

Hispanic American Views on the Stewardship of Federal Land Management Agencies: An Exploratory Analysis of the Ethnic NewsWatch Database

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Introduction

Ethnic and racial communities have often been found to hold distinct views about the environment and natural resource management (Schelhas 2002, Jostad et al. 1996). But these perspectives are often unheard or underrepresented in mainstream environmental discourses (Lynch 1993, Bengston 2004). As society becomes more diverse, natural resource planners, managers and policy makers need a more expansive and inclusive understanding of the perspectives of ethnic and racial communities.

Gaining clear insights into the environmental views of ethnic and racial communities is often difficult, however. Differences in traditions and language create obstacles to communication and understanding. Histories of exploitation often produce distrust of government institutions and their representatives. Social science methods used to obtain information about the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the dominant culture often are inappropriate and ineffective when used in the context of minority communities (McAvoy et al. 2000). This study explores an alternative approach for understanding the perspectives of ethnic and racial communities. Computer-assisted content analysis was used to examine the views of Hispanic Americans expressed in Spanish-language news articles about federal land management agencies and issues.² A similar approach has been used in previous studies to analyze attitudes related to natural resource management issues expressed in mainstream news media stories. This approach has been found to closely parallel the findings of attitude surveys and other social science methods (e.g., Bengston and Fan 2001, Bengston et al. 2001).

Social scientists have examined Hispanic recreation patterns and preferences in recent decades (e.g., Baas et al. 1993, Carr and Chavez 1993, Chavez 2002, Chavez 2003). But relatively little research literature exists on other aspects of Hispanic environmental perspectives, attitudes and values (for exceptions, see: Lynch 1993, Teresa Garcia 1996, Whittaker et al. 2003). Some researchers have found high levels of concern for environmental protection among Hispanics. For example, Whittaker et al. (2003) report that the percentage of Californian respondents expressing “extreme concern” for protecting the environment was significantly higher for Hispanics than for non-Hispanic Whites or African Americans during the late 1990s. Hinckley (2000) found higher support for forest protection among Hispanics (82%) than among non-Hispanic Whites (63%), Blacks (65%) and other racial/ethnic groups (68%).

This paper focuses on Hispanic American perspectives on the *stewardship* of federal land management agencies. Stewardship has been defined as “Caring for the land and associated resources so that healthy ecosystems can be passed on to future generations,” (Dunster and Dunster 1996: 299). Good stewardship of land and natural resources is at the heart of the missions of federal land management agencies. For example, the mission statement of the Forest Service reads in part:

The mission of the USDA Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. (Source: <http://www.fs.fed.us/plan/>)

The mission statement of the USDI National Park Service is similar in its emphasis on stewardship of federal lands for the benefit of present and future generations. It reads in part:

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² The term “Hispanic” is used by the U.S. Census Bureau to identify certain ethnic groups and is defined as a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or some other Latino origin, regardless of race (Ramirez and de la Cruz 2002). Hispanic is a contested term and some prefer Latino or other terms (Oboler 1995). But Hispanic is a more inclusive term (Teresa Garcia 1995), and it is therefore used in this study.

The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. (Source: <http://www.nps.gov/legacy/mission.htm>)

Because stewardship is the core mission of federal land management, examining Hispanic perspectives on federal land stewardship is an important aspect of gauging the overall attitudes of Hispanics toward these agencies. The next section describes the data and method used in this study. This is followed by a discussion of results. A concluding section discusses conclusions and implications for policy and research.

Methods

The data source for this study was the Ethnic NewsWatch, a commercial online fulltext database that includes newspapers, magazines, and journals of the ethnic, minority, and native press (see: www.slinfo.com). The following search terms were used to locate stories in Ethnic NewsWatch from Spanish-language news sources about the USDA Forest Service, USDI Park Service, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, USDI Bureau of Reclamation, and the US Army Corps of Engineers:

(servicio forestal) or (servicio federal forestal) or (forestal nacional) or (bosque nacional) or (servicio de parque) or (parque nacional) or (servicio de pesca y vida silvestre) or (servicio federal de pesca y vida silvestre) or (refugio de vida silvestre) or (oficina de administracion de tierras) or (oficina de reclamacion) or (cuerpo de ingenieros) or (departamento del interior) or (departamento federal del interior).

Using this search string, we located and downloaded 352 stories from Ethnic NewsWatch that were published during the five-year period January 1, 1998 through December 31, 2002. Upon examination, however, it became clear that a significant share of the stories were not about U.S. federal land management agencies. For example, some stories mentioned an agency only in passing (e.g., a story about photographer Ansel Adams that briefly mentioned his photographs in “el Parque Nacional de Yosemite”), some discussed national parks in other countries (e.g., a story about tourism in Nicaragua that mentioned “Parque Nacional Volcan Masaya”), some mentioned a state forest service (e.g., an article that mentioned “el servicio forestal de Nuevo Mexico”), and many were repeat stories that were contained twice in the database. Irrelevant stories such as these were deleted before we began our analysis. After eliminating extraneous stories, 109 stories discussing U.S. federal land management agencies remained.

The following six Spanish-language newspapers were represented in the 109 stories: *La Opinion* (Los Angeles, CA), *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami, FL), *El Diario-La Prensa* (New York, NY), *La Prensa* (Longwood, FL), *El Latino San Diego* (San Diego, CA), and *El Bohemio News* (San Francisco, CA). As shown in Figure 1, however, the vast majority of articles were from *La Opinion* and *El Nuevo Herald*. Both of these are daily rather than weekly newspapers, and both are published in close proximity to large federal land holdings. With the exception of *El Diario-La Prensa*, the other newspapers listed in Figure 1 are published weekly. About twenty additional Spanish-language newspapers and magazines are contained in Ethnic NewsWatch, but these publications were not represented in the final set of 109 stories.

These stories were coded for expressions of favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward the stewardship of federal land management agencies. The computer program N-Vivo was used to facilitate coding and analysis.

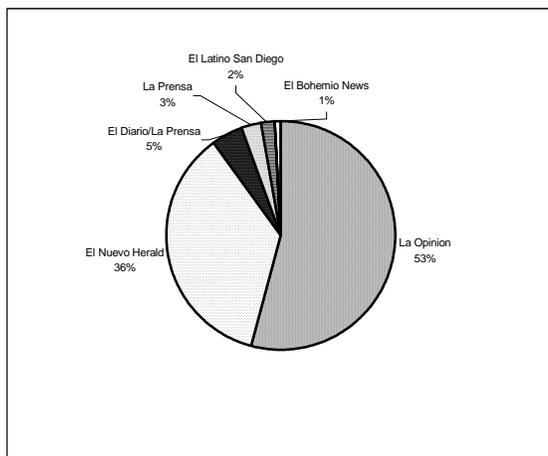


Figure 1 - News sources represented in our database of 109 Spanish-language news stories.

Results

The federal land management agencies that were discussed most often in our database of 109 Spanish-language news stories were the USDI National Park Service, USDA Forest Service, and US Army Corps of Engineers. Other federal land management agencies were seldom mentioned. We found that discussion of federal land stewardship was predominantly favorable (fig. 2). For all federal land management agencies, about 81 percent of the views regarding agency stewardship were favorable and 19 percent unfavorable over the 5-year period covered by our data. USDA Forest Service stewardship was discussed favorably most often (about 89 percent favorable), and the stewardship of the US Army Corps of Engineers was discussed favorably least often (70 percent favorable). National Park Service stewardship was discussed favorably about 86 percent of the time.

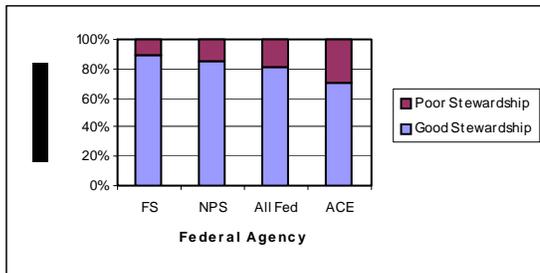


Figure 2 - Share of expressions of good and poor stewardship by federal land management agencies. (FS = USDA Forest Service, NPS = USDI National Park Service, All Fed = all federal land management agencies, ACE = US Army Corps of Engineers).

These percentages represent a relatively high “approval rating” of federal land stewardship compared to previous studies of the general population using surveys and other social science methods. For example, several studies have found approval ratings for the Forest Service and its stewardship ranging from 57 to 74 percent (Bengston and Fan 1999, Hammond 1994, Shindler et al. 1996, Smith and Clark 1994, Steel et al. 1998). One possible reason for the relatively high proportion of favorable attitudes toward federal land stewardship is that a significant share of the articles we analyzed focus on recreation and tourism opportunities on federal lands. Such stories tend to be positive in tone and are much more likely to contain expressions of favorable stewardship, unlike stories that focus on conflict and controversy over land management issues. Additional studies using different data sources are needed to corroborate the high ratings of federal land stewardship by Hispanic Americans.

A wide range of issues was raised in the discussion of favorable versus unfavorable stewardship. In some cases, attitudes toward federal land stewardship were general or historical in nature, as in the following example of an expression of good stewardship by the Forest Service: “For those landscapes to remain for future generations, 780,000 acres were designated as the White Mountain National Forest, thus preventing any development that will affect their ecosystem” (Arencibia 2000, p. 6F). In this example, the Forest Service is depicted as historically protecting this landscape and ecosystem from development, but specifics are not mentioned. Another example expressing favorable stewardship, this time about the National Park Service, discussed federal protection of the Miami Circle, an archeological site of the Tequesta Indians that was discovered in 1998:

“The federal protection will... put The Circle in a national and international plan,” said Roper Matkov.

The naming of the National Park will place the 2000-year-old archeological site at the same level as natural jewels like Yosemite Park and the Grand Canyon of Colorado. (Rivera-Lyles 2002: 4A).

Expressions of favorable attitudes toward agencies’ stewardship were more likely to be general in nature, while expressions of unfavorable stewardship tended to be about specific incidents or decisions. The following example discusses what is deemed to be a poor decision made by the Army Corps of Engineers to release water from Lake Okeechobee in Florida:

Neighborhoods near Lake Okeechobee admit that the shortage of water is a direct consequence of the drought, but maintain that the situation has been worsened by the erroneous decision made by the South

Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers... “If they hadn’t made that decision, there would not be a severe water shortage today,” explains Poppa. (Hoffman 2001, p. 4A).

In addition to coding for attitudes toward stewardship, we coded for a variety of other issues and concerns related to federal land management agencies. For example, environmental justice and racism emerged as an issue in a small number of stories in our database. In one instance, the lack of educational materials in Spanish was mentioned in the context of Everglades Forever, a state initiative in Florida that includes the Everglades National Park and the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge as federal partners:

Everglades Forever is a unique project because it has never been attempted in the United States to restore an ecosystem of this magnitude. However, it is practically impossible to find any information in Spanish that explains both the benefits that it will generate to the ecosystem and those that live nearby it...

Obviously, the Everglades can not wait for the one million 291 thousand Latinos that surround it to learn English, so they can then learn how to take care of it... (Cepero 2002, p. 23A).

In some cases, concerns about injustice or racism linked to federal land management agencies are much more severe. The following example discusses the refusal of the Fish and Wildlife Service to place water containers in the desert that could have saved lives:

The area where fourteen bodies were found lies only 25 miles (40 kilometers) from the border close to the Granite Mountain, within the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge... The US Fish and Wildlife Service twice denied Humane Borders’ petition to place water containers in places passed by immigrants. (Robles 2001, p. 1A).

Implications

Lynch (1993: 118) has stated, “... the prevalence of Anglo environmental discourse in the United States keeps other environmental goals, priorities, and issues off the agenda.” Listening to other voices – including ethnic discourses – is a necessary first step for getting these perspectives on the public agenda and managing federal lands and resources in ways that are responsive to these views. The research method and data source described in this paper is a promising approach for social scientists to inform policy and management about these often neglected perspectives. Unlike most social science methods – such as surveys, interviews and focus groups – the research approach used in this study is unobtrusive and not burdensome to community members. The idea is to provide land managers and policy makers a new window into the perspectives of racial and ethnic communities as a first step in building bridges of understanding and communication. Using this approach, agencies can easily update an analysis and monitor changing perspectives and emerging issues over time. The results may be used to inform managers about the unique perspectives and concerns of diverse stakeholder communities, thereby helping managers and policy makers better understand the social context in which decisions need to be made and resulting in policies that more closely reflect the true diversity of society. This paper has focused on perceptions of the stewardship of federal land management agencies, but the method is applicable to most issues relevant to natural resource planning, management and policy.

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