an informant who was a welfare recipient said that she did not feel comfortable going to white neighborhoods and recalled that her brother and his girlfriend had been harassed at a regional park by law enforcement officers. She said that she would go to a regional park only on holidays and only if there were many other people (not necessarily blacks) present. In other words, she felt that there was “safety in numbers.”

#### *Lack of Information*

All informants agreed that few East Bay black residents know about the forty-one regional parks in the East Bay Area and the twenty-nine activities offered in the park system. However, a study by Tyler Research Associates (n.d.) showed that lack of information did not correspond with lack of advertising, since the latter was viewed by most of those surveyed as adequate. Rather, it appears that the activities promoted in regional park publicity materials may not appeal to blacks, for the reasons cited above. If so, then additional advertising in black communities is unlikely to promote park usage, unless that advertising addresses black norms regarding leisure.

### *Transportation*

According to 80 percent of the middle-class community spokespersons interviewed by the EBRPD, most minority members do not have adequate transportation to reach regional parks. Furthermore, they stated that more minorities would visit these parks if transportation was provided. However, according to informants interviewed for this study, transportation was not a major deterrent to park usage, as has been suggested. Rather, because blacks usually attend parks in groups, one or more individuals can usually be counted on to provide automobile transportation.

Furthermore, some informants indicated that they were willing to ride buses for up to thirty minutes in order to reach city parks when car transportation was unavailable. With respect to regional parks, the *Report on 1984 Summer Bus Program* by the EBRPD (n.d.) supported this finding. Namely, since the busing program's inception in 1982, the number of people participating in the program has doubled every year. Of the participants, 66 percent are "youths."

However, provision of a structured summer busing program may not be the answer to increasing minority access to regional parks, for two reasons. First, as suggested by the percentage figures provided, such a program has obvious appeal to young people, who may not be representative of the entire East Bay minority community. The report, furthermore, does not indicate whether "youths" include only adolescents, who are capable of making the trip on their own, or also younger children who must be accompanied by adults. Although the EBRPD figures are encouraging, the EBRPD may be claiming victory over the group that is most likely to utilize the regional park system, with or without busing. Second, the structured nature of the program discourages spur-of-the-moment trips. Bus fares are paid a week in advance, and this is a definite deterrent to spontaneity, which is highly valued in the black community. Thus, it would make more sense if regular community bus services were scheduled, giving riders free choice over where and when they visit regional parklands.

### *Incompatibility of Park Activities/Facilities with Minority Interests*

Informants agreed that city parks were more likely than regional parks to sponsor activities oriented toward black culture. For example, one informant pointed out that "Black Liberation Day" is held annually on a rotating basis in East Bay city parks. This event draws blacks who do not ordinarily utilize the city park system. If such an event, of comparable historical and cultural magnitude, could be hosted in a regional park, it could turn out to be an effective way of introducing blacks to the regional park system without forcing them to abandon their own traditions for the "parkland" one.

## **Others Factors Affecting Use**

### *Children*

All but one informant said they go to parks because of their children. Among this group of informants, city parks were visited most often, because of their proximity, the perceived adequacy of their facilities, and parents' familiarity with them. Another factor involved the compatibility of the facilities with the parents' symbolic estates. Adults took their children to places where they believed their children would enjoy playing—often the same places where they played as youngsters. Thus, adults' notions of appropriate playgrounds for their children—and themselves—determined which parks were likely to be utilized. In this sample at least, regional parks were less likely to be compatible with the symbolic estates of black parents, who wanted their children to have playgrounds resembling those from their own childhoods.

### *Children's Life Experiences*

If one views the life experiences of poor minority children today and then compares this to the "nature" experience being offered by the regional park system, it is obvious that the two do not overlap. Whereas regional parks are designed for the protection of nature and the public's appreciation of it, lower-class minorities, and especially young people, may spend a significant amount of time ensuring their own survival. Thus, the idea of visiting a park to "appreciate nature" may seem ludicrous to an adolescent who must carry a knife or a gun for his own protection.

Children who have had to learn how to survive on their own in tough black neighborhoods may be literally incapable of entering a protected park setting and playing like innocent middle-class children. Backpacking on a trail overlooking the San Francisco Bay is probably *not* a meaningful leisure-time activity for a young man whose usual recreational activities involve shooting baskets, listening to rap music, or having sex.

In short, it is very likely that black symbolic estates, derived from both past and present, and the concepts and facilities offered by regional parks have very little in common.

### Conclusion

This paper has attempted to answer the question of why minorities, and blacks in particular, do not utilize East Bay Regional Parks. The paper examined the various possible determining factors described in the EBRPD's own internal report, as well as factors discussed by black informants.

The paper found that preferences for leisure-time activities among the East Bay black community—and the symbolic associations between these activities and city parks—were the primary determinant of nonuse of regional parks. Economic and physical barriers, such as cost of park facilities or lack of transportation, appeared to be of minor importance, contrary to the EBRPD's findings.

The question thus remains: How can the EBRPD make blacks feel comfortable at regional parks, thereby increasing utilization? The EBRPD's own recommended solution to this question is two-fold: (1) impress park rangers with the importance of improved relations with minority park users; and (2) develop and implement a minority job training program.

With respect to the latter, the EBRPD should explore the possibility of hiring black teenagers as docents or aides in park facilities. Such a program might have two effects: (1) making regional parks part of the immediate life experience of black teenagers; and (2) promoting future adult use of regional parks through the positive socialization experiences of black youngsters.

The EBRPD should also find ways to promote group activities and to develop facilities for such activities. In addition, it should focus on the introduction of minority groups to the regional park system, so that regional parks become integrated into the symbolic estates of various local minority communities.

Finally, further research by social scientists should be directed at understanding the sociodynamics of urban minority societies, so that we can begin to understand the driving forces behind minority leisure preferences.

### Notes

1. The concept of symbolic estate was developed by Farber (1971), who pointed out that the most important things we inherit from our parents and family are symbolic cultural items, such as a "family," ancestors, family stories, roots, life-styles, standards, and expectations. Material goods and heirlooms are mnemonics for these cultural items, and abstract wealth, while possibly supporting cultural values and styles, is the most superficial part of our estate.

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