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The Myth of the Non-Consumptive User

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The concept that some outdoor recreational activities are non-consumptive of the resource base is examined and rejected. Typical non-consumptive activities are seen to be consumptive along spatial, temporal, and physical dimensions. The wide acceptance of this erroneous concept has led to inappropriate behaviors on the part of Naturalist Club and Federation members. Serious errors in park and natural area planning and management have been made. Rejection of the concept frees us to formulate new guidelines and planning tools for parks and similar reserves. User restrictions, a proposed theory of non-use planning, and a new justification for landscape preservation are discussed within this context.

Key Words: non-consumptive user, recreation, resource base, parks, natural areas, landscape preservation.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of people participate in various outdoor recreational activities, but neither hunt nor fish, and are generally referred to as "non-consumptive" users. The purpose of this article is to cast serious doubt on the validity of this term. The perspective presented here is a policy statement adopted in principle by the Vancouver Island Region of the Federation of British Columbia Naturalists. The article was written at the suggestion of Neil Dawe, the past Regional Vice-President, and was subsequently reviewed and edited by a committee of executive officers.

In this article, consumption is discussed only in terms of outdoor recreation usually found in natural areas, parks, reserves, or conservation areas, and in unprotected semi-wilderness. Consumption in terms of what it takes to maintain the essentials of human life, such as food, water, or oxygen is not considered. The points presented here have important implications for naturalist clubs and conservation groups across Canada. It is not new to question the idea of the non-consumptive user, but there seems to have been no national discussion on the issue. Hopefully, this article will generate one.

It is easy to understand why recreational hunting and fishing are considered consumptive. Living organisms are physically removed from the scene, and consequences are apparent when populations of game decline. These resources are supposedly renewable, and can be manipulated by some sort of conventional management. Certain conservation groups, or individuals in them, often rail against consumptive forms of recreation. Naturalist groups typically cast themselves in this light. Other groups recognize and accept the consumptive nature of their activity, arguing that they merely crop off some sort of "harvestable surplus." Rod and gun clubs, rifle associations and other groups are in this category. No matter what one's particular attitude is toward hunting and fishing, there is general agreement that these are consumptive activities. They are closely regulated in terms of bag limits or in the number of licensed participants. These controls derive from the recognition of the consumptive nature of the activity, and are consistent with conventional management techniques.

By contrast, hiking or back-packing, sightseeing, general tourism and camping in parks,

nature study, nature photography, and picnicking are clearly regarded as *non-consumptive* of the resource base. These particular activities, and all the others in this category, do not seem to remove living organisms from the scene. They are regarded as healthful pursuits that are benign in terms of the surrounding landscape. Participants in these activities are regarded as non-consumptive users of outdoor recreation resources, and consequently there are few controls governing their numbers or behavior.

The non-consumptive user can be categorized in a number of different ways according to the frequency and duration of participation in conventional non-consumptive activities. Naturalist clubs and hiking clubs which organize a specific roster of regular outings are one such category; others include the cubs, scouts, and girl guides, summer camps, wilderness users, recreation vehicle enthusiasts, etc. By far the largest category consists of all the people who camp in or otherwise visit national, provincial, or regional parks, or who, in British Columbia and other provinces, travel on logging roads and camp along the way.

It is difficult to say precisely what the size of this group is. No one can possibly guess the total number of people who visit unorganized facilities, or who seek out other sorts of crown wildland for purposes of recreation. The point is that non-consumptive users are present in far greater numbers than consumptive users. For example, in 1975, the number of hunters and anglers in British Columbia was about 512 000. No figures are available on the numbers of hunter or angler days for that year, but they could not possibly aproach the 8.7 million day and overnight visits to provincial parks in British Columbia for the same year.[1] In addition, the British Columbia Forest Service provides unsupervised camping facilities throughout the province, and cannot estimate the number of people who use them. Both Crown Zellerbach and MacMillan Bloedel provide limited facilities in their timber limits, but lost count of the number of users when access to major logging roads opened on a twenty-four hour basis a few years ago. They do estimate, however, the yearly visitation to be in the tens of thousands.

These are estimates for British Columbia alone, with a population of 2.5 million. We would surmise that the total number of "non-consumers" ranging across the landscape of all provinces and territories is staggering — far greater than park visitor statistics and participation rate data from surveys suggest. Entire industries and retail empires have been created to cater to the needs of back-packers and canoe trippers alone. The "non-consumers" are using more sophisticated and mechanized equipment every year. It is now necessary for naturalist and conservation groups to recognize that non-consumptive users are no longer a few groups of nature buffs or boy scouts hiking into the hills. They are present in this country in enormous numbers. They have become big business, and a big problem.

Is the notion of non-consumptive use valid? The very idea of it does not seem to square well with recognition that some recreational landscapes become seriously degraded over a period of time. But strangely enough, the idea has become firmly imbedded in the rhetoric of the conservation movement. Most conservation officers and professional biologists use the term to refer to groups of non-hunters and non-anglers. Even our own Federation referred to its members as non-consumptive users in a recent brief on the Fish and Wildlife Branch to the Minister of Conservation and Recreation. Perhaps it is time that we, as naturalists, escaped from this comfortable illusion.

The concept of the non-consumptive user of outdoor recreation resources is false. It is an outdated concept that appears bankrupt of accuracy. Much like the now discredited notion of multiple use, the concept may have been useful once, but now in the face of the information available, it must be discarded. In fact, because the notion of the non-consumptive user has been so widely accepted, many serious errors have been made in land-use planning and in the philosophy of the conservation movement. Here is a case in which a comfortable myth has been applied as a principle of land use, and as a result some of the major objectives of the conservation movement are in jeopardy.

[1]Figures for hunters and anglers provided by G. Reid, British Columbia Fish and Wildlife Branch, Nanaimo. Figures on park use supplied by Mick Collins, Research Section, British Columbia Parks Branch.

Natural history clubs and federations have a major voice in the effective criticism of industrial, institutional, and private resource consumption issues. Until now, members of these organizations could lob their criticism from the safe fortress of the notion that their own activities were non-consumptive. But if non-consumption is a myth, then we can be held up to ridicule by our opponents.[2]

If so-called non-consumptive activities are not so benign, then we had better acknowledge this and get down to the serious business of re-assessing our priorities. One of the major objectives of the conservation movement, and one behind which naturalists stand firmly, is the preservation of natural landscapes and habitats. We have focused on gaining legislative protection for them without very seriously addressing the question of what happens to them next. We have not only supported the preservation of these lands, we have also been guilty of encouraging their "non-consumptive" use by our own members and the general public. In fact, the chief argument used in support of natural area preservation, except ecological reserves, is the benefit that supposedly accrues to the public in terms of recreation. This argument will have to be abandoned, particularly if clubs and federations address the contradiction of supporting both the *preservation* and *use* of natural landscapes.

Non-consumptive users do consume recreation resources along spatial, visual, and physical dimensions. They trample and re-arrange vegetation patterns, disturb wildlife, and are the chief distributors of refuse across the land. Let us discuss these and then consider some important implications of the position taken.

Spatial consumption simply means recreation consumes space. Picture a natural landscape. In order for it to be of any conventional recreational use, arrangements must be made for access to it and probably for accommodation in it. This results in the direct physical consumption of habitat in the area. A small park might serve as an illustration of this. Ivy Green Provincial Park, south of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, is sixty-two acres in size and is bisected by the Island Highway. The park is classified as Class A or dedicated to the preservation of the natural environment (*per* the Park Act for the Province). Ivy Green contains forty-eight campsites, each about 108 m^2 (1200 ft^2), thirty toilets and associated facilities located on pads cleared in the forest, a trailer sani-station, a paved parking lot for 104 cars, 3.5 km (2.2 mi) of roads with about 7.5-m (25-ft) clearances, and a large service yard (from the British Columbia Parks Data Handbook). All these facilities are installed for the non-consumptive user, and the process of installing them has left only about a quarter of the park unimpaired — and this is squeezed in between the campsites.

The act of providing for the accommodation of non-consumptive users has succeeded in directly consuming three-quarters of the habitat in a park which has statutory protection from impairment. In this example, the visitors do not directly remove organisms or entire habitats from the scene. The government does it for them, with our blessings. How many small parks can you think of in similar circumstances?

The problem of spatial consumption also extends to mechanized recreational vehicles. Trail bikers, waterskiers, and snowmobilers require much more space than do hikers or canoeists. Mechanized and non-mechanized pursuits rarely mix well on the same landscape at the same time because of conflicts between users. Therefore, most areas are needed to accommodate all the participants of all the various activities, and when more space is needed, it means that what was formerly available has been used up. Conflicting activities might be regulated in the same space by requiring that each occur at different times of the day or week. But this turns into a problem of regulations and controls, which appear to be unacceptable to those recreating under the

[2]The Village Lake Louise conflict is a good example. That was one of the major conservation victories in Canada. The environmental grounds against the proposed ski resort development were framed in terms of lost scenic and ecological amenities to non-consumptive users. The fact that it was in a national park only gave weight to our arguments. But if the project proponents, Imperial Oil et al., could have identified the long-term damage by tourists and scenery gawkers to the amenities of the site, and shown that this damage would be almost guaranteed by the management philosophy of Parks Canada, then the outcome of the conflict may have been very different. See Nature Canada 1(11): 35 and 1(2): 33, 1972.

illusion that their own activity is not consumptive at all.

Visual consumption means that large numbers of people consume solitude. Recreation research has confirmed that human crowding in outdoor recreation settings results in decreased satisfaction with the experience in the mind of each visitor (Lucas 1964; Stone and Taves 1956). Crowds in any particular area can build to the point where the scenic amenities of the site are completely lost by the presence of too many people. The visual and auditory impact of crowding results in a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the setting, and is often referred to as perceptual carrying capacity (Bouchard 1973; Lime and Stankey 1971). The problem is that large numbers of people (or even small numbers, depending on your degree of "purism") make solitude scarce. Since the necessary precondition of scarcity is consumption, we can conclude that visual resources have been consumed when the scenic amenties of a site are lost. If solitude becomes scarce enough to engender a feeling of over-crowding amongst people at a particular site, perceived or "expected" space has been all used up. As often as not, it is solitude that people seek when they visit natural landscapes. Here is a case in which larger numbers consume the very quality sought.

Another aspect of visual consumption is the visual impact humans have on wildlife. There are a number of wildlife species that seem to require privacy from human intrusion in order to thrive in their respective ecosystems. In these cases the presence of people may not be directly consumptive, but in the long run the result is the same. These organisms do not have somewhere else to go when they are pushed out by human presence. They are where they are because that is where they must be. The alternative for them is simply to disappear.

Beyond requirements for access and accommodation on recreational landscapes lies the problem of direct physical impact. This was first identified as a problem as early as 1929 (Bates 1935; Meinecke 1929). Subsequent studies have shown that in certain environments, such as forested areas with a well developed ground cover, very severe impacts occur with the lightest use, and that physical impact is cumulative over a period of time (Frissell and Duncan 1965; La Page 1967). Cumulative impact simply means that the year-to-year effect of human presence in natural recreation settings continues to build gradually until serious changes become apparent. Even light and occasional use of an area for hiking or nature study can have its effect in time. The amount of effect is also dependent on the particular sensitivity of the specific site.

The direct crushing of vegetation by trampling is one factor that favors the replacement of natural vegetation by non-native basal rosette-type plants such as plantain or hawkweed. Soil compaction caused by human treading retards the growth of trees, perhaps killing them. Forest duff can be pulverized, the soil denuded, the ground can become puddled and down-slope erosion can occur. The long-term effects of these impacts are visibly and seriously to alter the original vegetation patterns and associations in a manner that normal plant succession would not. Natural vegetation patterns contribute to the characterization of the unique or valued aspects of the particular site in the first place. Furthermore, wildlife that requires special vegetational habitats will be affected. Campgrounds in some parks, for example, contain populations of Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and even House Sparrows. These are species not normally found in any numbers in the surrounding natural habitat.

The non-consumptive user is guilty of these impacts. Point Pelee National Park in Ontario has been hammered by birdwatchers. The impact of camping has been so great there that it is no longer allowed. Restrictions are now being placed on the number of people entering some of our large semi-wilderness parks to keep down the collective damage (and to protect the visitors' experience). North of Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, there are hot springs in Maquinna Provincial Park that are waded and bathed in by organized groups from hiking clubs. These rare hot springs are now ruined and valueless as an ecological reserve. Members of naturalist clubs are often the worst offenders in unique or highly sensitive habitats. These are areas we actively seek because of their high interest value. But we tramp around in bogs, marshes, alpine meadows, and gull colonies, content in our non-consumptive status. Increasing numbers of natural food buffs are

systematically harvesting edible wild nature. This problem is especially relevant in parks and similar reserves where the hunting or "harvesting" of other wild things is forbidden, but where groups like Outward Bound teach live-off-the-land survival skills.

The accumulation of garbage and litter in remote places is a very serious problem. Tons and tons of it are hauled out of our remote and accessible recreation areas every year (53 tons from the interior canoe routes of Algonquin Park, Ontario, in 1972 (Toronto Globe and Mail, 8 June 1974)). Imagine the garbage that piles up in the well known and easily reached areas. Garbage is not only unsightly, its presence can alter natural behavior patterns in some species of wildlife. We all know about bears and garbage, yet how can littering activity that leads to the destruction of "problem" bears be called *non*-consumptive?

Not only is it necessary to remove portions of the original countryside initially to accommodate the non-consumers, but the impact that these users have on the remainder continues year after year to erode the landscape more. The massive numbers of such users, doing their collective "thing" on our natural landscapes, makes them (i.e., us!) the *most* consumptive and the *most* destructive of all groups of recreationists. So we are faced with an interesting irony: the "non-consumers" are shown to be the most serious consumers, simply by virtue of their numbers, by what they do, and where they do it.

We must accept that the notion of non-consumptive use is a myth. There is simply no such thing as a non-consumptive user. After all, land *use* has implicit in it the idea of consumption. The idea of land use probably derives from the bizarre human misperception that all of non-human nature is merely a storehouse of resources. To say "non-consumptive use" is actually to speak a contradiction. The net result of all so-called non-consumptive recreational activity is the creation of a real scarcity of unimpaired environments. The increasing scarcity of unimpaired environments is proof of the gradual consumptive nature of our activities.

Some may find it difficult to accept the position we have taken. After all, the idea of the non-consumptive user is firmly entrenched in our vocabularies. He has been the celebrated mythical beast that we have often used to justify landscape preservation. Under the myth we have self-righteously pointed accusing fingers at other resource consumers. We can no longer hold that somehow we are better than they are simply because we think we are non-consumptive. With a new perspective we can approach old problems with a fresh and perhaps more fruitful outlook. Let us explore some possibilities.

At least three implications come to mind if we are to reject the idea of non-consumptive uses. We must construct strict rules guiding our behavior when visiting natural landscapes. We must adopt a new attitude and approach to land-use planning as it applies to recreational landscapes. These ideas are to some extent interrelated.

Naturalist clubs must pay special attention to rules, or standards of conduct, in the outdoors. They often travel *en masse* to the most sensitive areas in their vicinity. We would recommend then that clubs make an effort to travel to special spots only very occasionally and when they do, they should travel in small groups. Choose places to go at a time of year when you'll do the least damage, and then stay on established pathways in small groups. Identify plants where they are, without picking bits off to check at home. We know a few "naturalists" who crash around looking for bird nests, and photographers who tear away the foliage for the proper camera angle. We do not say that nest records are unimportant, only that conscience often isn't part of the equipment of the recorder. Each club should recognize for itself what measures are necessary to ensure the least consumption on the part of its members.

Controls on behavior extend from the voluntary actions of clubs to the mandatory restrictions of government agencies. Nobody wants willingly to give up more liberties in a world in which they are rapidly eroding in all aspects, but it is time that naturalists begin a co-ordinated effort to get behavioral restrictions instituted, at least in our large semi-wilderness parks.

Strict visitor controls appropriate in large parks include party size limits, the use of burnable containers only, and the use of stoves rather than fires where natural wood is at a

premium. The ideal situation would entail licensing all back-country users and regulating their numbers through a permit system. The licensing procedure has a double benefit. It allows agencies to know how many users there are, and it could mean a skills test prior to licensing. A skills test is very important because ignorant and unskilled people are using natural landscapes more and more, and they do the most damage.

The prospect of licenses and permits for so-called "non-consumptive" users may make people recoil in horror. It conjures up the image of an enlarged bureaucracy to deal with it, as well as the spectre of more lost liberties. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, outdoor recreation of all sorts, but particularly in parks and equivalent reserves, was held to be a right, and available free to anyone. This idea has never been seriously challenged until now. The recreation we have been discussing is not a right any more; it is a privilege. We no longer live in the world of the 1960s. Solitude and wild nature are scarce. We would rather see the price for the privilege of using it paid in personal liberty than in the erosion of the unique character of the landscapes left to us. Strict controls will be made a widespread necessity anyway, when area by area, overuse becomes a crisis. If we have the vision to see that controls are necessary now, why don't we have the courage and freedom to implement them?

We have said something of the need for a new justification for landscape preservation. Total conservation is a four-part concern. Wisely managed use is just one part. Others are of equal weight and importance. They are preservation, restoration, and protection. Preservation figures importantly in overall conservation, and yet the rationale for the preservation of landscape is almost always that recreational benefits accrue to the using public. We have gone so far as to equate parks with "preserved" land, when nothing is further from the truth. If we reject the idea of the non-consumptive user, and yet recognize the importance of landscape preservation, we can hardly endorse parks as the appropriate vehicle for preservation, because parks are justified and developed for their recreational potential.

This does not mean we should reject the idea of parks, but rather encourage governments to become serious about their stated purpose of preserving unimpaired landscapes. Neither should we reject the idea of people in parks, because there are regulatory mechanisms available to limit resource consumption by tourists and others. But we must dismiss the idea that landscapes, and the communities of life on them, can only be preserved in parks, and that the rationale of preservation is recreation. Ecological reserves and nature conservancies are a step in this direction, but so far they have succeeded in setting aside only limited areas. It simply will not do any longer to justify parks, reserves and sanctuaries in terms of the benefits to be derived for the "non-consuming" public. This form at once categorizes these landscapes as "resources" anyway, and makes their eventual exploitation for recreation an imperative.

It is sad to think that any justification is necessary at all for landscape preservation. But if it is, then we should hold that natural landscapes should exist for their own sake: that their internal dynamics are fundamental engines of nature, fueled by the sun, and nurtured by the earth. We should hold that landscapes and their internal dynamics should be preserved solely because they are there, for their own sake, and because they have the right to exist (see Stone 1974 for a discussion of the notion of legal rights for non-human nature). We must not only reject the idea that nature exists solely for human benefit, we must also develop new planning tools that are not based on human utility.

Government land agency planning proceeds along conventional lines, and clubs and federations expend considerable effort criticizing the results. We can call it "systems," or "master," or "site" planning; but what these terms really mean is the planning of how to accommodate people on the landscape. In natural areas conventional planning merely orchestrates the systematic reversal of the principles of preservation. If we recognize the consumptive nature of all recreational land uses, and are really concerned about landscape preservation, then we should reject conventional land-use planning in favor of *non*-use planning.

A new theory of non-use planning can be generated from a thorough understanding of the nature of resource consumption by recreation-

ists. It would involve the identification of physical carrying capacities on natural landscapes through detailed inventories and sampling. It would center around strict controls on the numbers and behavior of participants in supposedly non-consumptive pursuits. It would place preservation as the top priority instead of use. Finally, it would emphasize that non-human nature exists for its own sake, and that the accommodation of people in it is not a matter of compromise but rather one of integration.

In this article, a critical evaluation of the notion of non-consumptive use was made and found to be false. Some of the implications of rejecting the notion were also explored. It remains to decide what to do next. The acceptance and implementation of the various issues raised here could mark a new era for conservation in Canada. We have a choice: either we take cognizance of the future of natural landscapes and organize ourselves to meet it now, or we languish, comfortable in the hope that somebody will do something when the crisis comes. For us, the price of waiting is too high.

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