

ASSESSMENT OF LEISURE AND RECREATION RESEARCH IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Leisure and recreation are now accepted as identifiable research areas. Retrospective and prospective assessments of research in the field are therefore not only desirable but also necessary to consolidate what has been learned, clarify concepts and theories and provide a focus for future research. No such assessments have appeared over the last two decades in Africa. This might be a reason why leisure and recreation research here have not yet achieved the same scholarly level and diversity as in North America. The research assessment framework of Goodale and Witt has been applied to retrospectively assess the published scholarly work in the fields of leisure and recreation for the period 1980-2002 and to prospectively ascertain the opinions of 86 active scholars and practitioners in the relevant fields on future research directions in 10 African countries. The overall assessment suggests a moderate growth in quantity, weaknesses in conceptualisation and theory development and an ad hoc and eclectic approach with no real principal issues for future research. Recorded research has a short-term focus and is mostly of the fact-finding type and results are not disseminated adequately. The disciplinary roots of the research lie in the social sciences. The main barrier to the development of research seems to be the uninformed or partially informed attitude of members of the public and decision makers regarding the role and value of recreation in society.

Key words: Leisure and recreation research; Assessment; South Africa; Africa; Research plan.

INTRODUCTION

In North America and Europe, leisure studies have gained a strong sense of scholarly legitimacy in the academic domain since the 1980's. Most university departments and nearly all of the leading scientific journals in this specific field were founded in the 1970's and early 1980's. Leisure and recreation are now accepted as identifiable research areas and this is reflected in the number of research publications, the many forums that exist for the exchange of research findings and the variety of scholarly journals dedicated to recreation and leisure studies.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although recreation and leisure studies are regarded as relatively young fields of scholarship, retrospective and prospective assessments of the field are not only desirable but also necessary. According to Jackson and Burton (1989), periodic assessments consolidate what has been learned, clarify concepts and theories and provide a focus for the future. As such,

different reviews of leisure and recreation research have appeared over the last two decades primarily in North America (Burdge, 1983; Iso-Ahola, 1986; Stockdale, 1987; Jackson, 1988). At the same time, however, leisure and recreation research in Africa has not yet achieved the same scholarly level and diversity as in North America. Isolated efforts have been made to create an awareness of what has already been accomplished in leisure and recreation research in South Africa in the form of monographs on published research (H.R.S.C. Sports Investigation, 1982; Burnett & Katzenellenbogen, 1993). The necessity of establishing a focused and systematic view of leisure and recreation research has been expressed by very few South African academics in the field (Scholtz, 1986; Wilson, 1992). The only South African research programme for sport and recreation was proposed in 1985 as a result of the then Minister of National Education's request that a national research programme for sport and recreation be developed by the South African Association for Sport Sciences, Physical Education and Recreation (S.A.A.S.S.P.E.R.) in conjunction with the Human Sciences Research Council (S.A.A.S.S.P.E.R., 1985). A literature study has revealed no similar co-ordinated assessment or research programme for the rest of Africa. The benefits and focus to be accrued from occasional assessment reviews as described by Jackson and Burton (1989) have therefore not been available to South Africa and Africa. This might even be a reason why leisure and recreation research on the African continent has never become the scholarly topic it could be or properly demonstrated its capacity for making a major contribution to the understanding of an important area of human behaviour. Without such assessment reviews, leisure and recreation studies could remain as they were in the 1960's in North America. Burton (1980) says the situation at this time was not unlike that of Columbus during his fifteenth century voyages to the New World – at his departure; not knowing where he was going, at his arrival; not knowing where he was and on his return; not knowing where he had been.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research is to identify and assess the:

- 1) growth in the quantity of leisure and recreation research over the past two decades in Africa;
- 2) diversity of issues and topics;
- 3) disciplinary roots of published contributions in the field;
- 4) principal issues for leisure and recreation research during the next decade in South Africa and Africa; and
- 5) perceived barriers to recreation and leisure research.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Working definitions

According to Burdge (1983) leisure research refers to studies of the philosophical and historical development of leisure phenomena, economic issues involved in programmes and services, sociological and psychological factors in leisure behaviour, planning and administrative policies and procedures. Recreation research deals with activities, facilities and programmes.

Spatial and time demarcation

A literature review indicated that the most recent holistic overview of leisure and recreation journal articles, dissertations and commissioned reports in South Africa, covered the period up to 1980 (H.R.S.C. Sports Investigation, 1982). Wilson's (1992) overview focused only on studies dealing with need surveys in sport, recreation and tourism in South Africa. No similar reviews for the rest of Africa were found. For the purposes of this study, leisure and recreation research published in the period 1980 to the first four months of 2002 have therefore been assessed. Only leisure and recreation research pertaining to Africa have been included in the assessment.

Assessment framework

The research assessment framework of Goodale & Witt (1985) has been applied. The assessment encompasses an extensive literature review of scholarly works in the fields of leisure and recreation complemented by a questionnaire survey to ascertain the opinions of active scholars and practitioners in the relevant fields.

Data collection

A primary literature search for published journal articles, unpublished dissertations, theses and commissioned research reports was done utilising the electronic data bases of Nexus, Web of Science Records, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, ERIC, Humanities Abstracts, Geobase, ISAP, Sabinet, SA Studies, Sport Discuss, Science Direct Platform and Academic Science Elite. The literature search covered the disciplines of Recreation Science, Leisure Sciences, Physical Education, Sport Science, Management, Education, Geography, Sociology, Psychology, Tourism, Anthropology, Community Development, Dance, Social Work and Public Administration. The search was structured according to key words relevant to the working definitions of leisure and recreation research. A secondary literature search was done utilising the references quoted in published articles in relevant journals in Africa. A short questionnaire was used to assess the opinions of active scholars and practitioners. The questionnaire was designed to assess their judgement of the quality and quantity of published research, perceived barriers to leisure and recreation research and the principal issues to be addressed in future research for the next decade.

Respondents

The questionnaire was conducted amongst 86 active scholars and practitioners (n=86) in the field of leisure and recreation research in Africa. Respondents were deemed "active scholars" when they had published in a relevant scientific journal on a leisure and recreation topic during the past five years or were currently full-time academics in the fields and "active practitioners" if they had been involved full-time in the practice of leisure and recreation services over the past five years. Respondents came from South Africa, Kenya, Botswana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, Mauritius, Madagascar and Egypt. A response rate of 74.42% (n=64) was obtained. Respondents represented government institutions (15.63%); academic departments at tertiary institutions (42.19%); sport and recreation service departments/bureaux at tertiary institutions (14.06%); commercial recreation service providers (7.81%); non-governmental organisations (10.94%); statutory bodies (1.56%) and voluntary recreation organisations (7.81%).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantity of recreation and leisure research over time

A total of 366 research items (published articles, unpublished dissertations, theses, reports and commissioned reports) were identified for the period under discussion. Figure 1 presents a breakdown of the quantity of recreation and leisure research over the period 1980-2002 (first four months).

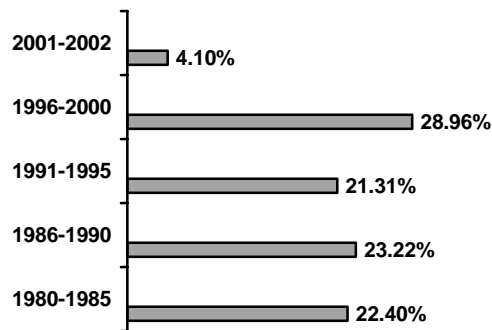


FIGURE 1. QUANTITY OF RECREATION AND LEISURE RESEARCH FROM 1980-2002

No dramatic growth in the quantity of research is demonstrated by the above results. The research output for the timeframe 1980-1995 appears relatively stable. The timeframe 1996-2000 reflects a slight increase of output to 28.96%. A finer analysis of the research produced during that specific timeframe (n=106) reveals a focus (21.71%) on topics dealing with recreation and leisure from a cultural perspective (traditional games, dance) followed by topics on the benefits of recreation participation (9.43%; n=10), outdoor and adventure (9.43%; n=10), preference and needs surveys (5.66%; n=6); historical aspects (5.66%; n=6); policy issues (5.66%; n=6); environmental issues (5.66%; n=6) and training and education matters (5.66%; n=6). Academic institutions are the main source of recorded research output. Theses, dissertations and articles in refereed scientific journals represent 45.92% of the output. Reports commissioned by government institutions (national, provincial and local) constitute 33.31% of the output. The majority of these deal with preference and need surveys (demographic studies) on specific geographic areas or consumer groups (senior citizens, women, marginalized youth, disabled). Reports commissioned by the private sector answer for 18.42% of the output and deal primarily with topics related to eco tourism (environmental studies), the tourism potential of recreation areas, events and activities and outdoor ventures. Greater publications (textbooks, chapters in books) constitute only 2.35% of the research output and focus primarily on management aspects of recreation and leisure, socio-political issues and sport tourism topics. Although an increase in the quantity of the recreation and leisure research has been recorded, the quality of none of the research items has been assessed.

Dominant research themes in leisure and recreation

A characteristic of the research output is the great diversity in research topics. Table 1 reflects the range of topics and themes produced in the specified timeframe.

TABLE 1. DOMINANT THEMES IN RECREATION AND LEISURE RESEARCH (1980-2002)

| RESEARCH THEME | N | % |
|---|------------|--------------|
| Recreation preferences and needs | 72 | 19.66 |
| Cultural aspects (traditional games and dance) | 49 | 13.38 |
| Management and administration | 39 | 10.66 |
| Outdoor activities (adventure and high risk activities) | 24 | 6.56 |
| Recreation behaviour of tourists (sport tourism) | 22 | 6.01 |
| Policymaking and planning | 21 | 5.74 |
| Spatial analysis (facilities, urban and regional studies, parks and reserves) | 20 | 5.46 |
| Historical perspectives | 17 | 4.64 |
| Benefits of recreation (social and health impact, therapeutic) | 16 | 4.37 |
| Leisure and recreation behaviour (motivation and satisfaction) | 15 | 4.10 |
| Economic models and impact | 11 | 3.01 |
| Methods | 9 | 2.46 |
| Philosophical aspects | 9 | 2.46 |
| Therapeutic (disabled) | 8 | 2.19 |
| Education and training | 7 | 1.91 |
| Gender issues | 6 | 1.64 |
| Barriers to participation | 6 | 1.64 |
| Sport for All | 5 | 1.37 |
| Environmental attitudes (energy, conservation) | 4 | 1.09 |
| Leisure and recreation theory | 3 | 0.82 |
| Catalogues of recreation activities | 3 | 0.82 |
| Law | 2 | 0.55 |
| TOTAL | 366 | 100.0 |

From Table 1 there is evidence that empiricism or simple fact-gathering studies (needs surveys, preference patterns, explanations of traditional games and dances) is the dominant focus of the research. This undoubtedly causes a short-term focus on leisure and recreation provision. Theoretical analyses and conceptualisation are notably under-emphasized. The range of topics might suggest considerable fragmentation, lack of integration and a lack of a common intellectual interest. According to Rojek (1989) signs of maturity and professionalism in a field of study are measured by the extent to which theoretical and conceptual development manifests itself in that field. When the reflected results are evaluated against this statement, it seems as if research over the past two decades has failed to be cumulative and to provide paradigms for future focused research.

Disciplinary roots of the research items

The 366 research items were further categorised according to the underlying discipline from which results were interpreted. Table 2 presents the findings in this regard.

TABLE 2. DISCIPLINARY ROOTS OF RESEARCH ITEMS

| DISCIPLINE | N | % |
|--|------------|--------------|
| Recreation Science | 88 | 24.04 |
| Geography (environmental studies; urban and regional planning, spatial analysis) | 51 | 13.93 |
| Management Sciences | 49 | 13.39 |
| History | 26 | 7.10 |
| Sociology | 25 | 6.83 |
| Psychology (motivation participation; impact on mood states; psychological benefits) | 18 | 4.93 |
| Education | 18 | 4.93 |
| Anthropology | 15 | 4.10 |
| Human Movement Science | 14 | 3.83 |
| Public Administration | 11 | 3.01 |
| Political Science | 10 | 2.73 |
| Economics (price barriers, economic impact) | 9 | 2.46 |
| Tourism (eco-tourism; sport tourism; sex tourism) | 8 | 2.19 |
| Policy Studies | 7 | 1.91 |
| Development Studies | 4 | 1.09 |
| Research Methodology | 3 | 0.82 |
| Architecture (facility design and accessibility) | 3 | 0.82 |
| Town and Regional Planning | 1 | 0.27 |
| Sport Science | 1 | 0.27 |
| Social Work | 1 | 0.27 |
| Physiology | 1 | 0.27 |
| Philosophy | 1 | 0.27 |
| Library Science | 1 | 0.27 |
| Law | 1 | 0.27 |
| TOTAL | 366 | 100.0 |

Evidence indicates that the majority of recreation and leisure research is based in and interpreted from a Social Sciences' perspective (56.55%). Studies embedded in the Economic and Management Sciences (22.96); Earth Sciences (13.93); Educational Sciences (4.93%); Engineering and Built Environment Sciences (1.09%) and the Natural Sciences (0.27%) complete the profile. The number of studies recorded in Recreation Science (24.04%) as part of Social Sciences and the Earth Sciences or Geography (13.93%) could be interpreted as showing that leisure and recreation research have not moved far away from their original dichotomous roots of recreation programme provision and spatial facility provision. The recorded studies in the Management Sciences indicate that leisure and recreation have realised and responded to the increasing need for knowledge to establish and maintain management practices. If applied effectively, this could help shape management practices and influence the ways in which specific programmes and facilities are managed. Although it was not within the scope of this study to analyse the methodological approaches or techniques of the recorded research items, it seems as if the current state of leisure and recreation research can be classified as multidisciplinary according to the classifications provided by Burdge (1983). The dominant Social Science perspective could serve as a guideline for the rational

positioning of Leisure and Recreation departments within the academic framework of tertiary institutions. The diversity of disciplinary roots also suggests that providing recreation services to communities could never be the function or responsibility of a single government agency.

Principal issues for research during the next decade

Any assessment of research in a specific field should also include a perspective on the future according to Jackson and Burton (1989). Respondents were therefore asked to list priorities for future leisure and recreation research. Up to five topics could be listed.

TABLE 3. PRINCIPAL ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

| RESEARCH TOPIC | N | % |
|--|----|-------|
| Needs analyses of specific groups | 24 | 12.57 |
| Benefit-based management of recreation service delivery (recreation's impact on society) | 23 | 12.04 |
| Transformation in/through recreation service provision | 13 | 6.81 |
| Facility and spatial development | 12 | 6.28 |
| Adventure trends and developments | 11 | 5.76 |
| Training and development of recreation managers/leaders | 10 | 5.24 |
| Programme and activity planning and development | 7 | 3.66 |
| Policy development | 7 | 3.66 |
| Leisure tourism | 7 | 3.66 |
| Determinants of participation motivation | 7 | 3.66 |
| Recreation awareness of communities and policy makers | 6 | 3.14 |
| Recreation delivery strategy for rural areas | 6 | 3.14 |
| Volunteers in recreation | 5 | 2.62 |
| National participation patterns and trends | 5 | 2.62 |
| Management issues | 5 | 2.62 |
| Recreation in the workplace | 5 | 2.62 |
| Funding strategies for providing recreation services | 4 | 2.09 |
| Campus recreation | 4 | 2.09 |
| Establishing recreation structures in communities | 3 | 1.57 |
| Therapeutic recreation interventions | 3 | 1.57 |
| Performance management/appraisal of recreation centers (cost-benefit analyses) | 2 | 1.05 |
| Value of life long sports | 2 | 1.05 |
| Experiential learning | 2 | 1.05 |
| Research perceptions of policy makers and practitioners | 2 | 1.05 |
| Youth development through recreation | 1 | 0.52 |
| Time-usage studies | 1 | 0.52 |
| Sustainable recreation provision | 1 | 0.52 |
| Sport versus recreation | 1 | 0.52 |
| Securing parent involvement in recreation provision | 1 | 0.52 |
| Relationship between recreation and culture | 1 | 0.52 |
| Recreation legislation | 1 | 0.52 |
| Recreation and the transfer of life skills | 1 | 0.52 |
| Recreation and education | 1 | 0.52 |
| Leisure in urban life | 1 | 0.52 |

| | | |
|--|------------|--------------|
| Influence of technology on leisure utilization | 1 | 0.52 |
| Indigenous/traditional games | 1 | 0.52 |
| Environmental conservation | 1 | 0.52 |
| Democracy and recreation | 1 | 0.52 |
| Creating recreation networks/data bases | 1 | 0.52 |
| Commercial recreation | 1 | 0.52 |
| TOTAL | 191 | 100.0 |

The lack of coherence and intellectual focus reported earlier is evident from the 191 topics listed by active scholars. The focus on fact-gathering research (empiricism) is reinforced. There is clearly no majority agreement on the principal issues to be researched in the immediate future. The impression emerges that scholars have merely indicated the isolated topics they are currently interested in and do not see a bigger research pattern or picture. Empiricism should, however, not be regarded entirely from a negative perspective. It could be interpreted as a positive sign that some projections of future research are related to social changes and trends within communities. Research that quantitatively substantiates the role and impact of recreation provision on social issues such as poverty alleviation, health issues, HIV/AIDS, stimulation of the economy and nation building are necessary and should be undertaken without delay. A long-term focus on conceptualising the impact of recreation in societal values, especially in African societies, is, however, imperative in order to establish sustainable recreation policy.

Perceived barriers to recreation and leisure research

Identifying barriers limiting or preventing the undertaking of leisure and recreation research or the use of results is crucial. Active scholars were asked to indicate the perceived barriers to recreation and leisure research in order to form an indication of required resources and strategies should regional research plans be formulated. Perceived barriers were categorised and are reflected in Table 4.

TABLE 4. PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO LEISURE AND RECREATION RESEARCH

| BARRIER | N | % |
|---|------------|--------------|
| Financial constraints | 39 | 21.31 |
| Lack of experienced researchers | 27 | 14.75 |
| The indifferent and uninformed/partially informed attitude of policy makers and decision takers | 23 | 12.57 |
| Lack of public interest and understanding of recreation as a social issue of priority | 22 | 12.02 |
| Inadequate dissemination of results | 16 | 8.74 |
| Access to research areas | 15 | 8.20 |
| Lack of coordination between researchers | 11 | 6.01 |
| Lack of supporting resources (books, technology, facilities) | 8 | 4.37 |
| Time constraints | 6 | 3.28 |
| Cultural differences between researchers and clients | 5 | 2.73 |
| Political interference and instability | 4 | 2.19 |
| Irrelevant research topics | 2 | 1.09 |
| Hostility between academics and practitioners | 2 | 1.09 |
| Absence of research ethics | 1 | 1.09 |
| Lack of clear research briefs | 1 | 0.55 |
| TOTAL | 183 | 100.0 |

Financial constraints (21.31%) are perceived to be the main barrier. One scholar commented that provincial and local government as funders and commissioners of leisure and recreation research have withdrawn thus leaving a void in funding options. Researchers are, to a great extent, dependent on either internal funds, funds from commissioned or contract research or funds from statutory research councils. Researchers have to compete for funds against a background of a lack of public interest and failure to accept recreation as a social priority (12.02%). The seemingly indifferent and uninformed attitude of policy makers and decision takers (12.57%) multiplies the effect of financial constraints. The cumulative effect of uninformed public as well as indifferent policy makers (24.59%) might be recreation's downfall in Africa and will undoubtedly be reflected in policy documents and budget allocations. The lack of experienced researchers (14.75%) should be a reason for concern. If a value framework for sustainable public recreation services is to be established, experienced researchers are crucial. The perceived lack of such researchers could be the cumulative result of financial constraints, the status of recreation as a profession and social service or even policy makers that ignore the value of research results as management tool. The perceived inadequate dissemination of results (8.74%) has been noted but is debatable. It is common knowledge that ample scientific avenues for the dissemination of research exist. These include scientific journals, electronic databases and conferences. Reasons for this perception might be fourfold: 1) scholars are not aware of the existing dissemination channels; 2) academics and practitioners might not subscribe to journals or attend conferences; 3) articles reporting on research results are mainly written by academics for academics and the style of writing might not appeal to practitioners; and 4) research commissioned by specific organisations has limited generalizability as it is not disseminated in the public domain. Comments by respondents questioning the quantity of published research might not be valid given the range of issues reported on as well as the number of recorded research items. Inaccessibility of potential

research areas (8.20%) is notable. Respondents have commented on safety risks as well as public hostility towards researchers in specific geographic areas. Lack of coordination between researchers (6.01%) is a disconcerting finding given the already limited pool of active leisure and recreation researchers and the perceived negative public opinion. Although the attitude and awareness of the public and the decision makers are perceived as a primary barrier, it is interesting to note that it is not identified as high priority future research topic. This confirms the earlier findings as indicated in Tables 1 and 3 that active scholars are myopically focusing on fragmented, individual topics rather than collective research issues.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

The results presented and subsequent discussions lead to the following overall assessment of leisure and recreation research:

1. Moderate progress has been made in terms of quantity over the past two decades.
2. Lack of funding as well as the perceived inadequate number of experienced researchers could restrict the optimal intellectual development of this field of study in Africa.
3. Weaknesses exist in conceptualization and theory development.
4. Leisure and recreation research have not yet reached a state of maturation as the research has a short-term focus and is mostly of the fact-finding type.
5. The great diversity of recorded research topics suggests an *ad hoc* and eclectic approach with no clear principal issues to direct future research.
6. A perception exists that research results are not adequately disseminated although reality contradicts this. It seems as if respondents are unaware of all available dissemination channels as well as the range of completed research.
7. The disciplinary roots of leisure and recreation research lie in the social sciences.
8. Practitioners might be unable to make effective use of research results.
9. The perception exists that policy makers are either uninformed or partially informed about recreation service delivery's potential to enhance social capital.
10. No evidence of replication that could lead to determining trends in leisure and recreation behaviour was found.
11. Contract research findings are seldom circulated in the public domain.
12. Respondents perceived the overall research environment as hostile (unsafe, lacking resources, technological and policy support).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested to guide leisure and recreation research (research plans) in Africa in the foreseeable future:

1. Unless the nature and role of recreation in building social capital is clarified and substantiated to the public as well as to the decision makers, this lack of awareness will be detrimental to recreation and leisure services' sustainable existence.
2. Recorded research items should be analysed in terms of methodological approaches to determine the interdisciplinary progress and level of maturation of the discipline.
3. As a matter of urgency active scholars should be assembled for a research round table to determine a coordinated and directed future research strategy to collectively influence and inform policy makers.

4. Leisure and recreation research in Africa can ill afford uninformed or partially informed members of the public and decision makers. Research should provide reliable and valid data on benefit-based recreation management to educate the uninformed.
5. A more accessible database and strategy for the dissemination of results to both academics and practitioners should be established and operated.
6. Leisure and recreation behaviour should be studied from a longitudinal perspective to establish trends as substantive input for policy formation.
7. Governments should demonstrate their attitude to acknowledge leisure and recreation as pressing social issues by providing research funds on a par with funds allocated to elite sport participation.
8. Research results should be disseminated to the general public and practitioners in the form of sustainable user-friendly awareness campaigns.
9. Addressing the perceived barriers to research as well as actively recruiting post-graduate students with relevant research topics could extend the limited pool of experienced leisure and recreation researchers.
10. Current and future researchers must be schooled in and exposed to interdisciplinary research methodologies to elevate research to the next level of maturation.
11. Regional research teams/units focusing on both conceptualisation and empiricism should be established to produce research results benefiting Africa's total population.
12. A continental research plan for Africa consisting of different regional research plans should be developed and implemented as an issue of priority.

CONCLUSION

Although the quantity of research items produced over the past two decades indicates an active interest in the discipline, the focus of leisure and recreation research in Africa does not suggest a mature level of scholarly legitimacy. Coordinated regional research plans as well as a holistic continental research plan should be a priority to active leisure and recreation scholars in Africa.

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