
Leisure Reflections

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 35 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 34 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); *After Work The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001); *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002); *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering* (CABI, 2004, edited with M. Graham); and *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004). Forthcoming books include *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig) and *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, primarily as Past-President of the Société d'accueil francophone (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

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Nature Challenge Activities: Answering the Call of the Wild

Outings in nature considered as leisure activity constitute a main way in which people in the West of today use their free time. I define nature, for the purposes of this paper, as any natural setting perceived by users as at most only minimally modified by human beings. Here I will define and describe a modern leisure phenomenon called *nature challenge activity* (NCA), a type of outdoor pursuit that appears to be gaining popularity. The NCA is leisure whose core activity or activities center on meeting a natural test posed by one or more of six elements: 1) air, 2) water, 3) land, 4) animals (including birds and fish), 5) plants, and 6) ice or snow (sometimes both). A main reason for engaging in a particular NCA is to experience participation in its core activities pursued in a natural setting. In other words, while executing these activities, the special (aesthetic) appeal of the natural environment in which this process occurs simultaneously sets the challenge the participant seeks. Of course, as I will point out later, other important reasons also exist for such participation, as suggested by the geographic, economic, and social dimensions of the use of nature. Moreover some NCAs even have a counterpart in a line of work (e.g., professional sport fishermen, mountain guides, nature photographers), which because they constitute a livelihood, will not be considered here.

Outings in nature considered as leisure activity constitute a main way in which people in the West of today use their free time. For the purposes of this article I regard nature as any natural setting perceived by users as at most only minimally modified by human beings. In its most general manifestation, nature thus defined is composed of one or more of the aforementioned six elements. The perceptual qualification just made is important, since nature lovers may feel they are in nature that, for example, is nonetheless imperceptibly polluted. In fact all six elements risk being sullied by this offensive process. Or nature lovers might recognise that pollution exists, but discount it as insignificant or unavoidable. For instance certain kinds of trees might be dying, precipitated by an infestation of an insect, but a hike or cross-country ski through this region is still enjoyable, in part because the hikers or skiers are enthralled with other aspects of nature viewed by them as pristine (e.g., the snow, forest, geography, and clean air).

Westerners have unequal access to nature, with, it would appear, those living in cities being, as a group, the most deprived in this respect. Much of city life takes place in substantially, if not entirely, artificial surroundings. Subways, buildings (notwithstanding the occasional plant or water fountain inside), streets and sidewalks (even those lined with trees), bridges, and the like are the antithesis of nature as just defined it. Furthermore city parks, walkways along rivers, public gardens, and similar developments are only marginally less artificial. And the built environment is as prominent in small towns and even on farms to the extent that the latter abut one another to form a contiguous stretch of land modified by humans. This is evident in roads, buildings, planted crops, and fenced pasture.

In all these settings nature has been, for the most part, far more than minimally modified for human use. This is the environmental dimension of nature challenge activity. And, for the inhabitants of these settings, nature as defined here must usually be sought elsewhere. But the question of how far they must go to find such nature constitutes another Western, in this instance, geographic dimension. In certain areas of Europe, compared with parts of Australia, New Zealand, and North America, nature is rather difficult to find. People in some rural areas need drive only a few miles to find the nature they like, whereas those in many cities have to travel several hours for such experience. Moreover nature may be costly — the economic dimension — ranging from a dollar or two to enter a state or provincial park to hundreds of dollars for a seasonal pass to an alpine ski resort. By no means everyone can afford the latter.

Nature Challenge Activity

Note that the six elements of nature are not equally appealing to all people. That is nature can also viewed along an aesthetic dimension. That is most of them are attracted only to some of the elements of nature and only to some of the NCAs available there. And there are people who care little or none at all for nature; they relish selected artificial aspects of their city, town, or farm. Furthermore, there is a social dimension to the free-time use of nature. In some of this use involvement with other people is essential, particularly in the various interpersonal competitions. Yet, in many activities in nature, direct involvement with others is either optional (e.g., one may hike, photograph flowers, or go orienteering alone or in a group) or impossible (e.g., alpine skiing, hang gliding, mountain biking).

The following list further describes the nature challenge activity. Always the underlying defining principle is that the setting in which it occurs is perceived as either fully natural or only minimally modified to facilitate the complex activity in question. Thus:

- many NCAs are pursued using special equipment (e.g., shoes, skis, boats, skates, bicycles, rope, maps, parachutes, compasses, binoculars, hunting rifles, fishing tackle, SCUBA equipment, wind/surf boards, snowboards, caving lanterns);
- some NCAs are pursued in natural settings, even while, to facilitate the activity, they require certain relatively unobtrusive modifications to those settings. Examples of such modification include groomed cross-country ski trails, foot bridges and drainage ditches on hiking trails, duck hunting blinds, and climbing pins driven into rock;
- some NCAs are pursued without aid of mechanical devices such as motors, which in any case, modify substantially the cherished experience of the immediate natural environment. Nevertheless some nature challenge participants use a motorboat to reach a fishing site, a sport utility vehicle to reach a hunting area, a helicopter to reach deep snow for backcountry skiing, a boat to get to a SCUBA site, an airplane to enable parachuting, a car to reach mushrooming terrain, and so on;
- other NCAs are motorized, among them, water-skiing,

aeronautics, snowmobiling, jet skiing, power boat racing, and beach auto and motorcycle racing. Here, for some participants, the appeal of the experience of being in nature is diluted to some extent by the noise of the machine. Others, however, interpret this noise favorably as part of the overall experience;

- by dint of the effort required to meet a particular challenge, all NCAs are serious leisure. They are pursued in all three of its types: amateur, hobbyist, and career volunteer (Stebbins, 2007);
- some NCAs may foster interpersonal competition. That is, some or all of the time, they are pursued as a sport (as defined by Coakley, 2001, p. 20). The attraction of the central activity done in nature remains important here, but competing against other people becomes another main reason for engaging in it.

To be as clear as possible about the nature of nature challenge activities, we also need to inventory the activities excluded from the list of NCAs. They are

- activities in which participants are not, themselves, in the focal natural setting. Such is the situation for those who fly kites or model airplanes or run model boats or cars. It is the kite, plane, boat, or car that experiences, as it were, the natural element of air, water, or land, not the person controlling it from a distance;
- high-risk, or 'extreme' activities' (defined as such by the participant), primarily because they shift the participant's attention away from the inherent appeal of the core activity in its natural setting to avoiding the substantial possibility of serious injury or death as well as to other extraneous considerations;
- activities that offer challenges through one of the six elements, but that are undertaken in substantially artificial circumstances. They include those requiring use of swimming pools, ice rinks (indoor and outdoor), artificial climbing walls, fish and game farms, snowboard parks, velodromes, luge and bobsleigh runs, ski jumps and groomed alpine ski and snowboard runs, race tracks (e.g., auto, horse, motorcycle), courses (e.g., track and field, sled dog, model trains and cars), rodeo arenas, pastures (for raising horses, sheep, etc.), golf courses, and equestrian grounds;¹
- a great variety of casual leisure activities that, in some ways, resemble NCAs, but nonetheless fail to meet the criteria of serious leisure, including the criterion of a natural challenge. These include bungee jumping, zip rides, whitewater rafting (experts at the helm excluded), inner tubing on a river, horseback riding (for greenhorns), sledding and tobogganing (on natural terrain), casual swimming, and snorkeling;
- activities whose chief appeal is promoting fitness, among them, jogging, swimming, rowing, and skating, all done in natural settings. True, these activities may be more attractive when done outside rather than inside, but even then, the principal goal is other than finding fulfillment in the activity itself or enjoying the natural environment in which it occurs.

To sharpen still further initial understanding of this idea, consider the following sample of NCAs:

- Collecting natural objects (shells, leaves, rocks, etc)
- Orienteering
- Back-country skiing and snowboarding
- Caving
- Mushrooming (gathering edibles or scientific specimens)
- Bird watching
- Amateur ornithology, astronomy, botany, entomology, meteorology, mineralogy – the natural challenge is to find new phenomena, rare but known phenomena, predict weather, and so on.
- Search and rescue, maintaining hiking and cross-country ski trails, volunteering through an NCA
- Sailing
- Wilderness camping
- Trapping

Bear in mind that I am, in all this, trying to generalize about NCAs and their enthusiasts. Generalizations gloss individual differences, however, such that a minority of individuals may interpret their own pursuits and experiences in them differently from any given generalization. Thus, some people love fitness activities that most others find disagreeably obligatory, have no sense of being forced to do them, and love them even more when done in a pleasant setting out of doors.

Still not every leisure activity undertaken in nature conforms to the definition of a nature challenge activity. Activities in which participants are not, themselves, in the focal natural setting are excluded. Such is the situation for those who fly kites or model airplanes or run model boats or cars. It is the kite, plane, boat, or car that experiences, as it were, the natural element of air, water, or land, not the person controlling it from a distance. Furthermore, high-risk, or extreme activities (defined as such by participants) are not NCAs, primarily because they shift attention away from the inherent appeal of the core activity in its natural setting to avoiding the substantial possibility of serious injury or death as well as to other extraneous considerations. I have also excluded activities that offer challenges through one of the six elements, but that are undertaken in substantially artificial circumstances.

Then there is the great variety of casual leisure activities that, in some ways, resemble NCAs, but nonetheless fail to meet the criteria of serious leisure and nature challenge. In this list are bungee jumping, zip rides, whitewater rafting (experts at the helm excluded), inner tubing on a river, horseback riding (for greenhorns), sledding and tobogganing (on natural terrain), casual swimming, and snorkeling. Finally I do not cover activities whose chief motive is promoting fitness, among them, jogging, swimming, rowing, and skating, even when done in natural settings. True, these activities may be more attractive when undertaken outside rather than inside; but even then, the principal goal is other than finding fulfillment in the activity itself or enjoying the natural environment in which it occurs.

What is special about the NCA?

Are we not splitting hairs in our attempt to distinguish NCAs from other outdoor leisure activities? No. Nature challenge activities stand out as separate and important for at least five reasons. First, it appears that many people also pursue NCAs considered as a category, though we do lack precise comparative data with which to substantiate this claim. Second, these activities, unlike the others, are exclusively serious leisure, experienced in this instance in highly appealing natural settings. Its principal reward is personally fulfilling execution of a core activity done in an environment that is itself awe-inspiring. Third, in part because nature is awe-inspiring for nature challenge enthusiasts and in part because it must remain as pristine as possible for them, they make fine champions of sustainability and the consumption of goods and services enabling the activity while causing minimal environmental damage.

Fourth, many NCAs, when pursued regularly, also contribute to their participants' physical fitness, suggesting that, for them, achieving fitness in such settings may be more appealing than doing so in artificial circumstances. Fifth, the NCAs offer greater scope for human agency than many other kinds of leisure activity. Thus, swimmers in lake and rivers with no officially established swimming areas have the freedom to swim where they wish compared with their counterparts constrained by official boundaries in such places or limited by the edges of artificial pools. Hikers and cross-country skiers may explore off-trail, hang-gliders are free to search wind currents and chart their course of flight at will, and hobbyist sailors have an entire ocean or lake to explore (necessarily mindful of dangerous areas and changing weather patterns). Artificial areas constrain such tendencies, while scope for human agency, say participants in many of the activities considered in this article, is a central attraction of their chosen NCAs.

Nature challenge activity as a concept is a newcomer to the literatures of leisure studies, sustainability, and consumption. Stebbins (2005) coined and defined the term to capture how his sample of kayakers, snowboarders, and mountain climbers viewed the core activities of their hobbies. It was also clear from his study that there are many more NCAs than these three and, following further analysis of the data, that the three types of hobbyists pursue such activities in their natural settings because of the wonder the settings hold for them. More recently he has examined the complex relationship between NCAs in general and the consumption of goods and services (Stebbins, 2009).

Being in awe, or wonder, of an aesthetically attractive part of nature brings a psychological dimension to the study of NCAs. I found that for the kayakers their wonder-filled environment had, among other features, the sound, sight, and feel of the rushing mountain rivers and creeks and the rock, earth, trees, and vegetation through which they flow. The snowboarders were enthralled with the snow-filled back-country setting through which they rode as it descended, often precipitously, before them. The mountain climbers loved rock, its nooks, crannies, and solidity (when present) and the way

these qualities and others combined to create a sense of being suspended in air far above the base of the steep slopes they mounted.

Awe and Wonder

A study presently underway explores systematically the proposition that a nature challenge activity is pursued in the awe-inspiring natural environment of that activity. Being in awe, or wonder, of an aesthetically attractive part of nature brings a psychological dimension to the study of NCAs. For the kayakers their wonder-filled environment had, among other features, the sound, sight, and feel of the rushing mountain rivers and creeks and the rock, earth, trees, and vegetation through which they flow. The snowboarders were enthralled with the snow-filled back-country setting through which they rode as it descended, often precipitously, before them. The mountain climbers loved rock, its nooks, crannies, and solidity (when present) and the way these qualities and others combined to create a sense of being suspended in air far above the base of the steep slopes they mounted.

Although I have chosen to summarily describe such feelings with the terms 'awe' and 'wonder', I pondered several alternatives. Two of these were 'euphoria' and 'exhilaration', which though rejected, I nevertheless regard as closely synonymous with awe. Another was 'spirituality', refused because of its oftentimes close association with religion. Some people in an NCA might well describe the experience precisely this way, but others would not. 'Delight' would have served our purposes were it not for its sense of pleasure. Casual leisure generates pleasure, whereas the central rewards of serious leisure are deeper. In brief I am trying to communicate with both noun and adjective (awe-inspiring, wonder-filled) the 'wow' feeling — the emotion — of an aesthetic encounter with nature, as experienced during normal conduct of the hobby's core activity.²

Conclusion

There is not enough space to include in this article nearly all the theoretic material that bears on the NCA. For example I have made reference throughout to the serious leisure perspective, but having failed to summarize it here, readers interested in it will find a much fuller statement in Stebbins (2007). Furthermore risk and adventure in activities pursued in nature merit a deeper treatment than I have given them in this article.

Notes

¹ One might question listing groomed alpine skiing and snowboarding here. Our justification for doing so is that large swathes of forest are typically cut down to develop the runs, resulting thus in a major modification of the environment. At times this environment is further changed by adding fences to demarcate the runs and making snow to give them

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the depth that nature has failed to provide. Lifts lining the sides of the runs also modify nature. The same may be said for the development of golf courses.

² Why did I not use 'awesome' as one of the adjectives to qualify 'awe'? The answer is that "awesome" is widely used in popular language as a synonym to describe objects, experiences, and situations experienced as terrific, or great. This usage is too broad for our purposes, for my interest lies specifically in the feeling of wonder. Note as well another main sense of 'awe', as denoting terror. If something goes terribly wrong during an NCA, terrifying awe may be the emotional response: which is not, however, what participants seek.

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Bob Stebbins
University of Calgary

Stebbins@ucalgary.ca

Website (personal):
www.ucalgary.ca/~stebbins

Website (perspective):
www.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure