



**Illuminare:**  
A Student Journal in  
Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Studies

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A Social World Investigation**

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**Online Publication Date: April 15th, 2011**

Publication details, instructions for authors, and subscription information can be found at <http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/illuminare/>

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## **Whitewater Kayaking: A Social World Investigation**

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### **Abstract**

This exploratory research identified kayakers participating at urban whitewater kayaking parks as a specific recreational user group that had yet to be examined socially and recreationally from a managerial and theoretical standpoint. To examine the social world of whitewater kayakers, twelve participants were interviewed at whitewater kayaking parks in Colorado and Utah. The interviewer utilized naturalistic methods with a concentration on grounded theory techniques. Constant Comparative Methodology (CCM) was used during the data collection and analysis process. Triangulation permitted the identification of thematic findings across participants and sites to determine the relevant meanings and practical applications associated with kayaking participation, social aspects, motivations, and perceived benefits. The implications from this study suggest natural resource managers may attract non-participating user groups by taking advantage of the social nature and pre-established mores found in the whitewater kayaking community. Recommendations suggest other adventure-based outdoor recreational user groups may be examined using a similar social-based lens.

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**Keywords:** Benefits, Motivations, Recreation, Social World, Whitewater Kayaking

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### Introduction

Outdoor recreation participation and public land visitation have experienced a recent decline in the United States (Pergams & Zaradic, 2006, 2008). This decline has been attributed to several factors such as changing population composition, age structure (Murdock, Backman, Hoque, & Ellis, 1991), socio-cultural demographics (Gramann & Allison, 1999) and income levels (Abercrombie et al., 2008; Moore, Roux, Evenson, McGinn, & Brines, 2008). Resource managers have noticed that many land-based recreation activities (i.e., hiking and backpacking) are especially affected by this national trend (Pergams & Zaradic, 2008; Zaradic, Pergams, & Kareiva, 2009). In contrast, participation in water-based recreation activities remains strong and continues to increase (Cordell et al., 2004; Jennings, 2007). Today, over 60 percent of the U.S. population participates in a water-based activity such as boating, swimming or visiting a beach at least once per year (Cordell et al., 2002). Paddle sports and adventure-based activities such as whitewater kayaking are becoming particularly popular. Increasing interest and participation in whitewater kayaking have helped establish its prominence in the field of outdoor adventure-based recreation (Jensen & Guthrie, 2006). In fact, research indicates that this type of water-based recreation will continue to increase in the future and comprise a larger percentage of the general outdoor recreation market (Cordell, Green & Betz, 2002).

Despite the growth and potential future market for water-based recreation activities such as whitewater kayaking, limited research has examined the sport and its participants.<sup>1</sup> The small but growing body of literature that has examined participation in whitewater kayaking suggests that participation is

often social in nature. For example, Schuett (1995) described the importance of the social aspects of whitewater kayaking by attempting to predict the types of participation enjoyed by kayakers. Schuett found that many factors (i.e., classes, guides, instruction, and skill level) could predict social participation within the sport. Schuett called for continued investigation into the social world of whitewater kayaking using qualitative methods to further identify factors contributing to explaining kayaking behavior. More recently, Galloway (2010) examined the continuum of behavior of whitewater kayakers in New Zealand from a social world perspective. Galloway found that motivation and site preferences varied by the specialization within the social world. In addition to studies examining whitewater kayaker participation, there has been substantial growth in the construction of urban whitewater kayaking parks that support a unique culture similar to that found in skateboarding parks (Sanford, 2007). Urban whitewater kayaking parks may be especially conducive to the social interactions between paddlers. As the urban population continues to increase, these whitewater parks provide important recreation opportunities to avid urban kayakers. Despite studies examining whitewater kayaking participation, there remains an absence of practical, qualitative investigations into the meaning and value of whitewater kayaking in the lives of its participants.

One way to gain this type of understanding is through studying the unique social worlds that are built within adult play groups, similar to those found in whitewater kayaking communities (Schuett, 1995; Scott & Godbey, 1992; Scott & Godbey, 1994). A social world can be loosely defined as an alternative value structure that contains its own rules and systems that are adhered to by its members (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). This social world perspective could provide a unique opportunity to examine interrelationships that may lead to insights about the social norms, motivations and benefits of whitewater kayaking (Scott & Godbey, 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with local parlance, the terms kayaker, boater, and paddler are used interchangeably, and, in all cases, these refer specifically to whitewater kayaking.

By developing a foundational understanding of these social factors, public resource managers may be able to determine if the current recreational needs of their participants are being fully met. For example, in describing predictors of social group participation in whitewater kayaking, Schuett (1995) suggested “specific information that can predict and/or possibly explain the role of the social groups in adventure recreation participation will not only add to developing theory, but benefit managers in service delivery” (p. 43). Therefore, by focusing on the entire participation process, public resource managers could potentially assemble information about other socially involved outdoor recreation enthusiasts or adventure-based user groups whose needs and preferences may not be fully understood.

Insights from the social norms, motivations, and benefits experienced by those in the whitewater kayaking community could be used to conceptualize and define the kayakers’ social world. Norms have been shown to influence participant interactions and behavior, helping to create a more socially dynamic and cohesive construct of group membership (Heywood & Murdock, 2002). Whitewater kayakers may also be unified by similar motivations. Research indicates that many whitewater kayaking participants engage in their activity for reasons such as thrill seeking and socialization (Schuett, 1995). These motives translate into a variety of benefits. For instance, participation in outdoor recreational activities has been shown to foster healthy lifestyles (Hanley, Shaw, & Wright, 2003; Weepie & McCarthy, 2002). In outdoor recreational pursuits such as whitewater kayaking, participants often realize additional benefits that are physical, psychological, social, spiritual, economic, and environmental (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991).

Emphasis on this social world perspective may provide public resource managers with opportunities to highlight the values and benefits of whitewater kayaking with the goal of increasing participation. For instance, research has indicated that

access to many water-based resources has become a concern for public resource managers, and subsequently whitewater kayakers (Cordell et al., 1999). Hence, the ability to attract and retain participants in other less-used public and federal water-based resources, where whitewater kayakers may be presently underrepresented, may become a valuable strategy in the future. Overall, an enhanced understanding of the social world of whitewater kayaking participants could provide a model for to assist recreation programmers and resource managers with securing the visitation of existing kayakers and attracting new participants.

### **Review of Literature**

This qualitative study of the social world of whitewater kayaking was based upon the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. This perspective allows actions and behaviors to be denoted symbolically (Blumer, 1969), a lens that is particularly useful in allowing researchers to apply subjective meaning to understand human behaviors associated with a particular social phenomenon. Of particular interest in this study was how kayakers adjusted their behavior to the actions of other individuals within community whitewater parks. From this perspective, it is the participants who are actively involved in creating their own social world. Hence, focusing on the face-to-face interactions between individuals is particularly important when attempting to interpret exchanges involved in the social processes of an outdoor recreational pursuit. Hence, this study focuses on the following themes:

#### **Social Worlds**

An understanding of participation in adult play groups, such as those found in many outdoor recreation endeavors, can be enhanced by examining the interactions between members of a group through socially based lenses (Scott & Godbey, 1992). Examining certain phenomena within the context of a “social world” may allow public resource managers to better understand and meet the needs of a particular user group (Gahwiler & Havitz,

1998). A social world has been defined as providing a structure of an alternative value system, which contains its own rules and systems (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Behaviors and interactions between social world members are therefore identifiable even though no defined boundaries exist (Shibutani, 1955). In fact, there have been several different views on how to study social worlds (Choi, Loomis, & Ditton, 1994). For example, some research has focused on forms of communication and symbolization associated with social worlds (Schütz, 1967; Shibutani, 1955), while other research has focused on sites, technologies, activities, and organizations that deal with social groups (Strauss, 1978). For the purpose of this study, social worlds will be used to examine recreation participation within the whitewater kayaking community; therefore, members of this social world are individuals who recognize themselves as whitewater kayakers and are recognized by others as belonging to the social world (Unruh, 1980).

In essence, participants within a social world may have different needs and preferences that must first be understood before outside influence can be exerted to affect their overall participation within any given activity (Scott & Godbey, 1992). In examining river-based user groups (i.e., kayakers, canoeists, and multisport racers) in New Zealand, Gallo-way (2010) found that social groups encounter specific barriers that limit their participation. Therefore, obtaining these insights into social worlds found in natural areas may be particularly useful to resource managers who are tasked with meeting public needs. One way to further this understanding is to examine the social norms, motivations, and perceived benefits of particular user groups.

### **Norms**

Social norms can be defined as the distribution of potential approval and disapproval by others for various alternatives of behavior along a continuum under specified conditions that affect participation with an activity (Jackson, 1966). In an attempt

to conceptualize social norms, Jackson (1966) created the Return Potential Model (RPM) to measure conditional norms of group behaviors. From Jackson's model, other researchers have attempted to explain the power of social norms to influence interactions between expectations about behavioral standards and the costs or benefits of a particular behavior (Heywood & Murdock, 2002).

In outdoor recreation research, investigators have applied normative theory to examine both conditional and behavioral norms. Conditional norms, for example, have provided a foundation for studying issues such as crowding, whereby a researcher asks respondents to determine the appropriate level of acceptable encounters with visitors in outdoor recreational settings (Manning & Valliere, 2001). In contrast, researchers examining behavioral norms are more interested in the behavior that results from particular interactions and less about the environmental and social conditions that occur as a result of individual or group behaviors. Therefore, by examining the conditional and behavioral norms displayed by outdoor recreational-based social worlds, resource managers can better understand the subtleties of user groups, which can enable them to further meet the needs and preferences of such groups.

### **Motivations**

By conceptualizing the motives of participants engaging in outdoor recreation on a behavioral level, researchers support the theory that individuals participate to fulfill a particular need or goal. These goals may be either intrinsic or extrinsic (Hurd, 2001; Iso-Ahola, 1980; Lee, Graefe, & Li, 2007), and are associated with an expected reward as a result of participation.

Lee et al., (2007) found strong relationships between specialization level, gender, motivations, and preferred environmental settings of canoeists. Other research shows the pursuit of status has also been a major motivation for outdoor adventure activities. Social artifacts, such as photographs, have also been seen as status symbols for individuals (Driver,

Brown, & Peterson, 1991). Many recreational participants feel a sense of satisfaction by pursuing, obtaining, and displaying artifacts such as photographs that portray their recreational endeavors (Jensen & Guthrie, 2006). Schuett (1995) suggested that whitewater kayaking participants engage in their activity for multiple reasons including seeking thrills, excitement, and socialization.

By recognizing that many individuals or user groups are motivated by the possible outcomes, or desired consequences, of their participation in a certain activity, researchers can gain a better understanding of the underlying objectives that influence behavior. Through this insight, researchers may reinforce their theories about the social tendencies of those involved within the realm of outdoor adventure-based recreation while realizing the scope of benefits received by participants.

### **Benefits**

Substantial research has examined the specific types of benefits that participants engaging in outdoor recreation activities receive as a result of their participation (Driver et al., 1991). Benefits pertaining to whitewater recreation are often realized on physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and social scales that tend to improve the state or condition of the individual (Driver et al., 1991). For example, Sanford, (2007) described whitewater kayaking as a religious experience where the “ritual practice of an embodied encounter with the sacred...is mediated through the body’s performance in the water” (p. 875). Others have suggested that the social interactions experience in whitewater kayaking can lead to learning more about a participant’s individual identity (Kelly, 1990; Schuett, 1995). These types of psychological outcomes are often positive and central benefits experienced by those involved. Hence, resource managers who are aware of the different types of benefits experienced by certain user groups may become better qualified to evaluate how public resources serve certain user groups, while also better understanding their recrea-

tional needs and preferences. For whitewater kayakers, these social norms, motivations, and benefits can be better examined through the social world in which they exist.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was exploratory in nature and sought to provide descriptive and interpretive insight into the social world of whitewater kayaking. The following research questions guided this study:

*Research Question 1.* What factors influence whitewater kayaking participation?

*Research Question 2.* How can social norms, motivations, and benefits be used to depict the social world of whitewater kayaking?

### **Methods**

This research used an interpretive design where naturalistic research methods allowed for meaningful information to be extracted by investigating the lives, stories, behaviors, and relationships of whitewater kayakers (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The study also incorporated grounded theory techniques developed by Glaser and Straus (1967) in an attempt to unveil and describe the social world of whitewater kayakers.

### **Study Setting**

This study was conducted on two separate rivers, the Clear Creek River in Golden, Colorado and Weber River in Ogden, Utah, during the months of May and June of 2007. This time of year was chosen due to the spring run-off, which attracted large numbers of whitewater kayakers. The rivers were also chosen due to the close proximity of community whitewater kayaking parks located along sections of the rivers. These parks were excellent locations for field observations as they provided access to the interactions between kayakers both on and off the water.

### **Selection of Study Participants**

This study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques as a means of focusing on selective settings frequented by whitewater kayak-

ers. These settings included the whitewater kayaking parks and other facilities (e.g., parking lots and picnic areas). Twelve individuals who were regularly observed were identified and intentionally selected as key participants who held status within the social world. Specific criteria to identify these participants were individuals who had (a) been identified to have a particular whitewater kayaking skill set (Class III minimum and surfing abilities), (b) purchased their own equipment, (c) frequented the whitewater kayaking park at least two consecutive days during the first week of the study, and (d) consented to participate in the study and were over 18 years of age. The twelve participants that met these criteria were approached and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. From the semi-structured interviews and ensuing conversations with these twelve participants, the primary researcher felt theoretical saturation was achieved.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Using an inductive theory building approach, questions were created for the purpose of conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The questions assisted the researcher in identifying the conditions that gave rise to specific sets of social actions and behavioral patterns between kayakers (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interviews were administered to the twelve participants within the study area, often near river focal points or surrounding parking lots. Social and behavioral trends were assessed throughout the study to generate grounded propositions leading to grounded theory about observations and interviews. These observed trends were documented in a field journal both during and after field sessions.

The process of constant comparison was also used during the data analysis and throughout theory construction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The steps used in analyzing data began with open coding to form initial categories that represented data relationships. Following the coding process, categories and themes were organized and refined through the use

of conceptual mapping (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, examples were provided from the data that explain how themes were created (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During the coding process, several thematic categories emerged that relevant to the specific research questions. The four major categories included whitewater kayaking participation, social aspects, motivations, and benefits.

In an effort to establish trustworthiness and maintain proper rigor throughout this study, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and objectivity were addressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, negative case analysis (i.e., examining other recreational user groups at the park), mechanical recording of data, and participant consent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was addressed by examining multiple sites using thick description and triangulation of methods (Geertz, 1973). Dependability and objectivity was achieved through peer debriefing, reflective journaling, and adjusting to changing field conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The primary researcher/field observer was an avid outdoor enthusiast and whitewater kayaker, which increased his accessibility to the social world. This unique connection allowed him to effectively administer semi-structured interviews and conduct insightful field observations. The primary researcher took measures to account for his personal biases by relating his observations back to participants and to his isolated, non-kayaking research team. A reflective journal was used frequently during and after field sessions to record the events and details of the each day and to further account for possible personal biases. Employing this analytical process allowed the researcher to base viewpoints from the participants' perspectives while acknowledging his inherent biases as a participant-observer (Charmaz, 2000).

#### **Results**

Results are divided into four sections: factors influencing participation in whitewater

kayaking, the role of social aspects and norms involved in whitewater kayaking, the motivations of whitewater kayakers, and an explanation of the benefits received by whitewater kayakers. These categories address the research questions and provide insight into how participants describe the social world of whitewater kayaking.

### **Whitewater Kayaking Participation**

Although this study concentrated on two whitewater kayaking parks, many participants did not paddle exclusively in these parks. A number of kayakers stated they often participated on other rivers along the Wasatch Front that did not contain park-type amenities. Despite geographical differences in participation, many kayakers commented upon preferring participation at whitewater parks due to their easy access. For example, most whitewater parks are constructed near downtown urban areas that allow riverside access in a variety of forms. Convenient parking lots in addition to biking and walking paths are situated along river corridors throughout these parks. Park characteristics allow paddlers to “escape” to the river with relative ease. Participants spoke of how this “park and play” mentality is different than participating in traditional river running in which kayakers must spend time on more logistical concerns, such as finding partners, arranging vehicle shuttles, and obtaining river permits.

Furthermore, the hydrological improvements found in many whitewater parks are condensed, allowing kayakers to practice on simulated features found on natural rivers within a more controlled environment. The main hydrologic features in a park are the waves where kayakers are able to surf their boats. Surfing is accomplished as moving water runs under a boat while the kayaker maintains a central location on the wave without moving up or down the river. Participants mentioned that while they practice surfing and other tricks on the wave, others would wait in small pools off to the side for their turn on the wave. This “waiting” is one of the many types of

participating etiquettes practiced by in whitewater kayaking parks.

The whitewater parks allowed paddlers the freedom to participate frequently and for different durations. While many participants in this study spent considerable amounts of time in the parks each day (e.g., 5-7 hours), it was not uncommon for kayakers to arrive at parks in business attire during lunch breaks or at the end of the workday for a quick play session before returning to the office or home for the day. To this extent, whitewater kayaking parks are used in similar ways to fitness centers or indoor rock-climbing gyms. Kayakers are able to budget and schedule times in their week when they can paddle. Hence, participation often results as a consequence of both a recreational pursuit with an emphasis on performance and exercise, or simply as a leisure activity. Furthermore, flexibility of scheduling time in the water and easiness of access also foster greater participation. Participants in this study claimed to participate between 25 to over 100 days per season (i.e., May-October).

### **Social Aspects**

Part of participating in whitewater parks is observing other paddlers. This process of observation mixed with participation is born partially out of necessity, but it also encourages the formation of friendships between kayakers. These friendships formed around kayaking are evident in a statement made by Old School (pseudonyms are used throughout), a 56 year-old musician from Denver regarded by others as a type of patriarch: “If you flip over or miss a roll and you get out of your boat, you are going to see other people paddling to you, directing you, grabbing your boat, your paddle and stuff. To see people watching out for you is comforting.” While at the park, kayakers are uniquely interested in the individuals that are paddling around them because these same individuals may be reciprocating help in the case of an incident. Incidentally, kayakers experience an unspoken trust between each other. This social norm was observed and commented upon

by participants as they left their vehicles unlocked, with a set of keys on the outside of the vehicle during the time they spend on the water. Others leave personal kayaking equipment in public areas unattended while running shuttles, talking with others, or visiting other locations in the park.

This open, supportive ethos is conducive to high levels of camaraderie. In this friendly setting, novice paddlers seek advice and instruction from other more advanced kayakers. Subsequently, the behavioral process of mentoring is common. Gunny explained, "It is as if everyone becomes adopted by the person that has got just a little bit more experience than them...you find somebody you can learn something from and it's a progression." Mentoring on the river takes place informally without any structure. Despite the lack of structure, the instructor/pupil relationship is often a rich source of long-term friendships. Participants who develop a passion for kayaking tend to have close social relationships with their mentors. Creeker, an elementary school teacher from Golden explained, "The guys who taught me to kayak back in 1992 are still my good friends. All we do is kayak. We don't see each other all year until three months [of paddling season] and then we separate again." While relationships founded for the sole purpose of paddling occur, many participants explained that relationships formed from paddling became meaningful in other areas of their lives. For example, many participants spoke of the unique support in their lives that came from other paddlers. These relationships were unique in that participants felt they could share anything with fellow boaters who they had shared time with on the river.

Social relationships within whitewater kayaking may also be explained in terms of commonalities that are found among paddlers. An aspect of this shared commonality is illustrated by the comment of Bliss Stick: "When you see a boat on a roof of a car you sort of figure that person has this unique enjoyment for whitewater and you feel a

bond that is rare." The similar interests that kayakers hold in common can be the medium for creating intense relationships that often transfer into other aspects of their lives.

The strong bonds among kayakers are evident in the conflicts they experience with other types of recreational visitors. In general, kayakers cited crowding as the one negative factor affecting participation on the river. As urban hubs for physical activity and water-based recreation, whitewater kayaking parks attract both large numbers of kayakers and other types of recreationists. Conflicts typically arise between kayakers and non-kayakers. For instance, one participant, Creeker stated "Non-boaters act inappropriately on the river and there is not a lot of sympathy for it. Inevitably, they drink a few beers and come stumbling in here and we end up pulling them out of the river every summer." For the most part, whitewater kayakers participate in ways that enable them to interact with their peers and increase their ability to have a pleasant experience on the river.

### **Motivations**

For many paddlers, the kayaking community serves as a motivational source for their participation. The kayaking ethos that is understood and embraced by paddlers may be an intrinsic motivation that allows individuals to relate to one another while providing meaning and importance to their participation. Whitewater kayaking is difficult and acquiring skills takes a significant amount of time, effort, and commitment. The individual challenge, however, provides a unique opportunity for self-discovery and motivates individuals to continue paddling in an attempt to refine their skills. Incidentally, some individuals' participate simply to be seen. Several paddlers explained that many kayakers paddle to show off for each other and nearby community observers. Others, however, are passive participants, less competitive, who simply enjoying interacting with others. Hence, differing characteristics of paddlers often

determine the extent of personal involvement and enjoyment of the kayaking community.

Another source of motivation found in this study were environmental-based motivations. The scenic beauty found in riparian environments in which kayaking occurs allows paddlers to interact with nature in a way many others seldom have the opportunity to experience. Even in urban-based whitewater parks, the connection with nature through moving whitewater is important to participants. Bliss Stick, a 36 year old physician from Denver, described this interaction and relationship with the natural environment as “an interplay of the forces of nature with the [the paddlers] ability to sort of dance amongst them.” This interaction and affinity towards the river fills a particular need in the lives of kayakers and becomes meaningful and valuable. As a result, kayakers are interested in preserving the natural aquatic environment from potential dangers such as development, restricted access, and river closures. Kayakers support organizations such as American Whitewater and the American Canoeing Association because of their efforts to increase river access and support the geo-politic that allows free-flowing rivers to exist. These pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors often influence kayaking behaviors and serve as a motivating factor in site preferences and attitudes towards participation. Overall, participants described a variety of motivations, however, the social, physical, and environmental motivations were most prevalent.

### **Benefits**

Participants described a wide range of benefits that they received as a result of their participation. Listening to these participants as they discussed these benefits, two broad subcategories emerged: interpersonal relationships and physical benefits.

Interpersonal relationships are formed as individuals paddle together. As based upon previous discussion, these relationships allow kayakers to form unique friendships that are initially premised upon trust through watching each other while on the

water. Several paddlers explained that kayaking was enjoyable because of the social atmosphere, both on and off the river. For example, it is not uncommon for participants to consume alcohol or eat together after playing on the river together. These behaviors are often accompanied by discussions about kayaking experiences. The telling of epic kayak stories is common and allows members of the kayak community to share information about rivers, rapids, and other relevant information. Many participants described the ways which friendships formed while kayaking permeated into other areas of their lives. Some participants described “going out” or “having a barbeque” as ways to spend time together when not paddling. Jerry, a middle-aged elementary school teacher from Provo, mentioned “When I am having a bad day, there is a certain hard core group of friends, that is who I am going to contact, because you’ve already put your life on the line with those folks.” These ties that extend beyond the whitewater kayaking park were seen as meaningful and of a great benefit to those participating.

Many participants discussed the physical benefits of their participation. Whitewater kayaking provides good exercise and those who paddle regularly often stay fit as a result. While physical fitness was perceived as a benefit, there were other physical benefits that dwelt more with the psychological interaction between boater and the environment. Many paddlers described these benefits of kayaking in metaphysical anecdotes like the “river speaking to them” or the water “touching their souls.” Others explained that paddling and being physically engaged with the river brought about “balance” and “direction” in their lives. While navigating a particular section of whitewater, there are moments when kayakers must perform crucial moves to avoid injury or death. Because of this, their physical performance also requires a unique psychological focus when paddling. A Denver boater mentioned, “the cool thing about boating is there is no yesterday, or tomorrow, or even five minutes from now. There is

just you, the river, and now.” Participants described this psychological and physical focus as a large benefit. One participant mentioned, “I am completely A.D.D., but with boating I’m not A.D.D. I’m completely focused.” Other participants suggested that, because of their involvement, they experienced a more “even keel” as they approached life in general. Kayaking helped one participant not feel “overly focused on one thing” such as work or relationships. For nearly all whitewater kayakers, the benefits they received from paddling and engagement with their unique social world were major factors that inspired their continued participation in the sport.

### **Discussion and Implications**

In an effort to provide more outdoor recreational opportunities, public resource managers and service providers strive to understand participation trends and preferences of their constituents. Studying social worlds has proven to be useful in this respect, helping to explain recreation participation across a variety of activities (Schuett, 1995). This study revealed defining features of the whitewater kayaking social world that have substantial implications for public resource managers.

Results showed that whitewater kayaking participation was influenced by the geographical characteristics and accessibility of urban whitewater parks (in comparison to unaltered sections of river). The results from one-on-one, semi-structured interviews indicated that individuals experienced an increase in participation by frequenting whitewater kayaking parks. This increase in visitation was partially due to the convenience and ease of access of park locations in proximity to urban areas, in addition to altered hydrological features, which support “park and play” participation. Park amenities (e.g., restrooms, changing rooms, put-in and take-out areas, walkways, and observation areas) also facilitated participation by serving paddlers needs both before and after kayaking. These site-based factors allowed kayakers the flexibility to participate frequently for

shorter periods of time than they would have on unaltered sections of river. Recognition of this participation trend in whitewater kayaking may allow resource managers to focus their efforts to abate park crowding by taking advantage of the flexibility and ease of access of participation through promoting activities or events during low-use times in an attempt to dissipate popular, high-use periods. For example, attracting individuals during lunch breaks and before or after work may allow kayakers to participate more often during these nontraditional times. As managers promote these types of programs, it is likely that issues of crowding and conflicts between user groups will subside and participants may experience quality recreational opportunities.

A central aspect of the whitewater kayaking experience was the social world that the paddlers created. The experience of whitewater kayaking was largely centered on the camaraderie and bonds formed with other boaters. There was an acceptance and openness supported by participants that was evident in the unspoken norms of the social world. These norms included the physical wellbeing of boaters on the water, the perceived lack of concern for the security of personal belongings, and general instructive support and mentoring to novice boaters. From their participation and adherence to these norms, boaters received multiple benefits that acted as motivation for their continued participation within social world and the urban park locations.

A common thread throughout the interviews was the significance of social relationships constructed through the kayaking social world. The importance of mentoring was an especially significant theme that may serve as a tool for managers to sustain current participation and increase involvement from nonparticipants by fostering relationships between novice and experienced kayakers. Because this norm is pre-existent and evident in this study, utilizing it to encourage bonding and retention of kayakers, both new and experienced, may be very effective in increasing participation. Research has

shown that novices prefer larger groups that increase companionship between whitewater kayakers (Schuett, 1995). This study suggested that capitalizing and improving on pre-existing mentoring relationships within the kayak community may therefore be particularly useful for resource managers targeting lower skilled individuals. For example, managers could recruit “gate keepers” or key personnel to serve as mentors to potential users who do not currently participate in whitewater kayaking. Management may also be able to use these individuals as volunteers in outreach programs geared towards nonparticipants. Research shows that one main reason that individuals do not participate in outdoor activities is because they often lack a partner to participate with (Jackson, 2005; Patterson, 2001). This may be especially true in whitewater kayaking because of the physical risk associated with participation. Hence, having established mentors in place to teach and introduce the activity and the social world to nonparticipants may prove useful in attracting individuals who are not currently using whitewater resources. Previous research suggests these types of mentoring and recruiting strategies have been particularly useful and effective with other recreational user groups (Enck, Decker, & Brown, 2000).

Programming around a particular resource area with an emphasis on increasing interactions between participants may also be applicable to other outdoor recreational user groups such as runners. The recent surge in charity events or fun runs has illustrated the positive impact of interactions between individuals participating in special events based on physical activity. Group based participation in running can be similar to the social world of whitewater kayakers. For example, both activities are based around a particular recreational pursuit that may have unspoken norms understood by participants. Both groups also can benefit from natural areas purposefully managed for their use. Increased participation may occur as managers take advantage of the social motivations experienced by participants

who desire to engage in certain activities. Therefore, this study of whitewater kayakers may provide a model for understanding the complexities of other recreational user-groups involved in activities that are particularly social in nature.

This study explored the social world of whitewater kayakers participating in urban-based whitewater kayaking parks. A baseline understanding of whitewater kayaking activities was described along with participation patterns, social aspects, motivations, and benefits that were relevant themes discussed by participants. Future research should look to use and expand upon this study’s methodology to examine other recreational social worlds and the implications they may hold for natural resource management.

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